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Psychedelic Science

Recreational drug users and academics join in conference



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This past weekend, the Psychedelic Science 2013 Conference, co-hosted by the Multidisciplinary Association for Psychedelic Studies (MAPS), took over two floors of the Oakland Marriott City Center, with attendees spilling into bars and waiting areas.

Though the illicit thrill of psychedelics (written in rainbow letters on the conference bric-a-brac) was dampened somewhat by the staid surroundings of the convention center, recreational drug users and academics alike networked at a conference that UC Berkeley professor of molecular and cell biology David Presti deemed “extraordinary.” Over five days, researchers discussed their clinical studies with LSD, psilocybin, MDMA, ayahuasca and other psychedelic drugs, and focused on the drugs’ therapeutic benefits.

The conference was like any other academic conference in that it was largely self-referential. Like novelists who resurface only for book tours, academics work assiduously, often cloistered in their respective niches. It is unsurprising, then, that not all are charismatic. Nonetheless, aside from a few speakers who pursued so arcane a specialty that it bordered on the personal, most researchers attracted a substantial number of nonacademic spectators. One such researcher was Amir Raz of McGill University (“The Neural Correlates of Altered Consciousness”). He opened his presentation

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with the following question: “How would you like to experience altered consciousness? A) 40-year meditation training in a cave or B) ingestion of a substance?” According to Raz, western culture, given its impatience, is migrating toward answer B. Raz’s approach was democratizing and his half-hour time slot was chock-full of scientific aphorisms like, “Science is not about the truth. We have no monopoly on truth,” or, “Remember that scientists, as dogmatic and anal as they are, are people.” He also offered pointers on how to get articles published in journals: “Brain images, always in color, better to have three dimensions.”

Each of the presentations reserved a few minutes at the end for questions. Fanaticism is implicit at a conference until the question-and-answer segment, at which point it becomes explicit. The questions, only obliquely related to the topic at hand, often devolved into a live version of Yahoo! Answers; Recreational practitioners would ask for personal diagnoses. For this reason, seasoned attendees fled as soon as the applause petered out. After Raz’s presentation, for instance, an older man who had taken LSD around 50 times and finally experienced “ego death” asked so esoteric a question that even the presenter was not privy to the question’s meaning and struggled to answer.

But not all presentations followed this pattern. The headlining act of Sunday was easily Earth and Fire Erowid (“State of the Stone 2013: Drugs of the Future, Now”). Erowid, the nonprofit dedicated to educating users on psychoactive drugs and plants, also manages the site EcstasyData.org. Users can anonymously submit ecstasy (in tablet or powder form) to the DEA-licensed laboratory for testing. EcstasyData then publishes the findings on the website along with photos. Given their illicit nature, drugs like MDMA are not necessarily subject to the same stringent standards that other drugs are subject to. For this reason, the founders emphasized the importance of “knowing what you’re getting.” In the crowded ballroom, Earth and Fire Erowid were met with electric applause. A few even sprang out of their seats for standing ovations. Earth and Fire used their clout and time to discuss drug awareness and presented compelling evidence on the rapidly changing drug industry. During a lecture on the infamous bath salt face-eating zombie uproar last year, they cautioned that a “poorly-functioning media” was willing to quote any authority tangentially related to the topic at hand. They also pointed to a startling number of new drugs emerging each week: 2012 boasted 73 new drugs. “Knowing what the dosages are is a big issue,” the pair said.

The conference’s main focus, however, was the use of psychedelics to alleviate pain for major ailments like PTSD and nicotine addiction. “Having been a close witness to the evolution of research in this area over the last 20 years, it is tremendously exciting to see the momentum grow as the contemporary field of psychedelic science truly begins to take off,” Presti said.

It was precisely this sort of practical application that was on display during Matt Johnson’s presentation (“Psilocybin and the Treatment of Nicotine Addiction”). Johnson, an instructor at Johns Hopkins University, conducted promising research on psilocybin in smoking cessation. The goal of his pilot study was to change the patient’s orientation toward the future so that “longterm benefits outweighed immediate desires.” His study proved successful. Of roughly 15 patients, nearly all emerged from the study with overwhelmingly positive results.

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