Social Sciences

Psychedelic Sensationalism: An Analysis of the Schedule Classification of Psilocybin

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In 1970, the United States Drug Enforcement Administration passed the Controlled Substances Act. This statute legally classified and banned a variety of drugs including psilocybin, the psychoactive prodrug found in *Psilocybe* mushrooms ("magic mushrooms"). Though psilocybin was known to possess significant psychopharmaceutical potential without any major negative side effects, the Controlled Substances Act labelled it as a highly unsafe drug. This earned psilocybin a Schedule I designation, which meant possession and use of psilocybin incurred the highest level of legal punishment. In spite of the existing biochemical evidence that psilocybin did not pose a threat to public health, social and political perceptions of the drug ultimately led the Controlled Substances Act of 1970 to classify psilocybin as a Schedule I substance. This paper asserts that the ban of psilocybin in the Controlled Substances Act of 1970 acted a form of social control used to suppress the progressive ideals of the youth counterculture movement.

INTRODUCTION

Psilocybe cubensis, most commonly known as "magic mushrooms" or simply "shrooms," is a species of mushroom with a complicated social, political, and scientific history that spans thousands of years. The genus *Psilocybe* is comprised of mushrooms containing psilocybin, a serotonergic molecule that triggers similar reactions in the brain to lysergic diethyl amide (LSD). Congress federally outlawed psilocybin in 1968 but did not often enforce its prohibition until the Controlled Substances Act was passed in 1970 (Special, 1970). Given psilocybin's Schedule I designation, it should have a high potential for abuse and no accepted medical purpose. However, scientists agree that psilocybin is not addictive, nor can it cause a fatal overdose. In addition, recent clinical trials show psilocybin therapies to be exceptionally effective for a wide range of mental illnesses (Lowe, 2021). Despite the fact that psilocybin does not lend itself to abuse, it became a Schedule I drug upon the passage of the Controlled Substances Act. The Schedule I designation meant possession of psilocybin incurred the highest level of legal punishment. Clearly, other factors beyond simple medical concerns influenced the decision to place such harsh legal restrictions on psilocybin. This paper aims to answer the question of what aspects of psilocybin's unique social and scientific history caused the Controlled Substances Act of 1970 to classify psilocybin as a Schedule I drug.

To address this inquiry, this paper explores a variety of documents from the 1960s in addition to research from other scholars in the field of drug policy history. It begins with arguments from other historians as they pertain to the scheduling of psilocybin followed by a discussion of what the general public knew about psilocybin in the years leading up to the Controlled Substances Act. This leads into an analysis of Richard Nixon's direct comments on the War on Drugs as well as the Controlled Substances Act itself, examining the link between psilocybin and the youth counterculture movement of the 1960s. This investigation finishes with the conclusion that anti-drug legislation was a form of social control in the wake of an era of progressive ideals; this new way of thinking threatened the mainstream and might have factored into psilocybin's classification. This paper places psilocybin within the context of American history and postulates the motivations behind its classification as a Schedule I substance, addressing a new aspect of psilocybin's history that other historians have yet to discuss.

EXISTING SCHOLARSHIP: DRUG ANTHROPOLOGY

Historians recognize the importance of the history and social stigma of a particular drug when discussing the policies that restrict it. Public perception is volatile; consequently, the reputation of a drug changes over time. Psychedelic drugs including psilocybin were once generally well-regarded, but they became harshly antagonized during the 1960s. Existing scholarship links psychedelic drugs' shift to notoriety to their emerging association with teenage rebellion as college-aged kids, particularly those involved in youth counterculture, became the main user demographic.

In their introduction to *Altering American Consciousness*, Sarah Tracy and Caroline Acker (2004) give an anthropological overview of drug perception and consequent regulation. They argue that the political climate and groups of people associated with a drug are equally as important to a drug's reputation as its known symptoms, side effects, and risks (Tracy & Acker, 2004). The Controlled Substances Act passed during a period of time when the abuse of opioids and cocaine posed a serious health concern in America, and so the government's desire to limit drug use makes sense in historical context. This book also shows that the same drugs have not always been used by the same demographic groups. As a drug's social associations evolved, so did the stigma surrounding the drug (Tracy & Acker, 2004). In an ever-changing American society, drugs that were once well-regarded become stigmatized in a matter of years, oftentimes not because of any significant scientific breakthrough. People simply fear certain substances based on their new anthropological connotations. This book demonstrates the importance of observing social associations of certain drugs in order to fully understand their legal classification. Knowing the anthropology of a drug is just as important, if not more important, as understanding the science behind how a drug works and the health risks it poses.

This anthropological approach explains why, in just a few decades after its discovery, LSD's reputation took a great hit as it shifted from being associated with medical research to being associated with college-aged youths (Dyck, 2008). In Erika Dyck's study of psychedelic history, *Psychedelic Psychiatry: LSD from Clinic to Campus*, she details the discovery of LSD, which immediately inspired clinical trials to explore its many promising medical applications. It was not long, however, before curious college students heard about LSD's intriguing effects and figured out how to produce it illegally (Dyck, 2008). This recreational drug usage became so widespread among college students that it was a defining element of 1960s youth counterculture (Dyck 2008). Once LSD became a "street drug" associated with experimental college kids, it lost any existing respect from the older generations. While there were plenty of reasons to be skeptical of a new mind-altering substance, especially one bought off the underground market, it seems that the primary motive behind the backlash psychedelics received stemmed from a sense of distrust and even resentment of the younger generation by the older generation. In this way, the demographics associated with psychedelic drugs dramatically influenced its public perception, just as Tracy and Acker hypothesized.

Beyond just associations with younger generations, psychedelic usage relates to countercultural ideals. H. Wayne Morgan's *Drugs in America* (1981) gives a broad sweep of the history of a variety of drugs over the course of nearly two hundred years, but the part of his book of greatest relevance to this paper concerns the historical links between psychedelic drugs and a rejection of societal norms. Similar to Tracy and Acker's claim that a drug's meaning depends on the demographic group with which it is associated, Morgan states that members of society often viewed the use of psychedelic substances as a rejection of the status quo leading up to the passing of the Controlled Substances Act (Morgan, 1981). Those who took psychedelics were portrayed as the type to try to shake up the established social order and go against traditional American values, which threatened and offended the older, more conservative policymakers at the time. Morgan (1981) bluntly states that the link between drug use and an attack on accepted

social values made the anti-drug agenda more viable to parents, politicians, and those who valued traditional ideals. This, in turn, made strict laws prohibiting psychedelic usage very popular. This book thus argues that drug restrictions were, at least in part, a form of social control rather than a simple solution to a major public health issue.

David Courtwright (2004) makes a similar point in his article "The Controlled Substances Act: How a 'Big Tent' Reform Became a Punitive Drug Law," arguing that there were a variety of political motivations surrounding the classification of certain types of drugs, in particular their alleged role in leading America's youth astray. He asserts that while Nixon publicly cracked down on drug abuse because of its detrimental effects on public health, "localized, self-interested politics" (Courtwright, 2004, p. 9) significantly influenced the penalties attributed to the drugs, which were based on their alleged health risks rather than their potential for misuse. Nixon was particularly concerned about drugs ruining the minds of America's youth (Courtwright, 2004), so many of his later policies and campaigns specifically targeted younger populations. He attempted to dissuade the youth from using drugs such as cannabis, LSD, and psilocybin—all of which became Schedule I substances after the Controlled Substances Act was put in place. Still, as hard as Nixon tried, these campaigns were largely unsuccessful, likely because of the drugs' immense popularity and the notoriously rebellious nature of the demographic he targeted (Courtwright, 2004). Courtwright's article makes an important connection between drug policy and social reform, especially during a time when counterculture movements and new liberal ideologies were on the rise and considered a major threat by the conservative government.

These secondary sources introduce the concept of drug policy as a measure of social control, and, in particular, they examine the way the general public has perceived psychedelics over time. A significant body of research exists that discusses the legal history of LSD, but psilocybin's place in the context of American history remains more elusive. Despite its massive cultural impact in the 1960s and 1970s, psilocybin is often lumped together with other psychedelic drugs in the historical analysis of drug reform. Historians seldom talk about psilocybin by itself in relation to the Controlled Substances Act or in any legal context at all. This paper aims to fill this gap in knowledge and discuss psilocybin's individual legal history.

PSILOCYBIN VS. LSD

Psilocybin and LSD may have faced similar criticism in the late 1960s, but they each have a distinct history and cultural significance. Psilocybin was oftentimes considered a more spiritually significant drug compared to LSD, with magic mushroom enthusiasts claiming that "the difference between LSD and the magic mushrooms is the difference between a stale hamburger and a T-bone steak" (Ryan, 1970, p. 1). This could partially stem from the differing chemical properties of the two drugs, but it also relates to the contexts in which psilocybin and LSD were typically administered and the environments in which they were taken. When people went on psilocybin "trips" in the United States and especially in Mexico, they typically tripped surrounded by nature, "away from the squares" (Ryan, 1970, p. 1). Though physically less intense, psilocybin trips were more closely associated with spiritual awakenings, religion, and revelations than LSD because of their ties to "witch doctors and priests of primitive cults among Mexico's Indians" ("'Psychedelic' Mushrooms Investigated," 1967, p. 1). *Psilocybe* mushrooms were known as "God's Flesh" in some parts of Mexico, and much like how bread and wine are consumed in Holy Communion, magic mushrooms were taken as sacraments rather than as part of recreational activities. Given the discrimination Indigenous people faced around this time (Churchill, 1994) as well as the degree to which Christian missionaries sought to eradicate Indigenous religions (Heise, 2017), the legacy of white colonialism further contributed to psilocybin's negative perception. LSD, which is a synthetic product rather than a natural one, did not share the same ancient history nor the religious significance as psilocybin. Although psilocybin and LSD do share many chemical and biological similarities,

psilocybin's unique history explains why LSD and psilocybin are by no means interchangeable.

PSILOCYBIN AND THE SCIENTIFIC COMMUNITY

Though psilocybin is still misunderstood over fifty years after the Controlled Substances Act was passed, there was a significant amount of knowledge about its chemical and medicinal properties in the years leading up to the Act. Scientists knew of at least fifteen different species of *Psilocybe* mushrooms, each associated with different regions of Mexico but all containing the same psilocybin molecule (Wasson, 1959). Analytical chemists confirmed the structure of psilocybin as early as 1959 (Wasson, 1959), and shortly thereafter learned to isolate it in a white powder form (Wasson, 1959). They found that a molecule identical to psilocybin except for the absence of a phosphate group, psilocin, was also present in the mushrooms in smaller quantities. This was a particularly impressive discovery given that psilocybin was characterized just a few years after the discovery of phosphorus, which is a key component of a phosphate group (Wasson, 1959). Though scientists had not yet discovered that psilocin is the partially metabolized version of psilocybin, they had already noted that psilocin was significantly more potent than psilocybin itself (Wolbach, 1962). A number of psilocybin analogs, or molecules with similar structures and chemical properties, began to gain attention from scientists and medical professionals who speculated whether they caused the same or similar effects (Leung & Paul, 1968). Though their research was far from complete, chemists and mycologists in the mid-20th century were on their way to a comprehensive chemical understanding of psilocybin before the Controlled Substances Act made obtaining the funding and licensure to continue such projects a long, complicated, and oftentimes impossible task.

Scientists were also well-acquainted with the physiological effects of psilocybin. In general, scientists and recreational users alike agreed that the effects of psilocybin were similar to those of LSD (McBride, 1967), though usually much milder. Gordon Wasson, one of the first Americans to research psilocybin, noted that some psilocybin users experienced "only a divine euphoria" accompanied by "uncontrollable laughter" (Wasson, 1959, p. 331), while many others had vibrant and colorful hallucinations (Wasson, 1959). He also noted specific bodily sensations as part of psilocybin trips, for example, a person's body and limbs feeling as "heavy as lead" (Wasson, 1959, p. 331). Above all else, scientists around this time were deeply fascinated by the increase in creativity and mental capacity that psilocybin seemed to instigate. In his writings, Wasson notes that while on a psilocybin trip, both intellect and emotions are "stepped up," and a person's "whole being is aquiver with life" (Wasson, 1959, p. 331). This sensation, he claims, is as if a person's "soul [flew] off to the ends of the world and, indeed, to other planes of existence" (Wasson, 1959, p. 331). Wasson and other researchers at the time studied psilocybin's psychoactive effects in depth—overall, psilocybin left a profoundly positive impression on both users and observers of the practice.

Perhaps the most exciting prospect of psilocybin's rediscovery was how the drug could be used to improve users' psychological well-being. As early as 1967, doctors acknowledged the potential psychiatric benefits of psilocybin for treating mental illnesses, spurring a variety of research projects led by biologists, doctors, and psychologists ("'Psychedelic' Mushrooms Investigated," 1967, p. 1). Originally, the test subjects for these experiments were the "emotionally disturbed" (Wasson, 1959, p. 332) from hospitals in both Paris and Kentucky. These trials went exceptionally well, even better than those of LSD in many cases, as LSD was known to have more prolonged effects and produce a significantly higher level of anxiety for users ("Psilocybin, Its History and Pharmacology," 1960). Though he admired the successes of psilocybin therapy on those suffering from debilitating mental illness, Wasson pushed for psilocybin to be made available to the "exceptionally gifted" ("Psilocybin, Its History and Pharmacology," 1960) as well. He claimed that "there is the possibility…that their powers will be sharpened and they will command insights not given to them in their normal existence"

("Psilocybin, Its History and Pharmacology," 1960). In an age when drugs were demonized for their negative impact on the nation's achievement, it seemed that psilocybin instead promised higher levels of intellectual capability, creativity, and happiness for users. Scientists in the 1950s up until the 1970s were not concerned psilocybin would have an adverse effect on the nation's productivity, but rather had high hopes for its potential to become a safe and effective mind enhancing substance for psychiatric patients and geniuses alike.

Scientists were also beginning to discover what exactly psilocybin did not do. In other words, they experimented with psilocybin to see what dangers it did or did not pose to the user. Despite its classification, people knew in the years leading up to the 1970 Controlled Substances Act that psilocybin and other hallucinogens were "not addicting" (McBride, 1967, p. 5) and that, unlike alcohol, psilocybin caused "no hang-over" nor any "obfuscation of the memory" (Wasson, 1959, p. 330). Though similar to LSD in many regards, scientists noted that psilocybin did not make the user as nervous or paranoid as LSD in clinical experiments ("Psilocybin, Its History and Pharmacology," 1960). As for its long-term effects and health risks, clinical trials showed psilocybin's effect on organs to be "insignificant" aside from some interference with serotonin during the period of the trip ("Psilocybin, Its History and Pharmacology," 1960, p. 936). Based on its scientifically observed properties, medical professionals knew years before the United States enacted the Controlled Substances Act that psilocybin did not lend itself to misuse, nor did it pose a significant risk to public health.

PUBLIC PERCEPTION AND POLITICIZATION

Despite what scientists knew about psilocybin, the public widely feared the drug and its impact on society. Part of this fear likely stemmed from rumors spread by anti-drug propaganda and the news, which included unclear or otherwise purposefully misconstrued knowledge about psychedelic drugs. For example, a booklet by the California Delinquency Prevention Commission stated that the perceptual distortions of psychedelics "usually last twelve to sixteen hours" and that "the effects *may* last several months" (McBride, 1967, p. 12). This was simply incorrect; the psychedelic effects of psilocybin and other psychedelics last around six hours (Lowe, 2021) depending on a variety of factors including food consumption, the user's body weight, and the method of consumption. A newspaper article from the late 1960s asserted that *Psilocybe* mushrooms "invariably make the user violently ill before his 'trip' begins" ("Psilocybin, Its History and Pharmacology," 1960, p. 936), which is also false, though some users do experience nausea at the beginning or end of their trip, especially when the drug is administered at a particularly high dosage (Lowe, 2021). Perhaps the most terrifying of these misconceptions was the link between psilocybin and suicidal tendencies (McBride, 1967), though more recent research has found that psilocybin actually decreases the incidence of suicidal ideation (Hendricks, 2015). It remains unclear if these statements intentionally spread misinformation in order to provoke a fear response, however, these false reports certainly made psilocybin appear to be much more dangerous than it actually is. The general public typically only interacted with these news reports and anti-drug propaganda, not the medical texts that detailed psilocybin's potential psychopharmaceutical benefits, which resulted in a widespread fear of psychedelics and support among the masses for the criminalization of psilocybin.

Psilocybin was not the only highly criticized drug during the late 1960s. Drug abuse was a major health issue at this time, which prompted the passage of the Controlled Substances Act. This Act sorted different types of drugs into different legal categories, assigning a level of punitive action for possession of drugs in each category. The punishments ranged from no penalty at all to life in prison and a fine of 20 million dollars (Drug Enforcement Agency, 1970, p. 43). The Act outlines five different classifications: Schedule I, Schedule II, Schedule III, Schedule IV, and Schedule V. In this system, Schedule V is considered the least dangerous type of drug with the mildest consequences, and Schedule I is supposedly for the most dangerous

drugs with the most severe punishments. To be classified as Schedule I, a drug must pose "a high potential for misuse," have "no currently accepted medical use in treatment in the United States," and have "a lack of accepted safety for use of the drug or other substance under medical supervision" (Drug Enforcement Agency, 1970, p. 18). Since there are no safe ways to use a drug that fits these criteria, the Controlled Substances Act prohibits the possession of Schedule I drugs under any circumstance. The Act placed psilocybin in the Schedule I category along with DMT, MDMA, and LSD because of the alleged threat they posed to society and the lack of any substantial medical benefits. In terms of "good" drugs and "bad" drugs, the Controlled Substances Act undoubtedly made psilocybin a "bad" drug. Therefore, those who sought to use or sell it anywhere in America became criminals, facing long prison sentences, hefty fines, and sometimes even felony charges (Drug Enforcement Agency, 1970, p. 43).

The Controlled Substances Act functioned as the unofficial beginning to the "War on Drugs," an international anti-drug campaign led by President Richard Nixon. In a now-famous speech, Nixon publicly announced that "America's public enemy number one in the United States is drug abuse" (Nixon, 1971) and that it was "necessary to wage a new, all-out offensive" (Nixon, 1971) to control the growing drug addiction problem. Nixon made it abundantly clear that he would be as forceful as needed in order to minimize and eventually end drug abuse in America. Approaching the drug crisis in America with aggression, Nixon chose to enforce harsh laws to dissuade people from using recreational drugs rather than supporting the more health-centered attitude that gained popularity in the 1960s (White, 1966, p. 13). He wholeheartedly believed that this was the correct approach, confidently stating that by following his plan, "the final issue is not whether we will conquer drug abuse, but how soon" (Nixon, 1971). Nixon firmly believed that drug users and dealers should receive criminal punishment for the threat they posed to the health and well-being of the country, and with that motive in mind, he pushed for legislation like the Controlled Substances Act that put management of drug use and addiction under the jurisdiction of the federal government. The "War on Drugs" promoted a general mindset that showed little tolerance for recreational drug use of any kind, which undoubtedly contributed to psilocybin's classification in spite of its low threat to public health.

However, not all groups opposed psychedelics. As previously discussed, psychedelics in general were closely tied to the 1960s youth counterculture movement. One subset of the counterculture movement at this time, hippies, consisted of generally middle-class young adults and was largely defined by their anti-war protests and rejection of traditional societal norms (Miller, 2012, p. 87). Psychedelics in general were a huge element of hippie culture, and for many, "magic mushrooms" were their preferred substance. It was common for hippies to travel all the way to Oaxaca, Mexico, "braving imprisonment and fines" (Ryan, 1970, p. 1) in order to experience the widely praised psychedelic trips. In fact, many of the most prominent scientists at the time began their research this way (Wasson, 1959). The love for psilocybin was quite apparent given the great lengths mushroom enthusiasts went in order to "trip," and the general public was certainly well aware of the hippies' affinity for the drug. Because hippie culture was intertwined with drug usage, hatred for drugs became a hatred of hippies and vice versa, which adds a new element to the discussion of policymakers' disapproval of psilocybin.

Hippies posed a major threat to the status quo, which in turn encouraged reactionary social control. Michael E. Brown, a sociology professor at Queens College in the late 1960s, remarked that he believed the government "projects a dangerous future and guards against it" (Brown, 1969, p. 33) by implementing measures of social control. This fear manifested in new legislation and stricter law enforcement. Being a hippie was essentially made illegal by declaring their practices, specifically drug use, illegal through federal drug restrictions. The passage of drug laws allowed for "police raids on 'Hippie pads,' crash pads, churches, and

movement centers" (Brown, 1969, p. 33) to become commonplace in the late 1960s and early 1970s. However, it was not just legal prosecution that was used to suppress the hippie movement, but rather "a conglomerate of educational, legal, social welfare, and police organizations" (Brown, 1969, p. 33). Society turned hippies into outcasts as "many different agencies that [were] ordinarily dissociated or mutually hostile" (Brown, 1969, p. 33) united with the common purpose of minimizing the spread of countercultural ideals through both propaganda and violent suppression. Brown's article illustrates that during this period, members of the countercultural movement believed that the outlaw of psychedelic drugs was just one part of a larger project to suppress counterculture, specifically hippie culture, because it directly opposed the established social order and posed a threat to the so-called "traditional" ideals of the conservatives.

CONCLUSION

The importance of the social perception of different drugs in determining their eventual classification is abundantly clear. While the biochemical properties of psilocybin and other psychedelics raised few concerns, the drugs' associations with the rebellious younger generation posed a clear threat to the American social order. Psilocybin's importance in the hippie movement is of particular importance given the violence that hippies faced in the years leading up to the Controlled Substances Act. The persecution of hippies only intensified as a result of the Act, which supports the argument that strict enforcement of the prohibition of psilocybin had less to do with protecting the American public from the horrors of drug use and more to do with protecting the public from counterculture.

In conclusion, the lack of medical justification for the schedule classification of psilocybin alludes to a more complex explanation for its harsh criminalization. In just a matter of years, psilocybin went from being regarded as a medical marvel to being vilified as a toxic substance fit for criminals and out-of-control kids. Based on physiological data alone, psilocybin should never have been included in the Schedule I category. This calls for a more critical look at the politics surrounding drug use during the years leading up to the Controlled Substances Act. By contextualizing psilocybin's scientific and political record within the scope of American history, it is apparent that its federal criminalization was far more complicated than a reaction to a public health concern or even a misunderstanding of its chemical effects. Psilocybin's association with LSD and the divisive hippie movement contributed to the government's decision to classify it as a Schedule I drug, repressing the hippies' radical lifestyle and controversial beliefs. By implementing legal restrictions, the government could limit the spread of progressive ideology without explicitly infringing upon the freedoms of speech, expression, and protest that the hippies embraced. In an era of dramatic social change, the Controlled Substance Act bolstered traditional, conservative values and effectively criminalized American counterculture. Whether or not it was the government's intention, the population that most threatened American traditionalism was the very demographic that was most negatively affected by psilocybin's classification in the Controlled Substances Act. For this reason, psilocybin's Schedule I designation in the Controlled Substances Act can be viewed as a form of social control under the thin guise of healthcare policy.

CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

The author has not disclosed any conflicts of interest.

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Elisabeth Dale Wood is currently researching psilocybin in an analytical chemistry lab setting here at Vanderbilt, which inspired her to explore the history of psychedelic drugs. Her chemistry research project, entitled "Analytical Detection and Chemical Supplementation of Psilocybe Cubensis," explores the ways that psilocybin content can be controlled and rapidly measured in biological samples. Her interests in historical research largely revolve around 20th century American legal history, particularly on the federal level. This paper combines her love of American history with her passion for psychopharmaceutical science. Elisabeth would like to thank her chemistry research mentor, Dr. Dusty Miller, as well as her history mentor, Dr. Arleen Tuchman, for all of their guidance throughout her time as an undergraduate. She would also like to thank her friends and family for their endless support in all of her academic endeavors.