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Counseling in Marital and Sexual Problems: A Clinician's Handbook, 3rd ed.

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Book Reviews

Counseling in Marital and Sexual Problems: A Clinician's Handbook, 3rd ed., edited by Robert F. Stahmann and William J. Heibert. Lexington, MA: D.C. Health and Company, 1984, 263 pp., \$18.00

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Marriage and family therapy is one area in which numerous clinical sociologists display their abilities. The volume under review promises to be of relevance to these practitioners as it is billed as a "clinician's handbook" to marriage and sexual counseling. The book's goals are to pass along "information, ideas, and guidelines" to students and practitioners of family therapy.

Academic insight confirms what everyday experience suggests, namely, that real marriages and families are dense causal systems consisting of a multiplicity of interacting forces. Moreover, the roster of concerns that such social systems encounter is similarly complicated. In an attempt to be a useful reference to this complex subject matter, the editors of this volume have assembled 16 contributors and 17 chapters to accomplish the task. The result is what might be anticipated—an athenatic and uneven presentation.

Briefly, the book's contents include the following. A coeditor begins the volume with a chapter containing a complicated typology of counseling approaches, as well as a discussion of the limited data on therapeutic outcomes and a useful summary of several concerns all counselors need to keep in mind. This chapter is followed by one that describes a comprehensive instrument for use in initial interviews. The application of this structured initial interview instrument is advocated in a later chapter dealing with couples whose relationships are affected by changing definitions of sex roles. Robert Beavers provides an excellent review of what pure and applied research shows are the cognitive and behavioral attributes of "healthy couples." Vincent Foley also makes a clear, concise contribution by outlining and evaluating alternative paradigms for alcohol counseling.

The book contains two chapters on sexual issues. One is a straightforward piece on talking with couples about sexual concerns, which reminds us that the counselor's orientation is especially important to defining the atmosphere in which such sessions are conducted. In addition there is a well-crafted chapter

by Corydon Hammond, which reviews the multiple causes of sexual dysfunction and methods of medical and interview assessment.

Two chapters focus on premarital counseling. In one, the editors present their views on the content and form such prewedding sessions ought to take. This is followed by a well-organized chapter which calls our attention to several religious and value dimensions deserving consideration in premarital counseling.

The editors also wrote an insightful chapter that identifies seven modal types of marriages and goes on to provide descriptions, cameos, and treatment suggestions for each. Other contributions in this volume include: James Harper's provocative ideas on how ordinal position data can be used in systemic marital therapy; approaches and concerns for counseling childless couples and those of middle age; the place of hypnotic techniques in marital and sexual therapy; reconceptualizing the status of extramarital involvements; elaborating the utility of employing an intergenerational orientation to couple conflict; and outlining an approach to divorce counseling.

From this content summary one of the volume's strengths is apparent; namely, it covers a wide variety of topics relevant to marriage counselors. It is unfortunate that a more comprehensive index was not provided. Moreover, although some of the chapters are stodgy, commendably, all have been kept to a length of 20 pages or so. Additionally, most chapters close with useful summaries.

Few practitioners of marriage and family therapy can claim mastery over the broad and interacting web of concerns that comprise troubled and failing marriages and families. Consequently, most who practice the craft are bound to encounter problems that test their own limits. This volume is valuable for these occasions, for it contains adequate reviews of the topics it covers. Overall, it is fair to say that most chapters contain enough sensitizing concepts and ideas to get a therapist oriented to a presenting problem and make an informed referral when required.

Reviewing the roll of authors in this volume reveals that clinical sociologists are underrepresented as contributors. It is apparent that although many of us practice marriage and family therapy, too few of us write about it. This substantive clinical area is in serious need of the kind of unifying theoretical perspective and empirical underpinning that sociology could supply. Although interventions in real families require an idiographic approach, few things are more useful to such an exercise than nomothetic understanding. The theory and practice of marriage and family therapy could both profit from a broader dissemination and application of sociology's resources, with a spin-off benefit being added credibility to the clinical sociological enterprise.