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## Sex, Sexuality and Therapeutic Practice: A Manual for Therapists and Trainers

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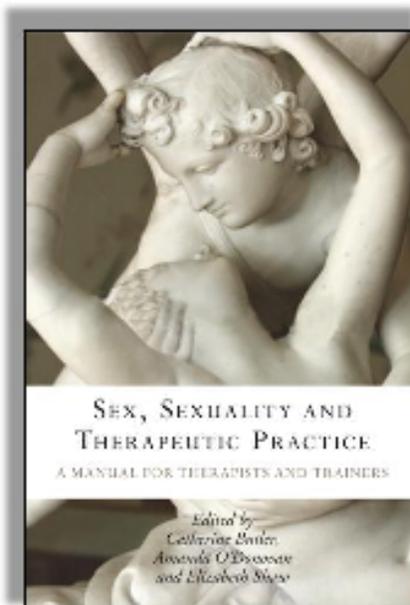
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Routledge, 2010

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Sex and sexuality are undoubtedly fashionable topics in our post-modern (Western) culture. They are ubiquitous in mass-media communication, popular culture, and everyday life conversations. "Sex sells". And yet, it might be that because of this intoxication with sexual stories and images that constantly tell us how sex is and should be we lose our own, personal sense, of what sex and sexuality are or should be *for us*. Not only because sex is such a fundamental part of our human nature, but also because we are faced with this "societal" avalanche of beliefs, norms, recommendations, impositions, and interdictions about sex and sexuality, that these topics tend to and need to occupy a central place in clinical and therapeutic practice. And it is in this context that manuals addressing sex and sexuality are a real necessity for therapists, health professionals and the general public at large. Moreover, it is not any kind of reading in this area that "would do". Past accounts of sexuality have largely been dominated by a rigid biological framework that managed to harm rather than help, to damage rather than heal, and to foster stereotypical views rather than to encourage an open and considerate discussion of human sexuality. It is for these reasons that a book like "Sex, Sexuality and Therapeutic Practice", edited by Catherine Butler, Amanda O'Donovan, and Elizabeth Shaw, goes beyond being just a manual for therapists and trainers, and constitutes first and foremost an indispensable invitation to look at sex and sexuality through constructionist lenses, to understand them as "historically, regionally and culturally determined" (p. 1), and therefore as changing, dynamic, and meaningful.

This book is, in many regards, a *myth-buster*. It fights against the myths of “normal sex”, of “perfect sex”, of “sexual polarization” among others and, through this, offers therapists and clinicians the essential tools for thinking about sex and sexuality in ways that both help and respect the needs and experiences of their clients.

“Sex, Sexuality and Therapeutic Practice” is intended to be a valuable resource for health professionals, therapists, clinicians, students and academics in the context of a rather generalised shortage of training for sexual health, sexual behaviour and gender. Trainers and educators will find this manual *indispensable*. Filled with practical activities and advice, case studies and exercises, reading lists and a series of further resources, this can easily be the best introductory text for guiding both teaching and learning on the topic of sex and sexuality. Be warned though, it is not a clinical manual about illness and disease or a sex therapy manual. Written by experienced clinical psychologists working, teaching and researching in the field of sexual health and human sexuality, this manual is informed by a “reflective-practitioner” model of learning, one that goes beyond simple transmission of information and encourages self-reflection and personal engagement with the reading. This makes the book particularly accessible and logical in its structure and presentation. Each chapter starts with a set of clear aims, and, as a whole, the book *promises readers to gain*:

- “A working knowledge of current thinking and models of sex and sexuality;
- An increased awareness of personal values around sex and sexuality;
- Further knowledge about sexuality and sexual practices that may be different from our own;
- An increased confidence and the skills to raise issues of sex and sexuality with clients;
- Structured exercises and ideas to run training programmes about sex and sexuality with other professionals or students;
- Access to resources and handouts to share with clients or for training purposes” (p. 2).

These objectives are achieved with the help of a well-organised set of six chapters, each addressing highly relevant issues about sex, sexuality and their relevance for therapeutic practice. The first two chapters (“Sex: body, behaviour and identity” and “Talking about sex”) give a good overview of the essential areas covered by the book and offer therapists and clinicians practical ways of talking and thinking about sexuality. The following four chapters take a closer look at particular and relevant topics such as: health, disability and sex (chapter 3), sexual and gender minorities (chapter 4), sex and sexuality across the lifespan (chapter 5), and culture, sex and

sexuality (chapter 5). All these chapter themes are not only immediately relevant but, all the more, came out of research with clinical psychology trainees about their learning needs when it comes to human sexuality and clinical practice. Designed primarily for trainers and therapists, this manual uses a professional tone, promotes at all time an open and positive attitude and constantly invites readers to be self-aware and respectful of differences and diversity. The book is firmly grounded in both classic and recent literature, includes the latest research findings and, above all, aims to unveil *hidden assumptions* (and their implications) behind our theories of sexuality and even behind the terms we use to talk about sex and sexual behaviour.

"Sex, Sexuality and Therapeutic Practice" is of interest for a *wide audience*. Focusing on the situation in the UK, it also makes reference to the context of other countries. Likewise, the book is relevant for practitioners and trainers from different therapy school, from cognitive behavioural and systemic to psychoanalytical. In the end, *all therapists* are confronted with questions such as those raised in Chapter 2: "What makes it difficult to discuss sex and sexuality from the client's / therapist's perspective?", and, most importantly: "How to start talking about sex?" Trainers are also spoiled for choice. This foundation training manual offers first-rate training exercises, offers handouts and questionnaires, discusses the stages and aims of the exercises and even suggests typical answers. All these are accompanied by many other resources: quizzes, case-studies, info-boxes, recommended films or Internet pages, etc. In the end, here stands perhaps the great value of this book: the fact that, most of the times, authors don't "give" information but invite readers to *build* their own conclusions based on increased awareness about the complexities of human sexuality and through sustained self-reflexivity. This is, after all, the core of the constructionist approach the book advocates for.