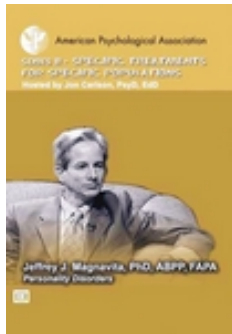


Personality-Guided Relational Psychotherapy

A review of the video



Personality Disorders

with Jeffrey J. Magnavita

Washington, DC: American Psychological Association, 2007. American

Psychological Association Video Series 11, Specific Treatments for Specific

Populations, Item No. 4310763. \$99.95



Reviewed by

[James M. Hepburn](#)

Working with individuals who have personality disorders is among the most complex challenges facing therapists today. For that reason alone, this video is likely to be of interest to students and instructors. There is much of value in this ambitious project. Clearly, Jeffrey J. Magnavita is a master clinician who makes his work with the client in this video look easy. His discussions of the underlying theory that motivates his interventions reveal a depth of knowledge and insight that has been honed over years of study and practice. Students who view *Personality Disorders* should gain an appreciation

for the intricate and subtle interdependence of theory and practice that is essential for effective psychotherapy. One only wishes that there would be an entire series on working with personality disorders and not just the few select videos that are currently available from the American Psychological Association (APA) video library.

Those of us who have used psychotherapy videos to train graduate-level clinicians have likely encountered therapy demonstrations that seem staged, stiff, or downright boring. Part of the problem is that so much of the work in psychotherapy is occurring at a relational and emotional level that is not visible to the camera. Earlier efforts to capture master clinicians plying their craft in extended role plays have often lacked the drama and genuine dynamic interplay that is present when real therapeutic work is being done. Fortunately, technological advances and production strategies have become increasingly more sophisticated since APA's earliest efforts to provide training videos. This video with Magnavita reflects a significant improvement in production quality, resulting in enhanced pedagogical opportunities as well as a more vital and realistic encounter between therapist and patient. This is not a boring video.

The DVD begins with an interview of Magnavita by the series host, Jon Carlson. The video begins simply enough with a basic definition of a personality disorder and characterizes such disorders across three clusters according to the severity of the pathology and the individual's ability to tolerate interpersonal relationships; the discussion then reflects the dynamic complexity of personality disorders in general. In his discussions with Carlson, both before and after his clinical demonstration, Magnavita reveals how important it is to have a clear vision and theoretical foundation to work effectively with individuals with personality disorders. He describes his theoretical perspective as personality-guided relational psychotherapy. This approach emerged from a study of unifying themes inherent in the work of family systems, interpersonal theories, and sociocultural theories.

Magnavita does not see his work as merely an integration of these theories, but rather he

has been able to use insights from each of these theories to illuminate the dynamic tensions that sustain the symptoms of those who suffer with personality disorders.

The clinical demonstration in this video involves a young woman in her 20s who comes to the session stating that she has recently had a reoccurrence of obsessions that cause her to focus on the symmetry of words. One of the nice aspects of this video is that the client is not an actress engaged in a role play. This is an individual who has agreed to discuss with Magnavita authentic problems and dilemmas in her life. So even though the session is staged, it does not feel staged. There is a genuine exchange, a dynamic energy that emerges, a building of rapport and an evolution of the therapeutic process during the course of the 40-min session. Magnavita is able to use his skill and insight to assess this woman's ability to engage in a genuine interpersonal encounter with him. During this initial brief encounter, he identifies for this client the meaning of her obsessive thinking as it relates to defending against painful feelings, traces the origins of the symptom to early childhood emotional experiences, and points out how the symptoms continue to reemerge in her life as a result of unresolved emotional conflict and how her current stress is a reflection of transgenerational dysregulation of emotion in her family. He challenges her to become more attuned to her feelings rather than to rationalize and overregulate her emotional processes. Finally, he is able to offer her his hypotheses about the etiology and prognosis of her current state of affairs, suggesting that she enter into a brief treatment of 20–30 sessions to work through her symptoms.

Magnavita's work is impressive in its fluidity and grace. It demonstrates the potential for real transformation in the therapeutic moment in the hands of a clinician who is prepared by both theory and technique. Just as a skilled musician might perform a technically demanding piece with the appearance of ease, so Magnavita makes his work seem effortless. And yet, he is clearly working hard to understand her and to move her to

greater awareness of her experience. She is surprised by her feelings... she is surprised *that* she is feeling, and it this capturing of the emergence of insight during the session that sustains the viewer's interest and intrigue.

This DVD offers a number of options for students and instructors. One of the most helpful features of the DVD is the option to watch the session with or without Magnavita's background narrative. The background narrative allows the viewer to hear Magnavita's running commentary about his intentions and approach in his work as it unfolds during the session. This provides an opportunity for the viewer to benefit from a detailed analysis of the session moment by moment. This is especially helpful to beginning clinicians-in-training who can see that there is a reason for every response from the therapist. The video also includes a 40-min interview of Magnavita by Carlson in which they discuss the theory that guides Magnavita's work with the patient. It is important for students to understand and appreciate the sophistication and depth of thought that is required for quality therapeutic work, and this DVD does a masterful job of explicating this subtle and often hidden dimension of therapy.

Obviously, no single video could offer a comprehensive approach to treating all personality disorders. In fact, the topic of personality disorder treatment could easily justify its own video series. But, taken on its own, Jeffrey J. Magnavita's demonstration of his work with an individual presenting with a personality disorder is one of the best training videos of psychotherapy that I have seen. Its significant advance in quality from the original APA video series on psychotherapy produced in the 1980s and 1990s may very well be an indication of the quality one might expect from other videos in this APA series. But it is really the knowledge and skill demonstrated by Magnavita that make this video worth the investment. I can recommend it to anyone who would like to learn more about how to work with individuals with personality disorders or to anyone who is curious about the

psychotherapeutic process in general.

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