

Self-help reading as a thin culture

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Self-help books are an enduring, highly popular non-fiction genre in the US, a tradition as old as the American republic (Weiss, 1969; Cawelti, 1965). To many, the term 'self-help' conjures up images of 'success manuals' that teach readers to be 'self-made men' in a competitive marketplace. But popular books on spiritual or personal well-being have long been a part of the genre too. At the turn of the century, inspirational books advocated the cultivation of self-expression as 'mind cure' (Lears, 1981) — a theme strikingly similar to ones articulated in self-help books today in more specialized vocabularies. Popular books advising readers on personal relationships or personal well-being with psychological terminologies (hereafter called self-help psychology books) now constitute a large segment of this genre. These books regularly grace annual bestseller lists in the US.¹ To name but a couple: M. Scott Peck's (1978) *The Road Less Traveled*, a book combining psychotherapeutic and Christian themes, has been on the *New York Times* list for nearly six years (at the time of writing). Robin Norwood's (1985) *Women Who Love Too Much*, a guide to 'addictive' relationships, had garnered an inprint figure of 2,700,000 mass market paperback copies by the start of 1988, and produced a spin-off as well — a book of letters to the author from readers. Many more of these guides to personal life have made their way through the US television talk-show circuit and out into everyday talk about intimacy, personal 'growth' or 'addiction' — the latter itself a term popularized in the US by books like Norwood's.

Yet, very few studies of the readership for self-help psychology books have ever been conducted. Fewer still have appeared that focus on the ways readers interpret and make use of self-help psychology books.² How do people appropriate popular non-fiction discourses, especially the psychological ones that have proliferated in the past twenty-five years?

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How much power do these psychological discourses have in everyday life? These are questions a study of self-help readers can begin to answer.

This article presents material from qualitative research on popular psychology readers and conceptualizes the relations between readers and these books. Middle-class readers read and impute authority to the books in a complex way that can not simply be deduced from content-based criticism of the genre. They read the books ambivalently, and in ongoing relation to other frameworks for situating personal selfhood in a social context. This paper proposes a new concept, 'thin culture', to describe the process through which readers make the self-help books meaningful in their lives. It contrasts that concept with the notion of 'interpretive community' becoming current in qualitative communication research. Short case studies of three representative readers illustrate the kind of relation readers maintain with the books. 'Thin culture' is a useful alternative to other concepts of the popular culture audience which see that audience as either 'resisting' some dominant cultural form, or else adapting it with an indefinite amount of flexibility in voluntary subcultures.

Recent American culture scholars frown on the profusion of popular psychologies in the US for their unsavory ideological underpinnings. These critics are wary of an expanding 'individualist' ethos which they say constricts moral or political reasoning within the narrow horizons of self-gratification and self-protection. In his widely read anatomy of American 'narcissism', for instance, social historian Christopher Lasch (1979: 30) charged that Americans had moved in the 1970s from 'politics to self-examination'. In their landmark study of American individualism, Robert Bellah et al. (1985) make a more measured argument that contemporary psychological reasoning makes it difficult to conceive of any common obligations beyond the self. They cite a particularly popular self-help psychology book to underscore their point.³ Self-help books have inspired potent sociological criticism for good reason: the books tell people how to change their personal lives through largely individual effort. They are an all too popular distraction from a good sociological imagination.⁴

Critics of contemporary popular psychology concern themselves with the shared culture of values and discourses that makes social cohesion, and social criticism, possible. Though this level of analysis is important, the specificity of everyday practices like self-help reading gets lost. Lasch, echoing Frankfurt school theorists (especially Horkheimer, 1972), elaborates a broad scenario in which genuine individuality in advanced industrial society has largely collapsed under the weight of bureaucratic manipulation. He cites self-help psychologies as but an instance of the generalized 'therapeutic ideologies' that falsely posit a free individual in a totally administered society. Bellah et al., in contrast, portray an American social order in which varieties of individualist moral reasoning still compete with older political and religious traditions. But whether described in terms of

'ideology' or 'individualism', self-help reading becomes an indistinguishable part of a broad, unitary cultural vector. These terms do not inform us on how people choose mass-mediated sources of expertise for personal life. They do not tell us how seriously or ambivalently people take such expertise. By default if not by design, these cultural analyses work on the model of a passive audience through which ideological messages diffuse.

But consumers of popular psychology — whether viewers of televised personal advice shows, or participants in self-discovery workshops, or self-help readers — negotiate popular psychology in particular discursive and commodity forms. We can not assume in advance that we know how strong or how unified an ideological message it is that self-help book readers read out of their books, nor that they are passive receivers of what 'ideologies' they may read out. Other recent studies of popular reading (Radway, 1984; Frazer, 1987) make similar points about the limits of ideology critique for understanding readers' practices. The research here focuses on ways in which self-help readers construct meanings through their reading.

Qualitative study of self-help psychology book readers

We need a working model of reader-book relations in order to understand the cultural implications of self-help reading. Like other qualitative communication research (Frazer, 1987; Lindlof, 1987; Long, 1986; Lull, 1988; Morley, 1980; Press, 1989; Radway, 1984), this study draws on interviews and focused discussions. There are still few studies of popular book readers — Radway's (1984) pioneering study of romantic novel readers is easily the most well known. Like Radway, I have started with pronouncements of culture critics as a baseline with which to compare my research. I find the critics' implicit model of audience reception to be too simple where self-help reading is concerned. But unlike many audience reception studies, this study retains the interest ideology critics have in understanding mass-mediated discourses in their relations to a larger cultural whole. I problematize those relations explicitly, rather than assuming that self-help reading is like all other practices a cultural theorist may subsume under 'therapeutic ideology' or 'individualism'. The study discovers the relations between self-help reading and a larger cultural repertoire through its interview methodology.

Recent qualitative communication research privileges the meaning-making of popular audiences over that of traditional critics. Reception studies have presented several new concepts as researchers try to penetrate the commonsense, often unarticulated ways that audiences construct meanings in popular culture. Frazer's (1987) use of 'discourse register' is one example of these efforts to supplant ideology critiques with treatments of popular culture which posit an active, if ultimately constrained,

audience. Another such concept is 'interpretive community', employed by Radway in her study of romance readers, and one of the only conceptualizations of book reading in the reception literature. I highlight my questions and my model of the reading experience by comparing them with qualitative researchers' uses of the 'interpretive community' construct.⁵

Interpretive community

Drawing on the reader-response criticism of Stanley Fish (1980), Radway proposed in *Reading the Romance* that readers construct and interpret a genre with strategies that vary from those of professional culture critics. Fish has insisted, in contrast to much standard critical practice, that texts acquire meaning only through the shared interpretive conventions of specific institutions or groups of readers. Texts can indeed be constructed to 'mean' different things in different interpretive circles. Radway discovered that her Smithton readers did not read the same simple messages of female docility or sexual submission from romance novels as did critics. Rather, her Smithton readers prized female assertiveness in the novels. What's more, Radway found that the act of reading itself had meaning as a temporary liberation from demanding daily obligations her readers fulfilled as housewives and mothers. Within their shared social circumstances, the housewives shared similar if little articulated norms about what constituted a 'good' romance, and when it was pleasurable to read one. For Radway, these readers constituted an interpretive community.

Lindlof (1988) has offered a systematic definition of 'interpretive community'. To paraphrase Lindlof, readers in such communities construct the boundaries of a popular genre, read the genre with shared interpretive conventions and interpret genres in the context of informal, everyday practices. These practices cross-cut interactions based upon more formal institutions such as family or work. The concept underscores those aspects of contemporary media use that elude more traditional methods of analyzing social relations: people confront diverse mass-mediated productions in diverse settings and may make sense out of those productions through groupings based largely on shared media experiences themselves, and not on more traditional social relationships. Viewers of a particular television program, for instance, may develop a shared sense of which characters are sympathetic or loathsome, and these shared understandings may have little to do with the viewers' other relations to each other. Dispersed home computer users may develop common strategies of computer use and networks of mutual assistance quite apart from their other daily rounds. As interpretive communities, such groupings develop norms for media use which do not necessarily follow from their institutional affiliations or social backgrounds.

The interpretive community concept deserves further development for its use in understanding audiences whose interpretive work may rely more on common media experiences themselves than on pre-existing, shared social characteristics. It assists our understanding of the numerous and fragmentary 'audiences' that get constructed in mass mediated societies. But the uses and limits of the concept are not yet clearly defined. It is debatable whether a concept originally applied to a literary establishment is as useful when applied to a loose network of readers. It is still a 'daunting' prospect to locate definitively the boundaries of an interpretive community (Lindlof, 1988).

It is unclear, for instance, whether researchers should define only a specific, localized audience as an 'interpretive community' (a women's reading circle) or whether the construct can denote as well a nationwide aggregate of viewers or readers who may share some common interpretive strategies (female romance readers in the UK or popular psychology readers in the US). Radway, for instance, argues that romance novel reading in the final analysis reproduces a generalized patriarchal culture. In her analysis, the romance readers construct romance reading as worthwhile on the basis of what they share as *women*, not as romance readers per se. In *Reading the Romance* Radway did not sketch the connections between the novel reading and other popular culture practices which might together constitute the cultural underpinnings of patriarchy. I do not question Radway's argument about the meanings and satisfactions of romance novel reading for women. It is the parameters of the proposed interpretive community that are unclear. We need more research and conceptualization to determine what relation an interpretive community and its focal genre may have to other communities and other genres of discourse. Radway (1988) has called for just this sort of research, noting that her own study did not inquire into relations between romance reading and other media practices.

Further, the interpretive community framework does not sensitize audience researchers to important questions: What are the different qualities of the relationship that audiences could have with mass-mediated products? For instance, romance novel reading is arguably a partial satisfaction of women's psychological needs in a patriarchal society. As shown below, self-help book reading does not have the same kind of relationship to reader's felt needs: there is not the same kind of close, satisfying 'fit' between forms of advice and readers' discomforts. The fact that particular groups of readers may develop common interpretive strategies does not in itself tell us whether their books are satisfying because they are cathartic, because they extend one's universe of discourse or because there is nothing better around.

More crucially, what is the larger cultural import of an audience practice such as self-help reading? What does this practice say, if anything, about

the comparative strength of widespread, competing understandings of what a good society or an individual should be like? What does self-help psychology reading imply, if anything, about the power and uses of other frameworks of personal meaning, such as traditional Protestantism or feminism? The broader cultural significance of an audience's practices tends to fall from view as researchers focus on a single audience–artifact relationship in their bid to establish that audiences are proactive, not passive.⁶ We need to ask the questions about continuity and change in widely shared values that have concerned traditional culture scholars and critics, without accepting their attendant notions of audiences as passive consumers, slowly homogenized by mass-mediated culture.

Self-help psychology readers are sometimes members of informal or formal interpretive communities as defined above. In the US, for instance, reading groups devoted specifically to Peck's or to Norwood's work — mentioned earlier — have proliferated. But the readers in this study all discuss their reading within the context of varied, pre-existing friendships and professional–client relationships. There is no reason to think self-help psychology readers in this study are different from the norm in this regard. The concept of interpretive community as developed so far would direct a research focus toward describing the ways specific groups of readers come to share meanings and uses for self-help books. It would not be fruitless to study each such 'community' that a reader or set of readers belong to. But if armed solely with the conceptual tool of interpretive community, we would not have a way to highlight the relation between self-help reading and a broader repertoire of discourses and practices. We would lack a clear way to discuss practices shared by readers across their many local interpretive communities. And we would not have a language for describing the qualities of the self-help reading experience itself in contrast to other possible reading experiences or other cultural practices — other than to say that there exist different interpretive communities.

Thin culture

Readers do share some limited expectations about the value of popular psychological knowledge in book form. Yet even those who discuss their reading with friends interpret the books from surprisingly different angles (see case examples below). These readers participate in a widely diffused — perhaps nationwide — subculture of popular psychology with but a few norms and a proliferation of discourses. To signify the combination of shared expectations about the books with varied meanings and uses attached to them, I use the term 'thin culture'. By 'thin culture' I denote the readers' shared understanding that the words and concepts put forth in these books can be read and adopted loosely, tentatively, sometimes interchangeably, without enduring conviction. Readers draw on the books

in ongoing relation to portions of more formally elaborated cultural frameworks, and in relation to mass-mediated images of personal life in the US.

'Thin culture' aptly summarizes a thick description (Geertz, 1973) of self-help reading. I name this culture 'thin' because it does not support a deep commitment from readers. Over a period of years, some readers do dive repeatedly into self-help reading, but they discover and rediscover that it is not such a long way from surface to bottom. The reading functions as a loosely adopted and partial source of self-definition for even avid self-help readers. By conceptualizing self-help reading this way, we can re-ask questions that have concerned culture critics about the 'effects' of popular practices like self-help reading on more institutionalized frameworks for self-construction. And we shall also be able to understand why self-help psychology books continue to sell so well.

The thin culture of self-help psychology reading

Educated, middle-class readers approach self-help psychology books ambivalently. They participate in a culture of popular psychology reading that allows them to simultaneously trust and discount the books, all the while maintaining an open-minded, experimental attitude toward new titles as they appear. The ambivalence stems in part from readers' recognition of the books as commodities, and in part from relations with other points of reference which readers juggle together with their self-help reading as they improvise ways of coping with personal troubles.

The presentation here is based on depth interviews, dyad interviews and supplementary interviews and surveys carried out with fifteen readers in the San Francisco Bay Area, outside the culturally distinct university enclave of Berkeley. They were six men and nine women.⁷ These readers have read more than one self-help psychology book, and they articulate in their own terms that they recognize self-help or popular psychology books as a rough genre.⁸ This research does not seek to find out what 'effect' the reading has on readers in a causal sense; nor will it assess whether or not the reading 'worked' for a reader's particular problem. A number of these readers only recognized themselves as having a specific problem after reading a term for it in a book. The goal is to find out how much and what kind of expertise readers credit their popular psychology books with, and what the reading contributes to readers' everyday sense of themselves in a larger cultural order.

Openness

One of the main requirements for participating in this thin culture is a willingness to entertain psychological interpretations of personal troubles

without condemning such interpretations a priori as amoral, immoral or overly scientific. In fact, when asked if they can imagine some sort of person who would not read self-help books, the most common answer is 'someone who is afraid to be open' or 'someone who is not willing to face up to their problems', or, in the words of one reader, someone who is 'still in the dark ages'.

'Openness' gets defined more in opposition to traditional cultural authority than in advocacy of any particular alternatives. Almost all of these readers share ambivalence toward organized, traditional religious denominations. The majority maintain at most a nominal commitment to their received faiths; a minority have continued occasional religious observances or have tried a different religious practice from that of their youth. In interviews, readers contrasted their popular psychological guidance with what they see as the stern dicta of organized religion.⁹

Once they have 'opened' themselves to the thin culture of popular psychology, readers share few concrete understandings about what goes into a 'good' or a 'poor' self-help psychology book. On the one hand, only two readers could name either a book or an author they thought particularly poor. On the other hand, no reader had on the tip of his or her tongue a favorite concept from the reading, or a favorite author. Readers did not easily identify any qualities they would look for in a 'good' book. With probing, I did elicit from some readers concrete examples of concepts they felt they could apply to their own circumstances. One housewife explained to me, for instance, that *I'm OK — You're OK* (Harris, 1969) helped her to be more 'effective', to stop playing the limiting 'parent' role so much at home. To illustrate, she pointed toward a sink full of dirty dishes that she was waiting for her son to wash, refusing to give in to his recalcitrance. Another woman, divorced, showed me how she could rate herself on a scale of assertiveness that was included in a favorite book of hers. Several others mentioned books that included descriptions of 'stages' they could expect to go through in dating or divorce.

Readers sometimes cited specific case examples or results of studies reported in a self-help book. But they commonly had difficulty summarizing even general themes in books they did remember as being valuable. To jog readers' memories, I would present them with a list of bestselling self-help books and ask if they had read any that made an impression on them:

Interviewer: Are there one or two on there that you feel like you particularly liked or were particularly influenced by?

Natalie: I liked the beginning of *The Road Less Traveled*. I liked the beginning but the end turned me off. It became too religious.

Interviewer: What's the beginning and the end?

Natalie: Well, he — gee . . . you read these things and they don't really stick with you. You've got to study them . . . OK. At the end he ends up being

religious and he's talking about, um . . . Christian religion. I can't tie myself to Christianity . . . I just had to put that down. Now, what was [it that] I liked — the beginning of it. It expressed a certain kind of tolerance. Specifics? I couldn't — probably couldn't tell you any specifics.

No reader claimed to have derived lasting insights from one book or one author to the exclusion of others. Often, readers remembered a message that went little further than a book's title. A single term might itself serve a reader as a useful category for a feeling or state of mind. For instance, I probed one reader who was particularly positive about self-help reading, trying to find out what she found specifically useful:

Georgia: I can tell you one specific. [The author] has a book that's just entitled *Risking*. And in this book he addresses the issue about — if you want to make changes in your life or move on or grow, there's always some risk. And real growth always, always entails some kind of risks, so, you know, that's very useful.

One might conclude that self-help reading matters little to readers one way or the other. But although they lacked rough criteria for defining a good self-help book, readers looked favorably toward self-help psychology books in general. They did so even though they had a hard time remembering a lot from recently read books, and even though the books they remembered may have condensed most of the insights into the title. When asked, all readers have said they would consult at least some kinds of self-help books again for personal troubles; some readers have in fact done so as new personal discomforts have arisen. Most readers see themselves as having gone through relatively heavy self-help reading periods alternating with non-reading periods. But none had shut the door on 'openness'.

Hal: . . . When my marriage ended, I had been in the process, for about five years at that point, of reading things that I apparently got through osmosis. I don't know where — it was in the air, you know, people might casually mention something or I might see a reference to it somewhere, and it might or might not consciously register. I think I went through a desert period for a few years where I just turned off all of that stuff, and several years ago, started rereading some of the stuff that I had read earlier, and reading some of the new . . .

A few felt that they had exhausted their interest in self-help reading at the time of the interview, but did not forswear such reading in the future.

Rina: I want to be open to it and I am . . . There's a saturation — that's how I feel. I'm a reader — then it's over. It's not that I think self-growth is not a continuing process. But you could read *War and Peace* and that's self-growth in another way.

A hit on the market

At the same time that they put the practice of self-help reading in a positive light, most of the readers described, without any prompting, what they

consider limits in these books. Along with the attitude of 'openness', participants in the thin culture of popular psychology reading maintain a view of the books as mass-marketed commodities with repetitious messages.

Patricia: Some [authors] would try to emulate others that had become successful in the marketplace and therefore prompted some author to, quick, throw out another book that would sell. And — but I can't think of any specific titles right now. I suppose if I went back and looked at my bookshelf, I might come up with one.

Natalie: I think lots of times they're written to be a hit on the market, and maybe not always have . . . a good correlation between some of the studies and what they say.

Rina: If you took twenty self-help books and lined them up and took another twenty, I don't think you would find anything new.

Other readers said the books were frequently 'simplistic' or designed to be 'accessible to a general public'.

Answering my queries about what, then, is good in these books, most of the readers spoke in terms of gleaning a 'nugget' in the books, as one woman put it.

Sheila: You might only get maybe one or two sentences out of one of these books, that really apply to you in a way that you say, 'that's it. Aha!' And if you can apply that to your life, you've learned a tremendous thing.

With a more playful optimism, Natalie evoked a similar search:

Natalie: There's always the hope. You may find a quick solution!

Five of the readers went further, not looking for simply practical answers but spiritual or moral guidance in their reading. Hal, for instance, explained to me that he wanted 'answers' on a 'more theoretical level':

Hal: What are the values, how do we get them, where are we going with them? I think I'm seeing through this reading some answers to that.

Sheila: Any growth you can make spiritually is what I'm supposed to be doing. As I get older, I read more and more books that give me that kind of help.

Sheila has found particular inspiration from the works of one author who teaches his readers that life is ruled by the duality of 'love' and 'fear', and that a good life tends always toward the former. But like the other readers, she does not read one author or theme to the exclusion of others, and she too views the popular psychology genre as marked by mass-market appeal as well as insight.

To sum up, readers with varying felt needs self-consciously relate to the books as a mass-marketed and hence less than fully legitimate genre.¹⁰ And they then go right on reading the books with an 'open' disposition toward them, even though they only occasionally derive help of lasting value from single books.

Form and content in the thin culture

Once 'open' to the thin culture, readers find few if any close fits between particular texts and their diffuse subjective needs. There are many convincing ways that diffuse personal troubles can be put into words. Readers both more 'practically' oriented and those more 'philosophically' inclined in their reading mentioned the value of finding words for feelings or vague ideas. Hal, for instance, mentioned M. Scott Peck's *The Road Less Traveled* as a book that he especially liked. He recognized his own experience as a teacher in Peck's dictum that to love is to nurture another person's 'spiritual growth'.

Hal: I found a, what's the term we used to use? — validation of things that I kind of felt but had not really verbalized. And, of course I find that's true of a lot of these self-help books, is that they tend to clarify, or maybe put into words things that I have felt.

And Georgia found 'risk' a useful word for articulating the personal challenges in 'just about anything you want to do in life'.

But the same lived experiences could be convincingly articulated by the books in terms of 'risk,' or as problems of 'dependence', or problems with 'anger', or problems with 'assertiveness', not to mention the ever expanding definitions of 'love'. Each of these themes has been the subject of numerous self-help books. Hal, quoted above, has read a large number of self-help books offering entire psychological theories with attendant labels for relationship patterns or feeling states. It is safe to say that more than a few of these psychotherapeutic syntheses cover the theme of love. He continues to read, deriving some short-term insight from many of these books, and enduring guidance from none. In another example, one reader praised Robin Norwood's *Women Who Love Too Much*, and told me that the idea of 'co-dependence' between partners in relationships is one she could have really used ten years previously, though at that time she had found other concepts from self-help books convincing.

In another case, I asked a male reader, a childcare worker in his late thirties, why he did not just find one self-help book to follow:

Interviewer: Why don't you find one book and think 'this is it' — to use it as a guide?

Rob: Well — there are *so many* kinds of things — there's process, relationships, there's intimacy, conflict . . .

Interviewer: So lots of different realities?

Rob: Well, or different steps, different processes for different areas.

'Relationships', 'conflict', 'intimacy' — each is its own category of personal reality and each deserves its own treatment in separate self-help books. When readers criticize the books for their repetitiousness or mass market appeal as noted above, they do so from the understanding that one can tell a mass-produced book by the quality of writing:

Patricia: Ones that do not appear to me to be well put together or to read well or to offer much in the way of the table of contents, are not books that I buy.

But with most of the books, readers assume the categories and analyses themselves are legitimate and unaffected by the production process. These readers have not questioned whether or not categories such as 'intimacy', 'anger' or 'risk' may themselves be constructed so as to be a 'hit on the market' or 'accessible to the general public'. And so they can continue to borrow or buy new books as they appear, accepting that new terms and concepts reflect newly discovered realities of personal life.

The form and content of popular psychology books are more easily separable for these readers than for many cultural critics. The content is legitimate, though the form is only marginally so. This way of conferring legitimacy would have important consequences for the continuing appeal of self-help psychology reading to any one reader, and for continuing sales. Underlying this commonsense is a folk theory of knowledge operating when these readers reach for popular psychology books. Both my least schooled interviewee and one of my most articulate and most affluent interviewees explained that the popular psychology books keep coming out because there is simply a 'flood' of new information about human development. The readers' theory is, commonsensically enough, that when authors discover new facts about the psyche, they write a book; several readers have articulated this theory to me. The concepts used in the books spring naturally¹¹ from clinical investigation, even if the final write-up must be toned down somewhat for what readers assume to be a wide audience. This folk theory of book production and marketing is an epistemological underpinning for participation in the thin culture of self-help psychology reading.

In all, these readers, and perhaps educated middle-class readers generally, approach popular psychology reading with three regular if unspoken expectations. First, in the books they will find authoritative validation for their feelings in categories that directly reflect the latest advances in psychology. Secondly, there is nothing exclusive about the authority of a

single book; the sense of solution or insight a book may provide may not be a long-enduring one. Finally, they may need to wink figuratively at themselves while reading, knowing the repetitive or simplistic writing is somewhat beneath their cultural status.

Readers pick through the books' packaging and glean a 'nugget' or two — a legitimate, useful word or phrase for a feeling state. Splitting off form and content the way they do, these popular psychology book readers have every reason to continue picking from the ever abundant new titles in this genre, all the while adjusting their expectations down to what they think a mass-marketed book can realistically make available. The thin culture of self-help psychology reading does not require standards for judging between two or more ways of putting feelings into words.

Between cultural points of reference: the context of the thin culture

But readers are not helplessly afloat in the cross-currents of popular psychological fashion. The popularity of books on personal development does not necessarily indicate that people are trying to situate themselves and their problems purely in the books' terms. And, in fact, most readers have brought up other cultural reference points on their own initiative just to be able to carry on a conversation about the popular psychology books. The fact they 'naturally' refer to these other reference points suggests that a researcher must understand these contexts if she or he is going to understand how the books contribute to everyday understandings of personal life.

Concerned with these contexts, I conducted the depth interviews respectful of other points of reference that readers use to situate their personal troubles in a wider world. Part of each interview was relatively unstructured so as to allow readers to bring up the teachings, media images, religious beliefs or rules of thumb that they may juggle with popular psychology in making sense out of personal life. To limit the interviews, or their subsequent analysis, to talk immediately about self-help reading would not 'clean' the data so much as dismember them. As argued in a recent study of interview methodology (Mishler, 1986), the interview can not be a simple stimulus-response situation between researcher and subject. Anecdotes, extended examples and seemingly obscure references should not be seen as extraneous information or random 'noise' elicited from subjects in the course of answering questions. Rather they offer valuable keys to a respondent's lived experience. They indicate the sorts of knowledge and memories that self-help psychology reading triggers for a particular reader. Work in linguistics also supports this view of the interview situation: an interviewee interprets both self-help

books and a researcher's questions about them in terms of pre-existing social and cultural contexts which organize the significance of the books. These contexts ought to be brought into the transcript analysis.¹²

These methodological advances yield new research findings. In her study of teenagers reading a popular magazine, for instance, Frazer (1987) used this less conventional stance on interviewing to good effect, discovering that the forms of readers' responses to her questions were themselves indicative of the magazines' 'effects' on the readers. In my research I have noted the genres of knowledge other than self-help psychology that readers bring up in interviews so I can reconstruct the way readers place themselves and their reading in the broader cultural environment.

What follows are analyses of interviews with three readers. These three readers are chosen to display a spectrum of self-help readings; the extent of variation in readings is worth further study. The first reader is perhaps the most skeptical, and the least avid participant in self-help culture. The third reader is one of the most enthusiastic. The point here is that though readers' readings of the books differ, and their self-understood goals for reading differ, what they all share is a similar relation to the books, to the act of self-help reading. The first two have been friends for a number of years, and discuss their reading on occasion. These two women differ in the points of reference important to them, and they actually differ in their general orientation to self-help books too. But they can still share their reading experiences within the thin culture of self-help psychology. The books become for these readers an accessible but not altogether satisfying forum for naming private troubles.

Case 1: Patricia

Patricia, in her early sixties, now lives alone in the large suburban single-family home she shared with the husband who divorced her. Her large living-room displayed carefully positioned, oversized coffee table books; the den was lined with neatly ordered paperbacks. Her self-help reading occupied a small shelf in her bedroom. She said she preferred to think of the popular psychology reading she had been doing as 'how to' reading, not 'self-help' reading. The distinction she was drawing says much about her understanding of the books. Patricia is an avowed 'independent' thinker who takes advice warily. She wants her own gauge for knowing 'how to' define her 'irrational' feelings about her divorce, how to know when her reactions are normal. All the same, mere 'how to' advice is not enough for Patricia to redefine post-divorce life; she articulated to me the importance of having some framework for this reading:

Patricia: If you read ten different books you'll get ten different points of view. And trying to make sense out of it all, you have to really sit down and establish where you fit into the general scheme of things.

Unprompted by me, she often juxtaposed her reading to what she considered more enduring sources of self-help — the Bible, and what she called ‘social tradition’.

Patricia: In the so-called good old days, when you had mainline religions that were stronger in society than they are today . . . you had a societal polestar by which to guide behavior . . . when we had the revolution in humanism all this was thrown out, baby with bath and substitutions coming in gave validity to almost any damned thing you want to do as long as it, quote, feels good.

In several follow-up interviews Patricia elaborated her theory that the ‘social revolt’ of the 1960s and 1970s had resulted in an ‘anything goes’ mentality that emboldened men to divorce their wives for younger partners, as her own husband had. She ‘take[s] issue with feminists who say you should throw everything away’, and used abortion as another example of how the ‘do it if it feels good’ ideas from ‘the 60s’ did not work.

Patricia: I think what we need more than anything else is an effort at balance, instead of saying ‘this is better than that’ . . . the either/or approach; black and white. I think there was an awful lot of that in the ‘50s, ‘60s and so on. And when everybody was in revolt. Everybody was revolting, too . . .

She now hopes that ‘the pendulum will swing back the other way’ toward traditional mores that she mentioned so often. But Patricia does not consider herself religious in a traditional sense. She avoids church and freely admits that she bolted from the Catholicism of her youth because of its stance on women.

Patricia found useful terms and psychological stage theories for the feelings that disoriented her during her divorce. She curtailed her self-help reading, and then started again as health problems arose. Positioned between an image of intolerably stern religious institutions on the one hand and mass-mediated images of feminism and ‘the 60s’ on the other, Patricia has read ‘how to’ books in efforts to name and validate her confusing, sometimes embittering feelings about her divorce and her precarious health. She returns to popular psychology books, even though she finds them ultimately unsatisfying, because the other frameworks available to her for understanding relationships — traditional religion or else a hedonistic anti-ethic — are themselves illegitimate in her eyes. She sees no other legitimate guides to making sense of personal life. With this constellation of reference points, she picks and chooses from the popular books believing all along that any one book is likely to be of very limited help. Yet she wants more than just words for feelings that confuse her; she wants a broader narrative:

Interviewer: Do you see any of the books we’re talking about as trying to recapture some of what you’re calling the ‘social need’ . . . ?

Patricia: I've been looking for that in these books, and I don't usually find it. I usually find the focus is on a single issue rather than the broad picture, and in that sense you can get very lost . . .

Patricia is hardly the passive recipient of individualist or psychologistic ideologies that is implicit in some critical accounts. But it would not illuminate much to consider her a member of an 'interpretive community', or several such communities. She has participated in several informal networks with others who read self-help literature. She lends her books on occasion to newly divorced acquaintances, and will take suggestions for reading from others. What is more remarkable, though, is her ongoing attempt to place herself and her reading in a larger context of cultural change. It is notable too that the sense of selfhood she has constructed with the help of her reading is a self quite differently positioned from those of reader friends that I also interviewed. One such reader is Janet, whom I interviewed alone and in a focused discussion with Patricia.

Case 2: Janet

Janet is a very soft-spoken housewife and part-time library assistant, about fifty, who lives several miles from Patricia in a similarly appointed suburban house on another eerily quiet street. The two women discuss their reading occasionally in the course of telephone chats and luncheons. Janet is very shy and spoke only haltingly about her reading and her personal life. She used none of the schoolish locutions that came so easily to Patricia. Like Patricia, she wanted words to attach to her feelings, and the confirmation that those feelings were not unusual, 'like you'd get in a counseling session . . . whereas in my background, someone wouldn't say anything, they'd neglect to say, or they would say you shouldn't feel that way'.

Janet described her husband as having changed his line of work and gone through a 'mid-life crisis' — itself a term popularized through self-help books. 'And that's all I did, was read these things.' She still reads self-help books on occasion. She has 'worked through' her husband's problems by reading the books, though without his input. She had hoped he would read about the 'Type A man' — a man whose routine habits are especially stress producing — but he was not interested in this sort of exploration.

Janet's upbringing did not encourage that kind of exploration either. Having been raised in a 'small religious community' she had never questioned what she now considers 'shabby treatment' by her husband. But then she read a book not usually considered self-help — Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* — which 'threw me a lot'. This harbinger of modern feminism was a springboard to self-help reading. Janet needed to find ways to readjust her feelings and self-concept to her new under-

standing of her marriage as unequal. Friedan's book was a theoretical inspiration for her, but it was not enough of a guide for managing a new sense of injustice in everyday life. Janet spoke of her self-help books — including the same titles read by Patricia — as a kind of 'continuation' of Friedan, a practical feminism. Through reading these books,

Janet: I want to make myself aware so I don't have to be walked on and used . . .

Interviewer: Would you say you're a feminist?

Janet: I guess I am, but not a very strong one.

Janet has tried to hide her feminist leanings, but is 'able to support myself'. She offered rather meekly that men and women are 'not equal in relationships'. She hopes that relationships in the next generation would prove more so. With Patricia shaking her head in disagreement, Janet stated those hopes for her own teenage children while conversing in our focus group.

Janet's tentative 'feminist' reading of her self-help books showed through in a specific comment about a book she had read in the past year. She claimed 'the psychologists wouldn't like *Men Who Hate Women and the Women Who Love them*', a book that traces men's 'hate' of women to their psychological development. Psychologists would see things from more of a 'man's point of view'. Though she said these psychologists' point of view would not change her mind, she then equivocated, conceding that a male prerogative may not be unreasonable because 'a man has to go to work every morning'.

Janet has tempered her tentative feminism with the desire to avoid divorce and the economic trauma that would accompany it. And she credited her religious upbringing more than a feminist awakening with sustaining her through the most difficult period with her husband:

Janet: Maybe [the upbringing] was what got me through it — which is ironic. Because of the strong stick-to-it-ness, whereas in true up-to-date living, you know, 'Forget it — I don't need all this' . . .

Like Patricia, Janet has read self-help in relation to other authoritative frameworks — a stern Lutheranism, her image of professional psychology and Betty Friedan's feminism. The popular psychology books have given her some helpful names, and occasionally techniques, for self-management inside her marriage. Janet has worked out a tenuous accommodation between her notion of traditional loyalty, her more recent feminist leanings and her experience with the self-help books. She says she is now avoiding the books because seeing them makes her wonder if she should be dealing with unresolved problems in her household. The same books that are a help to her in giving names and validation for personal troubles are also a

not altogether welcome invitation to verbalize in her own mind feelings she would sometimes rather ignore.

Janet and Patricia participate in the culture of popular psychology reading, a culture thin enough to enable Janet and Patricia — and other women friends of theirs — to share their reading experiences while disagreeing quite markedly, though privately, on what constitutes a proper relationship between women and men. Both women have spoken positively about their reading experiences. But neither woman simply assimilates ideas or behavioral programs whole from her reading. Neither has been carried away by an individualist ideological thrust in the self-help books. Patricia appears to have articulated a more systematic outlook on contemporary relationships than has Janet. But both improvise a sense of personal self in the world through accommodations between powerful images of feminism and of modern relationships, residues of religious teachings and their self-help reading.

Men as well as women read self-help psychology books. It is beyond the scope of this article to propose systematic differences between female and male readings, or between those who read the books as practical guides and those who read more for moral inspiration. More than most of the other readers, the following male reader is relying on his self-help reading for moral guidance — both for his own life and for understanding the contemporary social world. Still, the 'thin culture' model of reading describes his engagement with the books.

Case 3: Hal

A gregarious teacher in his mid-fifties, Hal lives in a suburban tract older and less affluent than the up-scale town in which Janet and Patricia live. More than Janet or Patricia, he positions himself and his reading in terms of other ideas that were themselves popularized in self-help books. Chief among these are a 1960s-style critique of 'material' values on the one hand and, on the other, a suspicion of 'New Age' spiritualisms that have proliferated since that time. Hal certainly reads in relation to a different cultural constellation than Janet and Patricia. He belongs to a meditation group. But like Janet and Patricia, he seeks words for feelings and experiences in the thin culture of self-help reading, and juggles these with other points of reference toward which he is ambivalent.

A glance at Hal's study, lined with evidence of his twenty years of self-help reading, would suggest him to be an extraordinarily self-enveloped man — a textbook example of Christopher Lasch's narcissist. Yet Hal sees self-help psychology as a means to understanding the dynamics of social problems that concern him both as a teacher and as a private individual.

Hal: I'm thinking about the drug problem and what it's doing to the ghettos and

to the inner cities, I'm thinking about the underfunding of schools . . . I'm very concerned about the future. And I think we — in the absence of a religion that offers solutions, I think that we are desperately going to have to find some kind of humane way to solve these problems and to learn to live together. I see these self-help books as attempts on the individual level to move towards that goal.

Hal endured a bitter divorce, and read self-help in conjunction with it, but unlike the two women readers he spoke only briefly about marital relationships. The recent historical trends and cultural points of reference he juxtaposes himself to have more to do with a broad cultural evolution than an evolution in gender relationships. He, like Patricia, uses 'the 60s' as a potent image in positioning his sense of selfhood in society. But the '60s' he recalls is much more sublime than the effusion of laissez-faire selfishness that figured so importantly in Patricia's rendition:

Hal: I really feel that the '60s was a time of a renaissance. And it died so fast as a true white-hot moment of truth — and went off into so many perverted, distorted versions of what I think was really happening then. I look back on it as a seminal moment in my lifetime — not necessarily just for me, but I mean for the whole country, the whole world . . .

What Hal saw coming out of the 1960s was a new quest for moral 'truth', a recognition that 'this whole concept of material progress' was 'bankrupt'. With a family he was 'struggling to raise' and two jobs, Hal characterized himself as, at most, marginal to the cultural eruptions of the time. And while he positioned his own 'quest' in relation to his image of cultural ferment in the 1960s, he continues to harbor suspicion for one slowly evolving class of cultural products of that period — a pot-pourri of new psychologies that raise personal growth to the status of a religious discipline.

Hal spent a notable portion of the interview describing and distancing himself from several such new philosophies which he found 'intellectually indefensible'.

Hal: I don't like gurus, for one thing, and I don't like that kind of mass emotional response. I get very uncomfortable around that . . . They [members of one spiritualist group] really identify themselves as 'new age'. They're all aging hippies, and, good people. Good people. But we only go a certain way down the road together and then we part company.

Hal's relation to the new spiritualities is rather like that of Patricia to traditional religion. Both are reading in the context of alternative frameworks for ordering personal life, frameworks which they consider partial at best and less than fully legitimate for their own lives. Both associate the word 'religion' with strict, institutionalized dictates and would rather describe as 'spiritual' what interests they have in the nature of ultimate reality. In that they are akin to many middle-class Americans who are wary

of any institutionalized cultural authority and uphold the individual as the final arbiter of moral questions (Bellah et al., 1985). Yet to leave an analysis of Hal's self-help reading with the observation that it manifests individualism, would blunt rather than sharpen our understanding of the cultural meaning of self-help reading.

Hal and Patricia stand at opposite ends of a large discursive space in which many categories for feeling states and regimens for personal improvement coexist, continually refurbished by the publishing trade, but none of which are popular for a great length of time. Most of the books share a psychologically articulated focus on the individual as the sole contributor to an improved or more moral selfhood. In that sense one might call them carriers of a dominant discourse or ideology of individualism. The point of this article, however, has been to specify the way readers interact with a very popular set of non-fiction discourses in book form. Self-help readers try out popular psychological guidance not as a definite, ideologically driven search for the perfect individuality but as an ambivalent, uncertain reach for a way to articulate personal challenges. As I show below, it would be more accurate to say that even avid readers are 'resorting to' the books, given the perceived alternatives, rather than eagerly anticipating them.

An ad hoc forum for personal life

Each of the three readers above, like others in this study, turned to self-help books as an available source of discourse about personal concerns, in the absence of other easily accessible, legitimate sources of help. Janet articulated the situation thus:

Janet: I see these books as a real positive thing. If no one else in my household is going to talk to me about my problem, I'm going to go somewhere else and see if I can work it out. And certainly, reading helped me through a difficult time . . .

In another example, Georgia told me that she liked self-help books despite their inattention to a broader context:

Georgia: I like self-help books because they discuss a lot of the issues and make them more accessible than the real abstract theories. The problem with self-help books is that they don't look at the larger cultural context where, how these problems emerged.

For Georgia, the larger context is her image of society as 'too competitive', and that women, 'in their attempt to be equal, have absorbed all the values of man'. Though she does not find this kind of context in self-help psychology books, she continues to reach for them, ambivalently, anyway:

Georgia: I don't think self-help books encourage you to bond with other

women. I think they encourage you to be a rugged individualist and solve your own problems. They don't encourage you to understand the resource in connecting to women . . . I don't think they push that, or joining with other women, but more just help yourself. You know, just a do-it-yourself kit.

Interviewer: You said they're important, and yet it sounds like you're saying a lot of them have this flaw that they're emphasizing people as competitive individuals. What's good, then, about the books that you're reading?

Georgia: What's good is you don't have — there isn't the sense of community between women that there should be, or between people, and what's good about these books is that it lets you know about — there are a lot of people who have these certain problems that you might think are very individual. Maybe you — maybe somebody — like your peculiar, weird problem — well, they let you know that these are common problems that a lot of people have, so in one respect they sort of do connect you with a community of people with the same problems . . .

Trusting the discourses about the personal problems described in self-help books, Georgia returns to them, imagining herself part of a 'community' of people with similar needs, even if she never interacts with many of them.

A wary neo-traditionalist like Patricia, a left-leaning, feminist-leaning reader like Georgia and a moral seeker like Hal each approaches self-help psychology books as an accessible forum for constructing a self in a world without clear benchmarks for personal life. Readers can continue reading self-help because they are 'open' and they use their other cultural reference points loosely. The contrasts that some readers have drawn here between self-help reading and religious guidance may be indicative of a particularly American penchant for religious articulations of self and society. In other societies, other ideologies, along with their organizational embodiments, may provide the dimming reference points that religion provides for the thin culture of self-help reading in the US.

For these readers, the challenges of personal life in a time of cultural vertigo do not lend themselves easily to established ideologies. By participating in the thin culture, readers can name their personal situations, and discover new situations to name. But the thin culture offers few if any of its own indications that one may exit from it:

Janet: When I see some of these books now again, I kind of avoid them, because I remember reading some of them and being so depressed for days after, because then I'd have to deal with something, that 'should I be dealing with equality in the house?' So I've kind of let them go by, now.

A number of other readers, as we saw, described themselves as burned out or 'saturated' by reading at various points. And the more philosophically inclined readers were just as subject to this saturation as the more practical readers. Hal, for instance, characterized his non-reading periods with 'a need to get away from theory and just do something. Almost anything. And stop being introspective. I think that I have a shift from introspective to extrovert'.

Sheila, a divorced artist, enunciated the belief that personal development is itself the purpose of life. Her reading has assisted her in this commitment. All the same . . .

Sheila: [C]oncentrating on yourself can be a chore.

Interviewer: So you're saying this is work to do this reading and really think about you[rself].

Sheila: Yeah. I think that's why people don't do it.

Interviewer: You're more drawn, immediately, to think about some current event, or something happening in the external world.

Sheila: Yeah. My children — what's happening in my children's life, and what's happening in — the latest man I'm attracted to, or whatever it is — going on with the people I work with, you know. I'm really not a self-centered person. I mean, I'm a person who is very much interested in, in other people, and . . . it gets boring, thinking about myself. You know, it really does, after awhile.

Readers will exit the forum provided by self-help psychology when they are saturated, bored, or else satisfied that further reading on their particular topic would be repetitious. They will then re-enter tentatively, juggling multiple points of reference. Individual self-help books may provide rules of thumb for some dimension of personal life. But as enacted by readers, the thin culture of self-help reading does not provide definitive standards for a healthy or adequate or fully 'grown' personality. It is not a stable basis for self-definition.

The commodified discourses of self-help are, ironically, discountable and attractive all the same. Still, describing the readers as subjects in the thrall of ideology would connote far too much a homogeneous, cumulative 'effect' of these books. The term 'individualism' may summarize the faith in self-improvement on which self-help is implicitly based. But we need to go further if we are going to understand how self-help reading works in everyday life. If anything, the term 'individualism' connotes a highly directed pursuit of selfhood. These readers, in contrast, wend their way through self-construction on the outskirts of more formal sources of guidance. Their reading does not keep them from situating themselves in some larger, if fragmented and mass-mediated, sense of the social world. The reading does not wear down more traditional or more collective forms of cultural authority. Rather, it suggests that readers understand such authority to be fragmented or inadequate and that self-help reading is a makeshift substitute.

Readers do adopt the words and categories of self-help, and to the extent that they do they construct a psychologized self that remains indefinitely open to further, though always partial, elaboration in future books. And they remain open to further book purchases. In search of ways to articulate personal experience, they make do with the highly psycho-

logical terms of discussion in the self-help forum. They are seeking not so much a perfect self as a new language for personal life.

Conclusion

Self-help psychology reading is a significant practice, not fully understood within more general analyses of ideology or individualism, or within the present terms of interpretive community research. This article has presented a model of relations between readers and self-help books, one that could be used and refined in further research, especially on the reception of non-fiction genres. I propose that 'thin culture' captures the ambivalent situation of readers negotiating self-help as discourse and as commodity. The concept denotes two, interrelated qualities of reader reception: readers read the books believingly yet loosely, defining and redefining aspects of lived experience with a variety of partly discountable terms, and readers read in ongoing relation to a larger cultural arena — a repertoire of everyday reference points that orient one's sense of self. Open-ended interviewing makes these reference points available for a researcher who wants to understand how much power self-help reading has in constructing selfhood.

More research needs to be done to clarify the social boundaries of self-help psychology reading. Further study could also specify different readings of self-help books and the genesis of those readings. Within the realm of non-professional, popular psychology, self-help reading might turn out to be one of a number of overlapping 'thin cultures' such as paid lecture attendance and self-improvement TV viewing. By studying other sites for popular psychological discourse, researchers might build a grounded understanding of popular psychology as a sprawling, discursive field. We need more research to understand how distinctly psychological conceptions of selfhood (as apart from political or religious ones) have entered into widespread common sense in the US and in some Western European societies as well.

The idea of thin culture responds to some of the important concerns raised by Radway (1988) in her recent call for a reorientation of audience study. Radway argues convincingly that audience researchers need a method and a conceptual vocabulary for understanding how individuals assemble and reassemble bits of different popular cultural forms into the shifting mosaics of everyday experience. I propose that by studying a 'thin culture' through interviewing as described here, researchers can understand how self-helpers alight upon and contextualize the advice from self-help books in relation to other genres of knowledge, both formal and informal. This approach allows us to ask broad questions about cultural power and shared culture in terms of specific everyday practices. We can

thereby retrieve a cultural category like 'individualism', grounding it in the improvisations and avoidances that texture contemporary self-construction.

'Thin culture' has served here as a conceptual alternative not only to interpretive community, but to other images of the mass media audience. Readers' engagement with self-help books does not bear being characterized as a form of 'resistance' or 'opposition' to a dominant order.¹³ And we miss the cultural context of self-help reading to characterize readers purely in terms of the 'uses and gratifications' that reading provides. I have described self-help reading in terms of ambivalence, tentativeness and making do. Rather than contesting an order, self-help readers are very much in between competing orders for personal life. Their reading indicates the precariousness of those orders more than their resilience.

While the treatment here focuses on self-help book reading, other practices might constitute thin cultural practices too. Reading of women's (or men's) magazines, viewing of current events programing, engaging with other non-fiction mass-mediated products — each might constitute a thin culture which readers or viewers adopt loosely and juxtapose to other points of reference. Further studies of thin cultures can bring to light the personal map-making that people accomplish in a culture scattered with signposts of varying durability.

Notes

This article is a revised and expanded version of the paper 'Studying the Audience for Self-Help Books: Exploration of a Thin Culture', which was presented at the 1989 Meetings of the International Communication Association, San Francisco, USA.

1. Between 1965 and 1986, a self-help book on personal relationships or psychological well-being had entered all but two of the annual bestseller lists in the book trade standard, *Publishers Weekly*. Over half of the lists included two or more such books. Before 1978, the lists included the ten bestselling hardcover books; after 1978, the fifteen bestselling books.

2. A large-scale survey of book reading (Yankelovich et al., 1978) included information on self-help reading which will be cited below. Data on self-help reading, broadly defined, are limited to a telephone survey (Wood, 1988) reported in the trade journal *Publishers Weekly*. It indicated that one out of three adult Americans had *bought* a self-help book. It is likely that a higher proportion had read such a book. To my knowledge, at the time of this study no research had been published which explored how readers make sense of self-help psychology reading or what the act of reading the books means in the larger context of their lives.

3. Bellah et al. (1985: 71, 79, 82). See also Rieff (1966). For other critiques of popular psychology see, for instance, Jacoby (1975), Schur (1976) and Palmer (1986).

4. Most studies of therapeutic culture do not give us a feel for the everyday relations of people to therapeutic expertise, especially in a popular form. Critiques of psychotherapeutic thinking by Lasch, Rieff and others have been based either on purely theoretical inquiries or else anecdotal cases. Bellah et al.'s (1985) *Habits of the Heart* study is an important empirical as well as theoretical advance; it is based on several interviewing projects. These interviews gave the authors a picture of what kinds of moral reasoning about relationships and about civic life are possible within a heavily psychological worldview.

5. For examples of research on interpretive communities, see Lindlof (1988).

6. See Press and Lembo (1989), for a complementary argument.

7. The Gallup survey (Wood, 1988) suggests that these readers are representative of those most likely to read the books. Surprisingly, American women and men buy self-help books in almost equal proportion. The survey suggests too that men are buying self-help books for guidance with personal relationships as well as books written on the traditionally male theme of business success. The survey also indicates that adults from middle-class backgrounds are most likely to read the books. Readers in this study are, with one exception, college educated if not college graduates, and live in middle- to upper-middle-class comfort. I wanted to study just the sort of educated middle-class people implicated in cultural criticism of the inadequacies of popular psychological reasoning. These readers were recruited from singles groups, a Protestant church group and a self-exploration group for social activists.

I did not recruit readers from organizations with a specific therapeutic credo like that of Alcoholics Anonymous. These organizations advocate particular self-help books within a broader, institutionalized set of routines and rituals. Such organizations elicit some degree of commitment from members and provide members with ways of defining selfhood that build on organizational membership as much as or more than on reading. The point in this article is to understand the experience of an occasional reader who must make sense of and assign or withhold legitimacy from commonly available popular psychology books.

8. It can be inferred that these readers' reading habits are not atypical: using a conservative reading of what relevant survey data exist (Yankelovich et al., 1978), we can infer that those who read self-help psychology books read an average of two every six months. In the six months prior to my readers' first interviews, some readers had read none of this kind of book, others had read as many as five. Most readers have said they read in spurts, with the more heavy reading not surprisingly accompanying the onset of divorce or loss of a spouse.

9. One reader, raised loosely in the Jewish faith, had recently converted to a committed practice of Protestantism. She too contrasted popular psychology with organized religion.

10. 'Legitimate' is used here in the sense Pierre Bourdieu (1984) uses the term in describing hierarchies of taste. Legitimate culture is high culture — the implicit standard for evaluation in any field of cultural production. In Bourdieu's analysis, this standard is by no means 'natural' but rather the outcome in any one period of ongoing competition between would-be arbiters of culture, such as powerful institutional or professional bodies. In the field of psychology books, an example of a highly 'legitimate' cultural product would be the multivolume standard edition of Sigmund Freud's works. A popular advice book would be considerably less 'legitimate'.

11. These findings parallel in some ways Elizabeth Long's work on middle-class reading groups in Texas. Long describes her largely fiction-oriented reading groups as working on the assumption that words are a 'neutral or transparent veil over

objective reality' (Long, 1986). The popular psychology book readers would seem to treat popular psychological categories similarly. While it would be wrong to treat fiction and popular nonfiction reading as the same kind of experience, it is still noteworthy that Long emphasizes that a simple realism informs even educated middle-class readers. As Long reminds us, most readers are not professional students of literature whose livelihoods depend on close, innovative interpretations. Just as she finds it valuable to reconstruct the non-scholarly middle-class reading experience for fiction, the research here attempts something similar for popular nonfiction.

12. See Cicourel (1981) for a linguistically informed treatment of qualitative methodology that is relevant for qualitative communications researchers who are concerned with macro-contexts. For a more technical review of relevant advances in linguistics, see Cicourel (1987).

13. Radway (1984: 213), for instance, concludes that romance reading constitutes a 'mild protest', a latent opposition to patriarchy.

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