

Book Review

Beck, Jerome & Rosenbaum, Marsha. *Pursuit of Ecstasy: The MDMA Experience*. (New York: State University of New York Press, 1994) 237 + xi pp., \$14.95.

Reviewed by Steve Heilig, M.P.H.*

MDMA, also known as Ecstasy, Adam, XTC, X or any number of other common and ever-evolving street monikers, certainly qualifies as a modern pharmacological phenomenon. In chemical, psychological, historical, social, and political terms the story of MDMA has been unusual at minimum, and often unique. *Pursuit of Ecstasy* presents the first comprehensive and in-depth sociological study of the varieties of MDMA experience, and goes further in the process by summarizing the current state of knowledge regarding this popular drug.

Between 1987 and 1989, Beck and Rosenbaum, along with colleagues at the Institute for Scientific Analysis, a social problems think tank in San Francisco, conducted in-depth interviews with 100 people who had at least three experiences using MDMA. This "Exploring Ecstasy" study group was well educated and affluent on the whole, with an average age of 35. Detailed demographic and survey result data are presented in appendices, but of more interest are the generalized categories into which the authors divide the respondents.

The researchers distinguish social subsets within their respondents, including college students, professionals/yuppies, New Age/spiritual seekers, and music/dance enthusiasts, which range from Grateful Deadheads to urban Texas preppies networking in trendy nightclubs. More generally, they deduce, MDMA users fall into one of two categories, with some overlap. The main distinction is between individuals who seek personal growth, either in formal therapeutic settings or on their own, and more hedonistic partiers and socializers. In the 1970s and early 1980s, the period covered in this study, when MDMA first became a widespread drug of choice, these distinctions were likely of more validity than since the advent of the "rave" phenomenon, where extended partying en masse has taken on ostensibly spiritual and political overtones. The authors note this blending of motivations in summarizing their perception of their study group: "We found marked differences between those who ingested MDMA strictly for personal

or spiritual growth and those who employed it exclusively for fun and partying. With a few notable exceptions, however, the vast majority of MDMA users lie somewhere in between these two extremes."

In any event, the many quotes from the authors' ethnographic study participants illuminate the mindset and experiences of MDMA users in ways academic analysis could not provide on its own. The contrasts between the various subgroups of MDMA users in the study are striking. Some of the "New Agers" viewed MDMA literally as a kind of religious "eucharist or communion." Conversely, for yuppies in Dallas, where there was a significant MDMA party scene in the mid-1980s, MDMA was hardly even seen as a drug at all. One respondent noted that "it was the kind of drug that SMU girls that would never even consider smoking marijuana would do because it was legal and it was socially acceptable . . . You weren't a drug addict if you used Ecstasy."

The placing of MDMA in Schedule I of the Controlled Substances Act by the Drug Enforcement Agency in 1985 changed that perception for some of the more cautious users and made it more difficult to acquire the drug in some areas, but Beck and Rosenbaum note that "Ecstasy's reputation as easily controllable or 'user-friendly' (relative to psychedelics, such as LSD) allayed fears of many individuals," and that the drug's "reputed therapeutic and euphoric qualities . . . account for MDMA's continued popularity among diverse user populations." Such enthusiasm is reflected by one subject, a 57-year-old woman from the Midwest, who purposefully defied the legal ban by continuing her MDMA use: "Here I am, so law-abiding, so everything, and we did this because we knew better than the government. We knew this was the most fantastic tool ever discovered."

Exhibiting similar enthusiasm and defiance, a few subjects who had distributed MDMA have especially interesting comments. One speaks in reverential quasi-Buddhist terms of spreading the use of MDMA as a small contribution toward "chipping away at the great stone of uncaring." Another former dealer speaks somewhat more analytically: "Almost everyone really enjoys and appreciates it. I would say maybe 30 percent of the people that take it have major insights about being alive and interacting in the world and trying to be fine human beings. Another 30 percent really like it and have fun with it. And the last 30 percent, basically, probably feel fairly neutral about it. They're used to something much stronger or it disconcerts them in some way or it just doesn't move them at all."

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Despite this dealer's missing 10 percent—into which might be lumped those who used MDMA in formal psychotherapeutic settings—and despite all the analysis of MDMA users applied by Beck and Rosenbaum and many others, this assessment may be as close to accuracy as has or will be attained. The diverse expectations and motivations, sets and settings, and experiences of MDMA users will likely preclude precise categorization of MDMA use and users. Legal limitations, or more accurately the outright ban on formal MDMA research with human subjects since 1985, have stymied both clinical research and much therapeutic use. However, the Reagan/Bush-era drug-hysteria-motivated ban on any sanctioned use of MDMA appears to be loosening somewhat in recent years, with some movement toward allowing human trials for studying MDMA as an adjunct in alleviating the pain and distress of end-stage cancer patients.

The perceived psychotherapeutic applications of MDMA receive considerable attention in this study, and several of the subjects were themselves therapists. One hails MDMA as a "penicillin for the psyche," allowing great insight and interpersonal contact. Another attributes to the drug breakthroughs in trust and empathy between therapist and patient, and maintains that "in a way that we do not understand, MDMA facilitates this to an extraordinary degree." The important question of whether such positive effects were transitory or lasting is summarized optimistically by the authors: "Respondents who used MDMA for spiritual or therapeutic reasons tended to retain benefits. Recreational users who were more interested in getting high got high and had fewer lasting benefits."

On a more philosophical note, Beck and Rosenbaum maintain that MDMA did take on a crucial role in the lives of some of their study subjects: "The positive feelings experienced by many of our respondents while on Ecstasy—those of tolerance, forgiveness, validation—filled a void, even in the short space of a minivacation. . . . Since our respondents generally had considerable life options, this Ecstasy-filled void is particularly revealing. In the modern developed world there is a genuine paucity of 'time-outs' from the stresses of work, family, and urban life. There is too little love and too much intolerance."

The authors provide a brief but solid review of the various reported negative effects and experiences attributed to MDMA, including rapid development of tolerance, varying attributions of toxic reactions, and reports of deaths purportedly related to MDMA use. Summarizing known risks, Beck and Rosenbaum conclude that serious physiological problems appear to be rare given the extent of use of this drug. While they do not delve deeply into the biochemical and clinical factors still being elucidated in ongoing research, their summaries appear to be in line with current knowledge in those areas. More recent and disturbing reports of extended psychotic or depressive episodes attributed to MDMA have surfaced after the period studied here. As for the future, they speculate that even for those persons prone to abuse of and addiction to psychoactive drugs, "if MDMA abuse has not occurred among the hard drug-using populations by now, it is highly unlikely that it will."

The authors conclude their book with recommendations for an overall nonpunitive harm-reduction approach to illicit MDMA use, primarily relying on educational outreach to users at the venues, such as raves, where MDMA use is most likely. As for what is probably the most prevalent risk—the impurity of doses sold as MDMA—the authors recommend a revival of street drug analysis services. Beck and Rosenbaum also advocate more research into both potential therapeutic uses and adverse effects, in the context of an overall more rational and science-based approach to drug policy, untainted by political whims. However, they concede that the realization of such goals "will depend largely upon revamping the governmental policies that continue to stymie such efforts."

There have now been thousands of published reports and studies on the varied aspects of the MDMA phenomenon, and Beck and Rosenbaum reference many of them in their extremely well-documented book. Perhaps the greatest contribution of *Pursuit of Ecstasy* is that it consolidates in easily readable form, and in a presentation that is both scientific and personalized, virtually everything now known about this fascinating and ultimately still-mysterious psychoactive drug.