

A QUALITATIVE INQUIRY INTO ETHICAL RELATIONSHIP AND BOUNDARY-
SETTING IN UNDERGROUND PSYCHEDELIC HEALING

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DISSERTATION

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CHAPTER I:

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

In recent years, research into the therapeutic potential of psychedelic substances has been undergoing a “renaissance” (Richert, 2019) after the cessation of such research due to legal restrictions enacted in the late 1960’s (Dos Santos et al., 2016; Feduccia et al., 2018; Rucker et al., 2016; Thal & Lommen, 2018). Two substances in particular, MDMA and psilocybin, are likely to obtain FDA (U.S. Food and Drug Administration) approval as therapeutic adjuncts within the next few years (Doblin, 2019; Hartman, 2018). Now that the question of these substances’ therapeutic efficacy seems close to a definite, affirmative answer, a new wave of questions has arisen as to how psychedelic psychotherapy will be integrated with existing models of psychotherapeutic care. One particular question that has come about is how to structure the client-therapist relationship in a way that is ethical and proactive in preventing harm to clients, since the unique characteristics of therapeutic work with psychedelics present relational situations that are not covered by existing ethical codes (Anderson et al., 2020; Hausfield, 2019), and these situations can lead to boundary violations of varying severity.

The current study used a phenomenological research design (Creswell, 2013) to address this question with underground practitioners of psychedelic guidework. Underground practitioners have used MDMA and psilocybin therapeutically with thousands of individuals over the past few decades (Ernst & Putzel, 2016; Harrison, 2018; Pollan, 2018; Stolaroff, 2004) and have continued to treat at least 2,000 clients annually worldwide (Passie, 2018). Although many of them do not use the term “psychotherapy” to describe their work, there are strong similarities between their methods and those of the protocols current under FDA evaluation, and

many of these practitioners are also credentialed psychotherapists. In fact, the treatment approaches developed and employed by these underground guides have provided much of the basis for the MDMA and psilocybin protocols currently under FDA review (see Chabrol & Oehen, 2008; Mithoefer, 2015; Passie, 2005). It thus stands to reason that these practitioners have considerable experience to draw from that could help ensure that legal psychedelic psychotherapy is practiced in a more ethical way. They were asked to share their experiences of having navigated ethical decisions and set relational boundaries in ways that have either succeeded or failed to keep their clients safe from the consequences of boundary violations.

The three forms of boundary concerns that were explored in the current study were chosen for their strong relevance in psychedelic psychotherapy (see section 2.3). They are therapist sexual abuse, non-sexual multiple relationships, and the use of non-sexual touch in session. The results of the current study address the central research question of: “What experiences have underground psychedelic practitioners had (or heard of in their communities) of navigating ethical relationship and boundary-setting around sexual contact with clients, non-sexual multiple relationships, and therapist-client touch?” The results are presented in the form of two sets of themes: descriptive themes, which detail the unique challenges that psychedelic practitioners have encountered in their work, and prescriptive themes, which consist of the “best practices” they have found most useful in confronting these challenges.

The current study is the first empirically-grounded attempt to address the question of how to best protect clients from potentially harmful boundary transgressions in psychedelic psychotherapy. It is also the first empirical study of the work of underground psychedelic practitioners. By bringing their decades of knowledge and clinical wisdom into the light of

above-ground, peer-reviewed research, the results of this study may be used to assist the fledgling field of psychedelic psychotherapy address gaps in its ethical underpinnings and thereby protect vulnerable clients from iatrogenic harm.