

PARALLEL SESSION 1A
Drugs, costs and consequences

Between prohibitions: patterns and meanings of magic mushroom use in the UK

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A survey of magic mushroom use was completed by 174 participants in 2004, a year when the sale of hallucinogenic mushrooms was not illegal in the UK. The data were collected in Edinburgh and Bristol (UK). Participants were a self-selecting convenience sample. Participants tended to be in their twenties, white-British, in education or employed; 64% were male. Participants reported a pattern of infrequent but intense consumption (47% used between 4-12 times/year, average consumption in one setting was 12g, a 'high dose'). Use was explained in terms of laughing, hallucinations, altering perspective (41-74%), and feelings of being closer to nature (49%). Negative experiences reported included paranoia (35%) and anxiety (32%). Mushroom use was located within a wider recreational drug and alcohol culture. Four focus groups aided the interpretation of the data. Future research is recommended into negative experiences. Implications for policy and harm minimisation literature are discussed.


For further details of this study please see: Riley, S.C.E. & Blackman, G. Between prohibitions: Patterns and meanings of magic mushroom use in the UK. *Journal of Substance Use and Misuse*, in press.

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Between prohibitions: Patterns and meanings of magic mushroom use in the UK

Sarah C.E. Riley & Graham Blackman (Department of Psychology, University of Bath) with thanks to Crew 2000 (Edinburgh).




- **UK Law**
 - 2002-2005 = the growing, gathering and possession of hallucinogenic 'magic mushrooms' was not illegal in the UK
 - Drugs Act 2005: Mushrooms are a 'Class A drug' classified as having the 'most harm'.
- **Survey and focus group study of patterns and meanings of use at this time (between prohibitions)**



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- **Effect of consuming ‘magic’ mushrooms** is complex and varies according to size, tolerance and individual differences.
- high doses: open and closed eye visuals, feelings of time-dilation, belonging and connection, religious and spiritual awakening, extreme emotional responses, and intense feelings of wonder, connection, joy, and fear (www.erowid.org).
- trip usually peaks 50 minutes after consumption and ends approx. 5.5 hours later (Passie, et al, 2002).



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Deleterious effects:

- moderate stimulation of the central nervous system (Hasler, Grimberg, Benz, Huber, & Vollenweider, et al., 2004; Young, et al., 1982).
- nausea, anxiety, panic and/or being caught in a negative loop of thinking during intoxication (CAM, 2000);
- triggering of latent mental health problems (Nielen, van de Heijden, Tuinier & Verhoeven, 2004).

However:

- Therapeutic uses for compulsive disorders or addictions (e.g. Dobin, 1998; Moreno & Delgado, 1997; Pollock, 1975).
- hallucinogenic mushrooms did “not, on balance, present any risk to the health of the individual” Cam (2000, p.5).



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- Research tends to focus on pharmacological or therapeutic effects or has been part of studies on more general drug use within particular populations.
- **Our study:**
 - contemporary patterns and meanings of magic mushroom use.
 - examination use during a period of restriction in prohibition.



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- 174 questionnaires.
- 63.6% male and 36.4% female
- age 14-48 years, mean of 24.9, mode 26 years
- 92.8% White-British (majority of non-white participants were Black, Asian or mixed race British)
- 45% employed, 37% education (university, college, school) (10% unemployed)
- 4 Focus groups (2 Bristol, 2 Edinburgh) (n = 20) - not representative but similar demographics and reported use to the survey



Patterns of use: infrequent but intense use

- *Participants tended to engage in infrequent but intense use:*
- *47.4% took mushrooms between 4 and 12 times a year*
- *tended to take enough to produce a 'high dose' effect (approx. 12g of bought mushrooms or 60 picked indigenous mushrooms)*
- *Some excessive use:*
 - *5.3% (n = 9) took mushrooms 'weekly or more than weekly'*
 - *Ben used to take "like cereal bowls full" and to this day his eyes go "funny" when looking at stars*



Planning, preparation and place of use

- **Wide range of planning behaviours:**
 - 15.5% 'I think about it weeks or days in advance and plan what I will need, where I want to be and who with'
 - 43.7% 'I think about it in advance, but don't plan what I'm going to do in detail'
 - 40.8% 'I don't plan in advance' 40.8% (n =71).
- Focus group participants sometimes engaged in considerable planning (drug, set and setting), but also expressed a more casual attitude.



Reasons: Rationale for and pleasures of mushroom use

Reasons:

- Laughing, hallucinations ('visuals') and altering perspective (41-66%)
- happiness, celebration and socialising (35-37%).
 - *Jet: [people were] actually falling on the floor just laughing so much (.) and basically me and this guy (.) and I could actually read his thoughts and he was thinking what I was thinking (.) and that's the whole telepathy thing I it was absolutely fantastic and (..) nothing was said it was just laughing and laughing.*

Pleasures:

- laughing and hallucinations (67-73%)
- feeling closer to nature, feeling silly, having strange thoughts, creativity and listening to music (44-49%).



Spirituality

- Daniel "[Mushrooms showed him] *that separation's an illusion ... that we are all linked on some level*"
- Max: *I appreciate life a lot more (.) I appreciate the beautiful things especially (.) like especially if I go to a hilltop take mushrooms I feel more connected (.) feel like I can actually see this beauty out there [.....] you actually feel that everyone is there for a purpose [.....] it does help you feel like a complete connection with everything around you (.) you actually feel plugged in for a change*



Negative experiences

- paranoia (35%), anxiety (32%), feeling overwhelmed (28%), nausea (28%) or feeling scared/frightened (24%).
- Acceptable risks – just like bungee jumping
- Develop techniques e.g. 'ride it out' strategy:
 - Max: *You know after five hours it's gonna wear off anyway (.) so ride it through [.....] if you're are having a bad experience with mushrooms (.) you know kind of two hours its gonna be over anyway so (.) just you know (.) sit tight*
- 86% would like more (credible) information



Mushroom use in context of wider drug and alcohol repertoire

- All participants had used either alcohol (87.2% n=150), cigarettes (73.8% n=127), or an illicit drug.
- 97% of participants had used at least one illegal drug in the past year.
- most prevalent illicit drugs were cannabis (89% n=153), ecstasy (73.8% n=127), cocaine (50%), amphetamine 47% and LSD (45%).



Conclusions

- non-marginalised young adults engaging in moderate use, characterised by infrequent but intense consumption that was part of a wider drug repertoire.
- Mushrooms used for 'visuals' and laughing and to engender a sense of connectedness and spirituality.
- harm reduction information could include noting the dangers of excessive use and strategies for dealing with negative experiences.
- future work needed on the nature of negative experiences (intensity, longevity, impact on future behaviour)
- magic mushroom use does not appear to be high risk (CAM, 2000; Halpern, et al., 2005; Hasler, et al., 2004) and does not warrant the current Class A status (Drugs Act 2005)



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