

## Academic/Research Article

# Altered State? An Exploration of the Views of Psychotherapists in Ireland Towards the Therapeutic Use of Psychedelics

By Niamh O'Sullivan



## Introduction and Literature Review

Psychedelics are strong psychoactive substances which can alter mood, perceptions and consciousness. They can be synthesised or found in fungi and plants (Garcia-Romeu & Richards, 2018; Kelemendi et al., 2022; Nicholls, 2016).

Evidence of psychedelic use in early humans suggests ceremonial and healing practices (George et al., 2020; Guerra-Doce et al., 2023; Kelly et al., 2019) and cultures of recreational, ritual and therapeutic use still exist today (Carhart-Harris & Goodwin, 2017). Changes in consciousness caused by psychedelics can help to relax

deeply held beliefs and negative thinking patterns (Carhart-Harris, 2019). Qualitative studies show that psychedelic experiences can facilitate deep personal insights, increased feelings of interconnectedness and mystical-type experiences (Carhart-Harris et al., 2018; Griffiths et al., 2006).

Psychedelic compounds were being widely researched for their therapeutic potential within modern medicine by the late 1950s (Carhart-Harris & Goodwin, 2017). However, by 1968, almost all psychedelics were banned in many western countries due to poor quality studies and the extensive use of synthesised Lysergic Acid

Diethylamide (LSD) within youth culture, particularly in America, leading to widespread social concern (Hall, 2022; Nutt, 2015). The U.S. was the first to issue a ban and subsequently exerted pressure internationally for similar legislative controls (Cahart-Harris & Nutt, 2013; Hall, 2022). Research on synthesised 3,4-Methylenedioxy methamphetamine (MDMA) continued, however by the mid-1980s, it was similarly banned (Sessa et al, 2019).

Research into the use of psychedelic substances for mental health issues has been revived in the last 15 years (Lieberman, 2021; Wheeler & Dyer, 2020). Much of the research worldwide into the treatment of conditions such as depression, anxiety, addiction and PTSD, is with psilocybin, a compound found in mushroom species, and with MDMA (Kelemendi et al., 2022; Nutt et al., 2020).

Part of a large Phase 2 double-blind clinical trial involving randomly assigned adults with treatment-resistant depression receiving a single dose of synthetic psilocybin at 25 mg, 10 mg, or 1 mg (control), with psychological support was recently conducted in Ireland (Goodwin et al., 2022). Findings from the entire study demonstrated that psilocybin at a single dose of 25 mg, but not 10 mg, reduced depression scores

measured highly significant (95% CI, 1.2 to 6.6) more than a 1-mg dose over a period of weeks and the study calls for further trials to determine the efficacy and safety of this type of treatment (Goodwin et al., 2022). Similar trials in other countries have presented comparably promising findings, leading to suggestions that Psychedelic Assisted Therapy (PAT) could represent a new paradigm in mental health treatment (Nutt & Carhart-Harris, 2021; Yaden et al., 2022).

Psychedelic substances are still illegal in most parts of the world, however, from July 1st 2023, Australia and New Zealand rescheduled these drugs as medicines available alongside psychotherapy (Dixon Ritchie et al., 2023)

Psychedelics are illegal in Ireland however the Citizens Assembly on Drugs Use recently published a summary list of 36 recommendations for the Oireachtas to consider (Citizens Assembly, 2023) which may present some opportunity for rescheduling of psychedelic substances.

PAT aims to reduce harm and maximise opportunities presented by psychedelics (Carhart-Harris, 2019; Carhart-Harris et al., 2018). PAT is a type of formalised therapy used in clinical trials of psychedelic medicines for the treatment of a range of mental health conditions (Andrews & Wright, 2022; Watts & Luoma, 2020).

While there exists a diversity of trials, the application of PAT generally involves four stages: screening for suitability, preparation sessions, the psychedelic experience and follow-up experience integration sessions (Brennan & Belsler, 2022; Watts & Luoma, 2020). A key aspect of responsible psychedelic use is the concept of 'set and setting',

## *Psychotherapy in Ireland must consider its role with psychedelics both in healthcare and in naturalistic use*

*Ó Cobhthaigh (2022)*

referring to the participant's state of mind (set) and the environment in which they take the substance (setting) (Hartogsohn, 2017). Evidence suggests that feeling prepared and safe can help to mitigate potentially damaging experiences (Hartogsohn, 2017; Kelemendi et al., 2022).

Challenges include meeting the demands for training sufficient PAT practitioners, statutory controls and potential negative perceptions towards psychedelics within the mental health care community (Ó Cobhthaigh, 2022; Nutt and Carhart-Harris, 2021). The author's research aimed to explore current perceptions towards psychedelic therapy within the counselling and psychotherapy community in Ireland and began with a review of literature of therapists' views of psychedelics and PAT.

Luoma et al. (2022) found that participants who had personal experience with psychedelics and those close to someone who had a positive experience with psychedelics reported more positive attitudes towards the medicines.

One study showed that 78.42% of respondents received requests for PAT from clients at least once (Barnett et al., 2022). Another found that 68.5% of psychologists reported working with clients who had experiences with psychedelics (Davis et al., 2021). The discussion sections of several of the studies address the significance of naturalistic client use to clinician practice, exploring from a harm reduction perspective and as an

opportunity for future research (Barnett et al., 2022; Davis et al., 2021; Hearn et al., 2022; Luoma et al., 2022; Page et al., 2021).

While there is a divergence in the findings with respect to demographics, it is notable that half the studies demonstrated that older, female clinicians who have been qualified the longest had the greatest predictors of negative attitudes towards psychedelics (Barnett et al., 2018; Hearn et al., 2022; Luoma et al., 2022).

### **Research Motivation**

Ó Cobhthaigh (2022) proposes that psychotherapy in Ireland must consider its role with psychedelics both in healthcare and in naturalistic use. Nutt and Carhart-Harris (2021) outline the need for negative perceptions within the counselling community at large to be addressed. The author's literature review revealed little research examining the views of therapists and none from Ireland. All studies reviewed were quantitative. Therefore, the author conducted a qualitative exploration of Irish-based psychotherapists' views on psychedelics and PAT.

### **Participant Recruitment and Selection**

To be included, participants had to be qualified and working in Ireland and were recruited using purposive and snowballing sampling methods. Two female and two male qualified psychotherapists were recruited. Demographic information was collected in advance of semi-structured interviews (see Table 1). Careful consideration was given to mitigate potential researcher bias. All data protection and ethical standards were adhered to.

### **Methodology**

For the literature review component of this study, following keyword search, seven studies underwent

**Table 1** Participant Demographics

Pseudonym	Gender	Age	Primary Modality	Clinical Setting	Qualified
Tracey	F	35-44	Person Centred and Humanistic	Private Practice	2 yrs
Liam	M	35-44	Person Centred	Private Practice	1 yr
Hannah	F	45-54	Somatic Experiencing & Compassion Focused	Private Practice	14 yrs
Seán	M	35-44	Person Centred	NCS & CIPC	3 yrs

systematic review having met several inclusion criteria exploring the views of psychiatrists, psychologists and psychotherapists/counsellors. Six quantitative studies emerged from the US and one mixed method from the UK.

In the research component of the study, participant data was analysed using Braun & Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis with emergent patterns grouped under themes and further decomposed into subthemes. Peer researchers reviewed the transcripts for emerging themes to mitigate bias. Themes were reviewed and refined using thematic maps in a recursive iterative process (Braun & Clarke, 2006). An initial thematic map of five themes and 19 subthemes was refined to a final thematic map

demonstrating the three themes and 8 subthemes presented in Table 2.

## Results

### Theme 1: Knowledge and Understanding of Psychedelics in Therapy

Knowledge about psychedelics came from academic literature, media, personal contacts, and direct experience.

#### Subtheme 1.1 Traditional Learning

Three participants had read academic literature on the topic. Tracey subscribed to the U.S. Multidisciplinary Association for Psychedelic Studies (MAPS) and she stated that she had been reading information relating to psychedelic therapy throughout

her psychotherapy training and since. Liam had been learning about psychedelic therapy for six years. Most content he consumed was podcasts and documentaries, adding that a lot of his reading came from non-academic sources.

All participants credited personal or professional connections as contributing to their understanding. Seán and Hannah revealed that they had connections with mental healthcare professionals in the U.K. and U.S. respectively, who were very interested in or already working in the field. Three participants also had family and/or friends who had informed them about their experiences with psychedelics.

#### Subtheme 1.2 Experiential Learning

Liam had been on several retreats in Ireland using Ayahuasca<sup>1</sup>, and stated that the retreats were *some of the most significant moments in my life*. Tracey spoke mostly of two experiences she had the previous year with *psilocybin and Kambo*<sup>2</sup> and MDMA and Seán had also taken part in an Ayahuasca retreat.

While Hannah had taken MDMA recreationally when younger, she did not consider that a therapeutic experience. She was planning her first intentional experience with psychedelics administered by her U.S. colleague who was working in the area and considered that this experience would be part of her process of learning.

### Theme 2: The Potential of Psychedelics for Psychotherapy

All participants saw positive potential with statements such as *Psychedelic assisted therapy administered in the right hands could literally revolutionize mental health and reduce huge bills that*

**Table 2** Themes and Subthemes

Theme 1: Knowledge and Understanding of Psychedelics in Therapy	Theme 2: Potential of Psychedelics for Psychotherapy	Theme 3: Concerns
<b>Subtheme 1.1</b> Traditional Learning	<b>Subtheme 2.1</b> Potential Impact of the Therapeutic use of Psychedelics	<b>Subtheme 3.1</b> Set and Setting
<b>Subtheme 1.2</b> Experiential Learning	<b>Subtheme 2.2</b> The Likelihood of PAP as Treatment in Ireland	<b>Subtheme 3.2</b> Concerns about Legalities
	<b>Subtheme 2.3</b> The Potential of Ceremony for Healing	<b>Subtheme 3.3</b> Clients and Psychedelics

1. A powerful hallucinogenic beverage made from the stems of a tropical South American woody vine. Retrieved from <https://dictionary.apa.org/ayahuasca>

2. Used as a traditional medicine in purging or cleansing rituals, primarily in South America. It is a waxy substance collected by scraping the skin of an Amazonian tree frog. Retrieved from <https://www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au/health/conditionsandtreatments/Kambo>

our governments are paying for antidepressants and medications to keep people ticking over [Hannah]

Tracey felt the potential of PAT is already well-known in Ireland and that if it was currently offered, there would be high demand.

### Subtheme 2.1 The Potential Impact of the Therapeutic Use of Psychedelics

All participants talked about accessing deeper parts of self and profound healing in much shorter timeframes than with traditional therapies. These perspectives were based on personal experiences and on academic literature. Tracey stated that she *got more out of those three experiences than I did out of 10 years of talk therapy* adding that *you can get to deep rooted trauma and pain that your mind can't even comprehend to take you to.*

Hannah spoke of the potential for trauma treatment:

*Hundreds of clinical hours...could be reduced to several hours...with less impact on the nervous system of the client*

Tracey and Seán suggested that psychedelics could help clients to access trauma, more easily with Tracey suggesting *...you can almost tap out the trauma itself or tap out the pain and the emotion just spills out.*

Three participants talked about the impact of having to face core emotional issues, with Hannah describing the use of psychedelics as *...making an appointment with our trauma.*

### Subtheme 2.2 The Likelihood of PAT as Treatment in Ireland

There were divergent views on this topic. Two participants felt that the health system was too antiquated for change. Seán noted *I work in the HSE, I know things change very slowly.* Tracey suggested that changes to drugs laws would need progressive lawmakers but didn't

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*All participants spoke of general concerns, stating that psychedelics are powerful agents*

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believe Ireland had them. However, Liam felt that Ireland had shown leadership on social issues in recent years.

Liam couldn't see his career in 10 years' time without PAT, but Hannah didn't think the counselling and psychotherapy profession would progress it and felt it could be 20 years before it might come.

Three participants felt that therapists in Ireland had a moral obligation to have the conversation about PAT if they were passionate about healing and harm reduction. Two thought that only younger therapists would push for PAT, however Liam suggested that age could be a driver for change and that an older therapist might think:

*...I've been doing this for 50 years, and this stuff was here this whole time, how did I not know about this? Let me learn – let me use it. Let me bring it to the people in the best way that I can.*

### Subtheme 2.3 The Potential of Ceremony for Healing

All participants saw therapeutic potential in learning from the traditional ceremonial use of psychedelic substances. Seán contrasted the ritualised use of plant medicines throughout human history with the recent arrival of psychiatric medication, suggesting that the latter did not have the same evidence base of the former. Liam considered the weeks long intentional preparation for the psychedelic ceremony to be part of the process. Hannah viewed ceremony as an important component of healing, stating:

*...part of what's wrong with us as a species is that we have no rituals*

*anymore...it was the stuff that held us existentially on the earth...So to go back and retrieve those rituals, or to...kind of road test them now with us modern civilized demented humans...there's huge value in it.*

### Theme 3. Concerns

All participants spoke of general concerns, stating that psychedelics are powerful agents. Liam likened working with them to *...playing with fire.* Tracey described a very troubling experience she had on retreat in Ireland:

*...it felt like I fractured my mind, like...I was going to fall off the edge of reason...*

Tracey stated that suicide had been a prominent thought and she questioned if her psychotherapy training and understanding of psychedelics had helped prevent her acting on those thoughts, wondering whether another person without those skills would be able to do the same.

Liam spoke of the need for PAT to be *studied and understood to a really high level* and Hannah articulated the need for regulation and monitoring to ensure *ethical and safe administration.*

### Subtheme 3.1 Set and setting

Participants emphasised appropriate set and setting as central to having safe psychedelic experiences. Hannah talked about putting a lot of energy into ensuring that clients feel *safe in lovely environments with lots of preparation.* Liam also spoke about the need for safe, therapeutic spaces and that a lack of safety could have unknown consequences:

*I think if the space is unsafe... something really, really difficult [can] unfold. And you don't know what's what the...long term effects of that is.*

Tracey discussed her challenging experience, citing her unsure mindset and lack of feeling safe in



the group as contributory factors:

*...it was a really big group...20 participants, and three facilitators... For me, it just wasn't [a safe environment] and...it's taken me a lot of work from that, to come back to feeling safe in the world.*

### **Subtheme 3.2: Concerns about legalities**

All participants agreed that psychedelics should be legalised for research and mental health care treatment, however there were divergent views on public use. Seán admitted didn't know enough about risks to the public to make an informed decision. Tracey had concerns around the potential for addiction and lack of understanding in the general public of the potency of substances. Hannah had concerns that current Irish law would prevent research and administration of PAT. Liam felt strongly that the law should not dictate what substances a person consumed or stand in the way of the potential impact of psychedelics, suggesting:

*...when you introduce the fact that these psychedelics have the potential to create such... monumentally drastic change in people's lives, for somebody in some sort of government body to say, no, sorry, you can't do that...absolutely none of that makes sense to me.*

### **Subtheme 3.3 Clients and psychedelics**

Participants raised concerns of legal and ethical implications in talking to clients about psychedelics. Seán stated that some clients had alluded to psychedelic use and he suggested that it would be important to have increased knowledge of the area so that he wouldn't cause harm to a client.

Hannah raised concerns about the risk to clients of taking psychedelics without proper

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support, noting one client who had taken mushrooms and had *been dissociated out of his body...It messed him up.* Tracey had worked with three clients on integrating psychedelic experiences, one of whom had had a difficult experience. This client came to Tracey before she had had her own challenging experience and she noted that *if someone presented with that now I would definitely feel more grounded in it because I have that experience.*

### **Discussion**

Findings from this study align with findings in the literature review, demonstrating a link between increased knowledge of and experience with psychedelics and favorable attitudes towards their potential in therapy (Barnett et al., 2022; Luoma et al., 2022, Meir et al., 2022) and this study presents more detailed findings on the views of this cohort of therapists.

Participants spoke of impact at a deeper emotional level, in shorter time frames, facing core emotional issues, working effectively with trauma and helping to release trauma held in the body. This approach of working with deeply held emotional pain and trauma from an embodied perspective is supported elsewhere (e.g. see Maté & Maté, 2022; Van der Kolk, 2014).

Participants had divergent views about the potential of PAT being introduced to Ireland soon.

Those who thought it was unlikely felt that Ireland's health system, lawmakers and therapeutic professional bodies would not change quickly. This could be interpreted as unfortunate in the context of recent research which shows that more than half of Irish mental health service users would accept psychedelics as treatment if recommended and 72% supported further research (Corrigan et al., 2021) and OECD statistics which reveal that Ireland has one of the highest rates of poor mental health in Europe (OECD, 2021). In contrast, one participant felt that Ireland could demonstrate progressive leadership on this issue, as it had with other social issues in the past.

Participants wondered about the impact of the age demographic of therapists in Ireland. Findings in some of the previous studies show a link between older female practitioners who were longer qualified, and increased concerns about PAT. (Barnett et al., 2018; Hearn et al., 2022; Luoma et al., 2022). These findings are notable, as 78% of IACP members are female with a median age in the early to mid-fifties and 74% of all IACP accredited members and supervisors combined have a tenure of more than five years. (IACP, 2021).

When asked if there is value in learning from the historical use of psychedelic substances either in Ireland or from other cultures around the world, or if they would prefer to position these substances simply as medicines within modern healthcare, all participants suggested that there is therapeutic potential in the ceremonial use of psychedelic substances which were used in traditional healing practices, as evidenced in the literature (George et al., 2020; Guerra-Doce et al., 2023).

Findings about concerns were

similar to those in the review (Barnett et al., 2022; Davis et al., 2021; Hearn et al., 2022; Luoma et al., 2022, Meir et al., 2022). However, the notable difference is that the quantitative studies measured for concerns around possible psychiatric and long-term cognitive impairment risk caused by the substances. Participants in this study focused concerns on the *setting* in which the drug is taken and the mind-set of the person taking it, rather than on the substances. Participants articulated the need for psychedelics to be administered under safe conditions to maximise potential and reduce harm. This approach is supported by literature with a focus on harm reduction (Pilecki et al., 2021; Gorman et al., 2021).

All participants agreed to the legalisation of psychedelics for research and mental health purposes. One voiced concern about a possible link between legalising psychedelics in the general public and increasing levels of addiction. Nutt et al. (2022, p.1) state there is a “common perception that these drugs are addictive whereas there is growing evidence that they are not...and indeed can be used to treat addictions.” The authors add that the current legal status of psychedelics exaggerates the perceptions of their risk and this is not based in evidence.

However, it is important to acknowledge the concerns that participants have, which may also reflect wider concerns in the counselling and psychotherapeutic community and in the general public. Andrews and Wright (2022) call for a recognition of the cultural stigma around psychedelics and argue for advocacy to help address the stigma.

Participants had concerns

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### *Previous studies show that clinicians report that clients are taking psychedelics and suggest therapists offer support to clients taking psychedelics*

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about talking to clients about psychedelics. Furthermore, some voiced concerns for clients they thought may be using psychedelics in a harmful way and who may feel uncomfortable talking to their therapist. Previous studies show that clinicians report that clients are taking psychedelics therapeutically or request PAT directly (Barnett et al., 2022; Davis et al., 2021) and other studies call for therapists to begin to offer support to clients around psychedelic use, from a harm reduction perspective (Hearn et al., 2022; Meir et al., 2022).

#### **Strengths/Limitations**

This is the first known study exploring views of psychotherapists in Ireland on psychedelics and PAT and therefore provides valuable insight into the beliefs, attitudes and understanding on this topic. The study has some limitations. It must be noted that the views of respondents to this study may not necessarily be representative of the wider psychotherapeutic community due to the homogeneity of participants and the likelihood that respondents were already predisposed to the subject. There was also a significant time limitation for this study as part of a Master's dissertation, delimiting the scope of the study somewhat and the number of participants recruited.

#### **Recommendations**

As previously outlined, Ó'Cobhthaigh (2022) proposes

that psychotherapy in Ireland needs to consider its role with psychedelics. Nutt and Carhart-Harris (2021) outline the need for negative perceptions within the counselling community at large to be addressed. Most therapists in Ireland are female, in older age categories and longer qualified. As the findings in this study and previous studies have demonstrated, this may impact attitudes negatively towards PAT. Therefore, information on psychedelic therapy history, research and best practice from within Ireland is recommended for therapists to address concerns and possible stigma.

As this was a small study, quantitative research is recommended to gather the views of the wider counselling and psychotherapeutic community in Ireland. Furthermore, as participants highlighted the value of ceremony to psychedelic healing additional research in this area and in the Irish context is recommended.

Mirroring Watts et al. (2017) follow up study, six months after their trial, a similar approach for those participating in Irish clinical trials could be warranted.

As participants in this study had concerns about clients taking psychedelics and previous studies show that clinicians report that clients are taking psychedelics and suggest therapists offer support to clients taking psychedelics, it is recommended that in the absence of legally available PAT and in the spirit of non-maleficence, information on harm reduction and integration strategies in line with ethical PAT protocols be made available to therapists in Ireland to support naturalistic use, as outlined in supporting literature (Gorman et al., 2021; Pilecki et al., 2021).

## Conclusion

As psychedelic-assisted therapy becomes mainstreamed in countries around the world, implications for the psychotherapy community in Ireland will become more prevalent and it is important that this profession is prepared, so that it can be involved in shaping any potential role played by counsellors and therapists. While limited in its scope, this study gives insight into the deliberation by a small number of psychotherapists in Ireland towards the opportunities and challenges posed by psychedelic substances and their therapeutic use, within healthcare and naturalistically. There may be a need for the education of therapists and consideration of the significant ethical and legal

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implications involved in developing this therapy within Ireland while also addressing the reality of current and ongoing use within the general public.

A final word of thanks goes to the participants in this study for their honesty and careful consideration of this topic. It is because of them and steadfast academic supervision that this research progressed to publication. ☺

## Niamh O'Sullivan

Niamh O'Sullivan recently qualified as a psychotherapist with an MSc in Pluralistic Counselling and Psychotherapy from IICP College, Tallaght and is in private practice in Sligo. Her research and practice interests include psychedelic science and neurodiversity as well as the potential crossovers between the two. Despite advances in psychedelic therapy research and practice worldwide, there has been little exploration within the counselling and psychotherapy community in Ireland. Her objective in publishing the research is to create conversation within this community on the therapeutic use of psychedelics.

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