

THE PROMISCUITY PAPERS



MATJAŽ REGOVEC

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When Sex is No Longer Taboo
A Jungian Analysis of Promiscuity

Matjaž Regovec



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Introduction

In this body of work about promiscuity, I will explain how this theme initially found a way into my practice as an analytical psychologist and psychoanalyst. We will explore a few archetypes of promiscuity, namely Chronos (Saturn) and Zeus (Jupiter). In the second part of this publication, we will explore the role of the Oedipus myth in the analysis of promiscuity and I will show how the archetypal theme of promiscuity was expressed in the archetypal transference-countertransference dynamic of an analytic relationship. Finally, I will elaborate on the link between promiscuity and incest.

In 2006, I gave two lectures on the theme of promiscuity. The first was at a psychotherapy conference in Rogla, Slovenia, and the second at another conference in Belgrade, Serbia. At both occasions, I asked the audience what they associated with the term 'promiscuity.' I'd first like to show you the two lists of words:

¹ A proto-version of this publication has been published in "Kairos, Slovenian Journal for Psychotherapy", No. 1/2007.

a) Psychotherapy conference at Rogla, Slovenia

- sexual attraction
- it concerns us all
- to gather experiences
- compulsion
- sex and the love question
- what is the purpose of sex?
- swinging of partners
- separation and choice
- fidelity
- pleasure
- attempt at satisfaction
- suffering
- growing up
- search for security
- the right to choose a partner
- communication
- sex and the question of freedom
- inability to form boundaries
- impoverishment
- addiction
- confusion
- expression of will to power
- inner void
- a substitute
- desire
- lust
- lasciviousness
- search for safe haven

b) Conference in Belgrade, Serbia

- licentiousness
- lewdness
- making it worthless
- atavism
- immoral
- loneliness
- misery
- unholiness
- immaturity
- homeless
- negligent
- directionless

In the responses of both groups, the following psychological terms appear: separation, choice, suffering, inability to form boundaries, as well as confusion, addiction, inner void, search for security, loneliness, unhappiness, misery, immaturity, and unholiness. All these qualities show that promiscuity as a phenomenon is, despite its sexual, i.e. physical dimension, a deep psychological phenomenon.

The Webster dictionary (Webster's Third Dictionary 1993a) defines promiscuity as 1. a) indiscriminate mingling, and b) a brief or random social exchange or relation, and 2. a) promiscuous sexual union. Interestingly enough, the etymology of the word promiscuous comes from the Latin word *promiscuus*, from *pro* meaning 'forward' + *miscere* meaning 'to mix.' Promiscuous could therefore also mean to mix indiscriminately. This reflects what the two groups associated with promiscuity, namely the issue of separation and inability to form boundaries.

Psychoanalytically, separation and boundaries go together. Every separation is a step forward in the development of the ego and personality. Yet, individuality is hard to attain, because promiscuity seems to be a collective problem. Jung says:

The overwhelming influence of collective emotions spreads into everything... You see this particularly in the American sex problem as it had developed since the war. There is a marked tendency to promiscuity, which shows not only in the frequency of divorces but quite particularly in the *peculiar liberation from sex prejudices* in the younger generation... Promiscuity paralyzes... *by offering easy opportunities of escape*... The most recent developments in the field of sexual morality tend toward sexual primitivity, ... where under the influence of collective emotion *all sex taboos instantly disappear*. [italics mine] (Jung 1930, §957-958)

Jung sees the problems in terms of secondary collectivization, as he puts it (Jung 1928, §236). Secondary collectivization is a phenomenon connected with the modern era and with the shifting values that appear at the end of the Piscean age, where old values collapse, but new ones are not yet fully established. Hence the state of confusion and disappearance of sexual taboos. The sexual revolution since the 1960's has seemingly liberalized sexuality and sexual life. Sexual and moral habits which were up until then quite strongly prescribed, as well as proscribed, were suddenly relativized. While I'm aware of some positive effects of this phenomenon, such

as for example the proliferation of psychotherapy and counselling in the UK and USA in the sixties, there also developed some difficult issues. Sexuality was supposed to have become a means for modern man and woman's salvation. But what do we get if a taboo disappears? An inner void, connected with a state of confusion and disorientation. In modern psychological terms, the issue of the inner void may be understood as a consequence, or as a result of a lack of object relations. Psychoanalytically speaking, the inner void, which is a recognizable dynamic in the psychology of various addictions, leads us back to the disturbance within the primary mother-child relationship. Hence the word substitute which appears in the list from Rogle. Promiscuity may be seen as an attempt to fill up the inner emptiness, an attempt to find an easy, 'instant,' outer, purely physical substitute to fill this inner void. And so, no psychological work is needed, no therapy, no counselling. No attempt at a possible painful realization is risked. And so there is no growth of awareness and generally, no psychological growth. Promiscuity is an unconscious unsuccessful attempt to circumvent the work that would otherwise be normally done in psychoanalysis and psychotherapy, which is inevitably difficult and sometimes painful.

Such a definition of promiscuity takes us to the necessary and obvious enlargement of the term to other aspects of life. This dynamic may be observed in various other neurotic activities of modern man and woman: for example in obsessive shopping and in destructive eating patterns. In some way, in the modern life of the western world, a psychologically qualitative and rewarding life has been substituted

by quantitative and indiscriminate consumption. Instead of inner psychological and spiritual values, there is a quantity of outer material but lack of quality. This is clearly another example of promiscuous activity, being an attempt to fill up the inner emptiness, to find an easy, 'instant,' outer, purely physical substitute to fill this inner void. This means that promiscuity is a larger and more complex problem than some, relatively simple, sexual activity—although Freud with his work suggests that sexual activity is never "simple." However, there exists a reductionist view (inherent in promiscuity), according to which we would tend to see promiscuity as a "simple" phenomenon, where a partner is not a person but merely a vehicle for instantaneous instinctual discharge.² Yet, this too is an over simplified evaluation of this problem, and it is precisely this attempt at simplification that seems to be one of the core dimensions of the phenomenon—which is just another sign of how deeply psychological its nature really is.

There is no reference to promiscuity in the General Subject Index of Sigmund Freud's *Standard Edition of his Complete Psychological Works*. However, the neo-freudian Clara Thompson makes an observation:

² See, for example (Bychowski 1959, p. 258), where promiscuity is linked with a result of the inadequate synthetic function of the ego, where "various [developmental] phases and constellations are far from being integrated". Bychowski continues that "this ... seems to be the reason for the incredible ease with which ... so many can substitute one partner for another."

“Adler’s description of the possible power uses of sexual activity could conceivably have thrown light on Freud’s puzzle about ... promiscuity. It will be recalled that Freud felt at a loss to explain ... [it] as neurotic manifestation because since libido is being discharged in these conditions, there should, according to his theory, be no neurosis. (Thompson 1950, p. 159)

This takes us back to the old view of the phenomenon of perversion in whose light promiscuity could have been observed, too. For example, Fenichel in his early writings felt that the difference between neurosis and perversion lies in the fact that the symptom is “de-sexualized” in the neuroses, but is a component of infantile sexuality in the perversions; that its discharge is painful in the neuroses but brings genital orgasm in the perversions (Fenichel 1930).

Promiscuity as one of the most characteristic phenomena of our post-modern world has other dimensions and at least the most important ones amongst them ought to be addressed before we venture into the deeper psychological and psychoanalytical issues concerning the psychopathological dimension of the topic. Promiscuous, in terms of sexual behaviour, does not directly and uniformly translate into, and does not equal, pathological. In the second half of the twentieth century promiscuity became more common as is well documented in ethnological and

historical literature,³ as well as in clinical writing. A variety of factors were responsible for this change, including the introduction of safe and available contraception (“the pill”), the influence of the feminist movement on the increased acceptance of sexuality amongst women (women were encouraged to delay childbearing if they wished) and the effects of the gay rights movement in lessening cultural prejudice concerning homosexual sexuality⁴ in general.

3 Works of Michel Foucault, especially “The History of Sexuality”, as well as Dr. Alfred Kinsey’s research into sexual behaviour (Kinsey’s books were, from a psychological point of view, giving permission for people to experiment sexually more freely), and others, pave the philosophical, as well as practical, pathway to this assertion. For example, Jonathan Ned Katz in concluding thoughts of his work “The Invention of Heterosexuality” summarizes how ‘today’s meaning of sexuality no longer seems to reside, self-evidently, within our bodies or in nature, but depends on how we use it,’ and that ‘Americans ... now commonly act as if there’s no necessary link between making love and making babies’ (Katz, J. N. 2007, p.184).

4 The modern gay liberation movement began after the Stonewall riot in 1969. Under attack came traditional notions of masculine and feminine, as well as the sexual conservatism of the psychiatric professionals. “Promiscuous homosexual” used to be a common offensive expression for somebody who engaged in same-sex activities, particularly in ‘sex cruising,’ with more than one partner. The perspective now used in clinical practice has changed a lot and has, at least to some extent, succeeded in removing the negative and stigmatizing label of pathologizing promiscuity within homosexual sexuality. For example, Jack Drescher in his “Psychoanalytic Therapy & the Gay Man,” shifts our attention from labelling promiscuity as something negative and pathological, to the issue of (non) monogamy in homosexual people, by giving an example: ‘one may value enduring monogamous relationships over

Another question which I will attempt to answer at a later point of this paper, is the following: Is promiscuity, defined as indiscriminate mingling, really limited to sexual consummations with many partners, or can it be, in its characteristic psychological dimension, also experienced within a single sexual relationship?

There may exist a biological basis for promiscuous activity. In his essay "Celebrating the Phallus", Warren Colman (Colman 2001, p. 122), quotes Stoller (Stoller 1985: 35) that "from puberty on into adult life, most boys are driven by their erotic physiology more than most girls..." Colman continues:

"It seems reasonable to assume that a genetically driven imperative to inseminate as many women as possible in order to promote the survival of their own genes is the source of this psychological and emotional imperative in men." (Colman 2001, p. 122)

It would be necessary to complement this research into the promiscuous activity of women as well in

non-monogamous ones, even though the latter may also endure for decades' (Drescher, J. 2001, p. 221), as well as his quite realistic finding that 'regrettably, psychoanalysis' countertransferential idealization of monogamy has been inadequately studied' (ibid, p. 288). Drescher, obviously very much aware of the negative connotations which the term promiscuity still evokes, prefers to use the more neutral 'non-monogamous sexual behaviours' instead. The countertransferential idealization of monogamy (which would thus imply pathologizing all promiscuity) is then unconsciously expressed by pejoratively labelling all patient's non-monogamous sexual activity as compulsive, or as a resistance, or as some kind of acting out.

order to counterbalance this finding—a finding that sheds an interesting view on male promiscuity only.

Some Historical Aspects and Turning Points in Society's Attitude towards Promiscuity

Society's attitude towards promiscuity is the result of a long historical development of social and moral values in relation to sexuality. We need at least briefly to examine some important historical aspects and turning points in history that can help us to understand the proliferation of promiscuity in the modern (or post-modern) world. There had been a long historical psycho-social build-up to something that erupted into the sexual revolution of the 1970's. It is at that time called "sexual freedom," but which, as will be analyzed later in this paper, is no freedom at all, but in many aspects rather a state of confusion, where decisions become quite uneasy, difficult, complex and multifaceted.

In the classical world, excessive sexuality *per se* seems not to have been openly tolerated. Although some Great Fathers, as we shall explore in greater detail later on in the next chapter of this paper, were clearly promiscuous, it seems that promiscuity, as with incestuous activity, while it was allowed among gods, was restricted within the world of everyday practical sexuality of mortals. Foucault propounds the classical Greek attitude towards sexual promiscuity while commenting on some important aspects of the love of boys, on which the whole philosophy of love was based:

By not yielding, not submitting, remaining the strongest, triumphing over suitors and lovers through one's resistance, one's firmness, one's moderation (*sōphrosynē*) – the young man proves his excellence in the sphere of love relations. (Foucault, 1984, p. 210)

The classical cultural sexual norm regarding the general practice of promiscuity was therefore quite restrictive. It was considered dishonourable to offer one's body to whomsoever it pleased and howsoever one pleased, whether out of weakness, lust, or self-interest. However, this does not mean that promiscuity as such was morally condemned automatically. What seems to have been of utmost importance was honour, chastity and other virtues that determine sound sexual behaviour. It is apparent that much of what we today consider as promiscuous sexual behaviour would not have been either culturally or morally accepted by the Greeks.

A similar attitude is found in classical Roman culture, where it was traditionally believed that excessive sexual activity was weakening and enervating. A man who excessively indulges in sexual behaviour would be considered unmanly—promiscuity would therefore run *contra* to very highly valued and esteemed, as well as socially approved and confirmed, sense of his own basic sexual identity:

According to the conceptualization of masculinity prevalent in the Roman textual tradition, a real man is in control of his own desires, fears, and passions, and he exercises dominion over others and their bodies. (Williams 1999, p. 153)

“Indiscriminate mingling” would therefore have been out of the question in Ancient Rome, at least if committed openly, that is in the public eye. Society demanded that unrestricted sexual consummation be restricted and limited; this ran in parallel with the imperative of controlling one’s passion in a morally firm and effective way. This was in turn reflected in *Stuprum*—the Roman law that punished the violation of the sexual integrity of freeborn Roman citizens of either sex. This would imply that slaves could be used for promiscuous sexual activities and probably they were. Promiscuity, if practiced, was relegated to human contacts within hierarchical relationships. Therefore, promiscuity in ancient Rome was to some extent tolerated, albeit in unequal relationships only. But, promiscuity was accompanied by a strong moral tone, which ran against *virtus*—another expression for the essence of the masculinity of a Roman. Promiscuity ran *contra* to the moderation that was such an important facet of personal moral fortitude and integrity and general social credibility. Excessive lustfulness was clearly condemned as it was supposed to be strictly controlled and not sexually consummated.

The ideals of spiritual love and romanticism of the nineteenth century represent another important historical aspect, as well as a crucial turning point, that needs to be considered in terms of our topic. The romantic ideal put an enormous strain on the practice of human sexuality. True or spiritual love meant that it had to be sufficiently deep and permanent to justify sexual activity. Sexual activity, which came to be perceived exclusively as a consequence and result of such true love, must only be used for

procreation, and not on unproductive, libidinous pleasures. All sexuality became divided into normal (serving reproduction) and abnormal (all other sexual practices). Homosexuality as a term was first used in 1869 by Karl Maria Kertbeny, (same-sex sexual activity had no exclusive name up to then), and the term became, after some initial confusion as to what it really meant, condemned as utterly abnormal. Promiscuity fell completely into the cultural shadow of western society. Society's view of sexual '*mingling*' became strictly and exclusively – '*discriminate*.'

Something extraordinary happened with the sexual revolution of the 1970s and 1980s, which suddenly broke the taboo against sexual promiscuity, the psychological consequences of which we do not yet fully grasp or comprehend. For the first time in the history of the western world human sexuality became, at least conceptually, wholly separated from biological reproduction. Although the taboo of sex was suddenly destroyed, a new problem arose. Until then, society held traditional views of male and female sexual roles. People knew what was expected (sexually) from her or him, and knew what to expect (sexually) from others—anything else meant risking the sexual taboo, which could easily have dire consequences. Victorian class standards were clear, offering an illusion of safety and dependability, although inherently repressive and patriarchal. Wilhelm Reich seemed to be aware of this problem as he wrote the following thoughts a few decades before the sexual revolution:

“The authoritarian familial tie presupposes the inhibition of sensuous sexuality. With-

out exception, all children brought up in a patriarchal society are subject to this sensuous inhibition. No sexual activity, no matter how showy and 'free' it appears to be, can delude the expert as to this deeply rooted inhibition. In fact, it is precisely this *inhibition* of the capacity for orgiastic experience that lies at the bases of many pathological manifestations that occur later in sexual life, such as indiscriminate choice of partners, sexual restlessness, proclivity to pathological extravagances, etc." (Reich 1933, p. 136)

With the sexual revolution came sudden sexual freedom, which implied an exciting opportunity for modern woman and man's salvation—an opportunity arose which undoubtedly contained some projection of a *numinous*⁵ kind, and a problem of choice

5 In a Jungian sense, it is a known psychodynamic fact that archetypal content can, in certain circumstances, become numinous. The pathological becomes relativized by the numinous. Jungians tend to look behind the pathology, particularly when we come to sexuality. See: "The Idea of the Numinous" (Casement & Tacey 2006). There, in a paper called "Varieties of numinous experience: the Experience of the Sacred in the Therapeutic Process," Lionel Corbett speaks about four main characteristics which he has adopted from William James. Firstly, such experiences are ineffable, and unless one has experienced something like it, one is incompetent to understand it. Secondly, such experiences produce an overwhelming sense of understanding or clarity – they have a noetic or cognitive aspect. Thirdly, the experience is transient, usually less than half an hour, after which point everyday consensual reality supervenes. Fourthly, one's will is in abeyance, in the grip of a superior power, regardless of whether such experience is induced or spontaneous. – It could well be true that promiscuity,

suddenly appeared. Yet, psychologically, choice can only be qualitatively made if we are ready to consciously take responsibility for its consequences. Obviously, one has to work through the new circumstances patiently before any such choice becomes psychologically possible, but the sexual revolution was sudden and irrevocable. This may be viewed as an *enantiodromia*, or turning the situation into its opposite, and is the true reason why we do not yet fully understand the negative consequences of promiscuity, or indiscriminate sexual mingling. The sexual revolution resulted in a state of confusion and conflict, where models from the past were judged as archaic and so no longer relevant. New patterns could only be learned through direct (sexual and psychological) experience. (Post-)Modern promiscuity therefore, beside being a normal reaction to the destruction of sexual taboos and a valid, and at least conceptually accepted, way of western sexual life-style, in its pathological dimension conceals personal confusion and deep psychological conflict of choice in terms of inter-human psychological relationships. It feels as if something is being consumed in its nascent form; it is eaten before it has found space and time to reach maturity. Indeed, one suspects an aspect of collective regression is at work.

as an experience of a numinous kind, induces such effects. In addition to this, Jung also says that contact with the numinous may have a healing effect (Jung 1973, p.377). Promiscuity could in this light therefore be seen as a legitimate attempt at "sexual healing".

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Abstract

Archetypal roots of promiscuity are explored. In classical Greek and Roman mythology some promiscuous father figures may be found viz. Chronos (Saturn), and Zeus (Jupiter). Another form of Saturnian promiscuous dynamic is explored in the mythological figures of Oedipus and Antigone. This is followed by presentation of a case history. Ines is a woman in her early thirties and enters analysis because she would like to solve the recurring problem of her unsuitable partnerships, in which her partners are predominantly promiscuous. The father was psychotically disturbed and the patient was the family member who offered support to him. Psychotherapy started with stable frequency of two sessions a week. Within the transference, there appear two figures. One is that of a positive father, and the other is that of the all-knowing one. The latter may be compared with the mythological figure of Oedipus, whose intelligence was exceptional, being demonstrated in his redemption of Thebes from the Sphinx. All the same, Oedipus suffered from a promiscuously incestuous relationship with his mother Iocaste. During old age, when he was expelled, and accompanied by his faithful daughter Antigone, Oedipus was most probably psychotic. In the analysis, Ines has decided, after 200 hours of analysis, to reduce the frequency down to one session a week. The problem of analytic interpretation is described, as well as the effects of interpretation (when it finally took place) that it had on the analytic relationship and analytic process. The intimate and important link between promiscu-

ity and incest is also explored, promiscuous actualizing the incestuous. Promiscuity is a manifest sexual activity with the unknown other. Promiscuity can also be considered as a defence against paranoia.

About the author

Matjaž Regovec is a Jungian analyst and analytical psychologist. He undertook his analytic training in Vienna while living and working in Slovenia and is a member of the London based Association of Jungian Analysts (AJA, IAAP), as well as a professional member of the Slovenian Association of Psychotherapists (ZPS).

In 1993, Matjaž founded IPAL (Institut za psihološko astrologijo in psihoanalizo Ljubljana) – Ljubljana Institute for Psychological Astrology and Psychoanalysis, of which he is still the managing director. The Institute offers a professional three-year diploma course in counselling, as well as a postgraduate training in psychoanalysis (www.ipal.si). Matjaž has a private practice in Ljubljana and works with Jungian analytic self-experiential groups in Ljubljana, Belgrade and Budapest.

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