

## Book Review

Emmers-Sommer, T. & Allen, M. (2005). *Safer Sex in Personal Relationships: The Role of Sexual Scripts in HIV Infection and Prevention*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum, 134 pp., ISBN: 0805844465 (hardback); \$49.95 (hardback).

Reviewed by **Sandra L. Faulkner**  
Syracuse University, Syracuse,  
New York, USA

Why is it so difficult to talk about sexual issues, especially sexually transmitted infections like HIV, with a romantic partner? What relational processes influence these conversations? What advice can we give to those involved in close relationships about how to address sexual issues? Emmers-Sommer and Allen address these fundamental questions in their book on HIV and safer sex wherein they adopt a communication approach to focus on interpersonal phenomenon that influence safer sex discussions. As a communication scholar who teaches and researches sexual messages in the context of close relationships, I appreciate this approach, and I believe that other scholars and practitioners who teach sexuality courses with a focus on relational processes will recognize the utility of such an approach. The authors frame relational processes, such as intimacy and commitment, from a sexual script perspective. This perspective examines sexual scripts from individual, dyadic, and cultural levels to demonstrate how definitions of close romantic relationships as “safe” constrain conversations about safer sex.

The authors rightly attempt to break down the still-prevalent notion of at-risk groups in chapters on safer sex among older adults and in the context of heterosexual dating relationships, marital relationships, and homosexual relationships that have hindered the fight against HIV. This focus on risk groups helps individuals to distance themselves from being considered at risk and lessens attention to the idea of high-risk behaviors. Estrada and Quintero (1999) elegantly summarize the implication of this notion:

Information about HIV, generated within the context of applied health research, including public health, epidemiology, biomedicine, and the social and behavioral sciences, has played a significant role in channeling perceptions of what types of people are more likely to carry HIV. . . . These categories of risk, practice, and identity help situate the disease within the boundaries of certain social and cultural groups. (p. 133)

Unfortunately, the organization of the book reinforces this conceptualization with chapters that concentrate on at-risk groups rather than on an infusion of issues. For example, the authors include a chapter on culture that discusses issues of

concern for Hispanics, African Americans, Native Americans, and Asian Americans, highlighting broad cultural scripts that may influence safer sex discussions. The separate treatment, however, makes the connections more murky than necessary. Where would we place a discussion of older African American lesbians—in the culture chapter, the homosexual relationship chapter, or the safer sex and the aged chapter?

In chapters 2 and 3, the authors discuss safer sex in heterosexual dating and marriage, emphasizing the manner in which conceptualizations of these relationships as intimate, trusting, and generally monogamous work against couples who want to talk about condoms and safer sex. This challenge is especially true in more serious dating and marital relationships where condoms are equated with mistrust, casual relationships, and infidelity. The authors outline the sexual scripts that make honest discussion of infidelity and condom use as nearly impossible to maintain the health of a relationship. I would have appreciated more discussion of how traditional gender roles influence men's behavior. As Emmers-Sommer and Allen observe, "It is important to also empower men such that they do not feel the need to have sex or 'conquer'—a social pressure bestowed on men, aligned with the traditional sexual script" (p. 29).

Chapter 4 provides excellent background on activism in the gay male community in the 1980s that contributed to the successful fight of HIV as demonstrated in lower instances of infection. The authors also call for continued attention to issues for younger gay men because of cultural differences, attitudes, and AIDS drug cocktails. In particular, the phenomenon of "barebacking," where sex is deliberately engaged in without condoms and discussion of HIV status, contributes to the rising infection rates among younger gay men. I would add to this discussion by arguing that placing oneself at risk for HIV infection through practices such as barebacking constitutes one way to feel part of the community because, for some, being HIV positive is one marker of being a gay male.

The authors, however, do not discuss lesbians and HIV, even though lesbians contract HIV, and many of their concerns differ from gay men and heterosexual women. This silence mirrors the insufficient attention that still plagues lesbians and women who have sex with women, ignoring the social constraints of gender and homophobia and the social realities of lesbian women living with HIV, yet again making their concerns invisible. A recent focus group study by Marrazzo, Coffey, and Bingham (2005), for instance, found that bisexual and lesbian women considered sexually transmitted disease risk reduction behaviors as something that was a concern mostly for heterosexual women. This book contributes to this perception.

Generally, the book is geared toward an undergraduate audience in a classroom setting because of the breadth of topics covered (safer sex in different relational types, relational processes, culture, age, HIV testing, and living with HIV/AIDS). Given this, I would have preferred more of a personal voice throughout the book as shown in chapter 4. The incorporation of a strong theoretical framework, however, helps the topics cohere in a fashion useful for classroom discussion. I would begin such a discussion with the authors' conclusion where they state that individuals have the choice to be seronegative or seropositive: "Recognizing the power and exercising it enables us to control, rather than be controlled" (p. 112). This potential may be the largest dilemma, where individuals wrestle with individual- and cultural-level scripts of appropriate sexual talk and behavior.

**References**

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- Marrazzo, J. M., Coffey, P., & Bingham, A. (2005). Sexual practices, risk perception and knowledge of sexually transmitted disease risk among lesbian and bisexual women. *Perspectives on Sexual and Reproductive Health*, 37, 6–12.