Book Review

Gender and Sex in Counseling and Psychotherapy. Lucia A. Gilbert and Murray Scher, Allyn & Bacon, Boston, 1999, 206 pp., $29.00

Becoming effective counselors and therapists is both challenging and rewarding. Students of counseling/therapy are expected to learn much new information and many new skills simultaneously (e.g., theories, research, interventions, assessment, and diagnosis). Increasingly, professional associations and graduate training programs are recognizing the importance of gender issues to therapy and mental health. Hence, helping students gain an understanding and appreciation of the contribution of gender and sex to clients’ issues and to the psychotherapeutic process is a vital component of effective training. Fortunately, the task of both students and educators has become a bit easier with the publication of this book.

The authors note three goals of helping readers to (p. xiv):

- Understand gender theory and the complexity of gender processes;
- Grasp the centrality of gender in clients’ lives and in the psychotherapeutic/counseling process; and
- Obtain sufficient knowledge to work therapeutically to enhance, and not further limit or diminish, the lives of individuals who seek help.

To advance these goals, the book is organized in three main parts: Theory, Fundamentals, and Applications. The book provides an excellent orientation to gender socialization, the implications of gender issues for mental health, and gender issues in counseling practice.

As one might imagine, engaging readers who begin with widely disparate knowledge of and appreciation for gender/sex is a critical challenge. This is a challenge that authors of virtually all introductory diversity-related books typically face. An important strength of this book is that it very effectively introduces these concepts to readers with little previous exposure to gender issues. In other words, it begins at a level that welcomes neophyte readers. Simultaneously, the book offers sufficient breadth and depth that it will be effective in increasing the sophistication by which more advanced readers examine gender issues in their therapeutic work.
To their credit, Gilbert and Scher accomplish this using an effective mosaic of methods. For example, in the initial chapter, “Gender and Its Many Faces,” case material, quotes from the public, common misconceptions, scholarly definitions, inventory items, and complementary theories are woven together to provide valuable background material, while also helping to assuage more skeptical students’ defensiveness and resistance. Accomplishing these goals while displaying a lively and engaging writing style is no small feat.

It is this weaving of current scholarly material with superb case material that underlies the book’s greatest strength. Specifically, Gilbert and Scher present and summarize scientific knowledge of gender in an engaging, experience-close fashion. Factual scholarly information is blended with case vignettes inviting the reader to consider “if you were the counselor or therapist to whom this person was speaking, how would you respond to the questions raised?” In utilizing these “real world” dilemmas, readers’ incorporation and integration of the scientific findings and practical interventions are facilitated. Hence, it is readily apparent that the authors are well versed in both the art and science of gender-aware therapy and in its effective instruction to college students.

Another tension successfully negotiated by this book is that of reconciling the degree of focus on gender issues in general versus examining issues that are more salient for women or for men. An example of examination of broader gender issues includes the language and “dominant discourses” that maintain stereotypic views of women and men. Subsequently, more specific gender issues are also discussed (e.g., women’s sexual attractiveness and beauty issues and men’s violence and gender role strain issues).

We would describe this book as one that invites readers to better understand the centrality and power of gender in the psychotherapeutic endeavor. It is engaging to read and provides an excellent introduction to important issues that are supplemented by illuminating case examples. As a course text, the book would probably be most appropriate as the primary text in diversity courses examining gender issues in counseling/psychotherapy. To our knowledge, there are no other books that focus on the graduate-level, comprehensive (women and men) gender issues in counseling/psychotherapy. All other texts at this level focus on either women or men; however, there is a growing frequency in which these issues are presented in a single gender issues course. The book would also be useful to include as recommended readings for practica, counseling theory, and multicultural counseling courses.

We would definitely recommend this text for adoption. As noted earlier, it is the only text designed to address the gender issues of both male and female clients and counselors. It is well written, broad in focus, offers poignant case examples, and provides recommendations for more in-depth reading.