

Book Review of Janelle M. Hallman's
The Heart of Female Same-Sex Attraction:
A Comprehensive Counseling Resource

Mary Beth Patton and Carolyn Pela¹

¹ Mary Beth Patton, MA, is a licensed professional counselor working full-time in private practice in Portland, Oregon. Her areas of specialty include sexual and gender identity issues along with sexual abuse recovery, sex therapy, and marriage counseling. Carolyn Pela, PhD, is the chair of the Department of Behavioral Studies at Arizona Christian University in Phoenix, Arizona. A licensed marriage and family therapist, she specializes in treating sexual issues and eating disorders and conducts marriage and family therapy.

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Janelle Hallman's *The Heart of Female Same Sex Attraction* (2008) is a bold work in a time when the very notion of the right to therapeutic self-determination for individuals dissatisfied with their same-sex attraction and behavior (SSA) is under attack. Hallman philosophically and practically demonstrates the importance of privileging the client's story and agenda. Between the lines of the text is her consistent claim to clients' rights to make their own choices and to walk their chosen therapeutic path. Further, she offers an alternative to practices that limit the client's agenda based on the therapist's personal values.

Hallman states that the book "is primarily intended for mental health professionals, educators, and pastoral-care counselors who are interested in clinical perspective on the issue" (p.12). Additionally, she recommends the book—especially chapters 3 through 5—for friends, family members, and women experiencing conflict with SSA.

Hallman is the first to critique her own book as she identifies possible limitations of her clinical perspectives and insights, specifically as they relate to the demographics and motivations of the women addressed in her book. Her clients are 25 to 55 years old, which eliminates adolescents and traditional college-aged women. Her clients are also dissatisfied with their same-sex feelings and behaviors and want to bring their experiences in line with their values. But because Hallman undergirds her work with mainstream philosophical principles and practices of psychotherapy, we believe other clinicians can generalize her insights and practices to SSA women from various backgrounds.

The text is organized in two main parts that are preceded by a prologue. Traditionally, readers often skip over the prologue in their rush to get to the "meat" of a book. In this case, however, the prologue is essential for understanding Hallman's foundational respect and valuing of her clients and her passion for helping this unique group of women. Hallman

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pursued her education and credentialing specifically so she could help women with unwanted SSA. Further adding to her distinct perspective, Hallman holds an orthodox Judeo-Christian view of human sexuality. She explains that her view of the connection of gender and sexual identity is illustrative of humankind's reflection of God's image.

Part one (chapters 1–5) provides a background for Hallman's approach to helping women in conflict with their SSA by introducing ethical and philosophical considerations. A review of Hallman's approach counters the claims of those who characterize therapists willing to work with individuals with unwanted SSA as unethical or unorthodox. Her approach to psychotherapy is philosophically and strategically reflective of mainstream psychodynamic and humanistic therapies.

Chapter 1 reveals the importance of a respectful and nurturing relationship between therapist and client. It includes a detailed description of the need for safety and trust, which involves a woman's right to choose how she defines herself sexually. This can be difficult for some pastoral counselors, but Hallman identifies as essential the construction of a safe place where there is unconditional freedom to grow and heal. This is a crucial point: Unless a woman can freely choose (or not choose) the lesbian lifestyle without judgment by her therapist, her choice is not freely made. Many of the women that we as reviewers and that Hallman have worked with come from family backgrounds of rigidity and constraint. A therapist's predetermined treatment goal of renouncing or promoting acquiescence to SSA only replicates what many have experienced in their families of origin, and such treatment may cause additional injury. We agree wholeheartedly with Hallman: Practitioners must hold the outcome of therapy lightly, fully respecting the client's right to self-determination.

This first chapter also includes a discussion of the controversy over change versus immutability, including a description of sexual fluidity as not being synonymous with changeability. The importance of grasping the difference between fluidity and changeability is essential for women who may feel victimized and blamed for something over which

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they have little control. Hallman's discussion underscores the idea that the factors causing a woman to change her attraction are complex.

Chapter 1 continues with a discussion of the ethics of treatment by addressing the issue of whether an attempt to change can actually cause damage. Hallman carefully highlights research on the topic indicating the positive impact of sexual orientation change-effort (SOCE) therapy; she also offers a bulleted list reminding the reader of standards of ethical practice (p. 31). It should be noted that this list of ethical practice standards applies to the practice of most therapists and their therapeutic goals with most clients, regardless of a client's presenting concerns. The research Hallman presents clearly indicates that with standard ethical practice and sufficient sensitivity to the needs of the woman she is likely to experience benefits, regardless of the degree of change in attraction.

Chapter 2 builds on the first chapter's discussion of ethical practice by emphasizing the importance of a therapist's professional competency. This chapter highlights Hallman's knowledge and insights related to working with this unique population that can come only through extensive experience. Hallman lists the empathic concerns that a therapist must fully grasp when working with these women, who commonly experience a depth of loneliness and shame, live in fear of themselves, sense more love and acceptance from gay or nonreligious friends than from religious friends and family, seem to lack the freedom to talk, and perceive an expectation to change "overnight."

Hallman cautions therapists against using a stance of "professional" detachment, arguing that it may be detrimental to the therapeutic relationship. She contends that the client, but not the therapist, may detach. This application of a traditional object relations approach continues throughout the book. Hallman includes several developmental trajectories of SSA as viewed from an object relations perspective. The use of orthodox psychotherapeutic approaches further communicates her concern for ethical practice, reminding the reader that ethical SOCE therapy is simply the professional application of standard therapeutic strategies.

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Chapters 3 to 5 provide a good introduction to the developmental issues surrounding SSA, so we suggest that our clients focus on these three chapters. Chapter 3 examines the nature versus nurture issue and states that “who we are directly affects how we perceive and process our worlds” (p. 51). The author discusses the significance of biology in determining SSA, describing these components as hormonal, neurological, genetic, or inborn personality characteristics or traits. Using existing research, Hallman comes to the same conclusion as the American Psychological Association (2008, p. 2), explaining that biology and environment each influence sexual orientation but that the exact role of biology is inconclusive.

Addressing biological influences, Hallman lists the common personality characteristics she has observed in women with SSA (pp. 54–55):

- Above-average intelligence
- Profound sensitivity and attunement to other people and relational dynamics
- Curiosity and sharp observation
- Gender-nonconforming abilities and interests
- Innate sense of justice
- Talent and far-reaching creativity
- High level of energy
- Adventurousness
- Athleticism

Concerning the influence of nurture, chapter 3 describes four developmental processes that are often compromised in women with SSA: attachment, formation of the self, gender identity, and socialization. Hallman states, “Typical in the history of women with SSA are interferences, stressors or failures in their most primal attachments, often arising at birth and continuing throughout childhood” (p. 57). Examples of the events that cause

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a daughter's defensive detachment include birth and postnatal complications, maternal deficits, abuse, or abandonment. Hallman has significantly broadened the classic "reasons why" and taken much of the blame off mothers for the development of SSA, which we consider a major contribution of her work. The author's insight and compassion allow her to see beyond typical explanations and help us to see with new eyes the complex and delicate dance of attunement between mother and daughter. The chapter's discussion of the interplay between biology and environment is accessible to clients, and reading this chapter often leads to further self-acceptance and reduction of shame.

Chapter 4 continues to address the developmental losses of women struggling with SSA. Hallman clearly but respectfully describes a girl lost in confusion who has settled for a re-created self rather than her true self. Hallman lists a variety of losses and disappointments that may be added to the young woman's gender nonconformity, creating even greater confusion. These losses may come from an over-identification with her father, trauma, sexual abuse, too few childhood girlfriends, same-sex admiration, the shock of puberty, a disparaging self and body image, and disappointing or negative encounters with young men. Such experiences may leave the young woman vulnerable, and she may eventually attempt to compensate by developing dependent relationships with other women.

While chapter 4 sets the stage, chapter 5 continues the story as the young woman begins "looking for home" (p. 98). Hallman's simple way of describing emotional dependency in women within same-sex relationships is to say that the woman is "depending on you for me" (p. 98). Hallman presents the complications of emotional dependency using the voices of the women she has worked with, and her respectful insight into this dilemma clarifies what she and we believe to be the core of female SSA.

Part two (chapters 6–12) continues to emphasize the author's collaborative approach and the priority she gives to the client's agenda. Hallman successfully balances the tension between psychodynamic developmental themes, profiles, and techniques with

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the call to see each woman as unique. The therapeutic practices of empathizing, valuing, and being genuine with the client also give evidence of a traditional humanistic approach.

Hallman's consistent use of orthodox practice is important. Some popular and academic media propagate misinformation about SOCE therapy, presenting it as a unique set of unorthodox practices. Part one clearly refutes this view as Hallman lays a foundation of ethical, mainstream therapeutic philosophies; Part two builds on this foundation, describing a therapeutic approach grounded in the traditions of classical psychotherapies.

Chapter 6 identifies four stages of therapy: formation, transformation, integration, and consolidation/maturity. Hallman contends that therapeutic attachment, which involves building trust and empathy, is not a one-time event but happens repeatedly throughout the therapeutic process. Unconditional acceptance is a theme of this chapter, particularly as it relates to the client's same-sex feelings and behaviors, her same-sex partner, and her goals for therapy. This modeling of acceptance is essential for helping the client become able to practice "radical self-acceptance" (p. 124).

Chapter 7 describes the process of attunement and attachment with clarity and grace. The detailed explanations present the intellectual as well as emotional process for both therapist and client. Hallman expresses the clear view that acceptance of the client includes acceptance of her survival strategies. This expression of the head-heart connection resonates with us as the ideal example of what it is like to do this work.

Chapter 8 describes a variety of personality profiles of women struggling with SSA that provide a starting place for the practitioner without pigeonholing the client into a single "type" of personality. Without exception, our clients have identified with a combination of profiles. If the book had been longer, it may have been helpful to increase the number of profiles presented.

Chapter 9 underscores Hallman's practice of concurrently providing nurture and challenge to her clients. She presents the importance of the additive structure of validating techniques and posture while simultaneously providing insight into identifying and dis-

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mantling the negative core beliefs. This chapter clearly paints the picture of a child devoid of feeling, blaming herself and moving into self-hatred because basic needs went unmet. Hallman describes the need to help clients face the false self and give up defenses—such as self-defeating and self-protective behaviors—allowing them to receive from others and experience the fulfillment of their unmet needs. She includes a detailed description of the progression of defensive attachment commonly found in women with SSA.

In chapter 10, Hallman highlights some of the challenges clients face, such as identifying and facing infatuation while staying present in relationships. She describes teaching clients how to make friends with women while understanding and dismantling the motivations behind the sexualization of these friendships. She walks the reader through the client's process of ending enmeshment, beginning differentiation, and putting to rest the need to caretaker. Hallman states that this is a time for the client to

openly discuss her struggle with God and general ambivalence and confusion with respect to her future and future choices.She will need the freedom to openly and frankly discuss her same-sex longings and her specific same-sex attraction and behaviors.At this stage of therapy my client may need the freedom to integrate and openly proclaim a lesbian identity, even as she makes decisions about ending a present relationship or foregoing a new relationship. This does not dismay me. (p. 210)

We are glad that she states this so strongly. Allowing the client the right to self-determination is crucial to the woman's individuation process.

Chapter 11 explores transference and counter-transference and focuses the therapist's experiences. Hallman lists common feeling states of therapists who are experiencing counter-transference, including severe anxiety, helplessness, inadequacy, defensiveness, anger, feeling guarded or violated, a fear of engulfment, and exhaustion. We suspect that

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therapists who are successful with this population may be more sensitively wired and especially attuned to their clients. If so, it may be necessary to restrict the number of SSA clients that a therapist sees in order to avoid “burnout.”

Chapter 11 continues by addressing the client’s experience of transference, projection, and regression. If a client expresses romantic feelings or attraction to the therapist, Hallman coaches the therapist to show no shock or surprise, to validate the client’s feelings, to reassure the client that the relationship will not terminate, and to assure the client that the therapist will maintain appropriate boundaries. Hallman follows this with a warning to avoid sexual involvement with the client. While this should be assumed, we have had more than one client present with a history of betrayal through seduction by a female therapist. Overall, the client’s experience of therapeutic attachment typically leaves her with new vulnerabilities for which she needs both protection and nurturing.

In chapter 12, Hallman suggests a myriad of ways to affirm the feminine and challenge the misogyny within. With her usual theme of patience and respect, she discusses the splitting or burying of the feminine identity and the hatred of the feminine that many of her clients experience. She cautions that this may be a significantly threatening process for many clients and encourages therapists to understand that some clients will never accept the challenge of embracing the feminine. At the same time, Hallman does not soft sell the harm experienced by women who maintain and even nurture this self-hatred. She challenges misogynist presuppositions that her clients bring to the conversation and in her final argument ultimately returns to her view of woman as God’s image-bearer.

Chapter 13 wraps up the book with a discussion of closure by first asking the question, “What about men?” Echoing the consistent theme of respect for the client’s process and the acknowledgment of each woman’s unique history and agenda, the author warns that not all women’s therapy will result in heterosexual attraction or even the desire to pursue relationships with men. The core of the chapter identifies specific challenges

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her clients often have in relating to men. Hallman finishes the chapter by offering strategies for successful termination.

As stated earlier, Hallman includes in the book's intended audience women in conflict with their SSA, their friends, and their family members. However, many of our clients who have read the whole book describe feeling overwhelmed by it and indicate their belief that therapists are the targeted audience. As a result of that fairly universal reaction, we now generally recommend that they read only the more client-friendly chapters 3 through 5.

Hallman's inclusion of the Theophostic prayer ministry approach (p. 255) is out of place in this otherwise theoretically well-grounded book. She mentions the approach in passing and without explanation as a method for dealing with trauma. Though this approach has not been researched adequately, it is included in the same sentence with the well-researched EMDR (Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing) method, suggesting that they share similar credibility.

This book was well named—*The Heart of Female Same-Sex Attraction*. While providing much information, explanation, and direction, the most important aspect—the heart of these women—is captured with authenticity and clarity. The book is a beautiful treatise on how to work with any client who is reluctant, passive, defensive, or avoidant. Hallman shows clinicians how to navigate the difficulties of the initial relationship, build trust, and move forward with dignity and purpose.

A significant element that sets this book apart from others is the use of the women's own voices and the knowledge Hallman brings as a therapist who has in-depth experience working with this population. The dialogues, explanations, and understanding that come from Hallman's insight and discussion of her clients are invaluable. Hallman's respect for the dignity of each woman and her profound understanding of the human condition makes this book a work of art.

While there are more resources available now for guiding therapists who work with conflicted SSA clients than there were just ten years ago, many of these resources

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are primarily, and often exclusively, focused on helping men. Others address only limited aspects of the therapeutic process. Janelle Hallman's *The Heart of Female Same Sex Attraction: A Comprehensive Counseling Resource* is unique as a single-authored, comprehensive resource for therapists who want to understand developmental issues and therapeutic strategies for helping women who experience SSA.

References

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