

SIMULATING SPIRITUAL EXPERIENCES IN THE LAB: OPTIONS AND LIMITS



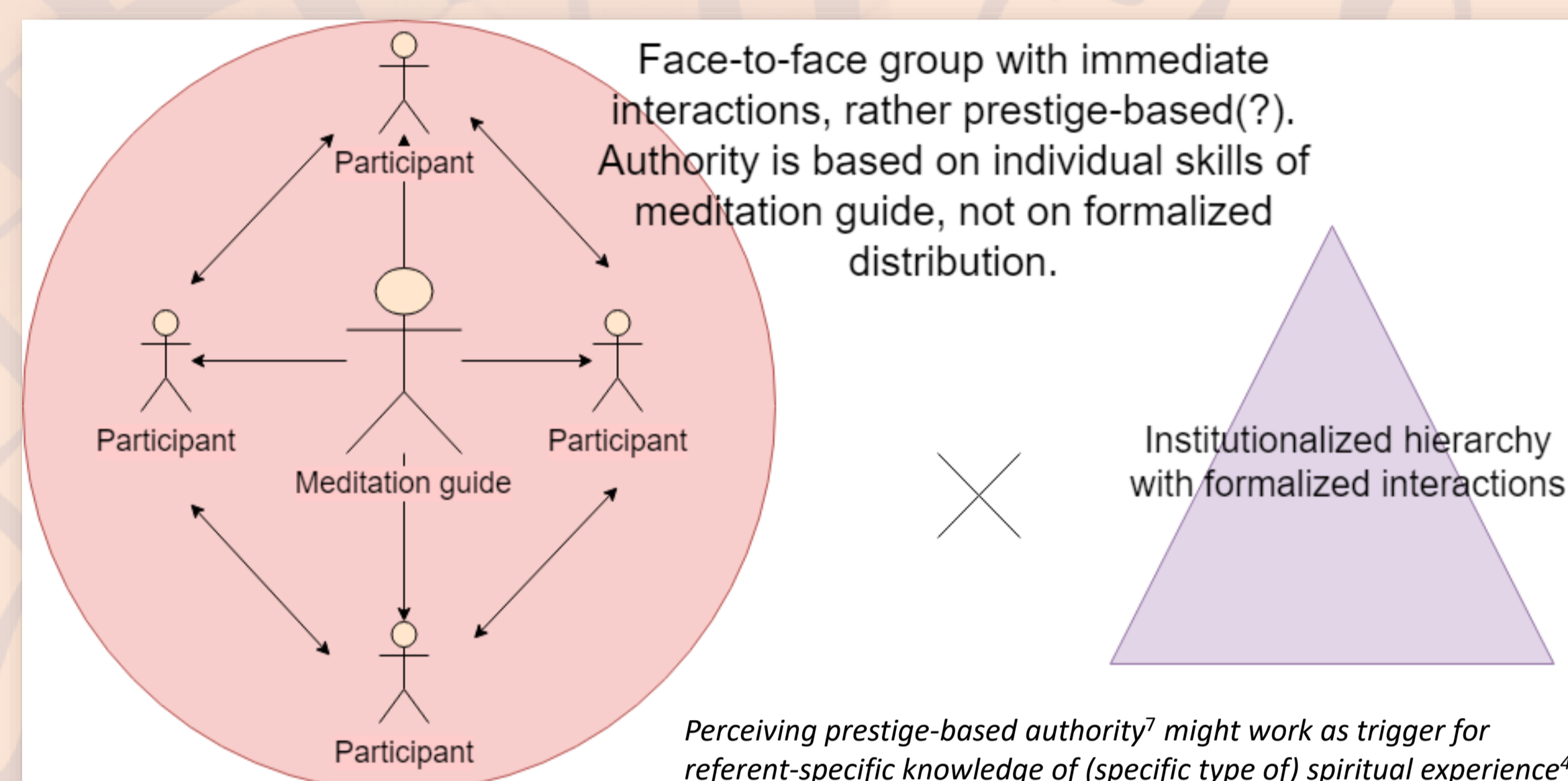
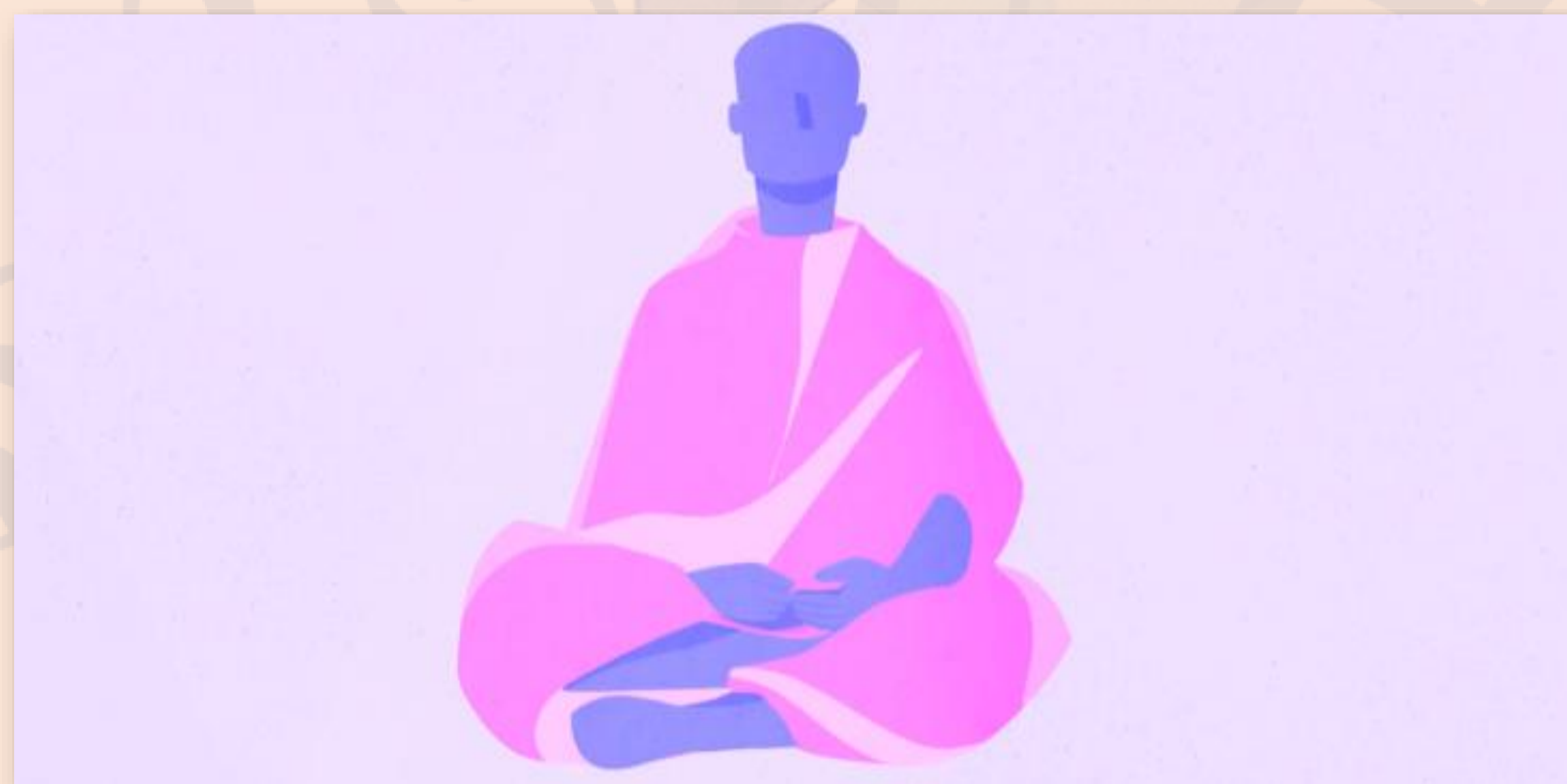
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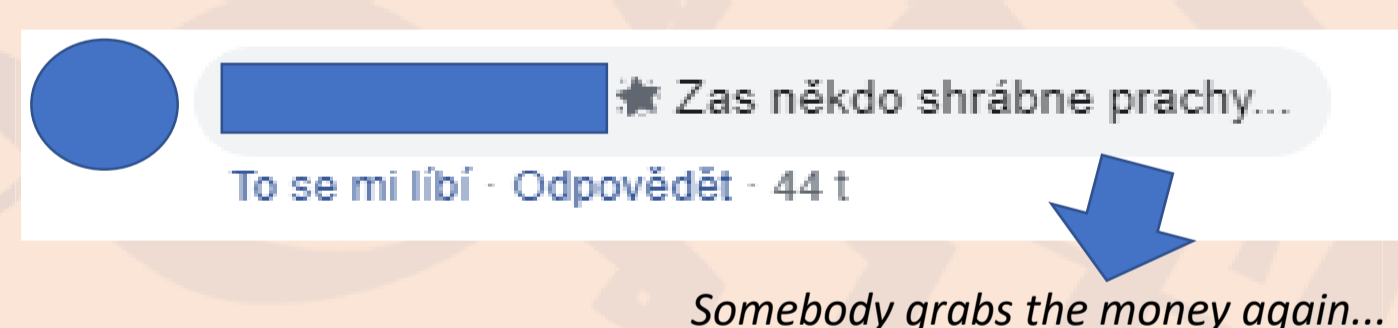
Introduction

- Two experimental studies were focused on inducing spiritual experiences in a controlled environment.
- Methodology was based on the predictive coding and event cognition theories^{1,4}.
- Experimental manipulation was based on the sensory deprivation of participants inset into highly suggestive context of popular spiritual practice – Dark therapy (1st experiment) and guided meditations (2nd experiment).
- Manipulation further involved controlling the imaginative suggestibility (both), paranormal beliefs (1st), fantasy proneness (2nd), and authority priming (2nd).
- Results show positive associations between cultural background of participants (alternative spirituality), form and intensity of their spiritual experience and levels of imaginative suggestibility and fantasy proneness.
- However, results from the 2nd experimental study are invalid because only a small number of participants recruited from the alternative-spiritual population wanted to participate. This problem was probably caused by a different kind of **authority and its constitution among alternative spiritual groups**.

The threefold problem with authority



1. Trolling



- Internet trolling and hostile conspiratorial rhetorics are a current issue of the whole internet, including alternative-spiritual Facebook groups.
- Irrational hate comments can effectively undermine credibility of the project.

2. Identification of involved authority

- Guided meditation is a process in which participants meditate in response to the guidance provided by a trained practitioner or teacher².
- After posting recruitment flyers to Facebook groups, several people reacted distrustfully and wanted to know the identity of the meditation guide.
- Priming with authority does not allow for the disclosure of the meditation guide's identity nor the character of the meditation before the experiment.

3. Better understanding of authority needed

- Distrust of institutional, scientific authority is a common narrative among the alternative spirituality⁶.
- Experiment designed in the same way as Schjoedt's³ with charismatic Christians or Paddock's & Terranova's⁵ with psychology undergraduates was not adequate.
- Authority among alternatively spiritual (meditation) groups is distributed differently than in bigger and more institutionalized groups, such as Christians or students and teachers of Psychology.

Conclusion

- The small number of participants was probably caused by the **concealed identity** of the meditation guide – candidates were unable to verify his credibility (and therefore the credibility of the whole project).
- Hence, it is crucial to **better understand group dynamics and inner constitution of authority** in alternative-spiritual groups **before creating experimental design and recruiting participants**.
- Spiritual experience therefore **might be bound** to culturally specific kinds of authority even in the **individualistic** field of alternative spirituality.

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