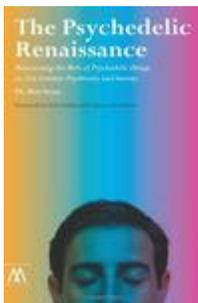


## Cleansing the Doors of Misperception

A review of



**The Psychedelic Renaissance: Reassessing the Role of Psychedelic Drugs  
in 21st Century Psychiatry and Society**

by Ben Sessa

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Reviewed by

[James Fadiman](#)

[Peter H. Addy](#)

After 40 years of almost-total prohibition, human research with psychedelic drugs has resumed, this time with the use of modern robust research methodology. Psychologists, psychiatrists, and neuroscientists who wish to update their understanding of these substances and their effects will find Ben Sessa's book a useful overview of their unusual past, the rapidly changing present, and a likely future of psychedelic use.

In *The Psychedelic Renaissance: Reassessing the Role of Psychedelic Drugs in 21st Century Psychiatry and Society*, Sessa deftly outlines the ancient cultural and religious use of psychedelic plants, including psilocybin-containing mushrooms, mescaline-containing peyote, and N,N-dimethyltryptamine (DMT)-containing ayahuasca, as well as the profusion of laboratory-derived substances including lysergic acid diethylamide (LSD) and 3,4-methylenedioxymethamphetamine (MDMA). He offers a dispassionate history of the

first wave of modern Western psychedelic research and describes in detail the ongoing investigations of the function and effects of plant and chemically facilitated spiritual and healing experiences.

Sessa contends that being knowledgeable about psychedelic drug experiences and research is important for psychology for a number of reasons. Most obviously, people are using these drugs, whether we like it or not; therefore, we had better understand them, if only to reduce what harm comes from their misuse. Indeed, according to the National Health Survey on Drug Use and Health, in 2011, 3.6 percent of adults 18–30 reported using a psychedelic in the past year. Previously, in 2006, approximately 23.3 million people aged 12 and over had used LSD. In 2009, there were 337,000 first-time LSD users. In 2010, this figure jumped to 377,000 (Johnston, O'Malley, Bachman, & Schulenberg, 2012).

Individuals who take these drugs should have access to accurate information to maximize harm reduction, and clinicians (and legislators) need to know about the actual dangers and benefits of the various licit and illicit substances. This pragmatic harm reduction approach is shared by Sessa's colleague David Nutt, whose book *Drugs Without the Hot Air* can be seen as a companion volume (Nutt, 2012). The premise of both books is hardly controversial: Possessing knowledge about drugs reduces misuse.

These books are valuable, in part, because we are still emerging from a long period of officially sanctioned information restriction. The fact that Nutt was fired from his longtime position as a senior advisor to the UK government for publicly suggesting that evidence-based legislation about drug use would be preferable to the current situation makes it clear that it will be a while yet until regulation catches up with science.

Psychedelic effects are relevant, as well, because of their value to the explosion of neuroscience research. These compounds offer unique probes into specific receptor systems implicated in many aspects of consciousness, personality, and behavior change. Furthermore, their use allows for unprecedented experimental analysis of experiences including love, bliss, and mystical experience, such as the Johns Hopkins-based series of studies in which psilocybin was used to induce spiritual experiences and subsequent stable personality change (Griffiths et al., 2011; MacLean, Johnson, & Griffiths, 2011).

## **Beyond Treating to Healing**

Where Sessa goes beyond Nutt, and indeed beyond much of modern clinical theory, is his assertion that for him current treatments, especially psychiatric ones, primarily treat or suppress symptoms; they do not cure or heal the person. For the latter, he argues, we need to assess the implications of results of psychedelic-assisted psychotherapy. Recent randomized clinical trials have investigated, among other conditions, the efficacy of MDMA-assisted psychotherapy to treat posttraumatic stress disorder (research Sessa intends to replicate),

LSD- and psilocybin-assisted psychotherapy to treat anxiety related to having a terminal illness, the use of psilocybin and an LSD analog to treat cluster headaches, and the use of ayahuasca and ibogaine in the treatment (and cure) of substance dependence. In addition, the use of ketamine as an alternative treatment for depression has already led to a new theory of the neurocircuitry of depression itself.

Sessa makes clear that, for him, a final reason to understand psychedelics is that, used correctly, they have helped healthy individuals become better human beings. This may explain, in part, the extensive personal experimentation and interest in these substances by graduate students in psychology and medicine. Sessa cites several suggestive anecdotes, including the positive LSD experiences of Alcoholics Anonymous founder Bill Wilson, Apple founder Steve Jobs, and Nobel laureate Kary Mullis (he also includes the contentious claim that Nobel laureate Francis Crick used low doses of LSD to conceptualize the double helix structure of DNA).

Implied in some of Sessa's more speculative chapters is the possibility that all of these substances can act as neuroplastic accelerators. This may begin to explain the massive, immediate, and lasting improvements in previous treatment-resistant patients with conditions like posttraumatic stress disorder (Mithoefer et al., 2013) and chronic alcoholism, and it holds the potential for a new generation of mental health pharmacology and treatment.

## **Science and Policy**

A problem students and researchers alike still face is that, for decades, most information about psychedelics in popular, governmental, and even scientific sources has been incomplete, distorted, and in many cases just plain wrong. Sessa's review is the best well-documented overview of prior and current research and includes a clear exposition of the issues that need to be dealt with before the science can proceed to the next stage of utility.

Restrictions on research, although lessened in recent years, are still formidable. This fact tempers but does not dampen Sessa's optimism in forecasting an expansion of applications for these substances. Sessa himself, after stressing the safety and therapeutic value of MDMA given as part of a therapeutic regimen, recognizes the problems already occurring when between 300,000 to 500,000 young adults in the United Kingdom are taking Ecstasy (which often contains MDMA but is also often adulterated and contaminated) every weekend. As of now, most of the mental health establishment lacks the basic knowledge to know how to work with the small but real percentage of severe problems that do occur with Ecstasy users.

It is difficult but, Sessa says, necessary to come up with appropriate regulations for illegal substances widely used, even touted by the stars of popular culture as inherently pleasurable, while at the same time making the same substances legally available to people

like Sessa and his colleagues to treat this same population. As law professor Matt Lamkin wrote,

Faced with two people using drugs in the same way, it is unacceptable to send one to prison and cut the other an insurance check. The idea that we can prevent people from using drugs to change how they think, feel, and behave has always been a pipedream. (Lamkin, 2012, para. 10)

Distinguishing *The Psychedelic Renaissance* from other histories is Sessa's encyclopedic knowledge of how musical groups, especially the Beatles, the Byrds, and Bob Dylan, played a role in the original wide dissemination of these substances and how contemporary music still influences their use today. Other contributions, found nowhere else, include annotated and mostly up-to-date lists of the few funding foundations, the major research locations, and the important individual researchers. Finally, Sessa has a wry sense of humor and writes well, rare traits in the professional psychopharmacology literature.

The purpose of a book review is three-fold: to describe the contents, to evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of what is presented, and to suggest whether the book in question is worth investing the money (valuable) and the time (invaluable) to read. One of us (James Fadiman) teaches in this area. In the future, he will assign Sessa's book as the text. It is an indispensable guide to these widely used, skimpily researched, and wildly inaccurately described substances. They were once, and may become again, the most extensively researched class of psychiatric pharmaceuticals. *The Psychedelic Renaissance* is one more step forward in our understanding of psychedelic experiences that may in turn help us in mapping the complexity of mind-body interaction.

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