

In the Press, “Insanity Chemicals” Become Mind Medicines

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The first time the word psilocybin appeared in *The New York Times*, the context was a November 1962 article headlined “Harvard Men Told of Mind-Drug Peril.” Other alarming reports followed, and six years later Congress banned psilocybin.

The story of LSD, as reflected in the pages of the *Times*, was a bit more complicated. The earliest references, beginning in 1955, described LSD as an “insanity chemical,” a powerful drug that “induce[s] in a few minutes a condition very similar to schizophrenia.” LSD was therefore a legitimate research chemical, useful to scientists studying the mechanism underlying psychosis.

But by July 1962, when the *Times* reported that a “black market” in LSD had emerged, the drug had become a public menace. LSD, the paper warned, “can produce prolonged psychotic reactions and antisocial behavior,” triggering “devastating” experiences that “could lead to suicide.” It was banned in 1968, the same year as psilocybin.

Psychedelics were tolerable as long as they remained obscure subjects of interest to academics. They became intolerable once they escaped the lab and people started using them for fun. Their recent rehabilitation in the *Times* and other major news outlets can be explained by a partial reversal of that process: Formerly fun drugs are increasingly seen not only as legitimate subjects of scientific study but as mind medicines that can treat psychiatric conditions instead of merely simulating them.

The warning that prompted the 1962 story about Harvard students experimenting with psychedelics illustrates the anxieties that drove prohibition of these drugs. “It has come to our attention that a number of undergraduates are becoming interested in the effects of LSD, psilocybin, mescaline and other mind-distorting drugs,” wrote John Munro, Harvard College’s dean, and Dana Farnsworth, director Harvard’s health services, in an open letter to students. “Our concern for this development is such that for over a year we have had an agreement that Harvard University experimenters studying the effects of such drugs should not employ undergraduates as subjects in their research work.”

Harvard officials clearly worried that undergraduates would enjoy the research too much, which might lead them to seek these insanity chemicals outside the laboratory, with potentially grave consequences: “It is important to warn undergraduates that the ingestion of these drugs may result in serious hazards to the mental health and stability even of apparently normal persons. The drugs have been known to intensify seriously a tendency toward depression and to produce other dangerous psychotic effects.”

Psychedelics, in other words, had to be used—administered, really—under the supervision of experts. They were not something for laymen to trifle with. Fear of such unsupervised experimentation eventually became so strong that it

HARVARD MEN TOLD OF MIND-DRUG PERIL

Special to The New York Times
CAMBRIDGE, Mass., Nov. 28
—A formal warning about the dangers in the use of “mind-distorting drugs” was issued to undergraduates of Harvard College yesterday.

The statement was issued by John U. Monro, dean of Harvard College, and Dr. Dana L. Farnsworth, director of the University Health Services, in a letter to The Harvard Crimson, the undergraduate newspaper.

The statement said: “It has come to our attention that a number of undergraduates are becoming interested in the effects of LSD [lysergic acid diethylamide] psilocybin, mescaline and other mind-distorting drugs. Our concern for this development is such that for over a year we have had an agreement that Harvard University experimenters studying the effects of such drugs

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Special to The New York Times
PRINCETON, N. J., Nov. 28
—Dr. Willard Dairymple, the director of health services at Princeton University, said today that so far as he knew there was no problem about the use of hallucinatory drugs by Princeton students.

Special to The New York Times
WASHINGTON, Nov. 28
—The Food and Drug Administration said today that it was investigating the possible boot-

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Psychedelics in the news, then and now. A 1962 New York Times story warns of “mind-drug peril” (left); a 2012 New York Times Magazine article explores psilocybin research for end-of-life anxiety (above).

overwhelmed the hope that medically sanctioned use could be beneficial.

The first *Times* story about black-market LSD noted that “hundreds of [scientific] articles have been published on LSD.” It quoted an article published by the *Journal of the American Medical Association* in which two psychiatrists reported that the drug “also has been employed as an adjunct to psychotherapy because recall of repressed memories is enhanced and ego defensiveness to conflict-laden material is reduced.” But in the end, LSD’s psychotherapeutic promise could not save it from prohibition once it was widely used for purposes seen as less serious and less respectable. The same dynamic played out with MDMA two decades later.

Government-approved research sponsored by organizations like MAPS has reminded the press and the public that psychedelics can help people while reassuring them that such assistance can be rendered in controlled conditions overseen by experts. Hence the *Times* sees fit to run prominent articles asking if magic mushrooms can “treat depression,” describing MDMA’s benefits for people diagnosed with posttraumatic stress disorder, and explaining “How Psychedelic Drugs Can Help Patients Face Death.”

Such stories may signal the opening of a medical exception to the prohibition of psychedelics. By and large, Americans are comfortable with medical exceptions. There was one for alco-

hol under the Volstead Act, and today there are many psychoactive substances that are legal only when blessed by a doctor’s note. For years a large majority of Americans have supported a medical exception for marijuana, a policy that almost half the states have enacted. So it is not hard to imagine a day when LSD, psilocybin, and MDMA can be obtained by prescription.

Surely that will be an improvement over the current situation, since many people who can benefit from these formerly taboo substances will gain legal access to them. But it’s not clear whether such medical exceptions will lead to broader pharmacological freedom, as with marijuana, or merely add a few more substances to the long list of drugs that can be legally used only with the permission of a government-appointed gatekeeper.

The panic that produced prohibition was about loss of control, and psychedelics by prescription assuage that concern by putting experts in charge again. But judging from public opinion about legalizing drugs other than marijuana, putting individuals in charge of their own bodies and minds remains a scary prospect to most Americans. 🌀

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