

The Interpreting Audience: The Therapeutics of Self-Help Book Reading

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□—Since the “second wave” of the women’s movement, psychological self-help books have been an important resource for many women regarding issues of relationships and identity. This audience study examines how the use of self-help books is enacted in everyday life, and how this use illuminates aspects of women’s lives in contemporary America. Although the genre has been criticized for its recipe format, readers use self-help books in complex, and often empowering ways. Readers often read for the purpose of extricating themselves from patriarchal authority and establishing personal autonomy. Yet, they simultaneously construct an experience with the texts which helps them establish a sense of what is culturally shared among a community of readers. This “abstract” community of others provides a sense of what constitutes shared cultural knowledge, something which readers are unable to glean from their everyday interpersonal interaction.

I share with my fellow American generation an acute sense of dislocation and the equally acute challenge of having to invent a place and an identity for myself without the traditional supports.—Eva Hoffman (1989, p. 197)

I read self-help books because there is safety in numbers.—Barbara (interviewee)¹

“SELF-HELP” has long been associated with something Americans value as a culture. Attributed first to Emerson, the term self-help is affiliated with self-reliance, the notion that we must learn to “walk on our own feet” (Briggs, 1987). In American lore, self-help is a celebration of the individual’s liberation from the authoritative shackles of the past.

The literature of self-help has had an enduring place in American life not only as a messenger of success ideology (Cawelti, 1965; Weiss, 1969) but also as a therapeutic response to rapid social change. When self-help began to proliferate during the nineteenth century, physician George M. Beard’s (1881) writings provided information about troubles such as “neurasthenia,” described as a distress reaction to the loss of traditional social order (Lears, 1981). Treatments for neurasthenia included the use of “mind cure” and New Thought, both the topics of popular books well into the twentieth century. By the turn of the century, psychiatry and psychology had aligned successfully with science, moving “into a central place in American healing and popular culture” (Starker, 1987, p. 59).

In the view of many scholars (Bellah, Madsen, Sullivan, & Tipton, 1985; Lasch, 1984; Lears, 1981; Rieff, 1966), the modern response to the deterioration of

traditional social order and sense of place has been a preoccupation with the therapeutic, a condition where personal well-being becomes an end in itself. In contemporary America individuals are increasingly detached from what constitutes a collective, turning instead to the self, to "becoming one's own person."

Therapeutic expression is not only present in talk between professional therapists and their clients; it is part of our everyday language and is also found in popular forms of mediated communication. Today, psychological self-help books represent one popular vehicle for therapeutic ideas and values.² Therapeutic ideas are also proffered through talk shows, advice columns, and television dramas (Gumpert & Fish, 1990). There is little research on how audiences members appropriate and understand therapeutic messages. Most research has focused instead on issues of therapeutic efficacy, often described functionally as the curing of an emotional or behavioral problem (see Bouhoutsos, 1990).

THE SELF-HELP GENRE

WOMEN AND SELF-HELP

The "second wave" of the women's movement has greatly influenced social change in contemporary America. Since the publication of *The Feminine Mystique* (Friedan, 1963), self-help books have become important sources of information for many women regarding issues of identity and relationships. Current research indicates that women read more psychologically oriented self-help books than men do (Starker, 1986) and that women purchase more self-help books (Wood, 1988). Within subgenres such as co-dependency and recovery literature, purchases by women currently comprise 75–85% of total sales (Jones, 1990).

The research presented here examines women's use and interpretations of the genre of psychological self-help books. It is a focused examination of one case of engagement with a form of mediated communication that has therapeutic intentions. Most studies of mediated therapeutic communication have analyzed either media content or the characteristics of the therapeutic "interaction," often making inferences about audience behavior without empirical backing.³ Using qualitative methods, this reception study is not only an example of how media influence is enacted in the social action of everyday life; it is also a lens through which women's struggles in contemporary America may be better understood. Self-help book reading is a relatively private act that therapeutically focuses on changing the *self*, but it paradoxically offers contact with a community of others who are not easily accessed in everyday discourse. A goal of the research was to understand what women's engagement with self-help means to them, and what their discourse about the books reveals about issues of identity and authority in their lives. A goal of this article is to illuminate *social and cultural* aspects of self-help by examining how these books are used and understood by readers.

THE POPULARITY OF SELF-HELP

Mass-marketed psychological self-help books have seen tremendous growth during the 20th century, with a yearly increase in the number of titles produced

(Starker, 1987). The 1970s marked the beginning of a virtual explosion in the mass marketing of popular psychology (Ehrenreich & English, 1979). Mullins and Kopelman (1984) have documented an increase in the number of best-selling books that focus on self-improvement, self-awareness, and personal growth since the early 70s. In the 1980s, the number of popular psychology books directed toward women increased rapidly (Shapiro, 1987). By 1987, Norwood's (1985) book, *Women Who Love Too Much*, had sold over 2,500,000 copies and was described by *Newsweek* as "becoming a way of life for millions of man junkies" (Leerhsen, Abramson, Anderson, & Donovan, 1987). Television talk shows such as *Oprah Winfrey* often feature self-help book authors who serve as resident experts on the problem of the day. Magazine advice columns feature condensed versions of best-selling self-help.

A 1988 national Gallup survey shows that one in three adult Americans have purchased a self-help book (Wood, 1988). Starker (1986) found that most psychologists recommend self-help books to their clients. According to one survey, adults read approximately three self-help books per year (Starker, 1986).⁴ Most of these readers are college-educated and middle-class, and nearly all have found the genre to be helpful.

Although there is a rich legacy of self-help literature in the United States, academic work in the area has largely addressed success books and the American ideology of the "self-made man." Some psychologists have praised the genre for making mental health information widely available; others have been alarmed by some authors' expansive claims of cure (Glasgow & Rosen, 1982; Rosen, 1987). My study did not assume that readers find claims to be compelling or that they expect a cure from a book. Indeed, my research indicates that readers often view self-help books as limited in their capacity to cure and that they feel empowered as they piece together ideas from a number of sources.

FEMINIST CRITIQUES

Many feminists have lauded best-selling self-help books that since the 70s have focused on helping women become more independent (Lerner, 1990). Books like *The Assertive Woman* (Phelps & Austin, 1975) and *Men Are Just Desserts* (Freidman, 1984) encourage women to leave behind dysfunctional behaviors that are rooted in female socialization. Over the past 5 years, however, a number of feminist critics have objected to the content of self-help books, particularly those directed toward women. The most frequent criticism is that psychological self-help books frame women's experience in the culture as "illness" that can be cured with the aid of learned experts.⁵ Most feminist authors have criticized the way in which self-help defines problems therapeutically—that is, as exclusively personal, rather than political and cultural (Lerner, 1990; Sidel, 1990). Even when a woman's problems are given a social and cultural basis, the "cure" rarely focuses on political and social change.

According to feminist psychologist and self-help book author Harriet Lerner, (1990), most self-help books are relentlessly trying to perfect or improve women, teaching them to "privatize, individualize, and pathologize" their problems rather than to understand them as a natural outgrowth of inequality" (p. 15). Self-help

books commonly profess that the good life is entirely in the individual's control. In one of the few systematic examinations of self-help books written for women, Schilling and Fuehrer (1987) found that self-help promotes an optimistic suggestion that battles for equality have already been won. Worell (1988) also finds that self-help books such as Cowan and Kinder's *Smart Women, Foolish Choices* (1986) present women as interpersonally incompetent—ironic considering evidence that women are especially skilled in the relational domain.

These criticisms raise important questions about the role of therapeutic ideas in women's lives. Analysis, however, needs to move beyond the examination of texts to the assorted arenas of readers' lives in which the social action of reading takes place. To date, analysis and criticism of self-help books have assumed that content has predictable effects on audience members. The readers of self-help are implicitly constructed as passively "digesting" information (Radway, 1986). Texts are assumed to deliver a fixed and stable meaning, and no insight is provided into how individuals negotiate understanding in their engagement with the texts. In examining audience use and interpretation of the self-help genre, this study is one of the first reception studies of popular nonfiction.

CHARACTERISTICS OF THE GENRE

Self-help books comprise a loose genre, as exemplified by ongoing discussion within the publishing industry regarding how to classify such books.⁶ At bookstores there is often cross-referencing among the shelves labeled "self," "recovery," "inspiration," "women's studies," "parenting," and "new age." The readers I interviewed included all of the above in their discussions of the self-help genre, thus reflecting the language of the marketplace.⁷ Their reading practices did not revolve around one central interpretive source, as did Radway's (1984) romance readers. Nor did the women I interviewed constitute a network of readers, though some participated in church or therapy groups where self-help was discussed.

Unlike fiction, which has been the subject of nearly all examinations of women's use of the media, self-help books have explicit therapeutic intentions. Many present themselves as aiding in women's "resistance" or liberation.

RECEPTION ANALYSIS AND QUALITATIVE METHODS

Interpretations of media fare and experience are realized in social action (Anderson & Meyer, 1988), through particular kinds of social relationships. For example, after reading a related book, a woman may decide to discuss "loving too much" with her therapist. Or she may label herself as such a woman as she watches herself falling in love with men she may now define as "needy." Because the act of reading as well as other media experiences may be private and unobservable, qualitative media scholars often use in-depth interviews. The interview becomes an instance in which social action unfolds (Mishler, 1979) as researcher and interviewee talk about media engagement.⁸

METHODOLOGY

The study presented here is part of a larger project of ongoing data collection. Participants were recruited during 1988–1989 in Lexington, Kentucky, a small metropolitan area of approximately 210,000. Results reported come from questionnaires and interview data, though primary emphasis here is on the latter. Initially, 33 women interested in participating in a study on self-help book reading filled out a lengthy questionnaire that tapped demographics and types of books read. Most had responded to fliers that asked, "Are you a reader of self-help books?" Others were contacted through word of mouth. From the questionnaire group, 11 women were invited to participate in a series of interviews.

A process of "maximum variation sampling" was used to select those to be interviewed (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Sampling of this kind is based on informational redundancy, not a statistical confidence level. The researcher attempts to "maximize information, not facilitate generalization" (p. 202).

The goal of qualitative media research is not to find lawlike relationships that are generalizable across a population, but rather to further *understand* situated instances of media engagement (Lindlof & Meyer, 1987). Those interviewed (and those in the original group of 33) were middle-class, mostly college-educated women who worked outside the home—matching the demographic data available on self-help book readership. The demographic variation among these middle-class participants closely reflects the larger "population," but this group is not a random sample, and no claim of representativeness can be made. Questions of how "transferable" my findings will be to others reading self-help are difficult to answer at this time, given the dearth of information about readers to date.

The hypotheses generated here are drawn from patterns observed in the interview data. My aim is not to suggest that the group I interviewed is a coherent entity, but rather to summarize the common experiences of a cluster of women who did not know one another. So that common themes may be featured in this report, many of the particulars that distinguish one reader's experience from another's are not emphasized.

Participants who were interviewed ranged from 22 to 55 years of age. Ten respondents were white; one was black.⁹ All had been raised in the Southern United States, nearly all had graduated from college (a few were in college), and over half had graduate degrees. Their occupations varied from secretary to university administrator, from community organizer to computer systems analyst. Four of the women (all in their 20s or early 30s) had never married. Of this group, one was living with her male partner, and another was a lesbian. Three of the women were currently married, one was widowed, and the rest had been divorced and were now single.

A distinguishing feature of this research is that all interviews were conducted one on one for a total of at least 5 hours during multiple sittings. Most audience research that has reached larger numbers of participants has done so through focus groups or much briefer interview contact. Prolonged interaction with participants was a priority, particularly for beginning this kind of research. Like others who have conducted research with women (Oakley, 1981; Reinharz, 1983), efforts were made

to empower participants to speak in their own voice. Because a woman was interviewing women, aspects of discourse approximated the trust and equality of friendship. This provided opportunities for frank discussions about personal issues surrounding self-help book use. For example, one woman took me to her boyfriend's apartment to show me some of the self-help books she and her boyfriend were reading together. Longer interviews also allowed for gentle delving into contradictions that arose over time.

ANALYSIS

FINDING ONESELF

Participants spoke of their sense of disorientation and confusion regarding roles, values, and life choices. They view self-help books as a resource when rules of conduct are unclear and when opportunities to learn about solving personal problems are not easily accessible through everyday interpersonal interactions. Readers' interest in self-help reflects Turkle's (1978) observation that modern life is characterized by difficulty in locating a shared body of knowledge and experience.

Nearly all the women I interviewed and surveyed described self-help books that mattered to them as ones that strongly promote autonomy and self-reliance. For these women, this message was consciously construed as a welcome antidote to the messages of constraint they had received growing up in a patriarchal culture. A first encounter with psychological self-help books often resulted in a profound sense of possibility and opportunity, an awareness that there are alternative ways of living one's life.

Nancy, a 49-year-old woman who works in the shipping department of a local medical supply company, described how *The Power of Positive Thinking* (Peale, 1952) introduced her to ideas that she had never before considered. She read this first self-help book at the age of 18, after she had just married.

With that very first book, religion was displayed as something that was helpful instead of something that you had to follow or terrible things were going to happen to you. It filled an inner need, instead of being forced with fear tactics. I always resented that as a very young child. And through the book I could do it in a different way, at my own pace. I was seeking out answers but it wasn't being forced.

Beth is a 55-year-old divorced woman and a registered nurse who has read self-help books since the age of 32. When asked if there was anything that had immediately struck her about self-help books, she said:

Mostly everything I read was new and different to me. I had not been told all these, what I thought were wonderful things I was learning. I had not had that in my upbringing. I don't know if other people had that or not.

Not all readers were as ebullient and grateful for self-help books as Nancy and Beth, and it is notable that the women quoted here were among the older women I interviewed. These women spoke in terms of having "no women's liberation" when they were young, often turning to books such as *The Power of Positive Thinking* for

solace. Regardless of age, however, readers identified self-help as a site where one could encounter the message of possibility and self-direction.

SELECTING BOOKS

When the women I interviewed select self-help books to read, they experience a sense of choice and autonomy. Early use of self-help was often the result of urging from a friend or minister, or was sometimes the serendipitous discovery of books in a store or library. Over time, however, searching on one's own for a book became important. For some, finding useful books is a conscious expression of control over one's life, a sense that one is "a pretty selective reader," as one participant stated. For others, the pleasure has more to do with options and possibilities, as book titles sometimes "popped out" at them at a bookstore or from a library shelf, naming a problem they had no name for. Browsing or seeking out a book is experienced as doing something for oneself, even if one does not make a purchase. Being in a bookstore or library is also a way to connect to a public world, keep on top of the latest information in an area of concern, or feel less alone with one's problem:

I just enjoy looking at the different things and seeing if there's something I'd like to look at further. 'Cause I feel like there's always going to be new books. And every time I go, there's something I haven't seen before. If I don't get it one time, I might get it the next time.—Margaret

The social aspect of self-help book reading is salient for some readers. Often, therapy groups or self-help groups provide a network of information about self-help books that influence reading and are influenced by it. For Sara, a young lesbian who has felt different from other people all her life, participation in a women's music festival in Michigan introduced her to a wider community of women who were dealing with a variety of personal issues with which she strongly identified. This experience, along with her participation in local Alcoholics Anonymous and Adult Children of Alcoholics groups, provided her not only with the names of books but with friends, and the knowledge that she was not alone with her problem.

As competency with the genre progresses, for many the degree of choice and selectivity toward books also increases. Increased selectivity seems to be an indication of self-improvement, sufficient healing to diminish one's vulnerability to advertising hype on a book jacket. The practiced self-help reader has achieved a degree of skill with her reading, an expression of her achievements in the realm of self-reliance. The issue of selectivity was a theme not only in how these participants described their decision to read a book, but in the course of reading itself.

ACTIVE READING

The self-help book readers I interviewed are both selective and interpretive. This was demonstrated by some in their hesitancy to recommend self-help books to others, since "what works for me may not work for someone else," a position which also reflects an appreciation of human differences. In addition, readers commonly spoke about texts not being "swallowed whole"; indeed, one's idea of what was in the text was often subject to one's state of mind. At times these women were

selective about what they assumed to be the “presented meaning” (Lindlof, 1988) inherent in texts. At other times, they spoke of recognizing how meaning emerges through an ongoing engagement with a text. Both situations are illustrated below:

In one sense, we are looking to experts more to guide us with our lives. At the same time, there is this whole other movement going on. I guess that's my attitude when I read these books, that I don't take what they say as gospel.—Barbara

Now the Big Book, the AA book is definitely a reference tool, and each time I might read the same page and get something different out of it every time I read it. It's got a lot of information and very few words.—Sara

I feel the information is not being presented as fact, or the way to do things. So I can adopt a suggestion, or not, as I see fit. Whatever works for me.—Lillian

Most of these women experience a sense of choice and control when they read. They consider engagement with authors an option, and see their anonymity as readers as significant protection from negative face threats often associated with the reception of help. This protection was a therapeutic change for many of the women. Participants often spoke of feeling damaged by overly critical parents, or parents who had a sexist view of the world. Others spoke of the destructive effects of the mass media in their lives.

STORIES WITHOUT ENDINGS

Referring to the contemporary world, Lasch (1984) comments, “Life consists of isolated events. It has no story, no pattern, no structure as an unfolding narrative. . . . The decline of the narrative mode both in fiction and in historical writing . . . reflects the fragmentation of the self” (p. 96). Karen, a 43-year-old university administrator, described her use of self-help as a search for structure assisted by the author's presentation of “cases.” These cases or stories tell how people became troubled and sometimes about how they solved their problems. The use of stories or cases in self-help books was described by nearly all readers as a necessary element for a useful book. Sara spoke about her identification with the book *The Courage to Heal* (Bass & Davis, 1988), a best-selling book for incest survivors:

In *The Courage to Heal*, stories often seemed like the sharing of events. It's not once upon a time, beginning and end. It's a sharing of an experience or an event that I can relate to.

Other participants made similar comments.

I'm not so interested in “Mary Smith,” as the problem she is having. If the author tells stories about Mary Smith, it gives you opportunities to identify with what you are viewing as your problem.—Sheila

Stories help me get over feeling self-centered about a problem. “Poor me.” I realize that the problem is not that uncommon.—Karen

Reading a case history or a story in a self-help book can be like being in a 12-step group. You're not the only one and that's the first thing you feel when you read a story. I'll find that someone has the same traits as I do. It's validating when I can identify with someone else.—Sara

Although one participant spoke about her preference for stories that started with the "problem" and ended with the "solution," this standard narrative form was not a requirement. Instead, because books contain multitudes of stories around similar themes, readers seem to take these fragments—some beginnings, some middles, and some endings—to construct patterns about people's lives in a way that makes sense to them. Their identification is generally not with the well-developed personality or character of fiction, but with a glimpse of many people's lives. Through this process, readers attempt to understand how other people commonly experience a particular problem.

AUTHOR AS SCIENTIST

Whether the reader is seeking out a self-help experience to establish a sense of connection or to gather information, she recognizes that her link to this experience is the author. Readers describe the writing of self-help as involving research that stems from unique access to people. Terms used by these women to describe how authors gathered information, such as "interviewing numbers of people," "meeting with a range of people," and "being able to recognize patterns among people," echo the methods employed by many social scientists. Being a professional helper enables the writer to see patterns of activity among people, an ability that grants the writer authority and distinguishes him or her from the reader. Readers generally consider such patterns to be perceptually and pragmatically unavailable in the course of day-to-day life.

There appears to be no tension between women seeking advice from "experts" and seeking independence from "inherited authority." Self-help book authors do not represent "inherited authority"; they most often present themselves as having been on their own quests, often disclosing information about themselves in a manner uncharacteristic of most psychotherapeutic relationships. The trappings of authority, such as having an academic degree, were not considered sufficient credentials for a self-help book author; rather, they were considered a necessary ticket to having access to people. It is striking that readers describe *personal experience* as requisite for competent self-help book authorship as well. "Personal" is broadly defined to include experience as a counselor. According to one woman, "Counseling is experiencing the problem yourself. You go through a problem with somebody else." Because some authors speak openly about their own problems and accomplishments, identification with the author could also be highly influential.

THERAPEUTIC CONNECTING

The therapeutic value of connection through identification was a thread that ran through all the interviews.

For me this whole experience of reading self-help books is one of feeling connected, maybe and just exploring things within myself.—Barbara

Reading a self-help book connects the reader with strangers, with those outside one's day-to-day interpersonal world. Such a connection may be beneficial because it

provides the anonymity and enables the unshackling that can result from leaving the constraints of community. In addition, connecting to strangers provides the kind of validity absent in everyday discourse.

I guess you come to doubt yourself and your friends. You begin to wonder why all of us are having problems. You ask, what is it about us? Are we so awful that this is happening to us? When you know that total strangers are going through the same thing then you realize that it's not all you. It's not quite as personal.—Barbara

The notion that one needs to be individually responsible for solutions, but not necessarily personally responsible for what caused one's problems, was frequently voiced. Knowing that countless others share your problem, on some level, seems to suggest to many readers that there is an overwhelming social basis for a problem, however obscure and unarticulated that basis might be to the reader.

READERS AND THE RELATIONAL DOMAIN

Strong ambivalence toward the concept of self-reliance and responsibility for one's problem emerged when the topic of relationships was raised. Nearly all of those I interviewed voiced frustration, sometimes in strong terms, with the model of relationships they felt was being forwarded by most self-help books. Some qualms seemed to have a moral basis, while others reflected pragmatic concerns. Speaking of one book, Margaret, the divorced mother of two, commented:

The book said that if you want to start a new relationship, you ought to be an eagle, alone, and enjoying life by yourself, and then find yourself another eagle, or you really aren't going to have a very good relationship. The problem is that there aren't that many people in the world who are just wonderful and perfect and whole, who are so independent and so happy.

For Margaret, many self-help books on relationships undervalued what she considered to be people's normal and desirable needs to be with each other and to depend on each other. Many readers interpret books as suggesting that one must be a "wonderful person" before getting involved in a relationship, finding such a requirement unrealistic and harsh. Although Margaret readily admitted that she was one of those "women who love too much," she believes that there is such a thing as too much self-reliance, or too much perfection.

In other instances, a book's information regarding relationships seemed unrealistic. As Nancy said, "There's lots of advice about how to get him to help around the house. But I have news for you—He's not going to change that easily." Others spoke of the craziness of the superwoman message that is a common theme in self-help and in advertising.

Affirming Lerner's (1990) belief that self-help written for women often urges the relentless pursuit of perfection, all women interviewed spoke about their resentment of either the number of books marketed to women or what these books implied about women. Some had read these books but refused to ever read them again. After finishing the book *Women Men Love, Women Men Leave* (Cowan & Kinder, 1987), one woman threw it in the garbage pail, angry about its portrayal of women as incompetent. Another woman resented the tone of *Smart Women, Foolish Choices* (Cowan & Kinder, 1986), because she believes it blames only women, and not men,

for relationship problems. "The man can be troubled as he can be but she should have seen it coming. She should have known he wouldn't be a good partner." One woman spoke of realizing that with changes in women's roles, self-help for women was more important than ever. But, she asked, "Where are the books for men? It suggests that we have more problems. It says that there is something wrong with us that has to be fixed."

Many interpret self-help books as purveying the message that taking responsibility for one's own life means putting in more than one's share of work in personal relationships because men cannot be expected to do so. These women are willing to assume responsibility for self-improvement, but they object to the notion that it is all up to them. In addition, the fact that so many books advise women about heterosexual relationships is seen by some as implying that a woman is incomplete without a man. For others, identifying with certain women's books meant accepting a conception of "woman" that they found repugnant. One participant, for example, felt that if she bought and read *The Cinderella Complex* (Dowling, 1981), she would start thinking of herself as more dependent than she really is. Although women seemed to consider this unfairness a form of continued sexism, almost none spoke, as Lerner (1990) has, of self-help neglecting the domain of the social and political as both a source or potential solution to problems.

SELF-HELP AND SOCIAL ACTION

Although self-help book reading is usually a solitary activity, it clearly references others. One may reflect while reading, upon how to change a relationship with someone in one's social world, perhaps a spouse or child. Participants spoke of sometimes underlining a passage or copying a quote that might enable them to talk more effectively with a family member or co-worker. Taping excerpts from books to bathroom mirrors, car visors, or kitchen cabinets was common.

A premise of a social action perspective in audience research is that through participating in the media "we create a vast reservoir of common experience by which we can share in one another's lives" (Anderson & Meyer, 1988, p. 113). Experiences such as watching a baseball game on television become vehicles for experience that might emerge in another context, such as striking up a conversation in a bar or the office lunchroom. The case of self-help book reading is anomalous because, in part, the motivation for reading seems to stem from the sense that there is not a *sufficient or satisfying* reservoir of knowledge available for significant aspects of life. This is true in the specific sense of not knowing how to negotiate a love relationship or help a shy child overcome a fear of strangers, but it is also true in the more general sense of not having a sufficient sense of what constitutes the common.

Like experience with any number of mass media, self-help book reading is often woven into the everyday. Margaret, the divorced mother and secretary who has been struggling to make sense of her failed marriage and who does not want to repeat her mistakes, has read many books on male-female relationships. She spoke of a particular book that she felt had helped her understand a man she had spent some

time with. She did not discuss the book, *Commitment Phobia* with her male friend at all, but she did discuss it with me:

It helped me to understand the relationship I had last fall, with this man who moved about every two years. He could get good jobs easily, especially every time he was getting too close to a woman. It made me understand that these people aren't necessarily out to have long lists of conquests, and that it's not necessarily something the woman has done. This was also part of the book *Women Who Love Too Much*. [Norwood, 1985]

With this understanding, Margaret believed that she was able to interpret his attention to her more accurately. Invitations to go to dinner or the movies were not a display of interest in the kind of relationship Margaret was hoping for, yet she could enjoy his company because she understood his limitations.

What Margaret describes is, in the words of Anderson and Meyer (1988), an improvisational routine upon her social world. Self-help book reading often serves as a resource for improvisation upon such culturally changing routines as dating and marital relations. Women's stories about the use of self-help offered countless tales of what might be called the interruption of *inherited social routines*—everything from feeling freer to reject inappropriate dating partners to realizing that married women need not do all the cooking and cleaning.

Self-help is more overtly referenced in the context of self-help groups and individual psychotherapy, a more formal domain of discourse that often stands apart from everyday interaction with friends or co-workers. After reading a self-help book, one participant had recognized that her father was alcoholic and brought this discovery to the attention of her therapist of several years. In providing an account of this experience, this woman did not speak of her therapist's seeming oversight but rather of the therapist's responsiveness to this new and important discovery, as well as her own pride in having made this self-discovery.

WOMEN, SELF, AND COMMUNITY

Themes of both "finding oneself" and "finding others" emerged in the interviews. Besides providing connections with the authors or the cases presented, self-help books and their intertextual references through other media seem to provide a way to *establish* something that is understood to be culturally shared among a community of "readers." What is shared may be the experience of being a woman who loves too much or being the child of an alcoholic. This link often transcends immediate geographic location and tangible contact, those things that had sustained communities of the past.

These new communities, partly constructed in the imagination of readers, are not just interpretive communities that readers draw upon to make shared sense of their media engagement. They are also the *products* of media engagement. Women's involvement with genres such as romance novels or with reading groups recently has been seen as having community-forming potential (Radway, 1986), but typically interpersonal experience is considered a component of such involvements. For example, Long (1986) found that the structure of discourse in the conversations of a middle-class women's reading group asserted "a vision of support, connectedness,

equality, and sharing that stands against the hierarchical and competitive nature . . . of corporate America itself" (p. 610). In my study, involvement with self-help books was sometimes accompanied by social activity that offered mutual support, such as a self-help group. But readers seemed at least as interested in reading self-help books for connection to an abstract sense of the common—a notion of what is widely distributed among everyone (Shotter, 1984)—which could not be apprehended in common interpersonal experience.

As pronounced as women's interests in *connecting* to others to establish identity and independence were their accounts of *extrication*—disconnection from the noxious influence of others such as parents, spouses, or co-workers. This concern may explain in part why some readers did not find their everyday associates therapeutically useful. To establish a sense of self, these women often thought in terms of separating themselves from traditional views about women and from others who hold what they might consider unhealthy views of human functioning. This need for separation from the past or aspects of the present may be one of the most pressing reasons for participating in self-help book reading.

CONCLUSION

Because of the conditions of my life, I have had to learn something many of my academic colleagues don't seem to know: that continuity is the exception in twentieth-century America, and that adjusting to discontinuity is not an idiosyncratic problem of my own but the emerging problem of our era.—Catherine Bateson (1990, p. 14).

Audience-based studies on women and cultural consumption have emphasized aspects of resistance to male dominant culture (Long, 1986; Radway, 1984; Seiter, Borchers, Kreutzner, & Warth, 1989). Conclusions from these studies have been provocative in part because genres such as romance novels and soap operas were unexpected sites of resistance. My own observation that women use self-help books to resist patriarchy is somewhat unremarkable, partly because much of the genre presents itself as fostering liberation. But it is perhaps because self-help books do make these claims that readers complain about how some self-help books position women. Readers' concerns mirror many of the objections to self-help made by feminist critics.¹⁰

Readers' objections seem to be partly rooted in dissatisfaction with the therapeutic ideal of autonomy and self-responsibility in women's lives, a view that does not integrate independence and connection in a way that is meaningful to readers. Reflecting Bellah, Madsen, Sullivan, and Tipton's (1985) finding that individualism is more vigorous than ever among America's middle class, the women I interviewed clearly state that a major reason for reading self-help is to establish autonomy. Yet, readers *also* have a sense of the self as socially constructed through contact with others who have similar problems. Their sense of self pivots upon a desire for autonomy and a desire for connection to a world beyond the self. There is a pull between autonomy and connection in the lives of those I interviewed that is not well articulated in most self-help books.¹¹

Tensions between connection and separation and between personal and abstract sources of knowledge reflect a fluidity of experience among the women I researched

that does not converge neatly with dominant work on gender differences. The influential work of Chodorow (1978) and Gilligan (1982) asserts that women define themselves primarily through relationships with others and prefer the realm of the personal to the abstract. These assumptions fray somewhat as the paradoxes of women's lives emerge—for example, as women attempt to connect to an *abstract* sense of what constitutes the common, often for purposes of improving one's relationships. But notably, in the talk of those I interviewed, the meaning of connection did not necessarily indicate caring or concern for others. As Albert (1988) has observed, many affiliations by women in our culture are now forged to serve the therapeutic values of independence and self-development.¹² In her extensive interviews with a cross-section of American women, Sidel (1990) found that not only did women seem influenced by the American myth of individualism, but that their talk about individualism reflected a pragmatic awareness that women must be prepared to stand alone. Like Sidel's interviewees mine were not critical of the existing institutional order. There was virtually no talk of a need for political change or for the establishment of the kind of supports that might help with the problems women face in the domain of work, child rearing, and relationships.

There is no question that among those I interviewed, self-help books have had a profound influence in helping with a myriad of problems that even 20 years ago were unspeakable. It is striking, however, that a key experience of those I interviewed—that of lacking a sense of the common—is *not* typically articulated in self-help books. It is nevertheless constructed as a concern of readers as they transform the text. In theory and research on human communication as well, the concept of "shared knowledge" has provided a basis for understanding how we manage to communicate at all. In doing so, it often glosses over the struggles of managing interactions and relationships in a culture that novelist Eva Hoffman (1989) describes as "incompletely charted."

The social change that women are experiencing today is both exhilarating and painful. Readers express delight with the crumbling of society's traditional structures, yet simultaneously feel dislocated. Surviving dislocation may require being comfortable with exclusion, being able to separate from the whirl of social pressures, and being able to create more functional connections. A fruitful area of continued research will be an examination of the ways women and others are establishing such connections.

NOTES

¹Barbara is a pseudonym for one participant in the study of self-help book reading to be described here. All participants have been given pseudonyms.

²I take the position that most psychological self-help emphasizes individual betterment. For a brief discussion of recent "new age" self-help that addresses political issues, see Jones (1989).

³Gumpert and Fish (1990) introduce an important theoretical discussion of the relationship between changing communication technology, the loss of face-to-face community, and the rise of mediated therapeutic communication.

⁴Starker's (1986) survey is a first attempt to gather statistical information about self-help book

reading, but his sampling procedures and the incomplete reporting of results raise questions about the validity of his findings.

³See Ehrenreich and English (1979) for a history of medicine, psychology, and women as receivers of scientific advice.

⁴An examination of *Publishers Weekly* over the past seven years indicates the variability of the self-help genre.

⁵This study was not restricted to specific books. The study taps involvement with broad reaches of reading, including choice of books and reading history.

⁶For an extensive discussion of the researcher-participant relationship in qualitative audience research, as well as a discussion about women researching women, see Lindlof and Grodin (1990).

⁷No women of color responded to recruitment efforts. I interviewed an African-American woman named Carolyn as a key informant because of her work as a community organizer. The study primarily focuses on white middle-class women, and Carolyn's disappointment in the genre is not chronicled in this paper. More empirical work needs to be done to document and understand the involvement of women of color and other minorities with self-help materials, particularly televisual sources such as *Oprah Winfrey*.

¹⁰Only one woman in my pool of the original 33 called herself a feminist.

¹¹Since I collected my data, there has been an increase in book titles that attempt to integrate self and concern for others.

¹²More recent research of Gilligan and associates (1990) on female adolescence conducted in a private school for girls shows a growing interest in establishing both independence and caring connection among the young women studied. Unlike the adults I interviewed, many young women in this school were conscious of wanting both independence and connection, and saw the two realms as complimentary. However, other young women endorsed a more "superwoman" version of autonomy where independence and connection were not integrated.

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