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Sara Angelini

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

Meg Barker. (2013). East Sussex & New York: Routledge.

We are in a state of uncertainty about relationships.

I had the pleasure of meeting Meg Barker at the 2010 Sexistential Conference in London. We shared a short conversation after a presentation about uncertainty in modern constructed relationships. Barker contrasted certain ‘solutions’ to relational, sexual or love struggles with engaging with uncertainty in relationships. Barker mentioned the need to ask better questions and to be curious about our sexual relations and love.

Three years later I had the pleasure of picking up *Rewriting the Rules*. I was excited to see where three years of work on this idea had taken Barker. The title was a bit concerning however. “An Integrative Guide.” I wondered if this was another book offering me answers. Was Barker pedalling a concrete methodology or specific processes designed to get me to certainty?

Thankfully, Barker’s opening line shattered my concerns.

‘We are in a state of uncertainty about relationships.’ A bold opening statement. Barker states explicitly early on that *Rewriting the Rules* is an anti-self-help book. This book does not contain suggestions, ideas, solutions or new rules to make readers’ love life, sex life or relationships better. Rather, it attempts to engage readers in questioning the rules that have governed relationships, sex, gender, identity and commitment. Conveniently there are two rules to guide this questioning. First, there are no universal answers. Second, it’s okay to question the rules.

Barker starts by examining rules about self. The first rule she challenges is the rule that you have to love yourself before you can love anyone else. She examines what this presupposes, suggesting that it sets up the idea there is a ‘true self’, or ‘core self’. The secret of loving others is then to

love our true self. This sets up a relationship with ourselves where our identity is static. Barker instead suggests we think of our identity as plural, and a process. Barker's ability to bring concepts of *Dasein*, facticity, situatedness, being-in-the-world and becoming into an accessible opening chapter is magnificent in my opinion. By the end of Chapter 1, I recognize the entire book is written on deep existential underpinnings, but not once in the book is there esoteric language that often turns lay people away. Barker grounds her insights in the lived life so readers can easily comprehend her meaning without a philosophy degree.

This is further elucidated in an exercise Barker gives her readers. Pick five people from your everyday life. Then, based on certain characteristics: 'outgoing', 'fun' or 'patient', you mark an X or O, on a grid. Ultimately, readers are challenged to look back and see that they are potentially shy in one relationship, but not in another. They may be impatient with one person, yet patient with another. This exercise allows for readers to experience their own plurality in a way they might have not recognized previously. In existential terms, Barker is offering a process to question readers' facticity. This is what I most valued in Barker's book. Barker's ability to engage readers in experiential processes that are defined by a deep understanding of existential philosophy and psychotherapy while remaining practical and accessible is what I most value about this book.

The chapters in Barker's book build upon one another sequentially, questioning the rules about: yourself, attraction, love, sex, gender, monogamy, conflict, break-up, and commitment. Each chapter follows the same structure: offer up rules, explaining why readers would question the rules, alternative rules, ending with a section she titles 'Beyond rules? Embracing uncertainty'. This book's value becomes apparent to me in the sections about embracing uncertainty. Each chapter opines that there isn't an answer. In the chapter about sex, the uncertainty is an invitation for readers to become curious about themselves in sexual activities, as well as the meaning and role of sex in their life. In the chapter on gender, the uncertainty invites readers to see how their rules on gender set expectations in relationships, and offers rather than gender being a continuum that gender is plural. A simple cartoon drawing illustrates multiple continuums including delicate to tough, emotional to rational, and submissive and yielding to dominant and bossy. The drawing is well placed, in that once again, Barker creates an experience for readers in which to reimagine their own and others' plurality.

In the final chapter on rules Barker brings her threads together by asking readers to examine their commitments to 'being present', flexibility, compassion, and freedom. These relational commitments echo the values and ideas of existential theory. I appreciate Barker's vision of freedom as 'taking mutual responsibility in relationships' and thus 'valuing the freedom

of others to make their own choices' and 'recognizing that the same is true for ourselves'.

The last chapter is a practical chapter on the process of rewriting your own rules. Barker reminds readers this is not a one time event, but a continual process. The idea introduced in the beginning is reiterated. This book is an 'anti-self-help book'. Barker instead suggests we build self reflection into our lives and use it as a tool to engage with the world.

While I enjoyed the entire book, the final section is what I find the most valuable. Barker invites readers to live an engaged life with themselves and others. While the rest of the book is composed of consistent invitations to start the process, the final section contains the practical suggestions on how to integrate investigations into uncertainty and curiosity into one's life.

In my opinion, existential psychotherapy suffers from a lack of accessibility to those outside our philosophical sphere. Barker's book, however is accessible to most clients. I can give this book to clients to read without the concern that they will get lost in overly intellectual rhetoric. At the same time, Barker's book doesn't hold back from the phenomenological investigations that are deeply valued in existential thought. Barker's avoidance of solutions provides a process for better understanding of ourselves, our relationships, and love.

Justin Rock

The Descriptive Phenomenological Method in Psychology

Amedeo Giorgi (2009). Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania: Duquesne University Press.

Whether familiar with phenomenology or not, researchers should find this book important because it describes what it claims to be a better way of conducting research into human psychology than empirical statistically-based methods. Giorgi advocates Husserl's Phenomenology as a better, more appropriate approach. As a psychotherapist, I regard myself in part as a researcher into the way clients' thinking might generate their complaints. Or in existential terms, how clients' intentionalities (valuing, judging, planning, remembering, hoping, expecting, giving significance and meaning to, making assumptions, desiring, comparing, measuring, calculating, etcetera) might sustain their experience of themselves and the world. A phenomenological researcher does this in a disciplined way to gain generalised psychological knowledge about the researcher's particular field of interest. I find that Giorgi's text speaks to both therapists and researchers, describing and fully justifying the steps that can produce stable and scientifically valid conclusions.

Chapter One lays out what Giorgi calls his Conceptual Framework,