

Making sense of ayahuasca experiences of those in the UK

An interpretative phenomenological analysis

By Adam Knowles

Abstract

Ayahuasca, an Amazonian plant-medicine brew, is increasingly popular in the UK with seekers of psychological, emotional, biological and spiritual healing. I think psychotherapists well-placed to amplify, question and work with ayahuasca experiences. I explore what four people in the UK make of their ayahuasca experiences using purposive sampling to focus on small groups using ayahuasca for healing in ritual settings. With each participant, I conduct a 45- to 60-minute semi-structured interview with the question, 'What did you make of your past, personal experiences with ayahuasca?' then use interpretative phenomenological (IPA) analysis. IPA emphasises personal, direct experience over theorising. I group the findings into five themes formed from participants' responses: '1. Our telephone line back to source: insight/changes'; '2. Three guys with feathers: intercultural exchange'; '3. Watch loads of ballet: different paths of healing'; '4. Gets you off your head: a drug?'; and '5. I ended up in my father's psyche: perspective'. Participants credit their ayahuasca experiences as being important for new insights that help them make substantial improvements in their life. The difficulty making sense of the international and intercultural aspects of ayahuasca permeates the participants' commentary. Participants regret the barriers to healing created by illegality and I outline the problematic basis of the illegality of ayahuasca in the UK. Participants consider other things alongside or instead of ayahuasca as essential to their well-being including integration work after ceremony, psychotherapy, meditation, shamanism, and yoga. Written by a UK-based existential psychotherapist with a qualitative, phenomenological approach, this research makes a fresh and distinct contribution to existing discourses. The findings and arguments are relevant to psychotherapy, philosophy, psychiatry, politics, pharmacology, medicine, social science and anthropology.

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Introduction

Ayahuasca is a plant-medicine brew important to indigenous communities of the Amazon, unique in its culture, history and effect (Shanon, 2010, p. 141). Those in the UK seeking psychological, emotional, biological and spiritual healing are increasingly attracted to psychedelic ceremonies (Sessa *et al.*, 2017). I believe UK psychotherapists are well-placed to offer preparation and integration services that are essential to safe and effective use of psychedelics.

It was soon after my initial experiences with ayahuasca that I started training as an existential psychotherapist. Five years on, I want to know how ayahuasca has affected the lives of others in the UK and how psychotherapists might best support ayahuasca as a path to insight and healing.

Research into the therapeutic potential of psychedelics is resurging following a hiatus going back to the 1960s. UK research by talking therapists on the longer-term applications of ayahuasca remains rare, with even less from an existential mindset. Written by a UK-based existential psychotherapist with a qualitative, phenomenological approach, this research makes a fresh and distinct contribution to existing discourses.

Using interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA), I investigated what four people in the UK think about their past, personal ayahuasca experiences. I conducted semi-structured confidential and individual interviews of 45-60 minutes. I followed this with transcription of the interviews, thematic coding and a subsequent write-up. My project took six months within the second half of 2018.

I have only words to represent psychedelic experiences that can be numinous, expansive and ineffable. I oppose both the impersonal style prized by science and the Kafkaesque prose typical of some philosophers. I write as personally and clearly as I can.

My existential outlook emphasises the intersubjective nature of the human experience and owning one's thoughts. I use 'I' and 'you' in this essay to refer respectively to myself as the writer and you as the reader.

Let's take a trip.

Literature review

An ayahuasca primer

As a brew, ayahuasca is a decoction of the ayahuasca vine *Banisteriopsis caapi* (Spruce ex Griseb.) C. V. Morton and the leaves of the chacruna bush *Psychotria viridis* Ruiz & Pav. The crushed ayahuasca vine and chacruna leaves work together (Nutt, cited in Coccozza, 2014) to produce effects including 4-6 hours of trance, euphoria, connection and insights into problems of living, alongside vomiting (ICEERS, 2017, p. 8) and frequent trips to the toilet. Visual and auditory effects, symbols, imagery are common. Shanon (2010) provides a compelling cartography of these experiences.

Healing and therapeutic potential

A range of literature describe healing and therapeutic associations with ayahuasca (ICEERS, 2017; Shanon, 2010; Tafur, 2017; Blainey, 2015; Ryan, 2015) and the UK-based Beckley Foundation finds encouraging results (Morales-Garcia *et al.*, 2017). Snider's qualitative research addresses ayahuasca and psychotherapy in a North American context (Snider, 2016; Snider, 2017) as does Harris (2017).

The pertinent aspect that emerges from these sources is the clash between Western notions/mechanics of healing and other discourses. Metzner identifies 'profound differences in the underlying worldview and conceptions of reality' (Metzner, 1998, abstract). Providing an example, Pollan (2018) theorises psychedelic experiences via pharmacological, psychiatric and neuroscientific lenses. I think we need wider global perspectives and a multidisciplinary approach.

Tupper (2009) takes a different tack to scientific literature, speaking of 'entheogenic healing', where 'entheogen' means to entrain experiences of god(s). Dev (2018) goes further

to propose that ayahuasca possesses it/him/herself a consciousness that deserves direct research, coining this idea 'interspecies listening' (Dev, 2018, title). Luke (2011) describes 'discarnate entities' (Luke, 2011, title). These conceptions of Luke and Dev stand apart from Western scientific models and open the way to understandings I believe will help psychotherapists with our clients.

Many have made substantial attempts to square differences between Western science/medicine and other modalities (Grof, 2000; Labate and Cavnar, 2018b; Judith, 2011; Mackinnon, 2012; Luke, 2015; Tafur, 2017; Miller, 2017; Liester and Prickett, 2012). I conclude that psilocybin for depression (Psychedelic Research Group, 2019) or ayahuasca for well-being is not the same as insulin for diabetes or ibuprofen for a headache. Schmid (2011, p. 246) suggests that ayahuasca is better thought of as a psychological catalyst than a pharmacologically active substance, which makes sense to me.

The difference between the Western medical model and other healing modalities constitutes 'a very fundamental difference with a good many implications' (Rogers, 1976, cited in Sanders and Hill, 2014, p. 60). I believe existentialism (van Deurzen, 2014; Kaufmann, 1960) helpful to address this difference since it addresses ontological and epistemological concerns.

Safety

Ayahuasca is one of the most powerful psychoactive substances known to humankind, but is safe when proper protocols are followed (ICEERS, 2017; dos Santos, 2013; Barbosa *et al.*, 2012; Johnson, Richards and Griffiths, 2008; Doering-Silveira *et al.*, 2005). Zinberg (1986) explains the vital importance, beyond 'substance', of the mindset with which people

approach ayahuasca, the context and circumstances of the ritual, and the skill of those in the role of facilitators.

I found no literature linking ayahuasca to 'Hallucinogen Persisting Perception Disorder' (HPPD) (American Psychiatric Association, 2013; World Health Organization, 2018) and think spiritual perspectives offer alternatives to psychiatric nosologies. What psychiatrists describe as a psychotic break others describe as a spiritual emergency (Megler, 2017).

Existentially I might consider the same phenomena an ontological challenge.

ICEERS conclude that ayahuasca has an 'acceptable physiological and psychological safety profile and with therapeutic potential' (ICEERS, 2017, p. 10).

Legality

While legal in other countries, the UK government website states it is illegal to take, carry, make or sell psychoactive substances, then excludes alcohol, nicotine and caffeine from its definition of 'psychoactive' (Gov.uk, 2015). It is far from an evidence-based policy.

Szasz (1992) makes a comprehensive and persuasive argument against the UK position. My view aligns with Szasz's that governments should listen more to scientists, and scientists should allow others to make up their own minds.

Whatever my disagreements, I work within the law as a professional and a researcher.

The need for further empirical research

There has in recent years been 'an explosion of high-quality scientific research into ayahuasca' (Gearin, 2017). While this explosion is welcome, research relevant to the UK and from an existential psychotherapeutic perspective remains rare.

An existential approach means openness to a plurality of ways knowing. No single perspective comprises the truth and a full understanding lies forever beyond our reach.

Further empirical research could not just deepen our understanding within existing paradigms but broaden it using a humble and interdisciplinary mindset. This is what I offer here, and I encourage more research along those lines.

Methodology

After some initial reading (Silverman, 2017; Willig and Stainton-Rogers, 2013; Braun and Clarke, 2013; Waddell, 2007), I concluded that quantitative methods that reduce rich phenomena to numbers via statistical analyses are unsuitable for my question.

Given Nietzsche's idea that 'truth is divine' (Nietzsche, 1974, p. 283, § 344), I considered the transpersonal research methods (Anderson, 2015; Anderson and Braud, 2011; Braud and Anderson, 1998; Romanyshyn, 2013). I sought a methodology that could do justice to the extraordinary experiences of ayahuasca and perhaps incorporate the personal transformation of the researcher as data (Anderson, 2015, p. 164).

After considering methodologies including narrative inquiry, action research, grounded theory (Thomson, 2011), heuristic inquiry (Hiles, 2001), and Foucauldian Discourse Analysis, I settled on Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA).

Phenomenology means suspending past conceptions and reductionist models to get 'back to the things themselves' (Husserl, 2001, p. 168). As such, I avoid psychoanalytic, humanistic and even transpersonal psychotherapeutic theory here to support phenomenological epoché. I want to 'make the scientific theme secure by working out these fore-structures in terms of the things themselves' (Heidegger, 2016, p. 195). I try to stay close to my participants' words, meaning and interpretations rather than generalise, theorise and reduce. This is the existential approach in action.

I chose IPA because I have some relevant experience of phenomenology, because it is well-described if difficult to master, because it is respected by my school within Regent's University London, and because it encourages researcher reflexivity. I remain mindful of scholarly criticism of IPA. In its openness IPA risks being ambiguous and underspecified

(Tuffour, 2017, p. 4), has a bias toward eloquent speakers, and is limited to participants' perspectives (Giorgi, 2011; Paley, 2017; Pringle *et al.*, 2011).

Method

My purposive sampling sought four participants that met eligibility criteria designed to enable safe and effective research. I recruited from personal and professional networks, ruling out anyone that already knew me. Ahead of the interview, I informed participants of my commitment to confidentiality but also the risks of taking part, including that of incriminating themselves (Finch, 2001, p. 41).

Table of participant demographics

Signifier	Gender	Age	Nationality	Occupation	# of ceremonies
P1	Male	42	British	Bodyworker	2
P2	Male	53	British	Entertainment	[blank]
P3	Female	38	British	Entrepreneur	[blank]
P4	Female	63	British	Semi-retired	25+

Data collection

I set up a face-to-face interview (Smith, Flowers and Larkin, 2012, p. 57) with each participant lasting 45–60 minutes then transcribed and time coded the audio using the F4Transkript software. The resulting transcripts total approximately 40,000 words.

Data analysis

I coded my transcripts using the F4Analyse software and grouped my codes into five themes using abstraction, subsuming, polarisation, contextualisation, numeration (sic) and function (Smith, Flowers and Larkin, 2012, pp. 96-99). To root the analysis in what my participants say I quote their words in the theme titles (Pringle *et al.*, 2011, p. 21).

Rigour, validity & transparency

It is important not to assess the validity of this qualitative study by criteria meant for quantitative studies such as the research being generalisable, repeatable, scalable or externally verifiable. Yardley provides more appropriate criteria of quality (cited in Smith, Flowers and Larkin, 2012, pp. 179-185). I think my study is appropriately rigorous, valid and transparent.

Findings

Table of codings per participant/theme

Theme	P1	P2	P3	P4	Theme totals
1. Our telephone line back to source: insight/changes	13	38	32	48	131
2. Three guys with feathers: intercultural exchange	67	31	18	18	134
3. Watch loads of ballet: different paths of healing	19	12	15	30	76
4. Gets you off your head: a drug?	14	36	7	16	73
5. I ended up in my father's psyche: perspective	4	17	14	17	52
Participant totals	117	134	86	129	466

1. Our telephone line back to source: insight/changes

This theme refers to expressions that the experience of ayahuasca leads to insights, many of which provoked significant improvements in participants' lives. Participants generally speak of the positive impact of ayahuasca.

Providing the theme title, P4 says:

all of these things, they're our tools. Our telephone line back to source
(P4, Paragraph 25)

P1 is reluctant to credit ayahuasca with substantial changes. P2 is more generous:

If you do it correctly, this can save your life (P2, Paragraph 100)

P2 says ayahuasca helped him move past a lifelong addiction to recreational drugs.

P4 agrees with P3 that:

I'd rather go through the toughest, horriblest, ceremony than have the
rainbows and unicorns (P4, Paragraph 65)

Shamanic experiences led P4 to change her life from one focused on herself to one more about others.

2. Three guys with feathers: intercultural exchange

Passages under this theme centre on intercultural aspects, positive and negative.

P2, providing the words to the theme, enjoys the rooting of ritual in cultural history:

When there's three guys with feathers. And you just, I'm like, 'well this was <year>, actually, I'm watching thousands of years of ceremony (P2, Paragraph 148)

P1, by contrast, reports his experience of visiting an Amazon-based ayahuasca resort:

everything is like an eco-resort, and it's very nice. But you just see all of the work and all of the people involved, all of the locals, practically enslaved for the benefit of my experience. It just didn't feel right (P1, Paragraph 201)

P1 and P3 found differences in culture problematic while P2 and P4 embraced the difference and diversity in favourable terms.

3. Watch loads of ballet: different paths of healing

Participants are keen to stress that ayahuasca was necessary but not sufficient for the changes they made. P1 begins:

there are just different paths (P1, Paragraph 38)

P2 muses:

you might watch loads of ballet; you might go running on the beach.

Anything that helps you become conscious of yourself. (P2, Paragraph 184)

For P3 ayahuasca offers advantages over the many other paths of healing. Unlike P3, P4 thinks psychotherapy and psychedelics go well together:

[I did] cognitive behavioural therapy. I did that alongside microdosing mushrooms. (P4, Paragraph 149)

P4 did not reveal this to the psychotherapist at the time.

P1 thinks non-ayahuasca healing is more important, P2 credits ayahuasca as a unique component to healing, P3 dismisses psychotherapy and P4 thinks a 50/50 mix of ayahuasca with other paths of healing works best.

4. Gets you off your head: a drug?

Participants often comment on the 'drugginess' or otherwise of ayahuasca.

P1 struggles with ayahuasca being a drug given his view that drugs are harmful.

P2 struggled with life-threatening drug addictions for decades. The idea of ayahuasca as a drug stopped P2 trying it for years:

when I sat down with the lady, she said 'Look, it's a medicine. We call it medicine for a reason'. And that day I was like 'Rar rar it doesn't, gets you off your head, it's a drug rar rar.' (P2, Paragraph 54)

P4 as P2 prefers the term 'medicine' to 'drug', differentiating it from manufactured substances and explaining that ayahuasca is more often difficult than fun:

Ayahuasca is a medicine. It's something that we use to heal ourselves. It's not something that people can use to get high because it tastes so horrible. (P4, Paragraph 25)

5. I ended up in my father's psyche: perspective

I consider perspective ayahuasca's mechanism of action for healing. P3 leads with her startling revelation:

I ended up in my father's psyche when he was five ... basically his mother disappeared ... but they didn't tell him what had happened (P3, Paragraph 341)

P3 could not make peace with her father via therapy or re-birthing, but this ayahuasca experience helped.

P1 notes:

it's just moving beyond your range, and if you can get 360 ... a different vista. (P1, Paragraph 297)

P2 talks of realising a sense of smallness that helps him recognise that his life is more manageable than he thought. P2 and P3 speak about ayahuasca offering insights about their fathers from taking up their perspective. P3 characterises ayahuasca as a conscious plant. For P4, ayahuasca is a (female) best friend who isn't afraid to tell you the truth. Perhaps the perfect therapist.

Discussion

My first theme, that insights from ayahuasca ceremonies help people make improvements in their lives, aligns with the existing literature and popular narratives (ICEERS, 2017; Luke, 2015; Miller, 2017; Tupper, 2009; Tuffour, 2017; Frecska, Bokor and Winkelman, 2016). P2's idea that ayahuasca helped his longstanding drug addiction finds support in (Liester and Prickett, 2012), amongst others.

Participants often interpret ayahuasca as a distinct, separate consciousness, relevant to (Dev, 2018; Luke, 2011). P4 told me that ayahuasca wrote a manifesto of its own, channelled via a human (Ayahuasca manifesto, 2011).

My participants described difficult ceremonies as 'terrifying' (P2), 'dark' (P3), and 'weird' (P4). Their and my response concurs with ICEERS that a 'bad trip' is poorly named and can have distinct psychotherapeutic outcomes (Multidisciplinary Association for Psychedelic Studies, 2017, p. 42).

Still, psychedelic terror is not something many wish for even if, for some, it is worth it. ICEERS (2017) support proper screening and preparation as do others, e.g. Lewis (2008, abstract) and I concur.

Regarding 'three guys with feathers', the 'urban shamanism' of modern ayahuasca ceremonies is a curious cultural combination (Labate and Cavnar, 2014; James, 2015; Pollan, 2018; Tafur, 2017). There is a moment when cultural exchange becomes cultural appropriation (Labate and Cavnar, 2018a, title). Trichter provides an accurate summary of 'the benefits and risks of a spreading tradition' (Trichter, 2010, p. 131). Westerners need to be alert to domineering or colonising aspects of their culture. This is what I think Nietzsche (2013) means by overcoming ourselves.

One important component of ‘watch loads of ballet’ concerns the need for integration post-ceremony. It is difficult to transport insights across the boundary between ayahuasca and non-ayahuasca as with trying to recall dreams once awake. It takes determination, skill and effort. It is with this integration I believe psychotherapists can help.

Ayahuasca aims to reach certain states of mind, body and soul. There are other routes to somewhat similar states. Grof (2000, p. 189) used breathing techniques and Jung (2009, p. 9) active imagination. Therapists with such experience are relevant to this topic despite not using the specific vehicle of psychedelics. Perhaps there are different ways up the mountain from where the view is similar. Ayahuasca-specific experience and knowledge remains important.

Relevance to and implications for practice

Psychedelic means mind-manifesting (Oxford Dictionaries, 2017) and Grof (2016, p. 45) considers psychedelics to be diagnostic instruments like the microscope for medicine or the telescope for astronomy.

I carried out this research as a practising psychotherapist and, ‘the best therapist is always aware of the transpersonal, though not necessarily practising in that mode much of the time’ (Rowan, 2016, p. 69).

Related to theme five, psychotherapy often involves the client gaining greater and different perspectives. In my work, I help clients to clarify good and bad, true and false, real and unreal, theirs and others, important and incidental (R. D. Laing cited in, Heaton, 2015, p. 57).

I think psychotherapists well-placed to amplify, question and work with the new perspectives made available by ayahuasca experiences. In the US, both the Multidisciplinary

Association for Psychedelic Studies (2018) and CIIS (2019) now offer postgraduate training in psychedelic therapy.

My reading and interactions with participants lead me to agree with Carhart-Harris who encourages professionals to attend to the context in which medications are given with an expanded model of mental healthcare that encompasses both pharmacology and psychotherapy (Carhart-Harris cited in O'Hare, 2017).

All participants spoke of the healing benefits of ayahuasca, the barriers of illegality and the need for long-term integration and support. For many, friends, family, books and conferences may provide enough. For others in the UK, I believe that qualified psychotherapists are better placed to offer serious, committed, long-term support than shamans, scientists, doctors, psychiatrists, nurses or underground therapists.

Psychotherapists can do this better if the UK makes psychedelics legal, at least for clinical purposes, something supported by the evidence.

Limitations

Beyond the limitations implicit in IPA identified earlier, this research is a study of only four participants conducted by a first-time researcher. I do not imply that a larger study would necessarily be better, just different.

I think there is scope for epistemological challenges more significant than I offer here. Dev (2018) encourages me to ask how the findings would change had I made one of the findings central; that ayahuasca can be treated as a separate consciousness. These more transpersonal approaches to research are enticing, but I feel not yet qualified to conduct this. I hope this study paves the way.

Future research and development

I would like to see more qualitative, phenomenological and talking therapy-focused research because I think other research often fails to address what is most pertinent to clients' needs for ceremony-preparation and integration. The differences and potential alliances between psychotherapy and ayahuasca deserve further investigation, building on the qualitative work of Snider (2017) and Ryan (2015).

Regarding 'gets you off your head', ayahuasca-as-a-drug is the single biggest obstacle to more widespread use. I would like to read a Foucauldian Discourse Analysis that situates ayahuasca within mainstream discourses around the war on drugs and the international drugs trade. This obstacle is subtler than the mere problem of illegality. What lies behind the illegality of ayahuasca is the conception of ayahuasca as a dangerous substance. Further research could help to clarify and question this conception, which may bring more people to the conclusions reached by P2, P3 and P4.

Reflection as a researcher

Before conducting this study, I knew little of qualitative research and no-one researching psychedelics. Now, I engage daily with an international community of leading ayahuasca researchers, which is the most diverse social gathering I have ever encountered.

During this research, I gave my first talk at a psychotherapy conference on ayahuasca and wrote my first paper (awaiting publication) for my accrediting psychotherapy college. I have completed my first qualitative study and immersed myself in contemporary discourses on research. Somewhere amongst this, ayahuasca research has, alongside my client work, become an important part of my life. I look forward, beyond the conclusion, to the next chapter.

Conclusion

Having accompanied me on this trip, let me now review the territories visited. After my introduction, literature review and methodology, in my findings, I present the five themes under which I group participants' interview responses.

My discussion takes up the main themes from the findings and sets them within the broader context of existing literature. I establish the limitations of this study, suggest implications for psychotherapeutic practice and areas for further research. I believe the findings and research worthwhile to those from a range of disciplines beyond psychotherapy. I reflect on myself as a researcher to acknowledge a profound change in me due to conducting this research.

It was my honour to hear what my participants had to say of their ayahuasca experiences, and I was humbled to receive their time, energy and care. The sense I made of those in the UK telling me of their ayahuasca experiences is that ayahuasca insights often lead to substantial life improvements via the mechanism of different perspectives when used as one of many different paths of healing within a dynamic intercultural exchange.

Psychotherapists are only just beginning to explore this valuable area and, following my career-switch inspired, in part, by ayahuasca, I am just starting out. I believe this research to be on the cutting edge, bringing perspectives from existential philosophy that challenge existing discourses in a productive way. I hope to take my research forward.

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