

Are we amidst a psychedelic renaissance?

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Background

Psychedelics have long been used by many cultures for spiritual and healing purposes. Examples of this include the use of magic mushrooms in religious ceremonies by old civilizations of Central America, like the Mayas and the Aztec; the use of cactus with psychedelic compounds by native Americans; and the use of ayahuasca by indigenous tribes in the Amazon jungle (Rucker, Iliff et al. 2018).

With the discovery of **LSD in 1943** by the swiss chemist Albert Hoffman (Fig. 1), these substances started to be largely investigated in the medical field during the mid twentieth century, both in the United States of America and in Europe (Rucker, Iliff et al. 2018). Studies were performed mainly in psychiatric patients with disorders like alcoholism, depression and anxiety. From the scientific field, the use of psychedelics proliferated to the recreational ground. However, mainly due to political reasons, summarized in what is now known as the war on drugs, their use both for investigation and recreation was prohibited in the seventies.

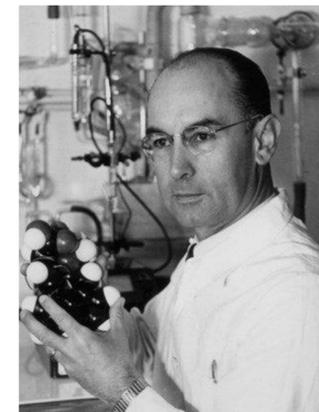


Fig. 1 - Albert Hoffman

Some argue that a new **psychedelic renaissance** is taking place in the last few years, because of a renewed interest from the scientific and the cultural fields (Raison 2018). We aim to review the evidence of a new psychedelic renaissance.

Methods

Literature review of published papers on classic serotonergic psychedelics in the last 10 years; investigation of cultural references about psychedelics like media coverage, published books and documentaries.

Results

There seems to be a renewed interest in psychedelics both in the scientific ground and the cultural ground (Fig.2). There is a large body of new research on the neurobiology, phenomenology and therapeutic potential of psychedelics (Sellers, Romach et al. 2018). The therapeutic potential has focused on addiction, depression and existential anxiety of cancer patients (Swanson 2018). At the same time, there is some evidence of a cultural interest in psychedelics. In a globalized world, ancient tribal practices are now available to a larger crowd (Winkelman 2005, Kavenska and Simonova 2015). In what has been called as 'psychedelic tourism', shamans travel outside their countries to spread their practices and foreigners travel to countries where ancient psychedelic practices are still present.

Psychedelic Renaissance

Scientific Renaissance

- Clinical trials:** In recent years, several clinical trials have been published about the effects of psychedelic substances on such diverse conditions as **depression** (Carhart-Harris, Bolstridge et al. 2018), **anxiety** in patients with life-threatening diseases (Ross, Bossis et al. 2016) or **addiction** (Johnson, Garcia-Romeu et al. 2017). Specialized research centres are now available, such as the **Center for Psychedelic & Consciousness Research** in the Johns Hopkins Hospital in the USA (Hospital) and the **Centre for Psychedelic Research of the Imperial College London**, in Europe (College).
- Scientific societies** – Scientific societies exist on both sides of the Atlantic. In the USA, the **MAPS Foundation** has had an important role in developing randomized clinical trials with psychedelics. In part due to their work, it is expected that MDMA will be available by 2023 as a FDA-approved treatment for post-traumatic stress-disorder, after phase-3 trials are completed (MAPS). In Europe, the **MIND Foundation** has been developing work in several fields: research, psychotherapy and drug policy (MIND).
- Scientific encounters** – Resulting from the above, scientific encounters specifically addressing psychedelic science are now possible, for example the **Insight Conference** held in Berlin (MIND) or the **5th International Conference on Psychedelic Consciousness** held in London, both in 2019 (Convention).

Cultural Renaissance

- Influential authors in popular culture:** In 2018, the influencing author **Michael Pollan** published a landmark book on psychedelics that reached the nr. 1 best seller list of New York Times, fostering a public discussion the subject since then (Pollan 2018).
- Legalization of religious practices with the use of psychedelics:** In 2006, the religion **União do Vegetal**, original from Brasil, in which believers take ayahuasca ceremonies, received approval to use the tea legally, which is regarded as symbol of a larger acceptance of use of these substances (Pollan 2018).
- Psychedelic tourism:** Simultaneously, ceremonies where ayahuasca is taken are occurring worldwide, outside their original setting in the Amazon forest. This dissemination of use has been referred to as **ayahuasca tourism** – shamans travel to developed countries and occidentals travel to the Amazon forest to take ayahuasca (Winkelman 2005, Kavenska and Simonova 2015).

Conclusion

The proclaimed psychedelic renaissance is backed by a renewed interest in research, with research centers specifically focusing in psychedelics and by a profusion of knowledge about psychedelics in the larger cultural context. Amidst a new psychedelic wave, psychedelics need to be reviewed from several standpoints: therapeutic potential, abuse potential, harm reduction and influence on culture.

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