Book Review


In his new book, Joe Kort sets himself twin goals: informing straight therapists about the gay and lesbian community and telling straight therapists how to do gay affirmative therapy with their gay and lesbian patients. Kort not only meets his goals, he exceeds them.

Kort is an affirmative therapist. He is also a flexible classical thinker, adapting mainstream therapeutic methods to the unique task at hand—treating a diverse population with the shared problem of early and ongoing cultural victimization. For him, the gay affirmative therapist is a tour guide, not merely a companion on a journey to health, as Davis and Neal (1996) insist he or she should be. His therapeutic method goes beyond offering up positive countertransference to compensate for prior negative life experiences due to cultural oppression. He makes differential diagnoses and uses classical therapeutic approaches within an affirmative framework. In this he differs from affirmative therapists who believe that making a diagnosis is incompatible with rooting for the underdog and empathizing with the downtrodden, and who damn diagnostic labels as oppressive tools—what Graz Kowszun and Maeve Malley call part of the "unthinking attitudes and abusive practices" nurtured by the "medical and psychiatric establishments" (1996, p. 172). Kort is a true eclectic in the best sense of the word. That makes his therapeutic recommendations acceptable to and useful for therapists straight as well as gay and of mixed theoretical persuasions. This is a book for virtually all clinicians doing psychotherapy.

While Kort admits he doesn’t cover everything that might be important, he offers clear and revelatory chapters on almost all the salient points relating to treating gays and lesbians. He informs straight clinicians about the experiential and developmental highlights relating to early humiliation, shame, and victimization that lead gay men and lesbians to feel the need to modify, compromise, or vandalize their true identity and thus lose their integrity to a divided self. He has an excellent chapter on coming out, where he identifies six stages, describing the problems relating to each. Here he advances what to me is a particularly helpful idea—that in a gay or lesbian person, what can look like hypomania can be a manifestation of Stage Five
of the coming-out process: the in-your-face stage of coming out where gays and lesbians display their gayness almost too proudly and expect everyone else to go along, no complaints or questions asked.

A chapter on helping families of gays and lesbians discusses understanding and dealing with the discomfort of learning that a child is gay—an important discussion meant to help not only those coming out but their families of origin as well. A chapter on gay and lesbian sexuality informs the straight clinician (and some gay and lesbian clinicians who need to know as well) about what actually goes on in the sex lives of gays and lesbians. Two chapters on working with today’s lesbian and gay couples and with couples in mixed marriages (where one is straight and the other gay) offer useful insights and helpful therapeutic suggestions, and a final chapter on making a differential diagnosis is extremely helpful for and especially relevant to clinicians treating a population where classic diagnostic criteria don’t always apply.

Issues around coming out and actuating inner identity and matters relating to belonging are important in this population, but an exploration of other issues such as problematic anger would have nicely rounded out the picture. I would also have preferred less of an emphasis on how gays and lesbians are victims of an unfriendly environment and more of an exploration of how gays and lesbians, like everyone else, create some of their own problems actively, then blame them on externals, perhaps to avoid taking responsibility for themselves. There are times when Kort spins behaviors some might consider to be problematical no matter how socioculturally validated they happen to be, for example, lesbians bringing old partners back into new relationships, potentially hurting a new partner’s feelings and accounting for why lesbian “monogamy” is so often “serial.”

At times he also condones certain things I might question, such as telling one’s current partner that you think that someone else is attractive (although you would not act on your thoughts). Just recently a friend looking at some beefcake in a gay magazine told me, within earshot of his partner, that he wouldn’t mind spending the night in a place where that guy slept. The partner didn’t like that and his being gay didn’t make him any less jealous or less easily hurt. I take a contrasting point of view that being as fully and unconditionally affirmative as one can be in one’s relationship to his or her partner is the cornerstone of relationship permanency and that inflaming jealousy is not a way to nurture but to kill a relationship (Kantor, 2005). In short, there are times when Kort’s laudable affirmation becomes excessively condoning and his refreshing tolerance seems a failure to set limits.

In addition, not all his ideas will be suitable for all therapists of all persuasions. Putting copies of gay-oriented magazines in the waiting room can pose a problem for therapists concerned about making gay or straight patients who suffer from erotophobia unduly anxious (I have found that for many of my erotophobic patients, erotophobia was the last symptom to go).
These minor personal-philosophical criticisms aside, I believe this excellent book is for more than straight therapists treating gay and lesbian patients. It ought to be read by every straight and gay clinician in practice regardless of whether or not he or she sees gay and lesbian patients. Straight patients need affirmation too, and therapists, straight or gay, almost always do better by becoming less critical of their patients. I also highly recommend this book for gays and lesbians themselves to use as a self-help manual for self-understanding and self-improvement, and for parents of gays and lesbians eager to help their sons and daughters live the happiest and most fulfilling lives they possibly can in spite of all the cultural sexual abuse they will have to endure, perhaps as long as they live. This book is a classic, and with only a few reservations I can recommend it highly and unequivocally.

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REFERENCES


