Developmental Issues, Environmental Influences, and the Nature of Therapy with College Men

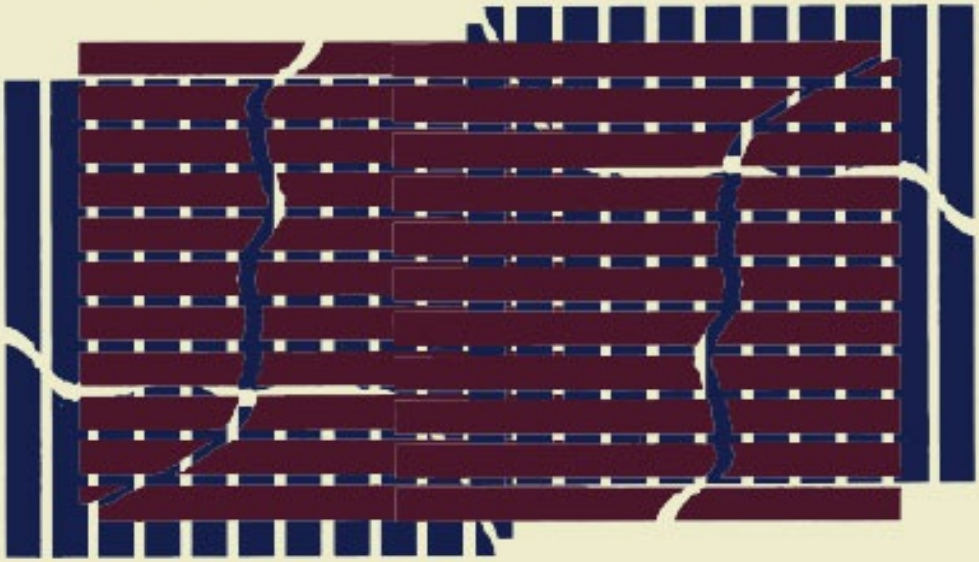

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Table of Contents

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The college years represent a time of tremendous personal change for college students (Feldman & Newcomb, 1969). As students leave their family of origin for the collegiate world, they embark upon a developmental journey that takes them from adolescence into adulthood. The developmental challenges facing college students include developing a sense of autonomy and identity, exploring intimacy in relationships, and committing to a set of values and lifestyle choices (Chickering, 1969). Throughout this journey the male student inevitably confronts his socialization as a male and encounters opportunities for redefining his masculinity. While the possibilities may be exciting, the process is often confusing, threatening, and painful. This chapter explores the developmental struggles of male college students and the influences of the campus environment as well as counseling approaches for effectively facilitating young men's growth as well-balanced persons.

Psychological Concerns and Help Seeking

The majority of studies on help seeking among college students reveal a pattern of gender-related differences. Numerous studies (for example, Shueman & Medvene, 1981) have indicated a higher prevalence of mental health concerns and need for assistance being reported by college women compared to their male counterparts. Similarly, other authors (see Tracey et al., 1984) have found college men to be less interested in outreach workshops aimed at personal enrichment than are women. These findings are interesting when considered along with a National Institute of Mental Health Survey (Robins et al., 1984) that reported a relatively proportional rate of emotional concerns among men and women in the general population. Role restrictiveness, as manifested by limited awareness of feelings, difficulty with self-disclosure, and a need to control situations may lead college men to be more hesitant to acknowledge emotional problems, and perhaps even to be less aware of their own internal difficulties (O'Neil, 1981; Warren, 1983).

Along with sex differences in help seeking, some studies (for example, Collins & Sedlacek, 1974) have also reported sex differences in types of presenting concerns. In general, these studies found women reporting intrapsychic concerns and men identifying difficulties in controlling or adapting to external events. For instance, Koplik and DeVito (1986) found women concerned with loneliness, low self-esteem, and depression, while men wanted to be more popular and proficient in securing dates. Furthermore, it seems that while women tend to attribute relationship problems to interactional difficulties, men more frequently attribute conflicts to problems in their partners and to external events (Wood, 1986). It appears that, unlike women, college men are more oriented toward controlling external events and the perceptions and behaviors of others rather than focusing upon their personal involvement in the process (Gilligan, 1982; Wood, 1986).

This line of reasoning seems to be validated by studies exploring college students' expectations of counseling. Again, numerous studies (Harding & Yanico, 1983; Subich, 1983) have reported a consistent pattern of different expectations for college women and men. Women tend to expect a high quality of facilitative conditions such as acceptance, genuineness, and immediacy. On the other hand, men expect a counselor to be directive, analytical, and self-disclosing. Consistent with sex-role socialization, college men appear to have a task-oriented view of counseling in which the counselor provides advice and direction for controlling the external environment. Unlike their female counterparts, college men—at least initially—are more cautious in viewing counseling as a safe opportunity to explore their internal worlds. These different perspectives of counseling might be better understood by examining the developmental journeys traveled by college men and women.

Psychosocial Development

The college years of the traditional-age student witness the developmental issues of late adolescence. Numerous theories have been proposed to describe the psychosocial (Chickering, 1969; Heath, 1965; Keniston, 1971) and cognitive (Kohlberg, 1971; Perry, 1970) development of college students. Chickering (1969) proposed seven vectors (tasks) that constitute identity development in college students, including the first three vectors of developing competence, managing emotions, and developing autonomy. With respect to the task of developing competence, students attempt to develop a sense of competence with intellectual, physical, and social skills. As an example, one sensitive though

timid upperclassman who was heavily involved in helping others suffered considerable loneliness and low self-esteem as a result of his inability to ask women out on dates.

In the realm of the management of emotions, students must also attempt to learn to become aware of emotions, control their expression, and learn to interpret these emotions when making decisions. For instance, an inability to accept feelings of loneliness and rejection may contribute to emotional acting out, as in acquaintance rape. Male students are often most conscious of anger but must also learn to identify and differentiate the variety of other emotions. This task may be facilitated as the student begins to perceive his ability to acknowledge and express emotional needs as a personal strength rather than as a weakness.

The third vector of autonomy development involves acquiring emotional independence from the reassurance and approval of others while simultaneously recognizing the need for interdependence. However, the need to prove oneself in a new environment may lead the male student to reject help from family or campus personnel while excessively relying on reassurance from peers. For example, a male student who drinks heavily with his buddies may mistake his rebelliousness for independence from others. The successful completion of this task is signaled when the student develops confidence to risk disapproval from peers and to accept assistance without being overly dependent.

The development of competence, emotional management, and autonomy provide a foundation for the fourth vector, establishing identity. Chickering considered identity development to be the central developmental task. This sense of identity represents an internal consistency of values, emotions, beliefs, and behaviors. The establishment of identity also provides a more stable foundation for pursuing the remaining vectors: freeing interpersonal relationships, clarifying purpose, and developing integrity. Freeing interpersonal relationships involves initially recognizing, then tolerating, and finally appreciating differences between persons. Purpose development involves formulating plans and priorities necessary for career and lifestyle commitments. Finally, developing integrity involves personalizing a set of values congruent with one's decisions and behaviors.

Chickering's theory can be seen to have clear implications for men's gender identity and role development. The vectors of developing competence, managing emotions, and developing autonomy are

laden with sex-role expectations and influences. Further, the successful resolution of gender issues related to competence, managing emotions, and autonomy can facilitate the development of a more androgynous male identity. Additionally, it is clear that successful completion of the tasks related to freeing interpersonal relationships would be essential for considering alternative perspectives of masculinity in oneself and in relationship to others. Also, in resolving the tasks associated with developing purpose, a man who had earlier developed a more androgynous identity would be freer to consider more options than would a man who had not developed an androgynous identity. These broadened choices include: the consideration of nontraditional careers, egalitarian relationships, and noncompetitive and less stressful lifestyles. Clearly, nonsexist value development in men can be seen to be related to Chickering's theory of psychosocial development.

Cognitive Development

In addition to psychosocial changes, college students may also make significant strides in their cognitive development (Widick, Knefelkamp, & Parker, 1980). Perry's (1970) hierarchical, sequential scheme of cognitive development describes four positions through which a student moves from a simplistic, categorical view of reality to a more complex, pluralistic view of knowledge and truth. Entering freshmen most commonly manifest Perry's first position of "dualism." The dualist views the world in distinct categories—good or bad, right or wrong. The dualist believes in absolute truth, relying upon authorities to transmit these answers while relying only minimally upon their own capacities. In considering masculinity, this student would most probably view men as strong or weak, manly or unmanly, heterosexual or homosexual. Further, these students would expect counselors to give direct advice to help them solve concrete problems and to gain social approval.

In the second position, "multiplicity," the student considers there to be an unlimited plurality of points of view. The multiplist believes that all people have the right to their opinions, and all opinions are valued equally. No criteria are used to evaluate the validity of a particular perspective. At this phase, the student may begin to analyze the male role and to consider alternative expressions of masculinity. A counselor might facilitate this consideration of alternative views, but the student may still have limited capacities for internalizing the implications of these views.

Greater cognitive complexity emerges with "relativism," the third position. The student begins to consider knowledge as relative and contextual, dependent upon a specific circumstance. Having forsaken their old truths, relativistic students may begin to consider the meaning of their own existence. These students are then ready to assume more personal responsibility and to explore new roles. During this position, students are more able to weigh the various implications of the concept of masculinity and sex roles. A counselor might help these students to consider their own needs in a problem situation and to evaluate the consequences of alternative ways of responding. For instance, a student experiencing a relationship conflict might consider directly sharing his feelings and unmet needs with his friends or mate.

The fourth position, "commitment to relativism," involves choosing values and beliefs that are consistent with an emerging identity. These students recognize diverse, conflicting themes within themselves, which create ambiguity and uncertainty in their lives. However, these students do internalize guiding principles to help them make choices with regard to career, a set of values, and selection of an intimate partner. It is in this position that students are able to commit to a synthesized view of themselves and their concept of masculinity. They are able to explain the various concepts as well as the reasons for their decisions. Counseling becomes more introspective, intuitive, and affective as students take greater risks, develop deeper self-understanding, and clarify their directions in life.

While these four stages appear sequential, a student's progress is rarely steady. Students may remain in a fixed position or possibly even retreat somewhat as they consolidate changes and develop a readiness to move forward. Clearly, in counseling male college students, an awareness of the clients' cognitive level of development is useful in selecting optimal interventions and enhancing therapeutic effectiveness.

Environmental Influences on Development and the Null Environment Regarding Alternative Male Gender Roles

People do not develop in a vacuum. Fortunately, increasing attention has been given in recent years to the impact of the college environment in promoting student development (Delworth & Piel, 1978; Huebner, 1980). Freeman (1975) coined the term *null academic environment* to describe the

detrimental impact of a sex-role "neutral" campus environment on women's academic achievement. Similarly, on most college campuses, male students encounter what might be termed *the null environment regarding alternative male gender roles,* an environment that neither differentially encourages nor discourages male students to explore their gender-role socialization. Throughout their precollege lives, however, men are inculcated with the traditional male mystique; they lack an equal exposure to alternative male gender roles. Colleges that assume a "neutral" stance on male sex-role issues fail to acknowledge the impact of precollege learning upon most students. Unfortunately, a campus that fails *actively to promote* male students' exploration of their gender-role identity inherently supports traditional male roles. These roles are often supported via existing campus institutions such as athletic teams and fraternities. In addition to lacking a proactive alternative gender-role presence, many campuses present the following additional environmental barriers to gender-role exploration: patriarchic faculty, peer pressure, homophobia, sexist humor, counseling aimed at "adjustment" to social norms, and academic and career advising leaning toward traditional roles.

Student services offices are given the mission of promoting student growth and development. From our perspective, this includes responsibility for encouraging students' exploration of alternatives to traditional sex roles. While not specifying what type of male role identity is ultimately desirable for each college male, alternatives to traditional male socialization warrant exploration. There are numerous types of interventions that may favorably alter the college climate, the male student's view of himself, and his interactions with others. Campus environmental alterations may also change the nature of the issues with which men struggle, and subsequently change the nature of the issues that men bring to counseling. Environmental influences that promote gender-role growth include: androgynous role models, psychoeducational programs on gender roles, men's/women's studies courses and resource centers, men's groups, community men's networks, and nonsexist personal and career counseling and advising. Some interventions may be designed to reach men who rarely seek out counseling on their own, such as screening disciplinary referrals for personal concerns, providing drug education programs to athletes, and conducting acquaintance rape workshops with fraternities. While much more research is needed, the important task of evaluating different types of psychoeducational programming for promoting college men's development has already begun (Murphy & Archer, 1986).

Several authors (Blocker, 1978; Knefelkamp, Widick, & Stroad, 1975) have described approaches

to facilitating students' development through environmental and programmatic interventions. Their suggestions include carefully appraising students' level of development and selecting experiences that provide masterable challenges to students at each developmental level. For instance, freshmen with a dualistic perspective may find the conversations in a men's group too emotionally intense, complex, or abstract for their developmental level. On the other hand, a mixed-sex program on sex-role stereotypes might challenge their perceptions while offering greater comfort and familiarity. It is also important that students have the opportunity to evaluate and process these experiences in a safe environment. Other ways to promote development suggested by Blocker (1978) include: exposure to role models who are slightly more advanced cognitively; exposure to networks of empathic and caring individuals, such as residence hall staff and faculty; and both intrinsic and extrinsic rewards for engaging in developmental struggles. Rewards can include such things as clear, honest feedback during group sessions and the opportunity to participate in volunteer and internship experiences.

In sum, an understanding of person-environment interactions is critical to promoting male development. The college/university environment has been clearly identified as a bastion of sexism (Banning, 1983; Sandler & Hall, 1982, 1984). An ecological perspective can reduce internal and external punishment for men struggling against significant environmental restraints. University personnel can use knowledge of person-environment interactions for shaping campuses into more humane living and learning environments. Although the dynamics of organizational change are complex, models have been developed (Fawcett, Huebner, & Banning, 1978; Kaiser, 1978) and implemented (Conyne, 1975; Daher, Corazzini, & McKinnon, 1977; Huebner, 1979), which offer promise for promoting both individual student growth and social change within institutions of higher education.

The Nature of Counseling College Men

As mentioned earlier, college men frequently experience difficulty entering into counseling since many of the basic elements of counseling are in direct opposition to traditional male socialization (Bruch & Skovholt, 1982; Chamow, 1978). Examples of this conflict include dependence on another person, emphasis on recognition and expression of feelings, and the requirements that one disclose honestly and interact genuinely in counseling. Hence, the very nature of counseling may be antithetical to the

traditional male role with its emphasis on independence, rationality, and emotional/interpersonal control. Nonetheless, the risks men experience in entering therapy will be mentioned only briefly here, as they are discussed in greater detail in other chapters.

Regardless of the risks involved there are of course some college men who do seek psychological assistance. Perhaps these men feel so greatly burdened by their difficulties that they are able to overcome the stigma of help seeking. Or, conversely, perhaps men seeking help are less traditional in their sex role and hence are not as affected by the conflict between traditional male roles and help seeking (Voit, 1980). Some common presenting concerns for which college males do seek help include academic performance and major/career choice concerns, substance abuse (alcohol and drugs), anger and behavior problems, alienation, loneliness, shyness, relationship issues, sexuality/sexual identity concerns, and racial/ethnic identity issues. Many of these problems are themselves natural outgrowths of the restricting traditional male role (O'Neil, Helms, Gable, David, & Wrightsman, 1986).

When examining the traditional male role, it becomes clear that common concerns for which men may enter counseling are career-related issues. Traditionally, men are expected to place considerable emphasis on their academic major and career. For men, work equals self-esteem and survival; men very rarely consider the option that they won't need an occupation. Additionally, having a presenting concern related to academic major/occupational choice is frequently a more socially and personally acceptable way to "get one's foot in the door" of a counseling center. Often this also provides a chance to "test the water" and perhaps to discuss more threatening concerns later if indeed counseling appears sufficiently safe to do so.

One concern that may be presented after trust is built, or perhaps even initially, is that of alcohol and drug abuse, a concern that itself is a recognized problem on many college campuses. The traditional male role often encourages reliance upon alcohol and/or drugs to bolster courage, assuage doubts, and numb physical as well as emotional pain. It is not surprising that with the freedom of being away from home, a desire to be accepted by one's peers, and extensive upheaval in one's personal structure many college men experience serious problems with drug and alcohol abuse. For example, one male college student was referred to the counseling center after assaulting his girlfriend and a residence hall staff member while intoxicated. The incident was precipitated by a breakup in the relationship, resulting in

strong feelings of abandonment and jealousy. While in a counseling group, the young man explored the modeling he had witnessed with his father, who responded to his own frustrations by punishing others. The student went on to explore the lack of nurturance he felt from his father and committed himself to becoming a more nurturing and tolerant man.

The interpersonal and sexuality issues facing college men are numerous. On the college campus, men often feel conflicting pressure to date, to be outgoing, to compete and excel, to be independent, to be sexually active, to be a skilled lover, and to be sensitive to women. Yet while men are expected to be proficient in these areas, rarely are they taught such skills, nor is there permission to be socially awkward while trying to develop confidence and grace. An illustration of an intervention to address this difficulty was an acquaintance rape workshop in a residence hall, which led to a lively discussion between the men and women participants. A brainstorming of sex-role expectations and games used to initiate sexual contact illuminated the artificiality of traditional dating interactions. While the men and women were able to examine their collusion in perpetuating these interactions, the men also clearly heard the women's desire for more genuineness, sensitivity, and respect from their dating partners.

Likewise, the college environment can have a variety of influences on young men with regard to their race and/or ethnic identity. In addition to both overt and covert discrimination, minority students may also experience stress as a result of out-group/in-group rejection-acceptance phenomena (Smith, 1985). However, individuals who do not identify with a traditional white majority are likely to be additionally mistrustful of seeking help from a counseling center or therapist whom they believe would hold a traditional white majority orientation. Thus a counseling center and/or particular therapist(s) with a reputation for effectively serving members of specific racial/ethnic groups (e.g., Blacks, Hispanics, Asians, Native Americans) or special populations (e.g., gays and lesbians, the physically challenged, religious groups) will be likely to attract a larger proportion of students from those groups than would otherwise seek assistance.

Choice, Change, and Confusion Reduction

In conceptualizing and intervening with the problems that college men bring to counseling, one useful approach is the Choice, Change, and Confusion Reduction Model (Gilmore, 1973; Tyler, 1969).

According to this model, counseling can have one or some combination of three overlapping general purposes: choice, change, and/or confusion reduction. This model can be of mutual use to both the counselor and the client in conceptualizing the nature of client's concerns, and in planning for appropriate counseling interventions. These three categories of counseling purposes—choice, change, and confusion reduction—use terms that both the client and the therapist can understand and employ in accurately describing the specific purpose of counseling. Through establishing the specific purpose of counseling, the nature of the *process* of counseling and of the *tasks* faced by the client and counselor in clarifying and resolving concerns become more explicit. Further, for the college man who so often only tentatively seeks professional assistance, providing initial structure to the counseling situation via discussion of these three purposes is often useful in reducing the client's anxiety. Each of these three purposes of counseling will be elaborated subsequently.

Being human means that people must choose, or choose not to choose, their own way of being in the world. A man who is coping effectively with his life acknowledges the ambiguity of life and makes the best decisions possible at that time; he chooses what he will do, how he will do it, and essentially who he will be. Clients who enter counseling seeking to make decisions about their lives are wrestling with "Choice"; they seek counseling to facilitate their use of effective planning and decision-making skills. Some examples of choices that male clients present for counseling include the following:

> My girlfriend thinks that we should be monogamous. I really like her a lot and don't want to hurt her, but I don't think I'm ready to settle down yet. I wanted some help figuring out what to do.
>
> There are lots of interesting courses here, but I've got to stop floating around and figure out my major!
>
> I've known that I'm gay for a while now. I feel like it's time that I tell my family. I'm just not sure if I should come out to them or not, though.

The counselor assisting each student may recognize the purpose of counseling as assisting the students in utilizing effective decision-making skills. Numerous authors have developed models of rational problem solving (e.g., D'Zurilla & Goldfried, 1971) that are generally effective in assisting clients with choice concerns. In addition to providing the client with a problem-solving/ decision-making model, the counselor's tasks also involve helping the client to collect relevant information; working with the client in assimilating and evaluating the data, ensuring that the different pieces of information are adequately summarized and that their relative meaning is emotionally and cognitively understood;

assisting the client to predict the implications of the alternatives that they develop; and, finally, to develop contingency plans. Since this rational, logical approach is congruent with male socialization, such an approach may be particularly useful for short-term counseling. However, deeper therapeutic interventions will likely require an exploration of more affective and intuitive capacities that are not likely to have been previously acknowledged or reinforced. These resources may be tapped through the use of visual imagery, dream work, nonverbal observations, music and movement, sculpting, and touching. The reawakening of suppressed wishes and desires can also facilitate choice making.

In contrast to choice as a purpose of counseling, change as a counseling purpose involves a client desiring to modify his emotional response, cognitive pattern, or behavioral reaction. He may seek "to do, think, or feel some specific thing more often or less often, or in some situations, but not in others" (Gilmore, 1973, p. 58). For the therapist, this frequently means supporting a scared young man as he first encounters change while also guiding him through experiences anomalous with and destructive to his previous maladaptive personal constructs (Mahoney, 1980). Utilizing a masculist approach as outlined in the final chapter, the therapist is responsible for talking with the client about the nature of counseling and then sharing responsibility for what occurs in counseling, as much as is possible. Some examples of client concerns based on change include the following:

> Whenever I try and study, I get distracted and do something else. My grades are showing it. If I don't learn to concentrate on my studies more, I won't be around here much longer.
>
> Because of my disability, my parents sheltered me, and I never had any friends in high school. I want to make friends here, but I feel too shy to ever talk to people.
>
> Whenever I get in a situation where there's a difference of opinion, I feel like I always have to win. Other people are starting to avoid me, and it's really causing some problems with my girlfriend. Besides, I don't feel that good about it myself either.

With these types of concerns, the counselor assists the client in implementing the changes that he desires. Cognitive and behavioral interventions are commonly employed to produce such changes (Ellis & Harper, 1975; Lazarus, 1976; Rimm & Masters, 1979). When employing cognitive and behavioral approaches, the therapist has primary responsibility for designing effective incremental lessons, pacing challenges to the client's level, and reinforcing positive changes.

Client-desired change may also be an indication of the clients' separation and individuation from

his family of origin. From this perspective, the desired change may also represent a violation of a parental injunction or family rule. Gestalt, psychodynamic, and/or family systems approaches may be useful for these types of interventions (Fagan & Shepherd, 1970; Lax, Bach, & Burland, 1980; Satir, 1983). From these perspectives, the therapist promotes emotional awareness and insights of childhood experiences and provides opportunities for working through the relevant conflicts from a retrospective and/or here-and-now context.

Confusion reduction is often an initial stage of therapy in which clients present choice and/or change concerns. However, many clients' *primary* purpose in seeking counseling is to reduce the amount of confusion that they are experiencing. That college men would be confused is hardly surprising, given the vast number of factors impinging upon them. Frequently they are "on their own" for the first time and are trying to present themselves as confident, assured, directed, and sexually proficient.

Concurrently, there may be strong expectations from peer groups and/or family to excel in academics, athletics, fraternity life, social life, and/or student government. Furthermore, all of these forces are occurring when college men are typically experiencing tremendous pressure to adopt and conform to the masculine mystique. They are expected to act as men, to "pass for" men, and indeed, to excel as men.

As mentioned earlier, it is theorized that college men pass through developmental stages. As college men wrestle with the pragmatics of their psychosocial, cognitive, and moral development, confusion is a natural product. As a counseling purpose, confusion reduction is likely to occur when an individual has inadequate personal structure with which to perceive and comprehend his daily life. An individual is likely to experience confusion and anxiety—frequently sufficient to interfere with his daily functioning—when the set of assumptions that he uses to interpret his world becomes ineffective. Some client concerns that are likely to result in counseling directed toward confusion reduction are as follows:

> I feel pretty strange about coming here for help,. . . It seems like if I'm not feeling strong and secure, and I dare to tell someone how I feel, I get kidded about it, or they get turned off. Isn't it supposed to be O.K. for guys to have feelings?
>
> When I was in high school, I didn't give much thought to being black. But at this campus, some white people seem to be really prejudiced against me. It is starting to make me think a lot more about what it means to me to be a black.

> In the little town that I grew up in, everybody was a Christian and followed the Bible. Here at the college, I've met a lot of different people. Well, I'm not sure what I really believe about God anymore. I just wanted some help getting my thoughts sorted out.

Perhaps because one's confusion may stem from many sources, a great diversity of therapeutic strategies surround confusion reduction as a counseling purpose. Numerous approaches such as client-centered, gestalt, and psychodynamic may be effective in assisting clients to understand better themselves and their place in the world. In order to be of assistance to the confused client, the therapist must respect the importance of one's personal structure in deriving a sense of meaning from an otherwise chaotic world. Counselors must also appreciate the difficulty men face in unveiling, reconstructing, and developing more adaptive and realistic personal structures.

Since ambiguity is typically antithetical to the male role's call for instrumental action, male clients are likely to be particularly uncomfortable with "hanging in there" while struggling with issues as abstract as values, meaning, and current implications of past learning. Furthermore, they may feel a need to mask any confusion. For this reason, the therapist has particular responsibility for helping the client to anticipate and prepare for often uncomfortable reactions to the examination of one's values and attempts to view oneself and the world in different ways. In addition, confusion can be discussed as a necessary, if not essential part of the change process. The therapist may encourage the client to explore the impact of his gender socialization on his apprehensions about the counseling process. Further, most male college clients benefit from repeated acknowledgment of the strength shown by seeking assistance, the courage shown by exploring the scary world within themselves, and the patience required to tolerate the anxiety that this process produces. In addition to assisting men to reach their self-identified goals, encouraging men to enjoy the self-exploration and growth *process* itself are worthy counseling achievements.

In sum, college men are facing difficult and complex developmental challenges at a time when they frequently feel the least permission to be uncertain or confused. Those individuals and institutions seeking to facilitate male college students' growth have the responsibility to be sensitive to male gender-role issues, create proactive environmental influences, and provide appropriate psychological interventions.

Self-Help Resources

Music

Lapow, Gary. *Tell it from the heart* [Record]. Springhill.

Morgan, Geof. *It comes with the plumbing* [Record]. Bellingham, WA: Nexus.

Morgan, Geof. *Finally letting it go* [Record]. Bellingham, WA: Nexus.

Books

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