

# The history of psychedelics and why psychedelic stories matter

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## Erika Dyck delves into the history of psychedelics, exploring how these substances have piqued the interest and influenced the attitudes of individuals across academia, culture, and medicine

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Psychedelic drugs have had a long and colourful history.

Although the word psychedelic was not officially coined until 1957, botanists, psychiatrists, anthropologists, and historians had long encountered substances that altered consciousness or even produced psychotic-like symptoms.

These experiences had captivated researchers and adventurous spirits who often attempted to give meaning to the experience, whether in a therapeutic or introspective encounter. Anthropologists became fascinated with indigenous rituals that incorporated the consumption of plants that caused spiritual visions.

At the same time, chemists clamoured to isolate their active ingredients or alkaloids from such mysterious or magical plants or plant healers/teachers to study the pharmacological properties separately from a ceremonial context.

The fascination with drug-induced alterations in consciousness has attracted a variety of serious observers but has also been held responsible for inducing pathological conditions, exacerbating depression and psychosis, and in extreme cases causing suicides.

## The history of psychedelics and its polarising effects

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These polarising opinions on psychedelics have, until recently, often reflected contemporary trends in cultural attitudes towards non-medical drug use in general and the role of consciousness-altering substances in clinical medicine.

For a brief period during the Cold War, these perspectives came into direct conflict: psychedelics represented a challenge to modern biomedical medicine by encouraging subjects to engage in a consciousness-altering and behaviour-changing psychotherapeutic experience.

This approach differed dramatically from a pain-dampening, or symptom-suppressing approach to healing, which became a more typical view of the role of psychopharmacology at the start of the mid-century. A decade later, the non-medical use of psychedelics also placed these substances at odds with the war on drugs and the mantra of 'just say no.'

Many early published writings on the topic were mainly anecdotal, providing testimonials about what these plant medicines did and claims about why they were so valuable for humanity.

That spirit of wonderment captivated authors and readers for several decades. It stretched beyond academic publishing – whether in science or literature, or philosophy – and began inspiring other minds and other writers. There was something about the psychedelic experience that was highly transformative and personal, which encouraged people to want to write theirs down.

## **Historians and journalists: Conflicting approaches when it comes to the history of psychedelics**

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Historians and journalists have not always followed the same path. Histories of psychedelics from the 1970s to the early 2000s were often more critical of the psychedelic culture – scientific trials and the counterculture connections.

Throughout this period, several historical accounts of this topic took a more pessimistic view, highlighting the unethical American CIA experiments or exposing Timothy Leary as a cult-like figure. Several historians and journalists since the 1970s seemed to take the side of the war on drugs and described psychedelics as dangerous, sometimes addictive, and often associated with a nefarious capacity to alter minds or change people's attitudes.

A growing but familiar tension exists in how we talk about psychedelics, particularly as we move beyond a psychedelic bubble or insider community. Academics tend to talk about legitimate research using scientific language, and social scientists consider the cultural impact or non- medical uses of psychedelics.

Still, we are trained to do this from a distance as dispassionate observers. Despite this writing tradition, more and more public conversations on psychedelics are coming from insider accounts, people with enthusiastic claims about the benefits of psychedelic drug use that rely on severing the current culture of psychedelics from the past, and some might even suggest severing psychedelics from mainstream institutions which tend to be more conservative – like universities or food and drug administrations, or even healthcare systems.

## **Psychedelic popularisation both in and out of science**

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In the 1950s, psychedelic researchers faced many of the same questions regarding concerns about mainstreaming psychedelics or making psychedelic medicine or therapy more broadly available. As a result, some investigators promoted their findings through the scientific community exclusively. In contrast, others either broke ranks with their colleagues or pursued a path of psychedelic popularisation outside of science.

For example, Abram Hoffer, a Canadian psychiatrist and biochemist, worked closely with psychiatrist Humphry Osmond on developing guidelines for treating alcoholism with psychedelics. Hoffer presented and published widely but almost exclusively within professional contexts.

However, he was openly critical of randomised controlled trials (RCTs) and pharmaceutical profits, which he felt distorted the psychopharmacology science. On the other hand, Timothy Leary famously lost his position as a psychology professor at Harvard (along with his colleague Rich Alpert). He dedicated himself to spreading the gospel of psychedelics using his considerable charisma and extensive networks that extended well beyond the scientific community.

## **Psychedelics and the arts**

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We know, too, that writers, poets, and psychedelic enthusiasts took to the pages of pulp fiction in the 1960s, writing accounts of their altered states and cosmic journeys. Some became counterculture icons, like William Burroughs, Ken Kesey, and Allen Ginsberg. Other LSD enthusiasts had more staid public images to uphold and discussed it more cautiously.

For example, Thelma Moss, a then- little-known actress who had taken LSD in therapy, wrote a bestseller about her experience under the pseudonym Constance Newland. The pen name allowed her to explore some of the darker sides of psychedelic therapy and the vulnerability experienced by women in this context. Still, others attempted to popularise psychedelics to profit off their knowledge without necessarily encouraging public use.

R. Gordon Wasson wrote an article on his adventures seeking 'the divine mushroom' in Life magazine in 1957. It was many Americans' first introduction to the reality that some mushrooms did have Alice-in-Wonderland properties.

In the 21st century, we are faced with a similar situation. Scientists and health researchers are competing with journalists and celebrities for political capital in the court of public opinion on the fate of psychedelics. For example, in 2018, food critic and best-selling author Michael Pollan entered the conversation when he published How to Change Your Mind, where he introduced readers to his voyages through consciousness by using different psychedelic substances.

Pollan's book brought much attention to psychedelics, broke from scientific or scholarly traditions, and relied on a testimonial-style intervention. And, more and more high-profile confessions or explorations are appearing from athletes, entrepreneurs, innovators, and actors, and the list grows daily.

## **How does the history of psychedelics affect our opinions on it today**

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How people learn about psychedelics today matters. Psychedelic researchers in the past were not simply victims of bad science or poor judgement. Public reactions and fears about psychedelics in the mainstream did not necessarily heed scientific or evidence-

based reasoning.

How we manage the psychedelic message seems to rely on more than evidence. Still, it also concerns what kinds of stories we privilege and how we facilitate opportunities for diverse voices in this conversation.

Reconciling our relationship with this past, and building genuine platforms for diversity into our future, may offer a more sustainable path for confronting some of the prejudice that has been baked into current drug regulations.

Considering diverse stories, including those that appear as psychedelic testimonials, may also help repair some of the damage caused by a war on drugs that celebrated abstinence and silenced drug consumers from sharing their expertise on harm reduction.

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