

Ayahuasca in Adolescence: Qualitative Results†

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Abstract—Qualitative research was conducted in Brazil among 28 ayahuasca-consuming adolescents members of the União do Vegetal Church, and 28 adolescents who never used ayahuasca. They were compared on a number of qualitative variables, including vignettes measuring moral and ethical concerns. Psychocultural studies utilizing co-occurrences of variables in the realm of qualitative studies are useful in understanding and complementing quantitative studies also conducted among this population. Qualitative data show that the teens in the União do Vegetal religion appear to be healthy, thoughtful, considerate and bonded to their families and religious peers. This study examines the modern use of a powerful hallucinogenic compound within a legal religious context, and the youth who participated in these ayahuasca religious ceremonies (usually with parents and other family members) appeared not to differ from their nonayahuasca-using peers. This study helps to elucidate the full range of effects of plant hallucinogenic use within a socially-sanctioned, elder-facilitated and structured religious context.

Keywords—adolescent hallucinogenic drug use, ayahuasca, União do Vegetal Church

The following are the results of the qualitative data obtained on ayahuasca-using adolescents of the UDV (União do Vegetal Church) by Dr. Alonzo, both in formal interviews and focus groups, as well as a control group.

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Data were collected among 56 adolescent volunteers, ages 15 to 19 (a subset of the data base in the other UDV adolescent research articles appearing in this issue), from three cities in Brazil (São Paulo, Campinas and Brasília). The control group were volunteers from the same schools as the UDV teens. The goal of this study was to assess the effects of long-term use of ayahuasca on adolescent cognitive functioning. With this in mind, the use of qualitative data, in addition to neuropsychological testing, is a useful procedure to allow us to understand the social context in which the ayahuasca use occurs among the UDV adolescents compared to controls. From an anthropological point of view, data obtained through participant observation and interviewing tends to be the most important aspect of ethnological research and includes descriptions of religious beliefs, social organization, etc. This type of qualitative data about a society helps the ethnologist interpret the quantitative data and both are integral to ethnological research.

In addition to field notes, which were generated by de Rios and Alonzo in direct observation, interviews and information obtained in focus groups with adolescents, appropriate categories for classifying data were developed

TABLE 1
Characteristics of UDV and Control Adolescents

	UDV	Control	Chi Square Total
Teen's chores			
Household chores	29	25	0.726; $p = \text{N.S.}$
Outside employment	1	1	
No chores	0	6	
Total	30	32	
Live with parent(s):			
Both parents	23	19	0.106; $p = \text{N.S.}$
One parent only	5	9	
Total	28	28	
Who raised you?			
Parents	23	22	0.645; $p = \text{N.S.}$
One parent only	5	6	
Total	28	28	
Quality of home life			
Positive home life	27	22	0.021; $p < 0.05$
Tension at home	1	6	
Total	28	28	
Relationship with father:			
Close	27	20	0.003; $p < 0.05$
Distant	1	8	
Total	28	28	
Friends drawn from:			
School mates	11	27	0.000; $p < 0.05$
Neighbors	9	9	
Organizations	27	1	
Total	47	37	
Future expectations:			
Higher education	27	27	0.180; $p = \text{N.S.}$
Professional career	25	25	
Marriage	23	18	
Travel	7	14	
Total	82	84	
Societal alienation and integration:			
Perception of violence	10	17	0.012; $p < 0.05$
Corruption	7	14	
Total	17	31	
Moral and ethical values:			
Importance of honesty	9	15	0.004; $p < 0.05$
Loyalty to family/friends	9	3	
Respect for others	23	17	
Love for humanity	3	6	
Having a goal in life	0	1	
Total	44	42	
Religious affiliations:			
Roman Catholic	0	21	0.00; $p < 0.05$
Spiritist religious groups	6	2	
Atheist	0	4	
Personal	0	1	
Non UDV	0	0	
Total	6	28	
Prior drug experience:			
None	24	24	0.513; $p = \text{N.S.}$
Marijuana	2	3	
Alcohol	2	1	
Total	28	28	
Sexual experience:			
Virgin	13	13	1.000; $p = \text{N.S.}$
Nonvirgin	15	15	
Total	28	28	

and have been incorporated into the moral/ethical vignettes to follow. Since culture, society and human behavior are not just a random array of occurrences that develop without rhyme or reason but rather as the result of interacting variables that influence the human condition, we have presented ethnological data in a correlative manner of two or more variables interacting together. Anthropologists recognize that no aspect of culture and society can be completely explained by any single cause or independent variable and they thus rely on multidimensional hypotheses where many variables interact with one another, giving rise to a holistic perspective, and the attempt to demonstrate how sociocultural systems must be understood through the interconnections among these variables (see Scupin 1995). Please note that on some tables, multiple responses were possible and data may not agree with that presented by da Silveira and colleagues in this issue, due to a different sample taken from the adolescents queried.

SOCIAL CHARACTERISTICS OF UDV AND CONTROL GROUP TEENS

Inquiry was made regarding teens' chores (see Table 1). There does not appear to be a significant difference between UDV and controls in this area. This suggests that UDV teens are just as involved and responsible as controls. However, it is important to note that six controls indicated they had no chores while UDV teens never reported lack of chores. This may suggest the UDV teens may be more responsible than the control group when it comes to having at least one chore to perform.

Demographic information was requested regarding the residence of the teens. There does not appear to be a significant difference between UDV and controls. This suggests that UDV teens are no different from controls with regard to social cohesion. Twenty-three of the UDV teens reported living with both parents, while 19 of the control teens reported that they lived with their parents. None of the UDV teens had parents who lived in different homes.

Teens were queried regarding who raised them. There does not appear to be a significant difference between UDV and controls in this respect. This suggests that UDV teens are raised similarly to control teens. All teens in both groups were raised by either both parents or by only their mother. None of the teens from either group reported being raised by their father.

The quality of home life was examined. There does appear to be a significant difference between UDV and controls. This suggests that UDV teens seem to have a better quality of home life compared to control teens. Twenty-seven of the UDV teens reported having a positive home life compared to 22 of the control teens. Six of the control teens reported having relatives who criticized them and tension at home. Only one UDV teen reported criticizing relatives with tension at home.

The teens were questioned regarding their relationships with their fathers. There does appear to be a significant difference between UDV teens and controls with regard to their relationship with their father. This suggests that UDV teens appear to have a closer relationship with their father compared to Control teens. Twenty-seven of the UDV teens reported having a close relationship with their father compared to 20 of the control teens. Eight of the control teens reported having a distant relationship with their father. Only one UDV teen reported having a distant relationship with their father.

The teens were also asked about where their friends originated. There does appear to be a significant difference between UDV teens and controls with regard to where their friends were drawn from. The data suggests that UDV teens appear to overwhelmingly draw their friends from church members. They seemed to rely less on developing friendships with schoolmates compared to control teens. Eleven of the UDV teens reported draw their friends from schoolmates compared to 27 of the control teens. The UDV teens reported that they were hesitant to discuss their religious practices with schoolmates, who simply assumed they were only involved in the drug aspect of religion.

Future expectations and career options were queried. There does not appear to be a significant difference between UDV teens and controls. This suggests that UDV teens are likely to have similar future expectations as controls. However, it is important to note that only seven UDV teens indicated they wanted to travel compared to 14 controls. This may suggest that UDV teens are more likely to stay in close proximity to their home environment, since they are part of a social community.

The concept of societal alienation and integration within society was examined. There does appear to be a significant difference between UDV teens and controls with regard to social alienation. The data suggests that UDV teens appear to differ in the areas of perception of violence and corruption in society, with the UDV teens exhibiting greater optimism.

Moral and ethical values were also queried. There does appear to be a significant difference between UDV teens and controls with regard to moral and ethical values, even though the two groups differ in the different categories. Both groups were similar in choosing the value of respect for others as paramount. The control group strongly endorsed the importance of honesty, more so than the UDV teens, for whom loyalty to family and friends would appear to be an important value. There has been some reported stigmatization by UDV teens' peers.

The teens were asked about formal religious affiliation. There does appear to be a significant difference between UDV teens and controls in regard to religion practices. The control group was overwhelmingly Roman Catholic. Of the UDV group, six also belonged to Spiritist temples.

TABLE 2
Vignettes

	UDV	Control	Chi Square Total
1. You are on a bus and an acquaintance sits down next to you. He offers to sell you some marijuana and he keeps insisting that you buy it and be like all the other kids.			
Leave without argument	2	5	0.065; $p = \text{N.S.}$
Leave denying interest	10	6	
Would buy for use in rock concert	0	1	
Total	12	12	
2. You are at a teen party and an acquaintance has a bottle of liquor that he wants to put in the drinks that people have without anyone seeing it. You tell him not to do this. He insists upon doing it.			
Convince youths and tell parents	9	9	1.000; $p = \text{N.S.}$
Just tell parents	3	3	
Total	12	12	
3. You are at school and you see a classmate go into a teacher's office and begin to look through her handbag to take money.			
Confront thief	4	9	0.056; $p = \text{N.S.}$
Tell teacher	8	1	
Lend thief money	0	2	
Total	12	12	
4. You are with a group of four teens who go riding. Your friend parks his car and starts to have sex with the person next to him.			
Agree it is okay	0	2	0.301; $p = \text{N.S.}$
Leave car and go away	12	10	
Total	12	12	
5. You win a lottery for a small amount of money. You are faced with a decision about what to do with the money.			
Save money and/or pay off debts	10	4	0.001; $p < 0.05$
Give money or gifts to loved ones	1	3	
Spend it on self	1	5	
Total	12	12	
6. You are at home. Late one night, your friend calls you to insist you sneak out of the house to go to a party.			
Reject offer	7	7	1.000; $p = \text{N.S.}$
Reject friend's offer/not tell their parents	5	5	
Total	12	12	

Lifetime drug experience was examined. There does not appear to be a significant difference between UDV and controls. This suggests that UDV teens and controls are similar with regard to prior drug experiences. The majority of the teens in both groups reported having no prior drug experiences (24 in both groups). Only four teens from each of the groups reported having prior experiences with marijuana and alcohol.

Sexual experience of the teens was queried. There does not appear to be a significant difference between UDV teens and controls with regard to sexual experience. This suggests that UDV teens are just as experienced with regard to prior sexual history. Thirteen from each of the groups

reported being virgins compared to 15 from both groups who classified themselves as nonvirgins. It is important to note that 12 females from each of the groups reported being virgins, while 13 females of each group reported being nonvirgins. Overall, with regard to gender both UDV and control groups were similar in their level of sexual experience.

RESPONSES TO VIGNETTES

The six vignettes in Table 2 were designed to measure moral and ethical considerations of both the UDV and control teens. In modern-day industrial societies, drug and

alcohol use is often associated with excessive risk taking, impulsivity and often a disregard for safety and consequences. The authors believed that vignettes would permit an honest self-reporting by teens of their potential responses to conflictful situations and their general level of maturity.

In response to the first vignette, UDV teens appear to be no different than controls in avoiding confrontation. This was also seen in their responses to the second vignette. Both alternatives in this case reflect a concern with the well-being of others and a disinclination of the teens to back away from doing the right thing.

Regarding the third vignette, it appears that controls may be more confrontational.

Results for the fourth vignette show that UDV teens find clandestine premarital sex to be distasteful and leave the scene just like controls.

Judging from responses to the fifth vignette, UDV teens are thrifty, responsible and think about the welfare of others.

Finally, concerning the sixth vignette, it is seen that UDV teens are realistic in not wishing to be antisocial and offend parents. This could be interpreted as a mature recognition of the importance of family in third world societies, both economically and socially. In this respect, the UDV teens are identical to the control group.

LIMITATIONS AND SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

Regarding the limitations of this small pilot study, the research is retrospective and, as such, is based on self-reporting. The sample was basically drawn from urban and not rural Brazil and was comprised of middle and upper-middle class students. Ethnically, both subjects and controls did not fully represent the multiethnic diversity of Brazil.

The significance of the study, however, is in the examination of a modern use of a powerful hallucinogenic compound within a legal religious context. The young

people who participated in these ayahuasca religious ceremonies, usually with parents and other family members, appeared not to differ significantly from their nonayahuasca-using peers.

This study and the studies to follow in this issue can do much to elucidate the full range of effects of plant hallucinogenic use within a socially-sanctioned, elder-facilitated and structured religious context.

CONCLUSION

Overall, there appear to be few if any differences in responses between the UDV teens and the controls. However, the UDV group seems to be more responsible, respectful, and concerned about the welfare of others. They also tend to be less confrontational. There also appears to be a better quality of home life among the UDV teens when compared to their counterparts. The UDV teens tended to have closer relationships with their fathers when compared to controls. They also exhibit greater optimism than controls. They do not differ significantly with regard to virginity or drug use (other than ayahuasca used sacramentally).

We might expect that given the destructive consequences of youthful drug use in contemporary society, that the UDV teens would lag far behind their peers in a number of different dimensions of sociability, honesty, studiousness, etc. In fact, it would be easy to assume at the outset of such a study as this that the UDV teens and the controls would differ in some significant fashion. In this sense, the qualitative data is quite revealing in that the teens appear to be healthy, thoughtful, considerate, and bonded to their families and religious peers.

REFERENCE

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