

***Talking to Tulpas: Sentient Imaginary Friends, the Social Mind, and implications for Culture and Cognition Research.***

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*Unpublished summary of preliminary findings.*

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**Overview.**

After 6 months of participant observation online, 166 Tulpamancers from 17 countries were recruited, interviewed and tested in a semi-structured survey by Dr Samuel Veissière, an anthropologist working at McGill University's Division of Transcultural Psychiatry. Veissière is now putting together a team of cognitive scientists (from such disciplines as psychiatry, philosophy, neuroscience and psychology) for an ongoing ethnographic, cognitive, behavioural, and neurological study of Tulpamancy. Findings from Phases 1 and 2 of the preliminary research are summarized below.

**What is tulpamancy?**

Tulpamancy, or tulpaforcing, is a recent social phenomenon that grew from increasingly popular forums and discussion platforms on the Internet. The term Tulpa has its roots in Tibetan Buddhist practice where it referred to intelligent, or sentient beings imagined into existence through mental concentration. Based on these practices and a diverse range of visualization and meditation techniques, modern tulpamancers ‘force’ – that is to say imagine, design, and bring to mental existence – intelligent companions (or Tulpas) who are said to experience and display full subjectivity, selfhood, and individual personality traits. Tulpas most often assume human form, but many are imagined within a continuum of humanoid variations with gender-fluid, gender-neutral, or pan-ethnic traits. Fandom culture drawn from fantasy-oriented genres also frequently prompts the forcing of non-human Tulpas such as elves, ponies, or ponies.

### **Why study tulpamancy?**

We are confident that the study of tulpamancy and tulpa-like phenomena will lead to fresh and ground-breaking perspectives on:

- 1) understanding the social nature of the mind;
- 2) revising mainstream biases toward ‘delusions’, ‘psychoses’, and altered states of consciousness;
- 3) showing how, through more open systems of shared representations and practices, the normal workings of the mind can be extended to more radical sensory experiences
- 4) demonstrating how Tulpa-like, mindful meditative practice can carry significant personal, emotional, cognitive, and social benefits.

### **How does Tulpamancy work?**

The best explanations come from the Cognitive Science of Religion (CSR), where perceiving/imagining non-physical agents (like spirits, gods, or ‘voices’) is understood as a normal, but possibly ‘glitching’ cognitive function called ‘agent hyper-detection’. This is why we see faces in the clouds, imagine boogeymen under our beds, or talk to imaginary friends – or why supernatural agents ‘exist’ in all cultures. Our intuitive psychology, or Theory of Mind – our ability to put ourselves in the perspective of somebody else – also prompts us to anthropomorphize the world around us, and infer agency and human-like mental processes to entities that don’t have minds. This explains why tulpamancy is both ‘normal’, and possible.

### **How ‘real’ are Tulpas to their hosts?**

CSR has also shown that belief in super-natural agents is always counter-intuitive – or in other words, presents a contradiction with our everyday perception and understanding of the world around us. ‘Successful’ religious cosmologies are accepted, recalled and passed on when they are *minimally counter-intuitive* (as is the case with a god or spirit: a minimally counter-intuitive variation on the concept of ‘person’ [understood as having a mind] without a body. See Pascal Boyer, *Religion Explained*).

Super-natural agents may be inevitable features of human perception, but because their existence is unverifiable collectively, they are always ‘difficult’ to fully accept or ‘believe in’. They are even more difficult to experience with our senses. Some believers *do* hear their god’s voice, but recent research (Tanya Luhrman – *When God Talks Back*) has shown that it takes specific talent and lots of learning and training in meditative practice to reach synesthetic experiences (where the experience *feels* real through our sense modalities).

A successful tulpa, as such, stems from the conscious-turned-intuitive construction of what we call an ‘infra-natural’ agent.

Of 73 Tulpamancers tested on this question, only 37% reported that their Tulpas felt “as real as a physical person”, while 50.6 % described their mental companions as “somewhat real - distinct from physical persons, but distinct from [their] own thoughts.

The median length of Tulpamancy experience for these respondents was one year. Tulpamancers with 2+ years of experience reported higher degrees of synesthetic experience, including 4.6% claiming “extremely real” phenomena, where Tulpas were “indistinguishable from any other agent or person” and heard “outside” their hosts’ heads.

### **Are Tulpas only experienced as “voices?”**

No. Tulpamancers also report (in order of frequency), tactile, sexual (\*controversial in the community – often deemed taboo), visual, and olfactory experiences. “Raw thought”, “intuitive thinking”, “speaking with no words” and “communicating with images, feelings and music” are also reported along with other non-verbal, non mind-voiced forms of interaction. In addition to imagined agents, tulpamancers’ mental constructs include spaces for tulpa-host interaction usually termed “mindscape” or “wonderland”.

### **How do tulpamancers understand the phenomenon?**

The community is primarily divided between the psychological and metaphysical schools of thought. In the psychological community, neuroscience (and/or folk neuroscience) is the explanation of choice. Tulpas are understood as mental constructs that have achieved sentience. The metaphysical explanation holds that Tulpas are agents of supernatural origins and nature that exist outside the hosts’ minds, and who come to communicate with them. Of 118 respondents queried on the question, 76.5% identified with the psychological explanation, 8.5% with the metaphysical, and 14% with a variety of “other” explanations, such as a mixture of psychological and metaphysical.

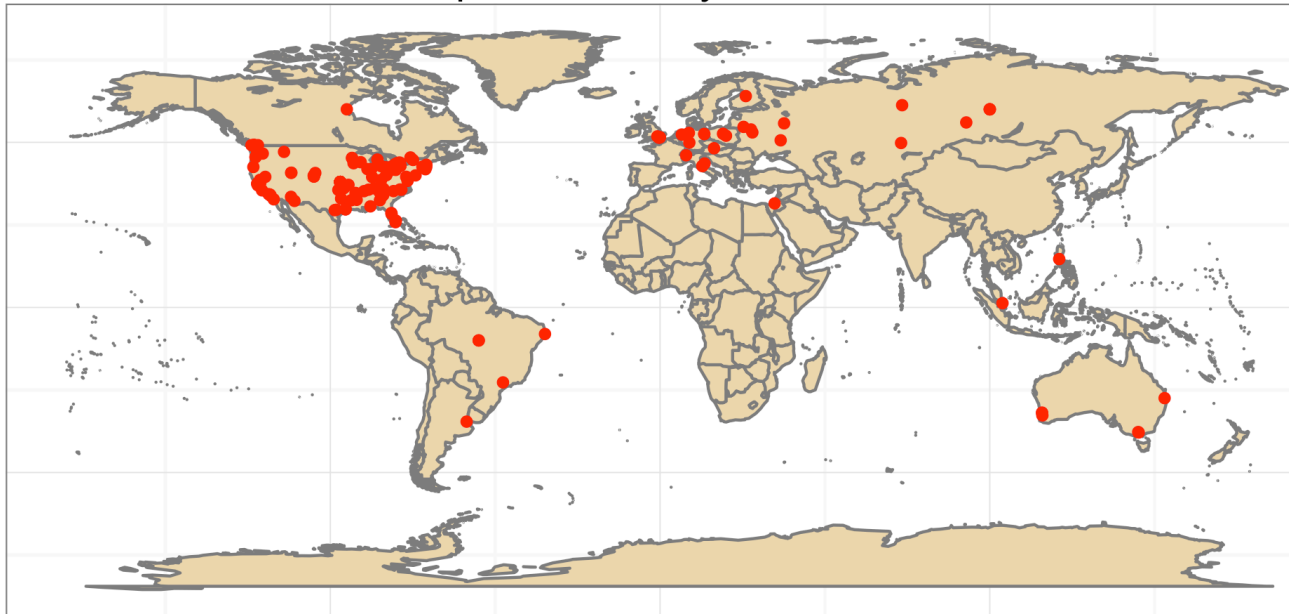
### **Who and where are Tulpamancers?**

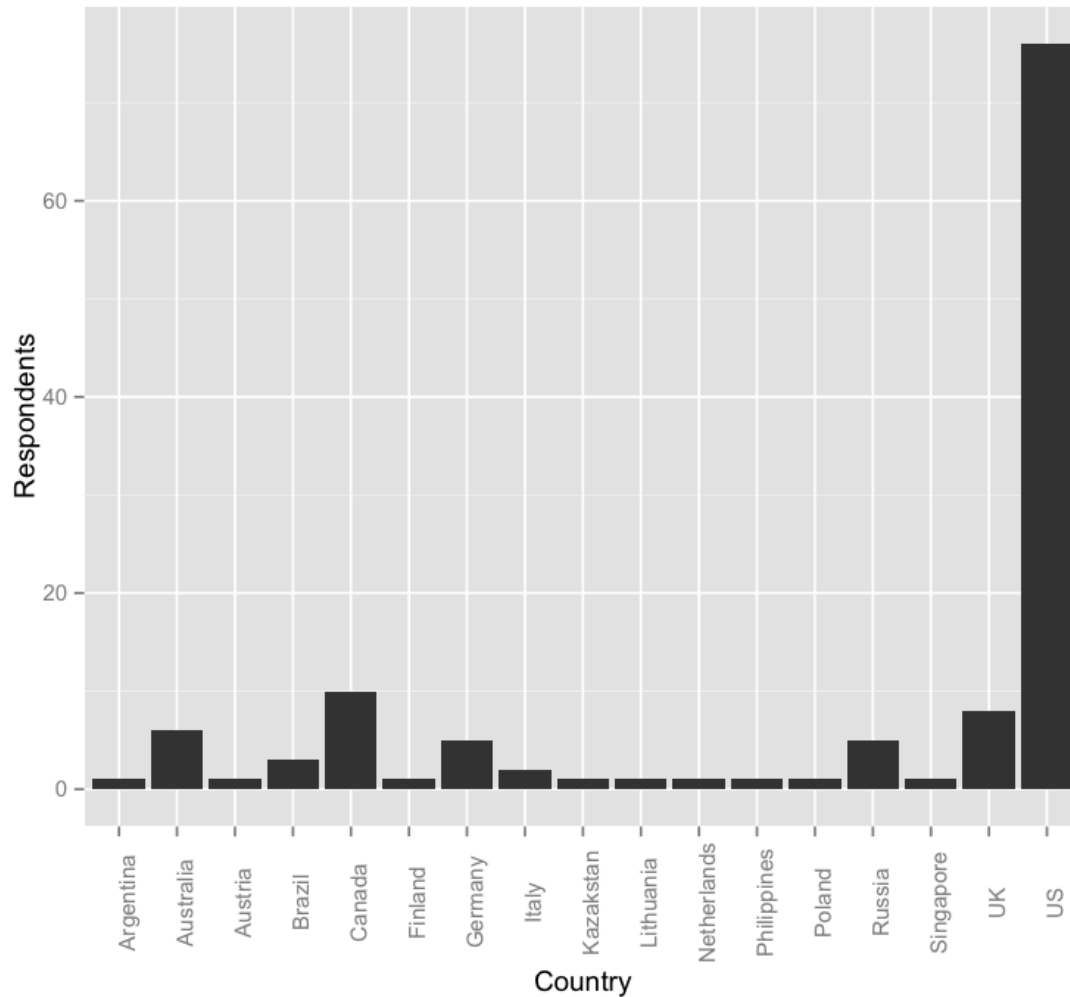
The age range of interviewed Tulpamancers was 14 to 34 years, with most falling in the 19 to 23 range. The male to female ratio is approximately 75/25 (male/female), though up to 10% identify as gender-fluid, and explore further ‘creative’ gender and ethnic variations through their humanoid Tulpas.

Tulpamancers are primarily white, middle to upper-middle class urban youth. Of 141 respondents, only 2 described themselves as “African American”, with two more reporting being “half black”. 4 respondents described themselves as Asian, 4 more as “half Asian”, and one a “one quarter Asian”. All others describe themselves as “white”, or by a variety of euro-American ethnic labels (Irish, German, Russian, etc.). One identified a “Siberian”. Most are undergraduate university students, but up to a third are fully employed. The IT field is the most commonly reported sector of employment.

The majority of Tulpamancers are located in urban areas in the US, Canada, the UK, Australia, Western Europe and Russia. The breakdown is as follows:

### Tulpamancers by Geolocation





### How do tulpamancers interact?

Most tulpamancers interact online and do not meet in person. Reddit is the most popular forum for discussion, guides, FAQs and debates, followed by tulpa.info, 4chan, IRC, and Tumblr.

The only known group of tulpamancers to meet in person are in Moscow and Omsk, where weekly gatherings are held with skype-conferencing capacities for other Russian-speaking tulpamancers located outside these locations. English and Russian seem to be the two dominant languages for the diffusion of Tulpa culture.

### **How many tulpamancers are there?**

The reddit forum has 6000+ members, but less than 200 active posters. The Russian social networking site Vkontakte also boasts 6000+ members, with a smaller ratio of active posters. Actual numbers are difficult to estimate. There may be tulpamancers who no longer use online platform, and many more who practice Tulpa-like phenomena without knowledge of, or allegiance to the community.

### **What gave rise to Tulpamancy?**

This is a complex question (see full paper for discussion). On the one hand, human consciousness is the dual product of biological and sociocultural evolution (Tomasello). Intentionality, perspective-taking, sentience, and selfhood, and indeed “Mind” itself are only possible through collective mediation and the sharing of symbols, ritual, and practice. As such, human minds, in ‘typical’ and ‘pathological’ functions, always tend toward intersubjectivity and connections with other people. This capacity may be reinforced and re-spurred in modern social contexts characterized by fragmentation and individualism, particularly in certain demographic niches where it is becoming more difficult to form meaningful social bonds.

The internet provides a useful matrix for the viral spread of neo-social activities like Tulpamancy. It is also the social medium of choice for lonelier, young, euroamerican upper middleclass individuals.

### **What are the psychological “profiles” and effects of Tulpamancy?**

The most common profile is one of a highly cerebral, imaginative, highly articulate upper-middle class, formally educated person with many consistently pursued interests, talents and hobbies, but limited channels of physical social interaction.

Average Tulpamancers (AvTm) are confident about their talents, but are quite modest and socially shy. They possess – or have cultivated – a high propensity for concentration, absorption, hypnotisability, and non-psychotic synaesthesia. Their limited social life and social anxieties, however, are *not* correlated with impaired levels of empathy and interest in other people. AvTm score average or above-average on empathy and Theory of Mind tests, indicating that their ability to relate to other humans is either optimal or enhanced.

The profile of tulpamancers is consistent with common traits found in the young, euroamerican upper middleclass demographic niche. *Loneliness* is overwhelmingly reported as a common factor for creating Tulpas, who are described as “most loyal” and “perfect” kinds of companions. Of 73 tulpamancers tested, the majority scored higher than average on the shyness scale, and lower than average on the sociability

scale for comparable population sets. Many respondents reported some degrees of social anxiety.

Their 'happiness' levels were assessed through a variety of qualitative interview tools, and correlated with the Positive and Negative Affect Schedule Scale, on which all scored very highly. This suggests that the experience of tulpamancy has an overwhelmingly beneficial impact on their general happiness.

Consistently high scores on the Tellegen Absorption Scale (to measure capacity for hypnotisability, synaesthesia and trance states) seem to reflect practice as much as proclivity. In other words, respondents reported improvements on their ability to concentrate, visualize, and experience sensory 'hallucinations' since taking up Tulpamancy.

Among the most interesting findings is the negative correlation between low sociability and high empathy. Further ethnographic findings from forum discussions and interview data also indicate a moderate-to-high prevalence of tulpamancers who identify with, or have been diagnosed with Asperger's syndrome. No significant findings of impairment were found for either of those two respondents who took the Theory of Mind test, suggesting a series of hypotheses: 1) an initial misdiagnosis for these respondents; 2) false-positive results from highly functional Aspergers' individuals accustomed to taking ToM tests and translating them to formal logic; 3) a flawed understanding (in mainstream neuroscience) of how so-called Autistic Spectrum Disorders affect intuitive psychology, or 3) the possibility that mindful tulpa-like practice may improve Theory of Mind and empathy.

While preliminary results strongly suggest that tulpamancy enhances hypnotisability and overall happiness state, more research is needed on the relationship with Theory of Mind, empathy and the possibility of intuitive [non-logical] improvement through practice.

### **What is the relationship between Tulpamancy and psychosis?**

None as far as we can tell. Psychosis is a medical label imposed on states of consciousness that are considered abnormal for primarily social reasons. The label is useful when 'patients' experience debilitating cognitive disorganization, negative relationships with their mental constructs, and high levels of social impairment. This is not the case with Tulpamancers, who report high levels of happiness, including significant improvement on self-reported "symptoms" (understood as whatever aspect of their life and personality they are unhappy about) such as anxiety, obsessive behaviour, phobias, loneliness, depression and self-harm. The example of non-psychotic, personally beneficial altered states of consciousness found in Tulpamancy may in fact carry fascinating implications for mental health research and practice. Transcultural studies have shown that many "schizophrenics" in non-western cultures experience much less fear, paranoia and violence than their euroamerican counterparts, suggesting that the debilitating paranoid delusions

associated with the disease may be a particular kind of western culture-bound syndrome. Further experimental work on encouraging patients to accept and work with their “voices” has also shown promising results. Tulpaforcing practice, as such, could be studied experimentally for potentially therapeutic ends.

### **Does Tulpamancy have negative effects?**

The only physical and psychological “symptoms” that may be increased by tulpaforcing are headaches and involuntary forms of cognition such as ear-worms (when a tune is “stuck in one’s head”). Some tulpamancers acknowledge risks of further social withdrawal as a consequence of having creating an optimal mental universe that cannot be matched in “real life”. Most actively discuss the need to temper mental and physical existence. The near-consensus on the taboo concerning sexual relations with Tulpas seems to be one such ‘measure’ to prevent excessive withdrawal.

Overall, however, preliminary evidence suggests that tulpamancy’s positive effects on confidence and self-esteem may improve practitioners’ social life.

### **How can I create a Tulpa?**

It is not the researchers’ place to make recommendations on practice. There are many FAQs, guides and forums on the internet dedicated to a broad variety of Tulpa experiences.