

‘Where were you while we were getting high?’

An autoethnography of psychedelic experience and doctoral study

The following essay was submitted in September 2016 in partial fulfilment of a Professional Doctorate in Education (EdD) at Oxford Brookes University. It formed the assignment for a D-level unit called The Independent Doctoral Researcher. My doctoral thesis is in the field of Philosophy of Education, and my thesis is a part-philosophical, part-empirical study of the purpose of universities in society.

Pharmacologists such as Fadiman (2011), Sessa (2012) and Feilding (2013) have made a persuasive case for the re-evaluation of entheogens like LSD and psilocybin (‘magic mushrooms’), citing fresh evidence not only of their clinical potential for the treatment of conditions such as PTSD, autism and addiction, but also as an instrument for personal growth, with a single psychedelic experience found to effect lasting changes in personality and cognition (Griffiths et al. 2006 & 2008, MacLean et al. 2011).

The coincidence in 2013 of my enrolment on the professional doctorate with my first psychedelic experience heralded a period of significant personal change. Having been invited to write an autoethnography of the doctoral journey, I wish to explore the influence of psychedelic experience on my educational development.

I am drawn to Denshire’s description (2013, p1) of autoethnography as ‘transgressive’; i.e. involving a violation of moral and social boundaries, and allowing ‘voices previously silenced to speak back’ (p2). Mainstream discourse tends to link drug use with delinquency or educational failure, and writing openly on this topic will be seen by some as audacious and/or radical. I have elaborated on my motivations for doing so (and my reservations) in my online journal (Jordan 2016c and 2016d); primarily, my aim is to disrupt cultural understandings and ultimately contribute towards a more just society.

Huxley (1954, p42) describes ‘the urge to transcend self-conscious selfhood’ as ‘a principal appetite of the soul’. But there are obvious inconsistencies in the laws that govern what substances we use to help us transcend ourselves. Tobacco and alcohol are both legal, despite the substantial health burdens they impose on society, from liver cirrhosis and lung cancer to casualties resulting from accidents (Vaccarino and Rotzinger 2004, p12). In comparison, psychedelics are ‘by far the least addictive class of drug’, ‘cause very little harm to the body’ (Nutt 2012, p58), and have been used for thousands of years to produce profound spiritual experiences (Muthukumaraswamy et al. 2013).

The psychedelic experience has been theorised (Griffiths 2008, Sessa 2012) as formed of three key factors, including psychological state (‘set’) and environment (‘setting’) in addition to the drug itself. My own psychedelic experience has tended towards the ritualistic or *entheogenic*. Typically I check the weather forecast, clear my schedule, and prepare with a healthy breakfast and a yoga class before taking my drug of choice - either LSD or psilocybin - and heading out to the park. I often have an intention; I may have read or heard about something that I want to

experience for myself, or have an issue in mind that I seek a different perspective on. I may feel I have made headway with an aspect of my personal development and want to see what *difference* this makes to the experience. An intense trip will give me plenty to think about, and I will not feel the need (or have the opportunity) to repeat it in a hurry. As Watts (1965, p26) explains; 'psychedelic drugs are simply instruments... the biologist does not sit with his eye permanently glued to the microscope, he goes away and works on what he has seen.'

In response to Anderson's (2006) proposition that 'all ethnographic writing should have evocative aspirations' (p459), and persuaded by Hogan's (2004) conception of *education as epiphany*, I have chosen to capture and communicate my experience in the form of *epiphanic fragments*. Each fragment is a pre-reflective account of a moment during the psychedelic experience that marks a 'discontinuity in [my] perception of the world' (Aldridge 2013, p5). Most have already been refined and distilled through repeated co-reminiscence with others, and in many cases it has been 'in the recollection that the epiphany occurs' (Kearney 2007, cited by Aldridge 2013, p10), allowing the fuller significance of the moment to be recognised.

While McKenna (1983) agrees that analysis of one's psychedelic experience is best undertaken once normality has resumed, the issue is; what of the experience to record, and how? Anderson (2006, p381) laments how the documentation of one's activities 'diverts the researcher's attention from the embodied phenomenological experience', and I feel this is especially problematic during a trip, when thoughts (and thoughts *about* thoughts) arrive thick and fast. I have felt more inclined to verbalise my thoughts rather than putting pen to paper, but this can be annoying for my companions. Despite these challenges, I increasingly 'return' with a selection of fragments and aphorisms which I can then discuss with fellow psychonauts (see Figure 1).

Through these conversations and my engagement with the literature, I reach beyond self-experience (Anderson 2006), aiming to situate my reflections in the rich context of the current psychedelic 'renaissance' (Sessa 2012).

The current revival in research on psychedelics and cognition (e.g. Carhart-Harris et al. 2014, Family et al. 2016) builds on a substantial body of work in the 1950s and 60s (Sessa 2012) ranging from effects on semantic processing (e.g. Amarel & Cheek 1965) to combination psychedelic psychotherapy (e.g. Sandison et al 1954, Simmons et al. 1966). Reflecting on their work treating alcoholism, MacLean et al (1967, p419) describe the psychedelic experience as 'one of accelerated un-learning and re-learning...essentially an educational process'. Stafford

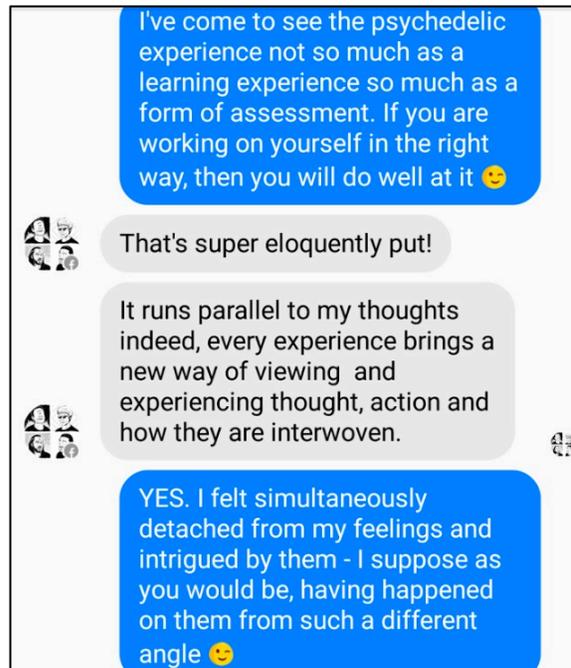


Figure 1: A psilocybin debrief

and Golightly (1967, Ch5) explain the role of LSD in learning, describing how it “inhibits the inhibitors” in the psyche’, a theory that persists today and is further explained by modern neuroimaging studies (e.g. Carhart-Harris et al. 2016).

While the relationship between psychedelic experience and my doctoral studies is integrative and centralising, the influences can be grouped into five interrelated categories; empathy, cognition, language, truth and education.

Empathy

June 2013: I am at Glastonbury, the sun is shining, and I have taken LSD for the first time. A bored-looking [Kenny Rogers is singing 'The Gambler'](#) and we are singing along loudly. Kenny is unimpressed, which amuses us greatly. As Brendan and I banter, landing punchlines in layers of irony, our two friends fall silent; they are overwhelmed. As I look around, I see some festival-goers stand out from the others; their clothes shining more brightly, their movements more dynamic, their expressions relaxed and blissfully happy. I catch their gaze and we smile at one another. (Figure 2)



Figure 2: The first time

Empathy has been a recurring theme in my doctoral journal. In my first year I noted the importance of empathy in my role as a teacher (Jordan 2013) and as an academic in a community of scholars (Jordan 2014). There is a high incidence of autism in my family, and while I am almost certainly inside the normal range myself, I have struggled to learn how to understand others’ motives, appreciate metaphor, communicate my feelings and feel comfortable in others’ company. Encouraged by my earlier psychedelic experiences, I began to develop an academic interest in empathy, absorbing myself in Krynaric (2014), Freire (1970) and hooks (1994), each of which have since had a profound influence on my becoming a teacher. In more recent posts I have reflected on empathy as a means and an end to generating new knowledge (e.g. Jordan 2015c, Jordan 2016b).

January 2015: I am walking home alone from a party. I have taken a microdot of LSD but socialising feels too much like hard work tonight and I want to be by myself. The sleet dances and sparkles in the glow of the street lights, which illuminate the footprints on the pavement. I can see each person’s track; I imagine who they are and where they were going. I feel a deep emotional connection to every one of them.

Countless psychedelic studies have highlighted the feelings of empathetic connection experienced by participants. I have personally found the realisation that we are not alone, but part of something much bigger than ourselves, incredibly reassuring. Purely on this basis it does

not surprise me that, when used in a therapeutic/clinical context, psychedelic drugs have been shown to be of use in the clinical treatment of addiction, depression, anxiety, and post-traumatic stress disorder (Gardner 2016). MDMA is not a 'classic' psychedelic, but is leading the way towards FDA approval, with Phase 1 and 2 clinical trials for PTSD complete and Phase 3 anticipated to conclude in 2020 (Tatera 2016a).

August 2016. As the last guests leave, Frank walks in. He has been enjoying his home-grown magic mushrooms. Laughing, we lament his timing. There is still plenty of delicious vegan curry on the hob, but he is not hungry. We sit in the garden, passing around a joint, chatting and laughing. Frank tells me that when he walked in tonight he felt a 'light positive brightness about the place'; the energy of friends and good food and laughter.

While it is unfortunate that the legal status of psychedelics means that those who wish to access their 'therapeutic modalities' (Ruane 2015) have to do so in less regulated, recreational settings, there is ample professional advice available for those who are keen to learn, Fadiman's *Explorer's Guide* (2011) being perhaps the most comprehensive and up-to-date.

Cognition

The Oxford Brookes EdD programme specification (p5-6) states that doctoral candidates are required to demonstrate *originality* (Domain A), and to think *positively* and *imaginatively* (Domain D). The 'transformation of ordinary thought patterns' (Genn-Bash 2015, p31) engendered by psychedelics has been found to be of use in creative problem-solving. It has been revealed that the 1962 Nobel prizewinner Francis Crick and his fellow Cambridge academics microdosed with LSD to 'liberate them from preconceptions and let their genius wander freely' (Rees 2004), a practice that is gaining popularity among creative professionals (Boult 2015). In a 1966 study with individuals working in the creative industries, Harman et al. (1966) proposed eleven different mechanisms by which psychedelic drugs can enhance creative problem solving, many of them echoing Rogers' (1967, p353) proposed 'inner conditions' for the realisation of creative potential (e.g. 'permeability' of beliefs and perceptions, and a 'tolerance for ambiguity').

One of Harman's co-researchers from the 1960s is currently orchestrating an online microdosing study (Doody, 2012) where volunteers obtain and administer the drug themselves and upload daily logs. I find microdosing a very interesting proposition. Although I enjoy the profundity of an intense trip, I would certainly agree with Stafford and Golightly (1967) that being overwhelmed with perceptual changes can make it difficult to remain focused on a specific problem:

August 2015. I am at a music festival watching the headline act. The weather has been superb and I have taken relatively small doses of LSD every day for three days. I want to do something purposeful with my altered brain state, so I ruminate a while on the political situation in the UK. It is quite a struggle to do so; I find it hard to see any connection between this euphoric experience with the beautiful colours and the heavenly music, and the frowning, tired people in suits sniping and jeering across the despatch

box. But I persist; there is nothing else to do, after all, and time is going rather slowly. I recall something I read in the first year of my EdD that described popular culture as a form of anaesthetic (Held 2004), and it occurs to me that the government should be delighted that we are anaesthetising ourselves in a secure open space far from London, rather than waving banners outside Parliament, asking difficult questions. Who is having the better time? Us, whose sensory equalisers are hitting the red at every frequency? Or the likes of Theresa May, who have presumably never and will never experience anything like this? I decide it is a moot point, as if you don't know what you're missing, you don't miss it.

Figure 3: Call for participants for a new study into psychedelics and creative problem-solving

Stafford and Golightly (1967, Ch3) stress that ‘fundamental directive techniques’ are to be used if LSD is to be of assistance in problem-solving. The presence of a therapist or guide is a consistent feature of psychedelic research, and there is no doubt that David Luke’s new study referred to in Figure 3 will utilise a well-considered directive framework.

Language

Genn-Bash’s (2015) interpretation of psychedelic thought as *resistance to the image of thought* makes a convenient segway here. As I discovered in my very first blog post (Jordan 2007), thought and language are deeply connected. There are some writers whose ideas, as I have confessed in my journal, I have clearly struggled to grasp; Bernstein (Jordan 2015a), Deleuze (Jordan 2015b) and Nietzsche (Jordan 2016a) being obvious frontrunners. I had almost written them all off as ‘wilful obscurantists’ (Atherton 2013) until Genn-Bash’s (2015) application of the lens of psychedelic experience

helped me, for the first time, to make some sense of Deleuze. Through his writing, Deleuze demonstrates that not everything can be explained or understood in a straightforward manner. He persuades us to relax our focus; to loosen our hold on what we think it means to think, echoing Watts’ (1951, p72) call to ease our ‘habitual state of mental tension’.

I have felt a certain anxiety about attempting to evoke a sense of my experience in this paper. Tauber and Green (1959) argue that attempts to recount dreams illustrate the weakness of language, and Krippner (1970) and Sewell (2006) agree that the same can be said of the psychedelic experience. The recounting can feel like a fabrication; it forces us to make sense out of something that makes *no* sense.

For many, Huxley’s (1954) remains the best evocative account of the psychedelic experience, particularly for the psychedelic-naive. This is no doubt due to his ‘considerable narrative and expressive skills’ (Anderson, 2006, p377). Perhaps, also, his own naivety enables him to pick

out the significant points of departure between ordinary and extraordinary experience. Having described the psychedelic experience so beautifully, Huxley still comments at length on the limitations of language in this context.

Echoing Huxley's (1954, p47) call for us to learn 'to look at the world directly' rather than through the 'half-opaque medium of concepts', Watts (1971) warns us not to 'confuse that system of symbols [language, calculation], with the world itself'. I feel as if I *should* feel released from words and notions, but I continue to find the ineffability of the psychedelic experience frustrating. The problem is that I am a teacher, studying for a doctorate, and, as Huxley (1954, p47) points out, 'all education is predominantly verbal'. I shall return to this point shortly, but first I wish to briefly reflect on the existence and nature of reality.

Truth

In preparing to write this paper, I noted in my journal (Jordan 2016d) my natural tendency towards analysis that presupposes an objective truth. I continue to stand by this. As I have said before, I don't think it is possible to know that truth completely, and given the above paragraph, certainly not to define it in words.

Psychedelics show us how the world appears when certain neural mechanisms of selection and inhibition are shut down. These mechanisms have a valid purpose in day-to-day living; to enable us to focus only on the stimuli that help us to survive and prosper. When we take a drug that allows us to receive information that would ordinarily be filtered out, we experience reality very differently.

I believe that it is a good thing for humanity if we can be shown that what we thought or always 'knew' to be real wasn't actually so; or at least prompted to question it. Reporting on the recently published LSD neuroimaging study by Carhart-Harris et al. (2016), Enzo Tagliazucchi points out that '...the reality we experience during ordinary wakefulness is also, to a large extent, an illusion. So when we take psychedelics we are... replacing one illusion by another illusion.' (Tatera 2016b).

May 2016: I am looking out over the boating lake. I feel a pulsating sensation throughout my body. I watch the backdrop of plane trees, their iridescent leaves moving in a synchronised dance. Suddenly, I become aware that I am pulsing in time with the trees. It seems that, by fortuitous coincidence, my internal rhythms are synchronised exactly with the ripple of leaves in the breeze.

The philosopher Alan Watts spoke often about how psychedelic drugs influenced his thinking. In the following passage (1971) he ponders what should be done when we realise - as he has done - that the human race has come to a 'dead end':

'...there's nothing you can do. You watch. And all you see is what goes on that is happening of itself. You're breathing, the wind is blowing, the trees are waving, your blood is circulating, your nerves are tingling. It's all going on by itself.'

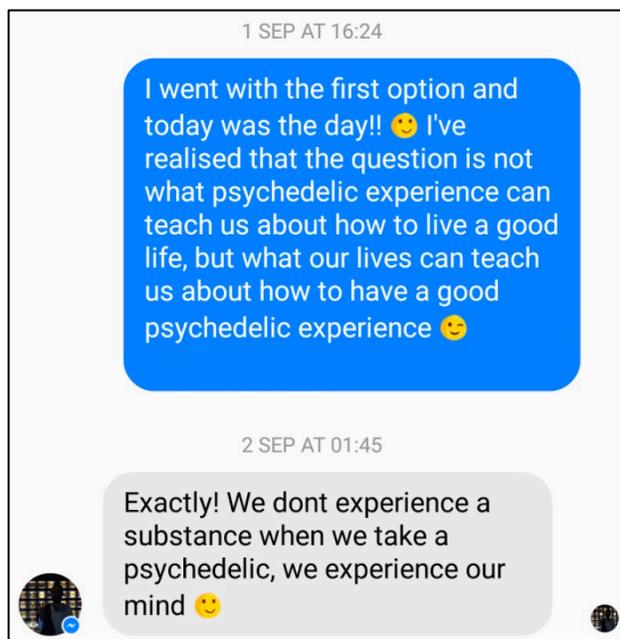


Figure 4: A debrief with 'D'

Psychedelics have a reputation for being unpredictable in their effects. As discussed earlier, it is not the action of the drug *per se* that is variable so much as the set and setting in which it is administered. Given an 'ideal' set and setting, the experience individuals have can be remarkably similar. As 'D' describes it to me in Figure 4 (echoing Frank's statement about 'experiencing thought' in Figure 1), 'we don't experience a substance, we experience our mind.'

Education

In the conversation excerpts with 'Frank' and 'D' included here, I allude to a shift in my view of the psychedelic experience, from an instrument to achieve certain ends, to having *intrinsic value*. I would still argue the case that

the psychedelic experience can teach us things that are applicable to 'ordinary' life and make that life better, but the relationship is reciprocal; if we are working on ourselves in the 'right' way; for example consciously developing an 'openness to experience' (Rogers 1967), our psychedelic experience will be more rewarding. It is, in a sense, a formative assessment of the self.

When I was asked at my EdD interview why I wanted to undertake a professional doctorate, I replied that I wanted to be as clever as I possibly can be, and an academic structure would be the best motivator for me to do so. What did I mean by 'clever'? I believe I was referring to self-actualisation; what Rogers (1967) describes as 'the curative force' (p150).

Moving away from an individual perspective on doctoral study towards a social or global perspective, the question is - why do we *as a society* channel resources into helping certain people develop their knowledge and intellectual capabilities? One argument is that intellectual development is one flavour of progression towards the *universal* goal of self-actualisation. A more explicitly collective answer is that concentrating resources on the brightest will further human knowledge and ultimately 'save' humanity. Some may say that the two are not cleanly separable. Some (e.g. Watts 1971) may say that humanity cannot be saved.

Given that I live and work in a world that increasingly confuses means with ends (Hogan 2012) and symbols with truth (Watts 1971), it is apposite to consider my doctoral journey through the lens of the Researcher Development Framework (Vitae 2010). As I have become more empathetic, more environmentally aware, less consumerist, more tolerant (a 'better' person?), the direction of my research has changed. Whether these shifts in values and worldview have made me a *better* researcher against the RDF criteria is debatable. I am certainly thinking more

deeply, having more ideas, and talking to people more about ideas, but these activities are increasingly taking me in directions that defy dominant forms of measurement.

In conclusion, experimenting with psychedelic drugs is unlikely to help anyone to succeed in a neoliberal, performative society (although it may help one to understand how such a society works, and to overcome some of the emotional challenges it presents). Some may assume that by, the same token, it is not going to help anyone to complete a doctorate. I would argue that it depends on whether one sees the doctorate - one's education - as a means to an end, or an end in itself.

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