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# New Age Seekers: MDMA Use as an Adjunct to Spiritual Pursuit

Lynne Watson\* & Jerome Beck\*

**Abstract** — The use of MDMA as an adjunct to spiritual pursuit among New Ager seekers is examined. These study respondents indicated that social worlds greatly influenced which qualities of the MDMA experience were most pursued and valued. In contrast to recreationally oriented respondents, who saw minimal long-term benefits accruing from MDMA use, New Agers typically believed that carefully planned experiences possessed significant potential for lasting spiritual and/or therapeutic value. While many New Agers eschew the use of alcohol and other drugs, these respondents were generally impressed with MDMA. Nevertheless, they differed in their motivations for use and their perceptions of its influence in their lives: some employed MDMA as a sacramental adjunct for following specific spiritual paths; others viewed it as aiding their spiritual growth in more general ways. Because the approaches to and motivations for using MDMA differ so markedly for New Agers and recreationally oriented users, the importance of social worlds and context in studying drug-using behavior is underscored.

**Keywords** — hallucinogens, MDMA, New Age, spirituality, subjective effects

By virtue of the media blitz that accompanied its scheduling controversy, 3,4-methylenedioxymethamphetamine (MDMA) suddenly occupied the public limelight for a brief period during the mid-1980s. Descriptive accounts typically cited both recreational and therapeutic attractions of this newly popularized drug.<sup>1</sup> On the one hand, college students and young professionals were enthralled with the sensual and euphoric qualities of "Ecstasy." Their enthusiastic descriptions were juxtaposed with those of psychiatrists and their patients, who were much more interested in MDMA's therapeutic potential in treating particular psychological and emotional problems.

In addition to these perspectives, some articles quoted users who focused more on what they perceived to be the spiritual attributes of the MDMA experience. This emphasis was also reflected in anonymously written "flight guides," which described proper use of MDMA to interested individuals before the extensive media coverage in the 1980s (Beck 1986). The philosophies and/or life-styles espoused by many of these users led Adler (1985: 96) to declare in an early popular press article that MDMA was

"the drug of choice of those who identify with the global consciousness and romantic ecology of the 'New Age' movement."

The use of MDMA as an adjunct to spiritual pursuits among a diverse group of individuals who could generally be described as "New Agers" is examined in the present article. In so doing, the authors hope to shed light on a unique drug and user population. In addition, the popularization and use of MDMA among a particular group demonstrates the conceptual importance of "social worlds" and "context of use" in shaping individual motivations and expectations as well as the drug experience itself.

Relevant data presented in the present article are drawn primarily from the findings of what remains the only federally funded sociological study of MDMA users (Beck et al. 1989).<sup>2</sup> In addition to understanding the MDMA experience itself, the research team sought to identify user populations and their respective motivations for use as well as beliefs about the drug. To accomplish this task, 100 formal in-depth interviews were conducted, each lasting three to four hours and utilizing both taped qualitative and quantitative instrument components. These were supplemented with ethnographic fieldwork at Dallas nightclubs, "Acid House" clubs in San Francisco, Grateful Dead concerts, and other locations where people used

\*Institute for Scientific Analysis, 2235 Lombard Street, San Francisco, California 94123.

MDMA; numerous informal interviews were also conducted. In so doing, a broad cross-section of users belonging to target populations — identified by pilot studies and media accounts — was sampled.<sup>3</sup> Subjects were recruited using the chain-referral method (Biernacki & Waldorf 1981) and theoretical sampling (Glaser & Strauss 1970).

Of the 100 respondents, 62 were men and 38 were women. They ranged in age from 16 to 73 years, with an average age of 35. The sample was 95% White, with 85% claiming to be heterosexual, 6% homosexual, and 9% bisexual. This was an educated population, with the average level of schooling being 16.3 years: 72% held bachelor's degrees, 30% masters' degrees, and 12% had received a Ph.D. or an M.D. Most of the respondents had never been convicted of a crime, were single (59%) and had no children (67%). Eighteen percent were married and 14% were divorced. Thirteen percent were students, 8% writer-journalists, and 8% in the high-technology fields. With the exception of students, about 50% earned a yearly income of between zero and \$20,000, while the other 50% earned above \$20,000; 31% earned more than \$35,000 per year.

In sum, the average respondent was about 35 years old, White, and heterosexual. Most listed their religious preference as either Spiritual (but no organized religion) or Jewish. The majority held a college degree, was single, and had no children. Many were students, and many others were employed full time in skilled professions. Their income socioeconomic status was middle to upper-middle class.

### SIGNIFICANCE OF USER SOCIAL WORLDS

User groups are extremely influential in shaping both the context and meaning of individual drug experiences. The concept of user "social worlds" employed in the present article reflects important societal developments that have substantially altered group characteristics and dynamics over the past few decades. A brief historical overview is helpful in understanding these changes and their significance.

Prior to the 1960s, the stigma and threat of punishment associated with the use of illicit drugs was severe. Media attention and drug legislation often contained an underlying intent to control certain populations whose reputed drug-induced escapades had aroused the fear and suspicion of society at large. Illicit drug use was typically associated with ethnic and racial minorities: opiates with the Chinese and poor ghetto Blacks, marijuana with Mexican migrant workers and illegal aliens, cocaine with Southern Black laborers (Helmer 1975; Musto 1973; Duster 1970). Repression and hysteria drove users into insulated and esoteric underground subcultures, which developed their own highly prescribed social sanctions, rituals, and criteria for membership.

However, a new phenomenon took place during the 1960s with the rapid spread of psychoactive drug use across the nation. Users in many parts of the country were informed and influenced more by mass media reports than by extant user subcultures (Brecher 1972). These new users were increasingly White middle-class youths.

One consequence of this phenomenon was a gradual change in the sociolegal status of most illicit substances. As the penalties and stigma associated with use became less severe, the need for highly protective subcultures diminished accordingly. Insulated, well-defined drug subcultures increasingly gave way to larger, more amorphous social worlds of illicit drug users. The concept of social worlds characterized a looser, less-defined sense of social grouping in which the individual's identity was increasingly shaped and informed by mass communication and the media. These new social worlds differed from traditional user subcultures in not being bound "by territory nor by formal group membership, but by the limits of effective communication" (Shibutani 1961).

Like their abstemious counterparts, psychoactive drug enthusiasts in today's society generally participate in many diverse social worlds. The importance of particular social worlds that include mind-altering drug use is significantly influenced by one's overall attachment to such use. Conversely, the extent of involvement in social worlds that have minimal or no interest in psychoactive drugs also contributes to limiting desire, availability and/or use.

Owing to MDMA's recent popularization, social worlds of MDMA users are only beginning to develop. Within these circles, a body of user folklore is evolving that informs and conditions individuals to accept certain norms of appropriate and inappropriate use, overall expectations, and perceived benefits and harms. In essence, these social worlds become remarkably effective in defining and/or influencing the attitudes, use patterns, and overall drug experience of the individual user (Beck et al. 1989).

### MDMA Social Worlds and Motivations for Use

Motivations for use are greatly influenced by an individual's identification with various social worlds. Some worlds are generally nonexclusive, and most of the respondents identified with more than one to some extent. With this in mind, it is necessary to understand which social worlds are most primary or pivotal in introducing and shaping MDMA use and its associated meaning for different users.

It is also important to emphasize the dynamic nature of social worlds and their participants. For example, many respondents described being introduced to MDMA within a particular social group and later shifting identification to a different social world that may have discouraged MDMA use or ascribed a different meaning to the experience. In addition, social worlds themselves often change

in relation to their view of acceptable drug use. As with other psychoactive drugs (particularly psychedelics), a journey through the various social worlds of MDMA users often reveals more about user context and expectations than about the drug and its pharmacology (Beck 1990). A brief examination of motivations for use is helpful here in understanding the different social worlds of users.

Different segments of the study sample were attracted to MDMA for two fairly distinct reasons: its alleged therapeutic/spiritual benefits and its reputed euphoric/sensual properties. Most users acknowledged both qualities, although there was considerable disagreement as to their relative importance. Often a sharp dichotomy existed between those who employed MDMA for perceived personal growth or enlightenment and others who primarily used it for recreational or social purposes. These differences in user rationales were evident in the diverse MDMA social worlds.

Although many respondents in the study considered MDMA to be a primary drug of choice, they presented different points of view regarding its most significant attributes. These differences were often reflected in the nicknames respondents gave to MDMA. On the one hand were individuals who specifically used "Adam" as a therapeutic and spiritual adjunct. Many of these individuals pursued New Age spiritual directions, often reporting little use of other drugs, with the possible exception of psychedelics. On the other extreme were those who sought the acclaimed euphoria and sensuousness associated with "Ecstasy." These respondents typically had used a wide array of psychoactive drugs and found that MDMA provided many of the qualities previously sought in other substances (e.g., cocaine). Reflecting on the terminological distinction regarding the most appropriate nickname, one New Ager explained: "I prefer to call it 'Adam.' 'Ecstasy' is a beautiful word, but I think Ecstasy is a word more often used by people taking it for thrills. And since I'm not a part of that group, I don't like to use [the word 'Ecstasy']."

Although extremists on both sides often found it difficult to understand each other, the vast majority of users in the sample fell along a continuum somewhere in between, sensing and often pursuing both therapeutic and recreational benefits. Even the most therapeutically inclined respondents reportedly experienced at least some euphoric or sensual enjoyment. Similarly, hard-core recreational and/or social users often attributed their enhanced communication abilities or valuable long-term friendships to MDMA use. In general, most respondents felt their MDMA use had provided a varied mixture of therapeutic, spiritual, and recreational benefits. However, there were substantial differences of opinion regarding the relative importance of these diverse attractions.

The varied motivations, intentions, and expectations found among the diverse social worlds of users provide

a significant explanation for the often remarkable differences in MDMA experiences. Acknowledging these influences, a veteran user and former dealer described what he believed to be the three major types of MDMA reactions: "I would say maybe 30% of the people that take it have major insights about being alive and interacting in the world and trying to be fine human beings: 30% have those major insights, another 30% really like it and have fun with it, and the last 30%, basically, probably feel fairly neutral about it. They're used to something much stronger or it disconcerts them in some way or it just doesn't move them at all."

Given the above, certain questions were addressed in order to examine the commonalities and differences between various social worlds of users. What are the important demographic variables that underlie the various user groups? What are the primary motivations for MDMA use among these groups as well as for their use of other drugs? Do they consider their MDMA use as an "end in itself" or simply a "means to an end?" The following discussion of New Age Seekers addresses these questions, attempting to provide a better understanding of this particular population. In addition, it illustrates how set, setting, and expectation influence user experiences and contribute to the formation of user social worlds.<sup>4</sup>

#### NEW AGE SPIRITUAL SEEKERS AND MDMA

The nebulous nature of the term "New Age" became readily apparent in the present study when the investigators attempted to label certain respondents as New Agers. The term has acquired something of a bad rap, often calling to mind participants in hokey seances or spaced-out nouveau-hippies wearing crystals around their necks.<sup>5</sup> The research team spent a considerable amount of time debating the criteria for inclusion in this definitive group, while also acknowledging the diversity of these respondents. An operational definition was developed, describing New Agers as members of a social world that included those respondents who described their use of MDMA as primarily spiritually oriented in nature and who identified with certain precepts commonly associated with the New Age movement.<sup>6</sup> They often saw MDMA as a valuable therapeutic tool as well. Many of these respondents did not necessarily conceive of themselves as New Agers. Certainly, there were markedly varying degrees of identification with New Age perspectives. Nevertheless, the prevalence of belief systems associated with this phenomenon merits the following discussion, which examines the history and meaning underlying philosophies of this type.

Many of the respondents had studied Eastern religions, attended human potential seminars (e.g., est or Lifespring) and/or were following a wide variety of spir-

itual paths. Some had been doing so since the 1960s, when an explosion of consciousness movements, Buddhist and Hindu teachers, and psychospiritual practices appeared on the scene. Many combined these approaches with the use of psychedelic drugs in their search for self-awareness and enlightenment.

### A Brief Review of New Age Perspectives

Much of this activity was the culmination of interest in the writings and predictions of various astronomers, astrologers, spiritual leaders, psychics, mystics and historians, both esoteric and exoteric, who had been observing for the past several decades that the planet was rapidly approaching a critical juncture in human existence. Some prognosticators averred that the years prior to the New Age's inception around the year 2,000 would be a time of chaos that people could transcend with adequate preparation.<sup>7</sup> Psychic Ruth Montgomery wrote (Montgomery & Garland 1986) that this New Age would "... bring with it an expanded consciousness, an acute awareness of the psychic realm and a deeper understanding of the purpose of living . . . it is awakening people of sufficient development to the reality of one world, one Creator, one Universal Truth — the eternal truth that there is no death and that love is the unifying force of the cosmic world. Such an attitude will help human beings to overcome their fears and reach out in helpfulness to others when the earth undergoes periods of famine, flood, earthquakes and spasmodic warfare."

Hippies of the 1960s often saw themselves as heralds of this new era. Psychology had reached the masses, and the new psychology was teaching people to love themselves, understand and communicate with others, and deal with their anger by getting it out into the open. In addition, psychology and the medical sciences were beginning to talk about preventive medicine and holistic health, concepts emphasizing that a sound and healthy body and mind were essential to total well-being. These concepts were embraced by those who saw the New Age as a time of love, harmony and the pursuit of enlightenment, in which people would transform a chaotic planet into a utopian paradise. Various writers claimed that in order to do this, people would need to prepare themselves for coming periods of strife by expanding their consciousnesses to unite with other enlightened ones and with the entire universe to nurture rather than destroy the planet. Reflecting the above, one article (Fong-Torres 1988) summed up the New Age movement as "... a new way of looking at the world that involves the mind, the body and the holistic way of seeing that everything is interconnected." Ferguson (1980) argued that the purpose of the New Age movement is no less than to achieve total "personal and social transformation."

Spirituality — a "transmaterial world view," as Satin (1978) called it — is an essential part of New Age philosophy. New Age and other spiritual seekers have used

a wide variety of techniques to raise their consciousnesses and attempt to achieve oneness with God (in whatever way they understand this term) and the universe. Many studied Eastern religions, which had been teaching such techniques for centuries. The influence of Eastern spiritual paths was recognizable in the growing belief that a hierarchy of more highly evolved consciousnesses is accessible, that being is eternal (reincarnation) and that actions have consequences (karma). In the 1960s, psychedelic drug use also became a part of this scene. According to Stafford (1983):

The first crest of the psychedelic movement, in the 1960's, coincided with a general recovery of the religious impulse, seen especially in the revival of interest in Eastern religions. A new flexibility in religious belief and spirituality came about at a time when influences such as existentialism had convinced many that "God is dead." . . . A sense of harmony spread with the use of psychedelics, along with a new appreciation of non-violence. However, these religious feelings weren't organized; they occurred spontaneously within individuals and were accepted largely as recognitions common to people who had seen beyond ordinary states of consciousness.

It is not surprising that after nearly 30 years of the association between psychedelics and religiosity/spirituality, a strong belief that these drugs can serve as an adjunct to such pursuits has become firmly entrenched. Most of the New Age respondents in the present study had prior experience with LSD and/or other psychedelics before discovering MDMA. A 32-year-old writer emphasized the importance of using MDMA and other psychedelics as an adjunct to her other spiritual practices:

And I already had taken up the practice of meditation and spent time in a monastery and intensive meditation retreats and reading very thoroughly in Buddhism and Hinduism and stuff like that for several years before I had taken any psychedelic drugs . . . [which] are of inestimable importance for many people in breaking through, in kind of initiating one into another level of awareness. But for the most part, they are abused. In my life, I'm not so sure that I've had, you know, unbelievable experiences that have been incredibly important for me. But they go hand in hand with more disciplined kinds of spirituality — particularly in meditation, doing meditation. For me, they've enhanced things that I had begun to appreciate and become curious about.

It is important to note, however, that growing numbers of New Agers eschew the use of all drugs, including alcohol. They believe that the use of such substances may open the user to illusory insights, possession or obsession and weaken the body and mind. Reliance on drugs is seen as contracting rather than expanding the consciousness by focusing the user in only one direction, thereby closing off other possible pathways (much the same way that a narrow flashlight beam in a dark room illuminates objects directly in front of it while leaving the rest of the room in blackness). Although many New Agers have significant past drug experience, rising antidrug sentiment within the movement is reflected in both the influence of and in-

creased participation in various 12-Step and other recovery programs. This trend is exemplified by the 1991 *New Age Sourcebook*, published by the widely distributed *New Age Journal*. While many pages are devoted to recovery programs and emphasize a drug-free life-style, there is no mention of the use of psychedelic substances for spiritual growth.

### Motivations and Introduction to MDMA Use

Undoubtedly, this growing antidrug sentiment has discouraged many New Agers from experimenting with MDMA. However, its highly-touted spiritual and therapeutic qualities as well as recommendations from similarly minded users, ultimately overcame respondents' reluctance to try a methamphetamine-based substance that was not even organic. One woman was the child of an alcoholic father and attended self-help groups to deal with childhood traumas. Despite having successfully avoided almost all psychoactive drug use (including alcohol), she was nevertheless intrigued by MDMA's reputed qualities:

I am very interested in spirituality. . . . I was studying Eastern religion, and I studied crystals, and I always looked at things outside myself. I never thought very much of myself. . . . So when this girl told me about this drug [MDMA], she said that it opens you up and it makes you feel alive and, most of all, it makes you feel. . . . She said that it would free me. I would be in touch with nature. It's almost like being close to God. 'Cause ACA's [Adult Children of Alcoholics] are always looking for God. They're always looking for an answer to make them happy.

Another woman also chose to try MDMA for enhancing spiritual growth: "And when I heard about [MDMA], I think that [Diane] and I had been talking to [Peter] about LSD and tripping or spiritual growth and initiative and that sort of thing, and he wanted to help me. He said, 'Well, have you tried MDMA?' I've found it much more helpful to me . . . in that way. And I really wouldn't have done it if it weren't for this."

Spiritual guides and teachers were responsible for the first use of MDMA for several users: "I encountered a gentleman who turns out to have been one of the major suppliers of MDMA during the seventies who became a very close personal friend and a spiritual teacher, in a manner of speaking, who had a lot of information and who I trusted. And through that person I gained the necessary confidence and the necessary information to know what to expect and to know a lot about people who had done it. . . ." One respondent met the individuals who later introduced him to the drug during the early New Age movement days in Oregon: "I started taking New Age trainings when I got here. . . . I really loved it and this Temple of Isis thing being sensitivity training in the early seventies, and then doing other trainings for psychological counseling and stuff like that. So I got here and found all these classes offered and met some of my best friends even to this day in those classes."

### Perceptions of the MDMA Experience

Reflective of a book devoted to spiritual and therapeutic accounts of MDMA experiences (Adamson 1985), several respondents used the word "heart" in describing the effects of MDMA. According to Hindu teaching, the heart chakra is the center of spiritual experience and feelings, as opposed to the head chakra (the crown center or Brahmarastra), which is the center of cognitive learning and thought. A 33-year-old electrical engineer, who had studied yoga, explained how MDMA affected his spiritual outlook:

*Interviewer:* So your yogic path was through the mind?

*Respondent:* Oh, I'd say very much so, yeah.

*Interviewer:* Would you say that's still true now?

*Respondent:* I don't think of myself at all that way. . . . But I guess I would say that MDMA is what developed that whole aspect of me more than anything else.

*Interviewer:* Which aspect?

*Respondent:* The aspect of heart versus mind. I think I realized what a lot of people mean by heart for the first time in my life.

A 32-year-old German chemist described his perception of MDMA's benefits in similar terms: "Opening of the heart and being more communicative and being able to talk about themselves more freely, and getting detached from their egos and being able to change, being able to let go of old structures and habits."

Several respondents believed that God had provided this substance for their benefit and used the word "grateful" when describing their experiences. A 24-year-old follower of Bhakti yoga (the path of love and devotion) said: "I get a feeling, which I guess falls under spiritual effects — I get a feeling of great thankfulness, a feeling of connection with God and just wanting to say, 'Thank you for this beautiful experience.' And I'm feeling very grateful and appreciative."

A 35-year-old psychiatrist, who had been a practicing Buddhist for nearly 20 years, used his Zen meditation training to help him overcome difficulties he encountered during his first MDMA experience: "I mentioned, I think, my first MDMA trip, when I got a little bit despairing and desolation overwhelmed me. I just flushed my breath and felt compassion for myself. One thing I learned to do as a result of meditating [when I have] nightmares: instead of running away, I'll just turn around and look at whatever it is and chase it or open the door when it doesn't want to open and stuff like that. So that's what I did with my fear of MDMA — my meditation. Yeah, it worked well." A 72-year-old man echoed other accounts from this user population in explaining why he considered careful preparation necessary for ingesting MDMA: "It was like a sacrament. That's the best description. But if you are going to go into a Holy of Holies and present your body as a living sacrifice for something to happen, for healing to take place, you want to give it the best chance."

Many of the spiritual questers were also therapeutically oriented. Such an orientation is a natural extension of many New Age beliefs, which stress helping others as well as seeking individual insight. Some of these respondents were psychiatrists, psychologists or counselors; others counseled or guided people in their spiritual pursuits. For them, like the German chemist quoted above, MDMA's benefits combined spiritual and more traditionally therapeutic aspects, as exemplified by a 35-year-old psychiatrist's description of his attraction to MDMA: "Mostly I liked it because it made me feel good . . . for therapy and for feeling good. And it can be used for religious stuff. I had some feelings of awe and mystery and wonder — religious."

One 33-year-old man, who gave workshops "focusing on dealing with people in spiritual emergency," felt the integration of the spiritual and the therapeutic was necessary for those in crisis. He explained how MDMA could help:

I think that the preeminent aspect of MDMA is a sense of acceptance. That, I think, produces the timelessness — you just accept you're not going anywhere . . . that's why I've used it with monks, rabbis, Zen Buddhist priests, as an aid to meditation in 25 to 50 mg doses — some very preeminent and prominent. All the reports in the media that came about the spiritual use of it? Those are all people I'd turned on, and they were willing to speak out to the press because they respected the experiences they had. . . . So those people who are most distant from themselves need that the most. So people who [have] Post-traumatic Stress Disorders, people who are psychotic, suicidal, schizophrenic . . . now, I'm assuming it's not psychoses of an organic nature. But if someone is that far gone, I think that's where it should be used first.

A 57-year-old counselor explained how MDMA could be used as an adjunct in treating people who are depressed. She was a little embarrassed about using spiritual terminology to describe the MDMA experience, but could find no other:

One of the experiences that people hesitate to talk about with MDMA, but which is actually the basic and most important experience that MDMA can give anybody, usually comes spontaneously . . . it goes under many names, some of them very far-out spiritual-sounding sort of nonsense, but those are the only names you can use. It's an experience of the core self or sometimes called the God-space or the peaceful center, or somebody once described it as experiencing themselves being held in the hands of God, this feeling that something in the universe is totally accepting of them as a whole, you know, bumps and warts and all, no matter what they have done or not or what they are or are not. It is a deeply spiritual experience, and it is perhaps most valuable for the person who is in a severe depression because it is the core of the experience of self-loving and self-acceptance. . . . Each person has their own way of explaining what it is. But once experienced, it is a permanent part of their consciousness and their view of themselves. And this is something MDMA can open up. It has nothing to do with the drug. It is intrinsic in the human psyche, of that there is no question. But MDMA seems

to be able to open that up, especially in an extremely depressed and stressed person. Now, that is one of its greatest values.

Because the New Age respondents believed that MDMA could serve as a useful adjunct in their efforts to attain various therapeutic and spiritual goals, many were distressed by its recreational use. They felt that such use defiled a "sacrament" or had contributed to MDMA's criminalization.<sup>4</sup> Although describing blissful intoxication as a potential outcome of taking MDMA, many respondents viewed this as secondary or even potentially distracting from their intended "work" or "search." Acknowledging the powerful and seductive powers of Ecstasy, some users claimed to deliberately fend off such feelings in order to reach a deeper, more beneficial level of experience. According to one 30-year-old man, "The biggest stumbling block for almost everybody who's into this sort of experience is the experience of intoxication. It's very easy to become intoxicated. And when you become intoxicated you lose your direction, you just fall into the experience completely. And while that's lots of fun, and that can be a very valid goal to have for the experience, you're not going to get any further as long as you remain intoxicated."

One New Age respondent described the difficulties involved in attempting to integrate spirituality and psychology in regard to MDMA use. She felt that people must be taught how to use MDMA to minimize potential problems and maximize benefits. She recommended that a board of advisors and consultants be set up to oversee the regulation and administration of the drug. She was asked what type of people should be selected to serve on such a board: "Well, I would *not* look to traditional psychiatry because, as I understand it, their approach to altered states is that they are dysfunctional, and that's not what's happening, usually, with MDMA or LSD. I would be more inclined to ask the transpersonal psychologist, if I'm gonna look in the psychology field. . . . But then on the other hand, I think there's a need for spiritual guidance, and I would prefer to consult with yogis and people like that . . . or the shamans, sure."

### MDMA on a Spiritual Path

Whereas some respondents dabbled with New Age ideas or practices, others lived them in a much more all-consuming manner. The use of various psychedelics has frequently played a central role for many spiritually oriented groups (Smith 1988). Similar to the ritualistic use of psychedelic plants by indigenous cultures, LSD has been employed as a sacrament by certain groups since the 1960s (Lyttle 1988). To a lesser extent, a similar phenomenon has occurred with MDMA. A description of the most prominent and well-organized spiritual group incorporating MDMA for transcendental purposes follows.

A 65-year-old artist and teacher who described the

MDMA experience as "a eucharist, a communion" took MDMA for the first time on the Inhuatana, the highest point in the ruins of Machu Picchu in Peru, and meditated for four hours. Later, she became involved in a spiritual path based on ancient mythology and astrology, which was formulated in the mid-1980s. The originator of this system introduced MDMA into the ritual of the group, while at the same time asking members to discontinue the use of all other drugs. The purpose of this path, according to this respondent, is to "create your higher body so that you move into a state which is no longer death-interrupted" (i.e., one becomes immortal, discarding the necessity to reincarnate). She and others stated that several hundred people are "making this journey," each attending a session on a day ruled astrologically by one's own particular planet. She described the MDMA use at sessions as follows:

Well, for the first year [one attends a session] every three weeks. And people do their work individually — no sound. They just lie down, close their eyes, and wait for the message that is uniquely theirs. [They're taking] different amounts [of MDMA]. It's graded in a resonance . . . you start, for instance, with 50 [mgs] and then you take 50 the next, and then you go to 75 and then you go up to 100, and then you go down to 75. And there is a chart, which according to the powers of those particular times, they meet and provide you with what you are to learn at that particular time.

She claimed that people receive different personal messages and insights during their experiences and that no guidance or counseling was provided as to the "meaning" of the sessions. In Peru, she had found a statue of a goddess while on her first MDMA experience. She revealed that during her second MDMA session:

I was told that I was to tell people about the . . . Path. And then I got up and went out on the beach where I was and a voice said, "You don't have to pick things up any more," and in that place I had found a statue . . . which is a Madonna — not the one I found in Peru . . . this was about 18 years later, and the voice said, "You don't have to pick up anything," and I bent down and scooped up sand and started to throw it. . . . And I felt something and I opened my hand, and in my hand was a little heart . . . that would fit in the Madonna. So it was like an absolutely spontaneous, in-the-moment important message, practical as well as a little bit of metaphysical stuff manifest in something.

She also claimed that people experienced cellular rejuvenation during their MDMA sessions:

And then another time, a session that other people have had too, I felt as if the voice said, "If you'd just roll over and get out of the way, we'd work on your cells." And so I felt as if I rolled up inside me and had this renewal going on inside me, and at the end of the session I was just me again . . . almost everybody who's been on [the Path], the first three or four or five or six sessions, you can see a difference . . . [they look younger and healthier or] they look more vital, something is more sparkling.

She also described aural and energy experiences: "And then there's sound equipment that you do at that time and vibrate your head, your third eye [the chakra of insight or clairvoyance] . . . some people who are more sensitive to energy than I said they could feel it going all the way through their body. One person dropped the little speaker that you hold up because he just went into a trance." Summing up her feelings about MDMA's place on her spiritual path, she stated that "it's not possible to say in a rational way what it is except that it feels good [and] it seems to be a system that is growth oriented. . . . I know that [MDMA] opens the gate, and I don't know why it is MDMA. I'm not a chemist. But it has a specific chemical basis that other substances do not have."

### RESPONDENT PERSPECTIVES ON LONG-TERM SPIRITUAL VALUE OF MDMA

The question of whether or not the MDMA experience is capable of providing any significant or lasting therapeutic or spiritual benefits is reminiscent of the long-standing controversy over the value of other psychedelic drugs, such as LSD. Are the alleged therapeutic effects (e.g., enhanced insight, reduced fear, empathy) of MDMA illusory, short-lived or potentially permanent?

When MDMA is used under appropriate conditions, therapeutically and spiritually oriented respondents strongly believed the insights and other positive benefits gained from its use could be integrated into everyday life. Several of them described how their first experience with MDMA had resulted in profound realizations and life changes. A 39-year-old mother of three children with minimal previous drug experience had no preconceptions about MDMA when she first took it on a secluded beach. She described both spiritual and therapeutic qualities in experiencing an incredible "bliss": "I experienced my essence . . . I had only been experiencing a small part of me. I felt this tremendous love for myself . . . I felt so happy, blissed-out, beautiful, and free, free, free . . . I went for a walk and figured out my whole life."

Similarly, a 40-year-old woman was very ignorant and negative about drugs in general before trying MDMA. As a result of her experience, she went from being a traditional housewife to a self-professed New Ager. She explained that "I was conscious of my body. . . . My heart got to swell out. . . . I moved into a space of consciousness where I experienced everything as one experience . . . You never see things the same again . . . a classic cosmic experience. . . . I felt warmth and flowing . . . a release of those blocks in me."

The most frequently reported spiritual dimension was a profound feeling of connectedness with all of nature and humankind. Respondents often sought the MDMA experience for the compassion, empathy, and unconditional

love they believed it fosters. After observing many positive relationships started or strengthened by MDMA use, a 35-year-old man concluded that MDMA is indeed "... the love drug, and you feel love a lot and you're able to express love and really feel the love."

Therapeutically and spiritually oriented respondents frequently described their efforts to incorporate both the feelings and insights garnered from the MDMA experience into their everyday lives. A 24-year-old Bhakti yoga follower explained how MDMA helped guide her on a spiritual path:

*Respondent:* Bhakti is the yoga of devotion, and I'm trying to see every experience in life as leading us closer to God and bringing out a more loving, harmonious way of being with other people and generally just having a devotional attitude.

*Interviewer:* OK, do you think MDMA has had any effect on your spirituality and your religiosity?

*Respondent:* Yeah, it has. It's been very useful from a Bhakti yoga perspective, because it's very heart opening and that's what you try to do in Bhakti yoga. So I think that it could have potential for people who want to learn to do that who don't already know how, especially.

One respondent, who had studied Eastern religions while holding on to some of his earlier Christian beliefs, remarked on MDMA's effect on his spirituality: "It certainly makes me feel a confirmation that there is sort of an equity in life, certain equity between the souls of people and equity in the balance of the life of man and the life of other forms on earth... certainly that man is a part of the web of life on earth." Many spiritually oriented users saw MDMA as a priceless tool in assisting spiritual evolution and New Age consciousness. A 72-year-old long-time user echoed the views expressed by many respondents in arguing that MDMA is the ideal medicine for an ailing society: "It is empathizing. It is so reassuring and rewarding, allowing a renewed access to feeling, which has been pretty much eroded out of our culture — too much thinking, not enough access to feeling. And the feelings are so warm and trusting that I think it's a precious gift and we're not learning how to use it."

#### PATTERNS OF USE: "GETTING THE MESSAGE"

Therapeutically or spiritually oriented users rarely reported abuse problems and generally used MDMA sparingly. A therapeutically oriented dealer concluded that those who attempt to abuse MDMA in their search for enlightenment are quickly disillusioned: "For me, the drug abusers, the MDMA drug abusers, have invariably been manic and have achieved these states that have been valuable to them but they don't want to come down after it... it really is destructive of that feeling you were seeking in the first place. Which is one of the safeguards of

MDMA, that within a relatively short period of time — I've seen it happen in a month and a half — it stops working at all. People get really exhausted. It's this manic sense of not wanting to do the real work."

While most of the New Age respondents continued to use MDMA periodically, some did not. In accordance with accounts provided by many psychedelic users in the 1960s, many respondents attributed their reduction or cessation of use to "getting the message." In essence, they felt that they had learned all that the MDMA experience could teach them and had integrated it into their everyday lives. Further use would therefore be unnecessary and potentially draining.

A German chemist strongly believed MDMA to be a very quick and efficient "learning tool" that "can be drawn into daily life because the drug does not lead very far away from daily life... it's not something that has to be used over and over again, because if somebody has learned it once, he got it. And he doesn't need it for that anymore." A psychiatrist who employed MDMA as an introspective psychological tool felt that he had successfully integrated the experience by simply "choosing to be happy." As a consequence, he no longer felt a pressing need to take MDMA again. Nevertheless, he remained open to the possibility of another experience, viewing his MDMA use as analogous to going to a monastery: "... great but you wouldn't want to live in one. You want to be able to use and utilize what you learn from them and be able to retreat to them periodically."

Some respondents believed that a few experiences were all that was needed to transfer the benefits of MDMA to their everyday lives. A young facialist described how she structured her last few MDMA experiences to learn what was necessary to feel that way naturally: "I remember when I'm on the drug how I say to myself, 'Why can't you feel like this in your everyday life?' And I decided that when I took the drug that that was going to be one of the reasons why I took it the last couple of times." As a result of her MDMA experiences, she declared that "I found myself... I never took the drug to get high, so the reason why I was taking it was to open myself up. And it did its job. It would be redundant if I took it now... I don't need to take the drug with someone to talk about something. I have all the skills now. And it gave me the start." As a consequence, she believed that she no longer needed to take MDMA, despite the fact that she considered it to have been the most beneficial experience of her life. She felt that she could produce the benefits spontaneously, simply by visualizing the experience. She even wondered whether taking MDMA again would produce any noticeable reaction: "So I don't know, maybe if I took it now I probably wouldn't feel anything."



## CONCLUSION

The research team of the Exploring Ecstasy study found that respondents' social worlds greatly influenced what qualities of the MDMA experience were most sought after and/or valued by users. Differences in intentions and expectations help explain why positive attributes described by some respondents were devalued or not recognized by others. As a consequence, the role played by a particular user's social world(s), combined with his or her own motivation, greatly shaped the actual MDMA experience itself.

In contrast to more recreationally oriented respondents, who saw minimal long-term benefits accruing from their MDMA use, New Agers typically believed that carefully planned experiences possessed significant potential for lasting spiritual and/or therapeutic value. While generally impressed by MDMA's qualities, spiritual seekers nevertheless differed with regard to motivation for use and perceptions of how MDMA had influenced their lives. While some employed MDMA as a sacramental adjunct for following specific spiritual paths, others viewed their use as aiding their spiritual growth in more general directions. Some New Agers have continued to use MDMA, while others feel they have "gotten the message" and subsequently discontinued its use.

What these New Age users had in common was a belief that MDMA had contributed beneficially to their various spiritual and therapeutic quests. Because their approach to and motivation for using MDMA differs so strongly from groups of more recreationally oriented users, they underscore the importance of social worlds and context in studying people's drug-using behavior.

## NOTES

1. MDMA is a psychoactive drug that is chemically related to both mescaline and the amphetamines. Although commonly labeled as a psychedelic drug, it possesses stimulant properties as well. It is rarely hallucinogenic and seldom produces the sensory phenomena or mental confusion associated with LSD and other psychedelics (Beck 1986; Seymour 1986; Shulgin 1985).

2. National Institute on Drug Abuse Grant No. R01 DA0440801, "Exploring Ecstasy: A Study of MDMA Users," Marsha Rosenbaum and Patricia A. Morgan, Principal Investigators, Jerome Beck, Project Director, and Beatrice Rouse, National Institute on Drug Abuse Project Officer.

3. In addition to the New Age Seekers examined in the present article, other significant user groups included college students, professionals, yuppies, gays, Deadheads, Dallas nightclubbers, and Acid House enthusiasts. For further information about these groups see Beck 1990, Beck

et al. 1989, and Rosenbaum, Morgan and Beck 1989.

4. The significance of set (the attitude of the person at the time of drug use, including personality structure) and setting (the influence of the physical and social environment in which the drug use occurs) in explaining illicit drug use and abuse has been well-documented (Zinberg 1984; Weil & Rosen 1983; Maloff et al. 1982; Rosenbaum 1981; Harding & Zinberg 1977; O'Brien 1976; Goode 1973; Weil 1972; Becker 1967).

5. Meditation, human potential seminars (such as est and Lifespring), Esalen, channeling, Indian magic, crystals, astral projection, prophecy, vegetarianism, holistic medicine, and healing have become — in varying degrees — identified with the New Age movement.

6. Such a definition would also apply to large numbers of Deadheads (aficionados of the Grateful Dead rock band) and Rajneeshes (members of the controversial sect led by Bhagwan Sri Rajneesh). Informal interviews suggested that in addition to maintaining alleged stockpiles of MDMA at their central Oregon commune of Rajneeshpuram (Unsigned 1985), followers of the Bhagwan were largely responsible for the initial distribution of MDMA throughout the world.

7. According to astrologers (Hall 1959), an "age" lasts for a "period of 2,160 years required for the regression of the sun through one of the zodiacal constellations." Therefore, sometime during the twentieth century (estimates range from 1936 to 1999), the Piscean Age, which began shortly before the birth of Jesus, will be coming to an end and the Age of Aquarius or the New Age will begin. For example, one interpretation (see Montgomery & Garland 1986) of the sixteenth century prophet Nostradamus' writings suggests that a cataclysmic global catastrophe will occur in July, September or October of 1999, followed by a period of great peace.

8. An extreme example of elitism was demonstrated by a small group of New Agers who had borrowed the theory of "morphogenetic fields" developed by biologist Rupert Sheldrake (1983). Applying this concept to MDMA, they conceived of a field of cumulative collective experience that all users somehow tapped into on ingestion of the drug. These respondents expressed concern that the field would become "polluted" or "muddied" by casual thrill seekers. For these users, MDMA was a religious sacrament or healing medicine; they did not want it trivialized or abused.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The authors gratefully acknowledge contributions of Deborah Harlow and Paul Watson as well as the consultation of Marsha Rosenbaum, Patricia Morgan, and Douglas McDonnell.

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