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Treating substance dependencies with psychoactives: A theoretical and qualitative empirical study on therapeutic uses of ayahuasca

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Objective: This dissertation explores the therapeutic uses of the Amazonian psychedelic plant compound ayahuasca in the field of complementary addiction treatment. The study addresses the following questions: (1) What is the therapeutic value of ayahuasca in substance-dependency treatment from a psychotherapeutic perspective? (2) Which variables influence treatment outcome? (3) What possible risks are associated with this treatment approach? (4) Is it possible to integrate this practice, rooted in indigenous Amazonian medicine, with modern medical and psychotherapeutic approaches to addiction treatment?

Research Methods: The research subject was approached by a literature review and an exploratory field study with qualitative research methods, which included participative observation, problem-centered interviews and the review of textual resources. Data were evaluated with qualitative analysis according to Miles and Huberman. Three partial studies were undertaken. The first study reviews ten therapeutic treatment institutions that employ ayahuasca as an adjunct in substance-dependency treatment. The second analyzes treatment outcomes from the subjective perspective of four indigenous ayahuasca therapists, nine therapists with medical or psychological training and two researchers in the field of ayahuasca and mental health. The third analyzes experiential reports of fourteen patients.

Results: Ayahuasca-assisted treatment and handling of substance dependency is found in traditional, religious, psychotherapeutic and hybrid therapeutic contexts. The literature review and outcome reports from therapeutic facilities suggest promising results, including for some non-responders to conventional treatment. Effects comprise the support of physical and psychological detoxification; increased awareness of the body; anti-craving effects; catalization of psycho-emotional processes; overcoming of denial mechanisms and facilitation of positive psychological resources, insights, and interpersonal, transpersonal and spiritual processes. Effects may, according to the interviewed therapists, be achieved principally through ayahuasca-induced non-ordinary states of consciousness. In particular confrontative experiences, the reliving of emotionally relevant life events, existential experiences, peak experiences and experiences of “redemption” are considered therapeutically relevant. Pharmacological processes may also play a role.

Both the patient's capacity for integration of the ayahuasca experience and the therapeutic support for such integration can have an important influence on treatment outcomes. Also, a number of other variables related to the patient, the treatment, the aftercare and the social context were identified as influencing treatment outcomes. Interviewed therapists regarded ayahuasca as a reasonably safe therapeutic agent in carefully structured professional therapeutic settings when counterindications were taken into consideration.

Discussion: The study results indicate that indigenous ayahuasca-assisted approaches to substance-dependency treatment and modern psychotherapeutic and medical approaches can be integrated with reciprocal benefits, when done with mutual respect and professionalism. The integration of ayahuasca-assisted treatment in modern contexts requires, however, the adaption of traditional rituals within structures for preparation, integration and aftercare. Concerns arising from the spread of ayahuasca around the globe include commercialization of indigenous practices, which may expose naïve individuals to charlatany. The author recommends the establishment of multidisciplinary, intercultural boards of experts, which could contribute to the regulation and optimization of existing therapeutic practices and further scientific exploration of this therapeutic tool.

This study was intended to generate empirically based hypotheses on the therapeutic mechanism of ayahuasca. Further clinical investigation is still warranted to assess the efficacy of ayahuasca-assisted treatment for substance abuse in comparison to current best practices. A design for such a study was proposed.