Ethnomusicology to Clinical Application: The Role of Music in Psychedelic Therapy

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Introduction

- Music listening is a quintessential aspect of the psychedelic therapy experience, yet there has been little standardization or recognition of how it is being currently utilized.

- Cross-culturally, the initial elucidation and employment of psychedelics in ceremonial and shamanic contexts has involved a multimodal musical approach.

- Research by Boney and Pahala (1972) and Kaalen et al. (2018) implicates certain characteristics of music such as familiarity, tonality, mode, instrumentation, and tempo, as imperative to the introspective experience of psychedelic administration.

- This scoping review aims to investigate how music is currently being employed to support clinical psychedelic therapy experiences.

Objectives

1. Conduct an informal narrative review investigating the ethnomusicology of cross-cultural psychedelic use in ceremonies and rituals.

2. Perform a rapid scoping review identifying how music is being used to guide clinical psychedelic therapy trials.

Methods

Dataset:

- A rapid review of MEDLINE database utilizing the following Boolean sets:
  - Set 1
    - “psychedelic”
    - “ayahuasca”
    - “ibogaine”
    - “LSD”
    - “peyote”
    - “ayahuasca”
    - “mushroom”
    - “hallucinogen”
  - Set 2
    - “music therapy”

Exclusion criteria:

- Title and abstract reading restricted inclusion to participants 18+, primary research involving a psychedelic therapy intervention, with music or sound-based treatment involved. Individual article review further excluded repeated articles, studies with limited to no discussion of music methodology, and studies using placebo psychedelics.

Outcome:

- Primary outcome assessed the “how” of music implementation, including which composers, genres, and music-related qualities were being used to guide psychedelic therapy experiences.

Analysis:

- Inductive thematic analysis was applied to further subcategorize musical selections by instrumentation, tempo, modality, tonality, familiarity, and method of administration. Comparable findings across studies were explored as central themes with clarifying observational statements included. Interpretation of this synthesis informed by the prior ethnographic review yielded discussion of recommendations toward the use of music in psychedelic therapy moving forward.

Systematic Search

Table 1. Major or minor in quality

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sonic origins of the piece</th>
<th>Setting</th>
<th>How music selections are administered</th>
<th>Tempo</th>
<th>Modality</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Volume maximization and broadband compression; wearing of eye shades or eye closed; MRI-compatible headphones with noise suppression vs surround sound stereo speakers; capacity for volume adjustment; recurrent participants; esthetic living room-like environment; dimly lit; quality recording or live music; participation and dancing rarely incorporated; videos occasionally incorporated</td>
<td>Variance with ascent, peak, and descent intensity phases of psychedelic effect; short polyrhythmic voices alternating with extended choral writing; classical upbeat and driving percussion contrasting with overtonal extended passages with gongs and tabla; tempo variance with time of day; some pieces rich in timbre but less rhythmic</td>
<td>Often a mixture of long and overtonal origins; colonial undertones identified by indigenous psychiatrists; some neocolonial romantic influence; Western tonal style remains predominant, though non-superior per Strickland et al. (2020)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2. Thematic composition and frequency of mentions in selected articles

Discussion

- Research thus far in music implementation is limited predominantly to psilocybin and LSD (ayahuasca administration more minutely).

- Reporting on methods of music implementation process has not been standardized and often not reported in detail.

- Qualitative interpretations arising from cross-study similarities thus far suggest a commonality to utilizing a mixture of Western classical and overtonal melodies, a combination of instrumental and non-familiar vocal music, varying tempo and rhythm according to ascent or descent phases of the psychedelic effect, as well as involving participants in the music selection process and allowing them to adjust volume, in facilitating the “trip” experience.

- Future suggestions are multimodal as above and suggest conventionalization of the reporting of musical qualities in psychedelic research.

References Cited