

Al Cooper, Ph.D.

Beyond Masters and Johnson: Sexual therapists in the 90's

by Al Cooper, Ph.D.

Despite the importance that sex and sexuality play in many relationships, the primary knowledge of sexual therapy for the vast majority of therapists revolves around some nebulous notions about the work of Masters and Johnson.

However, the field has progressed quite a bit beyond an almost exclusive reliance on a series of sensual focus exercises. These days, a competent sex therapist needs to be versed in system's and object relations theories, in addition to the more traditional behavioral and cognitive behavioral strategies. What follows is a discussion of some of the issues which allow a therapist to effectively offer help to patients.

Therapist comfort

Therapists must be fairly comfortable with issues of sexuality. It is difficult to provide an atmosphere of safety and empathy, or to promote disclosure and exploration, when the therapist is embarrassed, awkward or anxious. A number of factors might combine to produce discomfort in a therapist, including lack of knowledge around the issues being

discussed, inexperience in dealing overtly and directly with sexuality, and a vast array of countertransference reactions ranging from disgust/repulsion to excitement/arousal. In this area, possibly more than any other, the therapist needs to set the tone with their own comfort, confidence and respect for the issues being addressed.

Knowledge of issues

The therapist also must have some basic knowledge of the issues arising in the session. The general conception of sexual therapists is that they tend to overly simplify sexual problems. However, frequently the opposite is more common, as a lack of familiarity leads therapists to downplay the specifics of the problem itself in favor of searching for the "underlying meaning" (with which they are more comfortable). This is not meant to imply that systemic or dynamic factors should not be explored, but instead that this be one of the therapeutic options, not the only one. Kaplan (1993) says it best when she asserts that more complex and sophisticated interventions and understandings should only be employed when more direct and parsimonious ones have proven unsuccessful.

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Self-assessment

Sexuality and sexual satisfaction occupy an ever more central place in the lives and minds of people in this country. An increasing number of people entering, or in, therapy are wanting to deal with specific sexual issues. At the same time, the field of sexual therapy has undergone a dramatic evolution in a single generation and many clinicians have not managed to stay abreast of even the major developments. However the revised (1993) APA Code of Ethics strengthens the mandate to practice within areas of competence, making it clearer that clinicians who treat sexual issues without paying adequate attention to the aforementioned points are putting themselves, the profession and the public at risk. Thus clinicians dealing with sexual and/or relational issues would be well-advised to assess how adequately they compare with the standards of competence enumerated in this article.

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book review

by Ilene A. Serlin, Ph.D.

Why are we fascinated with horror films, with bizarre events? In this welcomed new book — *Horror and the Holy: Wisdom Teachings of the Monster Tale* — existential psychotherapist Kirk Schneider, Ph.D., uses the paradox principle to examine this question. Schneider's thesis is that the basis for ecstasy and terror is constrictive or expansive infinity (the holy). While terror sets the upper limit on ecstasy, the encounter with this limit promotes vitality and social integration.

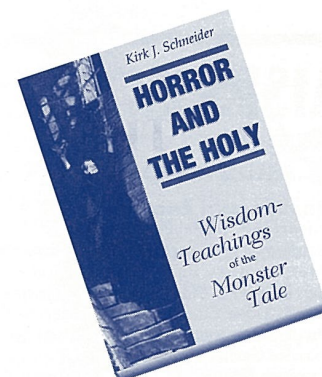
In the first section, the psychological structure of horror and its relationship to ecstasy and infinity is considered. Schneider reviews Freudian and Jungian perspectives on the uncanny, then proposes an existential alternative perspective of the continuum of constriction/expansion in his existential model, infinite constriction results in obliteration, while infinite expansion results in chaos.

In the second section, two archetypal thrillers exemplify these polarities. The first example is *Dracula*, in which hyper-constriction (or obliteration) is embodied in the language such as "sinking" and "hidden." The second example is *Frankenstein*, which portrays the overt and grotesque aspects of consciousness that result in passion and

chaos. As a clinician, Schneider deftly correlated this hyper-expansiveness with manic symptomatology.

Moving toward integration, Schneider then presents examples of bipolar (constrictive and expansive) horror. He studies *Vertigo* as a problem common to many of us and our clients (i.e., boredom with life and its daily routines, while at the same time throwing ourselves into dizzying transcendent states). Teaching that freedom and excitement are opposite of anxiety and disgust, and that both poles are essential for wisdom, Schneider points to a third integrative alternative. "Wonderment" combines the idea of inquiry ("to wonder about") with enchantment ("to wonder at"), and can provide the basis for decisions which are thoughtful, sensitive and flexible.

Schneider concludes by applying his theories to clinical examples. He suggests that we can learn to appreciate the lessons which can be learned from depression or constriction, viewing them instead as opportunities or providing a time to re-assess life. Using examples of a manic individual who may be afraid of melancholia, and an obsessive person who may be terrified of unruliness, Schneider urges us toward a



Horror and the Holy:
Wisdom Teachings of the Monster Tale
Schneider, K. (1993); Illinois: Open Court.
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balanced view which can learn from both extremes. From this perspective, indulgence in either extreme can be understood as defensive. Moving from polar extremes moves us toward balance and wonderment. Looking beyond clinical studies, Schneider envisions that we face these extremes in science, with genetic engineering and the biological and cognitive revolution, with issues of managed care and in the area of religion. Understanding evil as the inability to handle constrictive or expansive endlessness, Schneider proposes that we can achieve balance and wonderment only by confronting the extremes.