

# Book Review

Hunter, S. (2010). *Effects of conservative religion on lesbian and gay clients and practitioners: Practice implications*. Washington, DC: NASW Press.

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Ski Hunter is a professor at the University of Texas at Arlington and a leading social work researcher on lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender issues. This is her fifth book on LGBT issues, and I believe that it will be particularly useful for social work practitioners working with lesbian and gay clients as well as for social work educators interested in preparing students for work with lesbian and gay clients. The ten chapters grouped into four parts are sorted for easy reference, and the 30-page reference list will provide the more inquisitive reader ample alternatives to dig a little deeper.

Social work with lesbian and gay clients is a field of practice filled with potential ethical challenges and values conflicts primarily due to conservative Christian religion. While she does not organize this text in this fashion, Hunter clearly addresses three potential conflicts: (a) the conflict between anti-gay religious beliefs and the social work profession's commitment to social justice; (b) the conflict between a client's desire to change sexual orientation despite research indicating such change is not in the client's best interest; and (c) the conflict between a practitioner's anti-gay religious values and the professional obligation to serve lesbian and gay clients.

In her first chapter Hunter identifies the intersection between cultural heterosexism and conservative Christianity in some detail. To her credit, she avoids polemics against the rejecting-punitive view most Christian denominations hold against gays and lesbians, but readers should also note that it is unlikely that evangelical and fundamentalist Christians would completely agree with the description of their form of biblical interpretation. Hunter does briefly mention other religious perspectives from time to time, but the focus is clearly

on Christianity. Chapter two contains brief information about specific denominations, and chapter three addresses the effects of religious condemnation of same-sex attraction. The faulty belief that one is a sinner abhorrent to God is at the heart of a variety of mental health issues for gay and lesbian people and a significant hindrance in progressing through the stages associated with the "coming out" process.

The conflict between religious and sexual identities is addressed in the next section. Chapter four contains brief summaries of research identifying gay and lesbian attempts at addressing cognitive dissonance and stigma. While this chapter is written without pathos, the challenges addressed by the gay and lesbian participants provide moving examples of cognitive reframing and ideological/theological restructuring. Anyone who has addressed personal change on this deep level will be moved. In contrast, chapter five is a critique of sexual reorientation therapy (SRT) as unsupported by the research, ethically bankrupt, and unprofessional. "If a client remains steadfast in his or her desire to reorient to heterosexuality, no action is better than the wrong action" (p. 67). In Hunter's view, ethical professional practice is completely incompatible with SRT.

The practitioner desiring to provide effective services to gay and lesbian clients is likely to spend significant time with the third section of this book. Chapter six emphasizes the basics of practitioner preparation by eradicating personal heterosexism in order to become gay affirming, learning about the lesbian and gay community, and building skills to deal with religious conflict. Hunter also presents many specific suggestions for a four-step process of assessment, goal identification, intervention, and resolution in

working with lesbian and gay clients. Chapter seven is an exceptionally practical guide for techniques that might be useful in dealing with the client who is not open to a lesbian or gay identity. Although there does not appear to be evidence that such a decision is in the best interest of the client, respecting the client's right to self-determination is paramount. Affirmative practice leading to integration of religious and sexual identities is the focus of chapter eight.

In the concluding section of the book, Hunter's passion as a social work educator and LGBT advocate is revealed as she turns her attention to practitioners rather than clients. In chapter nine she confronts conservative religious practitioners who chose to avoid working with lesbian and gay clients. To Hunter such an implicit endorsement of heterosexism has no place in social work. She condemns this attitude as a violation of social work values, ethical practice, moral principles, court decisions,

and licensure requirements. The final chapter is a six-session training program aimed at changing heterosexist practitioners in accordance with the stages of change model. Gay affirmative practice is the goal, and here Hunter provides a useful and detailed tool for addressing the remnants of heterosexual bias within the profession.

I believe that social work programs should seriously consider use of this text in courses promoting diversity and multiculturalism. As Hunter so clearly presents, the central obstacle to LGBT inclusion is conservative religion. This book challenges the social work profession, social work educators, social work practitioners, and social work students to assert gay affirmation and full social inclusion. "If, as a profession, social work admits heterosexist students and practitioners without requiring that they commit to the values of the profession, social work colludes in the perpetuation of heterosexism" (p. 125). I agree.