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Ethical caring in psychedelic work

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In psychedelic work, the potential is greater for stronger, more subtle, and more complicated transference and countertransference to occur.

Steps need to be taken to ensure that if psychedelic research is someday adopted by mainstream science, the job qualifications for a therapist will include that he or she has done effective, deep personal work in nonordinary states.

Psychedelic work is one powerful way to trigger transpersonal experiences. Transpersonal experiences are those profound and often surprising moments in which we have access to a perspective larger than the one from which we usually operate. Methods and activities which have been found to elicit transpersonal experiences in some cases are: Holotropic Breathwork and other methods of controlled breathing, fasting, meditation, body- and energy-work, EMDR, vision quests (combination of isolation, fasting, sleeplessness, nature's power), sensory deprivation, drumming (entrains the pulses of the body) and chanting (controls and paces the breath and elicits vibrational responses in the body with the tones). Even joggers have nonordinary states sometimes from the breathing and pushing past their limits.

Transpersonal experiences allow us to visit the past and the future, other points in space and other levels of experience; communicate with or inhabit other life forms; and feel the connections and oneness of creation. These experiences also have the potential to connect us to lost parts of ourselves: our bodies, feelings, intuitive abilities, or to some indefinable Higher Power or Spirit. The Institute for Transpersonal Psychology in Palo Alto, California, puts it this way, "transpersonal experiences generally have a profoundly transforming effect on the lives of those who experience them, bringing a new understanding of great love, compassion and non-ordinary kinds of knowing. They are then more fully aware of the distorting and pathological limitations of their ordinary selves that must be worked with and transformed for full psychological and spiritual maturity." Ethical issues pertain to longings, feelings and motivations which resonate at our very core. Powerful, shared

experiences in the context of the psychedelic session and of transpersonal experience can bring to the surface compelling fears, needs, and longings in both the experiencer and the sitter. Our deepest yearnings, our fears and desires, and our assumptions are both catalyzed and framed by the psychedelic setting.

When we work under the magnifying glass of psychedelics as a sitter, we often get to view our unacknowledged material. Our unresolved issues tend to emerge in the form of countertransference. Ethical issues usually arise wherever there is a vulnerable experiencer and a sitter who is unconscious of how his or her longings, desires or fears are affecting the caregiving relationship. In a psychedelic session, there is usually a greater degree of vulnerability and transference on the part of the experiencer and a greater potential for unconscious countertransference on the part of the sitter.

Quantitative and qualitative differences in ethical psychedelic work

There are differences between ethical issues that arise in professional psychedelic work and those that typically arise in ordinary therapy. Some of these differences are quantitative. Since an experiencer is usually more vulnerable or more regressed, there is usually more need for careful attention to safety and boundary issues. Other differences are qualitative. For example, working with an experiencer who has an expanded consciousness during a multi-hour session is quite different in kind from working with an experiencer in an ordinary state of consciousness for a 50-minute office hour. Both the quantitative and the qualitative differences require a deeper willingness on the part of the sitter to engage in self-observation, self-reflection, and peer supervision. They also oblige the sitter to have certain special qualifications and competencies. We can outline three needs in working with people in psychedelic states that can, if not given a lot of conscious attention, produce a potential for betraying the trust of the experiencer.

1. The greater need for a safe setting for experiencers of nonordinary reality;
2. The need for an expanded paradigm which can contain the kinds of experiences people have in nonordinary states; and
3. The potential for stronger, more subtle, and more complicated transference and countertransference in psychedelic sessions.

The greater need for a safe setting for persons experiencing nonordinary reality

Experiencers of psychedelic states are more suggestible and

vulnerable. They are more likely than those in ordinary psychotherapeutic work to experience age regression, to need therapeutic touch, and to feel strong personal desires, fears and spiritual longings. They may have great difficulty making the transition between ordinary and nonordinary reality when they are moving in either direction. Because of the expansive effect of psychedelics, experiencers are likely to have greater cognitive dissonance between this universal or comprehensive perspective and their usual world view. They may have more need for an understanding, supportive network and adjunctive resources than clients in ordinary therapy. Experiencers and sitters may need stronger and clearer ground rules for an adventure into nonordinary reality. Sitters also need personal familiarity with the substance they will be using with others. It will certainly be useful if they have had training and practice in when and how to (as well as when and how not to) intervene verbally, non-verbally, or physically in the nonordinary state experiences of others.

The need for an expanded paradigm

There is a need for an expanded paradigm which can contain the kinds of experiences people have in nonordinary states of consciousness. Sitters need experience with a broad spectrum of the kinds of situations that may arise. Stanislav Grof has mapped an expanded territory of the psyche beyond the modern Western's world's biographical and biological psychology.¹ Shamanic traditions and ancient religions offer other maps. Grof and others have been clear that nonordinary states and perinatal and transpersonal experiences are not pathological, but actually are a natural way in which humans seek healing and wisdom.

It will usually benefit the experiencers if their sitter has studied how psychedelic work fits into a conceptual framework of therapy. The openness of the sitter to extraordinary experiences is a key factor in how the experiencer accepts his or her own emerging material while having a psychedelic session. The degree to which the sitter accepts such experiences may play a large part in whether the experiencer can let these experiences develop, amplify, integrate. Some of the experiences that would be difficult for a sitter to affirm without an expanded paradigm include: past lives, ritual abuse, "demonic possession," ecstatic states, spiritual concepts, emotionally charged images or themes from other religions, reliving birth, UFO abductions, or existential suicidality. Adequate training to provide information for informed consent and to sit with psychedelic experiencers requires many personal therapeutic sessions as the experiencer in nonordinary states of consciousness.

At this point in time most active researchers seem to meet the

unspoken prerequisite for involvement in professional sitting - they have integrated an expanded paradigm and have done prolonged, personal psychedelic work. But there is considerable precedent in the world for allowing theoretical learning to suffice on resumes for academic and medical professional employment. Steps need to be taken to ensure that if psychedelic research is someday adopted by mainstream science, the job qualifications for sitter will include that he or she has done effective, deep personal work in nonordinary states.

Personal issues of counter-transference: Money, Sex, and Power

Sitters in psychedelic work are called upon to examine their own personal and spiritual fears and desires and to take responsibility for doing what is necessary to keep these attachments to outcome from adversely affecting the experiencer. Experiential ethics training could prevent some ethical missteps. With systematic training about common ethical pitfalls and self-reflection on their own vulnerabilities to unethical behavior, sitters would increase their awareness and probably decrease the possibility of serious ethical problems. A thorough training would also include how to give and receive peer supervision in the area of ethics. There has been much written about the ethical pitfalls into which therapists have stepped because of personal desires and fears that arose in the course of ordinary therapy. These personal issues usually have headings such as Money, Sex, and Power. Ethical missteps occur when we want something for ourselves even at the expense of the person for whom we are sitting. The Money area relates to feelings of insufficiency which move us in directions not best for our clients. We want a favor; we want money, we want self-esteem and in some way we feel insufficient to get these things without the client. In the Sex area, we want touch, or we want sex. In the Power area, we want to be seen as a healer; we want renown for the research results, we want the person to do it our way. We also want acknowledgment for knowing how the process should or will go, or knowing what's happening before it happens, as it's happening, or after it's over.

Our fears, as well as our desires might cause us to take an ethical wrong turn. In the Money area (insufficiency) we fear we are not good enough. We may try in subtle ways to prove that to ourselves, to the experiencer or to the public (e.g., through publishing). In the Sex area, we may be scared of touching the person - afraid, perhaps, of our own inability to uphold appropriate professional boundaries. We might in such a case withhold touch even when the experiencer is regressed and needs a corrective nurturing experience.

In the Power area, we may be afraid of misusing power. We hold back actions that would be appropriate and helpful to the

experiencer's process. These can be subtle examples. We may doubt, for example, that an intervention is really what the experiencer needs. We may fear that it is really something we need. Oddly enough, it may be both. We may feel powerfully drawn to hold someone and it may be very appropriate in the context of the experiencer's process. If through need and fear of that need, the sitter withholds the nurturing, she is zealously oversteps the mark even while trying to be ethical. Either because of our personal fears or our personal desires, we can easily stray from the path of right relationship and miss doing what is in the best interests of the experiencer.

Let me here define what I mean by right relationship. The Buddhist concept of right relationship is akin to Jesus' injunction, Do unto others as you would have them do unto you. It implies that we take into account the bigger picture of how our intention and actions in relationship affect the other, and how that in turn affects still others in a rippling outward motion. It implies that we see also the effects on ourselves when we take certain actions toward others. In this definition the concept of others applies to persons and animals, but also to plants, ecosystems, planets, and numinous archetypes.

A seven center model² from yoga describes the areas of life experience. I combined it with the Buddhist idea that attachments (fears and desires) skew our sense of right relationship to each other and to Spirit to show how these attachments act in particular areas of caregiving experience. The model is designed to assist caregivers to identify with self-compassion their vulnerabilities in order to prevent harm to themselves and clients.

Transpersonal issues of countertransference: Love, Truth, Insight, and Oneness I have identified four additional areas of ethical issues that pertain to transpersonal or psychedelic work.[2] They are Love, Truth, Insight, and Oneness. Just as with the personal categories, these "spiritual" or transpersonal areas have desires and fears associated with them which might pull us off course in our caring relationship. In the area of Love, a transpersonal love is often confused with a personal love. Angeles Arrien has written about professional love,[3] which is an open-handed, well-wishing, positive regard. As sitters, we could deviate from professional love because of desire to be personally cherished, or to be cherished as a spiritual guide. We could equally miss the mark because of fear of intimacy. We might also experience spiritual envy of our client or a competitive feeling about their nonordinary experiences.

In the area of Truth, we may long to be as unaffected by social convention as the psychedelic journeyer. Or, we may fear to hear what the experiencer has to say from his intuitive state, especially if his revelations are about our personal selves.

In the area of Insight, we may want to acquire in some way the psychic powers of the experiencer. We may long to understand, or just as easily, we may fear to really comprehend what the experiencer's journey invites us to understand.

While longing for transcendence and union ourselves, we can also fear losing our self-identity or our belief in the dual nature of reality. If the experiencer comes to a place of non-duality or cosmic consciousness, our own beliefs may be threatened. We may prefer to leave a separation between us and the Godhead. We may fear difficulty in extricating ourselves after the session is over from a feeling of cosmic oneness with the experiencer.

These "spiritual" fears and desires (Love, Truth, Insight and Oneness) often mix non-linearly with personal fears and desires (Money, Sex, and Power). For example, "spiritual" sex with a vulnerable client can be rationalized as special, destined, or healing. An experiencer whose body is moving ecstatically and spontaneously in a kundalini-type process can be attractive physically but can trigger our longings for spiritual grace and thereby be spiritually irresistible. A shared past-life connection with an experiencer in nonordinary states may "justify" certain otherwise unjustifiable actions in ordinary life. In yet another scenario, a sitter may misinterpret the devotion of an experiencer (transpersonal Love) as personal love. The sitter may therefore assume that a personal sexual (Sex) relationship is appropriate and wanted by the experiencer. In another example, an experiencer's and sitter's shared vision (Insight) for transpersonal work may influence the researcher to use his influence (Power) to seek money from a client or enter a business partnership even when there is an unequal power relationship between the two. Sitters often feel that they will have no difficulty maintaining ethical conduct. Yet the profound or intense sitter-experiencer relationship that develops in psychedelic work can change easily avoidable pitfalls into invisible, deep quagmires. The best insurance that we will not betray our client's trust is to be willing to learn more about ourselves to seek consultation from peers. Although in this article I have focused on preventing the consequences of the fall into an "unethical pit," the greater reward for increased awareness of ethics in transpersonal work is enjoying the quality of right relationship itself with the love and respect that are implied therein for self, other, and one's spiritual path.

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