

A public and private trip to understand the mind

Susan Blackmore gives a personal account of how hallucinogens have influenced her career

I am so glad I took LSD – and mescaline, and psilocybin, and even DMT which must surely have given me the most terrifying 15 minutes of my entire life. But why? The reasons are both intellectual and personal – because of everything these drugs have taught me about mind, self, consciousness and how to live life as an imperfect human being. I am sure that if I'd never taken them, my life would have followed quite a different course. I might have accepted that

sensible PhD place I was offered and had a proper academic career. I might have got a job. I might have... Of course I cannot imagine what completely different life might have unfolded, but there is no doubt that my lifelong obsession with the mystery of consciousness has been aided and abetted by hallucinogens.

This all began in my first term of a degree in psychology and physiology at Oxford University, towards the end of the hippy era, when cannabis (sometimes called a 'minor hallucinogen') was widely available – this was the low-THC, high-CBD, old-fashioned make-you-high hash, not modern skunk weed. Sitting listening to music late one night I found myself going down an intensely realistic tunnel of trees towards an alluring bright light. When a friend asked me where I was, I struggled to come back, remembered I must be in a college bedroom, and was suddenly looking down from above. There followed over two hours of the most intense and extraordinary experiences, starting with a classic out-of-body experience, dramatic changes of body- and self-image, travelling in strange worlds, and culminating in mystical states of unity and selflessness.

How could I make sense of this? I had read about astral projection and was faintly

intrigued by tales of the paranormal but nothing had prepared me for such an inner adventure. This was years before the term 'near-death experience' was coined, and I had no idea that tunnels are common in cultures that use hallucinogens for spiritual or ritual purposes. Nothing in my undergraduate studies was remotely relevant and I knew nothing of mystical or spiritual experiences.

I guess my 'career', if it can be called that, began from that day. I *knew* that I had visited other worlds. I *knew* that my spirit or soul or astral body could live independently. I *knew* that my physical body was just a shell inhabited by something far greater with powers of telepathy, clairvoyance and precognition. I was so sure I was right, and that all my 'close-minded, materialistic' lecturers were wrong, that I was determined to become a parapsychologist and prove it.

I was wrong on all counts. I did become a parapsychologist. For my PhD (part-time and self-funded as no one was going to pay for it) I carried out dozens of experiments to test my memory theory of ESP but I could find no ESP, either then or in many years of getting by as a freelancer with occasional tiny research grants. It was a long and instructive route to learning that all those assumptions I'd so hastily jumped to back in 1970 were false; that there is probably no ESP and that nothing leaves the body in an out-of-body experience. Yet the intense memory of those precious few hours endured – and remained inexplicable.

There is a genuine mystery here – the 'mind-body problem' or the 'hard problem of consciousness', the relationship between subjective experience and the objective world. I did experiments and surveys, I studied psychology and neuroscience, but if I was to understand subjective experience I needed to investigate directly as well. So I had my head zapped with magnetic fields and tried weird machines and gadgets. I explored deep relaxation, lucid dreaming and sleep paralysis. I learned to meditate. And I took drugs.



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My first psychedelic experience was with LSD, which must be the ultimate psychedelic, although far from being my favourite. Effective in minuscule doses, LSD takes you on a 'trip' that lasts eight to 10 hours but can seem like forever. Every sense is enhanced or distorted, objects change shape and form, terrors flood up from your own mind, and joy appears in the simplest thing. The trouble is, there's no escape – no antidote, no way to stop the journey into the depths of your own mind – and to be of any use, the visions and insights need integrating into your normal life afterwards. In my twenties, I used to take LSD, mescaline or psilocybin a few times a year. This was quite enough, for a major hallucinogen is not an adventure to be undertaken lightly.

I've met horror with several hallucinogens, including visions of torture and cruelty, of death and disintegration, of self-loathing and of the terrible void. I can understand how such visions can become a 'bad trip', though that has never happened to me. One of the lessons these drugs can teach you is how to stay aware and calm in the face of anything your mind can throw up. I appreciate these hard lessons.

People often say I must be very brave, but I don't agree. I took hallucinogens and other drugs because I wanted to explore the further reaches of human consciousness. I gave up my only full-time academic job (Reader at the University of the West of England, Bristol) after a few years because it took me away from research I was desperate to continue. I was once paid several times the normal rate for writing an article called 'I take illegal drugs for inspiration' by the *Telegraph* because, they said, it was so brave to speak up. But it wasn't brave. I wanted to share what I'd learned. I wanted people to know what value these drugs can have if taken carefully and treated with respect – if used for real exploration or spiritual purposes, rather than for fun or escape. Hallucinogens provide no escape, in fact the reverse. There's no hiding from your own mind in the midst of a five-hour adventure with mescaline, a 15-minute onslaught from DMT or even the brief moments of revelation induced by nitrous oxide. This is one reason they have been so valuable to me.

For much of my life these inner explorations stayed separate from my academic work. Both were inspired by my longing to understand the mind, but one was public; the other private. Yet gradually they came together. And a shift has happened in the world of consciousness studies too. Back in the

1970s 'consciousness' was a dirty word in any scientific context, but from the 1990s that changed. There are now plenty of psychologists, philosophers and neuroscientists struggling with the 'hard problem', and an increasing number who combine an academic study of consciousness with a personal life of meditation, inner exploration or spiritual practice.

For me this coming-together of the inner and outer worlds has been crucial. I have trained in Zen for 30 years and this, and my drug experiences, have informed all my writings on self, free will and consciousness. I refer to them all as illusions because I believe they are not what they seem to be in our normal state of consciousness. We feel as if we are a persisting self that has consciousness and magical free will. But in other states of consciousness we know we are fleeting and ephemeral constructions without power or continuity; just part of a universe that is not divided into mind and body.

It's a well-worn but apt metaphor that a hallucinogen trip can be like taking a plane to the highest peak. You see how things really are; you know the truth; you laugh at the cosmic joke; but then you have to come back down again. Relying on plane rides is no way to live your life,

but nor is it worthless. For some the experience is inspiring; for others it is best forgotten; but for some, like myself, it just deepens our longing to understand – whether that is through personal experience or through science.

There are so many questions. What is happening in the brain? Who or what is the self that changes so radically? Are the visions comparable with mystical insights? Is the sudden understanding of the power of love the same as that reached through prayer or meditation? Is the involuntary reliving of what we've done and whom we've loved or hurt, the same as the life review in near-death experiences? Is the terror of letting go of self, or the joyful realisation that 'I am not other than the universe, the oneness or nonduality found in so many traditions? Or is it all just drug-based delusion?

And one last question – how can I get there without the plane? The slow climb must surely be hard work and may take a lifetime but the occasional trip to remind me of the view keeps me going.

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Your journey into psychology

To mark the fresh intake of psychology undergraduates, our journalist, **Ella Rhodes**, talks to some already on the path.

As thousands of nervous psychology undergraduates pour into scores of universities across the land their first thoughts may not be on their employability, but simply making new friends and settling into the new strange world of higher education. However, the first year at university is a good time to start gaining experience, making contacts for future jobs and discovering what part of the subject makes you tick.

As Julie Hulme, a psychologist who works at the Higher Education Academy, points out, first-year students can sometimes fall into a trap of complacency because their first year marks often don't count towards the final degree grade – they just have to pass. She offers the following advice: 'Putting in the work now, and getting into good habits, will prepare you for second and third year, when the marks do count! This is the year to acquire good academic skills, which will serve you well later in terms of getting good grades – and all these skills need practice.



Professor Catriona Morrison: 'It's never too early to start thinking about careers'

'However, it's also the year in which it's OK to make mistakes – you shouldn't set out to make them, but it's about finding your feet, working out how higher education works and how to learn in a new context and environment and way. So if you drop the ball this year, it's not a disaster – sometimes students can get very downhearted because they're used to high grades and don't get them when they first arrive.'

Professor Catriona Morrison, head of Psychology at Heriot-Watt University and Chair of the Society's Education and Public Engagement Board, feels it is important that first-year students maintain an open mind with regard to their future career, but keep an eye out for any good opportunities that might arise. She said: 'It's never too early to start thinking about careers, but you should come into first year with an open mind. A lot of psychology students come to university with

the idea of becoming the stereotypical image of what they think a psychologist is, listening to people's problems while they lie on a couch. But then they discover that psychology is a much broader field than they had anticipated



and they find a niche that they might not have expected to find.

'You should always try to have in mind what your career could be as you move through university and reflect on what you're good at and what catches your eye. Try to be open-minded and along the way think about ways you can get exposure to different careers, working with people and shadowing people.'

Professor Morrison said one of the key areas of good advice comes from a university's careers department, which can be overlooked by students. She added: 'A lot of students don't take full advantage of their university's careers service. It's part of the package, it's what you're paying for. There's nothing wrong with going in there during your first year to give you a feel for the resources they have, they may be able to offer your opportunities for work experience.'

Annabel Gooseman, who has just finished her first year of a psychology degree at Northumbria University, in Newcastle, says that due to an interest in eventually becoming an educational psychologist, she has begun volunteering with a local primary school. She said: 'I would have loved to have gained more directly psychology-related experience, such as working with an educational psychologist. I have searched the internet but am still unclear how I would go about this.

'I have realised that volunteering in places is a lot more difficult than I imagined. I thought many places, such as mental health hospitals, would be crying out for volunteers, but I found that this is not the case. One hospital I looked at had a year-long waiting list for volunteers! Also there is the issue of things like CRB checks, and in a volunteer position you

Some key resources

BPS careers page
www.bps.org.uk/careers

HEA Employability guide for psychology departments
tinyurl.com/kck86yd

The British Psychological Society's Research Digest: a free service which can keep you up to date with the latest findings
www.researchdigest.org.uk/blog
[www.twitter.com/researchdigest](https://twitter.com/researchdigest)

Careers in Psychology website, includes information on many careers in the area as well as CV advice
tinyurl.com/pq1pn5d



have any idea of which area you want to go into, it can cause a lot of stress! Equally, you could end up wasting a year doing a module that isn't going to help you in the long run.'

Luke Vasey, a second-year psychology student at Northumbria University, is hoping to become a clinical psychologist. He says his tutors had suggested studying relevant modules during his time at university: 'I originally got persuaded to do a placement or student tutoring. However, once I asked other psychologists and lecturers, they said it would be better to study modules of interest and relevance and then pursue work experience outside of university to go alongside the course. For me, I'm helping international students get familiar with moving in at university in hope it can train me for the future. I've also been encouraged to e-mail or write to other psychologists for tips.'

Roberta Clanton is a PhD student at the University of Birmingham. She originally studied in Florida, and her research is currently focusing on environmental and neurobiological factors implicated in children and adolescents with disruptive behavioural problems,

specifically conduct disorder. Before moving to the UK she was an intern working with children being removed from abusive homes, undertook independent research and after graduating from the University of South Florida was offered an Intramural Research Training Award at the National Institutes of Health (NIH) in Washington DC, where she was a Post-Baccalaureate Fellow. She said: 'My advice to new psychology students would be to identify a sub-field or population of interest and try getting a summer placement somewhere relevant. This will give you experience and help you decide whether you want to do research or clinical work based on the things you do day-to-day. I would recommend reading extra journal articles or books in addition to those assigned in modules to increase your knowledge on a particular topic [at this point can we recommend the Society's own Research Digest blog: see www.researchdigest.org.uk/blog and follow us on Twitter @researchdigest]. Also, volunteer positions in research labs or other organisations can be quite beneficial. Professors, lecturers and even graduate students can be excellent resources for guidance.'

are expected to pay for your own, which is obviously difficult for most students, including myself.'

Annabel added: 'I would definitely promote the idea of thinking about which area interests you early on. You have to choose specific modules about halfway through your first year, and if you don't



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Ethics Committee

Award for Promoting Equality of Opportunity 2014

The Ethics Committee is delighted to invite members of the Society to submit nominations for the Society's Award for Equality of Opportunity. This award recognises a person whose work as a psychologist - teacher, researcher or practitioner - has made a significant contribution to challenging social inequalities in the UK in relation to gender, race, ethnic origin, nationality, religion, sexual orientation, disability or age. The recipient is invited to deliver the Award lecture at the Annual Conference and to accept a commemorative certificate, which is presented at the Award Ceremony during the Society's Annual Conference.

Nominations should include a completed nomination form providing evidence of some or all of the following:

- Personal commitment to equality issues
- Impact of the candidate's contributions to psychological teaching, research or practice (inclusive of published works and influence on professional practice)
- Impact of the candidate's work on other professionals/service providers
- Impact of the candidate's work directly for people from marginalised and oppressed social groups.

A copy of the candidate's up to date curriculum vitae should also be included.

Guidance for assessors and the nomination form can be obtained from emma.smith@bps.org.uk

The deadline for nominations is **1 October 2014**.

No award will be made in the absence of a candidate of sufficient merit.