



AFFECT, COERCION, AND EXPERIMENTATION: LSD Treatment at Oak Ridge Maximum Security Psychiatric Hospital

**A History and Philosophy of Psychiatry lecture by
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In a 1977 article in the *Journal of the Canadian Psychiatric Association*, the psychiatrist Elliot Barker explained that “For the last nine years, on a regular basis, groups of naked mental patients have been locked in a small room for periods ranging up to eleven days.” This room, which Barker called the “Total Encounter Capsule,” became central to the Social Therapy Unit at Oak Ridge Maximum Security Psychiatric Hospital in Penetanguishene, Ontario. Built in the 1930s, Oak Ridge housed men convicted of violent crimes deemed “not guilty by reason of insanity.” Following postwar prison reforms that centered rehabilitation in Canadian penitentiaries, Barker was hired to develop the Social Therapy Unit. Barker was convinced that most inmates suffered from psychopathy; they lacked empathy due to early trauma and therefore never experienced “authentic encounters” with others. To create such encounters, he combined methods from psychopharmacology, Humanistic psychology, and the antipsychiatry movement: inmates acted as co-therapists for each other; they practiced “nude psychotherapy”; and they took psychedelic drugs while reading countercultural literature. While government officials initially praised the program, inmates later sued Barker and the provincial government. In 2020, the Superior Court of Ontario ruled that the program constituted “assault and battery.”

Drawing on historical work that calls for more nuanced accounts of experimental abuse, my talk explores the challenges and opportunities involved in using “affect” as a methodological tool to elucidate the ethical and epistemological contexts of these experiments. Through the analysis of archival sources, court documents, oral interviews, and scientific publications, I consider how affect helps reconstruct the complex relationships that formed between psychiatrists and inmates in this case.

Tuesday, Oct. 27 | 3:30–5 pm | Arts 206

