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*Corresponding author. School of Psychology, University of Ottawa, 136 Jean-Jacques Lussier, Vanier Hall, K1N 6N5, Ottawa, ON, Canada.
Tel.: +1 613 562 5800x4444;
fax: +1 613 562 5169
E-mail: Monnica.Williams@uOttawa.ca

Dr. Valentina Wasson: Questioning what we think we know about the foundations of psychedelic science

MONNICA T. WILLIAMS^{1*} , AMY BARTLETT²,
TIM MICHAELS^{3,4}, JAE SEVELIUS⁵ and JAMILAH R. GEORGE³

¹ School of Psychology, University of Ottawa, Ottawa, ON, Canada

² Department of Classics and Religious Studies, University of Ottawa, Ottawa, ON, Canada

³ Department of Psychological Sciences, University of Connecticut, Storrs, CT, USA

⁴ Department of Pediatrics, University of California, Davis Medical Center, Sacramento, CA, USA

⁵ Department of Medicine, University of California, San Francisco, CA, USA

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ABSTRACT

Equity and diversity are essential to the development of inclusive psychedelic research. However, oversights and misattributions are common, particularly when it comes to accounts of important psychedelic moments and key figures. Dr. Valentina Pavlovna Wasson is an important early contributor to the growth of Western psychedelic science but remains under-recognized. Psychedelic researchers must continue to address the glaring need to ask questions and examine the foundations of what we think we know about psychedelic studies—to question our assumptions with a critical and intersectional eye to resist replicating social and cultural inequalities in psychedelic research and history.

KEYWORDS

psychedelic research, diversity, inclusion, Valentina Wasson, psychedelic studies, psilocybin

In a recent article in a special issue of the *Journal of Psychedelic Studies* on Diversity, Equity, and Access in Psychedelic Medicine (Williams & Labate, 2020), we made the case for the importance of fairness and inclusion in the psychedelic renaissance (George, Michaels, Sevelius, & Williams, 2020). This is an urgent need underpinning the development of psychedelic research over the past few decades, to strive to include the full range of human contributions to this emerging discipline and resist replicating the social inequalities that plague our existing systems and structures.

But alas, soon after the article was finalized, we identified a problem. While highlighting the often under cited contributions of Mazatec native healer, María Sabina, we credited a White man with an achievement while accidentally failing to mention the equal (or greater) contribution of a less empowered individual. On page 10 of the article, we credited R. Gordon Wasson as “the most notable Westerner to intentionally ingest psilocybin in Mexico” as well as the only author of the book *Mushrooms, Russia, and History* (Wasson & Wasson, 1957). In fact, Gordon Wasson’s wife, Dr. Valentina “Tina” Pavlovna Wasson, had as much if not more influence in bringing the psilocybin mushroom to the attention of North America. This section of our article attempted to problematize the title often attributed to R. Gordon Wasson as “the father of ethnomycology” and we aimed to highlight María Sabina as his predecessor and trainer; however, we missed the equally important opportunity to name and credit Dr. Valentina Wasson for her significant contributions.

In many ways, the stories we tell around R. Gordon Wasson and other “founding fathers” of psychedelic studies are digested uncritically. When “we hold these truths to be self-evident,” as it were, we fall prey to the same misogynistic assumptions that made her invisible to writers and historians in the first place. The truth is that Valentina was a pediatrician and

scientist, a passionate mycology enthusiast (a hobby she cultivated as a child in Russia) and a prolific entomycologist. After Valentina had for a few years led several expeditions to research traditional uses of mushrooms in Mexico, Maria Sabina introduced her psilocybin mushroom-based practice to both Valentina and Gordon (who himself was a banker, not a scientist by trade) (Palmer & Horowitz, 2000). The Wassons together gathered mushroom spores during this visit (Wasson, Hofmann, & Ruck, 2008) which were subsequently cultivated and analyzed by psychedelic researcher Albert Hofmann, thereby contributing to his isolation of the psilocybin molecule (Stevens, 1998). Valentina had a deep professional and personal passion for the psilocybin mushroom, and she made important and influential contributions to its popularization across the Western world, including her belief that psilocybin could be used for therapeutic purposes, including to support the dying process (Grof & Halifax, 1977).

While R. Gordon Wasson did indeed write up his much-cited experiences in a famous *Life Magazine* article entitled “Seeking the Magic Mushroom,” in our article we failed to acknowledge that Dr. Valentina Wasson’s personal account was also published just a few days later in a very popular magazine at the time, called *This Week* (Wasson, 1957). *This Week* was a nationally syndicated Sunday magazine supplement that had been included in American newspapers since 1935, with a total circulation of 9.9 million when it folded in 1969 (Raymont, 1969). Importantly, we also failed to credit Dr. Valentina Wasson as the lead author of their two-part text, *Mushrooms, Russia, and History*, and instead falsely cited her husband Gordon who was the secondary co-author (Wasson & Wasson, 1957).

The prevalence and problematic legacy of these oversights and misattributions are exactly the issue we were hoping to underscore in writing our original article. Unfortunately, R. Gordon Wasson has been lionized in the story of psychedelic history, while Dr. Valentina Wasson and her many contributions and accomplishments have been obscured or receded into the background, much like many other women of this time. Consequently, it was easier for us to find reference information about the male contributor in our original research on this topic—an oversight that has been replicated hundreds of times in academic articles and research. This phenomenon of being obscured in the research is well-documented among many key female contributors in the psychedelic movement (Dyck, 2018; Mangini, 2019). And so when we encounter these oversights, it behooves all of us to update our claims about important psychedelic moments and figures; indeed, this was one of the aims of our original publication.

While we have attempted to make amends in this short commentary, the larger implications of this oversight should not be taken lightly. Dr. Valentina Wasson is but one of many dozens of marginalized people whose contributions have been undervalued and underreported in the literature. As researchers who are focused on equity, diversity and inclusion, even we failed to catch this

oversight in time to correct it before the article was published. None of us are perfect, but together, and with intention, we can hold each other and ourselves to account in order to better address the glaring need to ask questions and examine the foundations of what we think we know about psychedelic studies. We must continually question our assumptions with a critical and intersectional eye, and resist replicating social and cultural inequalities in psychedelic research and history.

Whether we are talking about the legends and stories we have collectively woven together about the foundations of psychedelic research, or whether we are actively accounting for race, gender, sexuality and culture in clinical trials and studies we are conducting in modern times (e.g., Michaels, Purdon, Collins, & Williams, 2018; Williams, Reed, & Aggarwal, 2020): we are hopeful that as research communities prioritize asking questions and examining the foundations of our understanding, we will be able to bring a collective critical eye to the stories, research questions, and methods we use to advance our understanding of psychedelic science.

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