

experiences with **ecstasy** — in search of ecstatic experience

my RESEARCH STARTED OUT with the question of how the drug MDMA (Ecstasy) could become so popular in two so very different social worlds: the psychotherapy/New Age scene and the Techno/Rave scene. I wondered why some people would be using the same drug for insight-oriented psychotherapy that others were using to dance and party all night. To answer this question, I

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Katrin Krollpfeiffer, Dipl. Psych.

talked to Ecstasy users that roughly belong to these two categories - New Age/ psychotherapy and Techno/Rave (insight-oriented or party-oriented). I am aware of the problems that arise with categorizing human experience in such ways, and certainly the borders between these categories are not strictly defined. Nevertheless, I believe that it makes sense to differentiate between different scenes or social worlds, since the inhabitants of each world create very different and specific settings for their drug experiences that strongly influence the "trip" itself.

Cultural contexts

First, there is the traditional psychotherapeutic use of MDMA, as we know it from Switzerland and the United States. Second, we find Ecstasy use in the so-called "New Age" scene, which is a little more difficult to define. To me, the main difference between these two scenes is that in a traditional psychotherapeutic setting (psycholytic or psychedelic therapy), the drug is taken under the supervision of an experienced psychotherapist who guides the person through the experience. New Age users, on the other hand, do not necessarily rely on a guide for their MDMA experiences, although some prefer a ritualistic setting with a shamanic type of guide. Generally, New Age users are more into the "free-lance" drug experience on their own or with their friends and partners. Aside from this difference, the motives for using Ecstasy appear to be very similar in these two scenes: insight,

self-exploration and expansion of consciousness. Then there is the third big scene for Ecstasy use that I describe in my thesis: the Rave/Techno scene. At Rave parties, Ecstasy is primarily used as a dance drug, to intensify the party experience and especially enhance the ability to "become one with the music," music being the central element of a Rave. Self-exploration or a close look at one's personal problems, as known in psychotherapy, are not particularly important for Ravers when they use Ecstasy — they just want to have fun. Sometimes, though, there appears to be a spiritual dimension to this way of having fun.

Theoretical background

The concept of set and setting as the forming factors of a drug experience was one of my main frames of reference. Also, I was very much inspired by the research of Jerome E. Beck et al. (1989) who published a sociological study about American Ecstasy users in different scenes. Another influential concept in my research was that of drug-related rituals, a concept used by researchers like Norman E. Zinberg (1984), a psychiatrist, or Marlene Dobkin de Rios (1976, 1977), an anthropologist. They assume that in every culture, the use of drugs is combined with specific rituals through which a certain degree of control over the drug experience is achieved. Researchers like Zinberg and Dobkin de Rios believe that these kind of rituals also exist within the drug subcultures of our Western industrialized societies, thus controlling the use of "street drugs" like LSD or marijuana from the inside, as opposed to outside government control.

Research methods

I decided to use a qualitative rather than a quantitative approach because I found it more appropriate for investigating the kind of questions that I had. My aim was to understand the subjective meaning that people belonging to a certain scene ascribe to their Ecstasy use and to the drug experience itself.

I decided to conduct open-ended, qualitative interviews. The humanistic psychologist Inghard Langer (1985) professor at the University of Hamburg, has developed a research method he

calls "personal discourse as a form of psychological research." It has a lot in common with certain forms of qualitative interviews, but the humanistic attitude of the researcher is an essential component. The "personal discourse" can be narrative or focused on a specific theme. This was the main method I used in my research. I developed an interview guideline, a checklist of questions that I wanted to address during the conversation, but I found that most of the questions were addressed by my interview partners without me having to even ask them. Also, in the course of the interviews, a lot of issues surfaced that I couldn't have asked about because I wasn't aware of them before my interview partners brought them up. I was learning new things with every interview, things that would have gotten lost had I worked with preconceived questionnaires.

The length of the interviews varied between one and three hours. I talked to four men and four women, age 26-38. Such a small sample makes it impossible to claim statistically valid representativeness or generalization. Rather, these eight interviews are examples for possible ways of using and experiencing Ecstasy, and therefore can claim a kind of "social representativeness," showing an existing option within its social and cultural context.

Half of the sample group were "insight-oriented" (psychotherapy/New Age scene), the other half more "party-oriented" (Techno/Rave scene) with the exception of one woman who had experiences in both scenes. Two people took part in illegal but therapeutically supervised "Ecstasy workshops." The others were "freelancers" who made their experiences unsupervised in their circle of friends or with their partner. Four are University students, the others have full-time jobs. It is apparent that my interview partners do not represent a broad range of ages — especially when you look at the rising number of very young Ecstasy users in the rapidly growing Techno/Rave scene. Nowadays, there are 13 year old kids experimenting with Ecstasy (or what is being sold to them as Ecstasy on the black market). I would have liked to include this age group in my research, if I had had the chance to investigate a bigger sample. I believe that age, education and life experience are important factors when looking at drug use, which is probably one of the reasons why the majority of my interview partners displayed a rather mature attitude towards their Ecstasy use and were able to relate to their experiences in a rather sophisticated way.

Findings

How do the experiences of Ecstasy users belonging to the Rave/Techno scene differ from the experiences of more insight-oriented users? It seems that even though most of my interview partners have tried Ecstasy in different settings (i.e. with a partner, in small groups of friends or in a ritualistic group setting), the intention for using it appears to be stable for each person (with one exception). Thus, the Ravers could not picture taking Ecstasy at home for a quiet "journey inside," and the New Agers could not picture taking it and going out to a dance party or disco. Only one woman describes a significant shift in her "social worlds" of Ecstasy use: she started out in a quiet, insight-oriented setting, and years later was exposed to the Rave scene, which is now the sole setting for her Ecstasy experiences.

How my interview partners typically experience the effects of Ecstasy appears to be closely related to their expectations, attitudes and the social context in which their Ecstasy use occurs. Whereas the Ravers emphasize the sensual qualities of the experience, the intensified ability to enjoy music and movement, and trance-like feelings of bliss, the New Agers value psychological effects like increased self-acceptance and self-awareness, a general feeling of empathy and love, also referred to as an "opening of the heart," easy communication or the ability to deal with one's own problems in a more constructive way. Some of these effects are also mentioned by the Ravers, but they do not seem to be the focus of their experiences. Interestingly enough, what is considered an unpleasant side-effect by some users can be valued as desirable by others: for example, Ravers often like the "speed component" of Ecstasy because it provides them with additional energy to dance and stay awake all night. New Agers, on the other hand, tend to look at this phenomenon as an annoying side-effect that can be overcome in different ways.

While analyzing the data gathered from the interviews, I developed four categories to describe the subjective meaning that my interview partners attributed to their Ecstasy experiences. These categories were partly inspired by the work of Andrea Blaetter (1989), an anthropologist from Hamburg, who has proposed seven general functions of drug use that can be found in every culture. The four categories I developed could be considered different aspects of the Ecstasy experience which appear in the stories of my interview partners. Each person emphasizes a certain aspect more than others. They describe

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the Ecstasy experience under the following aspects: 1) the aspect of insight/expansion of consciousness, 2) the aspect of hedonism/pleasure, 3) the aspect of addiction/compensation and 4) the aspect of peak experience/"frontier experience."

"Frontier experience" is a translation of the German expression "Grenzerfahrung" which goes back to the existentialist philosopher Karl Jaspers. I prefer this term over the term "peak experience" inasmuch as it describes an extreme experience, along the frontiers of consciousness, that can be both blissful and ecstatic but also frightening and dangerous. "Peak experience," as used by the humanistic psychologist Abraham Maslow, usually refers to an absolutely positive experience and has no negative connotations.

In my opinion, this aspect of the Ecstasy experience illustrates the desire for extreme experiences, a longing for experiences outside of the realm of ordinary life. This longing seems to be one of the underlying reasons for Ecstasy use (or drug use in general, for that matter). I call it the desire for ecstatic experience. This does not mean that taking Ecstasy automatically generates an ecstatic experience. Nevertheless, I believe that most Ecstasy trips contain at least some elements of it.

Rave parties are an example of how people in our culture try to ritualize ecstatic experience, although I readily admit the problems that come with the whole Rave phenomenon and the use of drugs like Ecstasy in this scene. To integrate an ecstatic experience in your life takes a conscious effort, otherwise it is going to be without lasting effects at best. At worst, it supports addictive behavior, because a person's everyday life might appear grey and unattractive in comparison to such an extraordinary experience. One of my interview partners describes his feelings after his first Ecstasy trip as follows:

"Oh, how sad is this world, and how grey, and how pale... we had no idea how to make sense of all of this (the Ecstasy experience)... it didn't compare to anything we ever experienced..."

Considering this, it is understandable that in some cases the desire for ecstatic experience turns into addiction. An article in a German newspaper summarizes the Rave culture with great poignancy as "a cult of ecstatic celebration that tries to force the extraordinary to become permanent — the party with no beginning and no end..." (Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung, 7-7-1994).

Summary of conclusions

My research findings verify in an exemplary (not a statistical) fashion the importance of set and setting as (aside from the drug itself) determining factors for a drug experience. The importance of the social/cultural context is verified as well. I differentiate roughly between more insight-oriented and more hedonistically-oriented types of Ecstasy use. These types are not mutually exclusive: sometimes, insight can be fun. All of my interview partners view their Ecstasy experiences under at least two of the four aspects I described in this article (the aspect of insight, the aspect of hedonism, the aspect of addiction, the aspect of peak experience). Some forms of Ecstasy use described by my interview partners appear to be attempts of ritualization (Zinberg 1984 and Dobkin de Rios 1976, 1977) — for example, the use in psychotherapy, shamanic "New Age" rituals, and, to a degree, at Rave parties. Not all of my interview partners succeed in gaining control over their drug experiences and their patterns of use through these rituals. I propose that assisting MDMA users in creating constructive, regulative rituals for their experiences would be more helpful than a restrictive drug policy geared towards criminalization of users and the overall goal of complete abstinence. A restrictive drug policy, like the one we currently have, only feeds into the black market and therefore promotes the uncontrolled distribution of potentially harmful substances that are produced without quality control and are consumed by people who have little guidelines for safe and constructive use. There are some steps in the right direction: in the Netherlands, they allow mobile testing labs at Rave parties where people can check their pills for contents. In Northern Germany, there are safer use guidelines available for Ecstasy consumers at some local drug counseling centers and at Rave parties. I propose that, aside from other reasons that my interview partners give for their Ecstasy use and that I regard as valid, an important reason for using drugs like Ecstasy is the underlying desire (or longing) for ecstatic experience that is partly fulfilled by the ecstatic moments of an Ecstasy experience. I propose that this desire is deeply rooted in the human psyche. This is illustrated by the various methods developed by cultures of all times and places to achieve such states of consciousness. I propose that addictive behavior is in part related to the lack of methods and models for ecstatic experience in our society, including the lack of models and rituals for constructive, ecstatic drug use. I

propose that the more fulfillment people find in their "normal" life, the easier it will be for them to incorporate the use of a drug like MDMA in their life without developing an addiction. Beware: frontier experiences of any kind always imply a certain risk. Crossing the frontier can be dangerous. But in a truly free society, people should have the freedom to take risks, too. Or, as one of my interview partners puts it: "Life isn't all safe — with or without drugs."

More research needed

A main goal of my thesis was to encourage more research like this: qualitative drug research that explores what the users themselves have to say. If we as scientists are not willing to listen to the experiences, thoughts, feelings, hopes and fears of the people who use drugs, even if we don't appreciate the way they use them, we disregard reality. Clinical and pharmacological drug research is very important. But so are ethnographical research, sociological research, psychological research, qualitative field research, "personal discourse" with the people who for whatever reasons have decided that drugs should be a part of their lives. Only with such dialogue can living social science exist. We have to leave our ivory tower and get out on the street. There is a lot we can learn from the "drug experts of everyday life." And if we are willing to learn from them, they might be willing to learn from us, too — from the "drug experts of the science labs." They might be willing to learn from us if they feel that we take them seriously and listen, instead of constantly reprimanding them. They might be interested in learning self control if we stop attempting to control them. Only if this dialogue, this exchange of ideas and experiences grows and flourishes, do we have the chance to facilitate more constructive, less damaging use of drugs like MDMA — and maybe even come a little further in our search for ecstatic experience.

Future Research plans

Since I just moved from Germany to California, I am very interested in working on a comparative study of the development of Ecstasy use in the United States and in Germany. Ecstasy use is booming throughout Europe now, because of the widespread Rave scene. Researchers in Germany are just beginning to investigate this subject — in fact, my own study was the first of its kind in my country. Currently, the German Council on Addiction, located in Hamburg, is conducting a nationwide survey on Ecstasy users. Contact persons are Dr. Udo Fluesmeier, Gerd Rakete and Dr. Manfred Rabes in Hamburg. I met with these researchers during my recent visit to

Germany and they expressed interest in a comparative study between Germany and the U.S. — similar to a European study that is under way now, comparing Ecstasy use in Germany, England and the Netherlands. The European study focuses on investigating and comparing the effects of various "safer use" campaigns specifically designed for Ravers. This could be interesting for the United States, too, where the "just say no" paradigm still seems to be the prevalent approach in drug education — with questionable efficacy. For Germans, on the other hand, it would be helpful to learn more about the way Ecstasy use in the U.S. has developed over the last two decades, since the drug has been available and known in the U.S. for much longer than in Germany. Thanks to the "Exploring Ecstasy" study by Beck et al. we already have a broad range of information about the development of American Ecstasy use through the 1980's. It would be great for future research to pick up where this study had to end and especially investigate Ecstasy use in the US Rave scene. There are a lot of interesting and important questions to ask. International exchange of experience and ideas is particularly valuable here. I would be more than happy to contribute to this exchange. •

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The author would like to exchange ideas and opinions with readers: Katrin Krollpfeiffer, Dipl. Psych.
P.O. Box 1117, Kenwood, CA 95452 USA
Phone: 707 833 6428 Fax: 707 577 8656

A main goal of my thesis

was to encourage

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