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Subjective Effects of *Salvia Divinorum*[†]

Phil Dalgarno, Ph.D.*

Abstract—*Salvia divinorum* is a hallucinogenic plant native to Mexico, where the Mazatec Indians use it in divinatory rituals as a facilitator for contacting the spirits of the dead. A number of traditions surrounding the ritualistic use of *Salvia* are still observed. Generally the leaves are chewed for the visionary effects. *Salvia* has recently been embraced by Western drug cultures, where the traditional methods of ingestion are generally eschewed for the more immediately effective technique of smoking the dried leaves. This article discusses the history and indigenous cultural uses of *Salvia* before outlining its rediscovery in the 1960s and its subsequent introduction to the Western drug scenes (particularly Britain) since the mid 1990s. Qualitative data from 10 *Salvia* users were collected by means of email interviews. The participants were asked to provide as in-depth responses as possible. No time or space limit on answers was imposed. Their responses to each question are presented verbatim. The effects of *Salvia* appear to vary between users and seem sensitive to situational factors. Users who understand something of the ritualistic setting for traditional use would appear to have a fuller experience than those who do not.

Keywords—qualitative, *Salvia divinorum*, subjective effects

Salvia divinorum is indigenous to the Mexican State of Oaxaca. It is a cultigen, and does not appear to grow in the wild (though it would, presumably, have had to have done so at some point in the past). For a number of years it was thought that *Salvia* did not produce seed and propagated only when the weight and height of the plant caused it to fall over, allowing it to root wherever it happened to fall, or by means of transplanting cuttings (Wasson 1962). Recently it has been found that the plant does indeed produce viable seed, but very infrequently (Reisfield 1993).

Historically, the date of the first human-*Salvia* interaction is unknown. It has been proposed that the plant was

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known to and used by the Aztecs (Wasson 1962) and therefore was more widely spread than now, but given the total absence of any evidence, this remains pure speculation. So while it is known that a tradition of human use exists, how old the tradition is remains unknown.

Recently, a number of countries (for example, Australia and Sweden) have implemented legislation in an attempt to control or curb *Salvia* use. The plant remains completely legal within the UK, with no immediate plans to the contrary.

CHARACTERISTICS

Pharmacology

The pharmacology of *Salvia* is unknown. The receptors affected by *Salvia* remain obscure (Nichols 1993).

Effects

These vary depending on whether the plant is smoked or chewed. Smoking the leaves can have an immediate effect, while chewing the fresh leaves takes longer to take

effect, but is “a deeper and more sustained experience, often with strikingly coloured visuals.” A physical effect that is experienced by some is hyperthermia (Pendell 1995).

The main ingredient, salvinorin A, “can bring about extreme hallucinations when inhaled in amounts of 250 to 500 mcg” (Schultes, Hofmann & Ratsch 2002). So while not a hallucinogen in the true sense, *Salvia* can still induce hallucinatory experiences.

Not all commentators have found the effects so intense. Gottlieb (1973) states that *Salvia* is “. . . similar to psilocybin with colourful visual patterns, but milder and lasting only 2 hours.”

Indigenous Use

While there is no evidence to indicate that the plant is used for the treatment of physical ailments, the Mazatec *curanderos* use *Salvia* for divinatory rituals and healing ceremonies. Psilocybin mushrooms (Teonanacatl, “Flesh of the Gods”) are the preferred plants for this purpose (Schultes, Hofmann & Ratsch 2002), but *Salvia* was used when the mushrooms were unavailable (Ott 1993) a practice which was noted as recently as the 1970s (Estrada 1981)

Because of the ritualistic nature of indigenous *Salvia* use, there are a number of rules and conventions governing the set and setting of use. The Mazatec rituals usually take place at night after a period of fasting; there is singing and chanting. For a number of days following the *Salvia* ceremony, sexual relations are avoided (Pendell 1995; Valdez, Diaz & Paul 1983).

Contemporary Use

Perhaps unsurprisingly, there is a tendency among contemporary Western users to eschew these conventions, preferring instead to go straight to the drug component of the overall experience. However, as will be seen presently, where even *ad hoc* preparations are made (using outdoors and at night, for example) in an attempt to simulate indigenous practices, the effects of the plant can be quite different.

Medical Use

As mentioned above, there appears to have been no function for *Salvia* in either indigenous or conventional medicine. A recent paper has raised the possibility for its use in depressive illness. However, as this is a single case study, the results are far from conclusive (Hanes 2001).

METHODS OF USE

In the West, the preferred method of use is smoking the dried and crushed up leaves. The effects of this are more immediate but generally shorter lasting than the traditional method of the Mazatec Indians, where it is either chewed and the juice allowed to absorb through the buccal mucosa, or fresh leaves are crushed, steeped in water, strained and

drunk. Indeed, until recently, the Mazatecs were unaware that the leaves of the plant could be smoked (the practice would appear to have been introduced by outsiders), having believed that once the leaves are dried their effect neutralised (Ott 1993). Chewing involves patience, as the effects take longer to appear but produce a “deeper and more sustained experience, often with strikingly coloured visual” (Pendell 1995).

Smoking as the preferred method of ingesting *Salvia* in Scotland is consistent with the use of other plant-based substances, particularly cannabis. With cannabis, the majority of users smoke rather than eat the drug because of the immediacy of effect, in spite of the knowledge that eating cannabis results in a more powerful and sustained effect (Coggans et al. 2004). While this may be due in part to impatience and a hedonistic motivation for the instantaneous alteration of mood, there is anecdotal evidence to indicate that smoking allows the user a degree of control over the effect of the substance.

Another possible reason for the popularity of smoking *Salvia* is that until recently, dried leaf purchased from Europe over the Internet was the most widely available. However, even with fresh leaves, cuttings from plants and indeed whole plants now being generally accessible (along with, in some cases, information describing the different methods of use) the preference would still seem to be for smoking

Salvia—if one is going to smoke it—is most effective if smoked in a large-bowled pipe, bong or water pipe. It is necessary to inhale the smoke deeply into the lung therefore rolling the leaves in a cigarette is ineffective and wasteful (Shayan 2001; Pendell 1995). The leaves should be smoked alone and not mixed with tobacco.

ROUTES OF SUPPLY

In 1996, the author became aware of anecdotal evidence as to the use of *Salvia divinorum* in Scotland. While a search on the Internet resulted in a large number of “hits”, there were very few from within the UK. In the course of researching this article, the author searched on the Lycos™ search engine for *Salvia divinorum*, restricting the search to the UK and Ireland only. This generated 700 hits, a number of which were commercial enterprises selling dried leaves, fresh leaves, cuttings, live plants and varying strengths of extract of *Salvia*. As well as these, there is a plethora of information regarding issues such as cultivation, use and first-hand experiences of users. The same search in 2004 yielded in excess of 1000 hits.

Whereas previously the plant was in the main brought into the UK from the Netherlands via mail order companies its growing popularity among particular types of drug user has resulted in the setting up of an increasing number of domestic companies. Many of these advertise *Salvia* in the back pages of a number of popular high street magazines (In fact, a number of these companies stock a full range of

“visionary” plants, cuttings and seeds. *Salvia* appears to be the one that currently commands the best price, with some of the more unscrupulous traders asking as much as £100 [\$200] an ounce.)

The main advantage of purchasing from within the UK as opposed to the Netherlands is that it’s unlikely (though not unknown) to lead to the unwanted attentions of either customs or the police. Given that *Salvia* is not illegal in either country, this remains an anomaly, but a case could be made for a package of green leaves being mistaken for marijuana (which of course, *is* illegal in the UK) by an overzealous and/or drug-naïve official.

One plant, properly tended, can provide the user with sufficient cuttings to ensure a constant supply of *Salvia* leaf. There are a number of underground publications and websites providing detailed instructions on the care and wellbeing of the plant. Anecdotal evidence regarding experiences of growing *Salvia* vary, with some people reporting total failure while others have overwhelming success.

In its native Mexico, *Salvia* is not usually grown near populated areas, and rarely in the house, as this is considered bad luck (Pendell 1995). In Scotland these conventions are generally ignored, and the separation between the traditional (use of the leaf as a component of an overall, integrated religious or mystical experience) and the modern (use of the leaf to get stoned) becomes still more apparent.

SUBJECTIVE EFFECTS OF SALVIA

Method

Contact was established with 10 Scottish users through a number of different dedicated *Salvia* websites. No criteria were imposed other than everyone had to have used the plant on *at least* three separate occasions.

Due to restrictions on time and money, together with logistical problems surrounding the possibility of carrying out face-to-face interviews, each participant was asked the same four open ended questions and allowed to respond as they liked. The questions were:

1. Where did you get it?
2. What did you expect to happen?
3. What actually happened?
4. Did you enjoy it?

The transcripts are presented here in their entirety.

Subjective Effects

Participant 1 (male, 26 years old)

Q: Where did you get it?

A: Me and a mate bought it off the net. I didn’t have a computer then but my mate did and he found a shop in Holland that sold it. I thought we were going to be ripped off to be truthful.

Q: What did you expect to happen?

A: A mad trip. I think we probably expected too much, but sometimes the hype gets you. I should’ve known that something supposedly that hallucinogenic wouldn’t be

legal. We smoked it straight in a bong thing. Nothing much seemed to happen but we’d had a few beers so maybe that did something to it. The next time a few of us got some fresh stuff from a friend of a friend who’d started growing it. They swore chewing was the real deal.

Q: What actually happened?

Pl: Chewing it was okay except it was a bit messy. It really kills the conversation if you’re sitting swilling a load of green shit around in your mouth, you know? You don’t want to say too much in case you end up with it all down your clothes. The other thing about it is that it takes forever for anything to start happening. In fact, on the first occasion I wasn’t sure anything *was* happening, although I can tell you that the inside of my mouth felt sort of numb and was tingling, like when you’ve been to the dentist and the injections have just about worn off. Know what I mean?

Q: Did you enjoy it?

A: Yeah, I did, though not because anything earth-shattering happened or anything. I enjoyed the fact that it was a bunch of friends doing this ritual thing together. We tried to do it as right as we could, so we went camping and chewed the *Salvia* in front of a fire under the stars and just hung out. It was a really good couple of nights, even though I didn’t get the experience a couple of the others seemed to get. I got light headed and really quite giggly; it was like the first times I smoked dope.

Participant 2 (male, 28 years old)

Q: Where did you get it?

A: I didn’t get it, my friend did. I think he got it from a friend of his who maybe grew it. He got a bag of dried leaves and a bag of fresh ones. It just looked like dock leaves, you know, but not the same colour of green.

Q: What did you expect to happen?

A: I couldn’t believe this stuff was supposedly so potent and totally fucking legal! I’d been told it was like mescaline, it was like peyote, it was Mexican so, you know. I think I thought I was going to get the Castaneda thing, turning into a panther.

Q: What actually happened?

A: We tried chewing it the first time, but I really didn’t like it. The taste wasn’t all that nice and it was a pretty horrible feeling in my mouth after a while. My friend said that we should try not to swallow it because it didn’t work in the stomach or something and I had to tell him it was as much as I could do to not spit the stuff out and forget the whole fucking thing. My mate got it completely the first time, but I didn’t get anything at all. I was really disappointed. The second time we smoked it in a pipe and the same fucking thing happened again: absolutely nothing! And again the other two folk in the company were completely tranced out on it! We’d a bottle of tequila and a load of beer with us that time so I got bombed on that instead. Maybe the first time ruined it for me. I’ve tried it a few times since then but I’ve never got anything other than maybe being slightly light headed. And I couldn’t swear to that and I’m sure I’ve tried to make an effect in my head, you know?

Q: Did you enjoy it?

A: I wanted to, I really did, but nothing happened. Then again, nothing bad happened either, I’d no adverse reaction or anything to it. I came out of it the same as I went in, and if I hadn’t seen the others I’d be really sceptical about the stuff. I think my mates still do it on occasion, but I don’t bother any more.

Participant 3 (female, 28 years old)

Q: Where did you get it?

A: I bought some dried leaf from a company who had put an advert in a magazine a boyfriend had. It was a web company, I don't remember their name, and I'm not absolutely certain where they're based, but I remember seeing the advert—it was called a herbal high—and because I'd heard of this stuff before, I thought I'd try it and see if it worked. I had the idea it was like grass for some reason. I'll tell you one thing, it wasn't much cheaper than grass! I paid about 30 UKP for it in total. That was for about 10 grams, I think.

Q: What did you expect to happen?

A: I thought it was going to be like smoking strong weed, with some visuals and that kind of thing. When it arrived, it was basically a bag of dried leaves. It could have been anything, really, and it had a sort of herby smell. I didn't expect much and I thought I'd been ripped off.

Q: What actually happened?

A: The first time it made me cough a lot. I smoked it straight in a sort of home made water pipe. It took me a while to get used to it 'cos it was quite a rough smoke. It was hard to tell if anything was happening or not. I felt really light headed and had a ringing noise in my ears but that might have been because of lack of oxygen from holding in a lot of smoke. I tried it again later that same night and I definitely got a hit off it; I felt very relaxed and lethargic, very heavy. I suppose it was like being really stoned, but there wasn't the stoned feeling. There was a definite alteration in how I felt, but it wasn't like being stoned on weed. The next time I did it was the next night. This time I had it at about ten at night. It came on really quite quickly this time, but I felt a lightness rather than the heavy sort of feeling I'd had before. I felt really good, really positive. I smoked some dope about 30 minutes after I'd had the salvia and that worked really well with it. I went to bed, slept like a log and had some really colourful and lucid dreams.

Q: Did you enjoy it?

A: Sometimes I've enjoyed it a lot and sometimes I haven't. Every time I've had salvia apart from the first time—and I think that was only 'cos I didn't really know what to expect—I've got something from it. Mostly I've enjoyed it, but once in a while it can get weird. After the first couple of times, I met someone else who had tried it, and had actually got cuttings from Holland and were growing their own. They were just growing it in the window of their flat. Dunno about the potency of the homegrown leaf anyway, I was still on some stuff I bought on the net, most people I have given it to seem absolutely blown away, but then maybe I talk it up—I have been very impressed and really pretty frightened by salvia experience. There was one time, I remember, where everyone in the room had these black lines running through their bodies in all different places . . . just one line on each person. You know that film *The Omen* where the photographs of all the victims have these marks on them showing how they'd be killed? Well, it was like that and it was pretty freaky 'cos I kept thinking about that and thinking "My God! This is how my friends are going to die!" But it wasn't like when it happens with acid, which can be really scary and go on for ages. This was freaky, but I could handle it. Just the same, I'm glad I was with other people. That was when we smoked some really concentrated extract someone had bought off the net.

Participant 4 (female, 27 years old)

Q: Where did you get it?

A: I bought a cutting from a mail-order specialist in Amsterdam. I think it cost me about five pounds in total (1 pound = \$2.00 US approx.) and it was worth every penny. It's amazingly easy to grow once it settles down and has given me an endless supply of cuttings. Now I've got dozens of plants, and it's reached the stage where I'm giving them away to friends. I think all the humidity this summer has helped mine grow—we have had steaming hot weather interspersed with thunderstorms for ages.

Q: What did you expect to happen?

A: Well, I first heard about it in a book by a guy called Dale Pendell. I forget the name of it. He made it sound really exciting, interesting and legal. Also, I got the idea that it was a safe sort of hallucinogen. Or not safe so much as controllable, which is something I really liked the idea of as I'm not really a big fan of acid. So I suppose I expected it to be like acid, but more natural if you like. Acid's made in a lab but this was something I grew myself. That made me feel a lot more comfortable about taking it. So I suppose I expected it to be like a mild and smokeable LSD.

Q: What actually happened?

A: It was nothing like acid for starters! It wasn't like mushrooms either. To be honest, the first time I tried it not a lot happened, but that might have been because I bunged some dried leaves into a joint. I don't think it mixes too well with tobacco. It made me cough a lot, and I remember having tears rolling down my cheeks. The person who was with me thought I was getting a really strong effect but I was actually choking! The second time was much, much better, but the whole situation was different. There were four of us and we'd hired a cabin on [an island]. It was a really warm night around midsummer and we decided to have a fire outside. We drank a few beers and then the salvia came out. We smoked it straight in a pipe, and this time for me it worked almost immediately. There were some really amazing shapes in the flames of the fire all of a sudden, and I thought I heard a sort of whispering going on. That was a bit spooky, but one of the others said it was a breeze blowing through the branches of the trees. I really enjoyed that night, but I think it was down to the combination of the place, the company and the drugs. Funnily enough, two of the others really got into the salvia, but it left [name of woman] completely cold: she just spent about 10 minutes coughing!

Q: Did you enjoy it?

A: Since the night on the island, I've had it maybe another dozen times and I've enjoyed every one of them. I know that some people have had bad experiences with it but that's not me. I've had a few weird experiences, like the whispering, and one time I went to the bathroom in my house to splash cold water on my face, when I had this really strong sense of someone else being in the room with me. It wasn't in any way malevolent or anything, but the hair on my neck stood up.

Participant 5 (female, 23 years old)

Q: Where did you get it?

A: My boyfriend got some, I don't remember where, but it was a bag of dried leaves that looked like spinach or something.

Q: What did you expect to happen?

A: I don't know really. I really like skunk, white widow [Note: "skunk" is a generic name for a potent form of cannabis plant, usually grown hydroponically and with an average THC content of 10-14%. "White Widow" is one of the strains of cannabis usually included in the general descriptor "skunk"] and stuff like that and I thought this might be like

those. My boyfriend was really into trying new drugs, especially hallucinatory ones and so I got the impression it might be that kind of thing. Stoned with afterimages or something.

Q: What actually happened?

A: The first time nothing at all! But a couple of weeks after that, my boyfriend and I smoked it on Halloween night. I remember it was raining really heavily outside, like coming down in sheets, you know? We smoked it in a bong just on its own. I'd tried it that other time but apart from really making me cough, nothing happened. It was totally different this time though. Two or three tokes and I was out there, you know? It was *really* sudden and *really* quite intense, the way I think DMT must be. I was scared for a while, just because it was so unexpected. The room had been quite dark but then I was aware of a lot of colours in the darkness, I don't know how to explain it but it was like a lot of dark greens, reds and blues swirling about all around me. Like a fog or something. There was a white light coming from somewhere and I had the idea there was something else about to happen, but it never quite did. The effect wore off after about fifteen minutes, but it seemed a lot less time than that.

Q: Did you enjoy it?

A: Yes, but I think I expected more from it. It was actually scary to begin with because it was like a plane taking off almost instantly, and I've never taken anything that works like that, you know? But after the blast off start it levelled out really quickly and let me get to grips with it. We've tried it again since then and I seem to get a little further along with it. It's funny, but it seems to give you a bit more each time you try it.

Participant 6 (male, 33 years old)

Q: Where did you get it?

A: From someone I used to buy dope off. He was into home grown home produced organic drugs kind of thing. So I got a bag of these dried leaves, all grown in Scotland and all organic.

Q: What did you expect to happen?

A: The guy I got them from told me that the dried stuff wasn't as good as the fresh leaves, but that dried leaf could be smoked so you got the effect quicker. He also said that it didn't seem to work for everyone. I know the guy who grows it is really into the psychedelics, hallucinogens or whatever, so I thought it might be a bit of a trip.

Q: What actually happened?

A: I nearly shit myself the first time I used it. It's weird though, I wasn't scared of the plant, it was more wondering how much stronger was this going to get and would I be able to handle it? As it turned out, it suddenly hit a sort of plateau, and levelled right out. I think it's the same when you try anything new and something like that happens. It was like a G-force or something that was only affecting me. I can't explain. It was like I was rushing through space without actually moving. There was even a whistling noise in my head like I was moving really fast. And really frantic patterns, quite bright and constantly changing. A bit like a kaleidoscope.

Q: Did you enjoy it?

A: Absolutely, but I can't say it's been every time. My mate was right, and every so often fuck all happens and that's a weird one 'cos you're sitting there waiting for it and there's just nothing. But that first time yeah, it was very different and I enjoyed it a lot. Almost like an acid trip but, I don't know, a lot shorter and that's good because a few hours of the *Salvia* thing might be too much. I like the aftermath bit a lot too. I always feel really relaxed and mellow.

Participant 7 (male, 34 years old)

Q: Where did you get it?

A: It was locally sourced. A friend who grows a lot of exotic plants grew this stuff and invited me and another person round to try it.

Q: What did you expect to happen?

A: Okay, the first time I did *Salvia* we smoked it in one of those home made pipe chillum things, know? Cardboard tube and tin foil thing it was. I can't say much happened, but maybe that was 'cos I'd had quite a few beers.

Q: What actually happened?

A: The second time was totally different and was quite something. Quite, not exactly hallucinatory, but it was pretty close. Lots of shapes and stuff in front of my eyes, and a weird feeling all over my body. The time after that was just amazing, but the company and the surroundings might've had something to do with that. I just smoked it in a big tobacco pipe that time. Smells and tastes of pipe tobacco but it's got a big bowl on it, so there's loads of room for leaves. It belonged to the hosts' grandad, I think. Anyhow, it was at a barbecue at [a festival in Scotland] and the thing is that I don't think anyone expected much to happen! We were sitting on the beach in front of a fire, and the pipe came round. I think that out of the four or five people there that me and one other guy took it. Nothing seemed to happen again, and I thought "right, another shite herbal high," know? Straight after that I remember the other guy who'd smoked it sitting next to me and the two of us just, and I don't want to sound like a hippy about this, but we were kind of sharing something, you know? We sat and looked into that fire for what seemed like hours. Just watching the shapes in the flames. The guy said it was like watching clouds, but in a fire. Seems daft telling you it, but that's how it was.

Q: Did you enjoy it?

A: After I'd figured out how to get it to work, if you understand me, yes I enjoyed it a lot. I think it was after we'd all lowered our expectations that it worked for us. For myself, if it hadn't worked that third time I'd never have done it again. I only actually had some anyway because it was there and on offer. I didn't expect anything to happen at all, and that's exactly the moment it decided to show me what it could do. Lovely stuff.

Participant 8 (male, 38 years old)

Q: Where did you get it?

A: No idea where it came from. I was probably told but I'm afraid I don't remember. I was at a party and someone produced this stuff that looked a bit like dried marijuana leaves. But a lot bigger.

Q: What did you expect to happen?

A: Again, I don't really know. I'd never heard of it before. I think someone might have mentioned it was a Mexican plant, so I'd have been expecting something like mescaline. I don't know. What did happen certainly wasn't what I expected though.

Q: What actually happened?

A: The first time I did it was at a beach party. We were all sitting in front of a pretty big fire, about seven of us maybe [recites names], and someone had some *salvia*. We were all pretty straight, cause nobody could get any party gear [usually, Ecstasy and/or LSD and/or amphetamine] but there was some beer kicking about. So we smoked some of this stuff, and I was expecting fuck all, possibly mild grass kick like a herbal high. Well, it was more like ketamine than grass.

[This was of interest to the author and a further question was included: How do you mean?] Well, it was really, *immediate*, you know? Suddenly you're just *there*, and there's fuck all you can do about it. With K, you're out of your body and can see yourself from the sky down. With *Salvia*, you're kind of doing the same thing but you're in the same space, but invisible.

Q: Did you enjoy it?

A: Enjoy isn't really the right word for that first time. I didn't expect that, certainly not from dried leaves. Maybe I'm supersensitive to some drugs or something, but I was really blown away. I think the tough part was not expecting that kind of effect that immediately. If I'd known what to expect I'd have enjoyed it more. At the time I was vaguely worried about how much more intense it was going to get, how much longer it was going to last and stuff. That kind of took some of the enjoyment away from it, but when I've tried it since then it's been really, really good.

Participant 9 (male, 37 years old)

Q: Where did you get it?

A: I was in Amsterdam a few years ago and I saw it in a head shop. I'd heard about it and I knew (or I was pretty sure) it was a "legal high," so I bought some to bring home with me. It didn't smell like Skunk or anything so I thought I'd be able to walk through customs with it no problem. It was when I was actually on the plane back that I started to get a bit worried about what would happen if I did get stopped, legal or not. Anyhow, I just walked through with it expecting all the time to be busted, but it never happened.

Q: What did you expect to happen?

A: I hadn't a Scooby [Note: this is UK rhyming slang: "Scooby" is a shortened version of "Scooby Doo" = "clue"], but I like trying out new mind-altering substances and that's why I brought it back with me.

Q: What actually happened?

A: Ketamine. The only thing I've had that's like it is Special K. But it's not really like it either, 'cos with K I kind of feel that I'm falling through space and time. It's hard to describe, but with K, I get an instant feeling of falling, know? With *Salvia*, it's more like I'm standing still and everything is falling past me. K is strange enough, but it's only a chemical. *Salvia* is a living plant, and I'm really glad I got to try it.

Q: Did you enjoy it?

A: Yes, I'd have to say I did. It's not something I could do every day, though. Too, you know, rough.

Participant 10 (male, 30 years old)

Q: Where did you get it?

A: I got my first lot from Amsterdam. On the net, I think, and it was dried leaves. I always remember thinking that it must be illegal, you know? I mean, something that could produce that kind of effect, there's no way that would be legal in the UK.

Q: What did you expect to happen?

A: [No answer]

Q: What actually happened?

A: It's a weird one. I smoked it with a few friends and they all got something off it. It varied from a mild stoned and contented feeling to a pretty heavy stone apparently with quite a bit of peripheral visual stuff. I felt pleasantly stoned until I went to bed that night. The dreams I had were absolutely amazing. Vivid, bright colours. The kind of dreams I used to have when I was a kid.

Q: Did you enjoy it?

A: I really enjoyed it. The conscious experience was pleasant enough, but when I went to sleep is when it really started properly. I'd never expected something like that. I'd forgotten how enjoyable dreams are and I was so blown away by this that I was telling everyone about it for weeks.

DISCUSSION

Siebert (1994) has identified a number of recurrent experiences reported by *Salvia* users, and categorized them as follows:

1. Becoming objects
2. Visions of various two-dimensional surfaces, film and membranes.
3. Revisiting places from the past, especially childhood.
4. Loss of the body and/or identity.
5. Various sensations of motion, or of being pulled or twisted by forces of some kind.
6. Uncontrollable hysterical laughter.
7. Overlapping realities; the perception that one is in several locations at once.

Interestingly, all of these features but one (uncontrollable hysterical laughter) are remarkably similar to events reported during ketamine experiences (Dalgarno & Shewan 1996), and two of the 10 participants (P8 and P9) plainly state that their closest point of comparison for *Salvia* was ketamine. Whether the other participants had experience of ketamine or not is unknown, but there are other similarities between the two drugs; P5, for example, noted the rapid onset of the *Salvia*: "It was actually scary to begin with because it was like a plane taking off almost instantly, and I've never taken anything that works like that, you know?" This feature is shared with ketamine, when delivered by injection or intranasally (Dalgarno & Shewan 1996).

One of the fundamental differences between *Salvia* and ketamine (in terms of effect) is that in the case of *Salvia* there remains the question of why some users have a full blow experience, others have a mild experience, and still others are aware of no effect whatsoever. With ketamine, given the correct dose, the full experience is a certainty. This anomaly in the effect of the same drug used by a group of people at the same time has also been noted with Ecstasy (Shewan, Dalgarno & Reith 2000).

Why then, should some *Salvia* users have the full experience noted above, while others experience very little or nothing? In the absence of further evidence at time of writing, one can only hypothesise. Seven of the 10 participants said that before using *Salvia* for the first time that they had the *expectation* that the experience was going to be hallucinogenic to some degree:

"A mad trip" (P1)

"I thought I was going to get the Castaneda thing, turning into a panther" (P2)

"I thought it was going to be like smoking strong weed, with

some visuals and that kind of thing" (P3)
 "I expected it to be like acid, but more natural if you like"
 (P4)
 "Stoned with afterimages or something" (P5)
 "...the guy who grows it is really into the psychedelics, hal-
 lucinogens or whatever, so I thought it might be a bit of a
 trip" (P6)
 "I'd have been expecting something like mescaline" (P8)

As it transpired, three of the 10 respondents (P6, P8 and P9) had a full *Salvia* experience, while the others found it had no noticeable effect at all. However in all but two cases (P1 and P2) all of the other participants found that in subsequent *Salvia* sessions, they became more aware of the effects, and in some cases the effects intensified on each occasion it was used:

I think it was after we'd all lowered our expectations that it worked for us... I didn't expect anything to happen at all, and that's exactly the moment it decided to show me what it could do. Lovely stuff (P7)

Where the respondents made impromptu attempts at replicating the traditional Mazatec setting (at least, as far as the respondents understood it), there seems to have been more success with the plant, though not always with the respondent reporting the event:

... we went camping and chewed the *Salvia* in front of a fire under the stars and just hung out. It was a really good couple of nights, even though I didn't get the experience a couple of the others seemed to get (P1)

The second time we smoked it in a pipe and the same fucking thing happened again: absolutely nothing! And again the

other two folk in the company were completely tranced out on it! (P2)

It would appear that there are rules to be observed and preparations to be made regarding set and setting if one is to have anything approximating a full *Salvia* experience. From the transcripts, it would seem that using at night, outdoors, in front of a fire and in the company of like-minded friends (apart from anything else, having friends around makes for a safer experience) is the best way to yield results. And perhaps most importantly, try not to expect anything to happen, as it might not.

Limitations

This was an example of guerrilla research. The sample isn't representative, no personal or socioeconomic data were collected other than age and gender of the participant. The interviews were conducted exclusively via email in order to preserve confidentiality and also to encourage frankness. Were the time and the resources available, it would be very useful in the future to conduct longer and more in depth interviews with a larger sample of *Salvia* users, as this would provide deeper insight to the nature of the *Salvia* experience and would greatly expand the existent knowledge base.

Disclaimer

This research was undertaken privately and with no financial input from any institution, official or otherwise. The views presented here and the interpretations of the data are wholly those of the author and are not those of BAHD or Glasgow Caledonian University.

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