

Psychedelics ‘Coming-Out’ (Un)Closeting Queer Narratives

Stefanie Desrochers and Jessica Shaw
Faculty of Social Work



UNIVERSITY OF
CALGARY

Purpose

This qualitative research project will engage in discourse with 2SLGBTQ+ adults regarding the ways in which psychedelic states have affected their experiences of sex, gender, and sexuality.

This research will: a) qualitatively explore the queer phenomenology of psychedelic mediated states of consciousness; b) develop discourse regarding how 2SLGBTQ+ persons subjectively experience and make meaning of these experiences in relation to their gender identity and sexuality; and c) understand and advocate for queer patients' needs in psychedelic healing, and in the development of Queer Affirming models of Psychedelic Assisted Psychotherapy (QA-PAP).

Research Puzzle

Questions which this research aims to answer, and which are necessary for the development of affirming, safe, and effective interventions using psychedelics with 2SLGBTQ+ persons, include:

- 1) *How do psychedelic experiences affect sexual and gender diverse adults' embodied sense of sex, gender, and sexuality?*
- 2) *Can psychedelics change the way that individuals understand and label their gender identity and sexual orientation?*
- 3) *How do sexual and gender diverse adults who have used psychedelics view those experience(s) in relation to their individual narratives of gender, sexuality, and 'coming-out'?*

Goals

The exploration of how sexual and gender diverse persons experience psychedelics will contribute data toward the development of queer-affirming models of psychedelic medicine.

This will support the inclusion of queer-identified patient needs in the design of psychedelic therapy interventions, and improve patient outcomes.

Specifically, this research will:

- 1) **Engage 2SLGBTQ+ persons who have had psychedelic experiences through interviews and focus groups, with an emphasis on understanding how psychedelics relate to their personal understandings of sex, sexuality and gender;**
- 2) **Locate the psychedelic experiences of 2SLGBTQ+ people within the growing body of literature on psychedelic assisted psychotherapies;**
- 3) **Develop practice recommendations for clinicians who desire to engage in queer-affirming psychedelic assisted therapies.**

Rationale

Psychedelics are a powerful class of substances with a rich and complex history. The primary effects of psychedelic substances are subjective alterations to cognition and perception. Classical tryptamine psychedelics, like lysergic acid diethylamide (LSD) and psilocybin (an active ingredient in "magic mushrooms") are like serotonin in chemical structure, and bind to specific serotonin receptors in the brain. While their use dates to pre-history, they were not scientifically identified and investigated until the early 20th century. Their potential as adjuncts to therapy was investigated with great success, but a number of political factors resulted in their complete prohibition in the 1970s. This stopped their use in research and in practice overnight, although they continued to be used recreationally, spiritually, and in underground therapy.

In 2013, Health Canada began allowing patients to access psychedelics in clinical trials through section 56 exemptions. In January 2022, Health Canada changed its Special Access Program (SAP), to permit access to restricted drugs, including several psychedelics. The SAP provides the ability for physicians to request drugs which are not normally available, to be used in situations of "emergency treatment". **Outside of clinical trials and the SAP, psychedelics remain restricted on Schedule I and are inaccessible to most Canadians.**

Concurrently the regulatory environment around Psychedelic Assisted Psychotherapies (PAP) is rapidly changing in response to a growing body of literature supporting their use for a wide range of mental health conditions. **The potential of PAP to improve outcomes, even in mental health conditions which have been treatment resistant, may be of particular interest for patient groups which are subject to socially engineered traumas and systemic oppression.**

Historical pathologization and contemporary marginalization of 2SLGBTQ+ persons contribute significant barriers to access health care services. These issues of risk and barriers to access are compounded for those who experience discrimination due to age, ability, race, and ethnicity, in addition to gender identity and sexual orientation.

As psychedelic medicines 'come out of the closet' it is imperative that 2SLGBTQ+ patients are not left behind. There is a need to develop intersectional queer-affirming models of Psychedelic Assisted Psychotherapies (QA-PAP). In order to do so, large gaps in the literature must be addressed. Queer patients' safe, equitable, and effective access to psychedelic medicines is dependant on understanding how queer persons experience psychedelic states of consciousness.

Role of Social Work(ers)

Clinical Social Workers have been included in Alberta's recent (2023) decision to regulate access to PAP.

As awareness increases, social workers need to be able to support clients who are seeking information about PAP and support harm reduction to those who might access psychedelics regardless of their legal status.

The profession of Social Work has well-developed codes of professional ethics, which are committed to social justice, and human dignity.

The Canadian Association of Social Workers, and the Alberta College of Social Workers ensure a high standard of professional practice and hold members accountable through established avenues of recourse.

Social Work theory and practice have much to contribute toward research on PAP, the development of safe and affirming modalities, and the protection of patients needs in these contexts.

Stefanie Desrochers
(She/Her/They/Them)
Stefanie.Desrochers@ucalgary.ca