

A Psychedelic Renaissance: Historical Reflections on the Future

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IN FEBRUARY 2014 *Scientific American* shocked readers with an editorial that called for an end to the ban on psychedelic drug research.¹ The article criticized the mental health treatment industry for failing to advance therapies beyond the golden era of the 1950s, and lambasted drug regulators for prohibiting psychedelic drugs, including LSD, ecstasy (MDMA), and psilocybin; drugs, which had historically held clinical promise but were “designated as drugs of abuse.”² As the editors pointed out, the situation has created a paradox: “these drugs are banned because they have no accepted medical use, but researchers cannot explore their therapeutic potential because they are banned.... The decades-long research hiatus has taken its toll.”³ Lest there be any confusion as to where the editors stood on the issue, they continued with explicit instructions: “This is a shame. The US government should move these drugs to the less strict Schedule II classification...it would make it much easier for clinical researchers to study their effects.”⁴ The article brought public and scientific attention to a growing contention amongst researchers, and even some regulators, that the clinical potential among psychedelic drugs had been dismissed due to a moral panic about drug abuse.

But, this article was just the tip of the proverbial iceberg. In the past decade psychedelics have returned to the clinical arena with renewed optimism for their positive role in therapeutics, across a range of areas. Hundreds of published papers have looked back and criticized regulators, researchers, and consumers for distorting the truth about psychedelics. According to British psychopharmacologist David J. Nutt, LSD, among other psychoactive drugs, has tremendous therapeutic potential yet existing restrictions in both laboratories and clinical trials have prevented the meaningful exploration of its scientific potential. He laments the “daunting bureaucratic labyrinth” that dissuades “even the most committed investigator.”⁵ Meanwhile, California-based neuroscientist Mark Geyer argues that the modern culture of scientific research discourages investigators from asking big picture questions in science. Taking time to ponder the intersections of spirituality, consciousness and brain science seems to have moved beyond the grasp of even the most successful researchers whose time is increasingly devoted to securing grants, filling out ethics forms, and logging hours in the lab accumulating data. In other words, the context of modern scientific enterprises has refocused attention on data accrual and away from larger questions of ontology. Franz

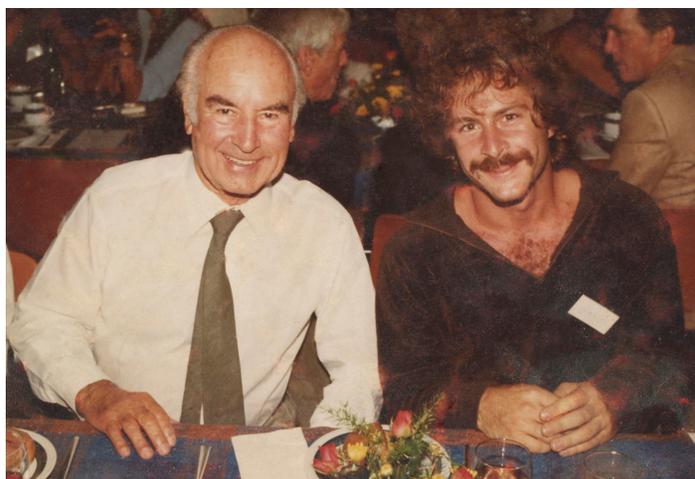
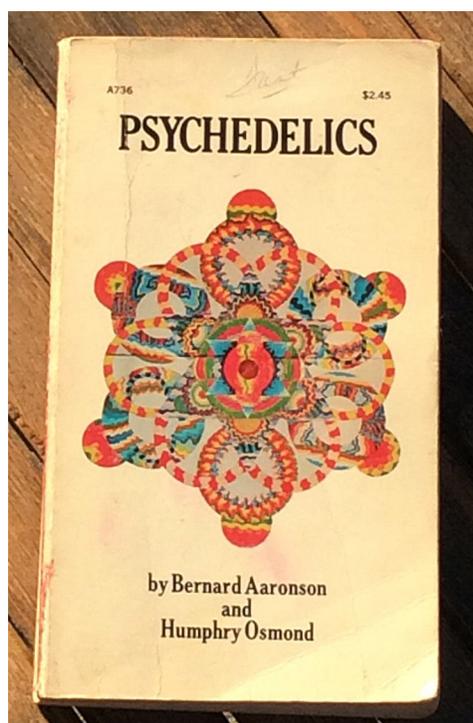
¹Editorial, “End the Ban on Psychoactive Drug Research,” *Scientific American* (2014) 310 (2), pp. 1–2.

²*Ibid.*, p. 1.

³*Ibid.*

⁴*Ibid.*, p. 2.

⁵“End the Ban on Psychoactive Drug Research,” *Scientific American* (2014) 310 (2): 33. Consulted at <http://www.scientificamerican.com/article/end-the-ban-on-psychoactive-drug-research/>



Humphry Osmond coined the term “psychedelic” in 1957 and later co-authored a book of the same name (left); Albert Hofmann, the first person to synthesize and ingest LSD (above left), shares a meal with MAPS founder and executive director Rick Doblin (above right).

Vollenweider’s work in Switzerland attempts to defy that trend, as he compares psychedelic reactions with subjects who had been administered LSD and subjects who had reached a similar state of consciousness through meditation. Using brain imaging techniques and questionnaires, Vollenweider has explained how the now well-established mantra of randomized controlled trial methodology all but paralyzes such attempts to raise what are essentially philosophical questions in brain science, which steers him towards other questions and other methods for exploring the relationship between spirituality and the brain.⁶

The psychedelic renaissance may then be less of a re-awakening and more of a realigning psychedelics with their own richer, deeper, and more culturally sensitive past. Over sixty years ago, as MAPS readers well know, Albert Hofmann at Sandoz Pharmaceutical Laboratories in Switzerland first synthesized LSD in 1938 and personally experienced its effects in 1943. In what was later described as a voyage into madness, or a chemically induced psychosis and spiritual awakening; Hofmann’s drug opened up a new era of hallucinogenic research. Over the next 15 years over a thousand studies using LSD or mescaline appeared in medical and scientific publications. Claims varied widely as to the drug’s inherent value, its therapeutic potential, or the most lucrative target areas for its use, but for over a decade the popular and scientific reports were generally positive, even optimistic.

Many of these studies were confined to laboratory settings,

and retained a careful focus on the chemical substances, rather than cultural rituals that might be associated with a longer tradition of healing or psychoactive exploration. Indeed German psychiatrists worked diligently to isolate mescaline from peyote in the 1930s, and with it, they interrogated mescaline as a substance free from the indigenous traditions that venerated the sacred cactus. Similarly, in 1957 when psychiatrist Humphry Osmond introduced the term “psychedelic” in the *New York Academy of Sciences* it was described as a scientific concept, a newly discovered phenomenon offering insights into the human psyche that might offer important research and therapeutic potential. Despite recognition of a longer history of so-called psychedelics in indigenous healing or spiritual encounters, drugs like LSD and mescaline were increasingly regarded as pharmaceutical substances, products of the modern, western, and increasingly lucrative psychopharmaceutical complex.

However, the psychedelics were destined to have trouble convincing regulators and researchers that they could consistently perform well in controlled and later randomized trial conditions, or that their therapeutic power followed a regular schedule of prescribed use. The psychedelics were different from their contemporary psychopharmaceutical counterparts, but perhaps in an effort to evaluate and justify their scientific merit, some of the more subtle, abstract, or philosophical benefits were discarded as too culturally specific, too anecdotal, or too difficult to repeat.

Despite the promising results from the 1950s, concerns

⁶For an in-depth study of both Franz Vollenweider and Mark Geyer, see: Langlitz, Nicolas. *Neuropsychodelia: The Revival of Hallucinogen Research since the Decade of the Brain*. Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2013.

emerged that the drug was an enticing substance for abuse, or that it was an altogether dangerous chemical given its capacity for conjuring visual hallucinations or producing psychosis. Critical scientific reports combined with negative media exposure made the continuation of scientific pursuits of psychedelic research more difficult. Much of that research halted largely as these substances had become synonymous with countercultural activities, hedonism, drug abuse, and a black market in acid. By the end of that colourful decade LSD was considered in many jurisdictions as a prohibited substance and its clinical applications moved to the margins of acceptable medicine.

Meanwhile, many psycho-active substances with more lucrative applications enjoyed widespread commercial success after performing well in the new gold standard for rigorous pharmaceutical tests: the randomized controlled trial. LSD, and other psychedelics for that matter, routinely failed to satisfy researchers seeking a set of conventional or repeatable responses. These drugs, instead, confounded the trial methodology and committed psychedelic researchers fought back against a method that did not allow for a more holistic or contextualized set of experiences to constitute an effective psychopharmacological intervention. In other words, LSD reactions were difficult to quantify or even classify in therapeutic terms, and neither the methodology nor their single-dose applications convinced commercial distributors that it was worth pursuing.

Psychedelic investigators in the so-called 'golden era' had not yet articulated a coherent plan for regulating these substances in a manner that balanced the appetite for non-clinical use with the desire to retain psychedelics within the clinic. Famously ex-Harvard University psychologist Timothy Leary proselytized the use of LSD, exclaiming that everyone should take it, and in fact he is rumoured to have recommended its use even more indiscriminately—by putting it in water supplies—but no specific thought was given to how much, or whether such a move should only be done on public holidays, whether they should use microdoses, or combine it with 'car free' days. While others, like Abram Hoffer in Saskatchewan recommended that it be tightly controlled and regulated by governments, permitting its use exclusively in medical contexts. Others were more elitist, suggesting that understanding psychedelics required experimentation, but that experimentation should involve intellectuals, physicians, theologians, neuroscientists, etc.—a particular strand of highly educated individuals who might then

harness the powers of psychedelics to improve society. These discussions over how to best regulate and control the use of psychedelics fell moot by the end of the 1960s as black market versions circulated freely and the political climate of the Cold War gave rise to the damaging association between psychedelics and subversive behaviour.

In the 21st century, both researchers and consumers collectively have more experience with psychopharmaceuticals than ever before. Indeed, in the 1950s, the marketplace was only really beginning to embrace the psychopharmacology with real intensity. As Nikolas Rose suggests, this period also witnessed the dawn of the 'psy-ences'—a term that he uses to describe the pervasiveness of psychiatry,

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psychology, and social work in the everyday lives of citizens.⁷ A return of psychedelics is perhaps for this generation of consumers neither off-putting nor obscene, but rather a response to the culmination of a cultural shift towards chemically altering our consciousness as a natural response to modern living. As we look forward to this new chapter in psychedelic science, we might also take the opportunity to look back and consider how the historical context of scientific research shaped our understanding of psychedelics in the past.

Historically, scientists were keen to separate the drugs from their cultural, spiritual, and healing contexts, even when they later compensated for this isolation by designing careful guidelines for establishing 'set and setting'. Our accumulated knowledge about psychedelics has demonstrated that the experiences readily invoke reactions that are not necessarily reducible to scientific categorization. Perhaps it is time for psychedelic science to emphasize the *psychedelic* elements of this approach, and to embrace a more holistic framework of understanding, interpreting, measuring, and ultimately treating modern human experiences. 🌀

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⁷Rose, N. (2003). Neurochemical selves. *Society*, 41(1), 46-59.