

BEFORE INTENTION

Orientation as a Foundational Process in Psychedelic Preparation and Integration

A proposed framework for exploring the relationship between internal maps, lived terrain, expectation and intention

Background

Psychedelic-assisted therapy commonly involves preparation, psychedelic experience and subsequent integration. Preparation may include intention-setting, while integration seeks to support the understanding and incorporation of material arising from the experience into everyday life.

Although expectations, intentions, preparation and integration are increasingly recognised as potentially important components of psychedelic-assisted therapy, their specific roles and interactions remain incompletely understood.

Research also suggests that psychedelic experiences are shaped by factors beyond pharmacology, including expectancy, set, setting, therapeutic context, preparation and meaning-making. However, these elements are not yet consistently conceptualised or standardised, and the mechanisms through which acute psychedelic experiences may contribute to enduring changes remain an active area of investigation.

This raises a broader question:

Are we trying to understand and influence downstream processes without adequately examining the person's starting position?

The Proposed Concept: Orientation

This poster proposes **orientation** as a foundational process within psychedelic preparation and integration.

We do not enter psychedelic experiences as blank slates.

We arrive with an internal **map**: beliefs, assumptions, expectations, memories, identity, learned patterns, previous experiences and predictions through which we understand ourselves and the world.

At the same time, we inhabit a **terrain**: our current circumstances, relationships, environment, resources, constraints, possibilities and wider interconnected context.

We navigate life through maps, but we live in terrain.

The Mountain Protocol proposes that making both map and terrain visible creates an externalised reference point from which the individual can examine their current position without necessarily becoming entwined with the content being explored.

The purpose is not to determine which map is correct.

It is to explore the **relationship between map and terrain**.

Map, Terrain and Relationship

The framework offers three possible points of entry:

MAP

How do I understand myself and the world?

TERRAIN

What is actually happening in my current circumstances?

RELATIONSHIP

How does my map relate to the terrain?

Where there is disparity between map and terrain, that difference may provide valuable information.

It may reveal assumptions, expectations, desires, uncertainties, unresolved questions or possible intentions that were previously implicit.

But disparity is not necessarily a problem to be corrected.

The map may fit the terrain.

It may not.

The terrain may have changed.

The map may have changed.

Or the relationship between them may simply have become more visible.

The framework therefore does not begin by assuming that something is wrong.

It begins with **curiosity about the relationship**.

Before Intention

Intention-setting is commonly incorporated into psychedelic preparation.

The Mountain Protocol does not propose that intention should be removed or replaced.

Instead, it proposes that **orientation may provide a context in which intention and expectation can be understood.**

Before asking:

“Where do I want to go?”

we might first ask:

“Where am I?”

For example:

“My intention is to heal my anxiety.”

This may be accompanied by an expectation:

“I expect this experience to show me what is causing my anxiety and help me overcome it.”

Both may be entirely understandable.

The intention describes **where I want to go.**

The expectation describes **what I think may happen when I get there.**

Orientation makes this relationship visible.

It therefore asks not only:

“What is your intention and what might your intention be carrying with it ?”

but also:

“What are you expecting and where did that expectation come from?”

This may reveal aspects of the individual's existing map that could otherwise remain implicit.

The Mountain as an Externalised Reference Point

The metaphor is central to the framework rather than simply illustrative.

By representing the individual's situation as a relationship between **map and terrain**, the framework creates a reference point outside the individual from which they can observe their current position.

Instead of:

“What is wrong with me?”

the question can become:

“What is the relationship between the map I am using and the terrain I am currently navigating?”

This creates a degree of distance from the content being explored.

The individual is not required to become their thoughts, expectations, diagnosis, history or current circumstances in order to examine them.

The metaphor therefore provides a **decentralised and externalised language for inquiry**.

A Focus for the Psychedelic Experience

Orientation does not necessarily determine what should be explored.

The map, the terrain or the relationship between them can each become a focus.

The individual might explore:

The map:

Why do I understand myself or my life this way?

The terrain:

What is actually happening in my life now?

The relationship:

Where does the way I understand my life fit — or not fit — with what I am encountering?

Each offers a different entry point into understanding the whole.

The framework therefore seeks to create **focus without prescribing outcome**.

Rather than:

“I want this experience to fix X.”

the focus may become:

“There is something here I am interested in exploring.”

A Recursive Model

The Mountain Protocol proposes that orientation should not be viewed as a one-time preparatory step.

Instead:

ORIENTATION

↓

MAP ↔ TERRAIN

↓

EXPECTATION / INTENTION

↓

EXPERIENCE

↓

REORIENTATION

↓

LEARNING

↓

UPDATED MAP

↻

The process can then begin again.

The framework provides a consistent language and reference point that can be revisited as new information emerges and circumstances change.

When the Experience Does Not Match the Map

A psychedelic experience may be unexpected, challenging or simply different from what a person anticipated.

The Mountain Protocol does not propose that orientation should prevent this.

Instead, it asks whether awareness of map, terrain and expectation might provide a reference point from which unexpected material can be explored.

For example, a person may enter with the expectation:

“I am going to confront my trauma and finally understand what happened to me.”

But instead experience grief, bodily sensations, memories or emotions that appear unrelated to that intention.

Without a reference point, the person might interpret the experience as:

“It didn't work.”

“I didn't get what I was supposed to get.”

“I must have missed the point.”

The map–terrain framework creates another possibility:

“Something happened that did not fit my map. What might that tell me?”

The mismatch itself becomes information.

The same principle may apply to powerful or apparently positive experiences.

A profound experience may be interpreted immediately as a definitive truth. The framework offers a way to step back and ask:

“Is this a new perspective, an experience, a change in my map and how does it relate to the terrain of my actual life?”

The proposition is not that orientation makes difficult experiences easier or determines how they should be interpreted.

Rather, it asks whether orientation may influence the relationship to the experience, allowing unexpected material to remain available for exploration rather than being immediately interpreted as failure, threat, truth or required action.

Integration as Reorientation

Integration is often conceptualised as what happens **after** the psychedelic experience.

The Mountain Protocol proposes an alternative possibility:

Integration may be understood as reorientation.

The individual returns to the relationship between map and terrain and asks:

What has changed?

What has not changed?

What did I previously believe?

What do I believe now?

Does the new perspective fit the terrain of my life?

Where is there still disparity?

What might that difference now be telling me?

New perspectives are not necessarily treated as conclusions that must be adopted.

They can become **information to explore and test against lived reality.**

The same reference point used before the experience can therefore be returned to afterwards.

And again over time.

Continual Learning

The Mountain Protocol does not propose that an individual arrives at a final or definitive map.

Maps are continually shaped by experience.

Terrain changes.

Relationships change.

Circumstances change.

Understanding changes.

The framework therefore proposes a process of **continual learning and reorientation** rather than a single moment of insight or resolution.

The question becomes:

Does my map still fit the terrain I am living in?

If not, that disparity may become an invitation to explore.

Why This May Matter

Existing psychedelic research increasingly examines the influence of expectancy, intention, set and setting, preparation, therapeutic relationship, meaning-making, integration and psychological flexibility.

Yet these factors are often considered as distinct components of psychedelic preparation, experience and integration.

The Mountain Protocol proposes that **orientation may provide a conceptual layer through which these components can be understood in relation to one another.**

Rather than adding another technique to psychedelic preparation, orientation asks whether we first need a clearer understanding of the person's starting position.

The proposition is not that orientation determines the outcome of a psychedelic experience.

Rather:

Could understanding the starting position provide information that helps contextualise what follows?

Proposed Contribution

The Mountain Protocol is presented as a **developing conceptual framework**, not as an established intervention.

It proposes that orientation may provide a language through which an individual can examine the map they are using, the terrain they are navigating, or the relationship between the two.

This externalised reference point may:

1. Make existing maps, assumptions and expectations more visible.
2. Identify the relationship between internal maps and lived terrain.
3. Use disparity, where present, as information for exploration rather than automatically as a problem to solve.
4. Provide context in which intentions and expectations can be distinguished and examined.

5. Create focus for psychedelic exploration without prescribing an outcome.
6. Provide an externalised reference point for preparation.
7. Provide the same reference point for post-experience integration.
8. Allow the framework to be revisited over time as both map and terrain change.
9. Provide a potential conceptual bridge between acute psychedelic experiences and longer-term changes in self-understanding and behaviour.

The proposition is **testable rather than assumed**.

Questions for Future Research

1. Orientation

Does an explicit orientation process increase awareness of an individual's existing maps, assumptions and expectations?

2. Map–Terrain Relationship

Can examining the relationship between internal maps and lived terrain reveal information relevant to expectations, intentions or readiness?

3. Intention

Does orientation influence the content, framing or meaning of psychedelic intentions?

4. Experience

Does awareness of map, terrain and expectation influence how unexpected or challenging psychedelic experiences are interpreted and subsequently understood?

The question is not whether orientation prevents difficult experiences, but whether it provides a reference point from which unexpected material can be explored rather than immediately interpreted as failure, truth, threat or required action.

5. Integration

Can a map–terrain framework provide a useful and repeatable reference point for evaluating and incorporating emerging perspectives after psychedelic experiences?

6. Long-term Change

Can repeated reorientation support the translation of acute changes in perspective into enduring changes in self-understanding and behaviour?

A Testable Future Model

A potential future study could compare:

INTENTION-SETTING ALONE

with

ORIENTATION + INTENTION-SETTING

Possible outcomes could include:

- expectancy awareness
- intention characteristics
- psychological flexibility
- openness to uncertainty
- interpretation of challenging experiences
- integration outcomes
- self-understanding
- behavioural change

A longitudinal design could additionally examine whether the map–terrain framework continues to function as a reference point beyond the immediate psychedelic experience.

This would allow the proposed contribution of orientation to be examined empirically rather than assumed.

Conclusion

Psychedelic preparation often asks:

“What is your intention?”

The Mountain Protocol proposes a prior question:

“Where are you?”

We navigate life through maps, but we live in terrain.

The map, the terrain and the relationship between them can each become a focus for exploration.

The Mountain Protocol does not prescribe which should be explored.

It provides a language and metaphor through which the individual can examine their current position, creating both distance from the content being explored and a reference point to which they can return.

Before the experience.

After the experience.

And over time.

The framework therefore proposes a shift:

From Preparation to Navigation

And perhaps:

Integration is not the end of the journey.

It is reorientation.