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Sex in therapy: female psy and LSD in the 60s

Today's psychedelic-assisted therapies face many challenges linked to issues of consent to touch. In recent years, numerous cases of sexual assault and abuse have surfaced, demonstrating the need for in-depth work on how to support the psychedelic experience. But back in the 50s and 60s, questions of medical ethics were still in their infancy. In this context, women were particularly involved in exploring the therapeutic potential of physical contact when using these substances.

German psychoanalyst Margot Cutner (1905-1987), English psychiatrist Joyce Martin (1905-1969) and American psychologist Betty Eisner (1915-2004) were three strong women in the psychedelic world of the time. Not only did they hold their own in a largely male-dominated world of “psy-disciplines”, but they helped revolutionize the practice of psychedelic therapy by insisting on the need for physical contact with patients¹. In those days, touching a patient was totally taboo during psychotherapy. For male therapists, touching a female patient was even more unimaginable². But the introduction of LSD was poised to revolutionize these practices: sexual themes were omnipresent in most sessions. Patients didn't just talk about problems or thoughts related to sex, they sometimes actually experienced it. Some masturbated, others had orgasms³ or were disturbed by the intense arousal provoked by Wagner's music⁴ (for example). Doctors were destabilized by the fact that “The sexual and sado-masochistic fantasies occur[ed] with such frequency⁵”. As Stan Grof explains in 1967, “Sometimes even a search for physical contact appears. The erotic component can come to the fore, evidenced by coquetry, minor sexual aggression and seductivity, or verbal expressions with obscene topics⁶.” But some sessions were also more terrifying: patients could relive their sexual traumas in front of helpless medical staff.

How could they manage and understand these disturbing manifestations? Overcoming the norms and taboos of their time, three women therapists proposed revolutionary methodological developments. First of all, Margot Cutner recommended in 1959 ceasing to interpret patients' requests for contact in erotic terms: according to her, patients needed reassurance and support

¹ Zoë Dubus, “Women's Historical Influence on ‘Set and Setting,’” in *Women & Psychedelics: Uncovering Invisible Voices* (Santa Fe: Synergetic Press, 2024), 201–6.

² Zoë Dubus, “Women, Mental Illness and Psychedelic Therapy in Postwar France,” in *Expanding Mindscapes: A Global History of Psychedelics*, ed. Erika Dyck and Chris Elcock (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2023), 75–98.

³ C. H. Van Rhijn, “Variables in Psycholytic Treatment,” in *The Use of LSD in Psychotherapy and Alcoholism*, ed. Harold A. Abramson (New York: The Bobbs-Merrill Company, 1967), 215.

⁴ Thomas Ling, “The Use of LSD 25 and Ritalin in the Treatment of Neurosis,” in *The Use of LSD in Psychotherapy and Alcoholism*, ed. Harold A. Abramson (New York: The Bobbs-Merrill Company, 1967), 133.

⁵ John Buckman, “Theoretical Aspects of LSD Therapy,” in *The Use of LSD in Psychotherapy and Alcoholism*, ed. Harold A. Abramson (New-York: The Bobbs-Merrill Company, 1967), 92.

⁶ Stanislav Grof, “Use of LSD 25 In Personality Diagnostics and Therapy of Psychogenic Disorders,” in *The Use of LSD in Psychotherapy and Alcoholism*, ed. Harold A. Abramson (New York: The Bobbs-Merrill Company, 1967), 163.

during the psychedelic experience, and this support necessarily involved physical contact. She didn't just hold her patients' hands or stroke their hair: she insisted that this contact be reciprocal. Thus, "it is, at times, not even enough for the patient to feel the analyst's hand touching him, but he himself may have to touch the analyst, or his clothes, etc."⁷ She knew how controversial this proposal was: "Just how far should the analyst permit 'acting out' under LSD? [...] might patients not use the drug as a conscious or unconscious 'excuse' for assaulting the analyst or nursing staff?" Drawing on her 4 years' experience with LSD, she reassured her colleagues: if the therapist properly explained the effects of the substance and the rules to be followed, patients never behaved inappropriately - i.e. breaking the rules set down by the therapist.

But what about patient consent? In those days, most therapists didn't even consider such questions. Yet Joyce Martin, who gave LSD to over 1,000 patients, always asked permission to touch them, and even to approach them, as can be seen in the following excerpt:

So this was where I knew that he needed some direct support for his feelings, and so I said, 'I am coming to sit on the bed with you, but if you don't like it just tell me and I shall understand.' So I went and sat on the bed with him, and he immediately grabbed and pulled me tightly towards him and pulled me down onto the bed with him and held me there in vise, and then he said 'Don't move, don't speak, please don't move, just keep very quiet.' And so he held me in a vise for what seemed a very long time, probably half an hour, and at intervals he would repeat "Don't move please, don't speak", and so I lay there for a long time. Eventually he relaxed his grip, and then he seemed to be bubbling over with happiness, and eventually burst into song "So nice to see you back where you belong", from the musical play 'Hello Dolly'. Then, after a pause, he said "Where have you been all my life?"⁸

Martin let her patients express themselves in every possible way, receiving their behavior in a positive and encouraging manner, secure in the knowledge that the therapeutic process was underway. For example, a patient suffering "an extreme sexual frustration" causing a deep depression, "was eventually able, through the right attitude of the therapist, to communicate freely with her and eventually to have sexual feelings and show his penis to her, which was the first time in his life that he had done such a thing, but he felt pleased and not ashamed of it"⁹. Eventually, the patient got better and better, enrolled at university and met a young girl with whom he managed to have sexual relations. With another patient she didn't hesitate to provoke sexual desire: "[I] thought it advisable to stimulate his heterosexual feelings by talking extremely frankly about sex [my]self and how it was available and acceptable"¹⁰.

Just like Cutner, Martin was not at all afraid that her patients would overstep the boundaries established between them during the preparation sessions, which impressed her confrere, psychologist Gary Fisher, asking her about a specifically violent patient: "She looked at me in amazement as though I were some totally uneducated and uninformed dolt and said 'Of Course not! He would never harm me.' Such absolute knowledge!"¹¹

⁷ Margot Cutner, "Analytic Work with LSD 25," *Psychiatric Quarterly* 33, no. 4 (December 1, 1959): 722.

⁸ Joyce Martin, "A Case of Homosexuality and Character Disorder in a Man of 37 Treated by L.S.D. and Resolved within Four Months," *Psychotherapy and Psychosomatics* 15 (1967): 44.

⁹ Joyce Martin, "L.S.D. Analysis," *The International Journal of Social Psychiatry* 10 (1964): 166.

¹⁰ A. Joyce Martin, "L.S.D. Analysis," in *The Use of LSD in Psychotherapy and Alcoholism*, ed. Harold A. Abramson (New-York: The Bobbs-Merrill Company, 1967), 227.

¹¹ Gary Fisher, *Spiralbound Notebook* (Purdue University Archives and Special Collections: MSP84i0017, MSP 84, Gary Fisher papers, s.d.), 8.

Betty Eisner has taken this exploration of sexuality the furthest in psychedelic-assisted psychotherapy. Unlike Cutner or Martin, she organized weekly group sessions during which she herself consumed psychedelics and gave free rein to her sensual sensations as these notes from May 1964 attest:

“Along with the progression of the drug, I had extremely strong feelings of sexuality. It was as though I were identified with the ground... Also I was fire from time to time - the energy source. [...] The fire, the ground, the sexuality, and the all-consuming laughter were the main feelings of the session. I was immersed in them; I was the experience...”¹²

She developed an impressive variety of techniques to release her patients' sexual frustration without ever crossing the line into actual sexual contact. Her aim was to create a catharsis that would liberate people from all the inhibitions of society. Sometimes she layed down face-to-face with her patients, and invited them to be naked; she used massage and even encouraged them to spit in her face¹³! After a peyote session in 1961 she wrote, “I was a real channel of love that day... I could help people get love and sex together without their being skewed into the sex with frustration from lack of ability to act¹⁴.”

This limitless exploration of the potentialities of psychotherapy was not unique to therapists experimenting with LSD, but was part of a wider movement in the 1960s, characterized by a quest for individual fulfillment. Some of the people of the time hoped to be at the dawn of a societal upheaval (in terms of destruction of capitalism and sexual taboos, women's liberation, racial equality, etc.) and saw psychotherapy as a means to achieve this goal. But as the '60s progressed, therapists were increasingly prevented from working with LSD. Cutner changed professions to become a midwife, Martin died in 1969, and Eisner plunged deeper and deeper into obscure practices, eventually becoming a veritable guru. After the death of one of her patients in 1976, her psychology diploma was finally withdrawn.

If these three women deserve recognition as pioneers of psychedelic-assisted psychotherapy, and for their efforts to transcend limitations imposed on the therapist's role, some of their highly controversial practices also helped pave the way, in psychedelic therapy circles, for the sexual violence denounced today.

¹² Betty Grover Eisner, *Remembrances of LSD Therapy Past* ([unpublished manuscript] 2002), 189.

¹³ Betty Grover Eisner, “The Importance of the Non-Verbal,” in *The Use of LSD in Psychotherapy and Alcoholism*, ed. Harold A. Abramson (New-York: The Bobbs-Merrill Company, 1967), 542–60.

¹⁴ Betty Grover Eisner, *Session Reports, 1955-1995. Peyote Session, November 11, 1961* (Stanford University: Department of Special Collections and University Archives, SC924, Session report, Box 14, Fol 8, 1961).