

The Wonderful World of Psychedelics

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In 10th grade, I had the opportunity to write a paper on any topic I wanted; so naturally, I chose to write it on Hippies. I was drawn to the accepting and free-spirited ideals of counterculture and wanted to learn more. I started my paper, titled “Turn On, Tune in, and Drop Out”, with a quote from *Sixties Source Book*, “The decade had grown its hair long, taken purple hearts, smoked pot, dropped acid, kissed the sky in a Saturn 5, dreamed a dream with Martin Luther King, taken the Pill, sat in at lunch counters, been jailed with Norman Mailer and Nelson Mandela, taken its clothes off on stage, wasted gooks from the Delta to the DMZ and done it at a love-in and a happening during the decade sex had been invented”. After hours of sifting through articles and books trying to find enough credible information to fill five pages, I found the name Timothy Leary.

Leary is considered by many to be the godfather of psychedelic research. Psychedelic, as I came to find out, means “relating to or denoting drugs (especially LSD) that produce hallucinations and apparent expansion of consciousness”. I had heard of LSD (acid) before and, was interested in experiencing it. I was especially interested in the ideas of hallucinations and altered reality. I became somewhat obsessed with psychedelics, using my paper as an excuse to research the different hallucinogens and their uses. As my research went on I kept finding more and more benefits to these substances and began to question: why are these substances illegal?

What began as an accidental discovery by Albert Hofmann in the late 1930s sparked interest by medical researchers and the US government in the 1950s. The CIA began conducting experiments on the general public, in some cases without their knowledge, and observing their reactions to it. This top-secret project came to be known as Project MKULTRA. One CIA study participant, Ken Kasey, had a life-changing experience. During his LSD trip, he gained an expanded sense of reality and consciousness, which he felt could change the world. Kasey then went on to start a group called The Merry Pranksters who traveled around in a repurposed school bus, dispensing LSD and sharing his experiences with the world. Around the same time, Harvard psychologists Timothy Leary and Richard Alpert (who was later known as Ram Dass) began studying the effects of psychedelics in controlled environments. However, once they started experimenting with it themselves, their interests shifted from psychological effects to questions of reality and consciousness.

Around the same time, a cultural divide began to form between the young people who wanted to escape the post-war, cookie-cutter lifestyle they were born into and their parents who clung to it. This divide gave way to the counterculture movement, which was a prevalent youth movement that promoted acceptance, peace, recreational drug use (mostly marijuana and LSD), and communal lifestyles. This community’s peaceful ideals, focus on consciousness, and lack of conformity clashed with current societal norms and the return to war in Vietnam. As the cultural divide widened, protests began to take place where participants would go as far as to burn bras and draft cards to make a statement. Because of this, the counterculture movement was seen as a threat to authority and an organized society by the older generation.

In 1970, President Nixon passed the Controlled Substances Act which made LSD, DMT, psilocybin, and mescaline, illegal. This put a stop to psychedelic research as they were classified as Schedule I drugs. According to the DEA, most psychedelics are Schedule I drugs, which means that they are “substances, or chemicals are defined as drugs with no currently accepted medical use and a high potential for abuse.” With this classification research and scientific studies become difficult to get permission and funding for. The bans on the research of psychedelics need to be reevaluated so that we can discover the true potentials that these substances have to offer.

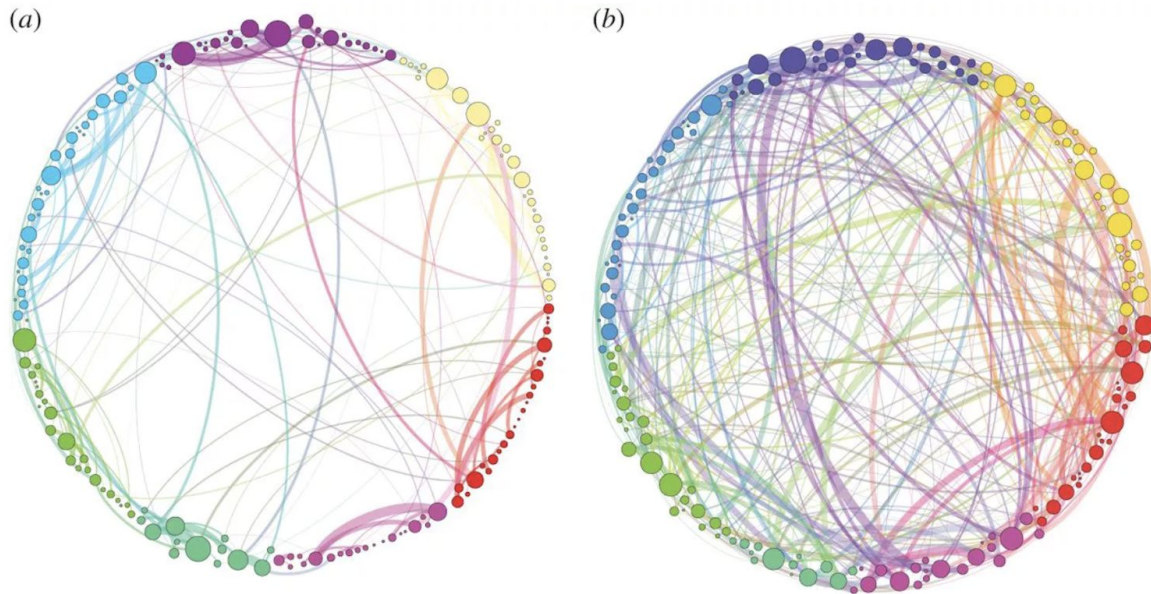
Hallucinogens are powerful therapeutic agents because they allow the brain to make connections that it cannot make otherwise. A study published by the *Journal of the Royal Society Interface* found that by administering psilocybin to subjects they experienced something known as a “hyperconnected” mind. The psilocybin allowed the brain to work outside the default mode network (DMN), which is the network of neurological pathways that our brains develop over time. This network helps our brains to run more efficiently by collecting knowledge from past encounters and applying them to new experiences. However, this network can prevent us from being able to create new pathways and experience new ways of thinking. Psychedelic therapy allows for a temporary break from the DMN in the form of “ego death”. This gives the patient the opportunity to evaluate personal issues and trauma from a new and removed perspective.

A therapeutic session should have at least one guide and be conducted in a safe and comfortable space. The current model for a therapeutic experience is to have around three therapy sessions before the drug is administered to build a sense of comfort and safety. The patient is encouraged to set an intention for their sessions around an essential question or issue they would like to explore. On the day of the psychedelic session or “journey day”, the patient is given the drug and provided with a private room and guide. The use of a blindfold is strongly encouraged to promote a more internal journey. The guide is essential to a successful experience, protecting the patient from physical and emotional harm along the way. These guides are specially trained to help patients navigate difficult moments such as existential crises and even the experience of death.

This treatment, although still in its clinical trial phase, has yielded highly promising results in the treatment of PTSD, addiction, and certain types of anxiety and depression. A recent study sponsored by MAPS (the Multidisciplinary Association for Psychedelic Studies) found that 68% of their patients no longer met the diagnosis for PTSD 12 months after their last of three sessions. This kind of progress has never been possible through pharmaceuticals or talk therapy. Similar results have been seen in the treatment of addiction, specifically in the cases of alcohol, tobacco, opiate addiction.

I began this project with an essential question in mind: how do the unchallenged biases we develop over time affect how we judge new ideas and concepts? I believe that psychedelics have fallen victim to this type of bias. The biases that the government had against psychedelics robbed a generation of a medical breakthrough and the opportunity to expand their collective

consciousness. The biases that the counterculture had against the government prevented Psychedelics from being understood in the positive light that they deserved. I hope in the future we have the freedom to use psychedelics both as a therapeutic tool and as a method for personal growth without the barriers of law or bias.



This figure is from a 2014 study in the *Journal of the Royal Society Interface*. The image on the left is of a human brain on a placebo, and the image on the right is of a brain on psilocybin.

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