When a person considers the actions of a person they perceive as intelligent, they
generally think of them engaging in beneficial, goal-oriented, and productive actions. We believe
that the intellectually gifted think in a strict, rational, and logical manner. In fact, almost as
evidence of our association between these two qualities, the word “rational” can be found as a
listed synonym for intelligent on Thesaurus.com. Still, there is some doubt to the correlation
between these two behaviors. Especially in a university environment, it seems like every day we
see people who prevail on an academic playing field make decisions that one would often call
“impulsive,” “dumb,” and “illogical,” all words one would not associate with the ideal intelligent
person. But the correlation between being intellectually gifted and making logical decisions may
not be as clear as one would think. After all, intelligence, a force many often associate with
logical decision-making, is actually a characteristic common to those who make one of the most
irrational, illogical decisions of all; the choice to abuse drugs.

With all of this talk of definitions, one must also be wondering what exactly is meant by
the word “intelligence” itself. Throughout history, psychologists have debated heavily on which
grounds we can measure a person’s cognitive ability. Charles Spearman’s psychometric
approach (1904) is categorized by several specialized areas of intelligence, including logical,
arithmetical, spatial, and mechanical intelligence. Each of these categories has an associated s
“special” factor which stands to quantify these specific abilities of intelligence, each with their
own assigned value. Each of these s factors overlap in some way or form to express a g “general” value under the idea that a high performance in any of the specific intelligence categories had a positive correlation with each other (Kalat 295). This now popular idea of a “general intelligence” is reflected throughout many other influential intelligence theories, and in essence modern day intelligence quotient (IQ) tests attempt to quantify this idea of a g factor, an overarching value representing how well the brain functions in dealing with various cognitive challenges of day-to-day life. In other words, these IQ tests evaluate fluid intelligence, the ability to work with and use a range of academic skills, rather than looking at crystallized intelligence, or the total amount information that is already stored in a person’s memory that could pertain to a specific topic (Kalat 299). When referring to people with “higher intelligence” throughout this essay, from this point forward it can be assumed that this refers to people above the established mean intelligence quotient (for adults) of 100.

There are many of these intelligent individuals throughout history who have engaged in the use of mind-altering substances. Oliver Sacks’ “Altered States” focuses on the personal experiences of the author, a neurologist, who clearly exhibits many of the signs one would see in someone labelled “intelligent.” Sacks, a thirty year old neurology resident at the beginning of his account, is well on the road to success with his already excessive amount of vigorous schooling.
His writing is clear and professionally written, both displaying his skills as a writer and his expertise and familiarity within the field of neurology. The reader has no doubt in their mind from the very beginning of this piece that Sacks is quite cognitively capable. So when Sacks begins to tell the story of how he transcended into using heavy drugs regularly, it may puzzle some readers why someone so bright and gifted could possibly engage in such a self-destructive activity. How could someone so intelligent find themselves lying in bed for more than twelve hours after injecting morphine, or so desperate for drugs that they had to raid the chemical supplies at work (Sacks 178-179)?

In order to figure out how this could have happened, it is necessary to consider what could draw someone like Sacks into this dark world of psychoactive substances. We know it was simply not ignorance of their pernicious properties. Sacks was fully knowledgeable of the effects these drugs could have on him, even before trying the most mild of mind-altering drugs himself. He had read many accounts of the effects of drugs, including De Quincey’s *Confessions of an English Opium Eater*, Baudelier’s *Artificial Paradises*, and the works of Silas Weir Mitchell, a medical man who wrote personal accounts of the vivid, colorful, geometric hallucinogenic experiences he had with use of mescaline. Sacks mentions the work of Aldous Huxley, author of *Doors of Perception*, who hinted at “both genius and madness” being hidden within these extreme, drug-induced states, ideas held by other intellectuals who had delved into these on-command chemical gateways into the mind (Sacks 170-171). Upon reading these works, it became clear to Sacks that the human brain was capable of so much more than people during Sacks’ younger years were truly aware of. So perhaps to Sacks, an intelligent, aspiring neurologist, it was not just the curiosity towards the effects of the drugs that drew him in, but
also his own ignorance of the limitations of the mind itself. Sacks wanted to experience himself just how warped human perception can become.

For Sacks and other intelligent individuals like him, a thirst for knowledge is what drives them to engage in these self-destructive behaviors. While many suspected it beforehand, it was not until 2009 that scientists from the University of Toronto and Mount Sinai hospital uncovered a new protein in an under-researched part of the brain, which effectively linked together curiosity and intelligence (McDermott). With this in mind, it starts to become easier to see why someone so gifted could see value in engaging in these activities. The proverb “curiosity killed the cat” certainly holds true in the case of Sacks, who demonstrates his expansive curiosity in the world of psychoactive substances with a long list of pressing questions in neurology at the time:

How did the dopamine and acetylcholine systems interact? Why did opiates—or cannabis—have such strong effects? Did the brain have special opiate receptors and make opioids of its own? Was there a similar mechanism for cannabis receptors and cannabinoids? Why was LSD so enormously potent? Were all its effects explicable in terms of altering the serotonin in the brain? What transmitter systems governed wake-sleep cycles, and what might be the neurochemical background of dreams of hallucinations? (172)

With these questions floating around about neurochemistry, along with them were the drugs involved. It was not difficult for Sacks, who had heard so many fascinating things about these substances, to become tempted by these seemingly magical psychoactives that had such potent effects, both physically on the chemistry of the brain and in the perception of the user. As a neurologist, his curiosity made him determined to see firsthand just how these chemical reactions caused these dramatic transformations in perception.
Using these drugs allowed Sacks the chance to be reflective on himself and get a better grasp on how his brain worked and personally see the effects these chemicals can have on the user’s state of mind and perception. Several instances can be observed throughout his writing in *Altered States* where it almost seems like Sacks is engaging in these psychedelic experiences in an attempt to be more introspective, as well as further understand the workings of the brain and what certain symptoms of mental disorders feel like. When Sacks took Heavenly Blue morning glory seeds, he made the illogical conclusion that his friend, Augusta Bonnard, was a doppelganger. To explain this, he said that “…my seeing her as a duplicate or impostor was neurological in origin, a disconnection between perception and feelings. The ability to identify (which was intact) was not accompanied by the feeling of warmth and familiarity.” Sacks then continues to say that this type of feeling is referred to as “Capgras syndrome,” which is common symptom of schizophrenia, as well as dementia, and delirium (177). In doing this, Sacks demonstrates that he was able to personally get a better understanding of his field by using drugs, satisfying his thirst for knowledge from the experience. Despite the fact that Sacks was clearly abusing drugs to most outside parties, to him, it almost seems like he was simply discovering the workings of the brain.

This was not Sacks’ only enlightening experience with the misuse of drugs. Later on in his piece, he describes intense hallucinations he started to have spontaneously after suddenly ending his use of chloral hydrate after running out of his supply. He struggled “…to maintain at least an external control and not panic or scream or become catatonic, faced by the bug-eyed monsters around me.” Sacks expresses that at the time he was worried that this was a sign he was schizophrenic, although his friend and doctor Carol Burnett later assured him it was something known as delirium tremens, caused by withdrawal from heavy use of the drug (179-181). Still,
Sacks had good reason to believe that these symptoms were the result of schizophrenia. Delusions, hallucinations, and stupor are common indicators of the disorder ("Schizophrenia Symptoms"). Still, despite the horrors of his unexpected hallucinogenic experience, Sacks was able to find intellectual value in it, even in the moment. In order to help cope with the situation, he started to describe his experience in written clinical detail. He felt that he had “…become an observer, even an explorer, not a helpless victim, of the craziness inside me” (180).

Sacks is certainly not the only intelligent person to engage in the illicit use of drugs in the course of history and felt some type of intellectual benefit. For example, George Carlin, an intelligent, witty, and cynical comedian who once said “Just think of how stupid the average person is, and then realize half of them are even stupider!” first delved into drug use at the age of thirteen. As time went on and he got older, he went on to try harder drugs, including acid and mescaline. “Hallucinogens are a value changer. So is marijuana. Like it or not, it changes your values. It opens up windows. ‘Doors of perception,’ as Huxley would call them” ("George Carlin on Drugs and Marijuana"). His appreciation and fascination for the use of mind-altering substances parallels those of Sacks. In fact, in this quotation Carlin expresses that he is familiar with the works of Huxley, whom Sacks had shown great admiration for previously. Still, much like Sacks, Carlin fell victim to drug abuse and eventually addiction. Carlin, who even late in his life an alcoholic and Vicodin addict, was also at one point using “six or seven grams a day” of cocaine ("George Carlin on Cocaine"). Even though Carlin was very intelligent, receiving high marks in school and being a world renowned-comedian, it seems that the curiosity that came along with this high level of intellect is what kept pulling him into brutal world of heavy drug abuse.
Sacks and Carlin are just two of the many intelligent people in our society who have succumbed to drug abuse. But to what extent do intelligent individuals in the general population engage in drug use, especially compared to people of lower intelligence? In 1958, a National Child Development study in the United Kingdom tested the cognitive ability of 11 year old children, 3,509 males and 3,204 females, with 40 verbal and 40 nonverbal items. These tests were then tried against other testing methods for their validity in establishing intelligence. Then, at age 42, these same individuals were asked to complete a questionnaire on drug use inquiring “...about the use of cannabis, cocaine, amphetamines, ecstasy, LSD, amyl nitrate, psilocybin mushrooms, temazepam, ketamine, crack, heroin, methadone, and the fictitious drug semeron to identify false claims.” Even after controlling for socioeconomic background, antisocial behavior, and material disadvantage, and psychological distress, it was found that “…one standard deviation increase in IQ scores (15 points) was associated with an increased risk of using all drugs with the exception of cocaine, amphetamines, ecstasy, and temazepam in men; ecstasy and temazepam in women” (Bon).

Another study, conducted in 1970, also sought to answer this same question with a similar methodology. At age five, 3,818 male and 4,128 female participants were given various cognitive tests. The scores in these tests were calculated and transformed into the standardized

![Graph displaying results from National Child Development study in the United Kingdom (Kanazawa).](image-url)
IQ with a mean of 100 and a standard deviation of 15. Intelligence was then re-affirmed at the age of ten for each of the participants using similar types of cognitive testing. Once the participants reached age 16, they were given questionnaires to assess psychological distress and simple yes or no questions inquiring about their use of commonly used drugs, as well as their street names, along with another made up drug to ensure validity. Researchers found that 16 year olds who used cannabis had higher average IQs. Boys that had engaged in marijuana use by age 16 had a mean IQ score of 109.65 in the tests they took as children, but boys who did not had a mean IQ of 103.86. The difference was even more significant in the female sample. Girls who had not consumed marijuana by age 16 in the tests taken previously had achieved mean IQ scores of 101.42, compared to a mean of 107.74 in girls that did. The study took this another step further and once again assessed the correlation between IQ and drug use, controlling for psychological distress, salary, socioeconomic background, career, etc. later in life. The differences were still present. “Men at 30 who had used multiple drugs within the previous 12 months had a mean IQ score of 104.72, men who had not had a mean IQ score of 101.69,” and “women at 30 who had used multiple drugs within the previous 12 months had a mean IQ score of 108.85, women who had not had a mean IQ score of 100.31” (Bon). This cohort study, along with the one done in 1958, establish the correlation between intelligence and drug use directly.

So why exactly is this the case? Evolutionary psychologist Satoshi Kanazawa believes that “more intelligent individuals are more likely than less intelligent individuals to acquire and espouse evolutionarily novel preferences and values that did not exist in the ancestral environment and thus our ancestors did not have.” In terms of our evolutionary history, drugs are very new, and could be considered “evolutionarily novel” items. Opium was one of the first drugs humans experimented with, being used about 5,000 years ago, and cannabis, another
psychoactive agricultural drug, had been used for pharmacological purposes around the same time. Other drugs, such as morphine, heroin, and cocaine, are much more recent in origin due to the fact that they must be manufactured through modern chemistry, all being discovered at some point in the 19th century (Kanazawa).

This is not the only theory about why intelligence and drug use are correlated, however. Dr. Clinton B. McCracken, a biomedical scientist who has built a career studying the neuroscience of addiction, believes there are other motivations for intelligent individuals to engage in this illicit drug use, and sometimes abuse. In his heartbreaking, but eye-opening piece *Intellectualizing Drug Abuse*, McCracken makes many confessions about his own drug use, much like Sacks, and offers explanations for his own behavior as well as other intelligent individuals, both within and out of his field of study. He was a high-functioning drug user, consuming marijuana daily for a decade and compulsively injecting opioids into his veins for three years. McCracken believed his knowledge about the criteria of drug abuse and dependence, particularly from the psychiatric diagnostic manual known as the DSM-IV prevented him from falling victim to the drugs he used, like those he studied. He states, “I was able to tell myself that those items on the DSM-IV clearly did not apply to my situation, and hence no problem existed.” But very quickly, the drugs started to become a problem for the biomedical scientist. His fiancée, having injected a drug with unsafe impurities, passed away from a severe allergic reaction. But he ended up losing more than just the love of his life. McCracken reminisces about when his life began to hit rock bottom. “As a consequence of her death, our house was searched by police, who then discovered the ongoing marijuana cultivation. I was immediately arrested, jailed, and charged with a number of felonies; then, in the space of a few days, my employment as a postdoctoral fellow was summarily terminated and I was evicted from my residence.”
McCracken, having spent most of his life exploring the topic of drug use, abuse and addiction, now sees how his previous views on his own use was flawed, and explains his beliefs on why healthcare professionals abuse drugs. Despite the fact that they have education and training, their rates of drug abuse are just as high, if not higher, than the rest of the population. On top of having easier access to illicit substances, much like Sacks, they also have the ability to “intellectualize” their habits. Even non-healthcare professionals who are intelligent and well-educated about the substances they use can develop this attitude. They believe they are above the common textbook examples of drug addicts, who are often presented as “degenerates,” criminals who have no sense of control. This education, knowledge, or training can promote a level of arrogance which in turn promotes an unwilling ignorance of the problem. It is for this reason that McCracken believes that “intellectualization is particularly insidious.” While this is a theory and cannot necessarily be proven, McCracken’s argument along with his own personal anecdotes present an interesting case for why intelligent individuals delve into abuse. Perhaps the most knowledgeable individuals at the same time can be the most ignorant of themselves once their mere curiosity turns into a toxic habit.

Sacks, Carlin, and McCracken, all curious and intelligent men, recklessly brought damage to themselves despite the “wisdom” that some believe comes along with intelligence. With that said, do we need these individuals to progress our knowledge as a race? Do they serve a purpose for the greater good, enhancing our knowledge of the human mind? Or are they merely self-defeating tragedies, wasting their potential? I believe these individuals embody the very principles of utilitarianism, whether intentionally or not. Without these intellectuals engaging in these activities, we would have little to no in-depth, scientific, and thorough analysis of the perceptual effects of these destructive chemical shortcuts to euphoria. Huxley, mentioned by
both Carlin and Sacks, was one of the first to take a detailed personal account of the use of mescaline in his *Doors of Perception*, advancing the collective human knowledge of this relatively new hallucinogenic, mind-altering substance. I believe Sacks had some validity in his claim that he had “…become an observer, even an explorer” in the midst of his hallucinogenic experience. Sacks is someone who values the power of knowledge, as many intelligent people do. As a result, even in the midst of a no doubt terrifying experience, he felt it was important to preserve his experience for all of humanity to understand in the future. Now, for the remainder of humanity’s existence, others can learn from his experience and use it to help them make their own decisions when it comes to the same sort of illicit drug use.

Even in the moment, we see that illicit drug use has some actual intellectual benefits to the user, and in turn society if the intellectual benefits are spread to others. When Sacks, who experienced Capgras syndrome upon taking the Heavenly Blue morning glory seeds, he enhanced his knowledge in his own field. To simply read about a symptom of a psychopathology is much different than actually experiencing it. I believe Sacks would agree with me when I say that this experience and others like this helped him understand Schizophrenia and how it can be majorly debilitating to the afflicted individual’s personal relationships. When Carlin says while discussing drug use, “Like it or not, it changes your values. It opens up windows. ‘Doors of perception’,” ("George Carlin on Drugs and Marijuana") he refers to this idea of getting a better understanding of human psychology in general. On a personal level, I can relate to this. The first time I used cannabis (out of a Gator, which was in the midst of taking an Intro to Psychology course in High School, it became clear to me while under the influence that there was indeed a distinctive difference between short-term memory and long-term memory. I couldn’t remember what was said minutes ago and I couldn’t remember where I put my wallet I just had, but still I
could recall childhood memories, recite songs, read, write, and was still fully aware of the major
previous events of my life. In using cannabis, I began to get a better understanding of how the
brain processes and retains information in a way that one could never learn in a classroom. To
say that drug use is purely nonsensical and for those that do not appreciate the beauty of the
natural human state is ignorant. If anything, I began to better appreciate and understand the
beauty of the natural human state. By using illicit substances, myself and those before me were
able to better able to appreciate and understand the human mind.

The use of drugs by intelligent individuals paves way for potential future users to get a
more detailed, credible, and careful account of what lies ahead. They give us even more
perspective on just how destructive these psychoactive substances can be. We see that these
bright, talented individuals can easily throw all of the things they worked hard to earn away
almost instantaneously. It is easy for someone to rashly make the claim that addiction is only for
the weak-minded and those of lesser intelligence. But these bright men and others like them
show us that they’re just as equally destructive to people from all walks of life. It could even be
said that these men are some sort of unintentional martyrs. McCracken’s tragic, eye-opening
experience inspired him to write his piece, which no doubt will discourage non-users and open
the eyes of many abusers who perhaps are still in denial about their problem. I believe that the
fact that even some of our most gifted members of society are just as capable, if not more
capable, of succumbing to abuse and addiction, helps society as a whole understand just how
much of a problem addiction is, and the complete loss of control a person can face in the wake of
abuse. Rather than viewing addicts and abusers as criminals, these intelligent individuals help
shed light to the fact that they should be treated as victims and patients who need help. It is a true
tragedy to see someone who is already mentally “incarcerated” by their own habit become
physically incarcerated into our already crowded prisons, as McCracken was, despite his talent in his field.

While intelligence, especially in today’s society, is generally looked upon as a positive trait, it is irrational to say there are not some drawbacks to having a high IQ. With intelligence comes inquisitiveness, and with inquisitiveness comes experimentation. As a result, many of these bright individuals, such as Sacks and Carlin, make the illogical, self-destructive choice to abuse drugs, in an effort to explore the inner workings of their own brain. These two and other individuals like them demonstrate that, contrary to what some believe, drug abuse and addiction occur in people of all levels of intellect. In fact, intelligent individuals are arguably even more at risk, due to their higher degree of curiosity. Whether it be their attraction to “evolutionarily novel” activities, their thirst for knowledge, their intellectualism, or some mix of these, it is difficult to deny that there is some sort of attraction to psychoactive substances in these bright individuals. While intelligence is certainly not the only factor influencing people’s risks for abusing drugs, it is undeniable that it plays a role in many people’s decisions to begin using psychoactive substances. Still, despite the tragedies of this illicit drug use, in the end, is it worth it? I would say yes. In the end, I think the negatives of these intelligent individuals abusing these drugs are outweighed by the positives. The acquiring of new knowledge of different mental states, the personal intellectual benefit, the enlightening of others in society about the dangers and risks of these drugs, and bringing light to the myths surrounding their use are all legitimate reasons to believe that the use of drugs by intellectual individuals can serve as a sail in the voyage of exploring the human mind. Even if their journey across the human mind wasn’t as beautiful as they expected, they can provide a warning to the people of the world and their posterity about the dangers to come from a credible source.
Works Cited


