

## Psychopathology of a Drug Experience

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A young man aged 23 made contact and asked to talk about an adverse drug reaction. He had been puzzled and frightened by what had happened to him and although he was a very experienced drug-user he had not fully realized that a drug could cause such consequences—he had feared that he was going mad. He came along not as ‘a patient’ but because he believed that he had something to tell which might add to medical insights.

A full psychiatric history was however obtained, but little of note was elicited other than that a parent had possibly suffered from a depressive illness. He himself sometimes got ‘anxious and depressed’, but had never been mentally ill. He was married and had held a variety of jobs. His interests, were music, his motor-cycle, and church activities.

He had wide experience of drugs and had used cannabis intermittently and at times heavily for many years; he had on occasion noticed minor perceptual distortions after smoking this drug, knew that it might make him slightly ‘paranoid’, but had never experienced any unusual adverse reaction. He had taken magic mushroom about 2–3 months before the events now reported, with typical but transient effects. He had never used LSD. In the past he had transiently experimented with oral amphetamine sulphate and with cocaine, without psychotic complications. His drinking was within moderate limits. He had never used opiates.

A mental state examination was essentially normal other than for lingering perceptual disturbances which could be seen as relating to the previous drug reaction. An EEG recording showed no abnormality.

There are dangers in drawing too confident inferences from any single case-study, but the richness of material that this man revealed, his descriptions of complex psychopathology, the possible relevance of his story to understanding of acute drug reactions and flash-back phenomena, and the importance of his plea for greater medical alertness, all seem to make this case worth detailed reporting.

This paper will present a shortened transcript of a tape-recording of the interview, followed then by a brief discussion of the questions which it raises. The

subject will be referred to as A and the interviewer as E. All identifying personal details have been disguised.

### The Interview

- A. I can only explain it as a bad trip that lasted for quite a long time. After that there were later experiences related to smoking dope (cannabis). But later smoking brought on a rather different effect not like the first one. The first experience was very very profound.
- E. Tell me from the beginning.

### The acute experience

- A. We were going to a gig and we decided to drop into a mate’s flat for a smoke. And he had all these bottles lined up. Smoking out of a milk bottle. He was going right, next one, you know, taking turns. Almost like a drinking contest. Who can keep up with me sort of thing. But anyway I only had three bottles full and my mate had about five. You get a milk bottle and you bang the bottom with a knife until the bottom falls out. And you put a piece of dope on the baking tray, and you get somebody to hold the bottle with their hand over the top. You heat two hot knives until they become red hot and you put them so that the dope’s in between the two blades, and squash them together. The bottle fills up with smoke, and then you inhale it. It’s equivalent to many joints. But I’ve had it before and no problem. This time it hit me quickly and I thought oh I’m stoned, I started laughing, didn’t quite know what was going on for a minute, and all of a sudden people were running about.

I don’t know whether you’ve smoked dope but sometimes you get a bit confused, you look at things and there’s people running about and you wonder, what’s happening. There’s noises, somebody speaks here, there and everywhere. And I was looking at this and laughing and thinking it was a bit funny. Suddenly it was not in this kind of plane or vibration anymore. And I thought, this is like tripping (a psychedelic experience), and my mind sort of went swooh, like it went somewhere else. It was like a mist all around and these faces,

they were all standing round looking, sort of smiling a bit, and I said you've put trip in this haven't you. Strange sort of faces. My first reaction was to panic. I wanted to get out from these guys. I went to get me crash helmet but it looked tiny, and in the distance. The door seemed tiny as did the room. Everything seemed to be like Alice in Wonderland, a weird long shape.

I ran down the street, Jack ran after me and said come on, what's the matter with you . . . I made a gesture, as if to put my arm round him, and it was almost as if my body passed through his. I said look they put something in it. And he said don't be silly, and then Tom came out and said what's the matter. And I accused him of putting something in it and he said no it's just very strong dope.

Anyway I went out the door and as I was walking down the road, there wasn't any wind at all, and yet I could hear myself moving through the atmosphere. It was so loud it was going sweet, shwee. It was just like floating. It was almost as if I blended into the atmosphere and the atmosphere blended into my head. And my voice sounded completely apart from me.

I was getting very paranoid, dope makes you paranoid anyway. We got on the bike, and I'm really surprised to have ever come through, but I did. It was like I was watching it on telly. Jack on the back was sort of driving the bike through me. We dropped in to get some petrol. I thought, see these men in these white coats in a van, they have done something that sent me out of my head, and these are the blokes from the loony bin, trying to come and get me.

I drove up to me house and Jack said mate, we must go and listen to some records. And we went up to my bedroom and just lay down, and it was all weird but it gradually mellowed out, it was more like a normal sort of drug experience.

- E. Over what sort of time did all this happen?  
 A. We took it at about half six at night, and I give Jack a lift home at midnight and I was still going, still very high.

#### *Next day*

- A. When I woke up in the morning I felt sober, but I did have sort of little mini flashbacks. Like I suffered from greater at a later stage. Things did look slightly strange. I felt extremely anxious. But the first thing I did, I needed a smoke (of cannabis) to bring me down. A smoke and that did bring on a sort of strange atmosphere.

#### *Two days after the acute experience*

- A. About two days later we went round this bloke's

house, and he set up this sweet-bottle made into a pipe. I only had one this time, one blast, and then Jack had another one and there was just a little bit left in the bottle and I took that out. Then about a minute later, sure enough these faces, people started turning into sort of pixies. Wolf-like faces, and everyone in the room was looking at me. The other guys seemed to be alright. The room was full of light, a bit small and out of proportion. And all of a sudden I couldn't feel my hands and couldn't feel my body and that. And all of a sudden I come round again and they was all laughing.

#### *Last smoke: a week after the first experience*

- A. The last time I smoked dope I was lying in bed with my wife asleep, and I smoked this joint. I was lying down in bed and all of a sudden, I kept seeing these faces and things. Not clear faces. It was in my head, and I knew it. Out of the darkness it hit you, horror. All of a sudden I couldn't feel my body. I was almost like non-existence. I got up, threw the dope out of the window and said, well if that's what it does to me. I haven't touched dope since.

#### *The second week: continuing disturbance and then some amelioration*

- A. Things were going on as normal for a couple of days only I'd be eating my breakfast and this cupboard in front of me would look a bit small. I would look at my hands and they'd look very tiny. The kettle would look a bit tiny. And I would be having a wash, and when I rubbed my hands together that really confused me. Can you imagine two little hands only about the size of your palms and then rubbing them together? And looking in the mirror used to confuse me, what I felt in relation to distances.  
 E. This was the first couple of days after the last smoke?  
 A. Right. And all of a sudden it started progressing into a feeling of being disembodied. Felt like I was sitting cross-legged in my head, and I'm watching. My whole being is in my head but this has got nothing to do with me, what I'm feeling. Periods of panic would come over me, paranoia, all those sort of feelings rolled into one. And anyway I was going mad, that is why I feel so sorry for anybody that gets this experience. It was a Saturday, it was there when I got up. I phoned up, and in the end the bloke down the hospital said come to Casualty.

I just told the doctor very briefly what's happened, and he said, very kindly, you're

suffering from anxiety. He asked about mental illness in the family.

- E. Did you tell him about taking drugs?  
 A. Yes. He said I doubt very much if it's any thing to do with that. He said what I think you're suffering from is anxiety, a perfectly normal thing that happens to normal people. He gave me some 'valium'. I was reassured! The rest of that day I was still a bit strange and the next day I felt a little better and in the end I got about 98 per cent better, a few days later I carried on working.

*The next four weeks and a further bad patch*

- A. Everything was going fine except for one day sitting in the shop, this wave of paranoia, I don't know what brought it on, but I know that all of a sudden I felt panic. All of a sudden things started to look a bit out of proportion again. I went round the back and did some press-ups, played my mouth organ. That weird sort of atmosphere where things look a bit surreal.

It started cooking up. This is coming up to the worst. I went to this doctor and he wasn't much help, he said I want you to see a psychologist. I saw her and all she did was say, you are suffering from withdrawal symptoms. And I thought marvellous. I knew that she was talking a load of rubbish. Then when I told the doctor I lived in another district he said you aren't anything to do with us. I thought I can't stand it. I went to the Citizens' Advice Bureau. I 'phoned up Release. They gave me the name of a doctor, a sympathetic doctor. She understands drug experiences. What a lot of other doctors don't.

Anyway, this was the real bad thing, for about 4 or 5 days it was like living in hell. I kept on having one dream after another. And I would wake up very early in the morning, couldn't go back to sleep again. I was so anxious. This time the world did look very strange. A room would look small, roundy. I was worrying, it's either they have got a spell on me, or I'm going mad, or they fixed me up with some trippy stuff or something that rots your brains. The mental torment and physical anxiety plus the weird sound like traffic, a child's voice outside went ah ah ah, like in the distance.

- E. Would your thoughts ever just be taken away . . .  
 A. Not really . . .  
 E. Did you have any sense that other people were controlling your mind?  
 A. Well that's difficult, because I felt these people might have had some spell over me so they were controlling the situation. But not my mind.  
 E. Sometimes people when they have got into this sort of state get an idea that, say, as they are

walking down the road a sign has something to do with them, or see something on television with a hidden significance for them, that someone is talking about them, that things have secret messages directed at oneself. Did you have any of that?

- A. No.  
 E. During this period did you hear sounds that weren't there, or anything like that?  
 A. No, nothing like that. When I 'phoned up Release I thought it was all a secret society, the guys that turned me on to this state of mind was all in with Release, and they wanted to analyse me. They were experimenting with acid, they were part of the Julie operation (a much publicised police action against drug peddlers).  
 E. Did you actually believe this or not?  
 A. No, no, not absolutely.

*Six weeks after the original experience*

- E. And then it gradually, not dramatically, got less bad?  
 A. Yes. Within a period of two weeks, it gradually got bad, and then it was bad for about four or five days, and then the next six to seven days it was a sort of steady level of bearable. But this last week I was feeling really weird and having another flashback.  
 E. Sitting in this room, is everything absolutely normal?  
 A. No. When I think about them they are not normal. When I don't think about them, they are alright.  
 E. Look at that chair, and tell me . . .  
 A. Well that doesn't seem . . . but that one does.  
 E. What does that one seem?  
 A. Well, it sort of looks very outstanding . . . it does something to the rest of the room.  
 E. Outstanding in colour or . . .?  
 A. In material, substance-wise, in colour it's a very bright green. But substance wise too it seems very hard, like the other substances seems finer.  
 E. Now what about your use of alcohol?  
 A. Not very much. Recently, I went to a friend's house and I had two vodkas and that sort of gave me a flashback and it looked like things were shining in the room.

**Discussion**

*Cannabis psychosis*

There is persuasive evidence that cannabis can on occasion give rise to an acute but short-lived psychotic illness, lasting perhaps 24–72 hours (Weil, 1970; Meyer, 1975; Edwards, 1982; Rottanburg *et al*, 1982). Whether cannabis can cause more prolonged psychological disturbance is generally today considered much

more doubtful, (Lewis, 1970). The present report might be seen as bearing on this debate. After taking a massive dose of cannabis A at first developed an acute disturbance which closely resembled many previously published descriptions of acute cannabis reactions, and there is nothing in this part of his story which is particularly surprising. His account of the subsequent six weeks of fluctuating and highly complex mental disturbance seems then to suggest that cannabis may indeed be capable of inducing a serious disturbance with a duration much in excess of just a few days.

But it should be stressed that the evidence certainly cannot in this instance be seen as going beyond the suggestive, given that there can be no absolute proof that the cannabis was not adulterated. The subject was assured by those immediately involved that the cannabis had not been spiked, and other people seem to have taken cannabis from the same batch. The psychotic reaction might be attributed to the sudden and massive inhalation from a resin with high THC content, together with idiosyncratic susceptibility, rather than it being necessary to invoke possible adulteration with an additional psychomimetic substance—the idea of adulteration is introduced by A (along with magical spells), in an attempt to explain what was for him the inexplicable. There can though be no firm conclusion without laboratory analysis of the actual drug material employed, and this was not possible.

#### *The psychopathology*

The *fluctuating* nature of the reported symptoms deserves note. The psychopathology included complex perceptual distortions and distortions of body image, de-personalization and de-realization, transcendental experiences, affective disturbance and panic, and a paranoid colouring. Although aspects of this story are schizophrenia-like (Thacore and Shukla, 1976), on closer inspection there are also features that are subtly different from a schizophrenic experience: it seems doubtful for instance whether there was any formed or meaningful hallucinatory experience, ideas of influence or reference were not well developed, and the paranoid ideas seem to have been conjectural attempts to explain a bizarre experience, and were not held with fixed conviction.

#### *Flashbacks*

That cannabis use can be followed by experience of flashbacks has already been reported (Brown and

Stickgold, 1976; Stanton *et al*, 1976). It is somewhat difficult in this story to separate circumscribed flashbacks from the fluctuating background of disturbance. Flashbacks appear at times to have occurred spontaneously, but also to have been precipitated by further cannabis use, and very interestingly by alcohol.

#### *Health service implications*

Given that use of drugs (including cannabis) is becoming increasingly common in this country, there is a need for increased medical education and alertness. A's story shows the great difficulty which someone suffering from a drug psychosis may experience in finding appropriate advice and help.

#### *Implications for research*

Complementary to other and more formal research approaches there may be merit in attempting to collect a series of single cases of drug-induced mental disturbance on an *ad-hoc* basis. More exact clinical descriptions of these complex pictures are badly needed.

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