
The Effects Of Psychedelics On The Psyche

Psychedelics have a deep seated history in various indigenous groups across the world for the purposes of obtaining enlightenment and divination. As a result of the past ignorance and social stigmas surrounding mind altering substances our knowledge is still limited and the field of study is relatively untouched. Throughout the 1950's till the 1970's there were many barriers in place to examining the use of psychedelics in psychotherapy with regards to the legality of the substances and funding for research (as cited in Griffiths et al. 2016).

However, the use of these drugs has recently made a revival in modern clinical and recreational settings. Psychedelics have shown promise in a few key areas of research. Individuals suffering from life threatening illnesses can greatly benefit from psychedelic therapy as it has been shown to significantly reduce instances of depression, anxiety, and suicidality that are common amongst cancer patients (Griffiths et al. 2016). The powerful mystical experiences that one undergoes through the use of psilocybin have also proved to be strong catalysts for change in individuals who struggle with addiction. In a pilot study conducted by Albert Garcia-Romeu et al. psilocybin proved effective in aiding individuals who struggle with tobacco dependencies. While it has also been shown that psychedelics such as ibogaine have the potential to treat opioid dependence at the molecular level (Noller et al. 2016) perhaps meaning that the benefits of psychedelic therapy are not only psychological, but physiological as well.

Finally, this paper will examine the role of psychedelics in providing individual benefits through ego-dissolution and how it encourages us to be more introspective. It is widely accepted that the use of psychedelics can result in feelings of unity and compassion, while instilling a sense of awe for the external world (Griffiths et al. 2006). Because of the positive feelings associated with psychedelic use, they have powerful applications in therapy for individuals who are dealing with life threatening illnesses such as cancer. Understandably, the knowledge that life is limited can bear a great mental burden for some individuals and often times cancer patients experience higher levels of anxiety, depression, and suicidality (Griffiths et al. 2016).

These increased rates of anxiety, depression, and suicidality are also directly correlated with "decreased treatment adherence, prolonged hospitalization, and decreased quality of life" (as cited in Griffiths et al. 2016). Psilocybin was shown by Griffiths to have an invaluable role in the elimination of these negative feelings for individuals with life threatening cancers. Not only were the negative psychological symptoms in remission following prolonged psychedelic therapy, but the benefits were also shown to be sustained after a 6 month period (Griffiths et al. 2016). Following a 12 month period individuals who underwent LSD-assisted psychotherapy reported an overall decrease in anxiety and worry while also reporting an increase in "insightful, cathartic

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and interpersonal experiences” (Gasser et al. 2014). Overwhelmed by feelings of optimism and a flood of positive thoughts, individuals struggling with life threatening diseases which typically burden the psyche with negative feelings such as depression and anxiety are seeing promising results that are being sustained over a 6 to 12 month period from the use of LSD and Psilocybin in therapeutic settings. This potentially proves the validity of the role of psychedelics in psychotherapy as an effective alternative to traditional antidepressants without the same potential for abuse. The reason for this is that prior experience in the use of psychedelics has been shown to curb the risk of opioid dependence, while prior use of other substances has been linked to an increase in opioid dependence (Pisano 2017) meaning that although psychedelics are classified as a prohibited drug in Canada they do not exhibit the typical addictive properties one would assume. It is also important to note that traditionally the medication prescribed for many of the aforementioned illnesses are only effective when they are present in the body and they require continued use. This can be problematic because as previously discussed; it has been shown that treatment adherence in cancer patients declines as a result of the depression and anxiety, meaning that the efficacy of antidepressants would also decline with reduced consumption.

So far the promising role of entheogens in the reduction of psychological distress for individuals battling life threatening diseases has been examined, but these powerful psychoactive substances have also shown validity in reducing an individual dependence that occurs through prolonged use of alcohol, tobacco, and other various opioids. The widespread issue of addiction has massive socio-economic implications throughout the world and global healthcare systems are extremely burdened as a result of addiction and other treatment resistant disorders. Diminished psychosocial capabilities, the inability to maintain healthy relationships, loss of employment and ultimately mortality are a few of the socioeconomic complications that arise as a result of addiction (Noller et al. 2016).

The effects of addiction on the brain are well documented. Often times individuals who struggle with addiction are unable to manage cravings, temptation, and self-discipline. It is important to note that the lack of self-discipline and temptation experienced by addicts is not limited specifically to drug use. This potentially shows the effectiveness of psychedelics in treating not only opioid, alcohol, and tobacco addictions, but a wide array of non drug related addictions as well such as gambling addictions and video game addictions (as cited in Garcia-Romeu 2015). This demonstrates that a prohibited substance with no known major health effects and an immense amount of social stigma can successfully treat addiction as opposed to a legal pharmacological substances that present known health detriments for humans. Another substance that is being used to treat heroin and cocaine addiction is Ibogaine. Research shows that individuals who struggle with substance abuse have higher rates of depressive orders, yet when administered ibogaine they experience “rapid improvement in depressive mood” (Noller et al 2016).

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If ibogaine has the ability to improve the mood of individuals who struggle with substance abuse then it should also have the ability, alongside other psychedelics to improve the mood of all individuals who are experiencing depression. Perhaps there is a role for psychedelics in treating a wide array of mental disorders and not just for individuals in certain circumstances (addiction, life threatening illness). The foundation of the human consciousness is built upon the selfish structure of the ego. Dissolution of the ego attained through mystical experiences can offer unparalleled insights into the inner landscape of the mind. It is important to ground the reader in an understanding of how psilocybin and other psychedelics generally interact with the brain. Simply put, Psilocybin is an agonist which primarily operates by interacting with the 5-HT_{2A} Serotonin neurotransmitters (Hassler & Grimberg, 2003). Psilocybin may alter neurotransmission in an inhibitory or excitatory manner as shown by (Carhart-Harris et. al 2012).

While we would typically think that psychedelics increase neural activity in various brain areas due to the robust visuals and perception shifts they produce, Carhart-Harris discovered and measured an overall decrease in cerebral blood flow to the anterior and posterior cingulate cortex.

This means that extreme neurological exertion may not be the cause for the visual hallucinations one may experience while under the influence of psychedelics. With this in mind, it brings to question what the actual function of the mind is. Take for example a faucet, where you have the ability to consciously control the flow of water depending on how much you would like. In the same way, consciousness may act as a controlling mechanism for the flow insanity that is produced by our minds. This gives rise to the possibility that it was evolutionarily advantageous for our minds to implement a controlling mechanism to manage the stream of consciousness, but that our minds naturally allow for hallucinations, visual distortion, and wide range of other sensory shifts to occur. This raises the question that if our minds are controlled by consciousness, do the decisions made by ourselves truly reflect the desires we have, or are we simply subject to the primal animalistic desires displayed by the rest of the biological life on earth? It seems that humans display a balance of primal desire and rational thought. In certain instances such as pursuit of a sexual partner there are underlying driving factors that are biologically grounded such as reproduction; other factors are socially motivated such as financial stability, status, social pressure from peers. Freud's concept of the ego can be divided into three separate functions the "Id" which controls instinctive desires such as sexual pursuits, aggression, hunger; the "Ego" which acts as a measure for reality and is influenced by the external world, and finally the "Superego" which is essentially a moral compass developed through the input of society and our upbringing (Siegfried 2014). Dissolution of the Freudian defined "Ego" can result in a loss of a self-centered attitude in everyday decision making, which has obvious benefits for society on a larger scale.

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While psychedelics promote a sense of unity among nature and the world other substances such as cocaine have been shown to promote self-centeredness above selflessness (Nour 2015). This shows the powerful potential of psychedelic use to positively influence personality traits. As discussed, the mystical experiences one encounters while under the influence of entheogens have the potential to calibrate our moral compass (Superego) pointing to the possibility of the regenerative effects of psychedelics on a traumatic childhood. If an individual was not correctly socialized from a young age, or their parents failed at instilling strong moral values in them there may be a possibility that psychedelic therapy can reverse these negative character traits through the profound mystical experiences. Nour's research involved surveying participants to understand their emotional perspective more clearly after ingestion of ego dissolving drugs. Participants scored extremely high on statements of selflessness, "I experienced a decrease in my sense of self-importance" "I felt far less concerned about my own issues and concerns" and "I felt a sense of unity with others" were common recurring themes which again point to the validity of psychedelics as catalysts for positive emotional and psychological change with a unique ability to not only produce a sense of euphoria among users, but a sense of unity.

Conclusion

In conclusion, psychedelics offer a truly unparalleled experience by altering everyday waking states of consciousness, perhaps unlocking the potentiality of our minds. The socioeconomic burden of common mental illnesses that challenge society today such as depression, suicide and drug addiction have all been shown to be effectively reduced through the use of psychedelics in therapy. Stepping into the future, the role of psychedelics in enhancing human behavior will only continue to grow and their use in clinical settings has the potential to aid vast amounts of individuals in maintaining psychological equilibrium. Psychedelics are an important rite of passage for the human race in gaining a deeper understanding of the self and their benefits for the field of psychology are profound.

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