

BOOK REVIEW

Rewriting the Rules: An Integrative Guide to Love, Sex and Relationships

Meg Barker. Abingdon, UK: Routledge, 2012. ISBN-13: 978-0-41551-763-8. Price: £17.99. Pages: 208 (paperback)

Many Journal readers will recall, back in the mists of time, a self-help best-seller that advised women who wanted a partner to follow a certain set of 'rules'. I simplify, but it seemed to boil down to mistrusting men's motives, playing hard to get, then setting up a truly nasty relationship dynamic.

Sadly, this toxic book is still selling. Happily, there is an antidote to its toxicity, and to the toxicity of all the myths, preconceptions and misguided expectations that we put on relationships in these early years of the 21st century.

Meg Barker, whose academic background solidly underpins the book but whose sensitive awareness of the

general public makes the work accessible to a wide readership, has deconstructed nine of the most fundamental 'rules' that we bring to bear on relationships: Yourself, Attraction, Love, Sex, Gender, Monogamy, Conflict, Breaking Up, Commitment. For each, she rigorously asks the questions: What are the rules? Why might we question them? What are the alternatives?

The chapter on Sex, for example, outlines the unwritten laws which state that we need to have sex, we need to have normal sex, we need to have great sex – and we need to do all this without even talking about it. Barker then logically and persuasively challenges each of these concepts, concluding that both individuals and society could benefit from a more flexible, positive, self-aware and free-speaking attitude to sexuality.

This is a thought-provoking and very useful book; but at first sight it might seem as if – with the possible exception of that chapter on Sex – it is at best peripheral and at worst irrelevant to the issues of family planning and reproductive health.

I would argue otherwise. It's not just that we need to be aware when our clients' approach to their sexual health may be affected by buying into the 'rules'. But also, our own professional practice, whether strategic or minute-to-minute, is of course constantly informed by our beliefs and values. Hence to have sound practice, those beliefs and values have to not only be well-informed, but also personally congruent and socially ethical. Barker not only informs, but also challenges in a way that surely will inevitably lead to a stronger congruence and a greater ethicality.

In short, my recommendation on *Rewriting the Rules* consists of the following: Read. Learn. Inwardly digest. And then let this book inform everything you do.

Reviewed by **Susan Quilliam**

Writer, Broadcaster, Consultant and Trainer, Cambridge, UK; susan@susanquilliam.com

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