

Coming Closer

A review of the film



The Sessions

(2012)

Ben Lewin (Director)

Reviewed by

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Although for every other kind of psychological therapy sex between a therapist and a client is completely, utterly, totally forbidden, in *The Sessions* such sex is what it's all about. The client is Mark O'Brien (John Hawkes). In real life, he was a poet and journalist. From the age of six, when he contracted polio, to age 49, when he died, he was unable to move any muscles below the neck. But he could talk, and, holding a pointer in his mouth, he could write by tapping out words on a computer.

At age 38 O'Brien hired a sex surrogate. In 1990 he published an article about his experience with her. *The Sessions*, written and directed by Ben Lewin, himself a polio survivor, was derived from this article. The surrogate is Cheryl Cohen Greene (Helen Hunt). She holds a doctorate and writes about her work as a surrogate and sex therapist in her 2012 book *An Intimate Life*.

So what's the difference between a surrogate-therapist and a prostitute? In her first meeting with Mark, Cheryl answers this question by saying that whereas a prostitute will see a client again and again because that's her business, Cheryl's job is to see the client just a few times to enable him to enter a sexual relationship with someone else. She tells Mark that his sessions will last two hours and that there will be a maximum of six of them.

In this film, an artful commentary is provided by a parallel set of sessions called confessions that Mark, a devout Catholic, has with his priest, Father Brendan (William H. Macy). Early in the confessional sessions, Mark tells Father Brendan that he would like to know a woman in the biblical sense and says he's thinking of seeing a sex surrogate. Recovering quickly from his initial surprise, Father Brendan smiles and says that he thinks Mark would get "a free pass on this one."

Mark's decision to hire a sex surrogate is prompted by interviews he conducted for an article he was commissioned to write on the sexual lives of people with disabilities. He is taken to the interviews on his gurney by his caregiver, Vera (Moon Bloodgood). When he decides to hire Cheryl, he has to borrow for the first session the bedroom of one of the people he has interviewed because the bedroom in his own apartment doesn't have a bed, only an iron lung, in which he sleeps.

Sessions with Cheryl start awkwardly. Mark feels unlovable and has no idea whether any of this could work. But Cheryl is reassuring, and progress is made, from her holding his hand and touching it against her face, and then against her breast, to more intimate actions.

The film's climax, if I may use that term, is in the fourth session. By now, the locale is a motel, and during the session Vera waits and chats with the motel receptionist about what is going on. She explains that the room is being rented so that Mark can have sex therapy. One senses, here, a certain rumbling of the film's machinery as the writer prepares a joke: Vera says to the receptionist that, on this day, the couple is working on simultaneous orgasm. "What's that?" asks the receptionist. Inside the motel room, the orgasms are not exactly simultaneous, but intercourse is achieved, and Mark asks Cheryl if she would come too. She does so. This is the signal that this session will be their last.

For psychologists an introduction to these issues was via a 1971 article by Elaine Walster (now Elaine Hatfield) and Ellen Berscheid. They argued that, although it had not previously been applied in this way, Schachter and Singer's (1962) theory of emotions was perfect for explaining sexual love. Schachter and Singer's original experiments compared anger between participants who had been given an injection of adrenaline and those who had been given a placebo injection. Anger was prompted by having participants answer a rude and intrusive questionnaire and by witnessing another participant, actually a confederate of the experimenters, become enraged by it. The intensity of anger was strongest in participants who had received the arousing adrenaline injection but no explanation of its bodily effects. On the basis of these experiments, Schachter and Singer proposed that emotion is typically a physiological arousal plus a cognitive attribution of this arousal to something in the social world.

This same idea led to an experiment that might be regarded as the most imaginative yet conducted in social psychology. It was by Dutton and Aron (1974). They compared sexual responses of men who had crossed a precarious-seeming, 450-foot-long footbridge made of planks suspended from swaying cables across a gorge 200 feet above a raging torrent, with responses of men who crossed a solid cedar bridge 10 feet above a small tributary, further upstream. The bridges were in a much-frequented park, and at both bridges the men were met, individually, by the same female research assistant who asked them to take part in her research on responses to the environment. After she collected their responses, she told the men that if they wanted to talk further about the study they could phone her at a number she gave them. Compared with the men who crossed the stable bridge, many more who crossed the arousing suspension bridge offered sexualized responses to an ambiguous picture, and many more later phoned the research assistant.

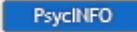
Walster and Berscheid extended their theory beyond mere attraction and proposed that, when one experiences the arousal of sex with another person, one tends to attribute the excitement and warm feelings to that person: The result is the emotional experience of passionate love. Hatfield and Rapson (2009) brought the idea up to date in a review that covered not only the history of writings about passionate love but recent research in neuroimaging, which has now extended issues of activation of the body to activation of areas of the brain in relation to passionate love.

The explanation of the emotion of love as arousal plus attribution works well for Mark. He had previously experienced erections and seminal emissions, but they were involuntary and shameful. Now, he experiences them as willing involvement with Cheryl. He becomes not only strongly attracted, but for him she becomes the most wonderful person in the world.

When one thinks of what was going on for Cheryl, the film suggests a lovely ambiguity. Does physiology influence emotion, or does emotion influence physiology? Cheryl engaged in sex with Mark for professional reasons and was paid with money left in an envelope on a table. So why was she so moved by him? With her expertise and experience, she would have had ready attributions for what went on physiologically during sex. Perhaps, instead, she was moved by Mark's stoicism, or by who he was, or by a poem he wrote for her. But she was moved, and she was pleased and able to come to orgasm with him, meaningfully, affectionately, lovingly.

Was the therapy successful in enabling Mark to have a sexual relationship with someone else? For that, you'll have to see the film.

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