Response Paper 1—Sophie Dewil

The world of psychedelic drugs is a wide and wonderful one, full of hallucinatory twists and turns and adventurous trips down the rabbit hole. The firsthand experiences that people have had with psychedelic drugs make it clear that these drugs are fickle friends. The baseline reactions to these drugs include basic changes in perception and cognition. However, these basic changes can quickly and unexpectedly transition to more drastic reactions in the blink of an eye.

In experience 1 the drug-taker (let’s call him Philip) presents his highly pleasurable first experience with MDMA (readings). His goal in the beginning was “to lighten up”, which makes quite a lot of sense since MDMA is known to enhance communication (Advokat). In fact, his first reaction to MDMA was an enhanced ability to communicate. Interestingly, Philip also experienced the need to urinate, but he had trouble doing so. This is because of the muscle tension associated with MDMA use (likely due to the increased amount of active Acetylcholine in the system) (Advokat). Philip’s most drastic reaction to MAMA was his extreme feeling of ecstasy. This was likely due to MDMAs action as a dopamine reuptake inhibitor or releaser. Dopamine has long been known as the “reward circuit” in the brain, and although modern psychopharmacology has proven this to be a gross oversimplification, dopamine’s role in reward cannot be denied. Additionally, alteration in dopamine circuits has been linked to schizophrenia —a disorder commonly associated with hallucinations (Advokat). This could explain Philip’s newfound technicolored world. MDMA’s increase of active Norepinephrine in the system would explain the increase in energy that Philip felt. Additionally, the “faint sheen of sweat” that he felt on his face is also a normal reaction to MDMA use (Advokat).

The reporter in Experience 2 (let’s call him Stanley) had a similarly positive experience with the psychedelic drugs that he took (readings). He began with LSD, and almost immediately began to feel the expected effects of the drug; he experienced heightened perception and thinking. Soon after, he took MDMA and began to feel the effects of that. He felt the release of energy due to Norepinephrine that had so excited Philip and went to dance. There, he experienced the mild hallucinations associated with the sensory/perceptual phase of LSD (Advokat). This soon transitioned into the psychic phase, where he began to experience distressing thoughts about the situation that he was in. However, he moved on to another drug (a time-honored tradition of avoiding anxiety) and his panic subsided. He took Psilocybin (commonly known as shrooms) as well as additional MDMA. He then began experiencing the intense empathy associated with MDMA, as well as the hallucinations associated with Psilocybin. Stanley’s experience of insomnia later that night is typical of MDMA. This is again likely due to the arousing effects of the increased amount of norepinephrine in the system. Additionally, serotonin is known to play a large role in the sleep-wake cycle, so the excess serotonin likely played a role in this insomnia.

The drug-taker in Experience 3 (let’s call her Grace) had an incredibly negative experience with the psychedelic drugs that she ingested (readings). The increased empathy associated with MDMA combined with the panic associated with LSD to create a “bad trip”. She experienced major disorientation (as is associated with MDMA), depersonalization (LSD), changes in mood (LSD), and an intense psychotic episode (LSD). Her experiences after she no longer had the drugs in her system are almost as fascinating as when she did, because it seems that she suffers from Hallucinogen persisting perception disorder (HPPD) (Advokat). She brought a part of her experience on the drug (the intense negative emotions) beyond the drug itself and into her daily life. This is likely due to the chemical imbalance that these drugs create. In fact, it is experientially shown that common use of MDMA often causes depression.

Psychedelic drugs create a fascinating change in the brain’s chemistry that causes strong changes in mood and perception. These changes are often associated with mild anxiety and panic, which taint the otherwise pleasurable experiences. It is a dangerous endeavor to play with the chemistry of the brain so drastically, and people should be aware of the possible consequences before participating in any illicit drug-use.