‘A deep-sea dive into the soul’

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Acknowledgments

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Preface

Since childhood, I have been drawn to people's life stories, curious about why we are the way we are, what we long for and how we navigate these lives we are given. This curiosity led me to the writings of Irvin Yalom (1989, 1992, 2011) and Atul Gawande (2014), where, as a teenager, I grew fascinated by their exploration of what it means to live, and die, with meaning and dignity. However, once I started studying psychology at school and at undergraduate level, I became frustrated at how traditional paradigms tried to make humans predictable, deliver certainty where there is none (Bull, 2009) and pathologise distress, which may simply be a natural response to having experienced painful or traumatic events. Despite this frustration, I held onto the belief that humans can be complex *and* simple. In our darkest moments, we seek to have another by our side, who sees and understands us, and it is this belief which now threads itself throughout this portfolio. In my thesis, I explore couples' experiences of psilocybin, where partners witnessed each other in their vulnerabilities, got to know each other in new ways and, explored the depths within themselves and in their partner. Alongside this, I present a piece from my clinical work. By drawing on the core principles of existential therapy, I hoped to offer my client an invitation to be witnessed in her full humanity. All of this is captures an attempt to take a 'deep-sea dive into the soul' and in many ways, I feel wildly grateful to have found a profession which allows me to channel my own curiosity into a practice of seeing, hearing and understanding others. In doing so, perhaps I get to understand myself a little bit better too.

Part A: Doctoral Research Thesis

In Part A, I present my doctoral research thesis, which contains a study exploring the experience of couples taking psilocybin together. The data was collected through semi-structured interviews, with couples together and separately, and participants were asked to contribute a multimedia-based data, alongside a 250-word paragraph. The data was analysed using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA; Smith et al., 2022), which allowed for insight into the subjective nature of the psilocybin experiences, as well as the meaning-making process. The study was underpinned by a phenomenological and a social constructivist epistemology, as the shared psychedelic experience needed to be considered within the context of their relationship. The key findings of this study are: 1) psilocybin amplified couples experiences of ARE interactions, which are integral in emotion-focussed couples therapy (EFCT), 2) shared psilocybin experiences strengthened both partners' individual sense of 'self'

and ‘us, and 3) findings suggest a ‘relational set and setting’ which acknowledges the safety and quality of the couple’s existing relationship as integral to the shared psilocybin experience. Clinical implications for both couples therapy and psychedelic research, including future research recommendations, are discussed.

Part B: Publishable Paper

In Part B, a manuscript was written for the submission to the academic journal ‘Culture, Medicine and Psychiatry (CMP)’ published by Springer and captures a condensed version of Part A. CMP was chosen as it sits at the intersection of psychiatry, social sciences and the humanities. The journal understands mental health ‘care’ as situated beyond the biomedical model, by including alternative approaches, including psychedelics, traditional healing, mutual support, and more. With this in mind, alongside the study being underpinned by Counselling Psychology values and ethos, CMP was deemed appropriate.

Part C: Combined Case Study and Process Report

The final part of this portfolio is a combined case study and process report presenting an existential piece of work I did with Ayesha (pseudonym); a Black British woman in her mid-thirties, who was referred to a charity providing therapy to people living with chronic health conditions. Our work focused on how Ayesha’s early confrontation with mortality, experiences of discrimination, as well as her chronic illness formed her sense of self and left her feeling isolated and lacking in meaning. Instead of completing a psychological formulation to understand Ayesha’s distress, which would go against existential principles, I brought Ayesha’s difficulties to life by providing a phenomenological account of how she experiences those difficulties. As part of this, I draw on the existential concerns proposed by Yalom (1980) extrapolating the following themes: fighting against mortality, the absence to exist freely as a black woman, loneliness in the presence of others, and transforming pain into meaning. Throughout our work together, I aimed to embody an I-Thou stance (Buber, 1958), which I hoped made Ayesha feel seen, heard and understood. Working with Ayesha highlighted my own ongoing journey toward cultural competence, although I remained with questions around existential therapy’s limitations when confronting systemic realities. As therapy progressed, Ayesha’s depression lifted, especially once she re-started with work.

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PART A: Doctoral Research Thesis:

‘*Fostering a cosmic connection*: The experience of couples taking psilocybin together.’

Chapter 1: Literature Review

The current study aimed to explore the experience of couples taking psilocybin together and respond to an increase in anecdotally reported accounts of couples' psychedelic use in the media (see Busby, 2023; Joshi, 2022; Ncube, 2024). Alongside this, academic research has also started to explore the intersection of psychedelic substances and romantic relationships (e.g. Anderson et al., 2019; Barba et al., 2024; Colbert & Hughes, 2023; Kruger et al., 2025; Neubert et al., 2024; Wagner et al. 2021a).

This chapter establishes the foundations, which have underpinned this study. I will first outline the strategy used to approach this literature review and subsequently present psychological theories, which provide a conceptual framework for healthy relationships, alongside the empirical evidence highlighting the link between romantic relationships on personal health and well-being. The literature review will then introduce psychedelics, by providing an overview of their history, the clinical, and a critical evaluation of the current psychedelic research landscape. This section will focus on the individualistic bias in the current psychedelic research landscape (Anderson et al., 2019), which calls for research to explore the interpersonal dimension of psychedelic experiences. Following this, I present the limited but emerging literature which examines the intersection between psychedelics and romantic relationships, before outlining the rationale for choosing to focus on psilocybin specifically. This literature review then concludes by addressing risks and ethical considerations around the use of 'love drugs' (Earp & Savulescu, 2020), alongside a problem statement outlining the rationale guiding this current study and its relevance to Counselling Psychology.

1.1. Literature Review Strategy

The literature review adopted a narrative format to guide the reader toward the intersection of two fields of literature and research, namely psychedelics and romantic relationships. The relevant literature was obtained from six databases: APA PsycArticles, APA PsycBooks, APA PsycExtra, APA PsycInfo, PubMed, and Google Scholar. The keywords used to identify the relevant literature included: 'psychedelics', 'psychedelic-assisted therapy', 'mental health', 'psychedelic group therapy', 'psilocybin', 'recreational drug use', 'couples', 'romantic relationships', 'intimacy', 'interpersonal relationships', 'relational'- and 'psychological processes', and 'subjective well-being'. I reviewed abstracts to understand their relevance to the current study, as well as quality of the studies, and irrelevant work was excluded. For the relationship literature, I prioritised peer-reviewed literature, which addressed the impact of

romantic relationships on physical and emotional well-being. For the psychedelic literature, earlier work was reviewed to build the historical context, although I *mainly* (not entirely) focused on research published after 2020, as the field is rapidly evolving. I excluded purely pharmacological and neuroscientific studies and prioritised qualitative psychedelic research to better understand the experiential features, with specific focus on psilocybin, as this was the substance relevant to this study. Finally, I aimed to explore the interpersonal dimensions of psychedelic experiences, which directed my attention toward literature exploring the relational undercurrent of the psychedelic experience, rather than purely individual psychological outcomes. Only publications published in the English language were included.

Reflexivity Box 1: Literature Review

My approach to the literature was shaped by several aspects rooted in my own positioning. Having grown up in Switzerland, I have often encountered the narrative which frequently credits Swiss scientist Albert Hoffman as the 'founder of psychedelic medicine'. When I started to engage with the psychedelic literature in the early stages of this research, I became aware of the blindspots of this narrative, especially as it fails to acknowledge the traditions and rituals practised by Indigenous communities over millennia before psychedelic substances entered Western consciousness (George et al., 2019). By acknowledging this tension, it felt important to thread in contextual and historical context in which psychedelics were understood across time. I started to read about the shifting paradigms which have shaped how we understand psychedelic, and drug use more broadly, and how substances generally have been conceptualised, criminalised, medicalised and reclaimed across different times and social contexts. Additionally, the marginalisation and erasure of women's contributions to early psychedelic research became apparent, which in my view, could be a chapter of its own. The Hoffmann narrative, alongside the current resurgence of psychedelic research, both situate psychedelics firmly within a medical paradigm, which prompted me to consider what gets lost in that framing and what might be found by stepping outside of it. Stepping outside the medical paradigm what is the role of a human aligned with the core values of Counselling Psychology, but also felt congruent with existential philosophy, which prioritises subjective experiences over measurable outcomes and challenges the push to pathologise the human experience. This shift meant I felt a tension when approaching the clinical and pharmacological research. It would have not been appropriate to disregard this area of psychedelic literature, as it provides the scientific foundations for the field and underpins our understanding of how these substances act on the body and mind, which is

central to harm reduction. With this in mind, the medical paradigm remains dominant in how these substances are understood and accepted in broader mental health care. However, I did not want to interrogate this literature in detail and instead aimed to provide a simple overview. Finally, it was the anecdotal accounts of psychedelic experiences and the qualitative literature, which opened a world where behind the psychoactive effects of psychedelic substances, there was a whole different world, which quantitative measures would not be able to adequately capture. My own curiosity toward experiences beyond ordinary consciousness meant I was perhaps more receptive to this literature than researchers approaching the field from a positivist stance.

1.2. Why Romantic Relationships?

Historically, psychology has attempted to understand psychological distress through the lens of pathology by focussing on diagnostics and treatment interventions to relief 'symptoms'. Positive psychology emerged in response to this by introducing a shift away from understanding what is 'wrong' with people to expanding our understanding of what makes life worth living. It is now an established psychological science, which aims to understand what individuals and communities require to flourish (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). To understand this further, Seligman (2011) proposed PERMA as the pillars for well-being, capturing ***p***ositive emotion, ***e***ngagement, ***r***elationships, ***m***eaning, and ***a***chievement. Here, although relationships are presented as a standalone, they seep into other pillars, such as relationships being able to foster positive emotions, create shared meaning, as well as being a source of support in each other's sense of achievement. Seligman (2011) further noted: '*other people are the best antidote to the downs of life'* further stating *'that very little that is positive is solitary*'.

Johnson (2008) writes, for better or for worse, in the 21st century, love relationships have become the primary emotional relationship in most people's lives, which is reflected in academic literature too (Kamp Dush et al., 2008). However, there seems to be an interesting cultural paradox. In the UK, over the past two decades marriage rates have declined by about 20%, and between 1997 and 2017, there has been a 16% increase in single-person households, although many are also celebrating singlehood (Walker, 2025). Amongst this shift, how can we better understand why couples are turning to psychedelics, perhaps as they seek to repair, or enhance their relationship?

Romantic relationships have been widely documented as integral for personal well-being with relationship quality being a mediating factor. As such, Eaker et al. (2007) found after controlling for various risk factors (incl. smoking, diabetes, age etc.), married men were 50% as likely to die as unmarried men, however, within the married sample pool, poor resolution of conflict within the relationship increased the risk of dying from coronary heart disease. Moreover, Murphy (2007) found single men and women were more likely to experience a 'limiting, long-standing illness' than their coupled-up counterparts. Other studies further suggested, romantic partnership as being linked to a reduced risk of developing cardiovascular disease and dementia (Sommerlad et al., 2019; Wong et al., 2018). In regard to psychological health, one study found for younger adults singlehood was associated with lower general life satisfaction and poorer flourishing (Watkins et al., 2024). In addition, another study found romantic relationships to be a vital source of well-being for both adolescents and emerging adults (Gomez-Lopez et al., 2019). Another study found married individuals reported higher levels of subjective well-being, closely followed by individuals in cohabiting relationships, steady dating relationships and casual dating relationships noting how regardless of relationship status, those in 'happy' relationships reported higher subjective well-being (Kamp Dush & Amato, 2005). This again points toward relationship quality being a mediating factor.

Further studies highlight desirable romantic relationship qualities, such as effective communication, partner support, relationship satisfaction, and positive attributions, to have positive impacts on individual well-being, including increased self-esteem and life-satisfaction (Pateraki & Roussi, 2013; Shek, 1995; Voss et al., 1999). A well-established relationship construct contributing to relationship quality is partner responsiveness. This is the extent to which when one partner discloses personal information, they feel their partner has accurately understood their thoughts, goals and needs, validated their position, and cared for their well-being (Reis et al., 2004; Arican-Dinc & Gable, 2023). This became particularly salient during the COVID-19 pandemic. With many people cut off from their wider support networks, partners often became the primary source of emotional connection and regulation. In this context, one study found partner responsiveness around COVID-related stressors was both positively and negatively correlated with overall relationship quality, suggesting responsive partners could buffer some of the strain caused by the pandemic (Balzarini et al., 2023). Another study found partner responsiveness was associated with lower mortality and improved health outcomes (Farrell et al., 2023).

In regard to relational distress, certain characteristics, such as low relationship satisfaction and high conflict, have been identified as predictive of poor relationship quality and likelihood of divorce (Fowers et al., 1996; Robertson et al., 2016). Another study found, economic stressors were associated with changes in relationship quality over time (Lucas et al., 2021). Gardner and Oswald (2006) observed a significant increase in psychological strain two years prior to couples divorcing, which likely related to poor relationship quality and increased conflict, again pointing towards relationship quality being a key factor in contributing to well-being. However, poor quality relationships do not necessarily point toward separation, as one study found 7.2% of individuals stay married despite being unhappy (Heaton & Albrecht, 1991). Finally, another key study found spousal handholding regulates neural threat responses, with higher marital quality predicting less threat-related neural activation (Coan et al., 2006). The authors noted that '*the people we love, are the hidden regulators of our bodily processes and our emotional lives*' (Coan et al., 2006). This suggests that romantic relationships, especially when individuals experience intimacy and belonging, are a fundamental human need and central to overall health and longevity (Lyubomisky, 2022). However, this overview highlights how the quality of the relationship, rather than their mere presence, predicts outcomes. To understand what contributes to the overall quality of the relationship, psychological theories, such as attachment theory (Bowlby, 1969) and emotion-focussed couples therapy (Johnson, 2008), offer useful frameworks.

Attachment theory, conceptualised by John Bowlby (1969), went against the idea of patients' problems as rooted in internal conflicts or unconscious fantasies, by proposing that instead those problems come from real relationships with real people. He was the first to suggest that humans are biologically programmed to form emotional bonds, namely attachments, which during infancy are integral for survival and have lasting impacts on psychological development. Together with Mary Ainsworth, Bowlby predominantly focused on the infant-caregiver relationship. It was Shaver and Hazan (1987) who then translated this work into adult attachment and found secure attachments between romantic partners as fundamental to a positive and loving relationship. For example, Simpson et al. (1992) found secure attachment predicted the extent to which individuals sought and provided emotional support and physical contact. Another study found close and secure relationships are a protective factor for long-term emotional stability and psychological well-being (Sagone et al., 2023). Finally, a meta-analysis found anxious and avoidant attachment impacted overall relationship quality, with avoidance being negatively associated with general satisfaction, connectedness and perceived

support in relationships, whereas anxious attachment increased the likelihood of general conflict in relationships (Li & Chan, 2012).

Greenberg and Johnson (1988) built on these insights and translated the theoretical foundation of attachment into a couples' therapy approach, namely emotion-focussed couples therapy (EFCT). EFCT views romantic bonds primarily as attachment bonds and proposes that secure relationships rely on partners being accessible (emotionally available), responsive (attuned to each other's needs) and engaged (actively nurturing the relationship). These three 'ARE' principles are the foundation for couples to feel secure within their relationship allowing them to foster trust and navigate challenges, and subsequently achieve relationship satisfaction. Research shows that EFCT meets and exceeds the guidelines required for classification as an evidence-based therapy (Wiebe & Johnson, 2016) with a meta-analysis suggesting 70% of couples were 'symptom' free at the end of EFCT (Spengler et al., 2024). Additionally, a systematic review found increases in marital satisfaction during, as well as after the intervention (Beasley & Ager, 2019), and at 24-month follow-up couples reported sustained increases in relationship satisfaction, secure base behaviour and an overall decrease in relationship specific attachment anxiety (Wiebe et al., 2017). As such, EFCT offers a useful lens to understand what partners require to achieve greater relationship well-being.

1.3. Overview of psychedelics

Psychedelics, a term first coined by Humphry Osmond (psyche = mind, delos = revealing), is an umbrella term for psychoactive substances interacting with serotonin receptors and then produce changes in moods, consciousness, perception and cognitive function (Beliveau et al., 2016; Gandy, 2019). Although the number of psychedelic substances known are countless, so far three main categories have been identified: 1) dissociative (e.g. ibogaine, ketamine), 2) classic psychedelics (e.g. psilocybin, lysergic acid diethylamide (LSD), N,N-Dimethyltryptamine (DMT)/ ayahuasca), and 3) entactogens (e.g. 3,4 Methylenedioxymethamphetamine (MDMA) (Bates & Trujillo, 2021; Gomez-Escolar et al., 2024; Nichols, 1986).

Whereas psychedelics have only recently re-entered Western consciousness, in Indigenous communities psychedelics have been used for millennia. In Mesoamerican civilisation, psychoactive plants were part of cultural practices and in the Amazon ayahuasca and psilocybin-containing mushrooms were part of Mazatec healing circles (Dyck & Elcock, 2023; Ens, 2021; Carod-Artal, 2015; Nichols, 2020). Psychedelic substances were used to provide

communal guidance, protection from spirits and increased spiritual connection. In group settings they encouraged laughter, music and storytelling, ultimately leading to greater social cohesion (Rodríguez Arce & Winkelman, 2021; Schultes et al., 2001). This communal orientation stands in contrast to later Western approaches, which prioritise an individual and scientific exploration of psychedelics (Osterhold & Fernandes-Osterhold, 2023).

An important moment in time for psychedelics in the West was in 1943 when Swiss scientist Albert Hofmann discovered LSD after which the pharmaceutical company Sandoz made the substance globally available for research purposes, which initiated the first wave of psychedelic research (Nutt & Carhart-Harris, 2021). Between 1950 to mid-1960s, over 1000 clinical papers were published, involving nearly 40,000 participants and six international conferences focussing on psychedelic-assisted psychotherapy were organised (Grinspoon & Bakalar, 1979; Kabil, 2016). In the 70s and 80s, Greer and Tolbert (1986) explored MDMA with over 80 participants in a couples' therapy context, which is key to point out for this study. They found couples who used MDMA together reported an increase in communication, overall improvements in fear of emotional hurt, as well as increased insight and improved emotional processing, which potentially contributed to long-term relationship changes. These studies were not controlled and findings never officially published, although the authors did prompt initial discussions on MDMA potentially yielding positive therapeutic benefits for couples and ultimately set the foundations for more contemporary psychedelic couples' research (see Wagner et al., 2021a). Studies from this initial phase of research are frequently criticised for small samples sizes, being poorly controlled and fraught with biased outcomes, however, they introduced key concepts, such as 'set (mindset) and setting (environment)' which remains central in psychedelic research today (Barber, 2018; Dyck, 2008; Hartogsohn, 2016; Novak; 1997).

1.3.1. Current Landscape of Psychedelic Research

Since the early 2000s, psychedelic research predominantly emerged from the fields of neuroscience, psychiatry and psychopharmacology and is often referred to as the 'psychedelic renaissance' (Sessa, 2018; Wark & Galliher, 2010). For depression, a systematic review by Yao et al. (2024) found the strongest therapeutic efficacy for psilocybin, closely followed by ayahuasca and LSD. Another study found psilocybin demonstrated a reduction in depressive symptoms (Davis et al., 2021). More recently, the same authors published a randomised-control trial (RCT) demonstrating sustained reductions in depressive symptoms at five years post-treatment with 67% still in remission (Davis et al., 2025). Further clinical trials demonstrated

the use of psychedelic substances in treatment-resistant individuals experiencing depression, anxiety and substance use (dos Santos et al., 2018), alongside improvements in quality of life, with no serious adverse effects reported, suggesting a relative safety when ingesting those substances (Ishak et al., 2023). For cancer patients, one study found a significant reduction in anxiety and depression, alongside improvements in demoralisation, hopelessness, spiritual well-being and quality of life (Griffiths et al., 2016). Another study found decreases in alcohol use among individuals struggling with alcohol dependency (Bogenschutz et al., 2022).

For post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), a systematic review and meta-analysis of MDMA-assisted psychotherapy found significant improvements in PTSD symptoms, enhancing both response and remission rates for treatment-resistant PTSD (Shahrour et al., 2024). Moreover, although to be interpreted with caution due to limited evidence, some studies suggest an efficacy of psychedelics for smoking, eating disorders, sleep disorders, borderline personality disorder, obsessive-compulsive disorder and body dysmorphic disorder (Noorani et al., 2018; Yao et al., 2024). Overall, the most common side effects reported in clinical trials are transient hypertension, anxiety, nausea and headaches, although these are mostly limited to the dosing session itself (Kaminski & Reinert, 2024; Santos & Marques, 2021; Yao et al., 2024). Across these clinical trials, the main challenges from a methodological perspective remain small sample sizes, selection bias, the lack of control groups and the difficulty of blinding (Gomez-Escolar et al., 2024; Muthukumaraswamy et al., 2022; van Elk & Fried, 2023).

Psychedelic use in non-clinical samples is known as the 'betterment of well people' (MacLean et al., 2011; Pollan, 2019) and reflected in growing trends around 'microdosing', which means consuming psychedelics in smaller doses (e.g. Lo et al., 2024; Prochazkova et al., 2018; Rosenbaum et al., 2020). In non-clinical samples, a study using data from online discussions found psychedelic users reported reductions in participants' use of alcohol, tobacco and other substances, especially when using psilocybin (Boehnke et al., 2024). Another study in non-clinical samples found, by drawing on self-reported use of psychedelics, psychedelics were successfully used for self-treatment of symptoms of anxiety and depression (Kryszajtys et al., 2024). Whereas these studies focussed on individual outcomes, some literature has also considered the impact psychedelics in communal contexts. One phenomena encountered in collective psychedelic experiences is spontaneous communitas, which is defined as '*an experience of intense togetherness and shared humanity that temporarily transcends social structures'* (Kettner et al., 2021). For example, a study conducted at mass gathering across the US and UK recruited over 1200 participants and found recent communal use of psychedelics

positively predicted self-reported transformational experiences, social connectedness and positive mood, and for some participants even changes in moral values (Forstmann et al. 2020). Therefore, in naturalistic settings psychedelics may offer an opportunity to increase a sense of connection, both with nature and with other people, potentially addressing contemporary challenges, such as the climate crisis and widespread social isolation (Anderson et al., 2024; Forstman & Sagioglou, 2025). Overall, these findings suggest an emerging trend of psychedelic use, which is aimed at wellbeing rather than pathology and therefore offers a unique opportunity for Counselling Psychology research and practice.

1.3.2. Current Challenges in Psychedelic Research

Over recent years, media reports covering psychedelic research has increased, which in turn has become the predominant source of information for non-clinical samples (Petranker et al., 2020). The so-called 'Michael Pollan Effect' is a term used to capture the widespread cultural impact of Pollan's book '*How to Change Your Mind: What the New Science of Psychedelics Teaches Us About Consciousness, Dying, Addiction, Depression, and Transcendence.*' Pollan's accessible narrative brought psychedelic research into the mainstream discourse and its adaptation into a Netflix documentary series (2022) further amplified public awareness and legitimised psychedelic-assisted therapy as worthy of serious consideration in mental health care. However, this increased visibility is not without risk and extends to clinical samples too; participants in clinical trials may arrive with expectations influenced by these narratives. As media reports often inflate the benefits of psychedelics, it is important to manage the expectation of treatment outcomes (Smith & Applebaum, 2022), especially as patients with a history of psychiatric care and unsuccessful treatments generally report a distrust in mental health care (Breeksema et al., 2024). Similarly, Aicher et al. (2024) caution against the narrative of a paradigm shift in psychiatric care and psychedelic practitioners increasingly raise concern that psychedelics are misunderstood as a 'panacea', meaning a remedy to cure all problems (Earleywine et al., 2021). Such overenthusiasm could eventually result in a backlash against psychedelic research and treatment (Muthukumaraswamy et al., 2022; Petranker et al., 2020), and promote harmful psychedelic use amongst the general public. Additionally, some authors write this current renaissance may be a response to the contemporary struggle to seek meaning in life (Hartogsohn, 2018), an inherently existential struggle.

Moreover, considering the long-standing history of psychedelics in Indigenous communities, ethical questions arise around an equitable redistribution of this 'psychedelic renaissance', as these traditions were often exploited without appropriate recognition or reciprocity (Feinberg

et al., 2018; McCleave et al., 2024). Therefore, one should remain critical of the motivation of pharmaceutical companies who are aiming to patent, especially naturally occurring substances, for profit (Love & Love, 2024; Smith & Applebaum, 2022). Moreover, the literature conveys an urgency to increase the recruitment of participants from racialised backgrounds (MacIntyre, 2024). For example, one study found the naturalistic use of classic psychedelics or MDMA was associated with decreases in symptoms of depression and anxiety caused by racial discrimination (Williams et al., 2020) pointing towards the use of psychedelic-assisted therapy to address racial trauma (Williams et al., 2024). Moreover, Thrul and Garcia-Romeu (2021) highlight the importance of considering historical and systemic factors impacting participants of underrepresented communities in psychedelic research, as much of this is likely related to a history of unethical research practices understandably leading to distrust in medical research. Finally, whilst psychedelics may be beneficial to some, systemic inequality generally prevents psychedelic use among underrepresented communities and therefore eliminates the potential benefits psychedelics could offer (Viña & Stephens, 2023; Williams et al., 2024). In relation to the present study, it is important to consider how couples from different socioeconomic and ethnic backgrounds are affected by the structural inequalities, which in turn could impact their motivations and the psychedelic experience itself.

In regard to moving psychedelic research beyond its psychoactive properties, some authors highlight the importance of expanding the current understanding of factors impacting the recovery process (Marcus & Dakwar, 2024). As previously explored, research from the past two decades has predominantly focussed on effects *within* the individual with limited research exploring the effects *between* individuals (Kettner et al., 2021; Neubert et al., 2024). Anderson et al. (2019) write about an individualistic paradigm, which views psychedelic effects as contained within individuals rather than shared across a relational network, which stands in contrast to a long history of psychedelic use in group settings (Guerra-Doce, 2015). Although modern psychedelic-assisted therapy protocols are often resources-intensive (Johnson et al., 2008; Kumar et al., 2009) this individualistic stance prevails. Interestingly, when reviewing one qualitative study specifically, participants expressed wanting to connect with fellow participants, perhaps indicating the value of sharing the intensity of psychedelics experiences with others (Breeksema et al., 2014). Therefore, exploring psychedelics in relational settings might offer valuable insight into their therapeutic potential beyond the individual, which further highlights the need for research which acknowledges the interpersonal aspects of psychedelic experiences.

1.3.3. Psychedelics and Romantic Relationships

Over the last few years, there has been an increase in understanding the interplay between psychedelic experiences and romantic relationships. Anecdotal accounts of this phenomenon are being increasingly published in mainstream media (see Busby, 2023; Joshi, 2022; Ncube, 2024) with a Time Magazine headline stating: '*Psychedelics Could Revolutionize Couple Therapy*' (Ducharme, 2023).

In psychedelic research, few studies have explored the impact of psychedelics on romantic relationships specifically. For example, one study explored the naturalistic use of psychedelics and found improvements in sexual functioning, including increased pleasure, satisfaction with one's partner and body image, as well as improved communication during sex (Barba et al., 2024). The same study also found participants treated for depression with psilocybin, as opposed to escitalopram, experienced changes in sexual functioning post-treatment (Barba et al., 2024). Additionally, a large-scale survey further found shared psychedelic experiences increased relationship quality, attraction to partners and sexual activity (Kruger et al., 2025). In addition, compared to before the psychedelic experience, participants reported an increase in perceived authenticity, self-acceptance and freedom in self-expression, including increased engagement in consensual non-monogamy (such as polyamory or open relationships), or a stronger commitment within monogamous partnerships (Kruger et al., 2025). A recently published qualitative study found the use of micro-dosing psychedelics had a positive effect on sexual and physical well-being, as it contributed to reduced performance-related anxiety and overall stress levels (Jacobs et al., 2024). Finally, one study found men, who had used LSD or psilocybin, reported better emotional regulation, which in turn mediated lower rates of intimate partner violence (Thiessen et al., 2018). Whereas this empirical evidence provides some preliminary insight into the potential impact of psychedelics on romantic partnership, the following studies have explicitly explored what occurs when couples take psychedelics together.

The substance most commonly known for its ability to increase empathy, trust and emotional openness between partners is MDMA and has been considered a promising tool for couples therapy (Lyubomirsky, 2022). Historically, studies characterised MDMA to lead to increased self-reported closeness to others, prolonged impact on social behaviours, improved relationships, communication, reduced defensiveness, and increased use of social and sexual words, alongside a willingness to disclose personal emotional context (Baggott et al., 2015; Borissova et al., 2021; Farrugia, 2015; Wardle & de Wit, 2014).

Whereas these studies lend some credibility to Greer and Tolbert's (1986) early research on MDMA, in clinical settings Wagner et al. (2021) have built on this. By running a pilot study, they explored the impact of conjoint cognitive-behavioural-couples-therapy (CBCT) and MDMA, where one partner presented with PTSD. It was found that both partners reported improvements in post-traumatic growth, relationship support and intimacy, as well as reduced conflict within the relationship. Partners diagnosed with PTSD reported improved psychosocial functioning and empathic concern, with all improvements being sustained at 3- and 6-month follow-up. Whereas this suggests a suitability for PTSD to be treated relationally within the relationship, these findings also highlight the opportunity to increase relationship quality using psychoactive substances. It is key to note that the study was conducted with no control group, meaning it remains unclear as to whether the outcomes were associated with MDMA, CBCT or their combination. Additionally, no qualitative data was collected meaning the subjective meanings of these changes within the relationship remain unexplored. Finally, the focus of this sample was on PTSD, so findings may therefore not translate to couples using MDMA for other reasons.

In addition, Anderson et al. (2019) and Colbert and Hughes (2023) both explored the experience of couples using MDMA in naturalistic settings. In both studies, couples reported a sustained and positive impact on communication and intimate bonding, describing the experience as a 'relationship tune up' or 'unique date night'. This was facilitated by self-disclosure, increased empathy, and breaking through emotional defences, as well as through the ritualistic preparation, which distinguished MDMA use from everyday life. Anderson et al. (2019) reported participants prepared for the shared experience by undergoing a 'purification', which included cleaning the trip space, curating the music, eating healthily and having baths. What emerged from both studies was that couples described making an intentional choice around *when* and *how* they used MDMA together, actively positioning MDMA as a relationship enhancer as opposed to an escapist outlet. From a methodological perspective, Colbert and Hughes (2023) drew on a grounded theory approach using semi-structured joint interviews and Anderson et al. (2019) used reflexive thematic analysis using semi-structured joint interviews, alongside diary entries and objects or photos.

Whereas these studies focussed on couples' experience of MDMA, Neubert et al. (2024) explored the use of classic psychedelics in couples. The findings suggested that those shared experiences allowed partners to share their most vulnerable side with their partner, enjoy the present moment together whilst feeling connected, as well as sharing positive regard for each

other through verbal and non-verbal cues. Participants reported that within the altered states, partners felt able to grow a better understanding of each other by gaining insight into their partner's inner and lived experience. Lastly, the couples reported greater insight into communication patterns, which enhanced the couples' ability for 'straight talking' and provided an opportunity for more spirited discussions. One participant shared: '*One thing that was different is that we didn't fight. Usually, when we discuss these things we fight at some point, but we didn't then. And we didn't do that on any of these trips*', which indicated the potential for classic psychedelics to facilitate conversation between partners which might be more challenging to have in ordinary consciousness. The authors further introduced the term 'psychedelic intimacy' defined as '*a state of interactional intimacy achieved via a psychedelic-induced altered state of consciousness*' (Neubert et al., 2024), suggesting a unique intimacy arising within a psychedelic-induced altered state. This study was the first empirical study to explore the use of classic psychedelics within romantic relationships in a naturalistic setting, filling a gap in psychedelic and relationship research. From a methodological perspective and similarly to Colbert and Hughes (2023) and Anderson et al. (2019), this study used joint interviews, which limits our understanding of differences within the couples and the individual process of the meaning-making. Finally, whilst the study does include psilocybin, it groups together classic psychedelics (incl. LSD, DMT, and mescaline), which limits our understanding of the psilocybin experience specifically, which likely differs in its texture.

Most recently, Cornelius and Barba (2026) conducted the first large scale survey study with 798 participants, including 81 couples. The researchers found that individuals who shared a psychedelic experience together reported greater 'shared reality', as well as improvements across physical intimacy, emotional and spiritual closeness, relationship satisfaction and overall commitment. By 'shared reality', the authors refer to couples' sense of shared understanding of the experience, which acted as a mediator for those positive changes within the relationship. Most notably, the study also reported that taking a psychedelic alone was indirectly associated with the decision to end a romantic relationship. As such, these findings highlight the interpersonal dimension in which psychedelics are used and the need for qualitative research to explore what these shared experiences actually feel like for couples from a phenomenological perspective.

It is important to highlight that across the naturalistic studies (Anderson et al., 2019; Colbert & Hughes, 2023; Neubert et al., 2024), the effects of psychedelic experiences on romantic relationships often arise from an intentional and careful use of the substances. To achieve a

positive psychedelic experience, it is recognised that appropriate motivation, preparation and harm reduction measures are key (Palmer & Maynard, 2022). Nonetheless, from these initial findings, it could be suggested that couples' psilocybin experiences, when approached with care and intention can potentially yield similar outcomes.

1.4. The Case for Psilocybin

It is important to highlight, there is currently another study in progress at Imperial College London, in collaboration with Beautiful Space, a psilocybin-assisted couples therapy programme in the Netherlands (T. Barba & S. Tilley, personal correspondence, 2025). However, to date, there is no published research that has explored what emerges between couples when they take psilocybin together. Psilocybin is among the three most frequently studied psychedelic substances over the last two decades (Schenberg, 2018), perhaps due to its low addictive potential and relative safety profile. A meta-analysis drawing on data from eight RCT's (n=110) examined the use of psilocybin in healthy and high-functioning individuals, where psilocybin was found to have an acceptable safety profile (Studerus et al., 2011). Another systematic review found similar results, noting no reports of clinical adverse effects and deaths associated with psilocybin ingestion (Hodge et al., 2023). Moreover, findings published by the UK's Independent Scientific Committee on Drugs in 2010 suggested psilocybin-containing mushrooms ranked lowest in terms of overall harm when compared with other widely used substances, such as alcohol, tobacco and cocaine (Nutt et al., 2010). Therefore, it could be argued that psilocybin's relative safety profile makes it attractive to study when used in naturalistic settings.

The following section explores the qualitative texture of the psilocybin experience in more detail, by highlighting frequently encountered experiences, such as mystical experiences, ego-dissolution, connectedness, emotional breakthroughs, and love. When reviewing especially qualitative research, it is evident that psilocybin can have significant impacts on relationships, although these studies did not directly focus on the impact on relationships. For example, a study conducted by Belser et al. (2017) found all 13 participants reported insights about their personal relationships, specifically noting relational breakthroughs, including one participant who forgave her husband for infidelity during her cancer treatment. Another participant experienced a '*deeper connection with his girlfriend*', becoming '*more emotionally open*' and proposing to her within three months after the psilocybin session. Watts et al. (2017) similarly report increases in emotional connection with one participant reporting their partner noticed

improvements in communication skills. Another participant described having improved clarity in relationships, stating it was '*as if suddenly the scales dropped from my eyes, I could see things as they really are*', suggesting psilocybin could facilitate meaningful insight and transformations in relationships. While these findings demonstrate the potential impact of psilocybin on romantic relationships, other experiential features of psilocybin may also be relevant for shared experiences in romantic dyads.

1.4.1. Mystical experiences

Mystical experiences capture a range of features, such as the disruption to self-identity, sacredness, timelessness, ineffability, and interpersonal connectedness (Griffiths et al., 2006). Research consistently demonstrates that mystical experiences significantly predict therapeutic outcomes, and directly correlate with therapeutic efficacy, as well as well-being (Garcia-Romeu et al., 2015; Ko et al., 2022; Roseman et al., 2019). Perhaps the most recognised psilocybin study was conducted by Griffiths et al. (2006), who found psilocybin-induced mystical experiences were amongst participants' most spiritually significant experiences across a lifetime. Mystical experiences are frequently underpinned by a noetic quality, which is also referred to as gaining a deeper insight about oneself, a situation, the world, and one's place in it (Barrett et al., 2015; Studerus et al., 2010), often leading to lasting changes in terms of self-awareness, creativity, relationships, and worldview (Metastasio et al., 2025). Whereas mystical experiences can lead to profound changes in meaning-making and personal narrative, which is central to therapeutic change, it is important to pay attention to the ethical challenges of introducing such profound 'newly gained' knowledge for participants (Timmerman et al., 2022). Nonetheless, Van Deurzen (1990; in Ruger, 2020) writes, there is 'a lot more to psychology than is written in the academic textbooks', further suggesting that in Counselling Psychology '*we can rediscover what has been so skilfully hidden elsewhere'*. However, this requires an openness to embrace experiences outside the conventional, which in turn could act as a catalyst for intimacy between couples. Moreover, in romantic relationships, shared spiritual values and experiences have been linked to greater relationship satisfaction and stability, as they increase a sense of shared meaning within the relationship (Mahoney et al., 1999), perhaps suggesting that psilocybin-induced mystical experience may support couples in those domains.

1.4.2. Ego-dissolution

Ego-dissolution is a frequently reported experience in psilocybin users defined as a breakdown in, or loss of the sense of self, typically characterised by a diminished sense of boundaries between the self and the external world (Nour et al., 2016; Millière, 2017). Qualitative studies suggest, ego-dissolution can re-define one's self-image and world view by releasing difficult emotions, such as guilt and shame (Nielson et al., 2018; Agin-Liebes & Davies, 2021). Another study found, those who approach psychedelics with therapeutic or spiritual intentions, experience greater ego-dissolution compared to those motivated solely by curiosity (Adamczyk et al., 2025), suggesting couples who might seek healing within the relationship can potentially benefit from experiences of ego-dissolution, as it may reduce barriers to intimacy and promote a more non-defensive way of relating. Unlike other phenomenon typically encountered during psilocybin journeys, ego-dissolution is a temporary experience confined to the trip itself. Nonetheless, the phenomenological implications of ego-dissolution for couples are to be considered, as phenomenology generally views the first-person subjectivity as foundational (Husserl, 1968). However, in subjective reports of ego-dissolution there is a noticeable absence of the first-person pronoun when describing the experience itself (Millière, 2017). So, for couples the disruption of a first-person subjectivity may open the space to shift from an 'I-You' focus to a more fluid sense of 'We', suggesting the experience of ego-dissolution in romantic dyads could offer valuable insight into the intersubjective spaces often written about in existential and psychodynamic literature. Moreover, a temporary softening of the rigid self-boundaries suggests that for couples there could be a window for reduced defensiveness and greater receptivity, which is a core mechanism in EFCT change processes (Johnson, 2008).

Ego-dissolution, with its dissolving of self-boundaries, might also manifest linguistically in couples, by shifting from individual to plural pronouns; a phenomenon frequently documented in relationship research. Seider et al. (2009) found middle-aged and older couples who used more we-pronoun, compared to 'you' and 'I', within a 15-minaute conflict conversations was associated with lower cardiovascular arousal, more positive emotional behaviour and generally higher martial satisfaction. In couples coping with heart failure, Rohrbaugh et al. (2008) found use of the 'we' pronoun by the spouse, predicted positive changes in patients' health symptoms and general wellbeing over six months. Overall, these findings suggest using the first-person plural pronoun use reflects a shared orientation toward coping, where a couple's problems are constructed as 'ours' rather than 'yours' or 'mine'.

1.4.3. Connectedness

Closely related to ego-dissolution is the sense of connectedness, which is defined as boundless connection and unity with one's surroundings (Kałużna et al., 2022) and often arises regardless of the condition psilocybin-assisted therapy might aim to address (Crowe et al., 2023). This phenomenon warrants particular attention, as it stands in direct contrast to disconnection and loneliness, which are states often found in individuals with lower psychological functioning, including depression, anxiety, suicidality, and alcohol dependence (Åkerlind & Hörnquist, 1992; Cacioppo et al., 2006; Hagerty et al., 1996; Watts et al., 2017). Research findings further suggest that connectedness also generally improved participants relationship with loved ones (Agin-Liebes et al., 2021). Watts et al. (2017) conducted a qualitative study during a psilocybin trial for depression and captured one participant stating: '*My wife and I went for dinner for the first time in 6 years: we were like a couple of teenagers*.' For couples, psilocybin's capacity to foster connectedness could offer specific value, as it is generally reported that connectedness is felt beyond the acute psychedelic experience for days and weeks after, and has been found to correlate with general improvements in mental health and well-being, perhaps also amplifying associated feelings of belonging, love, and responsibility of others (Amada et al., 2020; Belser et al., 2017; Kałużna et al., 2022). In the literature, these ongoing effects are also known as 'the afterglow' (Evens et al., 2023), which might strengthen the emotional intimacy and commitment between partners beyond the trip itself. Moreover, for Counselling Psychology connectedness is especially pertinent considering the profession's relational underpinning and belief that distress is frequently sustained by an intrapersonal and interpersonal disconnection, meaning interventions often aim to increase connectedness (Cooper, 2009), which could perhaps be supported by psilocybin.

1.4.4. Emotional breakthroughs

Another experiential feature frequently reported is emotional breakthroughs leading to personal, as well as interpersonal insights (Belser et al., 2017; Roseman et al., 2019) with greater emotional breakthroughs significantly predicting changes in well-being after psilocybin experiences (Roseman et al., 2019). The extent of those is often dose-dependent and are qualitatively different from mystical or challenging experiences. For example, participants from various qualitative studies describe how during psilocybin experiences, they 'remembered' aspects of themselves previously forgotten, often reconnecting them with a sense of what is important in their lives leading to feelings of being 'reborn', 'alive' and

'empowered'. They further reported becoming 'unstuck', which led to healthier behaviours and contributed to a lasting impact on quality of life, life priorities and overall sense of identity (Al-Naggar et al., 2021; Belser et al., 2017). It is further recognised that set (mindset) and setting (environment) can both predict the intensity of emotional breakthroughs, which indicates the context in which psilocybin is taken plays an integral role (Carhart-Harris et al., 2018; Hartogsohn, 2020). In the therapeutic literature, emotional breakthroughs are described as emotional transformation, which can provide an emotionally corrective experience (Greenberg & Pascual-Leone, 2006). In a romantic context, the disclosure of vulnerable emotions, when met with caring responsiveness, has been found to be a key predictor of intimacy and long-term relationship growth (Laurenceau et al., 1998), highlighting how psilocybin-assisted breakthroughs in couples could support relational flourishing.

1.4.5. Love

Perhaps a blindingly obvious aspect of relationships is love. Participants across studies consistently report experiences of profound love during psilocybin sessions (Griffiths et al., 2006; Brennan et al., 2012; Watts et al., 2017), with another study suggesting these feelings of love persisted for months following administration (Watts et al., 2017). Qualitative studies found these experiences of love emerged in relation to a specific interpersonal relationship, such as to a parent, child or partner (Belser et al., 2017; McCulloch, 2022). For couples in an altered state, this might suggest accessing a deeper emotional connection. Finally, in the relationship literature, studies found that positive affect, partner care, alongside expressions of love are integral to relationship satisfaction and long-term commitment (Proulx et al., 2007). This amplified experience of love during psilocybin trips could therefore potentially strengthen couples' bonds and again, support relational flourishing.

1.4.6 Others

Alongside the experiential features explored above, the psilocybin experience is perhaps most commonly understood through the profound sensory and perceptual changes impacting the overall embodied experience. One study suggested embodiment as an important feature with one participant describing it as an '*alternation or transfiguration of normally felt embodied state*' (Belser et al., 2017). Additionally, heightened sensory experiences can include changes to auditory and visual perception with one participant from a qualitative study describing: '*I first felt my temperature feel like it went up a little. Then my eyesight started to catch more colours, and I remember going to see myself in the mirror. I giggled a lot'* (Al-Naggar et al.,

2021). In regard to meaning-making, psilocybin experiences have been found to consist of layers of meaning arising through personal interpretation (Belser et al., 2017), which potentially indicates that during the shared experience the partner could significantly impact the meaning-making process. Finally, the ineffability of certain aspects of the psilocybin experience presents challenges during the integration phase with many participants reporting their experiences as 'beyond language' (Breeksema et al., 2024). Participants of the same study expressed wanting to connect with other participants, to create a sense of shared understanding of their experience with one participant explicitly noting: '*I would want to know what someone else's experience was like. So, I can say: yes, I saw that too. Or I have also experienced that. And that might make me start reflecting again.*' Therefore, potentially sharing the experience with a romantic partner could prolong the perceived benefits from the experience itself.

1.5. Risks & Ethical Consideration of 'Love Drugs'

It is important to highlight that psychedelic-induced experiences can also lead to challenging experiences, commonly referred to as 'bad trips. This can include frightening illusions and hallucinations, confusion, overwhelming anxiety or panic, paranoid delusions (Strassman, 1984; Gashi et al., 2021), or other unpleasant experiences, such as deep unhappiness (Breeksema et al., 2024).

Barrett et al. (2016) developed the Challenging Experience Questionnaire (CEQ) and provided valuable insight into the various relationships between challenging experience and therapeutic outcomes. As such, confronting one's own mortality positively correlated with meaningfulness ratings, while fear was negatively associated with overall spiritual significance of the trip. In a qualitative study, Belser et al. (2017) found over half of participants experienced temporary states of fear, confusion, panic, or paranoia during psilocybin experiences, although these occurred without serious adverse effects when managed well within a supportive therapeutic environment. Moreover, research shows that participants often interpret challenging experiences as an opportunity for growth, which in turn was perceived positively and provided existential and life-altering insights (Carbonaro et al., 2016; Gashi et al., 2021; Shaw et al., 2022). Within psychedelic literature, set and setting can contribute to an effective psychedelic experience, as well as reduce the risk of a 'bad trip' (Shewan et al., 2000; Hartogsohn, 2020). The absence of appropriate set and setting can include using substances without the adequate support, inexperience with drugs regarding purity, dosage, mixing drugs, not preparing properly for the trip, having a generally careless approach to drug use, having existing mental

health conditions, or unresolved acute or long-term psychological trauma (Bunce, 1979; Móró et al., 2011; Strassman, 1984). Generally, in naturalistic settings, appropriate preparation prior to trips has been linked to making a difference in well-being following a psychedelic experience (McAlpine et al., 2024; Modlin et al., 2023).

Finally, in a book published by Earp and Savulescu (2020), the authors address the ethical questions that might arise when interfering into relationships with psychoactive substances. Importantly, the authors note how psychoactive interventions already impact relationships. For example, serotonin reuptake inhibitors (SSRIs) are not explicitly designed to interfere with relationships, although they are also known to influence libido (Safak et al., 2025). Limited evidence also suggests that SSRIs can cause 'emotional blunting' (Marazziti et al., 2019), which could potentially impact emotional attunement between romantic partners. More generally, Earp and Savulescu (2020) further call for research to understand how other widely prescribed pharmaceuticals, such as hormonal birth control, as well as recreational drugs and alcohol impact relationships.

With this in mind, Earp and Savulescu (2020) propose two key ethical arguments. Firstly, if psychedelic-assisted therapy can genuinely improve interpersonal relationships, and for the sake of the argument of the present study, romantic relationships, this should be considered a positive. However, as the medical model remains the predominant lens, one should remain cautious of medicalising natural relationship dynamics into pathological conditions to can be 'treated' with 'medication'. Therefore, shifting the perspective to consider psychedelics as relationship enhancers, as opposed to treatments, could prevent the labelling of common relationship challenges as disorders, while still providing support to couples who might actually benefit from such interventions (Earp & Savulescu, 2020). Finally, in contrast to 'love drugs', the authors further argue that 'anti-love' drugs may be ethically permissible in contexts of severe relationship dysfunction, including abusive dynamics where emotional attachment might impede the ability to leave a toxic situation (Earp et al., 2013). However, the authors also caution against a trajectory where such interventions enter the mainstream. They warn against the potential of coercion, power imbalances, the challenges around informed consent, and the societal pressure to 'fix' relationships.

1.7. Relevance to Counselling Psychology

Firstly, at its core, Counselling Psychology views people as relational beings. Whereas more traditional views, and perhaps Western ideals, understand people as individual entities,

Counselling Psychologists have recognised the enormous value of incorporating relational perspectives when supporting people towards well-being (Milton, 2010). Anderson et al. (2019) write about the current gap in psychedelic research, which neglects the interpersonal dimension of the psychedelic experience and presents a gap where Counselling Psychology can offer valuable contributions. Whereas for Counselling Psychology the obvious relationship is the therapeutic relationship, this emphasis on relationships does extend beyond into family relationships, intimate partner relationships, as well as the relationships we hold to the wider social, political, and cultural context we find ourselves in (Milton, 2010). Therefore, this study rests on the assumption first suggested by Carl Rogers (1995), who wrote the conditions necessary for growth are not limited to therapeutic professionals and instead can also emerge from 'real-life' relationships. According to Rogers, this opens an opportunity for romantic partners to hold a psychological space, which perhaps can be equally conducive to growth. I want to further acknowledge the complex social and political landscape in which psychedelics are situated, especially considering the tension between their long-standing history in Indigenous communities, whilst also currently classified as Schedule 1 substances in Europe and the US, with few exceptions, such as ketamine being legalised for treatment-resistant depression in the US and some European countries (Behera et al., 2024). This tension will be explored throughout the literature review and discussion.

Secondly, Counselling Psychology is rooted in humanistic philosophy, which is often referred to as the profession's ethical backbone. Humanistic values prioritise the individuals' subjectivity and cooperation over hierarchy, and generally resist a reductionist approach to diagnosis (Cooper, 2009). In contrast to the medical model, which defines psychological difficulties as sickness and pathology, Counselling Psychology aims to promote overall well-being and flourishing (Douglas et al., 2016), which is an ethos recognised in psychedelic research too. For example, in psychedelic literature studies have increasingly focused on non-clinical samples, which has been referred to as the 'betterment of well people' (MacLean et al., 2011; Pollan, 2019). Although the study positions itself outside of the medical model, by focussing on relationship well-being and flourishing, it is crucial to recognise that this focus reflects a position of privilege, which is not accessible to all.

Finally, Counselling Psychology adopts a pluralistic and reflexive stance. This means the profession acknowledges that no theory can fully explain human suffering, as well as well-being (Douglas et al., 2016). For Counselling Psychologists, this means holding an open mindset that allows to both question and draw on knowledge emerging from other frameworks.

This does also include the medical model, which still dominates much of mental health care. Whilst the present study does not position itself within the medical model, I acknowledge that throughout this thesis, especially in the literature review, clinical studies from within the medical model are included, as these have allowed psychedelic science to establish itself in regard to harm reduction and our understanding the therapeutic potential of psychedelics.

To conclude, bringing together the core principles of Counselling Psychology with the core therapeutic benefits of psychedelics offers a unique lens, from which we can develop a more complete understanding of psychedelic experiences, which can be incorporated into supporting healthy relationships, and perhaps beyond. Moreover, Ruger (2020) states that Counselling Psychology should position itself within the psychedelic renaissance, arguing it is appropriate for the profession as it aligns with its values.

1.8. Rationale for the Study

The literature presented prompts two key arguments in support of the current study. Firstly, while limited, some emerging evidence suggests that shared psychedelic experiences may be a suitable relationship practice for couples to increase their relational well-being and flourishing (Anderson et al., 2019; Barba et al., 2024; Colbert & Hughes, 2023; Kruger et al., 2025; Neubert et al., 2024; Wagner et al., 2021). Secondly, psychedelic research reveals an individualistic bias (Anderson et al., 2019), despite the evidence considering relationships as integral to overall psychological well-being. Therefore, the study addresses a significant gap in both, the relationship and psychedelic literature, as no study to date has focused on psilocybin between couples. This focus is also particularly relevant for Counselling Psychology.

As outlined earlier, Counselling Psychology recognises the importance of the relational dimension in understanding people and therefore has much to contribute, especially as psychedelics are gradually moving into the mainstream. If psychedelics were to be legalised as a therapeutic option in the UK, it would require the involvement of mental health professionals (Lintern, 2022). However, Counselling Psychology and the counselling profession more broadly, have remained relatively passive in this psychedelic resurgence, with research of counsellors' attitudes in the US linking this hesitation to a need for more research (Hearn et al. 2022). This is worrying, especially given the increasing likelihood that couples who use psychedelics in non-clinical settings and might seek out therapists for support during preparation and integration, as already offered by the UK Institute of Psychedelic Therapy. The

integration process following psychedelic experiences is widely recognised as integral for lasting benefits and described by therapists as the bridge between the psychedelic experience and daily life (Earleywine et al., 2022). This highlights the importance of raising awareness amongst therapists who may not be familiar with psychedelic experiences and findings could contribute to harm reduction and integration protocols for couples.

Finally, by addressing relational well-being and flourishing as opposed to pathology, the findings could shine light on how psilocybin could enhance already established couples' therapeutic approaches, such as EFCT (Johnson, 2008), particularly for couples who have exhausted more conventional interventions and are open for alternative means to increase relationship quality. Therefore, the research question this study will aim to address is:

- **What is the experience of adult couples taking psilocybin together?**

Chapter 2: Methodology

In this chapter, I provide an overview of the methodology. I will outline the research design, before drawing on the theoretical and philosophical foundations underpinning this study, including a rationale for adopting a qualitative approach. The foundations of case study research design are then explored and Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA; Smith et al., 2022) is introduced, alongside the inclusion of object-based data. The chapter then moves onto the procedural components of the study, including participant recruitment, sampling and data collection before outlining the process around data analysis. Finally, the relevant ethical considerations are discussed, and the chapter closes with reflexivity around my own positioning in relation to the research.

In brief, the study adopted a multiple case study research design to explore the experience of two couples who have taken psilocybin together in the last twelve months. Each couple was interviewed together and separately, and each participant contributed an object of their choice, alongside a 250-word written paragraph to elaborate on the personal meaning of their contribution. All interviews, including the written contribution, were analysed using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) according to Smith et al. (2022) and examined the following research question:

- What is the experience of adult couples taking psilocybin together?

2.1 Theoretical underpinnings

In science, there are two recognised approaches to derive empirical knowledge. Firstly, quantitative methods draw on large scale samples and use statistical procedures to understand causal or correlational relationships between variables (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000b in Pontoretto, 2005). Psychology has been criticised to have been dominated by positivist and postpositivist research paradigms, and the associated quantitative research methods that sit within that paradigm (Pontoretto, 2005). In contrast to quantitative research, qualitative research aims to understand what participants' experiences are like and how they make sense of them (Willig, 2012). Although qualitative research can still draw on theoretical and psychological language, these experiences tend to take place in the real world and therefore, qualitative findings are often presented in everyday language and use participants' own words (Willig, 2012). Qualitative approaches further aim to understand how context influences these experiences, meaning that to understand a participant's experience of taking psilocybin, it is crucial to reflect

on the various paradigms in which drug-taking can occur. This includes medical contexts, religious and spiritual practices, or recreational settings (Gonzáles-Romero, 2022). Moreover, qualitative research is mostly, but not always, inductive. This means the research is not driven by an established hypothesis, which influences the direction of the research, but instead the aim is to bracket any theoretical knowledge before the analytical process. This allows novel insights to come from the data directly and, depending on the exact approach, is subsequently compared with theory and literature. In summary, Drisko (1997; in Willig, 2012) stated qualitative research is '*a family of approaches with a few close and distant relations, some extended kin, some off cousins and a few nasty divorces*'. Whilst there are many different approaches within qualitative research, it is the theoretical and philosophical underpinnings which guide a study in regard to research aims, design, methodology, and data analysis.

2.1.1. Rationale for qualitative research

There are a few important reasons for adopting a qualitative approach to this study. Psychedelic experiences are highly subjective and often ineffable (Griffiths et al. 2006), meaning qualitative methods allow participants to describe the richness of their experience beyond what standardised measures could capture (Watts et al., 2017). Additionally, as this study explored the psilocybin experience specifically, adopting a qualitative approach further contributed to the understanding of the texture and phenomenology of psilocybin specifically (Breeksema et al., 2024). Moreover, it considers the impact of context, such as the immediate and collective setting, to understand psilocybin beyond its psychoactive properties. As the focus of the study is the couples' experience, a qualitative approach further allowed for insight into the relational dynamics between couples. Finally, qualitative research can impact the world on multiple levels, such as adopting a role where participants shine light on an experience outside of the conventional (Larkin, 2019), as couples using psilocybin within romantic relationships.

Lastly, in qualitative research the researcher is a central figure meaning the researcher must possess reflexivity both as a person (personal reflexivity) and as a thinker (epistemological and ontological reflexivity) (Willig, 2013). This means researchers are encouraged to understand their own positioning in relation to the research topic and establish a theoretical foundation (Braun & Clarke, 2021). There are three distinct concerns: ontology, epistemology and axiology. Simply put, ontology asks 'what is there to know?', epistemology asks 'how can we know?', and axiology questions 'what values do we bring?' (Crotty, 1998; Pontoretto, 2005; Willig, 2013; Pretorius, 2024).

2.1.2. Ontology

Ontology is the branch of philosophy concerned with the nature of reality (Ponterotto, 2005). Although I believe the impact of psychedelics is objectively observable in terms of neurological processes, I also believe the experience elicited by the psychoactive properties of psychedelics differs for each individual. Therefore, this study subscribes to a ***relativist ontology***, which suggests instead of the reality being a fixed entity, the reality is formed by individual and collective experiences (Pretorius, 2024). As a relativist researcher, my aim is to capture the richness of the shared psilocybin experience, whilst acknowledging that multiple realities can coexist (Pretorius, 2024).

In the context of this study, each partner constructs their own reality of the shared psilocybin experience, which is influenced by their personal experiences, perceptions, interpretations, as well as interactions with wider culture and society. Importantly, there is no expectation for these experiences to be similar. The relativist stance is applied to each person's subjective experience within the context of their relationship. Although partners might share similar experiential features, these are ultimately interpreted differently depending on their history and context they bring to the experience, and can hold different meanings for each individual. Finally, as a relativist, I acknowledge to hold my own biases, beliefs and values, which are brought to the research process and explored later in 2.5.

2.1.3. Epistemology

Epistemology is concerned with the study of knowledge; it asks questions that focus on the nature of knowledge, how knowledge can be acquired, and whether valid and reliable claims about knowledge can be made (Willig, 2013). The epistemological positioning of a research study informs us about the goal of the research and what type of knowledge it aims to represent. For example, positivism, which is an epistemological position often encountered in social and psychological sciences, assumes a straightforward relationship between the world, our perception and our understanding of it (Willig, 2013). The foundations of positivism have been established by Karl Popper (1969), who introduced the hypothetico-deductivist method. In that paradigm, knowledge is gathered by setting hypotheses from existing theories, which are then tested through observation and / or controlled experiments and conclusions are drawn.

Whereas positivist approaches to psychedelic research have provided important evidence which ultimately supported the re-emergence of psychedelic research, researchers argue the therapeutic effects of psychedelics cannot be explained solely by their neurobiological

mechanisms (Vollenweider & Smallridge, 2022). Instead, it is the subjective effects of psychedelic experiences which play a central role in their therapeutic potential. However, the absence of phenomenology within psychedelic literature means, we still lack important insights into the form and structure of these psychedelic experiences (Miceli-McMillan & Fernandez. 2023; Yaden & Griffiths, 2020).

Therefore, the primary epistemological position of this study was phenomenology, and its theoretical foundations will be explored later in 2.2.2. By adopting a phenomenological epistemology, I aim to explore the texture, structure and form of the shared psilocybin experience, or simply put, *what it was like* for couples to take psilocybin together. Generally speaking, the main aim of phenomenological enquiry is to gain access to participants subjective experiences, by 'stepping into their shoes' to gather a better understanding of the meaning they attribute to these experiences (Willig, 2013; Willig, 2019).

Heidegger (1962), who was known as a phenomenological philosopher, argued every individual perceives the same phenomenon differently drawing upon their unique lived experience and historical context. However, ego-dissolution is frequently reported in psychedelic literature and involves a compromised perception of selfhood (Nour et al., 2016) and is known to evoke a blurring of boundaries, an increased sense of unity and connectedness. Although this challenges the first-person subjectivity of phenomenology, I acknowledge the distinctness of the two minds and two bodies within the shared experience. I assume each partner has an individual experience, personally meaningful in different ways, yet significantly influenced by their partner's presence. Moreover, when couples retrospectively talk about the experience, the assumption was that their shared meaning threaded itself into their respective accounts. For this reason, I further adopted a social constructivist epistemology, which assumes meaning comes into existence through our engagement with the immediate social world around us and further comes to light through the dynamic engagement between researcher and participant (Crotty, 1998; Ponterotto, 2005).

To understand this better, it is the works of Dupuis (2022) and Hartogsohn (2016) that I will refer to. Drawing on ethnographic research, Dupuis (2022) proposed the term 'socialization of hallucinations' to highlight how cultural expectations and social interactions influence the phenomenology of psychedelic experiences, such as encountering culturally relevant symbols (e.g. snakes, Christian imagery) during hallucinations. In the present study, the shared psilocybin experience unfolded in the context of the participants' own lives, their relationship and broader cultural context; all of which likely influenced the experience and the associated

meaning-making processes. From a social constructivist perspective, knowledge is co-constructed through dialogue and shared interpretation, suggesting that couples' conversations during and after the trip played an active role in shaping how the experience was understood between the couple.

Moreover, Hartogsohn (2016) explored how set (mindset) and setting (environment) impact psychedelic experiences, which highlights that a couple taking psilocybin together does not do so in isolation; their shared history, attachment patterns and communication styles all become part of the 'set' that influences their trip. Importantly, Hartogsohn (2020) extends this to a collective set and setting, which includes the broader social, cultural and historical factors. As mentioned previously, psychedelic use is often situated within broader narratives ranging from spiritual or religious use to therapeutic or medical use, and recreational use (Gonzáles Romero, 2022). In the context of this, participants' meaning-making might have therefore been influenced by their relationship, as well as the wider cultural discourse they encountered.

2.1.4. Axiology

The final positioning to consider is axiology, as it influences the ethical and moral dimensions of the research and encourages the researcher to consider how their values, beliefs and biases guide the research design and interpretation of the data (Pontoretto, 2005; Pretorius, 2024). Whereas in positivist paradigms, researchers will strive for objectivity with findings needing to be discovered independent of the researcher, this complete objectivity is often questioned as the researchers' worldview and cultural context are inevitably influencing the research from the point of deciding what research to engage with in the first place (Pretorius, 2024).

My personal stance is informed by humanistic and existential values, which appear both in my research and my clinical work. The works of Rogers (1995), Yalom (1980), and Frankl (1985) are fundamental in shaping my approach to people; I believe in the importance of forming empathic and respectful relationships with others, and I believe within such encounters, individuals can heal and find meaning. I also resonate with Gendlin's (1996) belief that humans have an embodied, pre-verbal dimension of experience, and therefore view and value the 'felt sense' as a legitimate and meaningful source of knowledge. Together, these principles inform my axiology in that I approached participants as individuals whose experiences should be encountered with respect, empathy, and care. I did not want to approach participants as objects to be studied.

2.2. Method

To answer the research question, the chosen research method was a multiple case study research design. This method allows the researcher the flexibility to draw on various research methods, which means the limitations of certain research methods can be mitigated by drawing on other methods (Willig, 2013). First, I will an overview of case study research and its relevance to Counselling Psychology, before exploring the theoretical foundations and relevant steps of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA; Smith et al., 2022) which were used to analyse the data. This section will conclude with a brief overview of object-based data.

2.2.1. Case study design

Case study research, albeit not a research methodology in itself, refers to *'an approach to examine a singular entity, which can involve a wide range of data collection and analysis methods'* (Bromley, 1986). This is not to be confused with *case studies* that are a popular tool to demonstrate a real-life example and often utilised in teaching across various disciplines (Yin, 2018). Although in psychology case study research can be approached using qualitative or quantitative research methods, which generally allows for diversity in how case study research is designed, Willig (2013) and Yin (2018) have identified several defining features researchers should adhere to.

Both authors suggest an *idiographic approach* to case study research, meaning it should represent an in-depth exploration of a particular entity, experience, organisation, or individual. The authors further suggest a *temporal element*, meaning data collection should reflect the development of a case over time. Finally, case study research should also be concerned with *contextual information* and researchers should pay careful attention to how the case is interacting with the environment. Willig (2013) additionally draws attention to *triangulation*, which is perhaps the most defining feature to case study research and further explored in 2.5.

Over the past decade, interest in case study research design has grown significantly and authors often argue it is an overlooked method of approaching research (McLoed, 2010; Yin, 2018). In particular for Counselling Psychology, case study research design presents a unique opportunity to uphold the professions' core values, as seeking the idiographic meaning of participants' or clients' experiences is both integral to qualitative researchers and Counselling Psychologists alike. Willig (2013) stated this renewed interest in such an idiographic approach is reflected in '*a desire to gain a deeper understanding of what motivates people, especially at an unconscious level, to move beyond qualitative research which describes but does not explain*

research participants behaviours and experiences.' Whilst case study research fits the current study, by aiming to explore the particular as opposed to the general (Bromley, 1986), it also provides a framework to situate the findings within the social, cultural and relational context (Yin, 2018). The possibility to explore the in-depth, as well as the context, enables a richer and more comprehensive understanding of the experience at hand. Moreover, IPA has been increasingly used to explore singular cases (e.g. Eatough & Shaw, 2019), as it allows for the analysis to be anchored in the context of the interview and the participants' experiences (Smith et al., 2022). Smith et al. (2022) do point towards conceptual and practical challenges, and encourage researchers to carefully plan the execution of a case study design. Finally, Smith et al. (2022) supported case study research design by citing Bromley (1986) who stated: '*The notion that a case-study, even an extended case-study, can only be exploratory, whereas a social experiment or survey can provide definitive results, is incorrect*.'

2.2.1 Consideration of Other Methodologies

Initially, I considered constructivist grounded theory (GT; Charmaz, 2014), as it is useful for areas of study lacking academic research backing (Birks & Mills, 2015) and to study the experience of concealed groups (Charmaz, 2014; Glaser & Strauss, 1967). However, through engaging with the psychedelic literature and growing need for a phenomenological understanding of the psychedelic experience, it became evident to consider a methodology which allows for the incorporation of phenomenology, such as Reflexive Thematic Analysis (RTA; Braun & Clarke, 2021) and Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA; Smith et al. 2022). In the second phase of research design, RTA was explored as it allowed for the integration of dyadic theory into the analytical process. The aim of dyadic interview analysis is to lift the analysis from an individual to a dyadic level to enrich the depth and credibility of the content by creating a birds-eye view of the relationship (Eisikovits & Koren, 2010). The idea was to recruit at least six couples and interview them separately to create a dyadic view of their relationship and the shared psilocybin experiences. However, as the research was classified a high-risk study, due to its participants taking part in illegal activities, stringent General Data and Protection Regulation (GDPR) applied, which eventually led to various recruitment challenges. In light of the time constraints within the doctoral programme, case study research design was considered, as it became apparent the research design already had a few of the important features of case study research design as proposed by Willig (2013) and Yin (2018). Examples of this included the idiographic approach, focussing on the context, and the temporal elements. However, the key rationale for opting for case study research design

was triangulation (Willig, 2012), further explored in 2.5. Stamp (1994) proposed the gold-standard procedure is to interview couples separately and together, however, due to resource and time constraints, this was previously not possible. Therefore, choosing a case study design opened the possibility for joint, as well as individual interviews, alongside the inclusion of a multimedia data and written paragraph contributed by the participants themselves.

Reflexivity Box 2: Choice of Methodology

Switching to phenomenology as the primary epistemology was partially directed by the psychedelic literature and my own clinical training. To move our understanding of psychedelics beyond their psychoactive properties, the psychedelic research landscape was increasingly calling for more phenomenological enquiry to understand why these substances might be effective therapeutically. At the same time, in my own clinical practice, I was consolidating a more humanistic orientation, so I recognised a natural overlap between what the literature was asking for and my own professional development. Long before my training, I appreciated Gendlin's concept of the felt sense and embodied experiences, however, I often lacked the language to articulate this within an academic context. As my training progressed, I began to find a language to convey this and then came the possibility to choose a methodology, which could explore the subjective quality of how psychedelic experiences are often described anecdotally. Finally, opting for case study design was initially a response to recruitment challenges arising from this study being classed as 'high-risk'. However, the idiographic focus of working more closely with two couples ultimately felt more aligned values in my own clinical practice. In this way, the initial methodological constraint became an opportunity to align my research approach more closely with my own axiology, and the research process as a whole became more congruent.

2.2.2. Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis

To analyse the data collected, Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA; Smith et al., 2022) was used, which is a qualitative research method committed to exploring participants' experiences in more depth. The following three subsections explore the three key theoretical underpinnings of IPA namely phenomenology, hermeneutics, and ideography.

Phenomenology

The first theoretical foundation of IPA is phenomenology, which is also the primary epistemological underpinning of this study. It is a philosophical approach aiming to understand

what the experience of being human is 'like', what matters to us, and what is part of our own lived world (Smith et al., 2022). The philosopher Edward Husserl encouraged phenomenologists to '*go back to the things themselves' (ger: die Sachen selbst)* and IPA is founded on this principle (Husserl, 1927; Smith et al., 2022). As people engage with the everyday flow of life, certain experiences become important for different reasons, which then prompts a flow of thoughts, feelings, and reflections, and it is those reflections IPA aims to interact with (Smith et al. 2022). To grasp the essence of this, Husserl suggested one should adopt a phenomenological attitude called '*epoché'*, which stands for our ability to 'bracket' our own ideas and focus on the structure of the experience itself (Husserl, 1927). Martin Heidegger, a student of Husserl, expanded this by suggesting human beings are always embedded in a world influenced by people, history, culture, and relationships (Smith et al., 2022), and ultimately recognised the impossibility of fully bracketing one's own preconceptions.

Similar to Husserl and Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty was committed to understanding our 'being-in-the-world', but he emphasised the situated and interpretative nature of knowledge (Smith et al., 2022). His phenomenology of 'embodiment' challenges the Cartesian split between mind and body, and argued perception is always mediated through the lived body and our bodily engagement with the world (Merleau-Ponty, 1962). This perspective resonates with Blevin's (2023) argument that neurological processes are inseparable from cultural processes, which highlights portrays the psychedelic state as both embodied and embedded within the social contexts in which they arise and through which participants are socialised.

Hermeneutics

The second principle of IPA is hermeneutics, which is the theory of interpretation (Smith et al., 2022). Friedrich Schleiermacher is often credited with shifting the focus from finding 'correct' interpretations of texts into a broader study of understanding of how interpretation itself occurs. He noted, interpretation involves a *grammatical* interpretation referring to the objective meaning of a text, whereas the second layer is the *psychological* interpretation referring to the uniqueness of the researcher (Schleiermacher, 1998). This marked a shift from seeking predetermined meanings to examining how meaning emerges through the interpretative process. IPA stipulates that humans aim to make sense of their experience and choose to share a certain narrative about their experience with the researcher. As such, the researcher needs to recognise, it is only the *account* of the experience, and not the experience itself, they have access to (Smith et al., 2022). This means the researcher sits in a dual role as they aim to '*make sense of the participant trying to make sense of what is happening to them'*, otherwise also

called double hermeneutics (Smith et al., 2022). As for this study, the aim was to explore how the individual makes sense of their shared experience, *and* how the couple makes sense of their shared experience. To accommodate this, a 'triple hermeneutic' was adopted, which refers to a process that moves beyond interpreting 'just' the individuals' interpretation, as it also includes how meaning is co-constructed between partners and subsequently interpreted within the analysis (Mavhandu-Mudzusi, 2018).

Finally, a concept claimed by none of the authors but integral to hermeneutics is the hermeneutic circle, which is the dynamic relationship between 'parts' and the 'whole' (Smith et al., 2022). In IPA, the hermeneutic circle arises from a continuous moving between the detailed analysis of the participant's experience and the greater understanding of the phenomenon. It refers to the iteration between those two processes, which allows for the emergence of themes used for the interpretation of the phenomenon (Smith et al., 2022).

Idiography

The third key theoretical component of IPA is idiography. Idiography is concerned with the particular and stands in contrast with most of psychology, which is 'nomothetic' and aims to make claims about the general population (Smith et al., 2022). Idiography operates on two levels. Firstly, it involves an in-depth analysis of each participant's account to understand their experience. Secondly, it aims to understand how a particular phenomenon is experienced by particular people in a particular context (Smith et al., 2022). Importantly, the particular is not to be confused with the individual. As per Smith et al. (2022), experience is always *'embodied, situated, and perspectival'* meaning it cannot be separated from the contextual and relational contexts in which the experience occurs. This recognition is reflected in newly emerging approaches, such as Multiperspectival Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (Larkin et al., 2019), which assumes the phenomenon is located within the accounts of others who belong to the 'lived world' of the person, such as partners, children, and friends.

However, this study makes a clear distinction between exploring a dyadic relationship and recent developments have addressed the multiplicity of perspectives involved in understanding a phenomenon (see Larkin et al, 2019). Whereas multiperspectival designs have been carried out, I want to highlight the epistemological challenge from a phenomenological perspective. Phenomenology (Husserl, 1927) rests upon the assumption of the first-person subjectivity, meaning experience is lived and interpreted by an individual who brings their own autobiography, cognitive processes, and biology, which all contribute to how the experience is interpreted. Therefore, when two people share an experience, the assumption is each person

has their own distinct experience of the shared event, shaped by their own interpretative positioning. I want to acknowledge couples' experience of psychedelics can evoke a sense of a 'shared reality' (Cornelius & Barba, 2026), however for the purpose of this study, the assumption around the separateness of the two beings remains and it is the exploration of the individual experience from which I aim to shine light on the shared experience.

Finally, to uphold the principle of idiography, IPA studies tend to have homogenous and smaller sample sizes. Although similarities and contrasts can be observed across cases, generalisation should only tentatively occur through the researchers' professional knowledge (Smith et al., 2022). IPA studies usually collect data through semi-structured interviews, although visuals, audio recordings, objects, and documents are also suitable and can add an additional layer of meaning (Smith et al., 2009). The written transcripts of the interviews are then analysed and presented by outlining the analytical interpretation alongside verbatim extracts from participants (Smith et al., 2022).

Limitations of IPA

Whereas IPA is a valuable qualitative research methodology, it is important to remain aware of its limitations (Willig, 2013) especially in the context of psychedelic experiences. Terence McKenna stated psychedelic experiences are *'private, personal… and ultimately unspeakable'* (McKenna, 1991), which poses an inherent challenge as language is the main vehicle through which psychedelic drug users can convey their experiences (Shulgin et al., 1986). The difficulty to articulate psychedelic experiences has been linked to conveying the frightening, and at times even shameful visions and feelings arising during the altered state (Harris, 2019), whereas some limited evidence suggests LSD can temporarily disrupt the structure of speech (Tagliazucci, 2022). However, a linguistic analysis exploring participants talking about mystical experience, often referred to as ineffable, showed participants could meaningfully communicate their experiences (Yaden et al., 2016). Nonetheless, this tension should be acknowledged, as IPA relies on participants being able to articulate their thoughts, feelings, and perceptions about an experience, in addition to phenomenological enquiry predominately relying on text, as in semi-structured interviews (Willig, 2013).

In addition to language, phenomenological research aims to understand on how participants perceive their world by describing and documenting experiences. However, it does not attempt to explain it, which arguably disregards a valuable aspect of understanding a phenomenon by not exploring the reasons for the cause in differences between experiences and their potential origins (Willig, 2013). Moreover, Smith et al. (1996) postulate, IPA could fit into a social

cognition paradigm as it relies on participants accessing a set of cognitions, such as thoughts and beliefs, and such prioritisation does not align with phenomenology (Willig, 2013). Perhaps this also stands in contrast to the embodied nature of psychedelic experience, as noted by Belvin (2023).

2.2.3. Multimedia-based data

When collecting data about the subjective experience of psychedelic experiences, researchers have frequently relied on language or observation of behaviour to ascertain a sense of the experience (Shulgin et al., 1986). As explored above, most qualitative research methods have predominantly relied on linguistic data points, often discrediting object-based data due to its ambiguity and challenge in interpreting it (Reavey & Johnson, 2008). However, it does remains challenging to capture the phenomenological aspects of psychedelic experiences (Shulgin et al., 1986), so visual data could generate valuable psychological information by allowing participants to contribute data not reliant on language (Frith et al, 2005). Whereas visual data cannot generate objective knowledge about an experience and objects are not a direct representation of reality and still need to be interpreted by the researcher, it can provide insight into a participant's world at a particular moment in time (Willig, 2013). Therefore, to gather insight into participants' experiences beyond language, the current study asked participants to contribute multimedia based data point, which was representative of the couple's psilocybin experience. In addition to this, participants contributed a 250-word written paragraph to capture the personal meaning of their contribution, which was then included in the analysis.

2.2.4. Validity and Reliability

The validity and the reliability of qualitative research has often been challenged, partly due to the difficulty for standardised agreements for conduct and evaluation (Yardley, 2000). As such, Yardley (2017) proposed four categories qualitative research should adhere to and Table 1 shows how this present study meets these criteria. Moreover, another claim is that compared to statistical calculations, which make claims about the broader population, qualitative data analysis lacks the ability to be generalised. However, this does not mean that qualitative researchers do not aim to gather new insights and findings (Willig, 2019). As such, Max Weber (see Gobo, 2004) argued, the aim of qualitative research is to bring to life features within an experience that could be found in experiences of a similar kind; it does not aim to generalise an experience which cannot reoccur in the same way. Therefore, the purpose of qualitative research is to increase our understanding of a phenomenon, by drawing conclusions from the

data in a clear and transparent manner, which allows for continued enquiry and evaluation by other researchers (Willig, 2019).

Table 1
Demonstration of the study's commitment to quality

Yardley, 2017	Methodological Considerations
Sensitivity to context	Literature was reviewed and situated within relationship, psychedelic and Counselling Psychology context, outlined in Chapter 1. Use of IPA and subsequent use of quotes in the write-up meant that the interpretation was grounded in participants' meaning making and experience, see Chapter 3. Ethical issues, especially related to confidentiality due to legal status of psilocybin, are considered and outlined in 2.6.
Commitment & Rigour	Reflexivity throughout the research process and thesis write-up, including use of regular supervision (individual and group) to ensure methodological rigour and personal therapy to ensure personal reflexivity. Multiple data sources, e.g. individual and joint interview, plus inclusion of multimedia data to bring depth to analysis. Limitations of the present study are acknowledged in 4.3.
Transparency & Coherence	Clear rationale for the study established in Chapter 1. Details of methods used, including sampling, recruitment and analytical process outlined in Chapter 2. Appendices include interview schedules, including examples of analysis.
Impact & Importance	The study contributes to furthering our understanding of the interpersonal dimensions of psilocybin use and moves the psychedelic renaissance beyond its individualistic focus. Findings highlighted the potential value of drawing on the couple as a therapeutic resource. Throughout the thesis, links to Counselling Psychology are made, including the value that Counselling Psychology could contribute. Chapter 4 includes a discussion of wider implications on relationship and psychedelic literature, as well as future directions of research and clinical implications for Counselling Psychology.

2.3. Procedural Components

The following section outlines the practical steps involved to carry out the study.

2.3.1. Sampling

Within case study research design, there is a distinction between a single-case study and multiple-case study as proposed by Yin (2018). Although single-case studies are suitable if a case is unique and critical, Yin (2018) proposes case study research design should aim to

capture at least two cases. In contrast to focussing on a singular case, having at least two cases means the data collection process can be replicated, which allows for the development of the analysis across cases strengthening the findings overall. For IPA specifically, Smith et al. (2009) offer guidance on sample sizes, although their recommendations are not prescriptive. For professional doctorates, they propose between 6-10 interviews (note: not participants), although also note higher numbers of interviews are not indicative of 'better work'. For example, Bartholomew et al. (2021) found phenomenological research with larger sample size often coincided with lower quality research, as larger samples might inhibit the depth in the analysis. Therefore, the study adopted a multiple-case study design, which included two couples/ four participants. A total of six interviews were conducted, and each participant contributed a multimedia-based data set, including a 250-word written paragraph.

2.3.2. Recruitment process

The study was open to all forms of romantic relationships, including same-sex couples, providing they were monogamous. Participants had to have been *together at least three years* at point of interview and be *at least 18 years of age*, with no maximum age set. To ensure the focus of the interview was on recent events, couples needed to have *shared a psilocybin experience at least once in the last 12 months*. For safeguarding purposes, participants were excluded if they had people considered as vulnerable, such as children under the age of 18, living at the family home, if they currently were experiencing serious distress, had past experiences that could be re-activated when speaking about the psilocybin experience or had a history of self-identified problematic substance use. Finally, couples were required to be UK-based and, have written and spoken English to a standard which allowed them to understand the relevant documents and complete the interview process.

In regard to recruitment processes, a recruitment flyer (see Appendix 1) was designed to direct participants who were interested to a blog post, which was published on the University's blog hub (see Appendix 2). This included a brief summary, the participant information sheet, and a link to a Qualtrics form, which asked closed questions regarding the inclusion and exclusion criteria (see Appendix 3). The aim was to ensure potential participants were able to anonymously inform themselves, without eliciting any unnecessary contact between the public and the researcher. Both partners were required to submit the form separately and to link up the two separate forms, participants created a personal code using their initials and year of birth, as well as their partners code (e.g. Jane Doe, 1984 = JD1984). On the form, participants were also asked to share their email address, and by doing so, it was made clear they were

giving consent to be contacted by the researcher (see Appendix 4). If both members of the couple submitted the form and fitted the inclusion and exclusion criteria, the couple was contacted to arrange a pre-screening call.

In a first phase of recruitment, the flyer was shared via email with eight psychedelic societies across the UK, from which five shared it across their marketing channels. I attended three psychedelic events and conferences, two in the UK and one in Switzerland, where I presented the study and included the recruitment flyer in the presentation. The flyer was also shared in communities on Reddit and Facebook groups. In the second phase, I shared the flyer amongst my own personal network, which included researchers and professionals active within the psychedelic community. On the Qualtrics form, a total of 15 submissions were made and four were eligible to contact. The main reasons for exclusion were only one partner signing up (6), country of residence outside the UK (2), not having taken psilocybin in the past 12 months (2), or not completing the whole form (1). Two couples met the inclusion and exclusion criteria, who I contacted to share the participant information again and arrange a pre-screening call, which was held on Microsoft Teams. The pre-screening call covered the participant information sheet (see Appendix 5) and the consent form (see Appendix 6), as well as re-confirming the inclusion and exclusion criteria. Throughout the call, I was careful not to ask participants to share any unnecessary information, which was not relevant to ascertain their participation. At this stage, participants were also made aware of confidentiality and its limitations (see 2.6.1), and participants were given the opportunity to ask questions related to the study. To ensure participants did not feel obliged to take part, they were asked to email following the call at which point the couple was formally asked to sign the consent form and dates were proposed for the joint interview.

2.3.3. Participants

Both couples who attended the pre-screening decided to take part in the study. They have been given pseudonyms to protect their identity and only their ethnicity and age bracket will be presented, as shown in Table 2.

Table 2
Overview of participants' demographic.

	Name	Age	Ethnicity
Couple One	Anna	35-40	White European
	Mark	35-40	White British
Couple Two	Nathan	35-40	Mixed Black British
	Elena	35-40	British Cypriot

2.4. Data collection

For this study, the data was collected through joint semi-structured interviews with each couple and individual interviews with each participant, meaning a total of six interviews were conducted. Additionally, each participant contributed a multimedia-based data set, which included a 250-word written paragraph.

An integral aspect of case study research design is triangulation, which is used to enhance the validity and reliability, and ultimately the depth of the findings. It is a significant strength of case study research, as by integrating multiple data sources, researchers can examine the case from different angles, reduce bias, confirm patterns, and gain a broader understanding of the case itself, without being constricted to just one research method (Yin, 2018; Willig, 2013). Patton (2014) proposes four main types of triangulation: 1) data triangulation, which relies on multiple data sources, such as interviews, observations, and documents (Stake, 1995), 2) methodological triangulation, which combines different research methods (Denzin, 1978), 3) investigator triangulation, which involves multiple researchers involved during data collection and analysis to reduce and counter personal bias (Patton, 2014) and lastly, 4) theory triangulation referring to the integration of various theoretical viewpoints to interpret the findings (Creswell & Poth, 2018). In case study research most commonly draws on data triangulation and was also used for this study, as it collected three different data points to explore the experience of couples taking psilocybin together.

During the first stage of the research design, the intention was to interview couples only once, which meant careful consideration was required as to whether that interview would be held together or separately. On one hand, interviewing the couple together would have created a shared picture and narrative, whilst also allowing insight into the relationship dynamic and subsequent meaning-making (Arskey, 1996). Whereas, this would have aligned more strongly with the social constructivist epistemology, as it assumes that social contexts inform how the meaning of an experience is created, Eisikovits and Koren (2010) suggest couples tend to have

topics that remain private and are not shared between partners. Therefore, separate interviews would have allowed each participant to share their individual standpoints without concern around the partner's response when discussing sensitive subjects or criticism (Morris, 2001). However, interviewing both members of the couple separately also presents numerous drawbacks. For example, an ethical consideration is the use of quotes from individuals in the written report later visible to their respective partner (Forbat & Henderson, 2003). To mitigate this, the guidance by Eisikovits and Koren (2010) was followed that when presenting quotes from the individual interview, as well as written extract, contextual information can be either omitted or modified to uphold confidentiality, whilst also respecting the integrity of the data. As the study eventually evolved into a case study research design, the opportunity emerged to interview couples both together and separately, which is generally considered the gold-standard when examining dyadic relationships (Stamp, 1994).

2.4.1. Participant interviews

Following the pre-screening call, each couple was asked to take part in a joint semi-structured interview, which lasted around two hours, and was held on Microsoft Teams. Following a short introduction and overview of the interview process, the couple was reminded of the confidentiality and its limitations, further outlined in 2.6.2. The interview prompts covered the following topics: 1) general relationship to psychedelics, 2) motivation and preparation, 3) trip experience and 4) impact and integration into relationship (see Appendix 7). Following the joint interview, each participant was invited to an individual semi-structured interview, which lasted around one hour, and took place within one week of the joint interview. For the individual interview, questions were also prepared (see Appendix 8), however it was also used as an opportunity to follow up on aspects of the joint interview, as explored in the upcoming reflexivity box. Due to the research being a case study, pilot interviews were omitted as the method allows for adaptations throughout the data collection process. However, I acknowledge pilot studies can improve the validity and the methodological rigour of a qualitative investigation (Shakir & Rahman, 2022).

Finally, the interviews were all conducted online to increase accessibility for participants across the UK. To address the challenges of the virtual space, I followed the guidance proposed by Chiumento et al. (2018), which includes inviting feedback about the interview afterwards. After the interviews were completed, an external transcription software, which had incorporated GDPR standards, was used to transcribe the interviews. Two weeks after each interview, the

recordings were transcribed, which allowed participants to withdraw if requested. However, none of the participants withdrew from the study.

Reflexivity Box 3: Interviewing Couples Together

Through my clinical work, I was predominantly used to speaking to individuals one-on-one, which meant that before collecting the interview data, I had no experience of couples work in therapy and similarly, conducting couple interviews was new for me. I remember feeling slightly nervous and unsure of the dynamics which might arise when both partners shared the intricacies of their psilocybin experience, although these nerves settled relatively quickly once the first couple was interviewed. Additionally, during the joint interviews, I paid careful attention to get both partners' perspectives, which felt especially important if one participant tended to lead the conversation while the other remained more reserved. When one partner shared one aspect of their experience, I would purposefully ask the other for their perspective to ensure a balanced account was collected. Between the joint and individual interviews, I re-listened to the joint interview to get an initial sense of how balanced their narratives were. In cases where I felt I had missed one partner's perspective, I used the individual interview as an opportunity to follow up.

2.4.2. Multimedia-based data

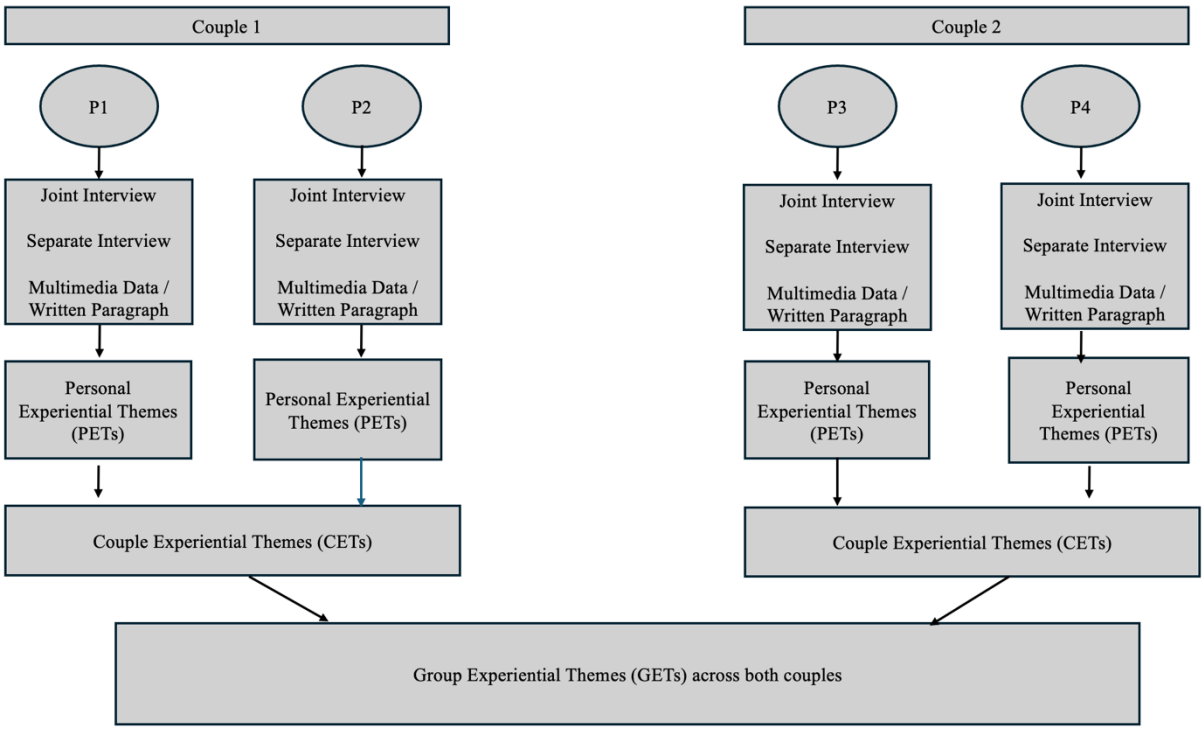
After the individual interviews, participants were sent a set of prompting questions (see Appendix 9) to guide them in writing the paragraph. All participants sent their multimedia-based data point, including the written paragraph via email after which it was stored on my personal City OneDrive.

2.5. Data analysis

Integral to case study design is the triangulation of the data points, which can be seen in Figure 1 below.

Figure 1.

Overview of triangulation process.



For the data analysis, I first followed steps 1-4 suggested by Smith et al. (2022). To ensure the analysis remained close to each participant's experience, the first step involved re-reading the joint interview (step 1), followed by the individual interview and written paragraph for the first participant. I completed the exploratory noting (step 2) for each participant separately and for the joint interview, I colour coded each participant to elevate each partner's individual experience (see Appendix 10). At this stage, I inevitably started getting a sense of the other partner's experience, and if something relevant emerged I would take note of that without overly focussing on it to ensure I remained close to the first participant. After completing the exploratory noting for all written data of one participant, experiential statements (step 3) were constructed, which was followed by naming personal experiential themes (PETs; step 4). These first four steps were completed for each partner within the couple. At this stage, I wanted to get an understanding of the convergence and divergence of the experience between the couple, so I created couple experiential themes (CETs; see Appendix 11). The same steps were

followed for the second couple, before developing group experiential themes (step 7) across both couples to produce group experiential themes (GETs) for the whole sample.

2.5.1. Rationale for Couple Experiential Themes (CETs)

The decision to introduce couple experiential themes (CETs) as an additional analytical layer within IPA was a deliberate methodological choice. Following Smith et al. (2022), the initial stages of analysis, e.g. exploratory noting, experiential statements and creating PETs, were first completed at the individual level for each participant within the couple. This was done to honour the first-person subjectivity central to phenomenology (Husserl, 1927), which ensured each partner's experience was given full attention. However, given the research question was also concerned with the dyadic dimension of the couples' experience, moving directly from PETs to GETs across both couples risked bypassing the shared meaning-making that likely occurred within each dyad. This consideration was particularly influenced by the concept of triple hermeneutics (Mavhandu-Mudzusi, 2018), which acknowledges the participant's interpretation of the shared experience as being alongside the couple's joint interpretation of the shared experience, which then in turn is interpreted by the researcher. Introducing CETs provided a structured way of attending to this interpretative layer, by exploring the convergence and divergence between partners within each couple, before zooming further out to identify patterns across both couples. In this way, the CETs served as a bridge between the individual (PETs) and the dyad, ensuring the dyadic dimension was not collapsed or lost in the movement toward greater thematic abstraction within the GETs.

2.6. Ethical considerations

The study received ethics clearance ETH2425-0137 on October 25th, 2024, through the Senate Research Ethics Committee from City, University of London (see Appendix 12) and was conducted in accordance with the British Psychological Society (BPS) Code of Human Research Ethics (2021).

2.6.1. Confidentiality and data protection

In the UK, psilocybin-containing mushrooms are classified as a Class A substance, and their cultivation, possession, or sale remains controlled under the Misuse of Drugs Act (1971), which meant the participants of this study engaged in an illegal activity under UK law. Therefore, the study strictly adhered to GDPR parameters set out by the University and the following steps were followed to uphold this:

- Two weeks after the individual interview and once the full data set was received, participants' contact details were deleted and participants were informed that the study's findings would be published on the blog site.
- The pre-screening call and the interviews took place on Microsoft Teams, on a laptop provided by the University, to comply with GDPR.
- Interviews were recorded on a GDPR-compliant recording device, which was approved the University.
- The recordings were stored on my personal City OneDrive only I had access to. After the transcription was completed, the recordings were deleted.
- Interviews were transcribed once the withdrawal window had ended and the transcripts were stored my personal City OneDrive.
- All identifying information was altered as best as possible. Pseudonyms have been used, and contextual information was altered without compromising the authenticity of the data.

2.6.2. Legal obligation regarding confidentiality

The study aimed to explore participants ***past*** experiences of drug use and as such, disclosures of personal drug use is not deemed illegal (Maguire & Maynard, 2021). Nonetheless, my legal requirement to breach confidentiality was made explicit in the participant information sheet, during the pre-screening call, and before both the joint and individual interviews. These parameters included: 1) the disclosure of serious drug offences, such as drug dealing (including supplying drugs to friends), drug trafficking, or other serious drug-related offences, and 2) if I believed there was serious harm done to self or others. As the researcher, I would have always attempted to speak with the participants before breaking confidentiality.

2.6.3. Consent, distress protocol, and debrief information

Before the pre-screening call, participants were sent the participant information sheet to ensure they understood the purpose of the study and involvement required. Once participants formally agreed to take part, they were asked to sign the consent form, which was exchanged as password-protected documents via email and stored on my personal City OneDrive. At the pre-screening call, I established a plan of action if concerns emerged during the interview, which included signposting to appropriate services were appropriate.

As the interviews were semi-structured, some responses required probing. Whereas my clinical skills supported me in maintaining a supportive and containing environment for

participants (Coyle & Wright, 1996), I was aware of my role as a researcher during the interview and would have signposted to relevant services instead of using those during the interviews (Thompson & Russo, 2012). In case of a participant were to become distressed, I adapted the Distress Protocol proposed by Draucker et al. (2009) (see Appendix 13) and a debriefing session was offered, alongside a leaflet with support services and the researchers contact details (see Appendix 14).

2.6.4. Right to withdraw

All participants were made aware of their right to withdraw from the study at any point before and during the interview up to two weeks after data collection was completed. This was explicitly stated in the consent form, participant information sheet, and reiterated at pre-screening and the start of each interview.

2.7. Reflexivity

Finally, as this is a piece of qualitative research, I as the researcher have inevitably impacted the entirety of the research process, from picking the research topic, to data collection and interpretation, and subsequent write up. To address this, I have added reflexivity boxes across this thesis, to allow the reader insight into how my being, preconceptions, hopes, interests and philosophical underpinnings have impacted the research process. However, it is key to note that reflexivity of researchers is fraught with ambiguity as a whole and can only ever be a partial account of what the researcher chooses to disclose (Finlay, 2002). As reflexivity is never final and always an ongoing process of reflection, there were a few tangible steps which supported me in bringing me closer to holding a subjective stance (Braun & Clarke, 2021). Throughout the duration of this study, I was dedicated to learning from those who understand and work with these substances, by integrating their expertise without compromising the authenticity of my own work. Additionally, throughout the research process, I remained in personal therapy, had access to research and peer supervision, and kept a reflective journal to process my experiences and monitor personal biases. To guide these reflections, I made use of the reflexive interview designed by Carla Willig (see Appendix 15).

From the reflexive interview, I want to point out two themes that are important. Firstly, my interest in the interpersonal dimension of psychedelic experiences emerged from hearing an anecdotal account of a couple using Ayahuasca together. After exhausting other more conventional therapeutic options, the couple spoke about their newly found energy within the relationship after 30 years of marriage, family and now empty nesting. Hearing this story

piqued my interest and led me down to find empirical evidence for what this couple had shared, and to my surprise, there was only limited research in this area. The absence of research exploring the intersection of romantic relationships and psychedelics resonated with my existing academic and clinical interests in romantic relationships. However, this meant I approached the topic with a sense of investment, excitement and hope regarding what the findings might contribute more broadly. I recognise this passion required me to pay extra attention to ensuring I continuously interrogated my assumptions through the entire the research process and maintained an openness throughout. I especially want to credit my research supervisor in navigating this.

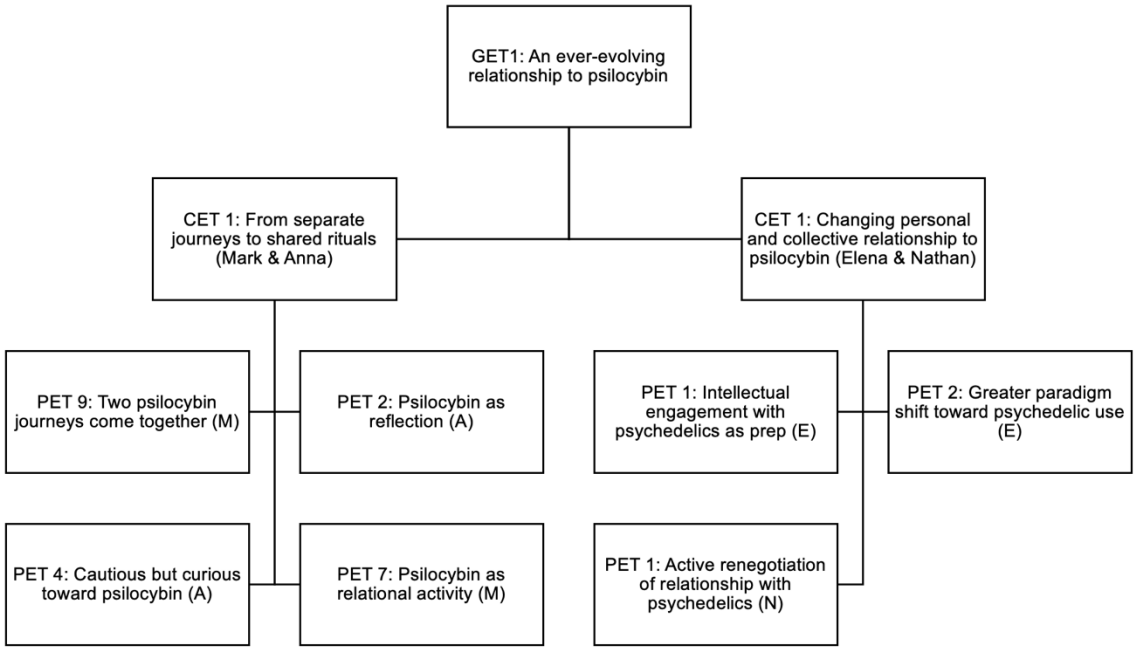
Secondly, conducting the literature review and research design, heightened my own awareness around my privileged perspective regarding psychedelic drug use. I recognise my access and curiosity around psychedelic experiences differ significantly from those whose encounters with these substances are significantly influenced by cultural, legal and socioeconomic constraints. For example, people of colour and people from a low socioeconomic background find psychedelic interventions, such as MDMA-assisted psychotherapy and psilocybin, unfamiliar due to the stringent drug laws and incarceration risks they might face as a consequence of engaging with substances (Williams & Leins, 2016). It is crucial to recognise, I have not experienced such cultural and social challenges, which are leading to unequal access to psychedelic medicine across the board. Acknowledging these broader inequities encouraged me to engage more critically with alternative histories, including Indigenous traditions and perspectives outside of Western frameworks. Moreover, the participants who took part in this study also held a relatively privileged position. They described feeling secure within their relationships, demonstrated skills indicative of being able to emotionally support each other during vulnerable moments, as well as had access to a safe and private physical setting in which the shared psilocybin experience could unfold. These conditions are far from being universally accessible. Overall, these reflections helped to identify both my motivations and potential blind spots, which would have influenced the interpretive lens I brought to the analysis.

Chapter 3: Analysis

This chapter presents the findings of the Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) of the data collected from two couples through semi-structured interviews conducted together and separately, including the multimedia data which entailed each participant contributing an object with an accompanying short text to clarify their personal meaning. IPA was the chosen method of analysis, as it allowed insight into the unique experience of individuals, whilst also understanding how these separate experiences impact the couples' understanding of the experience. The analysis began by examining each participant's individual experience to create personal experiential themes (PETs). This was followed by examining the shared experience of each couple to develop couple experiential themes (CETs). Finally, the analysis looked for common patterns of meaning across both couples by establishing group experiential themes (GETs). To illustrate this analytic process from individual to couple to group experiential themes, a worked example is provided, which traces how specific PETs were drawn together into CETs and subsequently into a GET.

Figure 2.

Example of Analytical Progression for GET 1.



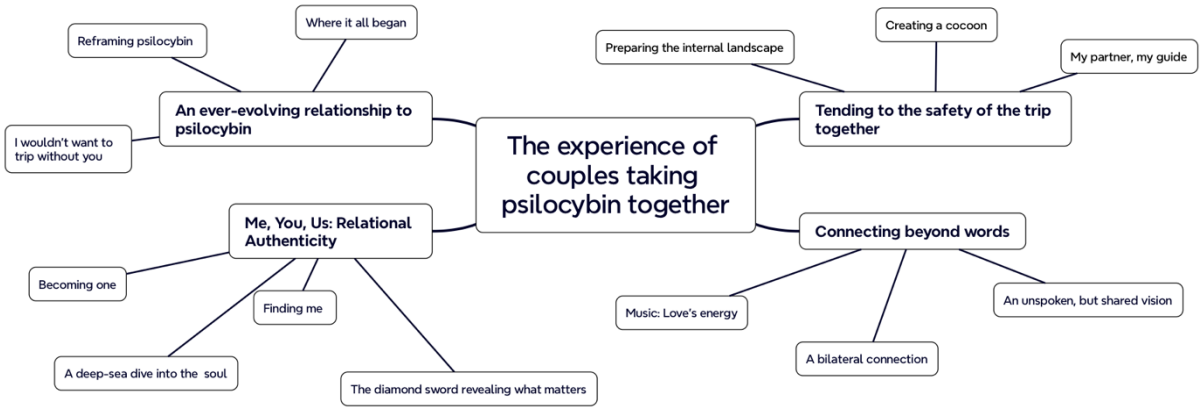
This chapter presents a detailed account of the couples shared psilocybin experience. Participants quote, as well as extract from their multimedia data, which will be used to bring

the interpretation to life (Smith et al., 2022). Following each quote, I provide the quotes' original location (joint interview = M, ***J***, p1, individual interview = M, p1, object data = M, O) and ellipsis (…) were used to sharpen the quotes and reduce to its relevancy. By doing so, I aimed to stay close to the individuals' and the couples' experience, as the analysis is a co-construction of meaning between the individuals, the couples, and my own interpretation; a process referred to 'triple hermeneutic' (Mavhandu-Mudzusi, 2018). Whilst the analytic approach followed was IPA and not Grounded Theory (Charmaz, 2014), the data highlighted how certain aspects of the shared experience were constructed between partners. This meant certain GETs pointed toward a social constructivist perspective, where meaning emerged from the couples' interaction with each other.

All GETs are mentioned by all participants, however, some subthemes focus on individual couples to maintain an idiographic approach, particularly when experiences held special significance for that specific couple, whilst other subthemes showed greater commonality across both couples. To guide the reader, Figure 2. provides an overview of the four GETs and 13 subthemes:

Figure 2.

Overview of Group Experiential Themes and Subthemes



3.1. GET 1: An ever-evolving relationship to psilocybin

This theme explored how both couples across time moved towards a new way of understanding psilocybin as a substance, and the experience itself. Subtheme 1.1, '*where it all began*' explores participants' first experiences with psilocybin, either intellectually or experientially, which seemed to reflect their context in that moment in time. Subtheme 1.2, '*reframing psilocybin's*

role' explores how participants gradually shifted their relationship toward a more mindful relationship to psilocybin and brings to life both partners' respective roles in this. Subtheme 1.3, '*I wouldn't want to trip without you*' shows how one couple integrated shared psilocybin experiences as a steady pillar into their relationship.

Reflexivity Box 4: A Social Constructionist Lens

The importance of cultural and social narratives in how participants understood and related to psilocybin was not something I sought to specifically explore when starting with data collection and analysis. As re-iterated throughout, the epistemological focus of this study was phenomenological, however, this broader cultural and societal dimension of the overall engagement with psychedelics was something participants raised naturally. Their relationship to psilocybin and how they perceived the substance was situated within their cultural and social contexts, which was meaningful to them and felt important to follow. Therefore, constructing a theme which is representative of a social constructionist epistemology felt important, because this was what participants brought during data collection, which perhaps is indicative of psychedelic experiences never fully being disentangled from the social and cultural contexts in which they are engaged with.

3.1.1. Subtheme: Where it all began

This subtheme explores the different starting points from which participants first encountered psilocybin. For Elena and Nathan, psychedelic use was rooted in recreational contexts where drugs use was associated with escapism. For Mark, psilocybin was the vehicle out of depression, whereas Anna shared her first psilocybin experiences with her ex-husband. What emerged across accounts was how these first experiences influenced their willingness and curiosity as they eventually embarked on their shared experiences.

The first couple, Elena and Nathan, both described their first experiences of altered states by using substances within recreational contexts, mostly through partying. Although both participants shared the same phenomenon, it was mainly Nathan who elaborated on their shared recreational use. According to his descriptions, this initial phase was marked by 'chasing the high' through mindlessly mixing substances, seemingly to escape himself. Nathan stated:

> *'I was experimenting with recreational drugs probably from young adult age… My experience was always from like a recreation party angle... It was often not mindful but was often about chasing the high more than anything' N, J, p2*

Nathan's description of 'chasing the high' is perhaps reflective of a societal understanding of recreational drug use, creating a sense of using drugs to grasp something beyond reach. The priority of these experiences seemed to focus on reaching an intensity of the trip, perhaps impacted by the people present, rather than seeking a meaningful experience. Initially the word *chaotic* came into mind; there seemed an unpredictability, perhaps as the physical environment exploited the surrendering of control, which is often associated with psychedelics. Although these experience often 'took a darker twist' at the end, having had '*incredible trips and scary trips and everything in between'* (N, J, p4), would later evoke a sense of safety in knowing what to anticipate during the shared experience.

Although, both Elena and Nathan decided to leave their recreational drug use behind, both were left with memories of moments they shared, either together or separately, where drug experience had offered an opportunity to turn inwards. Elena remembered smoking cannabis and describing it as '*it's more of a trip, it's more of a, it's something deeper' (E, J, p3)* sensing a different texture of the experience, but perhaps not quite knowing why. Nathan similarly recalled his first psilocybin experience:

> *'The people around me and the environment of that festival meant that the journey was certainly deeper than what I'd experienced in the past.' N, J, p2*

Here, Nathan referenced the importance of the 'right' people and music, further stating in his individual interview that he lacked receptivity to fully embrace the substance:

> '*It certainly made me feel introspective and made me look deeply in on myself and maybe in that period I wasn't, pause, I wasn't prepared for that.' N, p1*

As Nathan paused, I felt a sadness about what he might have missed. However, both participants, perhaps due to age and maturity, felt not ready to fully grasp the introspective nature of psilocybin. However, these positive moments seemed etched into their memory and would later be the breeding ground for curiosity.

Mark and Anna's starting point was different. Mark, who had his first psilocybin experience during a depressive phase, described the profoundness of this experience in his early twenties:

> *'I was very, very depressed and I had a very, very profound psilocybin trip one night… where I completely just (pause) psychically renewed myself and. Yeah, I don't know, I just, I felt like I woke up the first time in my life (trembling voice).' M, J, p5*

Mark's voice slowed down, paused, and his voice trembled, all indicating the sheer magnitude and importance of this first experience, perhaps as it stood in stark contrast to the depression.

For him, psilocybin continued to be part of his 'mental health toolbox' until he met Anna again in his early thirties. In contrast to Mark's individual journeys, Anna's first experience was with her ex-husband. Interestingly, the understanding of psilocybin she held at this point was predominately underpinned by viewing it as 'different' to other drugs:

> *'I was introduced to psilocybin as a drug you don't get addicted to … and you don't just think you are the best thing since sliced bread while you're trashing your surroundings or some cliche vision of what substances can do to you occasionally.' A, p1*

Here, Anna seemed to distinguish psilocybin from substances commonly associated with a loss of control, potentially reflecting how Nathan and Elena initially used it, which made it more attractive for her to take. When describing her first experience, she stated:

> *'My first experience was a strange one. Because it was involving my previous husband… I was intrigued, but I didn't have access to psilocybin.' A, J, p4*

She later elaborated to '*would have loved to write a book about it or something of the story of the Earth that I saw in the clouds there*' (A, J, p6). Similar to Nathan, there were positive elements which sparked a curiosity, although her context at the time did not present her with opportunity to continue that exploration. Like Nathan, Anna compared her first experience as '*an epic dream*' that '*was just gone, it just slipped away*', which suggested the importance of a trusted person present during the altered state to help consolidate the ineffability of the experience, as explored in GET 2. When Anna and Mark came back together, they had very different levels of psilocybin experience. Mark had already integrated psilocybin into his life, and for Anna it remained a past experience which left her curious. Mark acknowledged his intrigue, perhaps attributing a uniqueness to psilocybin, as Anna made that her 'choice of vice':

> *'I find Anna interesting because she's not, she doesn't touch alcohol, she doesn't smoke and she hasn't for many, many moons.' M, J, p32*

Similarly to Anna, Mark seemed to separate psilocybin from the mainstream understanding of substances and I wondered whether Mark was also alluding to psilocybin holding a unique place in their shared world, where they both usually abstain from 'conventional' substances.

Overall, these first experiences were formative, yet also incomplete leaving participants perhaps yearning for more. For Nathan and Anna especially, the absence of a trusted person to share the experience with meant the insight of their trips 'slipped away like a dream', further explored under '*my partner, my guide*'. Psilocybin was understood as 'different' and 'unique' positioning it outside conventional drug use, which left the door open for couples to consider

a shared experience. Understanding these contexts is crucial for understanding how each couple eventually came to share their journeys.

3.1.2. Subtheme: Reframing psilocybin's role

For three out of the four participants, the existence of a scientific and therapeutic knowledge base around psychedelics influenced how they approached their first shared experiences. Whereas Elena and Nathan drew on different epistemological paradigms to gradually shift their understanding of psilocybin, Anna's scientific identity initially led her to approach psilocybin as a research endeavour, although she gradually let go and surrendered to its embodied aspects.

Within the first couple, Elena was the instigator and driver who prompted a shift in the couple's relationship to drug use. As part of tackling health struggles, Elena engaged with alternative medicine and through her travels, she started learning about 'plant medicine' from Indigenous communities, which presented a new drug taking paradigm to her, where substances were understood as 'healers' and 'medicine'. With this information in her back pocket, she was also perhaps more receptive to engage with increasingly available information around the emerging academic knowledge base.

> '(*Psychedelics) just came into my vicinity, my awareness more… And I was like: Oh, wow, this is fascinating. And then I dived into it.' E, p2*

What stood out across both participants was how this fascination did not fixate on the psychedelic properties of psilocybin, but was on the mushroom as an organism. Elena described this as getting '*quite obsessed with the mushrooms in general, going foraging for mushrooms, trying to identify mushrooms and then just like slowly went into like psychedelics'* (E, J, p3), perhaps reflective of a growing respect that stood in contrast to the 'mindless' drug use in their twenties. Nathan was similarly captivated by this newly found respect:

> *'I was kind of just fascinated by the Organism of itself… it seemed like a complex and magical organism that I hadn't probably given much respect before.' N, p2*

As mentioned above, the shift they experienced was primarily driven by Elena, which was reflected in her repetitive use of 'I' when describing her increased engagement:

> *'Nathan was on the journey with me, but I was the one driving it. I was the one getting the books and identifying the mushrooms and going on the workshops and making us watch documentary after documentary… there's also so much more out there now of psychedelics as a form of therapy almost.' E, p3*

Here, emerging therapeutic evidence added a perceived legitimacy, and perhaps a purpose to prospective use, and it seemed her passion gradually drew Nathan in:

> *'I think that together, but also separately, we went on a bit of a journey of understanding the potential benefits… the demonization of magic mushrooms was starting to be peeled away a little. You know, (information) just became a little bit more accessible and less of a fringe subject.' N, J, p3*

When describing 'demonization', I wondered whether Nathan referred to the cultural demonization or his own demonization which allowed him to distance himself from recreational drug use when it became harmful previously. On one hand, clinical research added a new horizon of legitimacy. On the other, it perhaps also provided an explanation for the positive experiences they previously had. In his individual interview, Nathan described becoming '*fascinated by its potential to relieve anxiety, and that's maybe not something that I had associated with previously'* (N, p1), leaving him '*really intrigued in having a more mindful relationship to psilocybin to explore those deep crevices of myself*' (N, p2). In contrast to before, here Nathan suggested a certain receptivity to explore the introspective aspects of psilocybin, which is perhaps reflective of having grown in age and maturity, but also a general internal shift he noticed. In the accompanying text he contributed, Nathan stated:

> *'I chose the piece of music as it represents an artist who has gone through a growth period... For me, this transition and growth in someway feels similar to my own personal growth and connection the mushrooms.' N, O*

Elena similarly described an internal shift, stating to have '*grown as a person more confident in myself that I don't need to escape my body in that type of way.'* (E, J, p3). Whereas Elena conveyed a greater certainty and excitement in wanting to embark on a shared psilocybin journey, referencing '*it felt really right because of the rituals that I had experienced ... and then all the scientific knowledge that I armed myself with going into it'* (E, p2), Nathan remained more ambivalent:

> *'I was like 'You sure you want to do this?' Because like it can, it can sometimes get a bit dark.' N, J, p4*

What emerged was the changing narrative around psychedelics sparked an initial fascination for psilocybin, again beyond its psychedelic properties, but that a larger narrative shift also sparked a collective hope for change:

> *'I was just so excited of this elevation of consciousness for myself and also for the world. ... So, yeah, the feeling was excitement, fascination.' E, p2*

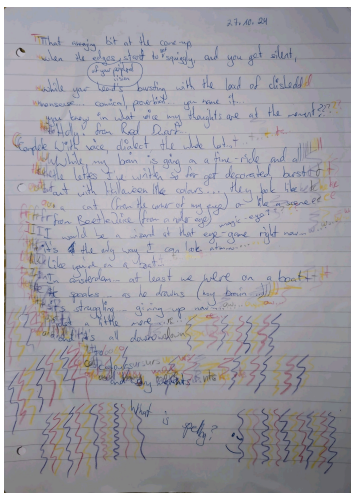
Whereas Nathan and Elena actively engaged with emerging information around psychedelics, which eventually shifted the way they understood psilocybin intellectually, for Mark and Anna this manifested slightly differently. Across their accounts, they spoke less about the emerging evidence and prioritised their own experiential insight. Mark started to use psilocybin before the Western cultural narrative had started to shift, although he also referenced a disconnect between the prevailing prohibition of psilocybin and his experience: '*It shocks me that they make this stuff illegal, I think the benefits are magnificent*' (M, p9). Perhaps because of this, Anna saw her psilocybin journeys as actively contributing to the scientific knowledge base.

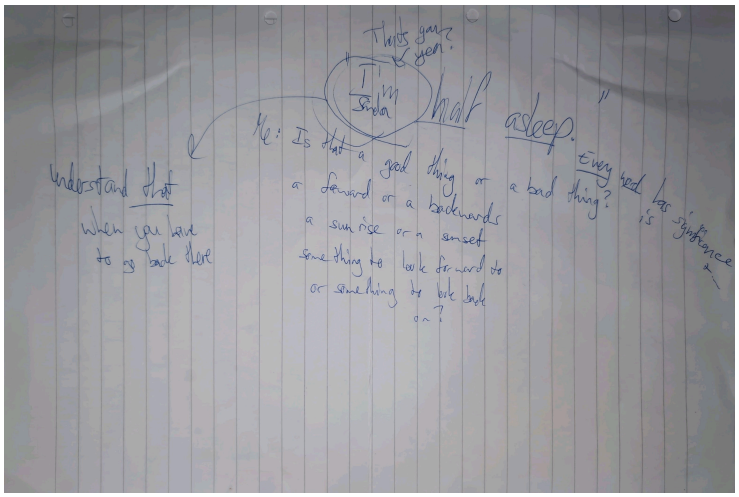
> *'I know because it's been suppressed as a substance… And so, I know that it would be pioneer work, so to speak, if I were to do that. But since I'm a scientist myself, I know kind of self-experimentation, that's nothing new to me.' A, p2*

Anna's description of taking psilocybin as 'pioneer work' carried with it a sense of responsibility, as though she was stepping into unchartered territory which was still contested in the wider cultural discourse. This positioning appeared to create a subtle pressure at the start of her shared experiences:

> *'In the beginning my science brain … took over and I thought I want to document all of this. So, I became tense during the trip and I was thinking, I need to write things I need to record everything.' A, p12*

Examples of such notes are:





The weight of ‘breaking ground’ seemed to make it difficult for her to fully embrace the embodied aspects of the trip. After multiple trips, perhaps influenced by Mark’s extensive experience, she noticed herself shifting towards a more intuitive experience:

> *‘It's been actually quite nice in the last few months to experience trips where I could just relax and think if there's anything I want to write down, I'll write it down, if I want to try to draw I draw, if I want to dance I dance, if I'll just sit there, jumbled up, confused about my own limbs, I will do that.’ A, J, p13*

Overall, this subtheme explores participants relationship to psilocybin and how this was influenced by the wider societal discourse. For Elena and Nathan, the changing discourse gradually supported them in shifting away from recreational drug use to the potential of a more mindful relationship, where they viewed it as ‘a therapeutic plant medicine’. Anna’s transition was marked by letting go of her ‘science brain’, which dominated her earlier trips to later experiences where she could ‘just relax’ and follow her intuition.

3.1.3. Subtheme: I wouldn’t want to trip without you

In contrast to Nathan and Elena, who have together re-negotiated their understanding of psilocybin, Anna and Mark had their separate introductions to psilocybin. Their understanding of psilocybin was influenced through their shared experiences and what it meant for their relationship. Beyond their interview data, their objects offered insight worth revisiting.

Mark became curious about the prospect of a shared journey, because of a heightened connectedness he previously experienced during his own individual journeys:

> *‘I've always found it to be a very connecting experience, and I've never had that particular experience with someone that I was as close to you as I was, so I wanted to see what it was like.’ M, J, p7*

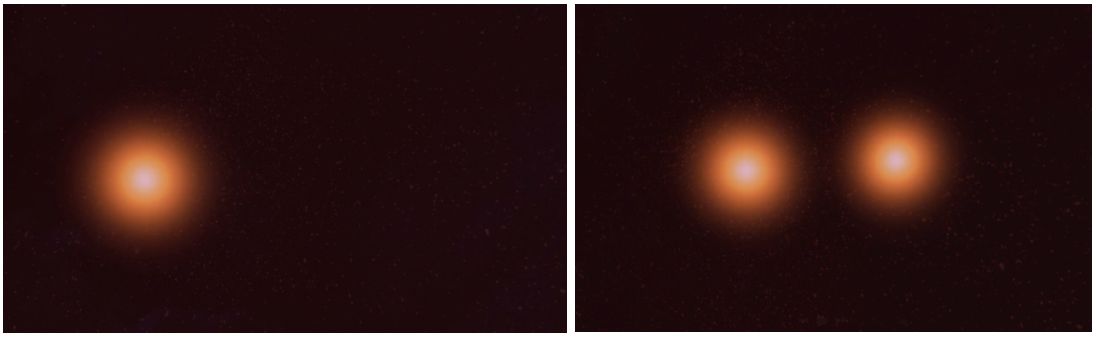
Anna, who had less experience, was merely excited at the prospect of sharing that aspect of life together. For her, getting back together as couple after a decade apart was often referred to as a ‘homecoming’, so sharing a psilocybin experience seemed like a simple decision for her.

> *‘When we came back together, we were like: ‘Oh, you too, oh cool.’ You know?... It was exciting.’ A, J, p3*

Her child-like excitement in ‘*oh, you too, oh cool*’ immediately evoked the image of two glows coming together from a video she created and contributed to the study. Whilst it was somewhat

unclear whether she meant their relationship rekindling or specific moments from the trip, it seemed to symbolize their lives joining, which perhaps also surfaced during trips. She stated

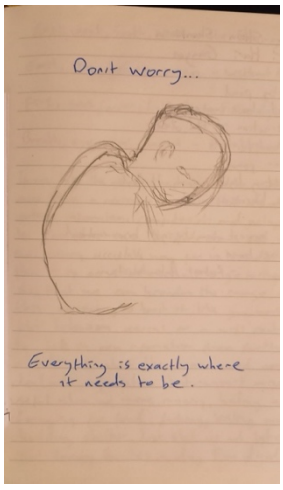
> *'When we met, it was wonderful! I had a fellow particle to dance with! Having never had this experience before, I had never missed anything. But now... I would not ever want to be without it.' A, O*



The above shows screengrabs of the video shared by Anna. Embarking on their shared journeys and eventually integrating psilocybin as a steady relationship activity was especially meaningful to Mark.

> *'... the experiences used to be isolated to within myself. But, yeah, it's had a completely new dimension added to it in the last few years with you.' M, J, p33*

Here, Mark's account suggested his earlier psychedelic experiences remained largely contained within himself. In contrast, sharing that connectedness with Anna seemed to enrich the texture of his own journey, perhaps through the act of being witnessed, which is explored throughout this analysis. I wondered whether this contrasted with his depression, where attention may have focused inward on suffering, and psilocybin helped shift his focus outward to Anna. This shift seemed to culminate in a deep sense of completeness and conviction where *'everything is exactly where it needs to be'* as reflected in his drawing:



The figure in his drawing, which is curled inward, carried the impression of Mark folded into himself, perhaps akin to womb-like themes, where vulnerability is held by a sense of safety and expressed across participants. The ability to share this experience with Anna conveyed a sense wholeness, which perhaps was previously missing, similar to Anna's accounts of her previous relationship. When asked what psilocybin journeys now meant to him, he stated:

> *'I mean, some people enjoy going out and eating in fancy restaurants, don't they, on date night, and I like fostering some sort of cosmic connection with my wife.' M, J, p32*

As Mark expressed this, he smiled as if conscious that what he described was different from conventional 'date nights'. His metaphor of '*shaking the psychic snow globe*' pointed toward a temporary disruption of their shared ways of being with each other, which seemed to open an opportunity to look at their relationship anew. He stated:

> *'... it does one well, I think, to shake that psychic snow globe occasionally and then to do that with someone else. It's yeah, it can be quite beautiful.' M, p5*

Overall, this theme captures how both couples' relationship to psilocybin evolved over time. The participants first encounters with psilocybin felt unique and left them open to explore a shared experience, although the eventual decision to share a psilocybin journey with their partner was ultimately influenced by the context the participants found themselves in. For Elena and Nathan, it was the changing cultural discourse which contributed to a shift in their intellectual understanding of the substance, which provided a way of understanding psilocybin where the substance held therapeutic potential and allowed them to distance themselves from recreational drug use to approach psilocybin more mindfully. For Anna and Mark, it was the re-kindling of their relationship that shifted their relationship to psilocybin, which meant psilocybin ultimately became a fundamental part of their relationship.

3.2. GET 2: Tending to the safety of the trip together

This theme focuses on how both couples intentionally established safety around their shared psilocybin use. Safety was created both practically, through attention to set and setting, as well as interpersonally where having their trusted partner present influenced participants' capacity to surrender to the experience. Subtheme 2.1. '*Setting the internal landscape*' captures participants mental preparation for the experience. Subtheme 2.2. '*Creating a cocoon*' explores how physical environments influenced the trip's texture and safety. Subtheme 2.3 '*My partner, my guide*' explores how the partners' significantly influenced the texture of their shared journey.

Reflexivity Box 5: Partner Vs. Mushroom as guides

Before data collection and analysis, I did assume the partner's role would be important, in both shaping the experience and potentially the meaning-making. However, what I did not fully anticipate was just how central the partner's presence would be. It became interesting to understand how, together, couples co-constructed a sense of safety, emotionally and physically, which allowed the experience to unfold and feel contained, as opposed to frightening and overwhelming, which seemed akin to what a psychedelic guide / therapist might offer and represent.

When constructing this theme, there was initially another interpretative route that felt feasible. Alongside the relational theme, the data did also point towards the mushroom itself by a source of guidance and direction, which at times was also experienced as a therapeutic presence. Although this interpretative thread was phenomenologically rich, on reflection the 'mushroom, my guide' interpretation was not specific to the couple context as a similar interpretation could have applied to an individual psychedelic experience. In this context however, it felt more pertinent to explore how both partners actively experienced a co-constructed sense of safety, which was distinctly relational and in line with the dyadic nature of this study. As such, I felt it aligned more directly with the research question, although, I also acknowledge that another researcher might understandably have followed this alternative route.

3.2.1. Subtheme: Preparing the internal landscape

All participants emphasised the importance of preparing their 'internal landscape' before their shared psilocybin experiences. This involved cultivating a mindset which helped them to step away from ordinary life and remain open to whatever might unfold on the trip. For Anna and Mark, this distinction was made clear when they spoke about the moment in time, they found themselves in when recounting a specific experience.

> '*The bad things in life were the bad things in life, but they were literally very far away and, the good things in life were right here and that was, that was quite nice. It was a good setting. We could both go into it with calm minds.*' *A, J, p13*

Anna seemed to convey that during psilocybin journeys, cultivating a calm mind before the trip involved holding the difficulties of life at arm's length rather than eliminating them entirely. Perhaps this is reflective of how life often entails challenges unable to be fully

disregarded, whilst the couple also recognised that during especially challenging times they might abstain from tripping together. Regardless, the couple would plan their shared journeys up to a week in advance as opposed to engaging in spontaneous use, which provided them with an opportunity to gradually prepare.

> *'Oh yeah, definitely from previous experience. Yeah, I know not to go in with any sort of, pause, lingering baggage of the day… I like to be meditated on days… We always know with fairly good advancements when it is that we're going to be doing it. So, it does normally give you a few days or a week or so to mentally prepare yourself… I'm absolutely humbled by the things, so I do tend to get very nervous' M, J, p10*

Mark's account suggested carving out a break from everyday life prevented routine stressors from contaminating the trip, by referring to this as 'lingering baggage' which might unexpectedly show up and drawing on meditation to support this. He also acknowledged a nervousness, perhaps reflecting the trip's intensity, but rather than avoiding it, he accepted and honoured this as part of the experience, perhaps feeling comforted by his extensive experience using psilocybin. In contrast to Mark, where preparation began days before, Anna's preparation focussed more on negotiating her mental state moment-to-moment.

> *'…if I've just thought of, like: 'Oh, you taking this much grams and I'm taking this much grams' and I'm actually kind of jealous. And I go into a trip with that. I've done that before, and it was horrible.' A, J, p11*

> *'So it's a mental thing. And so, I just try to mentally mantra myself, calming my, I don't know, lizard brain or something like that into just shushing.' A, J, p9*

Here, similarly to Mark, Anna described how emotions experienced before can resurface during the trip, which might cause a challenging moment. I also wondered whether her simplicity in 'shushing' the brain was reflective of their differing levels of psilocybin experience. She further stated:

> *'But, other than that, like ritual wise, it's been very just unromantic in the sense of, standing in the kitchen and talking about how to make it easier to ingest and thinking: 'Oh man, we should have tried that.' A, J, p10*

Here, I wondered whether Anna's use of 'unromantic' suggested she assumed I might be expecting a different preparation, perhaps more like Elena and Nathan's shared intention-setting, which might have been influenced by the information they engaged with prior. Nathan described the moments before the trip as follows:

> '*We had each other … it literally felt like … we've got the mushrooms, we've set our intentions, we're in this treehouse, the forest ahead of us. Let's go on our journey.*' *N, J, p7*

Nathan's repetitive use of '*we'* highlighted the relational quality of this phase. Both seemed to find comfort in knowing they were together, also reflecting the safety they feel in the presence of each other. Moreover, his description of the environment almost served like a checklist of tangible facts that they could hold onto. Elena described this as:

> '*We're either opposite each other or next to each other, and we're going to have an experience together. Yeah, it feels nice.*' *E, J, p5*

For both participants, the act of pausing to set an intention together emerged as a meaningful ritual in itself, perhaps as a nod to entering the journey as a unit. Setting an intention seemed to become less about directing the content of the trip and more about re-affirming their bond, which created a shared point of departure from which they could safely venture into their inner landscapes. Nathan described this as:

> '*I think that because when you go on a journey with psilocybin it often can be a very, very personal thing and I think … sharing (an intention) with your partner enables you to like to embark on the start of that journey* together.' N, J, p5

Both participants described their intentions differently, which suggests an individual undercurrent within shared experiences. Elena seemed more directive about what she sought, stating that without doing so, '*it doesn't mean anything*' (E, p4):

> '*'I am' or 'I want to have fun' or 'I want this plant medicine to help me give me clarity on this problem that I'm trying to solve*.' *E, p4*

In contrast, Nathan focussed on '*setting what (the trip is) not rather than setting what I want it to be*' (N, p4), reflecting his desire to engage differently with psilocybin.

3.2.2. Subtheme: Creating a cocoon

When speaking about a specific shared psilocybin journey, both couples elaborated how their physical environment was a space that allowed the trip's intensity to unfold, whilst also feeling held and supported.

Mark and Anna chose their own home for the experience with Mark explicitly stating to '*always feel much safer when it was at home*' (M, J, p15). He elaborated:

> '*… being at home and being somewhere where you feel comfortable and have the things that you're sort of connected to physically around you, it allows you to relax a lot more, you can open yourself up a bit more.' M, J, p15*

Mark's decision to use psilocybin at home felt important for several reasons. Home felt like the safest place, which helped him relax and let the experience happen naturally. Being surrounded by familiar items seemed to maybe remind him of who he was, keeping him grounded when the altered state became disorientating. Anna's description added another layer, elaborating how these items influence the phenomenological texture of the trip itself:

> *'We just strung balloons up … It made for so much colour and the light reflecting in them, which just made for a lot of lovely rainbow light worms… like fireflies, and they were in all kinds of colours. That was lovely.' A, J, p13*

What also emerged was how the environment changes from just being a backdrop, to an active part of the experience. Across accounts, participants described the gradual coming alive of their surroundings, which started breathing and moving, and as a result, encouraged them to observe and perhaps interact with it more intentionally as opposed to just exist in it. Anna stated:

> *'We were sat marvelling, at all the patterns that just the space between our eyes and the bookshelves were filled.' A, J, p16*

Although participants often described their settings as secluded from the world, they did also create a bridge to the outside world. Elena stated:

> '*And we were at the end part of the hotel, so it was quite quiet where we were as well. But also, there was enough people for us to people-watch our balcony*.' *E, J, p6*

I wondered whether the ability to people-watch provided her with a knowing that the 'normal' world kept spinning as she ventured off, similarly to Mark who referenced the presence of the outside world despite being at home:

> *'…we were able to sort of sit in bed, but still be in sort of the late afternoon and have the sun coming in through the window and then and hear people outside in the streets.' M, J, p15*

Elena and Nathan described their setting as a 'treehouse' as it was in a hotel room and had a balcony looking out into the forest. This became part of the trip's phenomenology, when Nathan ventured off on a journey through the forest encountering his ancestors, which is explored in detail in the subsequent subtheme. When asked what the atmosphere of their setting

felt like, they often used the word '*cocoon'*, which did not seem to solely refer to the physical environment itself, but a co-constructed feeling which emerged from being in this cocoon together. When they left their 'treehouse', Nathan found integrating with others '*a challenge*' (N, J, p11) and Elena noted *'...as soon as we were around people... it got weird and that was quite challenging'* (E, J, p11). The psychedelic state quickly seemed to become fragile with unfamiliar people being experienced as intrusive or dysregulating. However, the 'cocoon' continued to provide safety. Elena stated:

> *'But we had managed to cocoon ourselves beforehand and cocoon ourselves throughout the rest of the coming down, which meant that it continued to feel safe. And I guess that's probably what it does, the ritual, taking it together and the guiding with each other. And then coming down together. E, J, p13*

And Nathan described:

> *'Even though those people were around, it was just me and you again. And I think that because it was me and you on the way up together and also on the way down together, we kind of managed to cocoon ourselves on the integration part too.' N, J, p13*

Again, safety emerged less from the physical location and more from the shared emotional space they created through the intentional aspect around their psilocybin experience. For both couples, the setting impacted their experience, and both couples created safe spaces, while also maintaining some connection to the outside world.

3.2.3. Subtheme: My partner, my guide

An integral part of a shared experience is the simple fact of the presence of a partner who is also in the altered state. For both couples, their partners played an integral role in shaping their sense of safety of the trip, which either deepened the experience itself or allowed for emotional vulnerability to surface, especially as participants seemed to value being witnessed in their vulnerability. This subtheme explores this experience and also touches on the partners' role in supporting the meaning-making process throughout and after the trip.

Across participants, but especially for Anna, Elena and Nathan, the partner's presence provided a vital sense of safety. Mark was less vocal on the support he gained from Anna, although as explored in subtheme 1.3, Anna's presence undoubtedly magnified his own experiences. For Anna, having Mark who knows her well, provided an anchor.

'So, it's easier (to have Mark here) with everything in a psilocybin trip being kind of iffy… everything that you know and rely on can just go out the door, laughing… nothing bad has ever happened on a trip, but if anything bad were to happen on a trip, you know that there's someone there who cares for you who would know what to do' A, p13

Anna's laughter suggested an unease and strangeness of certain experiential features that perhaps could feel relatively unsettling if experienced alone. More importantly, she alluded to Mark buffering the anxiety of a '*worst case scenario*', as it enforces her knowing that if such a scenario were to arrive, Mark would be able to know how to adequately support her. This may be either through him knowing her, or perhaps Anna also felt safe in the knowledge of his extensive experience. I wondered whether without Mark's presence, for Anna the trip might be like driving with the handbrake on. Mark did also allude to the presence of unconditional support in Anna:

'... it's like climbing a mountain. It's fun to do it on your own… it's better to do it with a kindred spirit who has always got your back.' M, p5

Like Mark's reflection above, when speaking about how shared experiences may be different to individual experience, Nathan stated:

'... just being able to feel safe, being yourself, being able to share your experiences, that's what you get if you share a trip with someone that is trusted and safe like your partner.' N, p3

Both Nathan and Mark seemed to convey a relatively simple insight, namely that sharing of the experience with their trusted partner was simply better than doing it alone. It seemed that being alongside someone who felt safe and familiar added a layer of comfort, perhaps without needing to analyse or justify it. However, Nathan's statement also pointed towards being in the presence of Elena meant he felt able to authentically express himself and being seen in that. This was especially poignant during a moment where Nathan ventured off into an individual journey through the forest ahead of them to meet his ancestors. Elena described her experience during this moment as '*almost like a guide*' (E, J, p9) and elaborated:

'I was just like, I'm here. Go for it. Be there. Do that with the ancestors… I was there to go, like: 'Babe, you can do this, go be with the ancestors. You're safe.' E, J, p10

In her description, her words of encouragement did not seem forceful, but instead she seemed to recognise a moment of potential value for Nathan, which she seized and then created

conditions for Nathan to fully surrender to his experience. By conveying her presence, Nathan gradually started to narrate his experience to her:

> *'I'm explaining this experience to Elena while she's there and I, I was I was being very, extremely vulnerable about my experience of what was happening there and then I became quite emotional. I cried ... Elena was there to help guide me with that experience and make me feel safe and make me feel loved whilst I was having that experience.' N, J, p9*

This moment felt important. As Nathan shared what he was going through, it became apparent how vulnerable he felt during that time. Having Elena's support seemed to help Nathan let go and embrace the difficulty of the experience, turning it into something which felt safe and maybe healing. During the interview and when re-listening, I felt touched by this moment, as it truly sounded like what mattered most was Elena's presence and words of encouragement, which made him feel safe and loved, and not necessarily the practical guidance she provided. Elena's own account added meaning:

> *'But also, I felt safe too to… just be myself… because both of us didn't need the other person to, like, hold the completely, we were holding each other, but we weren't like holding (hugging herself) each other. There's a difference.' E, J, p10*

I wondered whether Elena meant that perhaps an 'expected' physical intimacy was not what mattered. She described feeling safe; safe enough to simply be who she was, whilst also 'holding the space' for Nathan without physically holding him. This suggested she offered a steady emotional presence, in which he could unfold, perhaps a key feature of the shared psilocybin experience.

Another aspect of the shared experience was the importance of a trusted partner in the meaning-making of what is perhaps predominately an ineffable experience. When Nathan and Anna spoke about their early experience, not with their current partners, they often referred to those as beautiful but forgotten dreams. Nathan stated:

> *'Maybe I had worked something out, but by the time it came to coming round, because I hadn't been on that journey with someone. It's like waking up from a dream, right? If you speak about your dream immediately, then you can remember it. But like if you can't then it's gone like within two minutes.' N, J, p14*

And Anna experienced her first experience similarly:

'It was like having had an epic dream and having forgotten it in the morning, you know, because I didn't write anything down.' A, J, p5

Although Anna attributed her forgetting the content of the trip to not documenting her experience in vivo, which perhaps contributed to her obsession to capture the details in her earlier trips (explored in subtheme 1.2), Nathan seemed to directly attribute his inability to not remembering to not having shared the experience with someone else. I wondered whether narrating his experience live to Elena meant he was speaking his experience into existence. At a later point, Anna re-iterated this point:

'I know that I'm an external processor. I need to bounce ideas off of another person to reflect back on 'Is that what I really think and things like that?' And I can do that with Mark.' A, p10

In contrast to when her experiences felt like a dream, she found someone in Mark who she felt able to share her internal world with. Perhaps having him present as a sounding board meant she almost made him the co-author to her experience's meaning. Nathan experienced this similarly:

'It's the ability of going on a journey together at the same times, and then when you're coming back to debrief, then the other person enables you to make sense of what your journey was.' N, J, p14

For both participants, Anna and Nathan, psychedelic insight seemed to become solidified interpersonally rather than intrapersonally. I wondered whether this was because they narrated their own internal experiences, as seen in Nathan's ancestral encounter, or whether this occurred through being able to share simple observations of perceptual changes during the altered state, as reflected in Nathan's statement:

'Are you seeing these purple leaves like sparkle? Are you seeing these trees like you like? Look at this marble floor, is that like melting to you.' N, J, p14

This checking in with each other seemed to serve as anchor points, as though having another person present maybe softened the strangeness of certain experiential features, which might otherwise be disorienting.

Finally, in the previous subtheme 2.2., Elena and Nathan's experience of coming out of the trip was explored. What stood out for them was how together they created a safe enough space between them, which allowed for the transition back into 'civilisation'. For Mark and Anna, having another person present also softened this transition. Anna described this as:

> *'Coming down from a state of feeling connected to everything to being birthed a bit into a cold world out from a warm womb into a cold world.' A, J, p26*

Hearing Anna describe '*being birthed into a cold world out of a warm womb*', I noticed the heaviness of landing back in a potentially lonely reality where she exists as herself, which stood in contrast to her increased sense of connectedness to Mark, explored in GET 3. I wondered whether Mark's presence had made that transition easier, as she noted:

> *'(Mark's presence) certainly helped me because I wasn't returning into a life with problems.' A, p5*

In contrast to Anna, who seemed more impacted by the heaviness of this transition, Mark described this phase with more ease, which perhaps is what made it also more gentle for Anna. He elaborated on the comfort of their bed, which evoked warmth and cosiness, perhaps reflective of Anna's description of the altered state as a 'warm womb', which seemed to help this transition.

> *'And we've had times where we would just get under the covers and lie in bed and there's just still that sense of everything kind of being one and all right and everything' M, J, p25*

Similarly to Anna, he shared:

> *'But it's nice to feel like there is at least some sort of thread that's running through with all the chaos going on around it'. M, p11*

Here, Mark draws on the metaphor of Anna being a 'thread', perhaps representing a continuity and familiarity of her presence across the various phases throughout the trip, and then beyond into every life day.

Across both couples, partners played an active role in how psilocybin experiences unfolded, with safety emerging as a key condition. Safety seemed to emerge through mental preparation, physical environments became 'cocoons', and most importantly, partners seemed to adopt the roles witnesses and co-authors of their experience, perhaps making them more real and lasting.

3.3. GET 3: Me, You, Us: Relational Authenticity

This theme explores participants' experience of finding greater authenticity, within themselves, the other and within the relationship. Subtheme 3.1 'Becoming one' explores the phemenology of blurred physical boundaries between Anna and Mark. Subtheme 3.2 'Deep-sea dive into each other's soul' examines how psilocybin opened new ways of getting to know each other.

Subtheme 3.3 ‘Finding me’ explores Elena and Nathan’s experience of using psilocybin to seek greater authenticity within themselves, which in turn supported their relationship. Subtheme 3.4 ‘revealing what matters’ brings together experiences of both couples where psilocybin amplified already present, but previously overlooked dynamics and emotions.

Reflexivity Box 6: Psychodynamic vs. Existential

Especially when constructing GET 3, I was aware that much of the data could have been interpreted through a psychodynamic lens. Participants spoke of ‘defences lowering’ and ‘masks being removed’, which are examples of where psychoanalytic language was used to describe the phenomenology. When interpreting the data, I often felt drawn to use Winnicott’s concept of ‘true self’ and ‘false self’ in how participants felt able to reveal parts of their true selves to each other. Although within IPA, occasionally the integration of theory into the analysis is feasible, given my own humanistic and existential orientation, I made the conscious choice to stay close to the participants’ language and their own meaning-making, instead of imposing a theoretical framework for purpose of interpretation. This choice felt congruent with my own axiology, and I recognise that a researcher leaning towards a more psychodynamic position, might have interpreted this theme differently and chosen to integrate psychodynamic theory at this stage.

3.3.1. Subtheme: Becoming one

What felt central to Anna and Mark’s experience was how they experienced an entanglement of their separate beings, through the blurring of physical boundaries. Both participants spoke about this experience extensively and their object data also provides valuable insight. Arriving at this place was described by Anna akin to a pendulum swing moving from cold to warmer body temperatures:

> *‘Like you feel it coming up and you start freezing. I start shaking and then you think: ‘Oh, it's really warm’ and then you go back to shaking and then it kind of levels itself out.’ A, J, p16*

Whilst here Anna describes her internal bodily experience, her video contribution visualises what this shift might have felt like in the context of her relationship. The video captures two glows dancing in darkness, which gradually move closer together.

'One day, a glow appeared in the distance. It was different from the stars... It was like me! I became excited and moved closer, as did it to me... Carelessly, and with no direction, flitting here, there. Dancing and twirling, being happy. Missing nothing.' A, O

Whereas this could represent their lives re-joining, I wondered whether this also represented the gradually 'coming up' of the trip, reflective in her language of 'flitting, dancing, twirling'. If so, her use of 'careless' seemed poignant, as there was a sense of everything falling perfectly into place, similar to Mark's drawing present in subtheme 1.3. As she described this slow and gradual increase of the intensity of the trip, she slowed down her voice and spoke the word '*perfect*' in a peaceful tone:

'And after maybe 20 minutes, half an hour, 45 minutes at the latest, you get into that realm where it is perfect… I feel connected to everything…' A, J, p16

It was within this space, where physical boundaries between her and Mark blurred, which often elicited an image of entanglemQent between their two separate entities. Mark described this as:

'…there's this sort of classic, I don't know where I end and you begin sort of thing going on with another human being, which was nice in its own way.' M, J, p18

On one hand, Mark's use of the word 'classic' suggested a familiarity and possibly reflects expectations rooted in the discourse surrounding psilocybin use. However, his drawing brings to life what this entanglement felt like, which language might not quite fully capture:

The image shows two figures at the centre, with their bodies pressed close together in an embrace. Their outlines seem blurred, which is reflective of what Anna and Mark describe above, with branches weaving around them making it difficult to distinguish where one begins and the other ends, which again is reflective of Mark's earlier statements. Interestingly, the web of lines is entangled with each other, but also within the larger world around them, further reflective of descriptions from across participants around a greater sense of connection to their surroundings. Mark elaborated on this in his accompanying text:

> *'There is a sense of two bodies becoming one… in the way that body parts seemingly melted into each other, in the way that one's central nervous system picked up stimuli from a body not one's own.' M, O*

Anna further described the experience as follows:

> *'… the psilocybin just deepens that (intimacy), so it was already there, the oneness. The psilocybin gives you a way of just diving into a rollercoaster of actually experiencing that in a much more 3D and much more all senses at once kind of way.' A, J, p32*

Both participants speak to the all-encompassing nature of this experience. By comparing it to a rollercoaster, Anna captured the all-encompassing nature of being in this 'oneness' and also conveyed that his intimacy is present in their sober consciousness too, although psilocybin undoubtedly amplified this. Anna further drew on her understanding of physics to make sense of this:

> *'You do feel a bit like a particle… and at the same time, you can entangle yourself with this particle next to you… and just start vibrating with it and understand what's going on with.' A, J, p19*

By using scientific metaphors, Anna perhaps attempted to articulating an intense form of connection. Both participants spoke about 'vibrating' with each other, pointing toward a synchrony where partners' bodies and nervous systems fall into a rhythm together. This is explored in more depth in the subsequent GET 4. Overall, this subtheme captures a phenomenological account of the blurring of physical boundaries between Anna and Mark, which felt like an entanglement of two separate entities.

3.3.2. Subtheme: A deep-sea dive into the soul

In contrast to the previous subtheme where the couple seemed to experience a physical merger, this subtheme explores how Anna and Mark used psilocybin to get to know each better or in

different ways, perhaps re-affirming their existence of being two separate entities. Through extensive individual experiences, Mark seemed to have established a solid understanding of himself and his position in the world, whereas as previously referenced, tripping with Anna has added a new dimension to this. He stated:

> '*... for every psilocybin trip that I take and I realize just how much depth there is to myself, where I fit into the world and how I interact with the world and how my mind operates and I'm learning that side of her as well.' M, p11*

Moreover, Mark shared how he often started a psilocybin journey with the deliberate intention to focus on getting to know Anna in more depth.

> *'But when you go in as we've done ... on numerous occasions with the intent on trying to just get to know someone better outside of yourself.' M, J, p.30*

Here, Mark references an 'exploration of the other' which psilocybin enabled, perhaps reflecting his curiosity about the various layers Anna consists of. In previous relationships, this curiosity to deepen the relationship seemed neglected for Anna as she described her previous relationship '*with regards to depth, it only went so far and then it just stopped and I just needed that, I realised that'* (A, p10). A rich dialogue seemed important to her, and she later explained how '*actually having a conversation about something that means something to us has always been very difficult, just with general surroundings'* (A, p9), indicating that for both partners meaningful conversations were hard to access elsewhere. Mark described the experiential quality of their conversations during their psilocybin experiences:

> *'We've had times where we've literally just sat on the settee and talked for hours and hours and hours. And we've got recordings of it and it's lovely to hear back because you think. Wow.' M, J, p8*

At a later point, he elaborated:

> *'We've sat here, and we've just talked, or you picked my brain or whatever. And we've just, I don't know, we've just come down these long sorts of spiralling conversations with each other with no matter how well we know each other, it's interesting because there's always something that comes up.' M, J, p25*

Mark's 'wow' conveyed what a meaningful experience this must be for him, further indicating how dialogue is a significant aspect of their shared experience and perhaps a need in relationships for both. By stating '*you picked my brain*', Mark seemed to suggest how these conversations offered Anna the opportunity to get to know him more deeply. Moreover, his

description of ‘spiralling conversations’ provided insight into the texture of the experience, where they revisit familiar territory, perhaps from new angles, and I wondered what the role of shared meaning-making was within that. Anna did mention that such conversations occur in sober consciousness too, albeit noting that psilocybin amplified these interactions:

> *‘It's a hobby of ours, laughing. I like that it invites so much of philosophy and talking together and exploring, you know, deep sea exploration, so to speak, of each other's souls. And that is something that we do, with or without psilocybin. So, psilocybin is basically just a vehicle of helping us to explore more of that, or to widen the horizons of those scopes and or widen the scope of those realms.’ A, p13*

When Anna laughed, I wondered whether, like Mark’s desire to explore the cosmic connection to his wife in subtheme ‘*I wouldn’t want to do it without you*’, she recognised the unconventional nature of their chosen ‘date night’. Similarly to Mark describing ‘spirraling conversations’, her use of the ’deep sea exploration’ metaphor captured the immersive qualitive of these conversations, where psilocybin opened otherwise inaccessible layers to them. Anna further references philosophy, potentially suggesting how these experiences also include exploring their respective world views.

> *‘I can't really point to a book or anything like that or a preacher, who's sort of, so I found that, with not having to really explain all that much, I think you kind of get a more of a feel to where I am kind of in that realm of things by having tripped with me.’ M, J, p.26*

Here, Mark described how religion or a scripture can provide ready-made frameworks for understanding someone. Anna, who identifies as a practicing Christian, described this similarly by highlighting how pre-determined scripts do not fully make up an identity.

> *‘But I've become a bit cynical towards churches because I don't believe that a church is the same thing as God … if I wanted to become, you know, a car … I would just have to hang out in a garage every week, which doesn't work, you know. So, hanging out in the church every week doesn't make you a Christian.’ A, p.6*

Together, they seemed to suggest that psilocybin allowed them to meet each other beyond established narratives, which perhaps offered direct insight into their actual ‘selves’. Across both, there was a willingness for this openness with each other. Mark addressed this directly:

> *‘It's not like taking a truth drug where you’re sort of obliged to say whatever it is that's true. It's more than that. I've sat there and I was just: ‘Ask me anything.’ I said: ‘My*

soul is open.' And, yeah, I mean the last time I found it very therapeutic, to be honest with you.' M, p.7

When re-listening, I questioned whether the temporary dissolution of boundaries, which made way for this enhanced openness, created boundary issues. However, all participants conveyed this vulnerability to feel fundamentally safe; a sentiment which Mark captured above, referring to it as 'therapeutic'. At this point, I was reminded by Anna's written account:

'I love how it reflects the way in which you can meet someone in a new way. As if you met them for the first time again. As if you met them with fresh eyes, falling in love with them (in my case) over and over again.' A, O

Across these accounts, Mark and Anna bring to life how during psilocybin experiences, they take this deep dive into each other's landscapes, which Anna described as 'deep-sea exploration of the soul'. There was a willingness which underpinned this, perhaps because of Mark's curiosity to explore Anna's life world, whereas for Anna the depth of their conversations met a relational need, which is evident in her description of how this contrasted her previous relationship. And although this desire and curiosity seemed present in their sober relationship, psilocybin acted as the vehicle for them to bring depth this exploration, providing them with new ways of seeing themselves and each other.

3.3.3. Subtheme: Finding me

In contrast to Mark and Anna who prioritised seeking 'oneness' and 'exploration of each other', this subtheme focuses on how Elena and Nathan consistently emphasised to use psilocybin for individual exploration and healing, which in turn feeds into the relationship. Elena stated:

'I think (the psilocybin journeys) have taught me that, we owe it to ourselves, first and foremost, to be true to ourselves, which means that we have a better relationship because we are true to ourselves first.' E, J, p.19

She further stated:

'We're having these individual experiences and then it merges into this relationship. So, it's like, what the mushroom has taught me personally, then feeds into this relationship.' E, p.5

An example of this is the ancestral encounter explored in the subtheme 'my partner, my guide'. Whereas Elena's presence was integral to the depth of his individual journey at the time, it was ultimately a journey that Nathan went on alone. It seemed that their mutual permission to fully

surrender into their own journey indicated a safety within the relationship, without imposing a disconnection between them:

> *'I think that was just the moment where, it was like okay, we don't need to be looking at each other's faces for four hours whilst we're taking psilocybin, but we can still be connected on this journey together but having an individual experience too.' N, J, p.12*

I wondered whether this stood in contrast to Mark and Anna, who seemed to prioritise the oneness the experience enabled. For Nathan, intimacy and connection remained, even when their focus turned inwards, pointing toward a paradoxical 'togetherness and separateness'. Elena stated:

> *'We were connected obviously 'cause we were having a journey together, but there wasn't, it didn't feel, pause, we were, we were hanging out.' E, p.5*

Although Elena did not finish her thought, I wondered if she meant to convey a similar notion of psilocybin holding an individual undercurrent. Moreover, her phrase 'hanging out', suggested a casualness, which perhaps reflected a comfort within the relationship. Elena further stated:

> *'But I was happy because I also dived into ancestral work, spiritual work for a while now... And I've gone to some, like, really dark places within my own childhood ... and Nathan hasn't... And that's not to say Nathan's journey isn't, or mine is deeper than Nathan's. It's not.' E, p.5*

Here, Elena seemed to establish a non-hierarchical stance towards individual healing journeys. Whilst she felt happy to bear witness to Nathan's exploration, she did seem to recognise the courage such personal work requires: I wondered whether there was a happiness around what this meant for their relationship. Nathan described what psilocybin has taught him personally:

> *'(The learnings) closest to the surface are around my connection to my identity, as a man, as a black man, as someone that's British, as someone who's mixed heritage. All often underpinned by anxiety, often underpin passions, underpins anger…. And what the mushroom has enabled me to do, I think it has helped me understand myself a little better… feel more comfortable in myself… be more confident in myself and helped me to be okay with holding my own space.' N, p.5*

Here, Nathan conveyed how psilocybin enabled greater understanding and acceptance of himself. Whereas this had a positive impact on him personally, I wondered whether it did indeed have a regulatory impact on their relationship. The ability to hold his own space evoked

an image of solidly standing on the ground with two feet and the impact of this seemed to ripple beyond himself into his relationships.

> *'It (psilocybin) just improves my relationship, not just my relationship to Elena, but my relationship to people. So, for me, like the mushroom is first and foremost, just helps me with me, which in turn helps me with the people that are around me.' N, p.5*

In Nathan's written text, he described an experience at a festival:

> *'I had a vivid feeling on interconnectedness with the large crowd, whilst also feeling like an important individual among the collective. This represents the positive desire to be connected with my partner, whilst feeling confident to own and hold my own space within the relationship.' (N, O)*

This refers back to this notion of 'togetherness and separateness' where feeling connected to others, but also to himself, was held in equal measure. Similarly, Elena's poem and accompanying text addressed space and togetherness, the being together whilst being separate entities. She stated, '*this poem is a reflection of the space that I need in the relationship and in the moment itself and equally connectedness that I want in the relationship*.' (E, O). The poem states:

> *'He gave me space*
> *He gives me space*
> *Knowing that when the time is right*
> *Together we will find each other*
> *And we did that night…*
> *And with each breath*
> *There was space*
> *And with each breath*
> *There was togetherness.'*

Here, Elena described how momentarily on a trip she *'was feeling anxiety in my body and was highly sensitive and so I created space for myself and moved away from my partner to be able to find clarity'* (E, O). She closed by stating:

> '*It represents space and togetherness, it represents the need for space in a relationship and the connectedness / togetherness that is also vital for a healthy relationship to thrive*.' *E, O*

Across these accounts, the paradox of being connected to others, whilst being connected to oneself becomes alive. It seemed to suggest that psilocybin supported their ability to find back to themselves, anchoring them on solid ground, from which the relationship could then flourish. Overall, they could journey together, sometimes connected, sometimes turning inward, because they trusted each other enough to allow for both closeness and independence.

3.3.4. Subtheme: The diamond sword revealing what matters

Whereas the above subthemes focus on each couple's experience of finding heightened intimacy during psilocybin journeys, this subtheme explores what psilocybin revealed when vulnerability between the couple heightened. Drawing on an experience from a festival, Elena and Nathan described a moment of silence where tension surfaced between them. Elena described this as follows:

> *'There was a stickiness where Nathan wasn't speaking his truth, which made me feel funky. Then I wasn't speaking my truth… there was something that happened that the mushroom heightened, brought it to surface, and we had to deal with it.' E, J, p.15*

As explored in the previous subtheme, Elena and Nathan emphasised how they consider authentic self-expression as fundamental to their relationship. When Elena described the above tension, I wondered whether psilocybin had amplified a dynamic present in their ordinary consciousness, which then required immediate resolution between them, indicating how psilocybin is merely an amplifier, as opposed to generating 'new' material. Elena made sense of her tension explaining '*there was an attachment thing that happened between me and Nathan that only afterwards we got to debrief on'* (E, J, p.15). Nathan specifically described the quality of these debriefs when this occurs:

> *'And sometimes that may cause difficult conversations but every single time we feel better after… as it doesn't snowball into something that is unnecessary.' N, p.6*

Nathan acknowledged the momentary discomfort such conversations can bring, perhaps even conflict, yet rather than experiencing it as threatening, he saw it as integral to their relationship. He described how they '*have become much better communicators… more honest and mindful with our communication and … feeling more comfortable and safer with speaking our truths*' (N, J, p18). In his individual interview, Nathan explained how psilocybin personally facilitated this:

'...being able to have some conviction in sharing ... that is probably the pillar of our relationship, is just our ability to share almost all of ourselves with the other.' N, p.6

When Nathan referenced this ability to speak his truth, which reflects sentiments from the previous subtheme, I wondered whether he was referring to an ability to authentically communicate his needs, whilst trusting Elena to receive and respond to them safely. In his individual interview, he directly attributed this shift to the shared psilocybin experiences:

'I feel like I'm able to speak my truth easier than maybe I did before we were having these psilocybin experiences together.' N, p.6

Whilst Elena and Nathan described an amplified attachment dynamics where psilocybin supported them in *how* they speak about this, Mark similarly described how psilocybin can 'bringing stuff up and out':

'For me, with someone that I am more than willing to open my heart and soul to, it's very good for bringing stuff up and bringing stuff out. Not that I'm particularly keeping a secret, but stuff that I probably wouldn't even thought about, or it would have occurred to me to speak of.' M, p.6

Similarly to subtheme 3.2 'a deep-sea dive into each other's soul', Mark references a willingness to be open with Anna. He also alluded to how this 'stuff' might have previously overlooked, where psilocybin shines a torch on the unseen. He further elaborated on how Anna's presence enabled this, reiterating the partners influence outlined in subtheme 3.2.4:

'But there are things in the moments, like deep seated emotions and then things that I feel quite free to get out and to exchange with Anna… a lot of that's probably sitting there somewhere in the subconscious and it comes out during the experience on psilocybin a lot of the times.' M, p.6

When asked what this experience felt like, he shared how '*there's this an absolute sort of outpouring of, from everything, outside and inside of you'* (M, p1), later adding:

'Psilocybin just seems to be like this diamond sword that just comes down and just cuts everything away in an instant and, when you realize, the sort of everything, absolutely everything that's going on.' M, p.9

The sword evoked an image of cutting through the noise to what truly mattered. Although the word cutting might initially seem harsh, Mark's description of a '*diamond'* sword, seemed to

indicate something more treasured and useful rather than destructive. Similar to Elena's account around psilocybin amplifying dynamics present in sober life, Anna stated:

> *'... you realise that everything from what happened the past week before the trip just plays to a wonderful symphony and this symphony of what actually happened in the last week kind of gets opened up to you… like, wow, yeah, that is what happened all week… And it does feel as if it cannot produce anything in you that is not already there, even if it's so small, but yeah, that you didn't notice it, but it was there…' A, J, p.29*

By describing the trip as a '*wonderful symphony*', Anna seemed to compare this reflection of 'real life events' during the trip. I found myself touched by her use of 'wonderful'; it felt like an appreciation for the mundane, yet beautiful everyday moments easily overlooked. Whereas psilocybin allowed couples to 'zoom in' on certain aspects, Anna also introduced a notion of 'zooming out', reframing larger disagreements into trivial arguments:

> *'...we had been bickering about something a few days earlier, and I had felt that it was still, it was still there, it was still annoying me, and it sort of melted away. It sort of melted away because in that moment where you begin to feel one with everything, you realize the silliness of some things, some things that you are holding onto, and I'm sure that it can help with that.' A, p.17*

When re-listening and hearing '*it was still annoying me*', I wondered how this hindered their intimacy in everyday life and then manifested if a psilocybin journey had not occurred. Almost like dusting a room. Mark re-emphasised this:

> *'There just comes a point where I just feel so humbled at the vastness of everything, when like you say, you sort of see a lot of issues and even issues that we might have been arguing with in the last day or week or month or whatever you can, sort of, see them for what they are, which is just minor, you know, minor issues, minor issues.' M, J, p.23*

Unlike Elena and Nathan, where the heightened tension required them to actively address the tension, for Mark and Anna psilocybin seemed to dissolve the intensity of their tensions. On one hand, this may reflect how the couples approach tension generally, however it may also reflect the underlying nature of the tension. Elena specifically referenced attachment, whereas Anna's use of '*bickering'* suggested lighter disagreements.

Across participants, language of dropping guards and egos emerged, a sense of letting go of a mask to reveal what lays behind. Mark stated:

'*Certainly, when you were sitting, even when we just sit, talk on psilocybin, and I mean, your guards are dropped, your inhibitions are down.*' *M, J, p.31*

Elena brought to life what this meant for their relationship:

> *'I think we are more open, more vulnerable with each other and less ego involved, from both of us. Being able to… drop my ego and be able to hear or see the perspective of Nathan in that dynamic.' E, J, p.18*

Interestingly, Mark likened the experience of 'what's behind the mask' to a newborn state without a developed ego:

> *'I've always imagined it to be in a somewhat similar experience to how a newborn baby probably feels… It hasn't developed an ego yet, so it hasn't built upon detritus and shit that we all do that sort of holds us back and clogs up our brains… it's like it strips away, all of the man-made issues that we have all have.' M, p.4*

Here, I am reminded of Anna's maternal care for Mark, where an intuitive knowing of the other's needs emerged, perhaps akin to a mother's intuition, further explored in GET 4. Mark also seemed to convey how barriers built across a lifetime might prevent him to fully surrender into intimacy. Moreover, his reference to 'man-made issues' carried a sense of triviality, as if these were less important, constructed problems when placed next to the insights psilocybin offered him. He further described how this state shifts his perception of Anna:

> *'You're looking at someone untarnished and you can see… I wanna say it's like falling in love again… and you can sort of sit there and think: 'I can see you as you are'.' M, p.5*

Elena similarly described feeling more able to connect with Nathan's essence:

> *'Another thing that I've noticed with the mushroom journey with me and him is being able to see him more and understand him more rather than always like second guessing him or like thinking that he's not telling the truth.' E, p.8*

Across the above accounts, it becomes evident how during shared psilocybin experiences partners felt able to let go of 'egos' and drop 'guards', which allowed them to see each other and connect to the others' essence more directly.

Another element, which perhaps hindered intimacy, was Elena's experience of how psilocybin supported her in letting go societal expectations. Returning to the idea of psilocybin amplifying existing tensions and dynamics, Elena brings to life what insight she gained from that:

'I was like 1) Is he going to be OK without me? 2) Is he going to be upset with me. What does Nathan want? Because actually, and this is my own subconscious conditioning is: 'What Nathan wants, should take a priority over what I want.' That was just some subconscious stuff that happened that I didn't even know that was part of me.' E, J, p.16

Here, Elena described an internal monologue that occurred where she gained insight into how she prioritised Nathan's needs over her own, which she attributes to her own conditioning.

'... it highlights some of my own conditioning. I think maybe like gender-based, more like gender-based conditioning, pause, and then also conditioning within my own family unit that I feel potentially was the psilocybin that helps dismantle it even if it was maybe not in that specific moment.' E, J, p.17

By using the word 'dismantling', she seemed to reference the deep-seated nature of this conditioning. Despite initially being ambivalent in attributing this to psilocybin, Elena wrote in her poem:

'I bled that night,
my blood escaped down to the roots
of those three wise purple leaves trees.
They guided me, back home, back home to myself, to be free.' (E, O)

Whereas this may similarly reflect subtheme 3.3 'finding me', the accompanying text offered further clarity:

'It was as if the plant helped me draw myself to a portal (the trees) which after the blood went onto the ground, gave me a message that helped me make a decision and also in a weird way stripped me back of societal conditionings of marriage, being engaged, a ring, a wedding etc. A message to say - we do things differently, and that is okay, remember what true love FEELS like, not what love - you have been TOLD - LOOKS like.' E, O

I remember feeling touched by this. Elena seemed to temporarily disconnect from her societal understanding of what partnership and love means, and instead re-connected with her embodied experience of what *her* ideal image of partnership and love is.

Overall, this theme captures how psilocybin allowed participants to access a greater authenticity within themselves, their partner, and within their relationships. For Anna and Mark, this showed up as 'becoming' one, where physical boundaries blurred, alongside a 'deep-sea exploration' of each other's souls, which was accessed through a richer dialogue and

greater openness with each other. In contrast, Elena and Nathan repeatedly referred to an individual undercurrent of psilocybin experiences, where through psilocybin they learnt to prioritise being 'true to ourselves first', which ultimately then strengthened their relationship. Finally, across both couples, psilocybin appeared to amplify previously experiences dynamics or moments, rather than creating new material. Whereas for Elena and Nathan this meant real-time resolution of attachment dynamics, for Anna and Mark it dissolved previous disagreements into something trivial.

3.4. GET 4: Connecting beyond words

This theme explores how couples experienced connection and communication beyond verbal language. Through a shared passion of music, Elena and Nathan found connection through music, which is the focus of subtheme 4.1 '*music as the shared guide*'. Anna and Mark experienced a form of communication which did not rely on verbal language, and therefore the focus of subtheme 4.2 '*communicating beyond verbal language*'. Subtheme 4.3 '*a vision of a shared future*' explores an experience Anna and Mark shared of a simultaneous hallucination where they envisioned a shared future together.

3.4.1. Subtheme: Music: Love's energy

This subtheme explores how music became the 'third' presence in Elena and Nathan's relationship, which facilitated a connection beyond verbal communication. To contextualise this, the analysis first highlights how music formed their initial bond, before exploring the role it played during shared psilocybin experience. The couple met at a music event initially and then connected them throughout their relationship, which Nathan described as:

> *'Music literally connected us to start with, because I was playing music and Elena was dancing, and she liked the music I was playing so that connected us and that's always kept us connected as well.' N, J, p.1*

In her poem, Elena elaborated on this. Her words evoked a powerful image of how music brought them together when they first met:

> *'I was on the dance floor looking up at him.*
> *Him looking down in the music smiling and moving.*
> *In between us there was space filled with love's energy - music*
> *The music weaving through the crowd drawing us close.' E, O*

Unlike Anna and Mark, whose 'love's energy' seemed to manifest through dialogue, Nathan and Elena found that connection through music, which serves as a hobby and soundtrack to everyday activities.

> *'Music kind of soundtracks most of our day, either individually or together and ... we go listen to live music together, we dance together, we like to go to festivals together.' N, J, p.1*

Nathan's repeated use of 'we' emphasises how music is a shared endeavour for them. Elena similarly described how *'... when we cook together, there's music on, if we're smoking together, there's music on'* (E, J, p.2). Music seemed to be an active participant within their relationship, which provided safety and expanded their understanding of each other. Elena stated how *'it also opens both of our minds up to different parts of music, because obviously my taste will be different also to Nathan's and then it expands our minds'* (E, J, p.2), perhaps also reflective of subtheme 3.2, where Anna and Mark explored each other through dialogue. This context highlights how an activity central within ordinary consciousness can become integral to their shared psilocybin experience. Describing the trip itself, Nathan stated:

> *'We played this album, which kind of like connected us to each other and yea, it literally felt like it soundtracked the experience… and you're for long periods in total silence. But that silence doesn't mean that we're not connected because we are.' N, J, p.7*

Here, music carried them when words might have been inadequate, which created space for a silence that maintained connection, as opposed to disconnection. Elena described this similarly:

> *'We were quite silent between ourselves. No one knew how to communicate, but we were still together like side by side still, like there was still connection.' E, J, p.16*

This made me wonder as to what role music played for the couple in creating emotional, but also physical safety, akin to themes explored around fostering a 'cocoon' in subtheme 2.2.2. It seemed to contribute to a holding environment, perhaps aligning their physiological and emotional states through rhythm. Even in difficult moments, tuning into music provided safety.

> *'And even when it got bit anxious… my intuition was saying, put on some music ... and then, boom, we went on a journey together through this music. But I then felt the music. I saw the music, I saw the notes being played out of the music.' E, p.5*

Here, Elena brings to life how music shapes the experiential texture of her experience and further suggests that music functioned as an emotional scaffold during the trip. Her decision to introduce music is also indicative of her ability to soothe both herself and Nathan, perhaps

reflective of her perceived identity as a guide on these trips. Overall, music held a dual function for Elena and Nathan. Firstly, it maintained their bond whilst also creating safety, an aspect explored in GET 3. Secondly, instead of facing each other during distress, perhaps in moments where connection felt too overwhelming, they turned towards music, which held them both. This is different to the entanglement described by Mark and Anna, and suggests how togetherness can be preserved through shared activities, as opposed to physical or emotional entanglement.

3.4.2. Subtheme: A bilateral connection

This subtheme explores the type of non-verbal communication Anna and Mark developed during their shared psilocybin experience. I often wondered whether they felt frustrated at the limitation of verbal language in conveying their experience. Mark stated how '*words are very clumsy and they're hard to define at times'* (M, p.3), while Anna described words as '*stumbly'* (A, J, p.18), indicating a gap between the richness of their internal experiences and language's capacity to capture them. This disconnection seemed amplified during the altered state, which made way for a non-verbal language. When describing their audio-recorded psilocybin experiences, Mark noted how '*all those breaks in the recordings ... can be filled with a million thoughts that you can never be expressed through words for each other'* (M, J, p.8). Mark further states:

> *'There just comes a point where I don't, need to tell her what I'm trying to tell her because she understands what I'm trying to tell her and it's possible to just sit in silence for however long. And have a more meaningful, more deep, you know, much richer exchange of information.' M, p.3*

What Mark seemed to convey here is an intuitive understanding of the other, which is reflective of themes explored in GET 3. In attempt to understand, a perhaps ineffable experience, Anna described:

> *'... you get so in tune with someone else that you can, you can almost converse with them without having to use anything as stumbly as words. You know, so you can sit there, and you can exchange ideas in, you know, in a nonverbal form. It's a bit as if you were, you had cabled us up together and we had some bilateral connection uploading and downloading data from each other.' (A, p.18)*

Anna seemed to reference more than connection here and instead brings to life a reciprocal exchange of information, which allowed them to remain connected in silences without relying

on verbal language. Unlike Mark and Anna who experienced this communication as almost telepathic, Elena and Nathan silences were partially guided by music as explored in the previous subtheme. It is further reflective of the moment described where silence amplified an attachment dynamic that required a conversation, as explored in GET 3:

> *'...we were just silent because we both were feeling this weird energy together, but no one was able to speak about it because the mushroom was trying to work a million things out at the same time...' E, J, p.15*

On one hand, their silences were guided by music, on the other, their silences were guided by the mushroom itself, and as Elena suggested above, the mushroom was experienced an active agent between them even within silence. However, this moment felt tense and uncomfortable with their momentary inability to communicate, which perhaps amplified the tension for them.

In contrast to complete silences, Anna and Mark also focussed on simpler forms of communication, during moments where Mark sought comfort from Anna.

> *'All of a sudden you just started, don't know, saying like: 'It's alright, it's alright, let it out.' Something like that. I mean just, you know, but you knew exactly what I needed at the time'. M, J, p.17*

By stating 'something like that', I wondered whether this reflected a difficulty in remembering the specifics, as Mark noted to *'...come away with broad strokes rather than the particulars'* (M, J, p.8), perhaps indicating that the felt sense, as opposed to the intricate details, was more easily remembered. Similarly to Elena during the ancestral encounter, Anna seemed to also briefly adopt the role of a guide. Although in both moments, Elena and Anna used some verbal language, overall, their responses demonstrated an intuitive understanding of their partners' needs. Mark stated:

> *'But in that moment, all that was needed was like I say, it was a head on a shoulder or whatever it was and Anna brushing my hair. And it was like, a year's worth of therapy in an instant'. M, p.8*

During this, Anna felt connected to her own maternal instincts, as '*in that moment, I do feel like a mother figure*' (A, p.7). I remember feeling struck by his words *'a year's worth of therapy in an instant'* and I wondered whether simplicity of her response carried a depth that no external therapist could replicate, perhaps as it was rooted in their shared history and intimacy.

What emerged was that beyond verbal communication, body language, facial expressions and gestures carried a specific value. Both Anna and Mark acknowledged this during the shared

interview; Anna shared the simplicity of '*a look, the eyes, or a giggle or something…'* (A, J, p.18) and Mark re-iterated the meaning behind this:

> *'And it can mean this much more than me giving you a paragraph explaining how my day was. You know, just a nod or a wink.' (A, J, p.18)*

As Mark said, '*this much'*, he stretched his arms wide out to demonstrate the magnitude of meaning these minimal interactions hold. Anna explained this through Schultz von Thun:

> *'He said: 'You package your message, and you send it off and you just hope that when the person unpacks it that it looks a bit like what you sent off.' And I think on psilocybin, you can forego, you can like go around all of that basically.' A, J, p.12*

While language was not entirely absent, it appeared that it was often reduced to its actual meaning, allowing participants in the altered state to access that meaning more directly, which was perhaps overlooked in ordinary consciousness.

Across these accounts, psilocybin shifted the couple away from verbal toward intuitive connection. Anna and Mark experienced moments where they understood each other without words, sharing thoughts and feelings directly in a telepathic manner. Anna connected to Mark's needs automatically, suggesting an intuitive knowing of the other. For Elena and Nathan, these silent moments sometimes created discomfort, demonstrating how non-verbal communication can be either beautiful or tense. Finally, the couple noted how psilocybin made both of them more aware of all the subtle ways they were communicating through body language and facial expressions, which at points conveyed more than verbal language was able to capture.

3.4.3. Subtheme: A shared, unspoken vision

The final subtheme explores how Anna and Mark connected through a shared hallucination, which occurred without the other knowing: a moment of profound connection beyond words that served as an anchor throughout their relationship. Anna described the hallucination from her perspective:

> *'…he was ageing before me, and it wasn't a bad thing. It wasn't like in one of those horror movies where people age quicker. It was just yeah, it was like you said, just watching him through his life… it was just like, pause, experiencing time passing by together and that was all it was.' A, J, p.20*

Anna conveyed a joy at witnessing Mark grow older, which perhaps stood in contrast to narratives framing ageing negatively. I was also curious about how decades got compressed into one brief moment. Mark described his perspective:

> *'I can remember just sort of … laying on this bed and just like I said, I'd sort of, I remember looking at you and sort of seeing this sort of history of your life and your face moving by.' M, J, p.17*

Mark's repetitive 'sort of' seemed to reflect him grasping for language knowing it cannot fully capture it, as explored in the previous subtheme. The experience felt so precious and delicate as he narrated it in real time, feeling his way back into the experience as opposed to just simply presenting the memory, which temporarily allowed both Anna and I into his world. Interestingly, both noted experiencing the same hallucination simultaneously, without discussing it in the moment. Anna stated:

> *'It was that moment when he looked at me and saw my face getting older. I didn't know that at the time… because in the moment when he had looked at me and that had happened, the same thing happened to me.' A, J, p.19*

Mark described his perspective:

> *'After she told me of the similarities that we were having in that moment. And I don't quite know what would cause two people to have a very similar experience at the same time, but I know for a fact that it happened. It gave me a sense of security in the sense that we're on the right path. And it was a path that we would continue on together.' M, p10*

Shortly after, he shared:

> *'I'm in my late 30s and I sat looking at my wife in her guise of a 80/90 year old woman and she was as beautiful to me as she was when we were 17 when we met.' M, p.11*

Whereas Mark referenced this sense of a confirmation, reflected in his drawing where he wrote '*everything is exactly where it needs to be'*, he alluded to how tangible the experience felt, which as an outsider is difficult to grasp. He stated:

> *'I was genuinely experiencing something that I was going to experience in the future.' M, p.10*

Mark attempted to make sense of this by moving beyond merely physiologically triggered hallucinations, stating to not '*believe in hallucinations, there's something more to it than that*'

(M, J, p.9), and later stating '*there is something real here'* (M, J, p.28). I wondered whether Mark was referring to the emotional undercurrent, perhaps the felt sense of this experience, which mattered. He described the emotional texture as:

> *'Because like I said, it wasn't, wasn't just a visual aspect of it, which is the thing it was, it was the, it was the sense or whatever that came with it… but it felt like a, I don't know, like a confirmation of something.' M, J, p.20*

In his written text he re-iterated:

> *'The vision I had of her ageing throughout her years yet to come, and the feelings of love and safety and comfort that came with it… It gave me a great sense of being in the right place at the right time in this life with the right person, and that whatever I felt for her now wouldn't ebb, but would only grow and strengthen as the years moved on.' M, O*

Although Anna shared less about the experiential texture of the experience, she did also elaborate on its meaning for her:

> *'It's a nice anchor for a relationship to take with you, yeah, to reacquaint yourself with… It was a lot more to hold on to. Basically, so yeah, that to me that is definitely, like you say, also confirmation of what's going to happen, something to look forward to. You know, like a glimpse or a teaser, trailer of like, laughing, yeah.' A, J, p.21*

Here, Anna also spoke how tangible the experience felt, allowing her to carry it as a souvenir from the trip. When she described it as 'a teaser, trailer', it also brought to life how the experience must have felt cinematic, like a movie she enjoyed watching. I also sensed that the experience served as a reminder, perhaps akin to themes explored in GET 3, where psilocybin allowed them zoom out to see what really mattered to them.

Overall, this theme captures how couples discovered more immediate and intuitive ways of communicating, through music or silences or shared hallucinations. Each couple found their way of communicating depending on what felt safe and was important to them. Finally, these findings suggest that it may be the felt sense which contributes to the significance of these interactions, as opposed to the sensory alterations or content. Perhaps Mark's drawing offers some insight into the nature of this intimacy.

Reflexivity 7: Capturing the ineffability of psychedelic phenomenology

Throughout the analytic process, and then also whilst re-reading the chapter, I noticed it felt easier to work on GET 1 and GET 2, as opposed to the phenomenological accounts in GET 3 and GET 4. I wondered whether this was because the latter two, the experiences were 'within' the psilocybin experience itself and quite simply went 'beyond words'. Especially when re-reading, certain aspects of the writing seemed more 'words on paper', as opposed to fully capturing the essence and magnitude, which participants seemed to want to convey, but evidently felt important to them. In GET 4, I wrote about Anna and Mark's frustration of language, as there seemed a disconnect between the richness of their internal words, and what words were able to capture, which is perhaps what I picked up throughout the analytic process too. Although this often left me with the impression that this was something important to elevate, it amplified my own challenge of trying to put into words to the 'felt sense' I vicariously experienced throughout data collection and analysis. I also wondered whether this contributed to my hesitation to 'interpret', because its meaning seemed beyond what maybe could be made sense of.

Chapter 4: Discussion

In this chapter, the findings will be discussed and contextualised within wider academic literature. Firstly, a brief summary of each of the four group experiential themes will be provided and relevant links to existing research will be made. Then, this chapter will expand on how the findings contribute to both couples' therapy and relational well-being, alongside contributions to psychedelic and Counselling Psychology literature. Clinical implications for professionals will be outlined, and suggestions for future research will be explored. Following this, the methodological strengths and limitations will be discussed, before concluding with final thoughts and reflections.

4.1. Overview of the findings

The research question was: What is the experience of couples taking psilocybin together? This study is the first to examine this experience meaning the findings are novel within their own right. The research question was addressed by completing an Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (Smith et al., 2022) of semi-structured joint and individual interviews, including multimedia data and short paragraphs contributed by the participants. The four group experiential themes identified were: 1) An ever-evolving relationship to psilocybin, 2) Tending to the safety of the trip, 3) Me, You, Us: Relational Authenticity, and 4) Connecting beyond words.

This study adopted primarily a phenomenological epistemology, which prioritises the subjective over the objective allowing for an in-depth exploration of the experience itself. Moreover, a social constructivist approach was integrated, which emphasises how participants co-construct meanings around psilocybin use within the context of their relationship. The findings should be understood as a means for couples to enhance their relationship well-being and flourishing (Seligman, 2008), as opposed to addressing relational distress, although tentative suggestions are made as to how psilocybin may amplify certain core processes used in couples' therapy interventions, such as emotion-focussed couples therapy (Johnson, 2008).

4.1.1. GET 1: An ever-evolving relationship to psilocybin

Participants reported that psilocybin held different meanings and significance at various points over time. For one couple, this shift was evidently shaped by the changing cultural discourse around psychedelics. Together, they actively researched a new drug-taking paradigm which stood in contrast to their understanding of recreational use. Interestingly, the emergence of

clinical research seemed to add perceived legitimacy to psychedelic use that prompted an openness to re-engage with substances, albeit differently. This somewhat overlaps with findings from a qualitative study where participants described engaging with research about psilocybin to optimise their trip experiences (Shaw et al., 2023). Participants' shift from recreational to more intentional view of psilocybin align with Hartogsohn's (2020) concept of 'collective set and setting'. Research confirms that cultural narratives and increased media coverage influences individuals' expectations of psychedelics and then the subsequent experiences, with personal psychedelic experience and knowledge being key predictors to more favourable views of psychedelics (Wells et al., 2024; Soylemez et al., 2025).

In the absence of support from healthcare professionals, users in non-clinical samples typically access information through mainstream media (Petranker et al., 2020), where such reports often inflate benefits. In the literature, this is referred to as the 'Michael Pollan Effect', noting higher expectations in individuals regarding psychedelics' efficacy, which is also encountered in clinical trials (Aday et al., 2023). Aicher et al. (2024) caution against overselling the potential of these substances as revolutionary treatments, meaning it is imperative for both clinicians and researchers to manage expectations of those accessing psychedelics trips (Smith & Applebaum, 2023). One study found that individuals who hold strong expectations, or clients who turn to psilocybin after other treatments have failed, experience distress if outcomes fall short, especially patients with a history of psychiatric care and unsuccessful treatments (Breeksema et al., 2024).

The couple also arrived at a new way of understanding psilocybin by recognising the mushroom as an organism beyond its psychoactive substances, understanding it predominately as medicine. Participants reframed psilocybin as 'medicine', while one participant noted to gradually learn to surrender to the trip itself instead of viewing it as a scientific endeavour. This overlaps with findings by Colbert and Hughes (2023), who similarly found that couples using MDMA conceptualised the substance as a 'medicine' and 'heart opener'. Interestingly, research indicates that Westerners frequently seek psychological benefits from psychedelic retreats, but often encounter far broader effects than anticipated (Bathje et al., 2021). This raises the responsibility of clinicians in supporting individuals and couples during the integration phase, which will be addressed later in this chapter. Finally, one couple highlighted how psilocybin became an integrated relationship practice, reflecting findings by Neubert et al.'s (2024) who pointed toward couples' classic psychedelic use as a relationship practice to increase relationship quality. Across participants, the difference between individual journeys

versus shared experiences was noted, with one participant describing that his partner's presence has *'added a new dimension'*. This points toward a uniqueness of the shared experience that participants positioned as superior to individual journeys.

4.1.2. GET 2: Tending to the safety of the trip together

In this theme, all couples mentioned safety, both practically and emotionally, as a prerequisite to allow the experience to unfold organically. Participants reported intentionally preparing for the experience, either together or separately, and choosing a safe setting in which to trip. This finding aligns with the established literature emphasising the importance of set and setting in psychedelic use (Hartogsohn, 2016; Carhart-Harris et al., 2018) and previous studies of couples using psychedelics in naturalistic settings where partners prioritised careful and intentional use of psychedelics (Anderson et al., 2019; Colbert & Hughes, 2023; Neubert et al., 2024). To achieve a positive psychedelic experience, appropriate motivation, preparation, and harm reduction measures are key (Palmer & Maynard, 2022). The findings further overlap with Anderson et al. (2019) who found that couples using MDMA together create a clear distinction, a particular kind of 'date night', between their journeys and everyday life to protect the integrity of the shared experience. Findings of the same study further suggested, couples undergo somewhat a 'purification' process, which resonates with participants descriptions of wanting to 'leave lingering baggage' behind.

Beyond the practical aspects of tending to set and setting outlined above, participants described how having a partner present had '*added new dimensions*' and '*made me feel loved*' as emotions and vulnerability surfaced. Whilst the literature on shared psychedelic experiences reflects psychedelics' ability for partners to share vulnerable aspects of themselves (Wagner et al., 2021; Neubert et al., 2024), one may also refer to the vast literature on the importance of guides and facilitators in psychedelic-assisted therapies (Eisner & Cohen, 1958; Hartogsohn, 2016). However, the relationship with guides and therapists is importantly constrained by professional boundaries and are imperative to safeguard clients, whereas romantic partners are embedded in the person's everyday life beyond a trip, suggesting a qualitatively different support. By describing partners as *'guides'*, participants seemed to blur the boundaries between the emotional support which naturally may arise in romantic partnership, and the kind of therapeutic support provided by trained professionals. This brings up important questions about how partners' support may function differently, and perhaps more potently, especially as their support extends beyond the trip into daily life and it rooted in a shared intimacy and history, which will be explored in more depth later in this chapter.

Additionally, during and after trips, partners played a vital role in making sense of the experience itself. Having a partner present, who is also in an altered state, enabled shared dialogue during, as well as after, trips, providing immediate feedback, which perhaps made the experience more easily remembered and tangible. This aligns with findings by Breeksema et al. (2024), where participants reported to seek a community to speak about the ineffability of the psychedelic experience, which could prolong the integration phase. The findings further point towards Dupuis' (2022) concept of the 'socialisation of hallucinations', where social interactions shape the meaning-making of the experience, as well as the phenomenology of the trip itself. Finally, findings from this theme further suggested, psychedelic insight may be solidified interpersonally, rather than just intrapersonally, reflecting sentiments from Enestrom et al.'s (2025) findings that, although meaning is predominantly personal, it is also facilitated by interpersonal processes.

4.1.3. GET 3: Me, You, Us: Relational Authenticity

Across participants, there seemed to be a quest to meet oneself and one's partner in the altered state with usual defences and barriers to intimacy lowered. The largest contrast between participants was in how they experienced this: some felt barriers break down within themselves (intrapersonally), while others experienced barriers breaking down between themselves and their partner (interpersonally).

Participants described the blurring of physical boundaries, noting an uncertainty of *'where my body ends and yours begins',* with others describing coming out of the trip as *'realising that my body has edges'.* This resonated with ego-dissolution, which is a widely recognised experiential feature of psilocybin (Nour et al., 2016; Millière, 2017). In interpersonal contexts, experiences of this are known as spontaneous communitas, defined by Kettner et al. (2021) as '*an experience of intense togetherness and shared humanity that temporarily transcends social structures'*. However, this study extends the literature on ego-dissolution and spontaneous communitas by exploring the phenomenology of these experiences in a romantic dyad. For couples, reducing these boundaries of self often expanded their perception to include the partner, creating moments where participants experienced a stronger sense of 'oneness' and 'connectedness', which is widely reflected in psychedelic literature (Kałużna et al., 2022; Watts et al. 2017) and identified as a contributor to improved relationships with loved ones (Agin-Liebes et al., 2021). In addition to this, the disruption of first-person subjectivity through ego dissolution may open the space to shift from an 'I-You' focus to a more fluid sense of 'We' (Millière, 2017). What the present findings add is that for couples, the sense of 'We' was

accompanied by a strengthened sense of 'I'; and the 'we' was experienced through the dissolution of the boundary between 'I' and 'You'. In both couples, participants described a form of relational integration that resonates with the we-language research. Seider et al. (2009) and Rohrbaugh et al. (2008) demonstrated that couples' use of the ‘we’ pronouns is associated with higher marital satisfaction and improved health outcomes. Whilst this study did not conduct a linguistic analysis, participants' retrospective accounts did reflect a fluid movement between 'I' and 'we' language, particularly when describing what the experience meant for the relationship. This shift documented here carries a linguistic dimension worth exploring in future research.

Across both couples, there seemed a paradox in seeking separation versus togetherness, although this was reflected most poignantly in one couple’s account. What they gained from the shared psilocybin experience was a greater understanding of their own identities, which in turn seemed to have a regulatory impact on the relationship. This helped them communicate their needs to each other more clearly, supporting findings by Neubert et al. (2024), where couples’ psychedelic experiences enabled insights into communication patterns, enhancing their ability for ‘straight-talking’. Moreover, a study by Kruger et al. (2025) suggested that after psychedelic experiences participants reported increased authenticity, self-acceptance and freedom in self-expression. Another study found, participants scored higher on state authenticity on the dosing day and the day after microdosing (Pop & Dinkelacker, 2023).

Finally, participants described psilocybin as amplifying the couples’ ability to explore each other’s inner worlds through meaningful conversations. This aligns with findings by Neubert et al. (2024), who noted ‘spirited discussions’ as a key feature of couples’ shared psychedelic experiences. Such conversations seemed to amplify their shared understanding of each other and deepened their insight into the inner and lived experiences of their partner. However, this study extends these findings by providing a phenomenological account of what this exploration felt like and by suggesting how these conversations may reflect ARE interactions in EFCT (Johnson, 2008), which is explored later in this chapter.

4.1.4. GET 4: Connecting beyond words

This theme explored participants’ experiences of discovering new modes of connection which moved beyond verbal communication. This was experienced through intuitive and bodily attunement, shared silences, music as an emotional guide, as well as simultaneously occurring hallucinations.

The primary sensation participants experienced was a profound sense of connectedness, which aligns with psilocybin literature. Studies exploring the impact of connectedness have found both general improvements in well-being, as well as heightened feelings of belonging and love (Belser et al., 2017; Amada et al., 2020; Kałużna et al., 2022). Participants in this study reported how connectedness usually transcended the dosing day, which in psychedelic literature is known as 'the afterglow' (Evens et al., 2023). Moreover, participants' emphasis on heightened sensitivity towards small gestures and facial expressions can be understood through neuroscientific research, which found psychedelics, such as psilocybin, MDMA, and LSD, to temporarily heighten emotional empathy and social connectedness in users (Preller & Vollenweider, 2019; Pokorny et al., 2017).

Especially for one couple, music played a vital role in supporting ongoing connectedness. During the shared experience, music adopted the role of a 'third presence' the couple could relax into and turn towards, even during difficult moments. This supports findings by MacLeod et al. (2025), who refer to music as the 'hidden therapist', and Barret et al. (2018), who found how music can shape the texture of psychedelic trips. In addition, across both couples it seemed that their shared passion, for either music or dialogue in ordinary consciousness, emerged during the altered trip as a key aspect of the experience.

Finally, participants' experiences of shared hallucinations and their interpretation of these as '*there was something real'* extend the literature around 'noetic insight', defined as having '*direct and immediate access to knowledge beyond what is available to our normal senses and power of reason*' (Institute of Noetic Sciences; Barrett et al., 2015; Studerus et al., 2010). This was further reflected in participants' sense of an 'intuitive knowing' of the other's internal landscape. Such experiences of shared noetic insight highlight the potential of shared psilocybin experiences to foster an intimate connection between couples. The shared hallucination, which both participants described as confirmation of being on the right path together, seemed to strengthen their shared commitment to each other. This is reflected in psychedelic literature, where one study found stronger commitment within monogamous partnerships, compared to before the psychedelic experience (Kruger et al., 2025).

4.2. Key Take Aways

While existing psychedelic research has focused on individual outcomes, this study brings to life the experiential texture of shared psilocybin experiences in romantic dyads. Below, I draw

out the key findings and contributions to the relationship and psychedelic literature, as well as making links to the findings' relevance to Counselling Psychology.

4.2.1 EFCT and ARE Interactions

The findings of this study add an important perspective to how we understand relationships. As it stands, the couple therapies with the most established empirical support are Integrative Behavioural Couples Therapy (IBCT; Jacobson & Christensen, 1996), Cognitive Behavioural Couples Therapy (CBCT; Baucom et al., 2008), and Emotion-Focused Couples Therapy (EFCT; Johnson, 2008). However, the findings of this study will be explored through the lens of EFCT, as its humanistic and existential underpinnings overlap with Counselling Psychology's values and epistemology. As such, I suggest that psilocybin may amplify the core processes integral to supporting couples toward relational well-being through EFCT, illustrated in Table 3, which shows the overlaps between the core aspects of EFCT, the current empirical evidence on psilocybin and then demonstrates how the current findings demonstrate these overlaps. It is particularly the ARE interactions, defined by Johnson (2008) as *'the ultimate bridge spanning the space between two solitudes'* (p.148), which are worth paying attention to in the context of couples' psilocybin experience. ARE interactions rest on the assumption that a partner is emotionally and physically **a**vailable for connection, the partner can **r**espond sensitively to the other's emotions, and the partner actively **e**ngages in the emotional exchange. Importantly, such interactions are difficult to sustain if the foundation of safety is not guaranteed (Johnson, 2008). In the present study, participants described feeling safe with their partners during the psilocybin experience, which resonates with the first pillar of EFCT. This entails establishing a secure base between the couple by identifying negative cycles, called attachment protests, which sets the precedent for engaging vulnerably and authentically in later stages of therapy (Johnson, 2008). It was notable that both couples reported a sense of safety within the relationship ***prior*** to the shared experience, reflected in statements such as '*I knew I was going to be safe, because I feel safe with Elena*'. This may be indicative of a relatively secure attachment dynamic between the couples in this study (Bowlby, 1969), although the findings also suggested that partners actively constructed a sense of safety together throughout all stages of the shared experiences. Examples of this included individual and separate mental preparation, shared intention-setting, continuous checking in, and remaining present with each other throughout, even when journeys went their separate ways. This is a critical point, as it may inform harm reduction protocols for couples who consider shared journeys in naturalistic settings. However, this raises important questions for couples where such a secure base cannot

be guaranteed, as it may inform harm reduction protocols for couples who consider shared journeys in naturalistic settings. The implications and risks of this, including the potential for psilocybin to amplify existing attachment patterns, are explored in more detail in section 4.2.3.

Table 3

Overlaps of EFT, Empirical Evidence in Psilocybin and Key Findings From Current Study

EFT Focus (Johnson, 2008)	How psilocybin supports (empirical findings)	Key Findings From This Study
Attachment / secure base	Inconclusive findings as to whether psilocybin supports secure attachment, although evidence suggests an interplay between the two (Stauffer et al., 2020; Stauffer et al., 2021; Cherniak et al., 2024; Khan et al., 2022)	Underlying attachment dynamics likely to be amplified during altered state. Couples co-created safety and trust describing creating 'cocoons', rituals, 'holding each other', which anchored the experience in mutual trust.
Responsiveness / Engagement	Heightened emotional empathy Preller & Vollenweider (2019) Enhanced emotional and interpersonal sensitivity, increased empathy (Metastasio et al., 2025)	Heightened sensitivity to cues (e.g. facial expressions) fostering emotional attunement. Partners felt understood without words. Couples described being, and perceiving the other to be, fully present and emotionally available.
Acceptance / Vulnerability	Decreased social rejection sensitivity, Increase in altruistic behaviour (Preller & Vollenweider, 2019) Ego-dissolution (Nour et al., 2016; Millière, 2017) Enhanced openness, decrease in neuroticism (Weiss et al., 2023)	Couples referenced an enhanced openness and willingness to allow vulnerability to surface without defensiveness.
Reframing / new narratives	Long-lasting insights into own life and personal value (Metastasio et al., 2025) Alterations to identity, sharing experience with loved one's post treatment (Belser et al., 2017)	Experiences enabled couples to 'see each other with fresh eyes', see arguments as trivial, enhance understanding of partner's perspective.

Moreover, within the shared altered state, partners seemed to become more responsive. Partner responsiveness is a well-established relationship construct and made up of several factors: 1) the experience of being valued, understood, and cared for, 2) interactions characterized by warmth, acceptance, and belonging, 3) the sense that a partner is actively attentive to the core personal needs, and 4) trusting that the partner will 'be there' when needed (Reis et al., 2004). These elements were evident in participants' accounts including '*Babe, you can do this, go be with the ancestors. You're safe,'* and *'Elena was there to make me feel safe and make me feel loved whilst I was having that experience'.* Another participant stated that *'if anything bad were to happen on a trip, you know that there's someone there who cares for you'.*

Additionally, psilocybin amplified participants' sensitivity to notice subtle features of body language and facial expressions, such as small gestures, a look, a giggle, nod or wink, usually

overlooked in sober states. This is consistent with neuroscientific research, which indicates that psychedelics, such as psilocybin, MDMA, and LSD can temporarily heighten emotional empathy and social connectedness in users (Preller & Vollenweider, 2019; Pokorny et al., 2017). In the relationship literature, partner responsiveness is found to be a key predictor of intimacy, trust and relationship satisfaction (Reis et al., 2004), and perceived partner responsiveness can lead to greater emotional expression (Ruan et al., 2020). Under the influence of psilocybin, such interactions may have likely facilitated the emotional vulnerability, which EFCT seeks to nurture further suggesting that partner responsiveness contributed to a continued sense of safety throughout the trip.

The findings suggested that couples attributed significant meaning to small interactions. For example, one participant described their partner brushing their hair during a difficult moment as feeling '*like a year's worth of therapy in an instant*'. This resonates with Gendlin's (1997) notion of 'felt sense', where meaning arises from bodily knowing, which extends beyond what can be communicated through language and intellectual knowing. Studies exploring the 'felt sense' within a therapeutic context found a correlation between integrating bodily awareness and positive therapeutic outcomes (Parker, 2022). This suggests that it was the meaning couples derived from the felt sense, which was what left a mark. This further resonates with Coan et al. (2006) who stated that '*the people we love, are the hidden regulators of our bodily processes and our emotional lives'* (in Johnson, 2008, p. 25), which also reflects EFCT's recognition how through adequate partner responsiveness, close partners can regulate affect and provide emotional safety.

The final ARE dimension, emotional engagement, refers to the couple's ability to engage with each other's emotions, which includes listening, validation and the co-construction of meaning (Johnson, 2008). Across both couples, participants emphasised how shared dialogue during and after the experience supported them in making sense of what happened, as well as supporting each other in the integration. Interestingly, participants contrasted their current shared psilocybin experiences to previous experiences where psychedelic insight was likened to being like 'forgotten dreams'. Couples emphasised processing the experience mainly through dialogues, which consolidated their experiences during and after the trip, suggesting each partner acted as a co-author on their journey and further reflective being intensely engaged with each other. This overlaps with studies indicating how high-quality listening and validation are important in fostering intimacy and long-term relationship satisfaction (Itzchakov et al., 2022; Walker et al., 2023). Therefore, the findings of this study suggest that the integration of

the shared psilocybin experience might strongly depend on this dyadic engagement between the couple.

Overall, these findings closely align with EFCT's core principles for fostering healthy relationships. Although they do not suggest that psilocybin can provide a foundational safety when it is absent as explored in 4.2.3., they do suggest that couples' ability to have ARE interactions can be amplified during shared psilocybin experiences, providing a secure base is already present (Johnson, 2008). This highlights how psilocybin-assisted couples therapy may be beneficial when integrated with attachment-based models like EFCT.

4.2.2. A healthy 'self' and healthy 'us'

Another key finding of this study was that across both couples, participants described a strengthened sense of individual self, alongside a strengthened sense of togetherness. Some participants emphasised how psilocybin allowed for self-exploration and self-awareness, specifically stating: *'What the mushroom has taught me personally, then feeds into this relationship'*, and how psilocybin experiences helped to *'understand myself a little better… feel more comfortable in myself… be more confident in myself and help me to be okay with holding my own space'*. The object data captured this sentiment too, where in one participant's poem it was noted that *'he gave me space' and 'together we will find each other*', before closing with *'with each breath there was space / and with each breath there was togetherness'*. As such, the shared psilocybin experience seemed to support a strengthened sense of 'self'. In EFCT terms, this resonates with the function of a secure base (Bowlby, 1969; Johnson, 2008): when partners feel securely attached, they are able to explore independently, both within themselves and in the world, precisely because the foundation of the relationship is secure enough to return to.

In contrast, participants also described a strengthened sense of 'we'. Across both couples, participants recounted moments of connection and for one couple, intimacy through the dissolution of physical boundaries. In addition to this, participants expressed the importance of their respective partners for mutual support, especially during moments of heightened vulnerability and affect. In EFCT, this reflects another function of secure attachment, namely the safe haven (Johnson, 2008), where turning toward the partner provides emotional regulation and comfort, which allows for a vulnerability to surface that might otherwise feel too exposing. Both couples described these experiences as supportive of the relationship, reflecting how in securely attached relationships, individuals can flexibly move between seeking closeness and

exploring independently. The findings of this study suggest that psilocybin can hold space for both within the same experience.

With this in mind, the findings invite reflection on which psychedelic substances may be better suited to relational versus individual work. For example, MDMA has historically been considered the more sociable and relational psychedelic, given its capacity to lower defensiveness, enhance open and honest communication, and increase empathy and trust between partners (Baggott et al., 2015; Borissova et al., 2021; Wagner et al., 2021). In contrast, psilocybin, ketamine and DMT tend to be considered more individually oriented, with specifically psilocybin often positioned as facilitating primarily individual psychological processes (Nour et al., 2016; Millière, 2017). However, the findings of this study suggest that psilocybin's interpersonal potential may have been underestimated. Across both couples, the individual and relational dimensions of the experience were intertwined, with participants describing to have met themselves more fully, whilst also simultaneously met how they encountered their partner. This capacity to inhabit both individual and relational dimension is foundational to secure relating, where a solid sense of self and active engagement with the other are held in equal measure (Johnson, 2008).

This has tentative implications for how we think about psychedelic-assisted couples therapy. Existing models, such as Wagner et al.'s (2021) MDMA-assisted CBCT protocol and Khalifian et al.'s (2024) ketamine-assisted model, both propose a framework which moves from assessment through to preparation, dosing and integration. Should a psilocybin-assisted couples therapy model be developed, the present findings suggest it would need to attend to both the relational dynamics between partners and also the individual process that each partner might experience during a shared experience.

4.2.3. Relational Set and Setting

Another key finding which emerged from this study was the extent and quality of support partners provided to each other during the shared psilocybin experience. Whereas the idea of the partner as a potential 'guide' introduces both opportunities for relational growth, it does also pose significant risks especially in regard to emotional safety. Both couples within this study appeared to be in safe and connected relationships before sharing a psilocybin experience. As far as could be determined at pre-screening and during the interview, there were no glaringly obvious high conflict patterns or any relationship volatility within either couple. This highlights the importance in distinguishing clearly between a healthy couple using psychedelics to

enhance their relationship and a couple contemplating psychedelic use to address or repair relational difficulties. It is therefore important to recognise that embarking on a shared psilocybin journey does not come without risk.

To examine this in more detail, I will propose to extend the concept of 'set and setting' to include a relational dimension. The absence of appropriate ‘set and setting’ has been identified as a significant contributor to adverse psychedelic experiences, which more concretely refers to insufficient support, existing mental health conditions, as well as unresolved psychological trauma (Hartogsohn, 2020; Bunce, 1979; Móró et al., 2011; Strassman, 1984). While 'set' is typically understood as the individual's mindset, and 'setting' as the external environment (Hartogsohn, 2016), Hartogsohn (2020) further extended this to a 'collective set and setting', which acknowledges the broader social, cultural and historical factors influencing psychedelic experiences and their meaning. However, neither the individual nor the collective framing adequately capture what emerged in this study, which is the relational context within which the couple's experience is situated and then interpreted. This might be conceptualised as a *'relational set and setting',* which encompasses both what each partner brings to the shared experience and the quality of the relational ‘field’ between them.

The ‘relational set’ may include factors such as each partner's emotional readiness, expectations, attachment patterns and capacity for self-regulation. Importantly, relational set also encompasses individual psychological histories within the couple. Unresolved trauma, including adverse childhood experiences (ACEs; Felitti et al., 1998), or other latent psychological material might surface unexpectedly during a psychedelic experience. This is particularly relevant given the effectiveness of psilocybin for trauma remains underexplored (Choi et al., 2024). In this study, participants did describe to have experienced a personal vulnerability and heightened affect, which required their partners to offer support in line with ARE interactions (Johnson, 2008), as explored in 4.2.2. However, the capacity to offer accessibility, responsiveness and engagement during such moments cannot be assumed across all relationships. Where this capacity is absent, experiences of vulnerability and heightened affect during a psychedelic experience, which risks leaving the individual without adequate containment and can perhaps lead to lasting psychological consequences.

In addition, ‘relational setting’ would refer to the quality of the interpersonal field between partners, including levels of trust, the ability to co-create psychological safety, communication patterns, and the capacity to respond to one another with attunement. Across participants, rather than introducing unfamiliar material, psilocybin magnified what was already embedded within

the relationship (Hartogsohn, 2018), reflecting how underlying attachment needs and insecurities could likely surface as these tend to arise in vulnerable states (Bowlby, 1969), which likely includes the psychedelic state. The current research landscape remains inconclusive on the interplay between attachment and psilocybin phenomenology (Khan et al., 2022). For example, one study found higher attachment anxiety was associated with stronger mystical experiences (Stauffer et al., 2021) with authors hypothesizing anxiously attached individuals sought closeness, which could lead to a greater sense of enmeshment. Stauffer et al. (2020) further found in a sample of male, long-term AIDS survivors who underwent psilocybin-assisted group therapy, self-reported ratings of attachment anxiety decreased significantly from baseline at 3-month follow-up, although no significant changes were found for attachment avoidance. In contrast, another study by Cherniak et al. (2024) found avoidance and anxiety scores were unrelated to key phenomenological features of psychedelics. However, the researchers noted they expected evidence for psychedelic phenomenology to promote earned attachment security, but found mystical experiences exacerbated the link between experiences of insensitive caregiving in childhood and insecurities in adulthood.

This presents a double-edged sword for couples with insecure or avoidant attachment patterns, or couples with ongoing unresolved conflict or entrenched negative cycles (Johnson, 2008). It could either provide an opportunity for emotional insight and reducing defences, as one couple reflected on this positively, which aligns with findings that challenging moments can provide deeply existential and life-altering insights (Carbonaro et al., 2016; Gashi et al., 2021; Shaw et al., 2022). However, such moments might also significantly heighten distress and likelihood for relational rupture, highlighting EFCT's emphasis on cultivating a secure base in ordinary consciousness before sharing a psilocybin journey together. Ultimately for such couples, shared psilocybin experiences should only be considered in combination with attachment-based therapy, such as EFCT, and future research is encouraged to continue to explore the impact of attachment on psychedelic phenomenology.

Taken together, in EFCT terms (Johnson, 2008) the findings suggest the presence of a secure base between partners may be an important precondition for a shared psilocybin experience, especially in naturalistic settings. Where ARE interactions are absent, compromised or characterised by entrenched negative cycles, the relational field may not provide the safety required. This is not to suggest that EFCT should function as a formal screening tool, but its core principles can offer a lens through which to consider a couple's readiness for potential shared psychedelic experience.

Lastly, given the growing public interest in psychedelic experiences, it is important to consider how these findings may be read beyond clinical and academic contexts. This study represents one of the first explorations of shared psilocybin experiences in romantic dyads, and as such, what we know about the relational dimensions of psychedelic use remains in its early stages. The findings presented here are drawn from two couples in relatively secure relationships who approached psilocybin for the purpose of relationship enhancement; they cannot be generalised to the wide range of contexts in which couples may consider shared psychedelic use. For couples who may be contemplating a shared psychedelic journey, it is important to stress the newly introduced concept of 'relational set and setting'. It is key to consider the quality of the relationship itself, including the capacity for mutual support and emotional regulation, open communication and the ability to navigate moments of heightened vulnerability. Without this, the risks outlined in this section, including the amplification of relational distress or the potential surfacing of unresolved trauma, with subsequent absence of adequate support during psychological distress, remain. This study does not provide prescriptive guidance for such instances, however these findings should be highlight that shared psychedelic experiences should be approached with care and deliberation.

4.3. Implications for Counselling Psychology

Firstly, romantic relationships are widely documented to be integral to personal well-being (see Eaker et al., 2007; Murphy, 2007; Pateraki & Roussi, 2013) with relationship quality being a key mediating factor. Secondly, in mental health care, psychedelics have been conceptualised as psychedelic-assisted psychotherapy. However, psychiatry often attributes the therapeutic effect to the psychoactive components, which is reflective of an outdated and reductionist dualism (Gründer et al., 2024) and some authors argue that in psychedelic-assisted psychotherapy, the psychotherapy component is heavily under-researched, making it difficult to identify best practices and inform guidelines (Aday et al., 2024).

Counselling Psychology offers a unique lens, which prioritises the relational and experiential dimensions, which presents a real opportunity for the field. However, the profession has not yet clearly positioned itself within the psychedelic renaissance, risking the exclusion of the immense value that Counselling Psychology could contribute, especially given the identified gaps in research that overlap with our values. Examples of this include the need for phenomenology to understand subjective experiences of psychedelics (Miceli McMillan & Fernandez, 2022), calls to understand the interpersonal dimensions of psychedelics (Anderson

et al., 2019), as well as calls to question the involvement of corporate stakeholders in this psychedelic renaissance (Love & Love, 2024; Smith & Applebaum, 2022).

The purpose of this study, which is rooted in the core principles of Counselling Psychology, was to demonstrate that the profession has a place in this psychedelic renaissance, which echoes sentiments of Ruger (2018) who published a literature review arguing the same. As such, the findings resonate with Counselling Psychology's core emphasis on relational processes (Milton, 2010) and Carl Rogers' (1995) assumption that any relationship can be conducive to growth, providing the necessary conditions are present. This study extends this by suggesting that the romantic dyad can serve as a therapeutic source, whilst acknowledging the potential risks related to any such intervention.

Moreover, the findings point towards a potential to further explore psilocybin to increase relationship well-being. By focusing on couples' naturalistic use of psilocybin, this study aligns with the demedicalised ethos of Counselling Psychology. However, the findings could potentially inform frameworks on psilocybin-assisted couples' therapy, where such frameworks could, and must, adopt a pluralistic stance, which is in line with our profession's openness to multiple perspectives (Cooper, 2009). At the same time, the integration of the medical model remains essential to ensure the safety and efficacy of psychedelic substances. The tension between biomedical models, and relational, and phenomenological approaches represents an epistemological challenge, which is one that Counselling Psychologists are familiar with in practice (Milton, 2010), making the profession well-suited to contribute meaningfully to psychedelic-assisted psychotherapies.

Finally, I want to acknowledge the existential underpinnings of Counselling Psychology and how the findings of this study could contribute to this tradition. An important sentiment was the 'deep sea diving' metaphor, which conveyed the immersive quality of psilocybin-induced conversations in couples. One way to understand this is through the existential concept of life worlds. Van Deurzen (2009) proposed that each person holds multiple dimensions of existence, namely physical, social, personal, and spiritual. Whilst existential therapy typically invites clients to grow their awareness of their own life worlds, it seemed that psilocybin enabled the couple to explore their own life worlds, but most notably, those of their own partners. Examples of this include exploring their physical worlds through an amplified intimacy, exploring spiritual worlds through ancestral encounters and shared hallucinations, and exploring personal worlds facilitated through lowering defences and being seen 'behind the mask'. In these moments, participants reported encounters that resonate with Buber's (1958) idea of the 'I-

thou' relationship, where their partners were no longer understood through history and utility (I-It), but seen for their respective humanity. Participants described that within this space, they were able to '*fall in love again'* and '*see them for who they are*', enabling an authentic encounter between them, perhaps simply as two fellow human beings, suggesting that the ability to fully see and understand the other may be integral to the healing process.

4.4. Clinical Implications and Future Research

As psychedelics gain increasing acceptance and public awareness, therapists are likely to encounter these practices more frequently in clinical practice. In the absence of support from healthcare professionals, clients in non-clinical samples are likely to access information through mainstream media (Petranker et al., 2020), where such reports often inflate the benefits. This means, clinicians require access to evidence-based harm reduction and integration protocols. Integration is widely recognised as fundamental to therapeutic efficacy (see Bathje et al., 2022; Greń et al., 2024), further highlighting the importance of organisations such as the Institute of Psychedelic Therapy in the UK, which provides integration services through qualified mental health professionals. While the recommendation here is not for therapists to actively promote psilocybin use, practitioners must have access to evidence-based resources to support couples in making informed decisions to reduce harm, and to facilitate effective integration processes.

Considering the naturalistic use of this sample, participants spoke about the importance of having a partner present and its influence is mainly represented in 'subtheme, 2.3: my partner, my guide'. However, this raises interesting questions about the potential integration of romantic partners in clinical settings. For example, MAPS published a clinical protocol for the use of psilocybin-assisted psychotherapy (PAP; Kumar et al., 2009) and explicitly states that 'significant others' (which is not exclusive of individuals outside romantic partnership) are encouraged but not required to attend with the patient. Their role can include attendance during preparatory sessions, staying overnight at the clinic after the psilocybin session, with an explicit rationale that their presence provides continuity of care and safety when the participant returns home. The protocol further outlines that 'significant others' can attend parts of, but not the full, dosing session, which is then documented. However, to my knowledge, no assessment or evaluation has been conducted on the impacts or benefits of such physical presence during preparatory, dosing, and integration stages. What stands out from the current study is, participants highlighted their partner's presence was a central feature of the experience itself.

This suggests that, while some individuals may prefer to journey alone, for others the inclusion of a romantic partner during clinical trials, could profoundly influence both the immediate sense of safety and then potentially the longer-term outcomes of integration. This highlights an important direction for future research, namely, to examine how the presence of a partner shapes therapeutic outcomes and under what circumstances this may be beneficial or potentially challenging. The findings further suggested that psychedelic insight may be solidified interpersonally, rather than just intrapersonally, which is supported by Enestrom et al.'s (2025). If psychedelic insight is in fact co-constructed, then clinical trials and integration protocols need to account for the interpersonal dimensions of meaning-making. Similarly, participants in the Breeksema et al. (2024) study spoke about wanting to meet other participants to speak about the trip. As this points towards the importance of community, clinical trials might want to consider peer-support, as demonstrated in MDMA-assisted therapy for Veterans in the US where peer support is part of the protocol (Skiles et al., 2023). Moreover, therapists should consider drawing on Bathje et al.'s (2021) overview of integration protocols that extend beyond the conventional therapeutic modalities (NB: it is essential for therapists to seek appropriate training where relevant).

Working with currently prohibited psychedelic substances raises inevitable ethical questions. The findings suggest the need for cultural competence, as couples framed psilocybin differently from the mainstream understanding of drug use. Therefore, therapists should develop their own reflexivity around how cultural narratives shape both their own understanding, as well as that of their clients, around through which paradigm psychedelic use is being viewed. Additionally, intervening in romantic relationships with substances may raise questions about pathologizing naturally occurring relationship challenges (Earp & Savulescu, 2020), whilst romanticising psilocybin use in couples could encourage inappropriate substance use. The complexity of this issue requires therapists hold an open but critical mind, recognising both the potential benefits and the inherent risks in supporting couples in these shared psychedelic journeys together. However, the psychedelic field is criticised for being fraught with bias, perhaps impacted by a high proportion of personal experience with psychedelics among psychedelic therapists (Aday et al., 2023), meaning that future research and practice should address how to best support the reflexivity required when working in this field to ensure best practice.

As the findings are situated within a naturalistic and non-clinical sample, and given the small sample size, a larger mixed-methods study, which combines qualitative and quantitative

research methods, could provide further insight into the prevalence of psilocybin use in couples and the various contexts in which they experience psilocybin together. Larger study designs could explore the different motivations of couples, such as relationship crises versus relationship enhancement, as well as more diverse samples, across age, relationship types, socioeconomic background, and ethnicities. In addition, longitudinal designs would enable the possibility of following couples more closely along their journey from before, during, and after the experience. This would eliminate a possible memory distortion in retrospective accounts, but also shed light on whether and how psychedelic insight evolves over time and how this is then integrated into everyday life. Finally, a significant limitation of this study is the absence of insight into physical intimacy, despite the evidence (Barba et al., 2024), which should be included in larger study designs. The phenomenology of shared experiences itself offers another area for future research. As the findings suggest that couples attribute meaning to the felt sense, as opposed to the shared sensory and perceptual changes, further qualitative research could explore this in more depth. To do this, researchers might want to draw on more creative research methods to move beyond conventional research methods in order better capture the incredibly subjective nature of the psilocybin experience generally.

4.5. Strengths & Limitations

A major strength of this study is that it addresses a current absence of understanding the phenomenology of interpersonal dimensions in shared couples' psilocybin experiences. Studies that have previously explored the intersection of romantic relationships and psychedelics have predominately explored the use of MDMA, or classic psychedelics more broadly (e.g. Anderson et al., 2019; Colbert & Hughes, 2023; Neubert et al., 2024; Wagner et al. 2021a).

By using IPA, the study aimed to explore the subjective nature of these shared experiences. Despite the small sample size, the depth of the data was remarkable, which was made possible by the participants' generosity and willingness to share their experiences openly, and I want to acknowledge that without their input this study would not have been possible.

As the study adopted a case study research design, using triangulation meant the experience was explored from various angles, with participants taking part in joint and individual interviews, as well as contributing multimedia-based data sets and written paragraphs, which proved valuable for multiple reasons. Firstly, most qualitative research in this field has relied solely on joint interviews (e.g. Colbert & Hughes, 2023; Neubert et al., 2024), although Anderson et al. (2019) also incorporate objects, photos, and diary entries. Whereas this

provides important insight, it omits the opportunity to understand the individual experiences within the dyad, especially as Eisikovits and Koren (2010) suggested couples to have topics that remain private between partners. Secondly, by including multimedia data, participants were offered an opportunity for contributing data that offered insight beyond verbal language, which proved valuable throughout the analytic process, where language did not seem sufficient in capturing the essence of participants' experiences. Finally, this study extracted the personal, couple, and group experiential themes from data. This meant the phenomenological foundation of the 'individual experience' (Husserl, 1927) was honoured, whilst also acknowledging the dyadic lens.

Despite the strengths and novelty of the findings, this study has several limitations. In regard to recruitment; this occurred through channels with generally favourable views toward psychedelics, such as psychedelic societies, which likely targeted individuals who were enthusiastic and willing to share their experiences. In the literature, this is referred to as the 'Michael Pollan Effect' noting greater expectations of psychedelics' efficacy, which is also encountered on clinical trials (Aday et al., 2023). It is likely that this recruitment bias excluded couples who had experiences which were more ambivalent, or challenging. This also raises questions as to whether the couples in the present study omitted adverse outcomes from their psilocybin experiences, while simultaneously overemphasizing positive elements. Moreover, this self-selection bias meant couples were likely more open to considering psilocybin as a relationship practice in the first place, which would have also influenced their willingness to participate. Additionally, one study found that individuals with higher self-transcendence values consistently report higher relationship quality, hold more favourable attitudes towards relationships, are generally more responsive to partners without expecting reciprocity, and remain in the relationship for personal meaning and connection, as opposed to external reasons (van der Wal et al., 2023). This suggests, the findings could reflect pre-existing values rather than the impact of psilocybin. Furthermore, given psilocybin's legal status in the UK, it was not possible to ensure the couples in this study were actually ingesting psilocybin, and quality and exact dose of the substance remain unknown, alongside possible polysubstance use (Colbert & Hughes, 2023).

Moreover, it is important to note, the couples in this study approached psilocybin from a position of relative privilege, which represents a significant limitation. Both couples had access to reliable information to prepare for their journey, as well as safe and private spaces for their experiences, which are conditions reflective of the importance of tending to set and setting

(Hartogsohn, 2016). They were also situated in a cultural context where the use of psychedelics is viewed more openly and had the emotional capacity to support one another before, during and after the shared experience. These intersecting privileges likely contributed substantially to the quality of their overall 'set and setting'. However, these conditions are far from universally accessible. Structural inequalities, including socioeconomic, racial and ethnic disparities and cultural stigmatisation, significantly impact access to and the experiences of psychedelics use among marginalised populations (Viña et al., 2023; Michaels et al., 2018). These systemic factors can undermine 'set and setting' by heightening anticipatory anxiety, unsafe environments, and limiting the opportunities for meaningful integration (Viña et al., 2023). Future research and clinical practice need to actively account for these inequalities to enhance set and setting, which is further imperative for the development of harm reduction and integration protocols.

Anther limitation to consider is that by carving out time and space to share an experience, participants demonstrated a willingness to invest in the relationship, which is recognised as supporting overall relationship satisfaction (Rusbult, 1980). Therefore, it is difficult to ascertain the exact impact of psilocybin, or whether their accounts were reflective of simply spending time together (Neubert et al., 2024). Additionally, the study did not evoke any findings on psilocybin's impact on physical intimacy, despite evidence suggesting that classic psychedelics can affect sexual functioning (Barba et al., 2024). This gap perhaps reflects both the interview format, and the schedule not specifically inquiring about the sexual dimensions of shared psilocybin use. This should be considered in future research.

While the case study design ultimately strengthened the study, triangulation required greater time commitment and effort from participants, potentially creating barriers for those more constrained in time. Moreover, the small sample size significantly limits the scope of claims that can be made, particularly given the relatively homogenous sample, which also leaves perspectives from other relationship types and backgrounds unexplored. This is a limitation frequently encountered in psychedelic research, which restricts our understanding of how different backgrounds impact benefits (Willams et al., 2020; Williams et al., 2024). This presents a significant limitation with regard to harm reduction and integration practices that can respond to the varying needs of the population.

Finally, the richness and validity of the data rely heavily on the participants' capacity to recall their past psilocybin experiences retrospectively. This was partially mitigated by having the inclusion criteria set for couples that shared an experience within the past 12 months. However,

this capacity may be further influenced by factors such as trust in the researcher, language capabilities, pressures of social desirability, as well as demographic factors, including age and level of education (Willig, 2001). Whilst most of the participants within this study were adults with higher levels of education, which might suggest these aforementioned influences were limited, an additional limitation lies in the inherent difficulty to articulate psychedelic experiences (McKenna, 1991). Although the use of multimedia data mitigated this to some extent, it was then interpreted through language, especially as IPA inherently relies on language. Additionally, Doss et al. (2024) identified that psilocybin can impair episodic memory, especially for emotional moments, meaning that participants' narratives may therefore contain memory distortions. Finally, my own personal and professional interest in psychedelics and couples work more broadly inevitably shaped both the interviews and the subsequent interpretation. While I have aimed to remain transparent throughout by offering reflexive notes throughout, including added reflections at the end of this chapter, this influence cannot be fully bracketed.

4.4. Reflexivity & Conclusion

As my training as a Counselling Psychologist concludes with this Doctoral thesis, I want to finish with these final reflections on the research process. When the idea of exploring the intersection of psychedelics and romantic relationships came to me, I scouted the literature and found minimal research on the topic (e.g. Anderson et al., 2019; Colbert & Hughes, 2023; Wagner et al., 2021a), presenting me with a unique opportunity, but equally not much literature to work with. Over the past three years, the conversations around this intersection have started to pick up and within that time, multiple studies were published (e.g. Barba et al., 2024; Khalifian et al., 2024; Neubert et al., 2024), and perhaps gave me a personal perceived legitimacy that I was not moving towards a dead end. I felt lucky and am grateful to have had the opportunity to present my research at various conferences, although I often felt that the topic was too big for what I was able to offer. With this in mind, I hope that the findings are a meaningful contribution to those that are so deeply invested in this work and champion the studies currently underway.

In regard to the research process itself, conducting this research whilst psychedelics remain classified as a prohibited Class A substance in the UK has imposed limitations on the research process. At times, this created frustration, particularly as all participants expressed the benefits they experienced. However, I also feel sadness about the limited number of couples that were

recruited. Whilst I am eternally grateful to both couples for sharing their experiences so graciously, a larger sample would have allowed us to expand our understanding on this experience further, which I hope to continue beyond my training.

As mentioned in the introduction, as well as evident in my clinical case study and process report, existential thinking has increasingly shaped how I work with clients and how I myself make sense of the world. From an epistemological perspective, my growing appreciation for phenomenology influenced the shift to elevate phenomenology as the primary epistemological stance. At the same time, I also acknowledge my own temptation to lean towards a positivist epistemology, particularly during the write-up, in the hope of making the work 'legitimate' and more easily received by a wider audience. Whereas this tension perhaps reflects the wider discipline of psychology in adhering to established ways of thinking, my intention throughout remained to resist that urge for certainty where none exists, remaining faithful to the ethos of IPA by bringing to life my participants' experience and interpreting it in a way that does justice to their stories. I want to acknowledge the value of research supervision specifically in navigating this tension.

Throughout these chapters, I have aimed to be transparent about my own process in relation to the topic and offered reflexive boxes through to invite the reader into what emerged personally the research process. Whereas I have aimed to bracket my own views, experiences and preconceptions as best as possible, the hermeneutic process of IPA meant the intricacies of my own experiences have inevitably seeped into aspects of my interpretations. Remaining in personal therapy throughout the past three years was incredibly valuable in developing my own awareness of this and hope supported me in bracketing.

Looking into the future, I hope this study contributes to broader conversations about the future of mental health care. Psychedelics are currently being studied and integrated into the therapeutic worlds in individualised ways, often framed as interventions targeting individual 'pathology'. However, the findings of the present study suggest the value of interpersonal dimensions of psilocybin experiences, bringing to life what emerges when we are seen and supported by loved ones. I wondered whether perhaps this should also act as a reminder, where in contrast to Western assumptions viewing well-being is an individual effort, we hold a collective responsibility to tend to the quality of relationships, communities, and perhaps the planet at large.

Finally, I want to close by acknowledging the immense privilege I feel for having been invited into my participants' relationships and the intimate moments they experienced during their

shared psilocybin journeys. At the end of one interview, one couple reflected on how unusual it felt to them to speak openly about an intimacy of that experience that usually remains protected and private, reminding me of the tenderness these shared psilocybin experiences elicit. The vulnerability participants showed in sharing these personal experiences carried a responsibility, and my hope is that their stories have been honoured. As we stand at the praecipe of how we understand psychedelics, my hope is that we remember that beyond the mere neurological aspects, psychedelics offer a window of opportunity to explore the world, each other, and ultimately ourselves.

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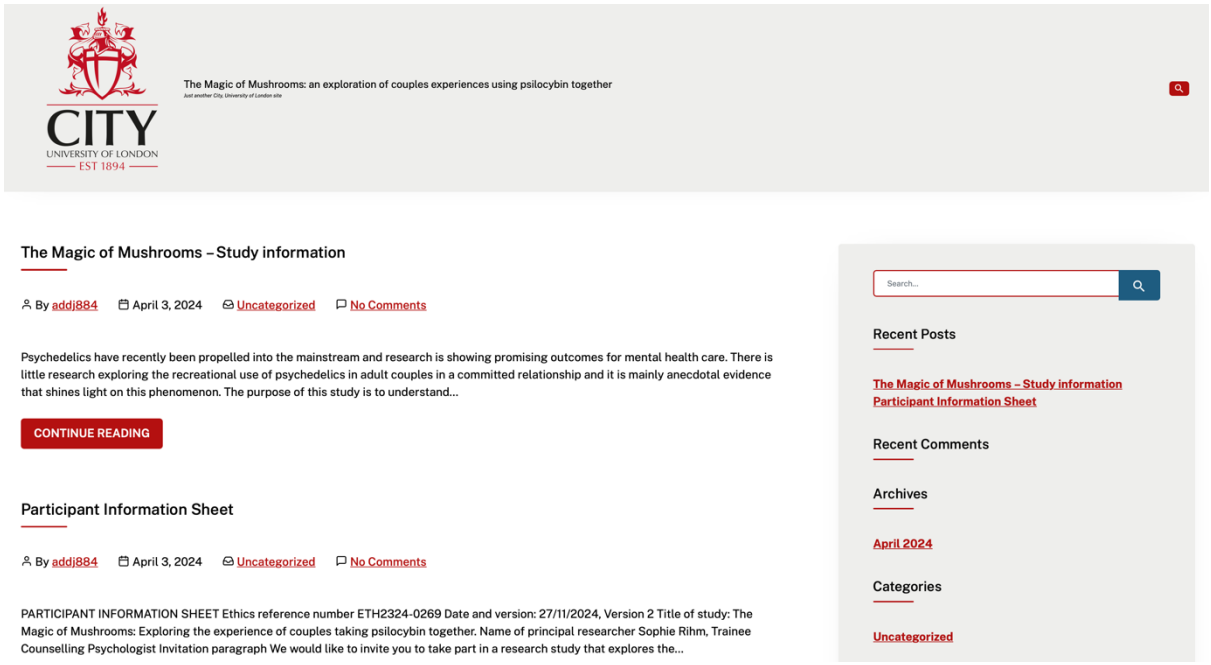
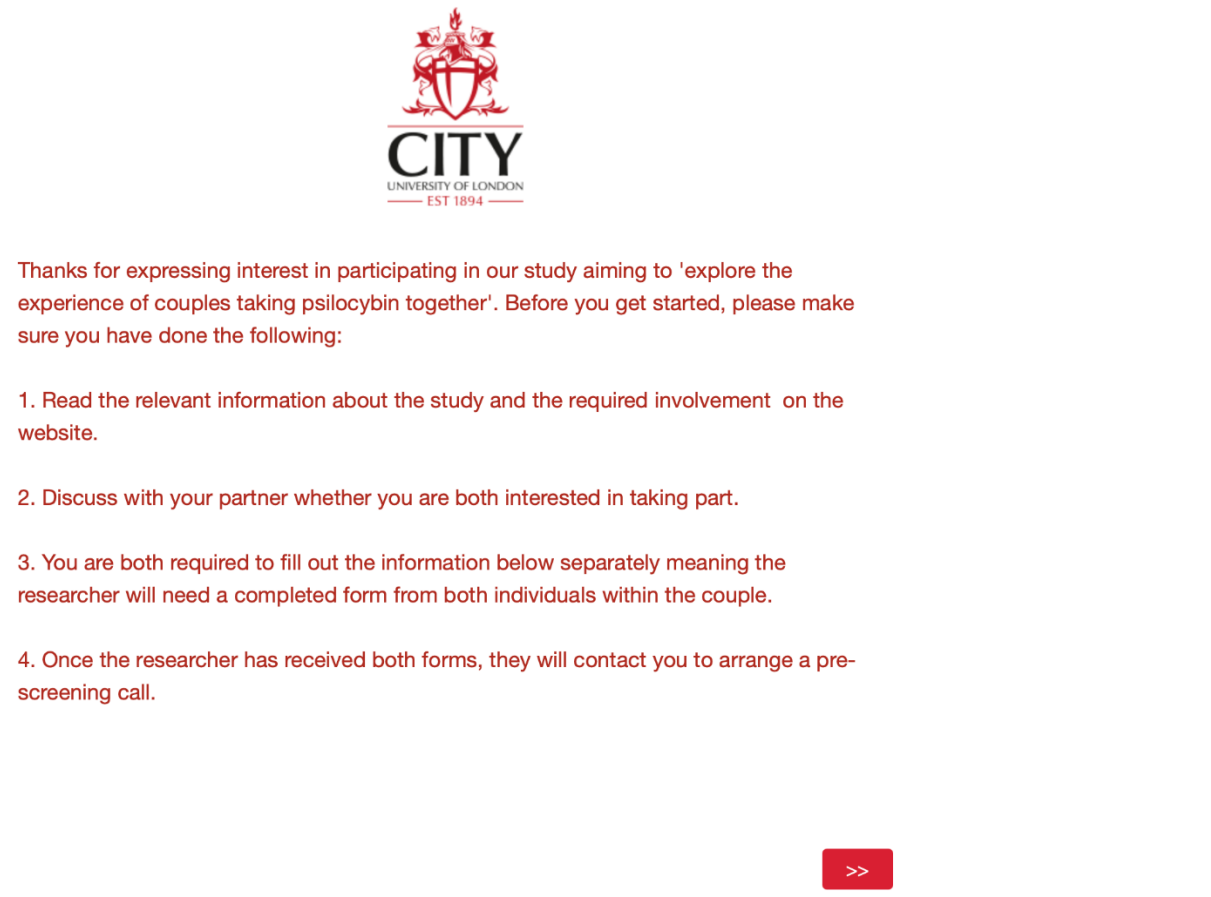
7. Appendix

Appendix 1: Recruitment Flyer

Appendix 2: Blog Post on University Site



Appendix 3: Qualtrics Form



Appendix 4: Consent to Contact

Appendix 5: Participant Information Sheet

Ethics reference number

ETH2425-0137

Date and version: 27/11/2024 Version 2

Title of study

The Magic of Mushrooms: Exploring the experience of couples taking psilocybin together.

Name of principal researcher

Sophie Rihm, Trainee Counselling Psychologist

Invitation paragraph

We would like to invite you to take part in a research study that explores the experience of couples taking psilocybin together. Before you decide whether you and your partner would like to take part it is important that you understand why the research is being done and what we would ask you to do. Take time to read the following information and discuss it with others if you wish. We are here to answer anything that is unclear and are happy to provide more information if required. You will be given this information to keep.

What is the purpose of the study?

Psychedelics have recently been propelled into the mainstream and research is showing promising outcomes for mental health care. There is little research exploring the recreational use of psychedelics in adult couples in a committed relationship and it is mainly anecdotal evidence that shines light on this phenomenon.

The purpose is to create a ***detailed account of two couples*** who have together taken psilocybin allowing for exploration of the experience from various angles. It aims to understand the motivations, processes and potential changes a couple experiences as a result of taking psilocybin (magic mushrooms) together. This study is being conducted as part of the researchers Doctoral programme in Counselling Psychology.

What is required to take part in the study?

The inclusion criteria for this study are as follows:

- Both members are required to be aged 18 or older.
- The study is open to all forms of romantic relationships, including same-sex relationships providing they are monogamous and lasting at least three years at point of interview.
- Both members of the couple should have used psilocybin at least once with their partner in the past 12 months.
- You no children under the age of 18 living at
- Written and spoken English to a standard that allows comprehension of the study documents and complete the interview process.
- UK-based.

The exclusion criteria for this study are as follows:

- If you are currently experiencing a period of serious mental distress.
- Have past experiences that could be triggered as a result of recounting a psilocybin trip.
- Self-identified problematic substance use.

Do I have to take part?

Participation in the project is voluntary, and you can choose not to participate in part or all of the project. You can withdraw at any stage of the project without being penalised or disadvantaged in any way. It is up to you to decide whether or not to take part. If you do decide to take part, you will be asked to sign a consent form. You are still free to withdraw at any time and without giving a reason. If the interviews have taken place already before your decision to withdraw, the recording will be deleted. ***Once the***

interviews have been transcribed and your information deidentified, you will no longer be able to withdraw your data. To withdraw, please contact the researcher up to two weeks after the second interview has taken place.

What will happen if I take part?

Initially, you and your partner will be invited to a pre-screening call where we will cover the relevant information of this study and confirm the inclusion and exclusion criteria. This is also an opportunity for both of you to ask any questions you may have about the study.

If satisfactory, you will both be invited to the following:

- A 90-minute joint interview, which will take place online via Microsoft Teams. The interview will start by collecting personal information, which is followed by a semi-structured interview. The researcher has interview questions prepared that focus on your preparation, motivations, experience, the impact on your relationship and integration into everyday life. Potential questions may include: *Tell me about your personal experience whilst on the magic mushroom trip* or *How is your relationship after taking magic mushrooms together*? These questions will serve as a foundation, but we also encourage an open dialogue about your experience. The interview will be recorded using an encrypted device and stored on a computer only the researcher has access to.
- You will then be invited to a solo 60-minute interview, where you'll be asked to bring an object, drawing, piece of music, poem, or anything else that you feel represents your psilocybin journey with your partner and that you feel comfortable sharing. You will be asked to write a short paragraph about this, and you will be asked a few questions about the item in the solo interview. Please note that the object should not be identifiable, for example, you are not permitted to bring a photograph.

After the interviews, the researcher will offer you a call to check in after the interviews. You have two weeks following completion of the second interview to withdraw from the study should you wish to do so. After the two weeks, the researcher will transcribe your interviews and start analysing the data.

What are the possible benefits of taking part?

- You contribute to our expanding knowledge and understanding of the experiences associated with psychedelic substances in a relational context.
- It may provide you with an opportunity of introspection and reflection on your recent psilocybin experience together.
- By taking part, you are actively contributing to the advancement of scientific knowledge within the field of psychedelic research. Your involvement can therefore potentially benefit others by informing therapeutic practices, improving guidelines and promote the responsible use of psychedelics within relationships.

What are the possible disadvantages and risks of taking part?

- Before the interviews, the researcher will arrange a conversation with you to discuss your current well-being to determine whether it is safe and appropriate for you to take part.
- The interviews itself might invoke difficult emotions; however, the researcher will support you and sign post you to services if relevant.

Is the information I share during the pre-screening and during the interviews confidential?

The researcher has an obligation to break confidentiality in two instances:

- If the researcher believes that there is serious harm done to self or others.
- Any disclosures about money laundering, terrorism or other serious drug- related offences. Please note that this also includes supplying drugs to friends.

The researcher will always attempt to speak with the participants before breaking confidentiality. In both instances, the researcher is obligated to report this information to the police by calling 101. In emergencies, the researcher will involve emergency services by contacting 999.

How will my identity be protected if I decide to take part in the study?

The researcher recognizes that drug taking remains illegal in the UK and will therefore follow strict guidelines to protect yourself and your identity. These are as follows:

- Collecting personal contact information will be limited to an email address for correspondence purposes. This information will be deleted once the interviews have been transcribed.
- The interviews will take place on Microsoft Teams and recorded on an audio recording device. Both software's comply with GDPR regulations.
- Once interviews have been transcribed, identifying information from the interviews will be deidentified by altering the context, whilst maintaining authenticity of the data.
- A pseudonym will be used in the final write up of the study.

Conflicts of interests

There is no conflict on interests.

What should I do if I want to take part?

To express your interest in taking part in the study, you and your partner are invited to fill out this form. The researcher will then contact you both to arrange a pre-screening call.

Data privacy statement

City, University of London is the sponsor and the data controller of this study based in the United Kingdom. This means that we are responsible for looking after your information and using it properly. The legal basis under which your data will be processed is City's public task.

Your right to access, change or move your information are limited, as we need to manage your information in a specific way in order for the research to be reliable and accurate. To safeguard your rights, we will use the minimum personal-identifiable information possible (for further information please see visit the following site.

City will use your name and contact details to contact you about the research study as necessary. If you wish to receive the results of the study, your contact details will also be kept for this purpose. The only people at City who will have access to your identifiable information will be the researcher and their supervisor. City will keep identifiable information about you up until the completion of the study.

You can find out more about how City handles data by visiting https://www.city.ac.uk/about/governance/legal. If you are concerned about how we have processed your personal data, you can contact the Information Commissioner's Office (IOC).

What will happen to the results?

The results of this study will be written up and presented in the researchers' Doctoral portfolio as part of their thesis. The results and write up of the study may also be published. If you wish to view the results of the study, please visit the blog site, as we will not keep your contact information on file to protect your identity.

Who has reviewed the study?

This study has been reviewed by, and received ethics clearance through the Senate Research Ethics Committee, City, University of London.

What if there is a problem?

If you have any problems, concerns or questions about this study, you should ask to speak to a member of the research team. If you would like to complain about any aspects of the study, please contact Annah Whyton, Secretary to the Senate Research Ethics Committee at senaterec@city.ac.uk.

City, University of London is the data controller for the personal data collected for this research project. If you have any data protection concerns about this research project, please contact City's Information Compliance Team at dataprotection@city.ac.uk.

Insurance

City, University London holds insurance policies which apply to this study, subject to the terms and conditions of the policy. If you feel you have been harmed or injured by taking part in this study, you may be eligible to claim compensation. This does not affect your legal rights to seek compensation. If you are harmed due to someone's negligence, then you may have grounds for legal action.

Further information and contact details

Sophie Rihm (Principal Researcher): [redacted]@city.ac.uk

Dr Holly Kahya (Research Supervisor): [redacted]@city.ac.uk

Thank you for taking the time to read this information sheet.

Appendix 6: Consent Form

Consent form

Name of principal investigator/researcher: Sophie Rihm

REC reference number: ETH2425-0137

Title of study: The Magic of Mushrooms: An exploration of couples' experience taking psilocybin together

1.	I confirm that I have read and understood the participant information sheet dated 27/11/2024 Version 2 for the above study. I have had the opportunity to consider the information and ask questions which have been answered satisfactorily.	
2.	I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw without giving a reason without being penalised or disadvantaged.	
3.	I understand that I will be able to withdraw my data up to the time of transcription, which will take place two weeks after the interview.	
4.	I agree to the interview being audio recorded.	
5.	I give permission for the researcher to make use of an external transcription software for the purpose of transcribing the interviews.	
6.	I agree to quotes I may share being used without identifying information.	
7.	I agree to bring an object, drawing, poem or piece of music to the individual interview, and agree that elements of it may be included in the write-up.	
8.	I agree to City recording and processing this information about me. I understand that this information will be used only for the purpose(s) explained in the participant information and my consent is conditional on City complying with its duties and obligations under the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR).	
9.	I understand that in the event of disclosure around money laundering, terrorism, drug trafficking or drug dealing (this involves giving drugs to friends), the researcher is legally obliged to break confidentiality.	
10.	I understand that my de-identified data may be used for publication in a scientific journal.	
11.	I understand that the researcher will delete my personal contact information after completion of the study and that the results of study will be made accessible on the studies website.	
12.	I agree to take part in the above study.	

_____ _____ _____ _____

Name of Participant Signature Date

_____ _____ _____

Name of Researcher Signature Date

Appendix 7: Joint Interview Schedule

Interview schedule

This document includes the interview questions that aid the data collection for the study 'The Magic of Mushrooms: An exploration of couples' taking psilocybin together.'

90-minute joint interview with both members of the couple

Thank you for taking the time to participate in this interview. I will first cover a few logistical aspects and give you the opportunity to ask any questions again. After the pre-interview, we'll be having a semi-structured conversation, which means I have a set of guiding questions, but the discussion will remain flexible. This format allows us to explore your thoughts and experiences in more detail. While I'll be asking specific questions, feel free to elaborate on anything you feel is important, or if something we discuss prompts new ideas, you're welcome to share those as well. There are no right or wrong answers; I'm here to learn from your perspective.

Pre-interview (15 minutes)

1. Review participant information sheet and consent forms and address any questions.
2. Clarify the researcher's obligation regarding confidentiality in Two instances: 1) Serious risk of harm to self or others, and 3) Serious drug-related offences, including drug dealing or passing drugs to friends. Participants are advised to refrain from sharing such information.
3. Collect demographic information.
    - Age:
    - Profession:
    - Ethnic Background:

Joint Interview (75 minutes)

25 minutes

Relationship:

- Tell me about your relationship. Prompts: How long have you been together? How did you meet? Are you married / living together?
- Can you share a bit about what your relationship has been like? How would you describe the way you connected at the start of your relationship?

Psychedelic experience and motivation:

- Can you tell me about your experience with psychedelics so far? Prompts: Individually and together? How has your relationship with psychedelics changed over time?
- Can you tell me about the experience of deciding to take magic mushrooms with your partner for the first time? Prompts: What was going through your mind? How did that decision reflect where you both were in your relationship at the time? What were your expectations, if anything?
- Can you describe what it was like to prepare for the magic mushrooms trip together? Prompts: What stands out about that process? How did preparing together feel for your relationship?

25 minutes

Trip experience:

- Can you describe the setting and atmosphere during your magic mushrooms trip with your partner? What did it feel like to be in that space together? Prompts: How did the setting influence your experience with your partner?
- What was it like to experience your partner during the trip? How did you see or feel about them in those moments? Prompts: how would you describe your connection during the experience?
- If there are any, can you tell me about any moments during the trip that felt especially meaningful to you? What made those moments stand out? Prompts: If so, how did those moments feel different from your usual experiences in a sober state? What do those moments mean to you now when you reflect on them?
- Can you describe any moments during the trip that felt especially challenging? What was it like to go through those moments with your partner? Prompts: How did you and your partner navigate those challenges? What did you learn about each other from those difficult moments, if anything?
- Can you describe what it was like coming down from the trip together? What stands out about that part of the experience? Prompts: How did you feel in those moments after the trip ended? What did you and your partner do afterwards?

25 minutes

Impact and Integration:

- When you think back to your magic mushrooms trip, what feeling or reflections come to mind now? How has your perspective evolved over time?

- Have you noticed any shifts in your relationship since the psilocybin trip? If so, can you describe what those changes have been like for you? Prompts: When did you first notice these changes? How do you make sense of these changes now?

- If you've noticed changes, can you describe how you both have made sense of and worked with those changes? Prompts: what have you done, if anything, to carry those changes into your everyday lives? How has this process felt for you?

- What have you learned about your relationship from the trip? Can you share any insights or moments of understanding that feel important to you? Prompts: How do these insights influence the way you see your relationship now? What do those learnings mean to you personally?

- How do you feel about the idea of taking magic mushrooms again with your partner= What would that mean for you both? Prompts: What factors would influence your decision? How would you imagine it might be different from or similar to your previous experience?

- Is there anything about magic mushrooms trip or its impact on your relationship that feels significant but we haven't talked about yet?

Appendix 8: Individual Interview Schedule

60-minute solo interview with each individual member of the couple

Thank you for attending the second interview. The purpose of this conversation is to gain better insight into your personal journey and experiences with magic mushrooms. We're particularly interested in understanding how this experience has impacted you emotionally, mentally, and spiritually, and how it may have influenced your perspectives or personal growth. Your reflections will provide valuable contributions to our study. Before we get started…

1. Clarify the researcher's obligation regarding confidentiality in Two instances: 1) Serious risk of harm to self or others, and 2) Serious drug-related offences, including drug dealing or passing drugs to friends. Participants are advised to refrain from sharing such information.
2. Ensure participants have brought an object, poem or music, along with a short paragraph they have written.

Magic mushroom journey:

- What, if any, were your personal motivations for engaging with magic mushrooms?
- Did you take any personal steps to prepare taking magic mushrooms together?
- Can you describe your personal experience during the magic mushroom trip? (E.g., what emotions did you feel, did you experience hallucinations?)
- Have you noticed any personal changes since taking magic mushrooms with your partner?
- Have you personally noticed any changes in your relationship? If so, tell me more about them.
- Is there anything else about your magic mushroom trip that you feel is important but hasn't been covered yet?

Appendix 9: Paragraph Prompts

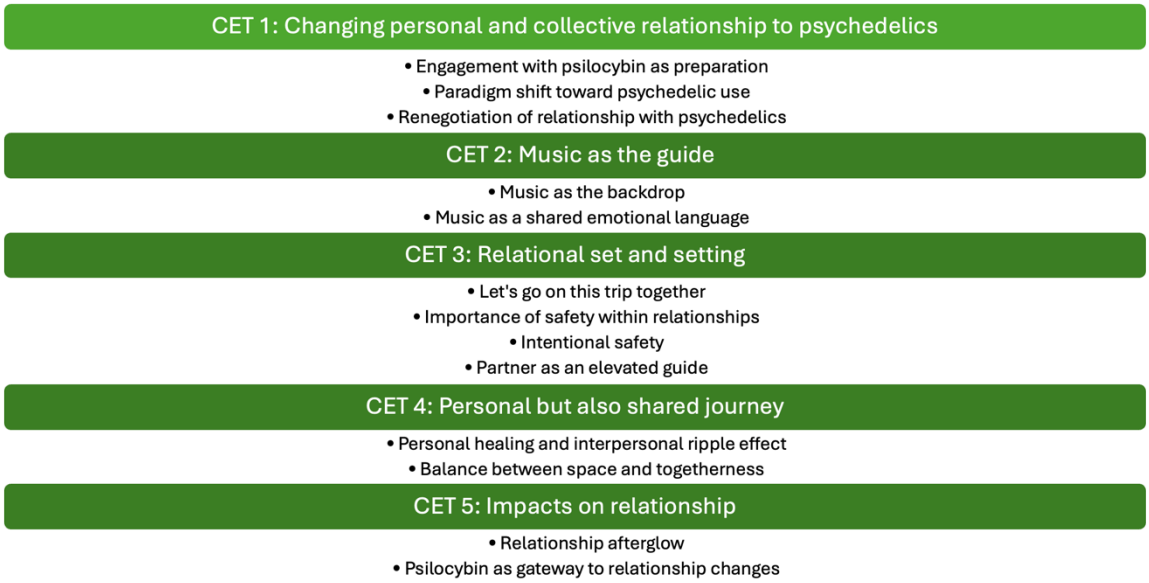
- What is the object you have decided on contributing.
- Why did you choose this?
- How does it reflect the emotions or sensations you experienced during the trip?
- How does it represent your magic mushrooms journey with your partner?

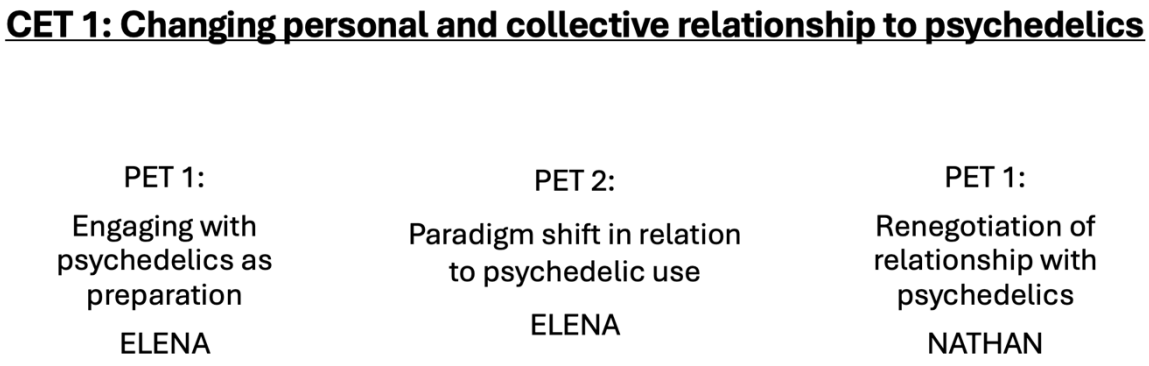
Appendix 10: Coding Example

Anna Mark Together

Marriages in the interim M (J, p3) Feeling settled and content within the relationship M (J, p3)	the time, you know. But, *pause*, it's been strange 'cause. I mean, we've both been married in the interim, yeah, I finally feel like, *pause*, happy and content in life, for the first the first time. **SR**: That's beautiful. Thank you for sharing that. *Pause*. If we were to think about your experiences with psychedelics. Would you mind sharing a bit more about? What your experience has been like so far, where you're at on your psychedelic journey, sort of individually or together.	Too young - naïve, lack of experience, responsibility of serious relationship felt too big? Marriages in between Happy and content – having arrived Finally – relief after struggle?
Separate introductions to psilcoybin A (J, p3) Excitement at psilocybin being a shared interest A (J, p3) Differing levels of psilocybin experience A (J, p3)	**P1**: Well, that was another funny thing, because in the interim, when we weren't together, I think we both had our introduction to psilocybin and so when we came back together, we were like: 'Oh, you too, oh cool.' You know? And so that was one of the many, many connection points just. And and so, *pause*, it was exciting. I mean, I hadn't, I hadn't had that much experience and he had much more experience than me at that point. But it was it was exciting to, you know, like what we're doing today, you know, exchanging experiences and like, and yeah, that was, yeah. And I don't know how it developed. I'm gonna have to think about that. You say something.	Separate introductions to psilocybin Oh, Oh – surprise, excitement Connection points – overlap in interest, common ground? Exciting – alive, curious, fun Different levels of experience between the two
First experience early on M (J, p3) Prior regular psilocybin practice M (J, p3)	**P2**: Yeah, I don't know. I think we had only been hanging out for a few months in person when we first tried them together. But I think, I mean certainly in the 16 months total maybe that we've actually lived together. It's been something that we've done fairly, fairly regularly. At least once a month, or maybe twice, maybe every two months or so. **P1**: Maybe every two months. **P2**: Yeah, I'd certainly use them quite a few more times than you, I think, when we met together.	First experience was early on in the relationship Fairly, fairly regularly – become a regular practice / ritual, integrated into their relationship / life? Every two months? Some hesitancy, vagueness More experience, trips before coming together – 'quite a few times'
Mark perceived as guide, teacher A (J, p3) Content in student / teacher dynamic A (J, p3)	**P1**: So it's fun as well, because he sometimes explains things, what to expect, which is really nice. It's like I feel very guided by him, which is nice that, yeah, and I marvel like, how do you like stay on top of that? Like with something, some effects that happen and things so. Yeah, I marvel at that.	More experience, more explanations / preparation – feeling guided by that? Reassured? 2 x marval – admiration, student / teacher dynamic?

Appendix 11: Couple Experiential Theme Example





PET 1: Engagement with psychedelics as preparation (E)

Subheading	Experiential Statement	Quotes
Curiousity beyond the high	Elena initiating research and action (E) p3	I was sharing it a lot with Nathan, and Nathan was on the journey with me, but I was the one driving it. I was the one getting the books and identifying the mushrooms and going on the workshops and making us watch documentary after documentary.
	Learning from indigenous communities (E) p1	I went to Colombia, I saw, I spoke to people that were cocoa plant leaf pickers and realizing that cocaine was from the plant and then I met an indigenous man, indigenous tribe, who showed us how they use coca leaves as a medicine. And I was like, oh, wow. So this is like this whole plant medicine then finding out about tobacco was also used indigenous times for again, spirituality.
	Fascination beyond the high (E) J / p3	I got quite obsessed with the mushrooms in general. Like going foraging for mushrooms, trying to identify mushrooms and then just like slowly went into like psychedelics and (pause) there's also so much more out there now of psychedelics as a form of therapy almost. this was like a complete obsession. Like, I was obsessed with it. I bought books, I was listening to podcasts. (from individual interview p2)
Knowledge is power	Research to support readiness (E) J / p4	We've probably watched all the documentaries together as well, even before we stepped into taking psilocybin together, so it felt as if unintentionally and probably intentionally, we were informing ourselves first before actually doing it as a 'right, we're going to sit down and take it and make tea together'.
	Gradual readiness for shared experience (E) p2	Like, it felt really right because of the rituals that I had been experienced before with cacao. And then all of the other, like, scientific knowledge that I armed myself with going into it.
	Legitimisation of psilocybin through science (E) p2	It just came into my vicinity, my awareness more, and, yeah, and then it was around the same time as psychedelics or magic mushrooms were allowed to be studied on, researched on in, I think in the Netherlands, it was maybe like five, six years ago. And I was like, oh, wow, this is fascinating. And then I dived into it.
Experimentation as a stepping stone	Cacao as first experience of plant medicine (E) p1	And then I dived into cacao as a medicine. So I would go to women's circles and drink cacao in a very ritualistic, ceremonial way.
	Ceremonial use of cacao sparked intrigue esp of role of the guide (E) p1	And what made me more fascinated with these plant medicines was actually the guide rather than the feeling that it happened, the feeling that happened with me. So like the guide being like the woman's circle and how we would be. So what's the word? Like, yes, ceremonial with the cacao. Thank the mama cacao for the insights, intention setting that really brought me into like, yeah, a deeper connection with a medicine that was a plant.
	Cacao iterated importance of intention setting (E) p4	I know it's important only because of, like, doing it with the cacao.
	Cannabis introduced substance induced oneness (E) p3	Yeah, and then, where we did go is we started smoking a lot of weed. And weed, even though it's not a psychedelic, it does give you something very different to the other drugs. It's like expansion, this oneness, this, yeah, these other feelings.
	Continued engagement with mushrooms for self-work (E) p4	I was just still working with the mushroom and with the plant medicine and just continue to just do it in a safe way. – after negative experience

PET 2: Paradigm shift in the relationship toward psychedelic use (E)

Subheading	Experiential Statement	Quotes
Catalysts for change	Health issues prompting shift towards alternative ways of healing (E) p1	I had my own health issues, I went into more holistic or natural ways of healing my body. And with that came up all the herbs and the tinctures and the plants that I had to be consuming.
	Emerging interest during personal search for meaning and healing (E) p3	Because when I first found it, I wasn't in a good space as well. Like when I was all obsessed with it and stuff, I just wasn't in a good, I wasn't mentally the most stable that I've ever been because it was like post (previous workplace), it was post Covid, and I was dealing with a lot, like, mental, like, mentally.
	Shift in relationship with drug (E) p1	My gateway into drugs anyway was one of partying. And I think what my fascination with generally plant medicine, which I didn't even know like existed was over just the periods of time of understanding more about the things that I was taking.
From recreational to intentional use	Alternative drug taking paradigm emerged parallel to lifestyle changes (E) J / p3	I think it's just because I've got so addicted to, I got a bit obsessed about mushrooms and dived into just mushrooms as a fungus in general and I then tried to grow mushrooms, and I think we both went through a period where we stopped taking or stopped partying. Like 'partying, partying' and then we moved into smoking cannabis together and that was our kind of that was our drug of choice and then once it became quite like harmful and addictive, we moved out of that and it's not as if we do it every, it's more of a trip, it's more of a, it's something deeper. Yeah, it's deeper than any of the other drugs.
	Elena reframing new drug-taking paradigm as medicine (E) p4	But you haven't taken drugs like this. And let's not even call it drugs. It's a plant, and let's call it a medicine. So let's change the perspective here.
	Radical shift in drug use (E) p2	My fascination was when I really, I stopped like partying in that way. Like stopped taking cocaine, stopped taking ecstasy, stopped drinking.
Psychedelics as self work	Drug relationship shift from marked by growth in confidence (E, J / p3)	I've grown as a person more confident in myself that I don't need to escape my body in that type of way.
	Shift towards drugs as self-work (E) p2	it supported me spiritually. It wasn't just about, I'm going to do this because I thought, I think it's fun. I was doing this because I wanted it to elevate my consciousness. I wanted it to basically dismantle conditioning and the disruption of the ego and all this other, bigger work that is outside of recreational drugs. **Is there something here about an internalised therapist?**
Plants as medicine	Student of the mushroom (E) J / p18	I've noticed it's like we're having these individual experiences and then it merges into this relationship. So, it's like, what the mushroom has taught me personally, then feeds into this relationship. **Fits into relational changes, but also 'taught me' refers to sense of being a student**
	Psilocybin viewed as healer / therapeutic (E) J / p3	But I see them as a medicine, or as a form of, of therapy, almost.
	Plant medicine understood as a healer (E) p2	Like, this is a medicine and treat it like a medicine and it has a spirit as well.
Hope for a collective paradigm shift	Hope for personal and collective awakening (E) p2	I was just so excited of this elevation of consciousness for myself and also for the world. So I was like, oh, I'm gonna. So, yeah, the feeling was excitement, fascination.
	Strong belief in psychedelic research as a catalyst for larger societal paradigm shift (E) p2	I really believe in, I really believe in this in this journey for these rebel scientists, these rebel researchers, to be able to do this work, because this work is really important. It's bigger than just taking some magic mushrooms at a party.

PET 1: Renegotiation of relationship with psychedelics (N)

Subheading	Experiential Statement	Quotes
Past relationship marked by excess and discomfort	Prev. impulsive drug use (N, J / p2)	I mean, I was, pause, experimenting with recreational drugs, probably from, young adult age. And I was smoking cannabis, taking ecstasy, ketamine, acid, magic mushrooms probably all the way through my (pause) mid 20s to early 30s. My experience was always from like a recreation party angle and was often mixing things together.
	Chasing beyond reach (N, J / p2)	My experience was always from like a recreation party angle and was often mixing things together. It was often not mindful but was often about chasing the high more than anything.
	Past experiences consistently ended in darkness (N, p2)	the way that I was taking it almost always take a darker twist towards the end
	Initial disinterest (N, p1)	Elena was starting to becoming really intrigued by psilocybin, by mushrooms. And I was kind of less so because I felt like I'd left, I kind of like left that part of my life behind to a degree, like taking hallucinogenics in a recreational party way.
	Urge for adventure from prev drug use (N, J / p8)	We wanted to go out of the room and go, go explore and you know, that was probably like a reflex to my previous experience, of taking mushrooms, because mushrooms to me in the past had always been quite exploratory, like it would be, you take mushrooms at festival when you're going on a whacky adventure
Initiution that mushrooms were different	Gateway into deeper drug experience (N)	The first time I took mushrooms in an environment which it felt like it had a deeper meaning was when I was at a festival and yeah, the people that I was around and the environment of that festival meant that the journey in the trip was certainly deeper than what I'd experienced in the past
	Previously overlooked the mystery of mushroom (N, p2)	I was kind of just fascinated by, by the Organism of itself, you know by the fact that this this thing that grows in the ground, you know, had so much more of a a magical, yeah, It seemed like a complex and magical organism that I also hadn't probably given much respect before
	Glimpse of psychedelic magic, disrupted by context(N, J / p2)	I've always been connected to music and my relationship with psychedelics, it would always of heightened my connection to music and my connection to people in those in those settings.
	Wasted prev trips (N, J / p15)	Previously, I didn't have anybody to help make sense of it, so it was wasted, laughing.

Seeking knowledge and legitimacy	Gradual exposure to more legitimate information (N, p1)	I felt like there was a lot more, there was a lot more materials, there was a lot more information, there was more documentaries and there was just generally more out in the ether around kind of, yeah, just a deeper relationship and the benefits of psilocybin than what I had been exposed to before
	Emerging information mirrored an inward journey (N, p1)	And it also kind of parallels, I guess a just a deeper journey to into myself as as well, and those are one of the the things that I remember from taking mushrooms in the previous way was like it certainly made me feel introspective and made me look deeply in on myself and maybe in that period I wasn't, pause, I wasn't prepared for that.
	Shift in societal understanding of psilocybin (N, J / p3)	I think that together, but also separately, we went on a bit of a journey of understanding the potential benefits. I think kind of like the demonization of like magic mushrooms was starting to be peeled away a little. You know, you're now able to access information about psychedelics and on Netflix and on BBC iPlayer and, yeah, I think it just became a little bit more accessible and less of a fringe subject. And yeah, from then it was just, we just saw it as a plant medicine that enabled us to connect and have these experiences together so.
	Intrigue by potential therapeutic use (N, p1)	Umm. I mean, I was, I was, I was fascinated by its potential to relieve anxiety, and that's maybe not something that I had associated with its potential previously.
	Curious to explore hidden parts of self (N, p2)	I guess I was really intrigued in having a more mindful relationship to psilocybin to explore those deep crevices of myself, which, yeah, which was intriguing to me.
Ambivalence regarding risk	Move beyond previous drug taking (N, p4)	I just think for me the intention is I'm no longer setting my intention to be like, let's take some mushrooms, let's have a mad trip, let's you know, let's party. Let's let's do XY and Z.
	Awareness of risk alongside an openness to explore (N, J / p5)	My expectation was that it would probably be emotional and because I'd taken mushrooms in a different setting in the past, my expectation is that it could also maybe take me to some dark places.
	Trust that psychedelic states are temporary (N, p3)	I'm experienced enough with hallucinogenics that I know that you get out the other side and I know that you know you're in the trip, and if you're less, if you're less experienced, then you that could maybe be scary.
	Finding safety in taking the substance differently (N, J / p4)	I got to a place where as I actually well, these drugs can be taken in a different way than the way that I've been taking them in the past and I think that's when we went on that journey together and separately of like, okay, well, this is, this is a way that we can take them together, that doesn't mean we need to be in, in a field at a festival when you could be sat at home, you know, as a couple.
	Vast spectrum of possible trips (N, J / p4)	I've had, I'd have a relationship with taking mushrooms as a recreation party activity, festivals, you know, house parties, whatever. I had you know, incredible trips and scary trips and everything in between.
Preparation as emotional and practical safety	Desire for certainty before tripping (N, J / p4)	There was a little bit of resistance I felt like from me early on to be like: 'You sure you want to do this?' Because like this can, it can, it can sometimes get a bit dark. Ambivalence regarding risk instead?
	Invited on a journey of discovery (N, p2)	Elena is taking me on this journey with her around mushrooms, it was really just fascinating me that this Organism was just quite incredible.
	Bearing witness to Elena (N, J / p3)	You've been talking about wanting to take psychedelics for a while and that was just like a moment that we had access to psychedelics.
	Certainty of safety with Elena helped readiness (N, p3)	I feel completely safe with her in our relationship in every other way so, when I'm going to be taking mushrooms with Elena I'm going to, I'm going to be safe.

Appendix 12: Ethics Approval

Dear Sophie

Reference: ETH2324-2024

Project title: Doctoral Research Project

Start date: 19 Jan 2024

End date: 30 Sep 2025

I am writing to you to confirm that the research proposal detailed above has been granted formal approval from the Senate Research Ethics Committee. The Committee's response is based on the protocol described in the application form and supporting documentation. Approval has been given for the submitted application only and the research must be conducted accordingly. You are now free to start recruitment.

The approval was given with the following conditions:

- Please confirm with Information Assurance to whether any updates need to be made to the DPIA to reflect recruitment from outside the UK.

Please ensure that you are familiar with City's Framework for Good Practice in Research and any appropriate Departmental/School guidelines, as well as applicable external relevant policies.

Please note the following:

Project amendments/extension

You will need to submit an amendment or request an extension if you wish to make any of the following changes to your research project:

- Change or add a new category of participants;
- Change or add researchers involved in the project, including PI and supervisor;
- Change to the sponsorship/collaboration;
- Add a new or change a territory for international projects;
- Change the procedures undertaken by participants, including any change relating to the safety or physical or mental integrity of research participants, or to the risk/benefit assessment for the project or collecting additional types of data from research participants;
- Change the design and/or methodology of the study, including changing or adding a new research method and/or research instrument;
- Change project documentation such as protocol, participant information sheets, consent forms, questionnaires, letters of invitation, information sheets for relatives or carers;
- Change to the insurance or indemnity arrangements for the project;

- Change the end date of the project.

Adverse events or untoward incidents

You will need to submit an Adverse Events or Untoward Incidents report in the event of any of the following:

a) Adverse events

b) Breaches of confidentiality

c) Safeguarding issues relating to children or vulnerable adults

d) Incidents that affect the personal safety of a participant or researcher

Issues a) and b) should be reported as soon as possible and no later than five days after the event. Issues c) and d) should be reported immediately. Where appropriate, the researcher should also report adverse events to other relevant institutions, such as the police or social services.

Should you have any further queries relating to this matter, please do not hesitate to contact me. On behalf of the Senate Research Ethics Committee, I do hope that the project meets with success.

Kind regards

Annah Whyton

Senate Research Ethics Committee

City, University of London

Appendix 13: Distress Protocol

Indications of distress during pre-screening or interview	Follow up questions
Indication of high level of emotional distress, or behaviours displayed such as uncontrolled crying, incoherent speech, indicates of flashbacks etc.	1. Stop the interview. 2. Offer support and allow time to regroup. 3. Assess emotional state. e.g. Tell me what thoughts you are having right now. 4. Use professional judgement to determine whether participant is experiencing acute emotional distress beyond what may be expected when discussing sensitive topics.
Indication of self-harm	1. Stop the interview 2. Express concern and ask further questions. e.g. Do you intend to hurt yourself? How / When are you intending of hurting yourself? 3. Use professional judgement to determine whether there is immediate risk of harm.
Indication of harm to others	1. Stop the interview 2. Express concern and ask further questions. e.g. Do you intend to hurt others? How / When are you intending of hurting others? 3. Use professional judgement to determine whether there is immediate risk of harm.

Appendix 14: Support Services

Support services

Relate UK: An organisation providing relationship support across England and Wales for individuals, couples and families. They offer counselling, workshops and a series of self-help resources to support you. https://www.relate.org.uk

The Awareness Centre: TAC offers affordable therapy at their Clapham centre making therapy accessible for people on a lower income. https://theawarenesscentre.com

Mind UK: They have an array of useful contacts to support different types of addictions, such as alcohol, drugs, sex and gambling. https://www.mind.org.uk/information-support/types-of-mental-health-problems/recreational-drugs-alcohol-and-addiction/drug-and-alcohol-addiction-useful-contacts/

We are with you UK: A free, online or in-person support service that helps people to overcome addiction by providing assistance in getting scripts, detox and access to rehab. https://www.wearewithyou.org.uk

Antidote UK: Advice giving and support to those seeks help in relation to their alcohol and drug use and identify as part of the LGBTQ+ community. https://londonfriend.org.uk/antidote/

Appendix 15: Reflective Interview by Carla Willing

1. Why this topic? Why this research question?
2. What do you expect/ hope to find out?
3. What are you afraid to find out? / What would disappoint you?
4. How are you implicated in the research? What is your personal relationship with the topic?
5. What is your emotional investment in the research? Why/how does it matter to you?
6. Who are you doing this research for?
7. What must the world be like for your research question to be meaningful and worthwhile?
8. How might your answers to questions 1-9 mediate your engagement in the research?
9. How might the research change you? Has it changed you so far?

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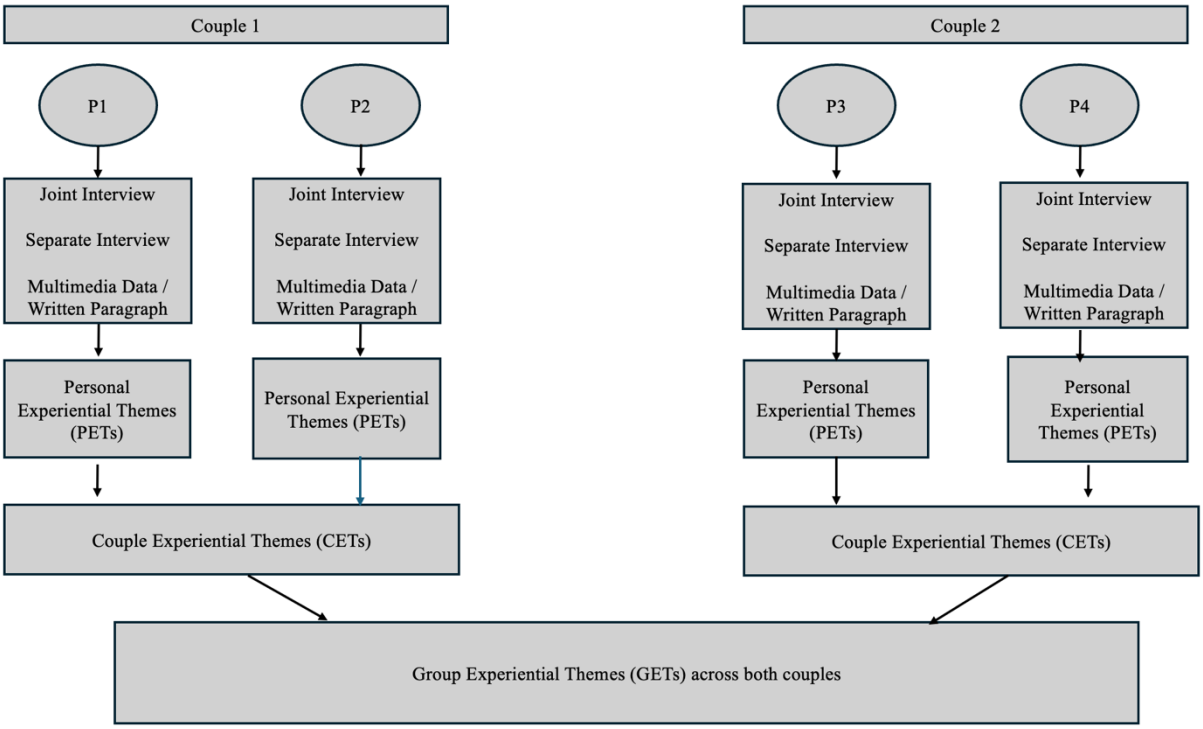

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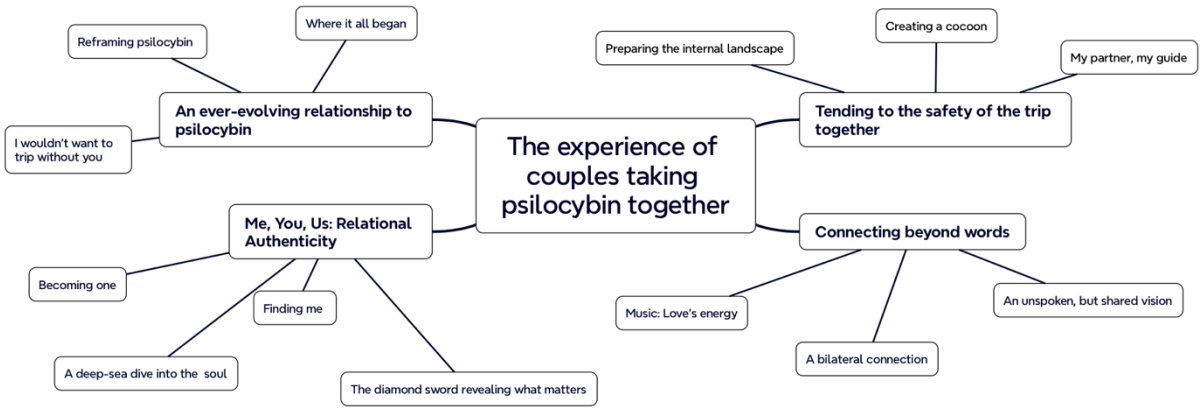
The experience of couples taking psilocybin together
An ever-evolving relationship to psilocybin
Where it all began
Reframing psilocybin
I wouldn't want to trip without you
Tending to the safety of the trip together
Creating a cocoon
Preparing the internal landscape
My partner, my guide
Me, You, Us: Relational Authenticity
Becoming one
Finding me
A deep-sea dive into the soul
The diamond sword revealing what matters
Connecting beyond words
Music: Love's energy
A bilateral connection
An unspoken, but shared vision

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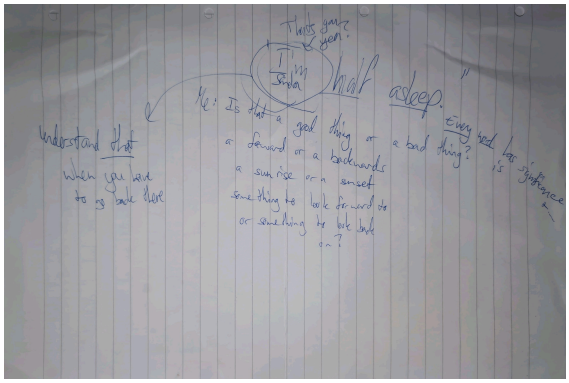

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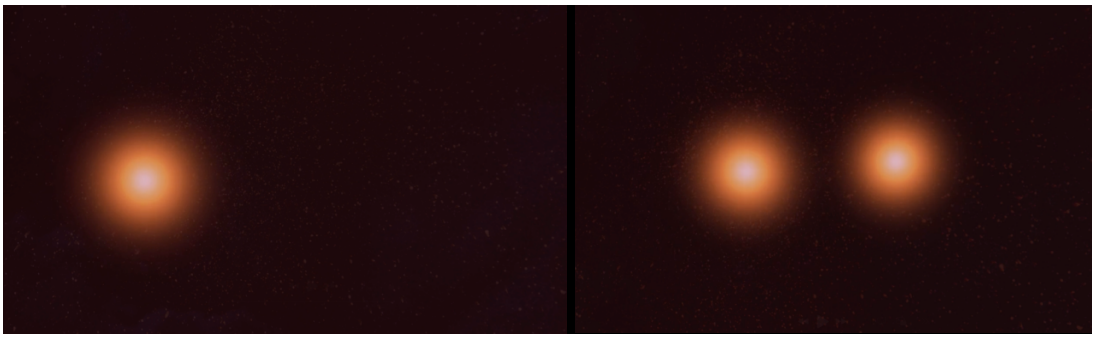

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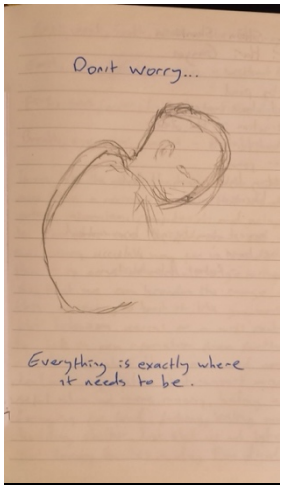

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Table 1

Overlaps of EFT, Empirical Evidence in Psilocybin and Key Findings From Current Study

EFT Focus (Johnson, 2008)	How psilocybin supports (empirical findings)	Key Findings From This Study
Attachment / secure base	Inconclusive findings as to whether psilocybin supports secure attachment, although evidence suggests an interplay between the two (Stauffer et al., 2020; Stauffer et al., 2021; Cherniak et al., 2024)	Underlying attachment dynamics likely to be amplified during altered state. Couples co-created safety and trust describing creating 'cocoons', rituals, 'holding each other', which anchored the experience in mutual trust.
Responsiveness / Engagement	Heightened emotional empathy Preller & Vollenweider (2019) Enhanced emotional and interpersonal sensitivity, increased empathy (Metastasio et al., 2025)	Heightened sensitivity to cues (e.g. facial expressions) fostering emotional attunement. Partners felt understood without words. Couples described being, and perceiving the other to be, fully present and emotionally available.
Acceptance / Vulnerability	Decreased social rejection sensitivity, Increase in altruistic behaviour (Preller & Vollenweider, 2019) Ego-dissolution (Nour et al., 2016; Millière, 2017) Enhanced openness, decrease in neuroticism (Weiss et al., 2023)	Couples referenced an enhanced openness and willingness to allow vulnerability to surface without defensiveness.
Reframing / new narratives	Long-lasting insights into own life and personal value (Metastasio et al., 2025) Alterations to identity, sharing experience with loved one's post treatment (Belser et al., 2017)	Experiences enabled couples to 'see each other with fresh eyes', see arguments as trivial, enhance understanding of partner's perspective.

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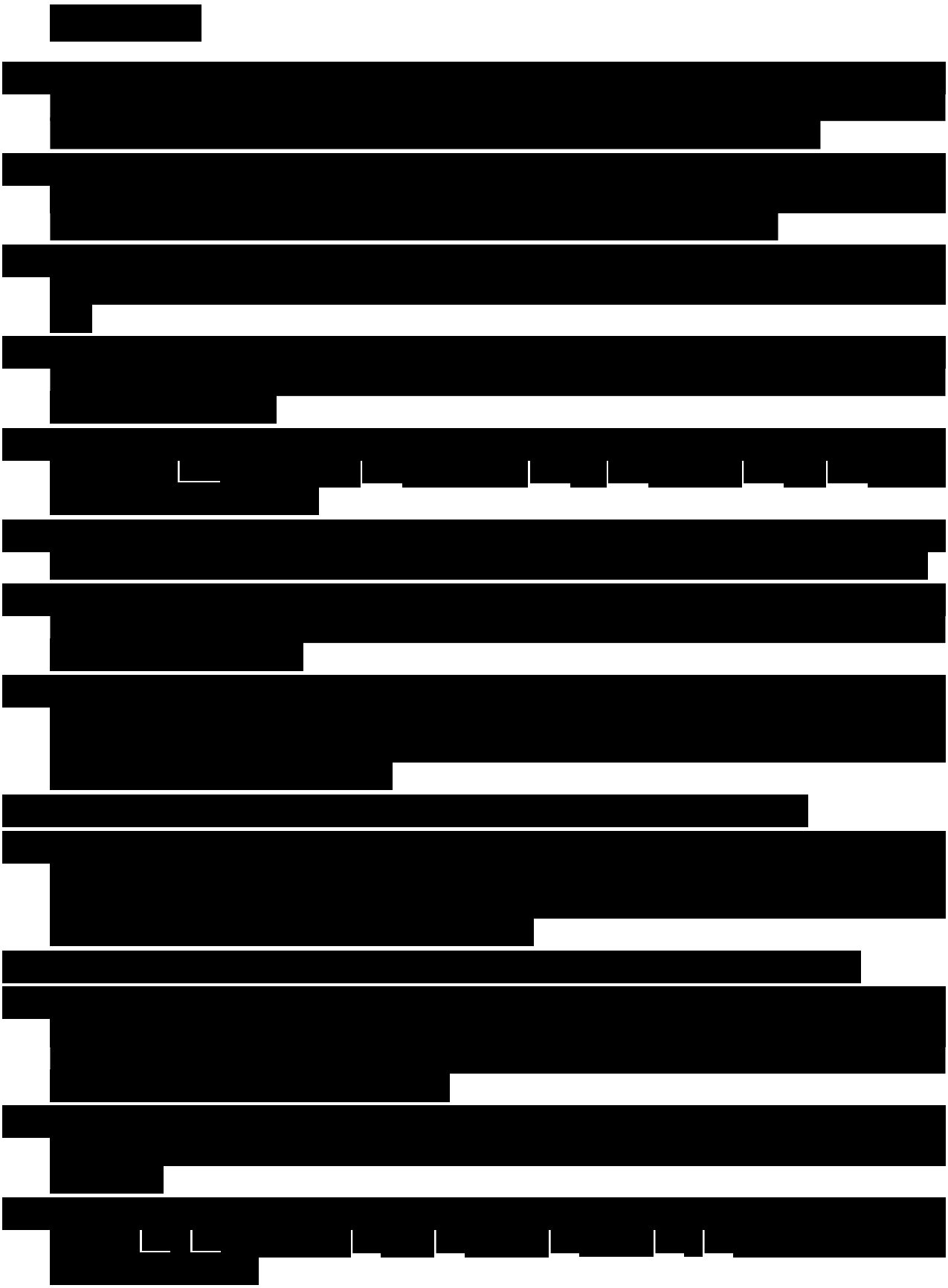

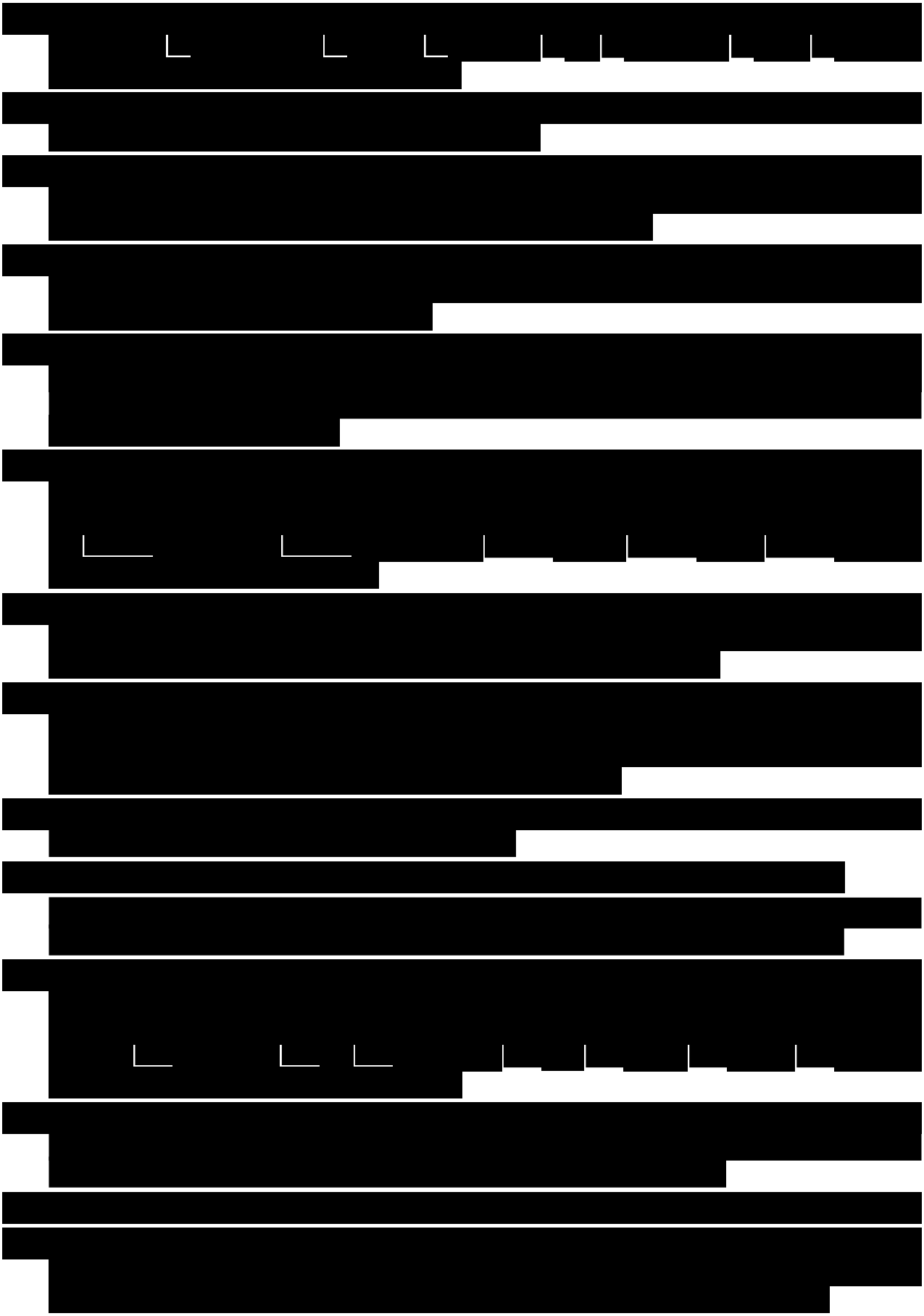

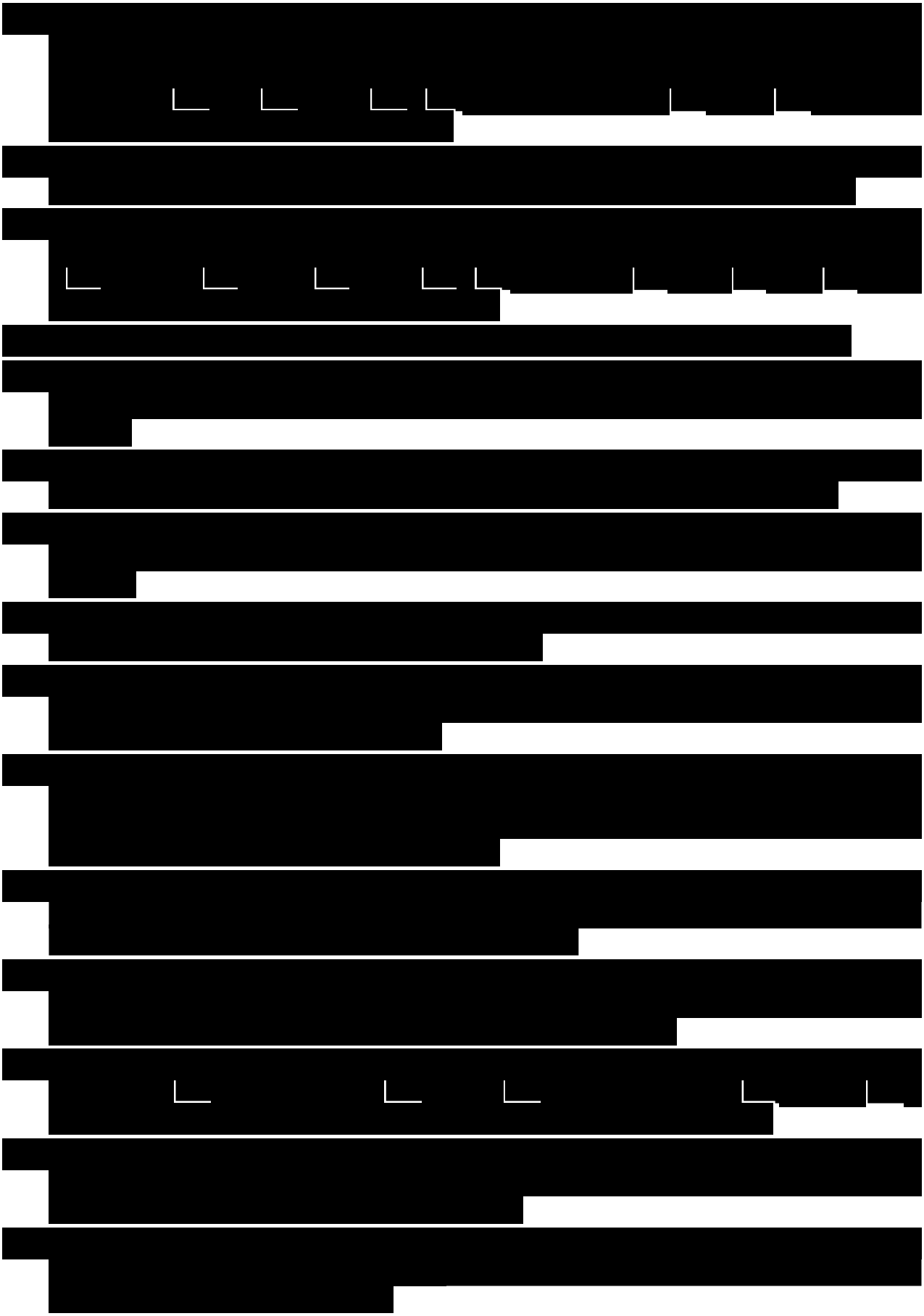

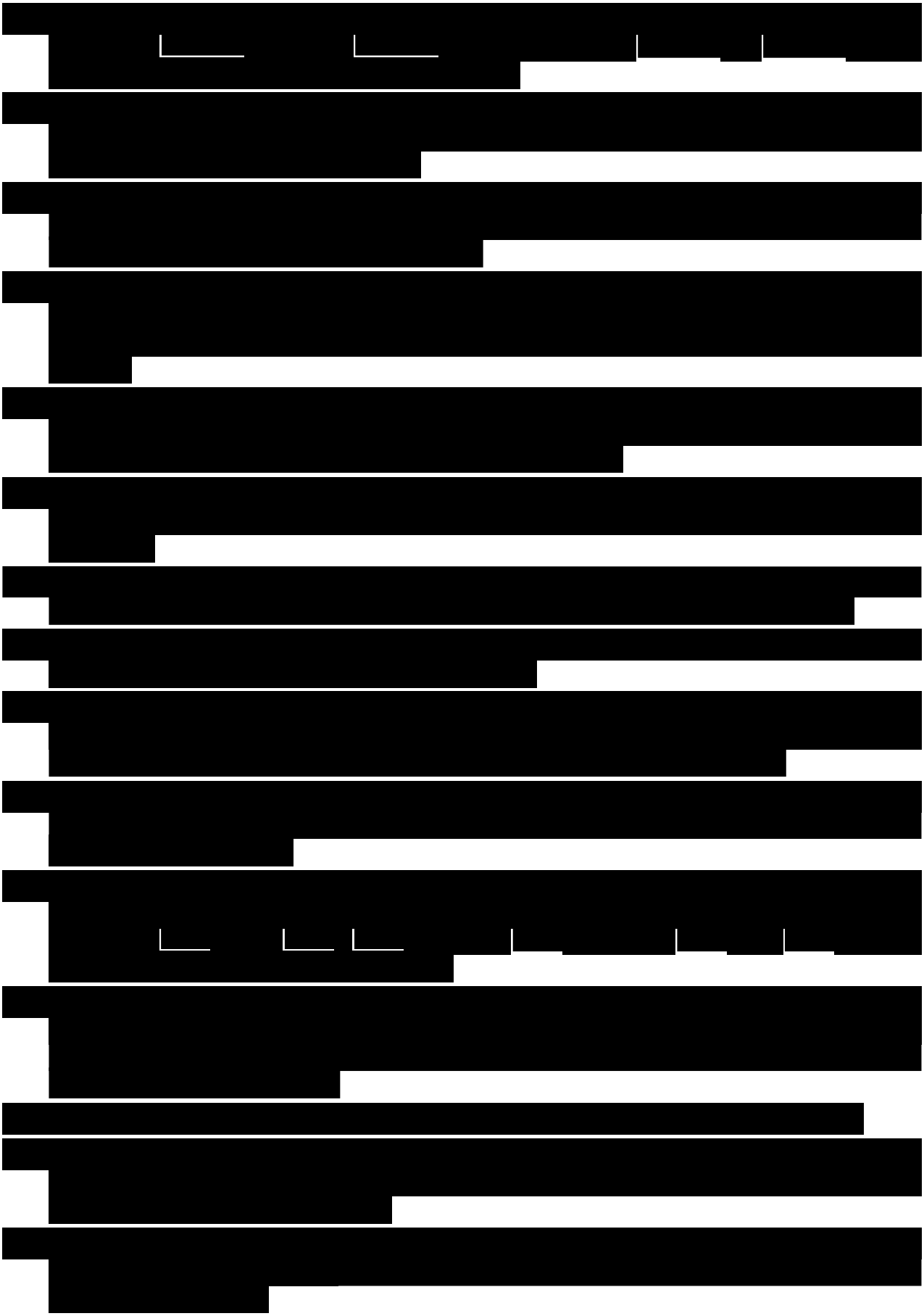

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*A pseudonym will be used and all identifiable information has been altered to protect the client's identity.

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