



SACRED WORK IN A SECULAR WORLD:
GUIDED, STRUCTURED, GROUP USE
OF ENTHEOGENIC SUBSTANCES

Roger Marsden

I AM DOING AN INQUIRY into the structured, guided use of psychedelic or entheogenic psychoactive substances in contemporary Western culture. This topic, while relatively new and controversial in modern Western post-industrial society, is understood quite differently in non-Western, pre-industrial societies. As Schultes and Hofmann state in the preface of *Plants of the Gods*, "Plants that alter the normal functions of the mind and body have always been considered by peoples in non-industrial societies as sacred, and the hallucinogens have been 'plants of the gods' par excellence."

The usefulness of entheogenic substances for personal exploration and development is well documented in the anthropological and psychological literature up to the late 1960s. The importance of this research follows from three points:

1. The positive indicators from the history of entheogenic research;
2. The development of new forms of structured group entheogenic work;
3. The lack of research focusing on the contemporary entheogenic experience.

Background

WHEN ONE EXAMINES the literature on psychedelic work of the past 30 years we could easily argue some of the conclusions, but there is suggestive evidence that these substances might be useful in psychotherapy, and more generally, as a tool for personal exploration, development and/or healing. It is difficult to deny that there is something worthy of further examination. Reports of therapeutic efficacy published by researchers embracing the psycholytic and psychedelic paradigms indicate that a broad range of disorders may be amenable to treatment with LSD. Over and over again both research and anecdotal reports indicate a tool that may have wide applicability and effectiveness. Much of the literature is based on clinical impressions rather than well controlled and followed-up studies. This fact prompts many scien-

tists to reject the findings without understanding the factors that make controlled studies with LSD impractical and possibly unethical.

A new synthesis

My interest in this psychospiritual technology is an outgrowth of two broad observations: 1) the abundance of promising research from the 1960s; 2) more recent developments into the use of these substances in the 1980s and 1990s. A new synthesis is emerging that incorporates experiences from the 60s, shamanic traditions, transpersonal psychology, and finally, the general ethos of the 90s. These are unique phenomena with far-reaching implications that have barely been examined; primarily documented in popular specialty magazines such as *High Times*, *Shaman's Drum*, *The Resonance Project* and *Psychedelic Illuminations*. Furthermore,

regardless of how we interpret it, the fact is that many people are currently using these substances with psychospiritual exploration and development as their purpose.

This research topic reflects 15 years of focus. I chose it because it interests me deeply and because I feel that if not for the social and political filters through which this subject is perceived it would, no doubt, be an invaluable tool for individual and collective transformation.

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REGARDLESS of one's individual assumption of the value of psychedelic work, it is happening in a variety of contexts across the planet. This alone demands scholarly attention. But because of its controversial nature, there is very little in the literature, subsequent to the 1970s, that documents or explores this important work. It should be noted that although there is a surprising wealth of literature from the 1960s and 1970s, the way entheogens are being used in the 1990s represents, like most things, an evolution from that time. These changes are represented in important writings of a theoretical, philosophical, even political nature, but there is very little that expounds upon the practical dimensions of psychospiritual development with entheogens. Even within the time of my own research I have made an adjustment based on cultural shifts. In recent years ayahuasca—an entheogen used primarily in Brazil—has begun to have a significant influence in the United States. Consequently my last (of three) group of interviews is focused on the use of ayahuasca in a guided, structured group setting.

One model of guided work with entheogens

The Secret Chief represents an important aspect of what I am interested in exploring. It delves into the experience of one guide's model of entheogenic guided, structured psychospiritual work. Reading *The Secret Chief* we begin to appreciate that references to "psychedelic work" reflect a wider spectrum than what Stan Grof presented in *LSD Psychotherapy*. This observation is made with the utmost of respect for Dr. Grof and the fact that his work with its detailed descriptions was virtually the only well-known western reference point for psychedelic therapy for the past 30 years.

As for the wide range of research that did occur, there are generally no comprehensive qualitative descriptions of the experience of guides and subjects from preparation to integration with follow-up. Secondly, as a reflection of the medical model orientation most subjects are brought to the experience via some "pathology." As in *The Secret Chief* most of the entheogenic work currently happening is in non-hospital/research settings with subjects/clients who seek guidance for a wide array of life's challenges, similar to the issues that bring people to seek a traditional psychotherapy experience. This is a focus on "growth" rather than the medical model, or focus on pathology.

This is not to imply that one scenario is more interesting or important than the other, only that the situation is different and both should be given the attention they deserve. Many of the individuals seeking psychedelic therapy or group experiences are not necessarily facing an extreme situation calling for an openness to an "extreme" response as with cancer patients or the acutely addicted. This reflects a trend in the culture toward the kind of experience that guided, structured entheogenic use provides. What I want to detail is what that experience is, what brings people to it, and how it seems to move people in a way that is as effective if not more effective for some people than other modes of psychological and/or spiritual facilitation.

Research Methodology

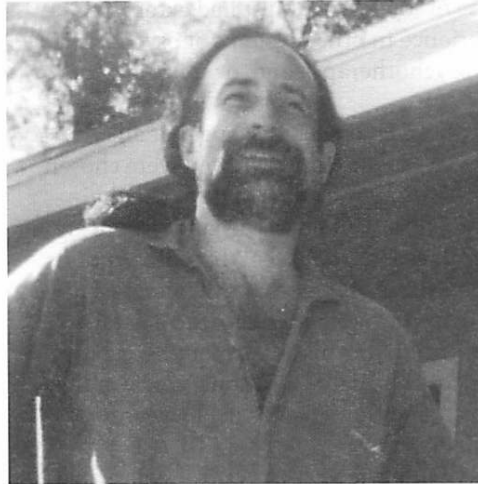
I am using a qualitative multiple case study method, built primarily around semi-structured interviews with both participants and guides in three groups using entheogenic substances in a guided, structured manner. The study is primarily descriptive. It is particularly important to give attention to ethical issues pertaining to design such as confidentiality. The history of sociology and psychology clearly shows the importance of examining behaviors at the outer edges of society. Because this work is unsanctioned the only way to ethically have access to its exploration is by carefully maintaining confidentiality. Consequently, I have avoided maintaining identifying information for all respondents. I followed an interview guide to make sure I eventually covered the desired points. Those points included: preparation, setting,

philosophical orientation of the guide, what brought the clients to this work, format of the actual entheogenic session, relationship of client and guide, relationship of client to other clients (in their own unique ways each group evolved a sense of community), transpersonal and spiritual experiences, role of “ego-death,” training of the guide, individuation from the guide, substance abuse history, etc.

Cause and effect?

Although I will not necessarily be establishing causal relationships, to offer an in-depth description of this population would provide useful information, opening up questions for follow-up research. It is impractical to look for causal relationships, as in the “effects” of psychedelic experiences. One reason is that there are so many extrapharmacological factors that contribute to the psychedelic experience and its consequences. Secondly, the effects are inherently too broad to control or anticipate; “psychoactive substances do not work as simple pharmacological agents, but instead mediate psychological experience which in turn result in psychological changes” (Lukoff et al., 1990). These psychological experiences are frequently manifestations of what was previously in the unconscious. In fact, we might say that psychedelics are ingested for just that reason—to make conscious that which was unconscious. There is a much broader intention than symptom alleviation, which would be more amenable to experimental design (i.e., is the symptom alleviated or not?).

To a certain degree, resolving cause and effect questions is either premature or even a distraction from other important questions. For example, when we talk to people who are actively involved in psychedelic work I expect to find a population that is quite diverse, but shares certain characteristics, such as a common interest, concern and sensitivity toward issues of ecology. Did the psychedelic work cultivate this orientation or does it reflect a characteristic of people drawn to this work? I do not expect to resolve questions like that in this research, but if I can confirm that there is indeed this focus on ecological values, that in itself is significant and can be a basis for future research that asks cause and effect questions.



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Questions addressed

a) What are the different frameworks being employed by entheogenic guides? Including: physical structure, sequential structure, preparation, ritual, integration, guide's role before, during and after session, etc. Or, what are the essential components of this work as practiced by these groups?

b) How are these frameworks different from those used in the research of the 1960s? How do these changes or adaptations seem to impact the effects? For example, what is the meaning of the contemporary emphasis on group work? How have the relationship dynamics between participants and guide changed?

c) How do the variations in present day frameworks appear to affect the outcome? In particular, I am interested in how this work may impact participants' attitudes, understandings, feelings, beliefs, etc. regarding: ecology, death, life values, mystical awareness, and “casual” or non-“therapeutic” drug use.

Preliminary observations

The guides all employ an integration of western psychotherapeutic techniques combined with an indigenous/shamanic orientation. The emphasis varies. In fact, one element that distinguishes these models is the extent to which they are syntheses of familiar systems, western and otherwise. In each of the three groups I interviewed four clients, who varied considerably in age, career background and social background. They came to this work in a variety of ways. Some were in personal crisis, possibly involving substance abuse. Some had backgrounds that included severe

abuse of some kind. Most had extensive experience in other systems of psychological (psychotherapy) and/or spiritual work.

ALTHOUGH it is true that all subjects interviewed were chosen by the guide and so will obviously reflect well upon the guide, there are several reasons that I feel their descriptions are reflective of the groups they represent. There is not the space to go into a detailed justification for this assessment here, but it includes the quality and consistency of the reports, and the progress made by group members.

All interviewees showed a remarkable openness and enthusiasm for discussing and describing their experiences. Virtually all felt that work with entheogens has been quite important to their lives and that its relative inaccessibility for the culture at large is tragic.

Preparation and integration

If there is anything that this work has taught us relative to the psychedelic experiences of the 1960s it is the absolutely fundamental role of preparation and integration. All three guides and their clients take this extremely seriously. In fact, one could almost question whether the form of the entheogenic session itself is all that important as long as certain fundamental pieces are in place, or if they are more expressions of the style, experiences and personality of the guide. This was one of the first questions that led me to this research: to what extent does the variation in structure impact the results? Variation in structure might include emphasis on music, use of external sensory deprivation (blindfolds, etc.), extent of interpersonal relating during the session, and type of substances used. This leads to a sub-question: to what extent does the medicine—versus the set and setting—direct the experience for the participant? Asked differently: to what extent do different entheogenic substances open up the same door allowing for the same essential experience, possibly with trappings a bit different? This may be in contrast to the way some substances are thought of (romanticized?) but it is consistent with the line of thought that says “the medicine will take you where you need to go,” an idea often repeated in psychedelic circles.

The most interesting example of this question emerged when interviewing the third group, which was focused primarily on ayahuasca as the central medicine. Most participants had extensive experience with other more familiar medicines, primarily psilocybin, in guided structured situations. They all seem to describe ayahuasca as more potent in some way, taking them where the other experiences could not quite get to. Is this true of the ayahuasca, or if the sequence was reversed would we be hearing something very similar about the psilocybin? Of course, this is difficult to answer conclusively. We do not have anything even approaching the opportunity for a double blind study with an appropriate sample size. But we do have some interesting questions that we can pay attention to over time.

The client/guide relationship

Essential to preparation and integration is the relationship of the clients to the guide. This can be a tricky matter when we consider that the usual issues of transference and counter-transference are magnified as everything is magnified in the entheogenic experience. This can put vulnerable clients at risk if a guide is not clear about his/her boundaries and intentions (counter-transference). Of course, this work is not technically psychotherapy and whether the ethical guidelines are exactly the same as for a licensed psychotherapist or counselor is an important question that I will not go into further here. This topic has been discussed in a previous issue of the *MAPS Bulletin* (Taylor, 1997).

One comment I will make though is that in the evolved profession of psychotherapy virtually all of the responsibility is on the therapist to maintain these boundaries as he or she is considered to be in the “power position.” Although this point of view is accepted as if it were a deeper cosmic truth, it is actually an outgrowth of a very unique and particular system which may often be dis-empowering for clients. In any case, it is not necessarily appropriate to generalize this imbalance of power and responsibility to all systems of psychospiritual work.

Since there is so much confusion in our society regarding the use of substances, I used this opportunity to explore whatever relationship there may be between the use

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of entheogens and destructive use of substances like alcohol, cocaine, etc. I took a profile, including history, of each interviewee's experience with substances. I found that over one third had a history of serious drug use or abuse. Part of that group actually came to psychedelic work partly to deal with this problem. The respondents were quite consistent in their assessment of the relationship, reporting:

1) The notion that they could fall into an abusive relationship with entheogens seems extremely remote, largely due to the lack of predictable or controllable enjoyment of the entheogenic experience; the experience is as often as not quite difficult if not painful.

2) The insights—actually it is usually described as much more than insight, also as catharsis and a significant sense of “working through”—they got into their personal psychology (as it related to their addictive behavior) moves them away from their addictive tendencies.

Discussion

Preliminary review of the data seems to point toward the following:

- a) that there are different models of organized, structured psychedelic work;
- b) that they all have a strong transpersonal element (sometimes connected to an experience of ego dissolution/ego death), impacting the values/life attitudes of the participants;
- c) that substance abuse tends to be less of a problem in this population. There is a sacralization of substances, often referred to as “the medicine.” Furthermore any participants who came in with drug “problems” seem to undergo positive changes in so far as “outgrowing” the addiction. This outcome seems to be based on the much written about theme of addictions as a reflection of an existential search for life meaning (Peele, 1975; Grof & Grof, 1992). The intentional entheogenic experience is often conceptualized as being about the individual's search for life meaning.
- d) This sacred relationship with the medicine and psychedelic work can generalize to other aspects of the client's life. In other words in a culture where there is a loss of sacred meaning, interviewees report a new or deepened sense of the sacred for life in general. Or, does this group of people reflect these attitudes

before undertaking psychedelic work?

Although the focus of this study will be on the last 30 years—even more particularly the last 10 years—of structured, guided, non-recreational psychedelic use in western society it may be useful to refer to ancient cultures and modern indigenous culture as well, since the models for current use are partly an outgrowth of those other cultures. Furthermore for so many of the people doing this work currently a great deal of the meaning stems from the way in which the substances connect or re-connect them with important elements and values of past cultures or modern indigenous cultures.

FINALLY, I AM INTERESTED in critically evaluating the serious use of psychedelics by individuals who choose to do it in structured, guided settings, especially at a time in our society when there are such extensive problems stemming from drug use. It has long been assumed by many that drug use leads to further drug use/abuse. I plan to look at psychedelic exploration with the question of its relationship to abusive or addictive use of other drugs. The point has been made that the lack of positive ritualized drug use in our society, linked to the search for deeper meaning, is part of the cause for its destructive use (Bravo & Grob, 1989). •

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