

Searching for Spirituality through the Use of Psychedelic Drugs: the Case of Psychonauts

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Abstract

Introduction: *The motivation underlying substance abuse is a complex one. According to some authors, spirituality and the quest for autognosis can be considered motivating factors for psychedelic drugs use. This goes beyond the sphere of neurobiological conditioning in drug use, assuming that there is something more complex such as someone's need to heal wounds from the past or idle curiosity to find answers to existential questions and spirituality.*

Objectives: *The main purpose of this study is to raise one's awareness over the subject and to emphasize the necessity for more advanced studies among Romanian population. By making a literature review of the findings concerning drug abuse proceeded from spiritual reasons, the article aims at clearly presenting the negative effects of psychedelic substances and also the limitations of their positive ones. It is crucial to know the long term effects as well as the short terms effects of this behaviour on humans.*

Also, another objective is to present a possible profile of a "psychonaut" that manages to perpetuate his/her habits without complications. In order to understand and to prevent this behaviour, it is important for us to understand the thing that triggers the decision to start taking psychedelic drugs and how this decision transforms in a way of living.

Methods: *Literature investigation.*

Conclusions: *The use of drugs for spiritual reasons can have a negative impact on the life of the consumer. Because of this fact, the psychologist must be able to find strategies to help them understand the risk of this behaviour, by exploring new alternative solutions to their needs.*

Keywords: *psychonauts, substance abuse, spirituality, autognosis*

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I. Introduction

Psychoactive drugs act on the noradrenergic, dopaminergic, and serotonergic systems of the brain by short-circuiting the nervous system, thus creating a tendency for drug-seeking behaviour (Bear, Connors & Paradiso, 1996). In this way, psychoactive drugs affect the chemical systems that control behaviour and the response to those behavioural changes (Nutt et al., 2007). Moreover, drug addiction is a relapsing disorder because it persists despite negative consequences, inducing pleasant states like euphoria or stress relief (Cami & Farré, 2003). There are some addiction theories that try to explain the whole mechanism of addiction mainly developed from a neurobiological perspective, but they are reductionist in nature because the addiction, as a process, has a more complex aspect (Cami & Farré, 2003). In addition, Cami & Farré (2003) point out that “addictive drugs can act as positive reinforcers, producing euphoria, or as negative reinforcers, alleviating symptoms of withdrawal or dysphoria” (p. 975). Knowing the biological process of addiction can help develop new methods of intervention but also can serve as a tool for understanding how drugs become addictive. In this way, one of the triggers that it is not very well understood resides in the spiritual quest of the consumer.

The relation between spirituality and substance abuse is a significant one, due to the fact that spirituality can act as a trigger for substance abuse or as a way of coping in the process of recovery. Regarding this, spirituality has been defined as a dimension of human experience “which incorporates what is intimate, immanent and personal within the self and others and a relationship with something that is transcendent and beyond self” (Cook, 2004, p. 548; Borrás et al., 2010). In this sense, spirituality is a multidimensional concept which includes a series of beliefs, behaviours, lifestyle and experiences motivated by the need for transcendence and divine contact (Borrás et al., 2010; Sussman et al., 2013). Because spirituality is an important part of human nature and because of the link which it has with the religious sphere, the relation between drug addiction and spirituality is a very complex one.

A series of studies conducted in this field views spirituality and religion as important components in upholding the process of recovery from substance abuse and not as causes for this (Longshore, Anglin & Conner, 2009; Pardini et al., 2000; Gorusch, 1995; Unterrainer et al., 2013). Moreover, spirituality is seen as a powerful tool in the process of recovery, because of its capacity to promote well-being and achieving meaning in life,

whereas spiritual struggle may have a negative impact on the subjective well-being (Ciarrocchi & Brelsford, 2009). Wood & Hebert (2005) showed that students with a higher spiritual meaning and purpose in life were less likely to use drugs and other substances. On the other hand, there is already a subculture that should be taken into consideration, promoted by people called “psychonauts”, who use drugs for self-exploration and spiritual motives (Moro et al., 2011).

The need for self-knowledge and for deeper understanding of transcendental realities can contribute to a spiritually inclined attitude in drug use “that promotes self-enhancement by rehearsing personal coping strategies and by gaining self-knowledge” (Moro et al., 2011, p. 188). Thus, even if a spiritual or religious context can contribute to less substance abuse, the purpose of drugs can be a sacramental one due to a tendency towards self-actualization or autognosis.

II. Objectives

1. Raising awareness

Psychedelic drug use catches the specialist’s attention just when this behaviour starts to cause problems to the user, destabilizing him. There is a small amount of studies that focus on drug users who have no adaptive problems and continue to live an apparently normal life both inside their families and in society (Kraus et al., 2002). These people raise specialist’s interest only when they have serious problems like being imprisoned, fired from the office or rejected by family and friends. In cases like that, the treatment becomes difficult because, up to that point, most of them are convinced that their behaviour doesn’t harm them in any way. It is known that most of the psychedelic drugs do not cause addiction. The risk for someone to become addicted is low (Reneau et al. 2000). Even though, most of the persons who get to take these drugs don’t stop after their first use or after just one substance. The proof can be easily observed by accessing sites like www.erowid.org and www.psychonauts.com, where users share their experiences.

Presently, there is a small amount of information concerning this subject. But “psychonauts” do exist. They are real people, with friends, families and jobs. Psychedelic drug use involves a lot of temporal and financial resources. Also, in many countries, endogenous substances are illegal. Paradoxically, users risk their own freedom to access enlightenment and personal well-being (Prepeliczay, 2002).

2. The profile of a "psychonaut"

The term "psychonauts" refers exactly to the above mentioned type of people, meaning those who manage to keep their psychedelic drug consumption under control and to maintain a healthy and normal life for a long period of time (Moro et al, 2011). Not all the people interested in autognosis use illicit drugs or any drugs, but only a part of them who usually present a particular set of personality traits (Khavari et al, 1997). When people start taking psychedelic drugs for autognosis reasons, they are actually trying, with less legal and moral methods, to satisfy higher human needs like gaining self-esteem, self-actualization, and self-transcendence (Maslow, 1971; 1943). Drug use, in general, no matter if problematic or not, involves a large scale of risks. These risks are very rarely taken into the discussion when it comes to non-problematic drug users. But these side effects exist and can be very unpleasant. This might happen especially when the user is new, he/she doesn't know what to expect or when he/she has pre-existing or dormant psychiatric conditions or some powerful trauma that might surface during the psychedelic experience (Strassman, 1984). Usually, the subject is neglected because the non-problematic drug use is less interesting or because of the majority who believes that drug abuse is immoral and can't have any positive effects for a long period of time.

As mentioned earlier in the article, popular believe is that drugs can only harm. This is why psychonauts might feel like they live a double life, being marginalized by society. Usually when these kinds of persons go to see a therapist or they attempt rehab, it is because they usually start to have problems indirectly linked with drug abuse: depression, anxiety, the impostor's syndrome, lack of sleep, nightmares, or eating disorders. Because of spiritual beliefs about psychedelics, they will tend to hide or minimize their drug use (Cunningham, 20008).

For psychologists, it is very important to identify this kind of problems, so that they can easily understand what happens in minds of the users and to decide how to help any possible client.

III. Method

Literature investigation

In Romania, the problem is new and very little taken into consideration. The National Antidrug Agency states that in 2004 there were less than 1% of hallucinogen drug users, while in 2013 there were 1,8% registered cases. Also the 2013 report shows that all the hallucinogen drug users that were admitted in

public treatment institutions were employed, had a stable house and were university graduates. This leads us to the conclusion that most of them are smart people with social abilities.

In 2013, the report shows an almost 14% increase of psychedelic drug use among students and pupils. Also, it is stated in the report that 3086 g of plants and endogenous substances were captured in Romania. This data and the existence of blogs like ayahuasca-romania.blogspot.com, ierburisacre.blogspot.ro and Facebook page called "Institutul pentru Studii Psihedelice și Terapii Alternative" ("*The Institute for Psychedelic Studies and Alternative Therapies*") might suggest that some of these registered users might be "psychonauts". It is important to study the phenomena, to understand who might use these drugs in Romania and how this behaviour affects their lives and the society.

The main risk is the psychological addiction. Drugs are classified in 2 categories: narcotic and psychotropic substances. Their use can cause three types of addiction: physical, psychological and mixed. Narcotic substances come with mixed addiction because of the physical symptoms like pain, cold, tiredness felt after abstinence. On the other hand, psychotropic substances come only with psychological addiction. The users constantly feel the need to change their mental state with drugs (Nița, 2013). Another risk is represented by the consequences that drug use might have, no matter if addiction exists or not. Psychedelic might have medical, psychological and social consequences in users' lives.

As mentioned before in the article, the medical risks are terrifying hallucinations, illusion, dissociation and alteration of time and space. These symptoms might become permanent if the users are predisposed to psychiatric problems. The psychological consequences consist in panic, anxiety, depression, suspicious and paranoid tendencies, emotional lability and alienation. This might lead to low intellectual performances and suicide attempts. Of course, these effects appear after a long use of combined big amounts of psychedelics. When the main reason to use drugs is to get high, not to access spirituality, the probability for this consequence to emerge is big.

Social consequences are also present. The "trip" caused from LSD, mescaline or DOC last from 8 to 12h and they are illegal in Romania, being considered major risk drugs. It is easy to observe that the users need big amounts of time to enjoy the experience. This might make the user avoid family and friends. He/she will try

to associate him/herself with persons who share the same interests and they are only pleased with this kind of social relationship. Families of psychonauts might not find drug use positive and they might not understand the spiritual reasons behind it. This might lead to low-quality relationships with family and relatives. Psychonauts are a special type of drug users. They continue to use psychedelic because of their needs to explore their selves and for spiritual evolution.

Moro and his team stated in their study that there must necessarily be three main reasons in order to consider a person a psychonaut: auto-medication, religious and spiritual practices and the need for self-knowledge and self-inspection. The rest use drugs because they search to avoid unpleasant moods, increase social contact, artistic creativity, to express membership in a group, out of curiosity and for rebellion (Moro et al., 2011).

Who are these users? What makes them different from the rest of the users or from non-users? When someone hears the word drug user, he rapidly associates that person with a junkie, a sick man, homeless, without any education, who comes from an unstable family. Just a small amount of persons can imagine that someone who uses drugs can wear a suit, can go to work and have a normal family, being active in the society.

Psychedelic drug users present some special characteristics and believe in: existence of a universal soul, unity of all things and a transcendent reality. Most of them are not afraid of death because they think they are the same with God (Lerner and Lyvers, 2006). But these believes aren't enough for someone to use psychedelic drugs. Personality traits like openness to experience are also needed (MacLean, Johnson & Griffiths, 2011). Openness to experiences is translated in the ability to be interested in new things, more able to accede to new concepts and also seeking to have extraordinary experiences (Khavari et al, 1977). In another study, it was shown that psychedelic drug users usually have negative attitudes towards conventional social values (Mabry et Khavari, 1986).

Absorption is another personality trait that most "psychonauts" seem to have. This trait is defined as a person's capacity to pay full attention and develop complete awareness of what interests them (Ott et al., 2005). The presence of these traits allows the users to totally let go into the experience. This means that people which are high absorbers are more likely to enjoy the effects of psychedelics (Studeruset all, 2012). Another study states that personality factors poorly distinguish psychedelic users from non-users. The study reports that

drug users with high IQs and low anxiety tend to use more psychedelic drugs than other users (Drive et Gerard, 1980). In Romania, these results are also supported by the national anti-drug agency report. But personality traits are not the only ones that lead someone to take psychedelics or narcotics. Social factors, like what drugs parents and friends use, or what drugs are available in the area, also play an important role.

But this is not enough to become a psychonaut. The way that person was raised, the way he/she learned to fulfill his/her spiritual and autognosis needs may bear influences on a person's decision to use psychedelic drugs as a way toward well-being. Also, some of the psychonauts use drugs for self-medication, being convinced that they can heal only with drugs.

Do psychedelic drugs really have positive effects? There are some studies that say they do. A study made on 20 paid volunteers found out that LSD users display low levels of aggression, increased tolerance, and more empathy and creativity than other users (Blacker et al, 1968). Also, it was observed that even months after use of mescaline, magic mushrooms, and LSD, users showed openness to experience, less anxiety and frustration (Grinspoon et Bakalar, 1986). Norwegian specialists say that some alcohol addicts stopped using alcohol after their first experience with LSD (Krebs et Johansen, 2012).

Of course, the validity and universality of these positive effects need more testing. Most of the cited studies were conducted in safe environments, with 100% pure drugs (not like the ones consumers can find in the street). Also, set and setting were very important. It is well known that the intensity and the content of a "trip" is influenced by how the users prepare themselves for the experience and by the ambient where the drug is taken. Just by running a simple internet search one can see that bad experiences are a common thing among psychedelic drug users.

The same thing can be said about negative effects like mental illness or dissociation for a long period of time. The incidence of these effects is correlated with how familiar the drug user is with the substance, the set and setting and, of course, with the pre-existence of psychiatric problems. Surely, the risks for a psychonaut to be imprisoned or isolated do exist and are influenced only by chance or faith.

IV. Conclusions

Because the main purpose of this paper was to trigger awareness over this subject by presenting some findings regarding drug abuse due to spiritual reasons,

we conclude that negative effects of psychedelic substances must be taken in consideration, this fact underlying the necessity for more empirical studies. However, uncontrolled consumption in unsafe environments can have a negative impact on the life of consumers, thus any attempt for accessing a transcendental reality must be done in a safe environment. Moreover, because the motivation of substance abuse resides in resolving past wounds, the results are unexpected and can affect the whole personality of those involved in this behaviour.

We also believe that psychologists must be well informed about this type of addiction, therefore they must be able to understand the complexity of this issue and the reasons underlying consumption. Helping “psychonauts” in understanding the risk of their behaviour can be a starting point for finding alternatives to fulfill their needs.

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