

A Psychotherapeutic View on the Therapeutic Effects of Ritual Ayahuasca Use in the Treatment of Addiction

ANJA LOIZAGA-VELDER, DIPL-PSYCH



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AYAHUASCA IS A TRADITIONAL PLANT preparation of the Amazon basin with psychoactive properties. In recent decades ayahuasca has gained the attention of researchers in multiple disciplines worldwide due to its acclaimed therapeutic and spiritual qualities. It is an admixture of two plants: the harmaline containing vine *Banisteriopsis caapi*, and the DMT-containing leaves from the *Psychotria viridis* bush. It is typically administered by a trained expert in a ritual context.

The use of ayahuasca has spread beyond the Amazon in the last few decades, reaching around the globe in contexts of religious, shamanic, psychotherapeutic, and hybrid ayahuasca rituals (Labate & Jungaberle 2011; Tupper 2008). Many participants report gaining benefits from ayahuasca rituals in ways such as acquiring deeper knowledge of oneself, personal and spiritual development, or healing for a variety of psychological and physiological afflictions, including substance dependencies (see Groisman & Dobkin de Rios 2007; Labate & Bouso 2010; Labate et al. 2010; Mercante 2009; Santos, Carvalho de Moraes & Holanda 2006; Schmid 2008; Thesenga & Thesenga 2012).

Based on observations of the positive therapeutic effects that ayahuasca ceremonies can have on people with addiction issues, informal and formal support for recovery from addictions is currently provided in diverse settings. These include rituals offered by indigenous healers, ayahuasca circles, or psychotherapists, and more or less structured ayahuasca-assisted, inpatient and outpatient addiction treatment programs. Such approaches are rooted either in indigenous Amazonian medicine traditions, the Brazilian Ayahuasca Religions, psychedelic-assisted psychotherapy, or consist in a hybrid combination of these. Some multidisciplinary intercultural pilot projects have shown

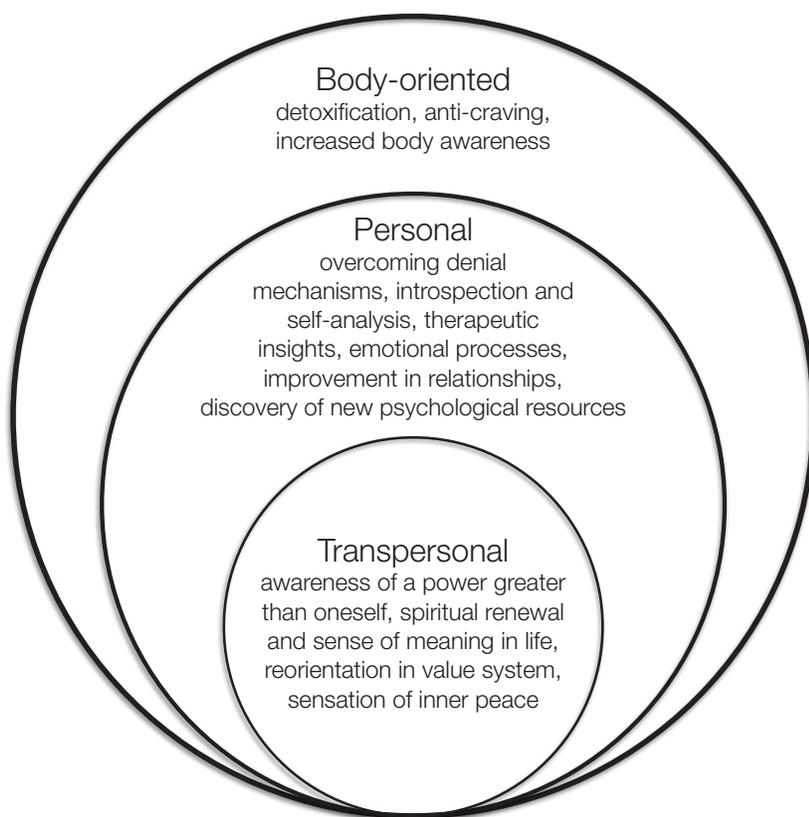


Figure 1: Therapeutic value of ayahuasca.

promising preliminarily therapeutic outcomes (Fernández & Fábregas in press; Giove Nakazawa 2002; Mabit 2007) that warrant further scientific confirmation through controlled clinical trials.

This author conducted an exploratory study using qualitative research methods based on a combination of participant observation and problem-centered interviews (Witzel 2000), in order to describe the therapeutic value of ayahuasca in addiction treatment from a psychotherapeutic perspective, and to provide guidelines that may help improve therapeutic efficacy for traditional and modern ayahuasca-assisted addiction treatment. Research data was evaluated and conceptually structured with qualitative data analysis according to Miles and Huberman (1994).

The qualitative study included: (1) a review of seven therapeutic projects

which apply ayahuasca in the treatment of addiction in diverse settings, (2) interviews with four traditional healers and 11 mental-health professionals with expertise in both treatment of addictions and therapeutic ayahuasca use, and (3) interviews with 14 individuals who had undergone ayahuasca-assisted therapy for addiction in diverse settings (Presser-Velder 2012).

THERAPEUTIC VALUE

The findings of this research indicate that participation in ayahuasca rituals can help certain individuals gain abstinence from, or reduce, the abuse of harmful psychoactive substances in a substantial way. In an appropriate context, ayahuasca can be a valuable therapeutic tool and can act as a catalyst that can render psychotherapeutic processes more effective in less time, and sometimes allow for

critical interventions when several other therapeutic strategies have been unsuccessful.

Substance dependency can be conceptualized as a multi-factorial problem that requires comprehensive and integral intervention strategies. Ayahuasca seems to provide multidimensional subjective experiences that can facilitate interconnected body-oriented, psychological, and spiritual processes with observable therapeutic outcomes.

The most relevant findings of this study concerning the therapeutic value of ayahuasca from the perspective of therapists and ritual participants are illustrated graphically in the figure to the left.

BODY-ORIENTED EFFECTS

Due to the intense physical experiences that are commonly associated with the ingestion of ayahuasca, ayahuasca-assisted treatment can be characterized as a body-oriented approach. Body-oriented effects of the ayahuasca experience may include subjective experiences of detoxification, anti-craving effects, and increased body awareness.

Intense experiences of purging that many participants undergo during the ayahuasca induced non-ordinary states of consciousness can, according to both the interviewed therapists and ritual participants, assist the detoxification process significantly and can also help release tensions, physical blockages, and psychological burdens, inducing a subjective feeling of relief, inner peace, and mental clarity.

The purging works on physical and psychological levels... there are many interesting cases were patients describe...expelling psychological issues and the accumulated intoxication of the drug...others expel emotional hang-ups like rage or anger through vomiting...this vomiting really has an impact [on the life of the patients]; it's not just symbolic. (Interview with Therapist G.)

Most of the interviewed ritual participants reported that purging during the ayahuasca experience was accompanied with experiences of unloading psychological burdens, such as guilt, negative emotions, negative attitudes, and negative thoughts. Purging was oftentimes followed by a sense of redemption, new beginning, and an increased awareness of responsibility toward their health and well-being. The emetic effect of ayahuasca can also contribute to attenuated withdrawal symptoms and drug cravings. Both psychological and physical mechanisms may underlie this effect (see also Brierley & Davidson 2012; Liester & Prickett 2012; Presser-Velder 2012). Further clinical studies on the anti-craving mechanisms of ayahuasca are highly recommended.

PERSONAL (PSYCHOLOGICAL AND PSYCHOSOCIAL) EFFECTS

Participation in ayahuasca rituals can help individuals gain a better understanding of their addiction and overcome the roots of their compulsions and other psychological issues that have impaired general functioning in the past. The ayahuasca-induced modified state of consciousness can facilitate introspection, the processing of unconscious psychological material, and emotional catharsis. Traumatic life events that underlie individual psychopathology can be experientially relived from a new perspective and integrated in a functional way. As stated by an interviewed psychiatrist:

Ayahuasca is a shortcut to the unconscious. It allows for the possibility to relive stressful biographical situations again, and repair them, reorder them. This has tremendous therapeutic value. For example, Western pharmacopeia and psychotherapy can be of little help in cases of deceitful abuse or childhood violence; however, ayahuasca provides the possibility of reliving these situations with the same emotional intensity of the original moment, but with a structure and the experience in the present. Then, one arrives at forgiveness: which is to liberate the conflict and remain in peace. Ayahuasca is one of the possible ways to achieve this (Interview with Therapist I).

Interesting cognitive dynamics seem to occur under the ayahuasca trance. Therapists and ritual participants alike referred to ayahuasca as an “inner mirror” that allows individuals to readily accept previously denied aspects of the psyche, which are difficult to address with conventional therapeutic methods.

Ayahuasca provides for a kind of mirror that does not

conform to the patient's sophisticated denial mechanisms. The mind is loosened up and maladaptive thinking and feeling is brought to the patient's awareness...the patient is then confronted not by treatment structures or therapists but by their own inner self. This aspect is, I believe, what makes ayahuasca especially effective in helping addicts because they are unable to deny their reality and must therefore accept change. (Interview with Therapist M)

Confrontation with denied aspects stemming from within or from a perceived “spiritual source,” such as “Mother Ayahuasca,” “Mother Earth,” or “the Divine,” are apparently better received, integrated, and contained than those stemming from a therapist. Ayahuasca can also lead to precise therapeutic insights that can become crucial turning points in the recovery process.

The above-mentioned ayahuasca-facilitated processes also include shifts in points of view and empathy that can improve the quality of relationships with family and significant others, allowing for forgiveness, reconciliation, and better interpersonal communication. This, in turn, may contribute to positive emotional feedback that can counteract the typical isolation of addiction. The shared collective experience of the ayahuasca ordeal can furthermore promote group cohesiveness and function as a catalyst for positive social processes, such as increased participation in activities with a peer group that ideally holds positive, health-oriented values.

Ayahuasca experiences can also contribute to personal growth and tend to facilitate an increased sense of self-efficacy and awareness of positive personal resources. As illustrated by one of the interviewed traditional *ayahuasqueros* (traditional healers specialized in the use of ayahuasca):

Ayahuasca helps addicts...to awaken parts of themselves that are asleep...helps one to find oneself, to value oneself, and to project oneself in a healthy way....All this can help one to achieve a lot of things...like finding oneself and one's inner potential. (Interview with Ayahuasquero C)

TRANSPERSONAL EFFECTS

Throughout this study, spiritual or transpersonal aspects of the ayahuasca experience were reported to have been pivotal in the recovery process. Many interviewed ritual participants reported spiritual peak experiences that fostered a connection with the divine: a spiritual power or existential values infusing life with meaning, providing a sense of relief from confusion, and pro-

moting feelings of wholeness and inner balance. These types of experiences can have therapeutic effects on inner, developmental, or existential wounds, helping patients to transcend such issues. For some patients, such experiences were followed by a complete absence of drug cravings, such as Steve [pseudonym], who stated:

They [ayahuasca ceremonies] made me feel that there was a presence of someone who loved me unconditionally and who gave me the strength to stop myself from drinking or drinking too much...the experience gave me a spiritual basis for my life and made me realize that life had a purpose and meaning...I [now] have a spiritual link to call upon. I can look back on my experience and [back on] that feeling of being in touch with God and realize that life isn't empty...My experience with ayahuasca stood out to me as a clear reminder of the beauty and the importance of life...Not drinking came naturally [as a result of this experience]...there was no void that needed to be filled anymore. (Steve)

Ayahuasca-induced transpersonal experiences helped several of the interviewed patients to reformulate a new vision of the world and generate new perspectives on life, leading to changes in attitudes. One of the interviewed psychologists further pointed out:

Another reason why shifting into non-ordinary states of consciousness (NSCs) is therapeutic, is that they can allow access to very different realities where people may find helpers...guides and allies and find strength and guidance through trials and tribulations. Now, whether these are real entities or projected parts of the inner self does not matter. The transformation that may occur in people who have been touched by these experiences is very real; and experience shows that it may have deep and long-lasting effects. These resources are essential for long-term recovery. This is why Alcoholics Anonymous makes such an emphasis on finding a power greater than oneself. (Researcher O)

In addition to spiritual peak experiences, another type of transpersonal experience credited with important therapeutic value was experiencing one's own death.

The encounter with the medicine was the most powerful experience I have ever lived. I have always lived on the edge and I am used to strong emotions, but never something similar to this...During my healing process, the spirit of ayahuasca showed me visions of the future if I

continued smoking. I saw my daughters' faces in my funeral. I could see their pain and feel their suffering. I felt a huge irresponsibility, because even when you know you might die from smoking, only when you experience your own death can you understand. (Ernesto [pseudonym])

VARIABLES THAT INFLUENCE TREATMENT OUTCOME

Although ayahuasca-assisted treatment can be very valuable therapeutically, it is, however, important to point out that it is useful only for certain individuals and under certain circumstances. Ayahuasca, in and of itself, is an instrument, a tool. The potential outcome can be beneficial or harmful depending on different variables. The subjective experience and hence the therapeutic value of ayahuasca, as with other psychedelic substances, is intrinsically related to the triad of drug, set, and setting.

Variables related to the ayahuasca compound that could influence treatment outcomes include quality, composition, and adequate dosing. Variables related to the participant or "set" include absence of counter-indications, psychological readiness to undergo deep states of consciousness and to be confronted by denied aspects of the psyche, preparation for the experience, and the individual capacity for its integration. Variables related

to the context or "setting" include the quality of the ritual, the quality of music, and the skills and sensitivity of the facilitator. A beneficial ayahuasca experience requires a context that provides a sense of containment for the experience, one that allows patients to surrender by providing a therapeutic or spiritual focus within ethical guidelines. Well-guided rituals serve this purpose.

Ayahuasca therapy should therefore be understood as a ritual-based intervention and not solely as a pharmacological one. In addition to the drug, set, and setting variables, the support provided for integration, complementary therapeutic interventions, adequate frequency and spacing of the ayahuasca-assisted interventions, as well as proper aftercare and supportive social context, were elements that stood out as influential in determining treatment outcomes.

CONCLUSIONS

The study was intended to generate empirically based hypotheses on the therapeutic mechanisms of ayahuasca in substance dependency treatment. As outlined in this paper, ayahuasca-assisted treatment can trigger various types of psycho-spiritual processes that are valued in other therapeutic approaches for substance dependency.

Further clinical investigation is still warranted to assess the

“The transformation that may occur in people who have been touched by these experiences is very real; and experience shows that it may have deep and long-lasting effects.”—Researcher O

efficacy of ayahuasca for substance dependency treatment in comparison to current best treatment practices. It seems, however, based on preliminary research that ayahuasca interventions for substance abuse treatment are, in some cases, very effective and that they can be integrated into multidisciplinary multicultural addiction treatment programs. ●

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Anja Loizaga-Velder is a German-Mexican clinical psychologist who has been learning from and collaborating with indigenous healers who use psychedelic plants ritually for over 20 years. She received a MA degree in psychology from the University Koblenz/Landau in Germany and currently is a PhD candidate in Medical Psychology at Heidelberg University (Germany). She has written her doctoral dissertation on the therapeutic uses of ayahuasca in addiction treatment. She is founding member and director of research and psychotherapy of Nierika A. C., a Mexican NGO aimed at supporting the investigation and preservation of indigenous knowledge and traditions around the use of sacred plants. Learn more at nierika.info. Anja can be reached at nierika@gmx.net.