

***The pattern of memory and
perceptual dysfunctions in
recreational ecstasy users***

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Declaration

I declare that this thesis reports my original work, that no part has been previously accepted and presented for the award of any degree or diploma from any university, and that, to the best of my knowledge, no material previously published or written by any other person is included, except where due acknowledgement is given.

John Anthony Brown

“If MDMA neurotoxicity in humans is a myth, then it is a myth with a very heavy serotonergic component.”

(Turner & Parrott, 2000)

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Abstract

There is a growing body of evidence that the main psychoactive ingredient of the recreational drug “ecstasy” (methylenedioxymethamphetamine; MDMA) causes lasting changes to the serotonin system in both animals and humans, including the hippocampus (involved in memory) and the occipital lobe (involved in visual perception). Previous studies have often found memory deficits in ecstasy users. However, the results have been far from consistent across studies. None of the methods used to date have adequately isolated the hippocampal component of memory from the contribution of other brain regions. Three memory studies were conducted in this thesis to clarify which components and processes of memory are in deficit in ecstasy users.

In the first memory study, ecstasy users ($n=32$) did not differ from non-drug using controls ($n=29$) on implicit memory (automatic non-conscious retrieval, as revealed by a stem-completion task), or explicit memory (conscious recollection, as revealed by stem-cued recall). In the second memory study, no significant differences were found between ecstasy users ($n=30$) and non-drug using controls ($n=34$) on tests designed to clarify the findings on explicit memory, or on two standard neuropsychological tests of long-term memory (prose recall and Auditory Verbal Learning Test) that allowed greater use of elaborative processing at study. In the third memory study, a number of tests were applied that differed in their elaborative processing demands, including the California Verbal Learning Test, Visual Paired Associates, and Verbal Paired Associates. Ecstasy users ($n=32$) had poorer recall, and made less strategic use of elaborative processing compared to both cannabis-using controls ($n=33$) and non-drug using controls ($n=33$). Also, on a novel test of elaborative processing (“Verbal Triplet Associates”), both cannabis users and ecstasy users had memory deficits on the first trial, but only ecstasy users had a significant learning deficit over successive trials. On the basis of the localisation of the components and processes of memory in literature, it was concluded that long-term memory deficits in ecstasy users may reflect changes in elaborative processes localised in the frontal lobes, or global deficits, rather than just changes to the memory functions of the hippocampus.

With regard to visual perception, no studies have been published to date that have examined MDMA-related changes to the behavioural functioning of the occipital lobe in humans. In the current thesis, this was investigated using the tilt aftereffect illusion. In accordance with expectations, ecstasy users had a larger tilt aftereffect compared to

non-drug using controls ($n=34$). Unexpectedly, this result was only obtained for a subset of 12 ecstasy users (out of $n=30$) who had not used amphetamines in the recent past. It was concluded that the results for ecstasy users who had not recently used amphetamines were consistent with the proposal that ecstasy-related serotonergic changes in the occipital lobe broaden the tuning bandwidth of orientation sensitive neurons, and that the recent use of amphetamines appears to counteract that effect.

Table of contents

Acknowledgements.....	5
Abstract.....	6
Table of contents.....	8
Table of figures.....	13
Table of tables.....	15
Chapter 1. The pharmacology, use patterns and neurotoxicity of MDMA....	18
1.1 Introduction.....	18
1.2 The chemical classification of MDMA.....	18
1.3 The use of MDMA as a recreational drug.....	18
1.3.1 A brief history of the use of MDMA as a recreational drug.....	18
1.3.2 Current ecstasy use in Australia and Australian Capital Territory.....	19
1.4 The effects of MDMA administration	20
1.4.1 Acute effects	21
1.4.2 Residual effects.....	23
1.4.3 Long-term effects.....	24
1.5 The organisation of serotonergic axons	25
1.6 Long-term changes to the serotonin system in animals	26
1.6.1 The nature of the neurochemical and neuroanatomical changes.....	26
1.6.2 The dosage at which the detectable effects occur	28
1.7 Convergent evidence of long-term MDMA-related neural changes in humans	30
1.7.1 Human neuroimaging studies.....	30
1.7.2 Other evidence of lasting MDMA-related changes in human brain chemistry and structures.....	34
1.7.3 Summary of the long-term effects of MDMA on the neurochemistry and neuroanatomy of the brain	36
1.8 Rationale for the current series of studies.....	37
Chapter 2. Retrospective cohort studies: Methodological issues.....	41
2.1 Introduction.....	41
2.2 Inferring causal relationships in retrospective cohort studies.....	41
2.2.1 Hill's (1965) criteria.....	41
2.3 Factors which effect the ability to detect a <i>biological gradient</i> in the results of the current series of studies	42
2.4 Factors which effect the <i>specificity</i> and <i>temporality</i> of results in the current series of studies.....	44
2.4.1 Possible levels of specificity	44
2.4.2 Methods used to control possible covariates: exclusion criteria, sample matching and statistical control	44
2.4.3 Factors which influence the specificity of the findings to drug use	46
2.4.3.1 Control of possible covariates	46
2.4.3.2 Recruited verses random samples.....	47
2.4.3.3 The temporal order of the proposed cause and the observed effects	48
2.4.4 Factors which influence the specificity of the findings to ecstasy use	49
2.4.5 Factors which influence the specificity of the findings to MDMA.....	49
2.5 Summary of design considerations	51
2.6 The recruitment and collection of drug use histories in the present thesis	52
2.6.1 Recruitment.....	52
2.6.2 Drug use history	53
Chapter 3. Introduction to memory deficits in ecstasy users.....	55
3.1 Basic processes and components of the human memory system.....	55
3.1.1 Long-term memory and working memory	56

3.1.2	The use of elaborative and associative processing to aid the encoding of material in long-term memory	57
3.1.3	Explicit memory and implicit memory	59
3.1.4	The localisation of long-term memory components in the brain	60
3.2	Why study memory deficits in ecstasy users?	62
3.2.1	Brief overview of research to date	62
3.2.2	Memory studies in the current thesis	64
 Chapter 4. The consequence of ecstasy use on implicit and explicit memory for lists of unrelated words..... 65		
4.1	Introduction to the present study	65
4.1.1	Overview	65
4.1.2	Evidence from tryptophan depletion studies of serotonergic involvement in implicit and explicit memory	66
4.1.2.1	The tryptophan depletion technique	66
4.1.2.2	Review of tryptophan depletion studies: Serotonergic involvement in long-term implicit memory	67
4.1.2.3	Review of tryptophan depletion studies: Serotonergic involvement in long-term explicit memory	67
4.1.2.4	Summary of the evidence from tryptophan depletion studies regarding implicit and explicit memory	69
4.1.3	A review of evidence regarding on memory for lists of unrelated words (explicit memory) in ecstasy users	70
4.1.3.1	Evidence from standard neuropsychological tests of delayed memory retrieval	70
4.1.3.2	Evidence for an association between long-term memory deficits and changes in neural functioning in ecstasy users	74
4.1.3.3	Summary of and interpretation of evidence regarding the performance of ecstasy users on explicit memory	75
4.1.4	The possibility of implicit memory deficits in ecstasy users	76
4.1.5	The present study	77
4.2	Method	79
4.2.1	Participants	79
4.2.2	Structure of participant contact and test session	82
4.2.3	Experimental design	82
4.2.4	Experimental stimuli	84
4.2.5	Experimental procedure	85
4.2.5.1	Study phase	85
4.2.5.2	Distractor phase	85
4.2.5.3	Test Phase	86
4.2.6	Statistical analysis of cohort effects and covariates: General approach	87
4.3	Results	88
4.3.1	Study phase: Performance on the word-learning and digit-monitoring tasks	88
4.3.2	Test phase: Baseline response rates	88
4.3.3	Test phase: Replication of standard test-type by attention interaction	88
4.3.4	Test phase: Cohort effects: Was ecstasy use associated with implicit and/or explicit memory deficits?	90
4.3.5	Subsidiary results: An ecstasy advantage in dual task performance?	92
4.4	Discussion	94
4.4.1	Summary of findings in the present study	95
4.4.2	The consistency of the results compared to previous literature, and the interpretation of findings in the present study	96
4.4.2.1	Implicit memory	96
4.4.2.2	Explicit memory	97
4.4.2.3	Reaction times under divided attention	98
4.4.3	Summary of discussion	99
 Chapter 5. The effects of the number of learning trials, level of cueing, and the opportunity for elaborative processing on long-term explicit memory 100		
5.1	Introduction to the present study	100

5.1.1	Aim: To evaluate the effect of the number of learning trials on the explicit memory performance of ecstasy users compared to controls	100
5.1.2	Aim: To evaluate the effect of the level of cueing on the explicit memory performance of ecstasy users compared to controls	102
5.1.3	Aim: To evaluate the effect of elaborative and associative processing on long-term memory test performance, as revealed by standard neuropsychological tests.....	103
5.1.3.1	The Auditory Verbal List Learning task (AVLT).....	103
5.1.3.2	Prose recall	105
5.1.4	Aim: To increase the power of the study to detect an ecstasy-related deficit	106
5.2	Method	108
5.2.1	Participants.....	108
5.2.2	Experimental design.....	109
5.2.3	Experimental procedure and stimuli	110
5.2.3.1	Follow-up tests: Study phase.....	110
5.2.3.2	Follow-up tests: Distractor phase	111
5.2.3.3	Follow-up tests: Test Phase	112
5.2.3.4	Prose recall and Auditory Verbal List Learning (AVLT) tests.....	112
5.3	Results.....	113
5.3.1	Follow-up stem-cued recall tests.....	113
5.3.2	Standard clinical neuropsychological tests of long-term memory	114
5.3.2.1	Prose recall	114
5.3.2.2	Word list learning (AVLT).....	115
5.4	Discussion	117
5.4.1	Summary of findings in the present study.....	117
5.4.2	Interpretation of the combined findings from the present and previous memory studies in the current thesis.....	118

Chapter 6. Ecstasy-related effects on associative processing in list learning memory tests using multi-component items 121

6.1	Introduction to the present study.....	121
6.1.1	The California Verbal Learning Test	121
6.1.2	The Verbal Paired Associates test.....	123
6.1.3	The Visual Paired Associates test	126
6.1.4	The Verbal Triplet Associates tests.....	127
6.1.5	The present study	128
6.2	Method	129
6.2.1	Participants.....	129
6.2.1.1	Demographic, personality, and mental health characteristics.....	130
6.2.1.2	Drug use	131
6.2.1.3	Summary of group characteristics	133
6.2.2	Experimental design.....	133
6.2.3	Experimental stimuli	133
6.2.4	Experimental procedure	134
6.2.5	Statistical Analysis.....	135
6.3	Results.....	137
6.3.1	Immediate recall.....	137
6.3.1.1	California Verbal Learning Test (CVLT).....	137
6.3.1.2	Verbal Paired Associates	139
6.3.1.3	Visual Paired Associates	143
6.3.1.4	Verbal Triplet Associates	145
6.3.2	Delayed recall	149
6.3.2.1	Verbal and Visual Paired Associates	149
6.3.2.2	CVLT.....	150
6.3.3	Use of semantic strategies in the CVLT.....	154
6.3.3.1	Immediate recall	154
6.3.3.2	Delayed recall.....	156
6.3.4	Recency of drug use: Correlations between memory performance and the last use of ecstasy, alcohol, cannabis and amphetamines	158
6.3.5	Dose dependence: Correlations between memory performance and measures of ecstasy and amphetamine use	159

6.3.6	The validity of comparing results across the second and third memory studies: Are the results due to sample or test characteristics?.....	161
6.4	Discussion	165
6.4.1	Summary of findings in the present study	165
6.4.2	The consistency of the results compared to previous literature	166
6.4.3	Interpretation of findings	168
6.4.3.1	The CVLT semantic clustering index	168
6.4.3.2	Learning in ecstasy users compared to cannabis-controls.....	169
6.4.3.3	The validity of interpreting the pattern of results across memory studies in the current thesis	170
6.4.3.4	The localisation of long-term memory deficits in the brain: The implications of the pattern of results across the memory studies in this thesis	172
6.4.4	Evidence regarding slower processing speed in ecstasy users in previous literature...	172
6.4.5	Summary of discussion.....	174
Chapter 7.	The consequences of ecstasy use on the behavioural functioning of the occipital lobe	176
7.1	Introduction to the present study.....	176
7.1.1	Overview	176
7.1.2	Evidence consistent with ecstasy having a long-term effect on the neural functioning of the occipital lobe.....	177
7.1.2.1	Subjective report	177
7.1.2.2	Electroencephalography (EEG).....	178
7.1.2.3	Functional Magnetic Resonance Imaging (fMRI).....	179
7.1.2.4	Summary of published research to date regarding the effect of ecstasy on the operation of the occipital lobe.....	180
7.1.3	The functions of the occipital lobe which can be observed experimentally	181
7.1.4	How orientation is encoded in the occipital lobe.....	181
7.1.5	The tilt aftereffect and the neural mechanisms thought to underlie it.....	184
7.1.6	Evidence in literature for an association between serotonin and the magnitude of the tilt aftereffect.....	185
7.1.7	Does ecstasy use influence the tilt aftereffect?	186
7.1.8	Summary and the present study	188
7.2	Method	191
7.2.1	Participants and testing schedule	191
7.2.2	Design.....	192
7.3	Stimuli and equipment	193
7.4	Procedure	193
7.5	Results	195
7.5.1	Cohort effects on the magnitude of the tilt aftereffect.....	195
7.5.2	Cohort effects on the slopes of the psychometric curves at the PSE	199
7.5.3	Dose dependence and recency effects for ecstasy, amphetamines, and cannabis: Correlations between the magnitude of the tilt aftereffect and measures of drug use.....	201
7.6	Discussion	202
7.6.1	Summary of ecstasy-related findings.....	202
7.6.2	The consistency of the results compared to previous literature	202
7.6.3	Interpretation of findings	203
7.6.3.1	The tilt aftereffect in amphetamine-abstinent ecstasy users.....	203
7.6.3.2	The effect of the recent use of amphetamines	204
7.6.4	Summary of discussion.....	204
Chapter 8.	General Discussion	206
8.1	Specificity of the findings in the current thesis to drug use, ecstasy and MDMA.....	206
8.1.1	The specificity of the results to drug use	206
8.1.2	The specificity of the results to ecstasy use	207
8.1.2.1	Alcohol.....	207
8.1.2.2	Cannabis.....	207
8.1.2.3	Amphetamines	208

8.1.2.4	Ecstasy: The absence of dose dependent effects.....	209
8.1.3	The specificity of the results to MDMA	211
8.1.4	Summary of the specificity of findings to drug use, ecstasy and MDMA.....	212
8.2	From the current thesis to future research: Issues regarding the testing of cognitive and perceptual deficits in ecstasy users.....	212
8.2.1	Refining the approach to ecstasy research regarding cognitive/perceptual deficits	212
8.2.2	New findings	213
8.2.3	Future research	213
8.2.4	Final summary.....	215
Appendix A: Additional sample characteristics		216
Appendix B: Participant information sheet and consent forms.....		219
References.....		221

Table of figures

Figure 1.1 Serotonergic pathways in the human brain (Heimer, 1994 with "Occipital lobe" label added).....	26
Figure 4.1 Memory scores (target word completions of studied stems – baseline) on stem completion (implicit) and stem-cued recall (explicit) memory tasks as a function of level of attention (full, divided) and cohort (controls, ecstasy users). Error bars = standard errors	90
Figure 4.2 Mean memory scores (target word completions of studied stems – baseline) as a function of type of memory task and cohort (control, ecstasy users). Error bars = standard errors.....	91
Figure 4.3 Mean reaction time and accuracy performance on the digit-monitoring task as a function of task (the first and second set of practise trials under both single- and dual-task conditions, as well as the divided attention at study conditions of the stem completion and stem-cued tasks) and cohort (ecstasy users, controls). Error bars = standard errors.....	93
Figure 5.1 Explicit memory performance on the three follow-up memory tasks: a) stem-cued following one learning trial; b) stem-cued recall following two learning trials; and c) free recall (following one learning trial) as a function of cohort (ecstasy users, non-drug using controls). Error bars = standard errors.....	114
Figure 5.2 Prose recall as a function of test (Story A, the first repetition of Story B ("Story B1"), the second repetition of Story B ("Story B2")) and cohort (ecstasy users, controls) . Error bars = standard errors	115
Figure 5.3 Mean words recalled in the AVL T as a function of trial number (1 st ...5 th) and cohort (ecstasy users, controls) . Error bars = standard errors.....	116
Figure 6.1 Stimuli for the Verbal Triplet Associates test.....	134
Figure 6.2 Mean number of words recalled in the California Verbal Learning Test (CVLT) as a function of trial (1...5) and cohort (ecstasy users, cannabis-controls, non-drug using controls). Error bars = standard errors	138
Figure 6.3 Mean recall on the Verbal Paired Associates test as a function of trial (1..4) and cohort (ecstasy users, cannabis-controls, non-drug controls)	140
Figure 6.4 Mean number of correct colour associations in the Visual Paired Associates test as a function of trial (1...3) and cohort (ecstasy users, cannabis-controls, non-drug controls). Error bars = standard errors	142
Figure 6.5 Mean number of correctly matched words recalled in Verbal Triplet Associates as a function of trial (1...5) and cohort (ecstasy users, cannabis-controls, non-drug controls). Error bars = standard errors.....	145
Figure 7.1 An example tuning curve for an orientation sensitive neuron in the occipital lobe. The sample neuron shown responds with its maximum level of activation for vertical lines (i.e. its preferred orientation), with a bandwidth of approximately 50°,	

as determined at the width of the curve at half the height of the curve (from Sekuler & Blake, 2002).....	182
Figure 7.2 Illustration of the pattern of activation of a population of neurons to a vertical stimulus. The neuron with a preferred orientation of vertical has the maximum level of activation. Neurons with nearby preferred orientations have progressively lower levels of activation in proportion to the difference between their preferred orientation and the orientation of the stimulus. (Extract from Figure 7.3; adapted from Sekuler & Blake, 2002).....	183
Figure 7.3 Illustration of the (i) actual stimulus orientation, (ii) pattern of activation of affected neurons, and (iii) perceived orientation of the stimulus at three stages of the tilt aftereffect, specifically, (a) when tested on a vertical stimulus during the pre-adaptation test, (b) at the end of the adaptation phase, and (c) when tested on a vertical stimulus in the post-adaptation test phase (adapted from Sekuler & Blake, 2002)	185
Figure 7.4 Illustration of the potential for relatively large increase in the magnitude of the tilt aftereffect to be obtained at larger adaptation angles	187
Figure 7.5 Illustration of the possible effect of ecstasy on the tuning bandwidth of a V1 orientation selective neuron. The double-ended arrows show the comparative difference in activation for stimuli at 15° and 40° from the preferred orientation that an ecstasy-related change in tuning bandwidth may cause.....	188
Figure 7.6 Example psychometric curve showing the Point of Subjective Equality (PSE) corresponding to the point on the fitted curve when the proportion of stimuli perceived as being as orientated to the right or to the left is 0.5 (i.e. the test angle that the participant perceives to be vertical). Example pre- and post-adaptation psychometric curves for a participant in the present study are shown in Figure 7.8 (p.197).....	190
Figure 7.7 Example Gabor stimuli at various orientations	194
Figure 7.8 Example pre-adaptation and post-adaptation psychometric curves for a single participant in the 15° adaptation condition	196
Figure 7.9 The magnitude of the tilt aftereffect at 40° for cohorts of: non-drug using controls; ecstasy users who had recently used amphetamines (within the 61 days prior to testing); and ecstasy users who were abstinent from amphetamines (for 115 days or more prior to testing). Error bars = standard errors.....	198
Figure 7.10 The magnitude of the tilt aftereffect at 15° for non-drug using controls, ecstasy users who had recently used amphetamines (within the 61 days prior to testing), and for ecstasy users who were abstinent from amphetamines (for 115 days or more prior to testing). Error bars = standard errors.....	199

Table of tables

Table 4-1 Memory for lists of single unrelated words for studies with relatively strong control over the influence of drugs apart from ecstasy	71
Table 4-2 Memory for lists of single unrelated (unless specified) words for studies with that exercised less control than the studies in Table 4-1 over the influence of drugs and other possible covariates.	72
Table 4-3 Selected characteristics of ecstasy users and controls in the first memory study	80
Table 4-4 The sequence of events that took place with each participant.....	83
Table 4-5 Performance on the word-learning task (words correctly read aloud) and digit-monitoring task (accuracy of odd-even decisions) as a function of level of attention (full, divided) and cohort (controls, ecstasy users)	88
Table 4-6. The mean and (standard deviation) of baseline response rates (completions of unstudied stems with target words) as a function of memory task (implicit, explicit), level of attention (full, divided) and cohort (controls, ecstasy users).....	89
Table 5-1 Prose recall test results in literature for studies with relatively strong control over the influence of drugs apart from ecstasy.	106
Table 5-2 Prose recall test results in literature for studies with relatively weak control over the influence of drugs apart from ecstasy (c.f. Table 5-1)	107
Table 5-3 Selected characteristics of ecstasy users and controls in the second (follow-up) memory study	109
Table 5-4 The sequence of events that took place with each participant.....	111
Table 5-5 Covariates of the total AVLT score, $p < .10$	117
Table 6-1 Summary of ecstasy literature regarding memory for lists of word-pairs using either Verbal Paired Associates (VPA, Wechsler, 1997a) , LGT3 (Bäumler, 1974), or a similar variant of these tests.....	125
Table 6-2 Selected characteristics of ecstasy users and controls in the third memory study	131
Table 6-3 Selected drug use measures by non-drug using controls, cannabis-controls, and ecstasy users (Standard Error of the Mean in brackets)	132
Table 6-4 The sequence of events that took place with each participant.....	135
Table 6-5 Bivariate correlations of total CVLT immediate recall across trials 1...5, $p < .10$	139
Table 6-6 Bivariate correlations of the total score of trials 1 and 2, and trial 1 alone, for Verbal Paired Associates, $p < .01$	141

Table 6-7 Summary of the simple effects analysis for each trial of Visual Paired Associates controlling for sex, lifetime dose of alcohol and maximum ever dose of alcohol (standard drinks) as a function of cohort (ecstasy users, cannabis-controls, and non-drug using controls)	144
Table 6-8 Bivariate correlations between total Verbal Triplet Associates recall, $p \leq .10$	146
Table 6-9 Summary of simple effects analysis for each trial of the Verbal Triplet Associates test, including the backward elimination of estimated IQ, the lifetime dose of alcohol, and the maximum every monthly dose of alcohol.....	148
Table 6-10 Mean number of words recalled in the California Verbal Learning Test (CVLT) as a function of test type (free recall, category-cued recall, correct recognition), duration of delay (short, long) and cohort (ecstasy users, cannabis-controls, non-drug using controls).	150
Table 6-11 Covariates of short and long delay, free recall and category-cued recall, $p < .10$	151
Table 6-12 Bivariate correlations of CVLT long-delayed correct recognition, $p < .01$.	154
Table 6-13 Mean List-Based Semantic Clustering Index (Standard Error of the Mean shown in brackets) for tests of free recall in the California Verbal Learning Test, as a function of test (immediate, short delay, long delay) and cohort (non-drug using controls, cannabis-controls, and ecstasy users).....	155
Table 6-14 Bivariate correlations of the CVLT List-Base semantic Clustering Index (LBSCI) as a function of the delay (immediate, short-delay and long-delay) on the free recall tests, $p < .01$	156
Table 6-15 Bivariate correlations between the principal memory measures in the present study and the number of days since the last use of alcohol (for all participants), as well as the number of days since the last use of cannabis (for cannabis-controls and ecstasy users only)	158
Table 6-16 Bivariate correlations between the principal memory measures in the present study and the number of days since the last use of amphetamines, as well as the number of days since the last use of ecstasy, in the ecstasy users group.....	159
Table 6-17 Dose dependence of ecstasy: Bivariate correlations between the principal memory measures in the present study and lifetime dose of ecstasy, maximum monthly dose of ecstasy, and the maximum ever dose of ecstasy in a single session, within the ecstasy users group only	160
Table 6-18 Dose dependence of amphetamines: Bivariate correlations between the main memory measure in the present study and lifetime dose of amphetamines, maximum monthly dose of amphetamines, and the maximum ever dose of amphetamines in a single session, for all amphetamine users in the cannabis-control and ecstasy user groups	161

Table 6-19 Comparison of ecstasy users who participated in both the second and third memory studies (Study 2 & 3), with ecstasy users who only participated in the second study (Study 2 only).....	162
Table 6-20 Comparison of ecstasy users who participated in both the second and third memory studies (Study 2 & 3, 'Old'), with ecstasy users who only participated in the third study (Study 3 only, 'New') and non-drug using controls in the third memory study ('C').....	164
Table 7-1 Selected characteristics of ecstasy users and controls in the visual perception study.....	192
Table 7-2 The Mean (Standard Error of the Mean) of the magnitude of the tilt-aftereffect as a function of cohort (controls, ecstasy users).....	195
Table 7-3 The Mean (Standard Error of the Mean) of the slope of the psychometric curves at the PSE for the pre-adaptation and post-adaptation tests, as a function of adaptation angle (15° and 40°) and cohort (controls, ecstasy users).	200
Table 7-4 Dose dependence and recency of ecstasy and amphetamines: Bivariate correlations between the magnitude of the tilt aftereffect as a function of adaptation angle (15°, 40°) and drug use (number of days since the last, lifetime dose, maximum monthly dose, and the maximum ever dose of ecstasy in a single session) of ecstasy, amphetamines, and cannabis within the ecstasy users group.	201
Table A-1 Additional characteristics of ecstasy users and non-drug using controls in the first memory study (Chapter 4). SEM = Standard Error of the Mean. (.ns indicates $p > .05$). Additional characteristics are shown in Table 4-3 (p.80).....	216
Table A-2 Additional characteristics of ecstasy users and non-drug using controls in the second memory study (Chapter 5) and the low-level visual perception study (Chapter 7). SEM = Standard Error of the Mean. (.ns indicates $p > .05$). Additional characteristics are shown in Table 5-3 (p.109) and repeated in Table 7-1 (p.193).	217
Table A-3 Additional characteristics of ecstasy users (n=32), cannabis-controls (n=32) and non-drug using controls (n=33) in the third memory study (Chapter 6). SEM = Standard Error of the Mean. Additional characteristics are shown in Table 6-2 (p.131) and Table 6-3 (p.132)	218