A Socioecological View of Working With Gay Male Clients

A Review of

Working With Gay Male Clients

with Douglas C. Haldeman

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Reviewed by

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Decades have passed since the American Psychological Association (APA) removed homosexuality from its diagnostic lexicon (Conger, 1975). Today, within both the academic and popular presses much affirmative information exists on being gay. Individuals need not look beyond their home computers and televisions to access gay affirmative resources and positive gay role models. For example, a Google search on March 28, 2011, on “gay affirmative” yielded over 3.3 million results.

Juxtaposed to this presentation of positive gay images and resources, however, is a strong current of homophobia and prejudice. Alongside its positive portrayal of gay individuals, the mainstream media are replete with stories of gay people being denied basic civil rights and of the stigma and consequences of being labeled gay within the military, schools, and the workplace. In 2008 the Federal Bureau of Investigation reported 1,617 hate crime offenses based on sexual orientation bias under the Hate Crimes Statistics Act of 1990. Of this number, over half were classified as antimale homosexual bias. Recently, APA’s Division 44 posted a statement recognizing current lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgendered and questioning (LGBTQ) youth tragedies, calling for psychologists to be proactive in securing equal rights and protections for LGBTQ individuals.

It is within this complex social context that the APA released its 32nd DVD in its Specific Treatments for Specific Populations series, Working With Gay Male Clients. Hosted by Jon Carlson, this over 100-minute DVD features Douglas C. Haldeman, a past member of APA’s Board of Directors and the recipient of multiple national commendations for his work with LGBTQ individuals, conducting therapy with a 22-year-old, highly verbal gay man who is struggling with his “gay self.”

The DVD is divided into three sections: (a) an introductory discussion between Carlson and Haldeman, (b) a 45-minute therapy session conducted by Haldeman, and (c) a debriefing period with Carlson and Haldeman. The majority of the DVD is devoted to dialogues between the two psychologists, which are structured in a question-and-answer format. The sections move logically and smoothly, building upon each other, with the depth of the discussions increasing with each successive question. Throughout the therapy session, a minute timer is displayed in the right-hand corner, conveniently allowing viewers to track the therapeutic process over time as well as to locate specific aspects of the session.

Throughout the DVD, Haldeman does not advocate a specific orientation but instead uses an eclectic, interactive approach that recognizes the interwoven relationship that exists between the individual client and the multiple levels of his environment: interpersonal, familial, community, and cultural processes over time. For the novice therapist, the introductory section of the DVD provides clear information on general issues facing gay male clients, challenges to conducting gay-affirmative therapy (including the therapist’s attitudes toward/ability to empathize with gay male
clients), and the general therapeutic approach being used. Viewers are invited to use this information as a guide for interpreting the therapeutic process. Split screens, wide-angle shots, and close-ups enable viewers to make detailed observations of both nonverbal and verbal behaviors. All of the above make the DVD easy to dissect within a training environment.

It is a testament to Haldeman’s expertise that the therapeutic process appears deceptively straightforward. Relying on his extensive personal and professional experiences, he adeptly (and gently) moves from engaging the client, to slowly challenging some of the client’s beliefs, to offering the client hope for a better future. His questions facilitate simultaneous information gathering and relationship building, while placing the client’s issues within the broader socioecological context. He advocates strategic risk taking as a method for developing self-efficacy but cautions viewers on the timing of this intervention.

Although Haldeman stresses that all gay individuals within the United States live in a heterocentric society, he equally emphasizes client individuality. He never endorses a “one size fits all” model but instead individually tailors the therapeutic process by taking into account the client’s internal (and external) resources, experiences, and interpretation of the broader cultural values regarding being gay.

The DVD can easily be used to train seasoned clinicians who are new to working with this population, as well as to train novice clinicians in general. Many of the therapy techniques can be generalized to other stigmatized groups, and the population-specific information readily transfers across theoretical orientations. Its focus on basic human experiences makes this DVD a keeper.

Reference