The making of a mushroom people

Toward a moral anthropology of psychedelics beyond hype and anti-hype

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What is the place of anthropology in the current revival of psychedelic research? Neuropsychopharmacologists and psychiatrists have driven the resumption of scientific studies on psychedelic drugs (Langlitz 2012). They seek market approval for psilocybin, MDMA (methylenedioxymethylamphetamine) and related substances to return them from the counterculture to mainstream medicine and, thus, society. As this goal is coming within reach, the question of these compounds' cultural significance is returning with a vengeance.

We, the mushroom people?

In the 1970s and 1980s, anthropology and ethnopharmacology came to be *the* sciences of psychedelics when the drugs' poor showing in randomized placebo-controlled trials, their association with the counterculture and their subsequent prohibition had brought most medical research to a halt. Anthropologists have a longstanding interest in the ritual and shamanic uses of psychedelics that dates to the late 19th century. After the drugs' prohibition around 1970, studying their non-Western uses became one of the few academically respectable ways of learning about these wondrous substances that had made a lasting impression on so many young people in the preceding decade. The anthropology of psychedelics served as a vehicle of cultural critique when leading researchers claimed that cross-cultural comparison had proved North American and European opposition to drug-induced ecstasies the ethnological exception rather than the rule (Bourguignon 1973; Dobkin de Rios 1984; Furst 1976).

In 2006, cultural historian Andy Letcher looked back at this anthropology of psychedelics and found that it said less about the peoples of the world than about that generation of anthropologists, their political engagement against the 'war on drugs', and the inability of the moderns to countenance religious ecstasy without the use of psychoactive substances. It was not as if Europeans had never noticed the effects of accidentally consumed psilocybin-containing mushrooms but – like people in the mountains of Yunnan, China (Arora 2008) – they did not attribute any deep spiritual significance to their mushroom poisonings. Even in the Amazon, there were ethnic groups who refused to use ayahuasca because they associated it with sorcery, warfare and strife. In a provocative turn, Letcher reversed the thesis of Western exceptionalism and claimed: 'That we in the West have found value in these remarkable mushroom experiences, where almost all others before us have regarded them as worthless, means that in a genuine sense, we could claim to be living in the Mushroom Age. We are the Mushroom people' (Letcher 2006: 5).

Considering that less than 10 per cent of Americans and less than 5 per cent of Europeans have ever experienced a psychedelic, Letcher's point appears just as hyperbolic as the universalization of psychedelic use that it challenges (European Monitoring Centre for Drugs and Drug Addiction 2022; Shalit et al. 2019). And yet his provocation contains an important insight: the wave of enthusiasm for psychedelics in the 1960s was no less part of American and European culture as their repression. The same is true for the hype surrounding psychedelic drugs, which may carry them into Western pharmacopoeia. A new anthropology of psychedelics might offer an opportunity for participant observation of the making of a mushroom people in real time (or we will learn more about what – once again – is keeping late moderns from giving an institutional place to psychedelics in their societies).

A new hype

The recent surge of cultural enthusiasm surrounding psychedelics repeats the enthusiasm of the 1950s and 1960s in the wake of the invention of LSD (lysergic acid diethylamide) by the Swiss pharmaceutical corporation Sandoz in 1943. In the mid-20th century, hopes ran high that psychedelics would revolutionize psychiatric medicine and better society morally and politically. If only the egos of world leaders were pharmacologically dissolved, there would be no more war. It is well known that this first wave led to a severe medical and political backlash, which ended psychedelic research and legal use.

Medical historians have noticed a recurrent pattern in the careers of new drugs: initial enthusiasm and therapeutic optimism followed by a subsequent negative appraisal and, finally, limited use. Once introduced into a culture, many drugs undergo these so-called Seige cycles

Fig. 1. *The revival of psychedelic research has been driven by neuropsychopharmacologists and psychiatrists.*

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1 See the podcast 'Cover story: Power trip' by *New York Magazine* at https://www.psymposia.com/powertrip/.

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(named after Max Seige, the German psychiatrist who had first described them in 1912). Seige cycles become especially pronounced if a drug is not only manufactured as a therapeutic agent but also as a hypersymbolic icon – as has been the case with psychedelics (Snelders et al. 2006). Due to their prohibition, psychedelics never had a chance to enter the phase of limited use (unless one counted their continued use in the underground at a time when both professional and public attention had shifted to other substances). When the psychedelic renaissance began in the 1990s, the moderation exercised by some early protagonists, especially the scientists of the Heffter Research Institute, suggested that the prohibition had only delayed the transition to limited use (e.g. Langlitz 2012: 235). But soon it became clear that, instead, psychedelics entered a second round of hype and anti-hype.

The new hype began with the passage from preclinical to clinical research in the 2010s when the rest of neuropsychopharmacological research and development lapsed into crisis. In 2010, most big pharmaceutical corporations decided to cut their losses. They stopped investing in their central nervous system pipelines, which had produced insignificant variations of old drugs for three decades (Miller 2010). The comeback of psychedelics became one of the few areas of psychopharmacological research and development that gave researchers and investors new hope amid widespread diagnoses of a global mental health epidemic (Langlitz 2022). Due to their politically motivated prohibition, these substances never had the chance to show their mettle, the drugs' champions suggested. Now they had got a second chance. The result was a new – or rather the return of an old – treatment model that offered an alternative to the insurmountable limitations of biological psychiatry.

Instead of correcting anomalies in neurotransmitter systems, they increased neuroplasticity and would be used to catalyze a psychotherapeutic process that gave new meaning to patients' lives, especially if the drugs induced mystical-type experiences that made patients understand their finite existence as connected to something infinitely larger, which would outlive their suffering. Between 2017 and 2019, the incoming results of the first clinical trials proved promising enough for the US Food and Drug Administration (FDA) to designate psilocybin- and MDMA-assisted therapy for depression and post-traumatic stress disorder as breakthrough therapies (Aday et al. 2019). By 2021, about 600 pharmaceutical start-ups jockeyed for the emerging mental healthcare market that would open as soon as regulatory agencies approved the first medical applications. Successful decriminalization and rising illicit use have given fresh vigour to nonmedical applications. Media coverage has become so ebullient that some worry that the psychedelic renaissance is a bubble about to burst. [Fig.2] [Fig.3]

The backlash has begun

This bubble is poked from several sides. First, scientists questioned the rigour of each other's data and interpretations (Doss et al. 2022). There was nothing unusual about this. If anything, it might have been an overdue corrective to shared enthusiasm and an insufficiently agonistic peer review process in what had initially been a small and somewhat exotic corner of psychopharmacology and psychiatry where everybody knew each other.

Second, clinical trial results did not meet the high expectations of investors and journalists. While psilocybin was still on its path to market approval, it began to look less like penicillin for the soul, whose therapeutic efficacy was hard to miss and more like other psychiatric drugs whose benefits had to be teased out of the statistical data (Carhart-Harris et al. 2021; Goodwin et al. 2022). These sobering findings sent psychedelic start-up stocks plummeting in the broader biotech bear market context.

Third, prominent psychedelic researchers warned against meeting psychedelics with either superenthusiasm or superscepticism. Familiar with the literature on hype cycles, they worried that history would repeat itself. If radically inflated and culturally charged expectations that psychedelics could cure mental disorders and put an end to racism and war went unchecked, the backlash might be so pronounced that the drugs would again be discounted and repressed instead of graduating to limited medical use (Yaden et al. 2022; see also Noorani & Martell 2021). As psychedelics enter Western societies through medicine rather than religion, they cease to be wonder drugs and spirit molecules and find their place in normal science as regular pharmaceuticals. This disenchantment may contrast sharply with the strange and often fantastic experiences they continue to elicit. Anthropologically, the question is how this tension between experience and empiricism will be resolved.

The hype bubble has also come under attack from a very different angle, as the mainstreaming of psychedelics led these substances into the American culture wars. Surprisingly, the strategy of the most prominent activist organization – the Multidisciplinary Association for Psychedelic Studies (MAPS) – to appeal to both liberals and conservatives appears to have succeeded in keeping this formerly divisive class of substances out of the political field of fire. At a time when even trivial items of everyday life have become bones of partisan contention, psychedelics of all drugs enabled two bipartisan initiatives in the US Congress to support psychedelic research in 2022. Yet this smooth integration into American life is precisely rife with social conflict, generating massive friction in a rapidly diversifying psychedelic culture. Thus, the second round of anti-hype does not take the form of a moral panic among 'the Establishment' but comes from forces *within* a psychedelic culture that registers moral and political discontent with the medicalization and capitalization of psychedelic drugs.

The most prominent representatives of this cultural critique have been critical psychedelic study proponents, scholars and journalists associated with the watchdog organization Psymposia. These denounced ties that MAPS and leading psychedelic researchers cultivated with right-wing philanthropists, media personalities and pharmaceutical corporations seeking to maximize shareholder value and profits (Devenot et al. 2022; Pace & Devenot 2021). Analogous to the #MeToo movement, these critics also decry a culture of silence surrounding sexual predation in psychedelic therapy settings that protects both abusive therapists and the clinical trials meant to return psychedelics to mainstream medicine and society.[1]

While much in favour of decriminalizing psychedelics, these voices demand conformity with professional codes of conduct, the penalization of unethical behaviour and an alignment of psychedelic culture with American progressivism against the right over bipartisanship. Journalists reporting on the psychedelic renaissance now regularly cite these critics. After several years of almost exclusively positive media coverage, the news value has shifted from puffing the therapeutic potential of psychedelics to scrutinizing cases of scientific controversy, sexual assault, corporate greed and authoritarian currents in psychedelic culture (Browne 2022; Love 2021).

This remoralization and repoliticizication of psychedelics has little in common with earlier anti-drug campaigns but tries to ensure that psychedelics will only be used for good instead of spreading across a factionalized society where they serve a variety of supposedly unethical and politically harmful ends. Meanwhile, members of advocacy groups

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Langlitz, N. et al. 2021. Moral

and clinical trial researchers who see the goal of market approval within reach, reject many of the allegations. They worry that waking slumbering moral anxieties and pulling psychedelics into the culture wars might not lead to normatively limited uses but renewed repression. As the level of moral aggression rises, American psychedelic culture begins to look more like American culture at large: what used to be known as 'the psychedelic community' is now scattered across a rugged ethical and political terrain.

(A)moral anthropology of psychedelics

Anthropology takes hype and anti-hype as social facts that produce effects and impact where psychedelics will eventually land. It is not the anthropologist's job to promote psychedelics as the next big thing in psychiatric medicine or as a consciousness technology that will enable us to overcome the planetary crisis. And just like the anthropologists of old could leave it to missionaries to condemn cannibalism, anthropologists of the psychedelic renaissance should study rather than rebuke LSD use by right-wing militias. The word *unethical* does not belong to the anthropological vocabulary: the goal is not to decide what is ethical and unethical but to understand what is at stake in distinct ethical projects. Paradoxically, such an attitude reflects an ethic of its own, but it is a vocational ethic oriented toward nonmoral, especially epistemic values (Langlitz 2019, 2020a, 2020b).

Considering a recent pharmacopsychological study that suggests that psychedelics foster liberal and anti-authoritarian attitudes, the use of psychedelics on the far right not only calls for an anthropological veto over unfounded generalizations but also suggests that we do not know yet what a psychedelic drug is, what it can or cannot do to humans (Langlitz 2020c; Nour et al. 2017). This opens a space for collaboration between anthropologists and psychopharmacologists on psychedelics' moral and political effects (Langlitz et al. 2021).

Looking at the ethnographic archive, it becomes clear that the societal functions of psychedelics have gone far beyond medical applications. They have served as tools for belief transmission, lent credence to different cosmologies and have been used in rites of passage to fuel a sense of ethnic identity (Dupuis 2021; Furst 1976). If psychedelics were widely institutionalized in Europe and North America, if we did indeed become a mushroom people, the question is what novel nonmedical cultures would emerge around these substances. Even if their uses remained confined to the augmentation of psychotherapies, it is important to note that no psychotherapy is simply about the reduction of psychopathology: there are always ethical questions at stake (how to relate to an abusive parent, how to personally overcome racial trauma, what meaning to give to one's life, etc.).

In their edited volume *Therapy with psychoactive substances,* Henrik Jungaberle and colleagues wrote: 'Psychotherapy is not just a treatment method but, in (post-) modern societies it also designates a form of life. After the breakdown of traditional systems of orientation (church, village community, party ideology, etc.), for many people it has become an identity-defining project' (Jungaberle et al. 2008: 38). Anthropologist Alex Gearin and literary scholar Neşe Devenot argued that the ethical questions posed by psychedelic therapies are continuous with political questions as this treatment modality individualizes solutions to complex social problems and thereby stabilizes neoliberal and anti-authoritarian moralities as therapeutic (Gearin & Devenot 2021).

With an eye to society at large, philosopher Thomas Metzinger (2009, 2023) proposed cultivating a consciousness culture guided by consciousness ethics, which evaluates actions and states of consciousness, including

Fig. 3. *Psilocybin is on an expedited path to receiving market approval.*
Fig. 3: *The new hype began with the transition from preclinical to clinical research.*
Fig. 4. *LSD store in Berlin selling the LSD analogue 1D-LSD in 2022.*

pharmacologically altered states of consciousness. How the introduction of psychedelics transforms consciousness cultures is not only a neuroethical but also an ethnographic question. The psychedelic renaissance is equally relevant to medical and moral anthropology: what is the place of psychoactive substances in different moral cultures? Do they transmit and amplify existing cultural valuations, or do they transform such valuations? Are psychedelics means to different ends, or do they alter the ends themselves (Latour 2002)? [Fig. 4]

The case of psychedelics is especially interesting for moral anthropology because they frequently induce mystical-type experiences (Griffiths et al. 2006). Anthropologist James Faubion (2013: 296) points out the 'ethically irritating role of mysticisms in the history of ethical transvaluation'. Irritating because, in an economy of ethical valuation, mysticism represents the maximally indeterminate pole opposed to the maximally determinate pole of a strict moral order enforced through disciplinary practices. It is no coincidence that time and again, psychedelics have attracted and produced anti-establishment figures that promote these drugs as tools of desubjectivation and to challenge moral routinization.

Faubion notes that even ethical liberals usually disapprove of such characters – and for good reason. For mystics must remain eccentric: if they moved to the system's centre, the system would fall apart. And yet, Faubion (2013: 303) argues, 'we need our mystics after all' because 'a bit of systemic irritation is a good thing'. The decisive question for moral anthropology to answer ethnographically is how to define 'a bit': what is the right metric of ethical irritation in already ethically irate societies? And the question for an anthropology of the psychedelic renaissance is what cultural consequences a potential spread of mystical experiences would have for contemporary Europe and North America.

As anthropology resumes its enduring interest in the uses of psychedelic drugs, the goal is no longer to exoticize the West, one way or another. Nor is it to participate in either hype or anti-hype. Suppose psychedelic states of mind find a place in European and North American cultures. This event will be historically significant enough to provide plenty of fodder for ethnographic and moral enquiry. ●

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