

Correspondence

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A role for psychedelics in psychiatry?

I read with interest the editorial 'Can psychedelics have a role in psychiatry once again?' (Sessa, 2005). Aside from overcoming current legislative barriers, attention needs to be given to education about known research into this field, a function which this editorial usefully starts to fulfil.

The concern remains that the image of psychedelics was not shaped by the already existing extensive professional literature, but by the mass media sensationalising the accidents of unsupervised self-experimentation (Grof, 2001). It could therefore be surmised that decisive influences will be a variety of political, legal, economic and mass-psychological factors, rather than the results of current and ongoing scientific research. Interest from the psychiatric community will be paramount if this research information is to be critically reviewed with a view to clinical application.

The difference between psychedelics (entheogens) and other psychotropic drugs is that entheogens work as 'non-specific amplifiers of the psyche', inducing an altered or non-ordinary state of consciousness (Grof, 2000). The content and nature of the experiences are not thought to be artificial products of their pharmacological interaction with the brain ('toxic psychoses') but authentic expressions of the psyche revealing its functioning on levels not ordinarily available for observation and study. In order to conceptualise this, a vastly extended cartography of the psyche (Grof, 2000), one which challenges our biomedical psychiatric model, is required.

Within psychiatry, entheogenic substances (one of several methods of inducing a non-ordinary state of consciousness) could contribute to a powerful form of experiential psychotherapy; an important addition to a psychiatric armamentarium, working with domains of the psyche

traditionally ignored in our ethnocentric Western model (Schlitz *et al*, 2005).

Potential credence for this field depends upon whether we view all non-ordinary states of consciousness as pathological or whether in some cases, some 'psychotic' experiences can be seen to have potential value as well as being potentially damaging. There is ongoing interest among mental health professionals in the concept of spiritual emergence as well as the therapeutic power of altered states of consciousness, the subject of a recent 1 day meeting held jointly with the Royal College of Psychiatrists and the Royal Society of Medicine (<http://www.rcpsych.ac.uk/college/sig/spirit/index.asp>). I would certainly value a continuing debate exploring this area.

Grof, S. (2000) *Psychology of the Future: Lessons from Modern Consciousness Research*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.

Grof, S. (2001) *LSD Psychotherapy*. Sarasota, FL: Multidisciplinary Association for Psychedelic Studies.

Schlitz, M., Amorok, T. & Micozzi, M. (2005) *Consciousness and Healing: Integral Approaches to Mind-Body Medicine*. St Louis, MO: Churchill Livingstone/Elsevier.

Sessa, B. (2005) Can psychedelics have a role in psychiatry once again? *British Journal of Psychiatry*, **186**, 457–458.

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The editorial by Dr Sessa is both timely and encouraging. The almost complete denial, not only by the media but also by the psychiatric establishment, that lysergic acid diethylamide (LSD) and related psychedelics had an important place in the therapy of a wide range of psychoneurotic disorders is astonishing. This clearly has a psychodynamic explanation.

The interest shown during the 1950s and 1960s by the psychiatric establishment

in the use of the psycholytic agents is even greater than Dr Sessa indicates. The meeting of the 'American Psychological Association' at which the therapeutic use of LSD was discussed was actually held at the Annual Meeting of the prestigious American Psychiatric Association, in 1955, rather than 1951 (Cholden, 1956). Subsequently, the role of psychedelics in therapy was the subject of a number of national and international conferences. Perhaps the most significant of these was held in London in February 1961, when the Royal Medico-Psychological Association, the forerunner of the Royal College of Psychiatrists, devoted the whole of its 3 day quarterly meeting to the subject (Crockett *et al*, 1963).

Dr Sessa touches briefly on the question of the possible resumption of psycholytic therapy. There have been a number of recent suggestions that this could once more become a possibility. Psychiatrists tempted to enter this field (assuming that the appropriate drugs – LSD, 3,4-methylenedioxyamphetamine (MDMA), psilocybin – are made legally available to doctors) should bear in mind that the success of psycholytic therapy depended on careful training, not only of the therapist, but also of the nurses and others who formed the therapeutic team. That expertise at one time reached a high level, and all that has been lost. My hope is that research and practice will continue, and that it will be supported by the College.

Cholden, L. (ed.) (1956) *Proceedings of the Round Table on Lysergic Acid Diethylamide and Mescaline in Experimental Psychiatry*. New York: Grune & Stratton.

Crockett, R., Sandison, R. A. & Walk, A. (eds) (1963) *Hallucinogenic Drugs and their Therapeutic Use*. Proceedings of the Quarterly Meeting of the Royal Medico-Psychological Association in London 1961. London: H. K. Lewis.

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Dr Sessa is to be congratulated on his welcome review of research into psychedelic drugs. We are reminded of the hope that these drugs 'could be for psychiatry what the microscope is for biology or the telescope is to astronomy: an essential tool to explore the parts of the internal world that are usually inaccessible'.

Grof (1975, 1990) has been the most prominent explorer of these inaccessible regions for over 40 years and once research into lysergic acid diethylamide (LSD) became impossible, developed a technique for inducing non-ordinary states of consciousness called 'holotropic breathwork'. This offers many of the features of the psychedelic state without the need to take a drug. Using insights from the use of LSD and holotropic breathwork in thousands of people, Grof (1975) proposed an extended model of the psyche with psychodynamic, perinatal and transpersonal layers. These are provocative models of mind which challenge existing Western paradigms of consciousness and which probably reinforce mainstream suspicion of any insights purporting to arise from the psychedelic experience. However, they do represent a serious attempt to explore, describe and understand the complex features of the non-ordinary state of consciousness and its theoretical implications.

Holotropic breathwork is marketed more as a means of personal exploration than psychotherapy, but careful preparation, the context, a highly supportive setting and integration after the non-ordinary state of consciousness are deemed crucial if the experience is to have value (Grof, 1990). This approach is in contrast to the views of Strassman (<http://www.tripzine.com/interviews.asp?id=strassman>) who researched the use of N,N-dimethyltryptamine (DMT) in 65 volunteers between 1990 and 1995 in a hospital setting with little attention to the surroundings. Strassman (2000) concluded that DMT probably did not have a beneficial effect in itself, that its use was high risk and that psychiatrists generally did not have the experience, sensitivity or training to support, contain, direct or interpret the more unusual experiences that arise. Thus, although the drug is easily taken, the context and setting is a little more complicated and is at least as important.

My point is that psychedelic drugs are just one of a number of methods for the induction of a non-ordinary state of consciousness. Non-drug methods for the induction, exploration of and therapeutic uses for non-ordinary states of consciousness may prove to be more productive for psychiatrists interested in this area, given the controversy that the use of psychedelic drugs will always arouse.

Grof, S. (1975) *Realms of the Human Unconscious: Observations from LSD Research*. New York: Viking Press.

Grof, S. (1990) *The Holotropic Mind*. New York: Harper Collins.

Sessa, B. (2005) Can psychedelics have a role in psychiatry once again? *British Journal of Psychiatry*, **186**, 457–458.

Strassman, R. (2000) *DMT: the Spirit Molecule: a Doctor's Revolutionary Research into the Biology of Near-Death and Mystical Experiences*. Rochester, VT: Park Street Press.

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In his stimulating editorial, Dr Sessa gives a history of the enthusiasm for psychedelic psychotherapy that enjoyed a brief flowering following Hoffman's discovery of lysergic acid diethylamide (LSD) in 1943. Dr Sessa argues that the time may now have come for a reappraisal of the role of such substances in psychiatry. Having myself recently had cause to look at this literature (Edwards, 2005), I find myself somewhat less keen on a reinstatement of this practice.

Within the historical frame one could argue that the proper subject for the case study is the conduct and attitude of the professionals who were the enthusiasts of that time. The tone of the contemporary publications was in general remarkable for a willingness to get ahead of the research evidence, and rush to positive and at times even messianic conclusions. Here are some examples of writings within that genre: 'These agents have a part to play in our survival as a species...' (Osmond, 1957); 'The wonder of LSD is that it can bring within the capabilities of ordinary people the experience of universal love' (Davidson, 1961); 'I feel that those on the moving edge of new culture will eventually use these tools in a way that will utterly transform the nature of human consciousness' (Einhorn, 1971).

What one sees in those kinds of statements is the dubious ambition of therapists to gain possession of chemical magic and exert power over their drugged patients – the therapist as shaman rather than as evidence-based practitioner. But that I'm sure is not Dr Sessa's intention.

Davidson, R. S. (1961) Introduction: a psychologist explains. In *Exploring Inner Space: Personal Experiences Under LSD* (ed. J. Dunlap), pp. 3–10. London: Victor Gollancz.

Edwards, G. (2005) *Matters of Substance*. London: Penguin.

Einhorn, I. (1971) *From Data Collection to Pattern Recognition. Annual Report of the Smithsonian Institute*, pp. 537–548. Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institute.

Osmond, H. (1957) A review of the clinical effects of psychomimetic agents. *Annals of the New York Academy of Sciences*, **66**, 418–434.

Sessa, B. (2005) Can psychedelics have a role in psychiatry once again? *British Journal of Psychiatry*, **186**, 457–458.

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Author's reply: I am most grateful for the correspondence regarding my article on psychedelics. Dr Read is right to point out the various techniques for inducing a non-ordinary state of consciousness. As well as the breathwork developed by Grof (1990), humankind has historically used meditation, exercise, fasting, chanting, dancing and even sex to induce transforming internal changes. What all these states have in common is the final goal of increased awareness and a loosening of the ego – facilitating personal exploration and being useful therapeutically to aid psychotherapy. As well as non-drug-induced non-ordinary states of consciousness, psychedelics may have an important role to play – both in psychotherapy and in the scientific study of consciousness.

I agree with Dr Edward's comments about statements made by some overenthusiastic individuals of the psychedelic movement. Many clinicians of the 1960s (not to mention writers, artists and pop stars) saw LSD as a magic wand, a common panacea to assure 'better living through chemistry'. It was this attitude that killed genuine scientific study and kept the therapeutic potential of psychedelics shelved for so long.

Psychedelics cannot save the world, but they may have a role to play as adjuncts to the psychotherapeutic treatment of neuroses. We must at least study and research their potential with modern randomised controlled trials. For the hundreds of clinicians and thousands of patients of the 1950s and 1960s that witnessed the safe and effective usage of psychedelics, these substances did appear to be useful (Masters & Houston, 1973). But as a profession we need to distance ourselves from the Timothy Leary-esque, messianic approach to psychedelics, if we are to allow a dispassionate and scientific study of their potential.