



Working with Mixed Sexual Orientation Couples

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Overview

- Mixed Orientation Relationships
 - Characteristics of mixed-orientation couples
 - Unique Challenges
 - Common concerns
 - Resilient factors
- Counseling Considerations
- The PARE Model: A Framework for Counseling
 - *Provide* Sexual Identity Therapy
 - *Address* Interpersonal trauma
 - Foster *Resilience* through marriage counseling
 - *Enhance* sexual intimacy

Mixed Orientation Relationships

- Mixed orientation couples can be defined as any couple in which one spouse experiences same-sex attraction and may or may not identify as lesbian, gay, or bisexual, while the other spouse is heterosexual (Buxton, 2001).
- Harry's (1990) study: 42% of gay and bisexual men reported that they were heterosexually married
- Buxton (2001) estimates up to 2 million lesbian, gay, or bisexual individuals in the U.S. who are or who were previously married.

Characteristics

- Relationship Quality
 - Many of these couples experience poor relationship satisfaction and do not succeed.
 - About 1/3 of couples attempt to stay together after disclosure and approximately 1/2 actually do for more than 3 years (convenience samples)
 - However, studies have found that some couples are able to maintain satisfying relationships

(Buxton, 2004; Coleman, 1989; Yarhouse, Gow, & Davis, 2008; Yarhouse & Seymore, 2006; Wyers, 1987).

Motivations to Marry

- Likely an individual factor
- Common themes
 - Intrinsic reasons (e.g., Love, desire for companionship)
 - Reasons related to sexual identity
 - Confusion
 - Hoped it would "cure" them or chose to ignore SSA
 - Married before sexual identity fully formed
 - Fulfill familial or societal expectations
 - "Normal" or "Natural" thing to do
 - Desire for a family

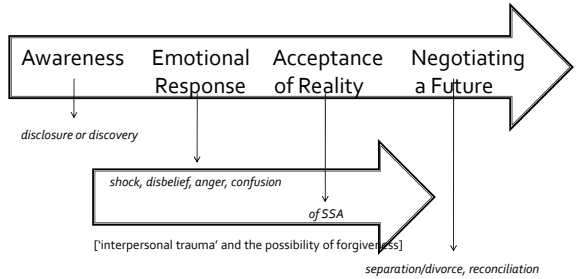
Motivations to Stay Married

- Most reasoning is similar to other couples
 - Love for their spouse
 - Trust
 - Desire to maintain commitment and vows
 - Desire to support spouse through disclosure
- Religious reasons
 - Maintain "covenant"
 - "Obey God"
 - May believe spouse has "overcome" SSA

Role of Religion and Faith

- May influence motivation to stay married
 - "Commitment to God"
 - "Obey God"
- Religious coping
 - Often found to be a significant source of support and coping for many couples trying to maintain their relationship
- Personal acts of worship
 - Prayer
 - Faith
 - Worship
 - Church support

Stages of Relationship Change



(see also Buxton, 2004a; Hernandez & Wilson, 2007; Latham & White, 1978; Gordon & Baucom, 2003)

Sexual Relationship

- How Couples Cope (adapted from Ross, 1971)
 - Emotionally satisfying but not sexual
 - Gay liaisons
 - Open as a couple
 - Resilient couples – maintain fidelity
 - Sexual fantasizing (Dank, 1972)
- Risk of Infidelity

Resilient Factors

- Communication
- Flexibility
- Commitment/Cohesion
- Social Support

Resilient Factors: Communication

- Many studies have found this to be one of the strongest factors and highest rated coping skills among MOC's
- Honesty is important in communication
- Communication builds trust and intimacy



(Hays & Samuels, 1989; Matteson, 1985; Yarhouse et.al., 2003; Latham, 1978)

Resilient Factors: Flexibility



- What is flexibility?
- Couples who make it work do so by re-defining their marriage and re-negotiating the rules
- Making meaning out of experience
- Can focus on commitment to one another
- Can renegotiate relationship/sexual behavior

(Brand, 2001; Dank, 1972; Lee, 2002; Matteson, 1985)

Resilient Factors: Commitment/ Cohesion

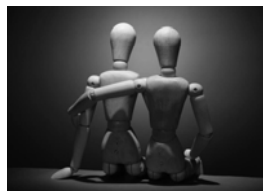
- What is cohesion?
- What are the ingredients of commitment/cohesion?
 - Love
 - Religious beliefs (e.g., covenantal view)
 - Empathy



Brownstein (1985), Buxton (2001, 2004), Edler & Shea (2002), Latham, (1998), Matteson (1984), Yarhouse et al. (2003), 2006, 2008)

Resilient Factors: Social Support

- Family members
- Friends
- Church
- Professionals
- Mutual aid and self-help support groups



(Buxton, 2001, 2004a, 2004b; Duffey, 2006; Yarhouse, Palowski & Tan, 2003)

Counseling Considerations

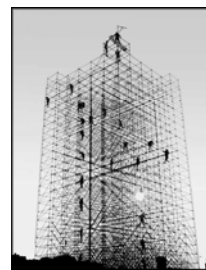
- Clinicians may assume that SSA signals who the person "really is"
- Assumption that marriages cannot survive the experiences of SSA
- Assumptions about best outcome
- A 'framework' for counseling mixed orientation couples



A Framework for Counseling

The PARE Model

- Provide Sexual Identity Therapy
- Address Interpersonal trauma
- Foster *Resilience* through marriage counseling
- Enhance sexual intimacy



A Framework for Counseling

Sexual Identity Therapy Interpersonal Trauma Marriage Counseling Enhancing Intimacy

3-tier distinction
Weighted aspects of identity
Attributions
Congruence

Sexual Identity Therapy

Three-Tier Distinction

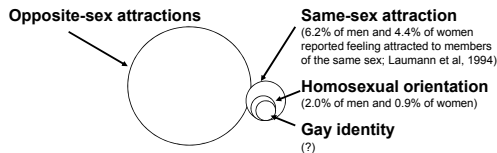
Weighted Aspects of Identity

Attributions

Congruence

A Three-Tier Distinction

- Experiences of same-sex attraction
- Homosexual orientation
- Gay identity



Quote

Orientation indicates that there is some sort of natural bend to me towards homosexuality... identification is what sort of label are you placing on yourself. ... I believe that you can have a predisposition towards something. ... There may have been things in my life that moved me towards homosexuality making that an easier leap than others. That would be more or less an orientation and through that, I've had certain things happen in my life...circumstances, ...that oriented me towards homosexual attitudes, and beliefs. That orientation then led to identification. It was like well...okay I am feeling this way, and believing these things, that must mean I'm homosexual. These two questions together they are not really two separate issues they are tied together. Your orientation can lead to identification.

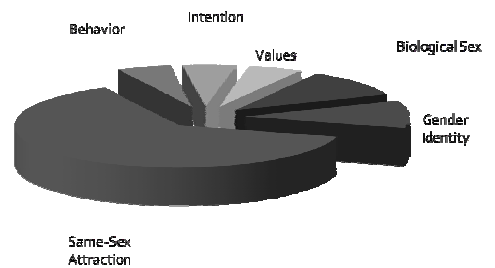
- Research participant

Weighted Aspects of Identity

- What factors into labeling ourselves?
 - Whether you were born male or female
 - How masculine or feminine you feel
 - Your sexual attractions
 - What you intend to do with the attractions you have
 - What you actually do with the attractions you have
 - Your beliefs and values about your sexual attractions and behaviors



Weighted Aspects of Identity



Attributions & Congruence

Gay Identification

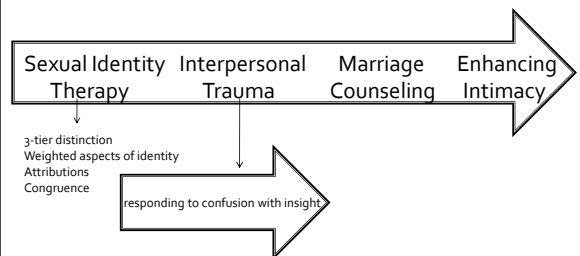
- Congruence – lining up religious beliefs with behavior and identity
- Attributions that link SSA with who a person "really is"
- One meaning of authenticity

Gay-Dis-Identification

- Congruence – lining up identity and behavior with one's religious beliefs
- Attributions that give greater weight to other aspects of identity
- Another meaning of authenticity

Yarhouse & Tan (2004)

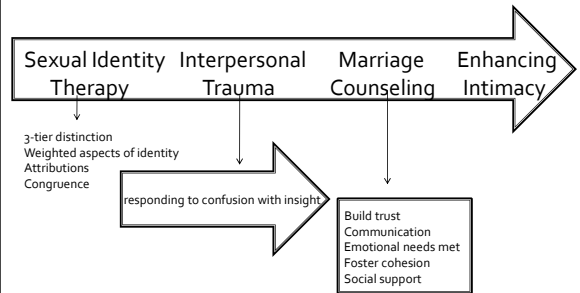
A Framework for Counseling



Interpersonal Trauma

- Recovering from a deception
- From emotional reaction to insight (leads to the possibility of compassion, which can facilitate forgiveness)
- Reconciliation now becomes a possibility

A Framework for Counseling



Marriage Counseling

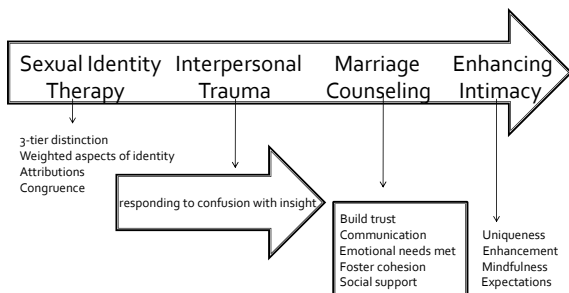
- Normalize unique challenges they face
- Enhance communication
- Meet emotional needs
- Foster sense of cohesion/commitment
- Develop social support

Marriage Counseling, cont.

- Suggestions:
 - Emotion-Focused Therapy
 - Communication Exercises
 - Exercises that foster friendship and intimacy
 - Treatment for affairs
 - "Getting Past the Affair" by Snyder, Baucom, & Gordon (2007)
 - Focus on forgiveness
 - Setting Boundaries
 - Time out and venting to control emotions

see also Baucom, Gordon, Snyder, Atkins, & Christensen (2006)

A Framework for Counseling

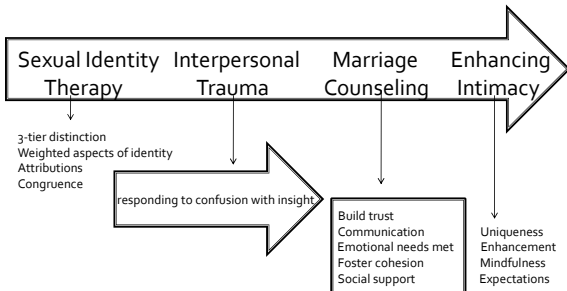


Enhance Sexual Intimacy

- Developing something unique
- Different experiences of desire
- Lifestyle/routine/priority
- Enhancement exercises
- Sofa sessions
- Mindfulness exercises
- Address comparisons/expectations/'ghosts'



A Framework for Counseling



Questions & Discussion

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