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Ketamine Case Study: The Phenomenology of a Ketamine Experience

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Abstract
Psychonautics refers both to a methodology for describing and explaining the subjective effects of drugs, and to a long established research paradigm in which intellectuals have taken drugs to explore human experience and existence. The Psychonautics Project was an intermittent research enterprise set up in the UK in 1990 to develop this method/model, and involved a series of mixed-method studies of the phenomenology of hallucinogenic drug effects. This article reports a case study of a ketamine *trip* by a British academic in 1996, which should illuminate the unique nature of ketamine's effects. The account was based on a retrospective written self-report by the psychonaut of two serial injections of 40 mg of ketamine. Set and setting variables are also described. The excerpts presented here focus on his experiences of an alternative reality occupied by disembodied beings, visual hallucinations, the repetition of particular words and statements, and his affective reactions. The final section considers the impact of ketamine on depression, the importance of reflexivity in researching drug effects, and the critical role of psychonautics in the development of effective drug policies.

Keywords: Psychonautics, *hallucinogens, phenomenology, ketamine, case-study, reflexivity*

Introduction

This article presents a case-study of the phenomenology of ketamine use, in order to illustrate the subjective content of such experiences. This case-study is part of a research paradigm going back to at least the 19th century, in which writers, academics and intellectuals have taken hallucinogens or other drugs in order to explore and understand human experience and existence. This research model and methodology has no generally

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accepted label, and is based on a literature scattered across several disciplines, though is often referred to as psychonautics (Newcombe and Johnson 1999). Some of the most well-known examples of psychonautics research over the last century include work by Aldous Huxley, notably with mescaline (e.g., Huxley 1954, 1956); Timothy Leary and his colleagues, notably with LSD (e.g., Leary and Metzner 1964; Wilson 1983); John C. Lilly, notably with ketamine (e.g., Lilly 1972); and Alexander and Ann Shulgin, notably with ecstasy-type drugs (e.g., Shulgin and Shulgin 1983). Jay (1999) provides a diverse selection of such accounts, while Jansen (2001) provides a good overview of ketamine 'dreams and realities'.

The ketamine *trip* reported here was generated as part of a 'psychonautics' research programme conducted during the 1990s, which aimed to generate a methodology and conceptual framework for exploring the phenomenology of psychoactive drug experiences (Newcombe and Johnson 1999). This was achieved by training 'psychonauts' – psychologists, writers and other professionals whose work involved drugs issues – in the use of relevant techniques and descriptive tools, so that they could provide detailed semi-structured reports on such *trips* into psychological space. This project was carried out under the auspices of the Psychonautics Sub-Committee of the UK Drug Policy Review Group. The DPRG was set up in 1988, while the Psychonautics Project was an intermittent research enterprise developed and managed by the present author between 1990 and 2000.

The psychonautics methodology involved eliciting free-form verbal accounts alongside completion of a set of rating scales designed to systematically quantify the experience on various dimensions (including perception, cognition, affect and motivation). The verbal account presented here was selected to illustrate the unique nature of the ketamine experience in relation to trips on other hallucinogenic drugs. A short excerpt from this case study has already been published in *Tripology* (Newcombe 2004). Other excerpts from the self-reported *trips* of participants in the Psychonautics Project have been published elsewhere (e.g., Newcombe 2005, 2006).

In short, this article presents an account of the effects of ketamine on a single case, using the first-person retrospective self-report method. In addition to the direct effects of ketamine on the brain/mind, the set (person factors) and setting (situation factors) are also major determinants of drug experiences (Zinberg 1984). Consequently, along with relevant consumption factors, these are briefly described in the next section.

Methodology

Background

Starting in 1990, a group of British professionals interested in exploring psychedelic experience began meeting on about two or three weekends each year, in order to systematically examine the effects of various drugs. They included psychiatrists, psychologists, social scientists, journalists, writers and drugs workers. Sessions typically took place in hired 'holiday cottages' in rural areas of Britain or other EC countries, though some took place in private residences in cities. After several initial exploratory sessions, a model and methodology was developed for researching and theorising the subjective effects of drugs, called *psychonautics* (Newcombe and Johnson 1999). In addition, a number of qualitative case studies, based on written notes, observations and tape recordings were completed, and one of these is presented here – a case report of a ketamine experience.

Set and setting factors

Location: a large room in a farmhouse in a rural area of central Europe, in spring 1996.
Social setting: Five adults, aged 30 to 55 years (including a medical doctor, a psychologist, a mental health nurse, and two writers), took the drug in the same evening session.
Set: the case was a white English, heterosexual male in his late 30s. He was from a working class background, held a higher social science degree, and had worked for several years as an academic. His worldview was liberal, atheist and existentialist. He had recently overcome an amphetamine habit, and had been experiencing moderate depression in reaction to both this and to the break-up of his 20-year marriage a year earlier. He had taken Prozac for 6 months in the previous year. He was otherwise healthy.
Drug history: regular cannabis use over 20 years; speed habit for three years (ex-user); occasional use of wide range of hallucinogens and other drugs; daily tobacco smoker and caffeine user, and occasional user of alcohol.

Present drug consumption factors

Frequency/duration of use: first use of ketamine, though he had tried many other hallucinogenic drugs – including several *trips* on LSD, psilocin, and MDMA; and one or two *trips* each on MDA, DMT, DOM, and 2CB
Route of administration: intravenous injection.
Dosage: Two doses of ~40 mg of pharmaceutical ketamine hydrochloride powder were injected, the second dose about 2 h after the first.
Other drugs: the case had consumed some legal drugs (coffee and cigarettes) earlier the same day, along with two or three cannabis joints/reefers.

Reporting procedure

The session was tape-recorded. Discussions of the experience were held by group members afterwards, including listening to the audiotape. Initial notes on the experience were jotted down both immediately after the ketamine trip and the next morning, though the full, final report was written up two days later. It should be noted that this procedure was an experimental step in an evolving methodology for eliciting detailed verbal accounts of drug experiences. Due to space constraints, only salient excerpts from this final account are presented here.

Ethical issues

Clearly, there are a variety of ethical and legal considerations involved in setting up, conducting and reporting psychonautics research. Space constraints rule out a thorough discussion of these. However, the main potential pitfalls were avoided in this and other psychonautics studies by employing such measures as (1) focusing on uncontrolled drugs (ketamine was not 'banned' in the UK until 2006), (2) conducting the study in an unidentified location (outside the UK in the present study), (3) obtaining private, anonymous funding, (4) conducting the research under the auspices of an informal group rather than an official institution, (5) appointing a Research Director whose occupational status was (at that time) self-employed, and (6) ensuring all participants were guaranteed anonymity and confidentiality. Furthermore, all psychonautics research was carried out

under an ethical code of practice designed by 3*D Research Bureau*, an independent specialist drugs research agency based in Liverpool during the 1990s.

Case study

''Within a few seconds of the needle being removed from my arm, there was a bitter chemical taste in my mouth, along with a dizzy swirling sensation sweeping through my skull. Seconds later, this mental swirl became an overwhelming energy rush which almost knocked me into unconsciousness. Having remained 'awake', there then followed what can only be described as a huge visual stripping away of the room. It was as if my visual world was made up of glistening fish scales with parts of the overall image in them, which dropped away to the floor in a diagonal fashion starting from the top left. What was revealed behind, or possibly superimposed on top, was some other large area/space, with strange textures and geometrical shapes. Two of these shapes were eventually perceived as intelligent beings, and were moving around on lines, turning in different directions but always at 90° angles. Then, behind them, I saw something like a gateway, so difficult to describe because it was visually complex and madly multi-dimensional. It was bright, but had dark components which changed shape, size, and color. I suddenly felt a massive feeling of recognition, lifted my arm towards it, and exclaimed aloud: ''*The Godhead*''.

It was at this point, I suddenly realized that I was talking with one or possibly two beings (and/or sometimes the 'real' people in the 'original' room), using strange noises and gestures to do so. There was a huge expansive feeling of having 'come home', and of remembering something which seemed outside this lifespan, or maybe from early childhood (infancy). What I was initially saying (as confirmed later by the audiotape) was ''This is K-World . . . there are no egoes here''; ''these are emergent creatures'', and ''this is multi-dimensional''. Strange being(s) appeared to be giving me information which I could not understand, though I felt that some of it had something to do with their amusement or amazement at my appearance in their world. At times these communication impressions became distinct auditory hallucinations, based on short hard word-sounds, often with 'k' sounds in them – I specifically recalled sounds like *klonk*, *doink*, *splodge*, *kodak* and *kapisode* . . .

. . . I felt excited and energized, but made no attempts to move physically, while asking in my mind (and sometimes saying aloud) how it was possible to move round in this strange world, to which the unusually clear reply was *point* . . . Suddenly, from sitting with my back slumped against the wall, I sat up and started pointing with my finger . . . It seemed hard to speak unless I pronounced each word carefully, and I asked aloud: ''Why am I pointing?'' The answer to this seemed to be a short phrase which stayed with me, namely: *You are pointing your soul down a K-line*. On reflection [over two days], it seemed odd to me that I felt no fear at any time, in fact the usual range of emotions seemed to be largely replaced by pure wonderment and mental excitement, generated by a kind of intense child-like innocence . . .

. . . at one point I became aware of a 'ketamine creature' (Kreature) who was simultaneously some kind of spaceship, and it told me that the person I usually was in everyday life was also something like a four-dimensional 'badge' that was worn by some larger multi-dimensional entity – and that I served both as a physical 'vehicle' for this being, and also as a communication device between their reality and the Planet (Earth). Ideas such as this were bubbling up all around my mind, and at times I thought that the flood of information was going to expand my consciousness to beyond bursting point . . .

. . . Someone passed me a balloon full of laughing gas (nitrous oxide), which I inhaled without thinking, and suddenly the air seemed to fill with ectoplasmic webs which melted into synaesthetic textures which reverberated and spiralled around my mind. This episode finished with the ectoplasmic webs becoming like semi-transparent leaves falling slowly from invisible trees . . . within seconds I was starting to feel like I was back on this planet, like the nitrous oxide had accelerated re-entry . . . I stood up to walk across the room to the kitchen to get a drink for my dry mouth, and started to fall over. It seemed like the room was swaying about, and walking on the floor was like walking on a trampoline . . .

. . . After reclining on the sofa for 10 min . . . I decided to have the same dose of ketamine again, and to see what happened the second time. . . . within seconds of being injected, the room and the people in it were wiped away like chalked symbols on a blackboard, first smudged, then slowly fading away like bits of white dust falling to the floor. I was sitting on the floor – but I was also sitting on the ceiling and on the walls, looking down and up and sideways at everything. Multiple perspectives – then suddenly more and more – I was sitting, standing, walking, flying, falling and totally still. Someone was taking something from my hand (it was the used needle, which I was apparently staring blankly at). I fell backwards in slow motion onto the floor, into a horizontal position – this seemed to happen several times, with overlap between repetitions. Everything was so familiar, but yet so alien . . .

. . . A lot of ineffable events followed, then I recall suddenly understanding something with a revelationary mental flash: I wasn't afraid of dieing any more, but best of all, I wasn't afraid of living either. I felt like I had been relieved of the existential heft I had been carrying inside my head for so many moons. When I said ''OK'', the K in OK seemed to have real special significance, though I had forgotten why – I was becoming aware that I had taken something inside me that changed what I normally was, but I could not remember what kind of thing it was or the name of it. I felt K-world starting to fade again, with the room and my friends seeming more real again, and had a sudden urge as my usual frame of mind returned to ask the fading Kreatures a corny question like: ''is there a god?'', or ''is love the answer?'', but then realized these questions would only be met with cackling laughter, and so I let them go . . .

. . . After LSD experiences, I tend to feel a deep but resigned sadness, about so many things . . . However, the K come-down was beautifully free of emotional tangles, and I will just list the first words that entered my mind in recollecting the post-K pre-sleep period during notes jotted down the following morning: amazed, amused, refreshed, rebooted, revelationary, ineffable, magical, novel, metaphysical, multi-dimensional, paradoxical . . ..

. . . J and I walked outside and lay on the grass, the tops of our heads touching, staring up at the starry black sky . . . I told him that the K trip was very different from DMT and LSD trips to me. I was astounded that each K-world visit had lasted about one to two hours – I was totally confounded by the plastic and elastic nature of time in K-world . . . Ultimately, I was impressed by K because it showed me a unique mental space, and revealed a version of me that was so much more than the everyday me – tantalizingly different, and metaphysically gigantic. It had been like finding a secret door to a huge room in your house that you had never noticed before . . . and then later (post-trip) forgetting where it was again . . .''

Update

The case was contacted again at the start of 2007, and briefly interviewed. He had had about a dozen more experiences with ketamine over the past decade, mostly involving snorting

it rather than injecting it. Interestingly, he reported that the salient phrases he had spoken on the first ketamine *trip* had been repeated on almost every subsequent *trip*. These utterances included the key expressions: 'this is multi-dimensional', 'we are emergent creatures', 'you are pointing your soul down a K-line', and (from the second K *trip*) 'superfine'. However, the case reported that these utterances were experienced as coming through the mind rather than from it – in short, he felt like he was the medium for these messages, not the originator of them. It was noted that these experiences were much more intense and full-blown when ketamine was injected, though the objective duration of effects was similar whether the drug was snorted or injected. The case also noted that he had not experienced any flashbacks or other after-effects following his ketamine *trips* – nor had he experienced any more episodes of depression or mental disorder.

Discussion

The present case's suggestion that ketamine use may have 'lifted' his depression is of particular interest given recent research evidence that ketamine reduces the symptoms of depression within a few hours of use (Zarate 2006). The psychonaut in the present study also indicated that, compared with other hallucinogens, use of ketamine seemed to be relatively free of emotional after-effects such as depressed mood and insomnia. Clearly, more research is urgently needed into the effects of ketamine on mood, including the extent to which individuals suffering from depression use ketamine to self-medicate. Another critical issue concerns whether any anti-depressant effects of ketamine are purely psychopharmacological, or whether the ketamine *trip* (subjective experience) provides enough insight and catharsis to alleviate depression.

This article has presented a glimpse into the subjective world of hallucinogenic drug experiences, using an approach which has been heavily neglected by present-day drugs researchers – even though an understanding of the phenomenology of drug experiences is critical to the development of effective drug policies (cf. Cohen 1995). There is an urgent need for more sophisticated models and methods to explore the subjective experience of drug effects, particularly conceptual frameworks and research procedures which permit comparisons of different types of drugs, drug users, and drug consumption methods. If this call is not heeded, our failing drug policies will continue to lack a fundamental cornerstone: a proper understanding of what drugs do *to* people, and therefore of what they do *for* people.

The value of psychonautics is further highlighted by contextualizing it within the broader debate about quantitative and qualitative approaches to data collection and analysis in drugs research. As a qualitative methodology, it gives invaluable insights into the subjective dimension of drug use, providing an 'inside view' of human experience which cannot be adequately conveyed by such quantitative methods as psychometric tests and rating scales. Like other qualitative methods, psychonautics puts the 'color' and 'life' back into quantitative accounts of drug experiences, by allowing the 'voice' of the drug user to 're-humanize' statistical analyses of drug effects. But perhaps the defining feature of psychonautics, and the broader methodology of participant observation, is reflexivity – a two-way perspective arising from the psychonaut's double-edged role as both researcher and research subject. Reflexivity is the core concept underlying the unique contribution made by psychonautics to the psychology of drug effects. Indeed, it is arguable that contemporary research into the effects of drugs typically fails to provide an adequate description and explanation because of a lack of reflexivity. This neglect of reflexive research

is undoubtedly rooted in both research fashions and the ethical and legal considerations covered earlier. As Measham and Moore concluded from their overview of 'implicit insider knowledge' in research into the use of dance drugs, we can only hope that future research will be ''confident enough to pursue a more reflexive, more open and ultimately more fruitful research agenda, incorporating a multiplicity of approaches and focuses'' (2006, p. 25).

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