

Feminist Eye for the Macho Guy

A review of the video



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Working With Men Survivors of Trauma and Abuse

with Laura S. Brown

Washington, DC: American Psychological Association, 2006.

American Psychological Association Specific Treatments for Specific Populations Video Series, Item No. 4310740. \$99.95

Reviewed by

[C. Albert Bardi](#)

With all the groundbreaking work in the last 20 years on the psychology of men, one might raise an eyebrow that the editor of the APA Psychotherapy Video Series chose Laura Brown, a nationally recognized feminist scholar, to present *Working With Men Survivors of Trauma and Abuse*. One could be tempted to wonder if a male therapist (feminist or not) would not be a better choice for a man suffering from the sequelae of domestic trauma. However, Brown, with the patience of someone who deals with these types of misgivings often, puts such questions to rest in an excellent demonstration of how solid theory, refined skills, and a good choice of case can have a positive impact on trainee and accomplished professional alike.

Gender Theory

Brown makes a thorough case for the use of gender theory in therapy with traumatized men. She explains that in our highly gendered, patriarchal society, men are trained to be strong and, even more important, to avoid vulnerability at all costs. As men are taught that only women can be in the victim role, a gendered perspective is crucial to creating a space that is sensitive to respecting the choices (even poor ones) men have made to survive. Through the use of this sensitivity, Brown shows us how therapists can avoid mistakes that essentially boil down to power struggles—such as poorly timed interpretations that can feel like confrontations—that can ultimately lead to attrition.

Skills and Timing

However clearly and carefully Brown makes the case for a gendered approach to psychotherapy, in fact very little of this orientation is directly obvious in the session work. This is a good thing. Brown clearly puts into action her belief that it is important that she not push an agenda onto the client but work carefully and slowly toward gaining the client's trust and respect. So while her discussion of activity in the session points to her "busy-ness" as a listener, we only witness the client's increasing comfort in disclosure with a therapist who throughout the course of the session speaks only after careful self-reflection.

There was only one moment when Brown made me wince. Near the end of the session, she told the client (referring to his paranoid coping style) that she thought he had "found a great hammer" and "here was this therapist trying to convince him to try to learn how to use a socket set." Nothing that Brown said in the session up to this point seemed distant from the client's experience, but this out-of-the-blue (and overly gender-based) comment fell quite flat. Brown, however, redeems herself wonderfully. In the discussion of the session with the series host, she explains the moment of disconnect by saying that this "was me trying to be the brilliant Dr. Brown." She continues on to note sagely that it is often exactly when therapists are trying to be brilliant that they completely miss their clients.

The Case

Another strength of this video is the choice of case. The DVD materials do not make it clear to whom to credit this aspect; nevertheless, it was very well done.

One could imagine potential problems such as a case in which the trauma was too severe to show without exploitation, or one in which the client would not be seen as representative enough. The client, "Mario," however, presents clearly with problems that arise out of the "intersection of gender and trauma" that Brown describes for men. Mario is very masculine, but he is also able to look at his own gendered behavior and comment on it (though I doubt he would ever use the word *gendered!*). Mario is never exploited by the session exercise for the video, and he is able to comment on the cameras and on the difficulty of sharing personal information in that venue. But for all of the strengths that we see in the session, and which Brown reflects on with Mario, we are also well aware that the client has suffered severe abuse and that his functioning is constantly threatened by his history. This is what makes the choice of case so fine: Mario is far enough along on his recovery path to reflect and share some of his experiences, but still quite driven on a daily basis by problematic coping strategies rooted in trauma.

Conclusion

In summary, the video is outstanding. Not only does Brown introduce the viewer to basic concepts in treating trauma, she also makes a strong case for a particular theoretical orientation (gender theory) that bears out well in the sample session. The production quality of the DVD is quite good, although the right and left audio channels are reversed for the therapy session (client, on left, is heard through right speaker). The DVD includes an interview with Brown about theoretical issues, a discussion of the sample session with reference to specific clips, and a commentary by Brown that viewers can listen to over the session dialogue if they choose.