

The New Psychedelic Culture: LSD, Ecstasy, "Rave" Parties and The Grateful Dead

Some accounts suggest that drug use facilitates entry to an otherwise unavailable spiritual world.

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Psychedelics have been used since ancient times in diverse cultures as an integral part of religious or recreational ceremony and ritual. The relationship of LSD and other psychedelics to Western culture dates from the development of the drug in 1938 by the chemist Albert Hoffman.¹ LSD and naturally occurring psychedelics such as mescaline and psilocybin have been associated in modern times with a society that rejected conventional values and sought transcendent meaning and spirituality in the use of drugs and the association with other users. During the 1960s the psychedelics were most often used by individuals or small groups on an intermittent basis to "celebrate" an event or to participate in a quest for spiritual or cultural values.

Current use varies from the rare, perhaps once yearly episode to enhance a party, concert, or holiday to frequent use by people who may use the drug to seek solace in an altered state that is free of the pressures of consensual reality such as school or social obligations. LSD has been used compulsively by some young people as self-medication of psychopathology such as unwanted thoughts and feelings. For clinicians to best treat patients using hallucinogens, a basic understanding of the patterns of use and settings where the drugs are used is essential.

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RELATIONSHIP OF PSYCHOPATHOLOGY TO PATTERNS OF USE

Hallucinogens and psychedelics are terms used to describe both the naturally occurring and synthetic compounds primarily derived from indoles and substituted phenethylamines that induce changes in thought or perception. The most frequently used naturally occurring substances in this class include mescaline from the peyote plant, psilocybin from "magic mushrooms," and ayuahauscu (yagé), a root indigenous to South America. The synthetic drugs most frequently used are MDMA ("Ecstasy"), PCP (phencyclidine), and ketamine. Hundreds of analogs of these compounds are known to exist. Some of these obscure compounds have been termed "designer drugs."²

Perceptual distortions induced by hallucinogen use are remarkably variable and dependent on the influence of set and setting. Time has been described as "standing still" by people who spend long periods contemplating perceptual, visual, or auditory stimuli. Users often describe effects reminiscent of derealization and depersonalization; a sense of enlightenment is common such as a vision of "clear light" at peak moments.

MDMA (3,4-methylenedioxymethamphetamine) or "Ecstasy" that is currently in vogue is a synthetic substituted phenethylamine, similar to mescaline, DOM, and MDA. MDMA is a short-acting drug that produces fewer perceptual phenomena and thought disturbances, and less emotional lability and feeling of depersonalization. Users of MDMA generally do not experience significant visual illusions or the experience of profound cessation of the temporal flow.

Patented by Merck in 1914, MDMA has been widely studied. Ecstasy has been described as an "empathogen" because its most profound effect appears to be the experience of intense emotions and the perception that the

user is able to experience the emotions of others. Other observations reinforce this description; David Nichols proposed creation of a new chemical class termed "enactogens," from the Greek meaning "touch within."³ Many also believe MDMA to be a potent aphrodisiac.⁴

PSYCHEDELIC USE AS AN INTEGRAL PART OF GROUP CULTURE

Ecstasy Use and the Rave Phenomena

The use of hallucinogens by indigenous peoples of the Americas is well documented from the arrival of the first European explorers in the late 15th century. Group use in preparation for battle, celebration of particular events, ritual, and healing is typical among many of these tribes. Observers have noted longstanding, culturally integrated use of hallucinogenic plants that is often aimed at the creation of a shared consciousness among participating tribe members. Some accounts suggest that the drug use facilitated entry to an otherwise unavailable spiritual world.⁵ Psychedelics in our current culture can be similarly considered.

The "rave" phenomenon has been a major element in the resurgence of psychedelic drug use in Western society. Originating in Europe in the 1980s, raves are parties open to a select public for a fee in a unique location chosen for the night of the event. Major attractions of the rave scene include the unpredictable location and the integral role psychedelic drugs play in the event. Entrepreneurial sponsors, such as club owners, managers, or businessmen within the local entertainment industry rent inexpensive buildings for the event and then spread publicity to attract their audience.

The derivation of the term *rave* might have to do with the loosening of inhibitions and sense of abandon that participants seek incident to the combination of drugs and milieu. The locations play a role in this feeling as they are often warehouses, basements, broken-down condominiums, unused tenements, schools in disrepair, or any other spot that might be conducive to the ephemeral sensibility raves represent.

Participants both bring and buy drugs while listening and dancing to "technomusic" played by disc jockeys. Technomusic dominates the rave culture. The music is marked by a dense, cold beat that enhances the sense of distance and anonymity. Participants attempt to "lose themselves" in the combined effects of drugs and the energetic, rhythmic dancing.

An entry fee is charged at rave parties, ranging from \$7 to \$20 per person. Because raves are chiefly attended by young people including minors, nonalcoholic beverages are provided, often at inflated prices. The subtext of these gatherings attended by hundreds to thousands of participants involves the surreptitious drug use of the party-goers. Dealers who have drugs for sale often wear characteristic backpacks. Available drugs include LSD, MDMA,

and other less potent hallucinogens. Alcohol, marijuana, and cocaine are often less available.

Participants describe the rave experience as having anticipatory, beginning, middle, and end phases. A person may buy several "hits of acid" and ingest these early on at the party, they may "come on to" the hallucinogenic effects within the first hour, dance furiously for several hours as the drug peaks in two to four hours, "come down" and lay exhausted as the drug effects wane in eight to ten hours.

Handouts describe the dangers of intensive drug use in these settings and are often distributed at raves by the sponsors. Experience has shown that adverse drug effects may occur in an overheated space where people are dancing vigorously for many hours. The handouts contain specific information regarding the need to drink fluids, take breaks, and leave the scene if paranoia, agitation, or other difficult-to-control symptoms occur.

It might be conjectured that in the modern era, given the very real dangers of intimate sexual contact, raves have developed as a situation where young people can experience intense excitement, a sense of belonging to a group, and escaping from their everyday concerns. It is as if the goal is to depersonalize, to lose oneself in the drug, the group, and the music.

The Grateful Dead and Their Following

Grateful Dead concerts represent another assembly where psychedelic drugs are taken by large numbers of people in a ritualistic fashion. Since they began playing in the late 1960s in San Francisco, the ethos of this musical group has been intimately connected to the use of psychedelic drugs, particularly LSD. The continuing popularity of this rock group nearly 30 years after they began playing might be attributed in part to the persistent attraction of psychedelic drugs and group interaction.

Whereas, in their earlier history, the band may have explicitly condoned and even encouraged the use of psychedelics at concerts, their stance is now neutral and even avuncular to their young audience. Nevertheless, the audience has developed a complex and ritualistic system of beliefs and practices that are inspired by the concerts and by their perceptions of the meaning of the group and its music.

The Grateful Dead is perhaps the most active and popular touring group in the country. Several hundred to thousands of young people follow the group around from venue to venue "doing tour." They are a ragtag group wearing brightly colored tie-dyed clothes, beads, flowing pants, skirts, and scarves. They travel in cars, trucks, campers, and by hitchhiking. Some generate revenue by selling T-shirts, pictures, tapes, and other memorabilia in parking lots before concerts. Often drugs such as LSD, MDMA, PCP, and ketamine are sold or bartered between people on tour and other members of

the audience. Psychedelic drugs, particularly LSD, are taken in bewildering combinations by these "Dead Heads."

The Grateful Dead play a tightly organized concert that begins on time, always consists of a mixture of familiar songs, and always ends on time. There is a palpable sense of certainty about many elements in the concert, particularly its length and structure. It might be conjectured that the stability of the concert, the stylized dancing, the familiar camp followers provide a sense of solace, continuity, community, and stability in an unsympathetic world that is perceived as without rules, harsh, and out of control. A language and ethos have developed in association with these ritual events that is surprisingly gentle and supportive to both the uninitiated and the devotees.

According to the celebrants in this ritual, LSD and other psychedelics facilitate the experience of the music and its meaning. Their altered state allows "Dead Heads" to approach a world view and a spirituality that values beauty, generosity, and love—attributes that seem to be less highly valued in society at large. Many describe experiences of depersonalization, derealization, and synesthesia, which seem to heighten their perceptions and emotions during the concert. Interestingly, there appear to be relatively few "bad trips" or acute adverse psychologic reactions in the group. This probably relates in part to what Norman Zinberg has called the influence of set and setting on drug use and behavior.⁶

Young people know exactly what to expect at a Grateful Dead concert and feel quite secure. At the same time, many of these people have dropped out of school, are not negotiating the requisite rites of passage, and may spend several years as part of the extended Dead family. In some, the drug use and rituals may be perceived as evidence of widespread psychopathology and chemical dependency. Some of these people would benefit from psychiatric care and support to help them decrease the influence of drugs and their bizarre devotion to the life of The Grateful Dead community, and to return to the lives and responsibilities they have left.

Support groups such as Alcoholics Anonymous are also available at the concerts for those people who are rejecting drugs. The Grateful Dead themselves seem to have become increasingly aware of the abnormal dependency and dangerous drug use of some of the followers and have begun to downplay the drug use and ritualistic elements so prevalent in their followers.

Other musical groups also have their followings, but in no case have the rituals and the ritualized drug use become so consistent or so integral a part of the experience. The music, the scene, the dress, and the orderliness affected by the "communicants" might be seen as similar to that in well-organized religious groups. Perhaps these people are seeking initiatory rites, rites of

passage, and structure that seem not to be available in more conventional churches and religious movements.

No systematic studies have been done in this group, though clinical and anecdotal experience suggests that there is extensive psychopathology in many of the communicants. Psychopathology and financial considerations, among other factors, are probably responsible for the significant change in the ranks of the "Dead Heads." Most do eventually leave the tour and attempt to find a place back in school, at home, or in some stable living situation.

There is clearly some tragedy here in that many of these people have been out of mainstream culture for so long that they are unable to take advantage of their skills and sensibilities outside the Dead milieu. Unlike people who have left dedicated religious movements ("cults") such as the followers of Reverend Moon or Scientologists and see themselves as deprogrammed from a repressive society, "Dead Heads" who have returned to school or home often think nostalgically of the tour with its "highs" and sense of community that are not easily duplicated in their everyday lives. Many continue to attend Grateful Dead concerts on occasion.

CONCLUSION

A resurgence of psychedelic drug use is occurring as groups of young people discover the effects of altered associations, perceptual distortion, and heightened emotional states caused by LSD, MDMA, and other hallucinogens. These drugs are widely available, inexpensive, and socially reinforced by various societies of adolescents and young adults. Both the rave phenomenon and the "Dead Heads" represent organized and predictable assemblies where a growing movement of young participants engage in psychedelic drug use. Development of rewarding alternatives, including a sense of belonging in "straight" society, is a critical aspect in treating young people involved in these drug-dominated cultures.

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