

## **Do self-help books help? Conversations with adult readers about learning and well-being**

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### **Introduction**

Self-help literature has become one of the most important domains of adult learning in Europe and North America. Thousands of books have been written with the explicit pedagogical intent of helping readers change and improve some element of their personal or professional lives. Millions of readers have turned to self-help literature for guidance in areas such as health and well-being, interpersonal relationships, and careers. While self-help books have been popular for decades – Dale Carnegie's *How to Win Friends and Influence People* was published in 1936 – recent decades have witnessed a remarkable expansion of this genre.

Given the commercial success and social influence of self-help books, a substantial secondary literature has emerged in this field. Professional reviews exist to assess the merit of self-help books for purposes such as psychotherapy, weight loss, and career development. Feminists have criticized the impact of self-help literature on women's lives. Sociologists have examined the contribution of self-help literature to contemporary forms of governance that rely on internal forms of self-regulation. Others have examined the cultural impact and economic significance of self-help literature.

In this literature, there are two notable gaps. First, the literature has tended to be speculative rather than empirical when it comes to describing impacts on readers: few studies have been published that assess learning processes and outcomes among those who read self-help literature. Existing studies tend to interpret the meaning of self-help books, and then impute the supposed impact of those books on those who read them. Second, despite the evident connections between self-help literature and informal adult learning, there has been little original research about self-help literature from scholars of adult education. Self-help books have been dramatically successful in commercial terms, and they have undoubtedly influenced the lives of millions of people. For some reason, the field of adult education has

been virtually silent regarding the analysis and critique of self-help literature. This silence is perplexing, since scholars of adult education would seem to be ideally positioned to examine what is currently missing in the study of self-help literature: the actual learning experiences of readers themselves.

In this conference paper, I address a question central to the SCUTREA 2012 theme: do self-help books help? I begin with an exploration of alternative conceptual frameworks for the interpretation of self-help literature. I then focus my attention on in-depth interviews undertaken with six Canadian women who had recently read self-help books dealing with relationships and well-being. These interviews explored questions such as: what do readers learn from self-help books, and how does such learning change their sense of themselves, their world, and their relationships with others? What, if any, impact on well-being do such books have?

### **Conceptual Frameworks**

There are three basic frameworks for addressing the question of whether or not readers benefit from self-help books. First, those who author and publish self-help books typically argue that self-help books provide ideas and insights that readers may use to improve their lives in some way. Authors of self-help books offer readers advice on how to take charge of their lives, feel better about themselves, and achieve such goals as prosperity, love, happiness, wellness, and self-actualization. Often written with a vocabulary of empowerment, self-help books would appear to constitute a pedagogy of hope, enabling readers to autonomously learn, grow, and change their lives.

Second, mainstream critics of self-help books frequently challenge the quality of advice provided in such books. Critics argue that such books simply do not provide readers with meaningful resources and plausible pathways to personal change. They point out, ironically, that self-help books may actually increase the dependency of readers on authoritative advice presented by putative experts. The true purpose of self-help books, according to mainstream critics, is simply to make money for authors and publishers, by preying upon the insecurities and gullibility of readers. From this perspective, self-help books may actually harm readers, through raising

unrealistic expectations, offering poor advice, and inculcating dependency on seemingly authoritative sources of information.

Third, the work of Nikolas Rose provides a more subtle critical framework for interpreting self-help literature. From this perspective, the key to understanding the social and political impact of self-help literature is to understand that the nature of human subjects, and the relationships between those subjects, has changed significantly in recent decades. Rose (1999, p. 84) asserts that in the latter twentieth century, advanced liberal 'strategies of governing autonomous individuals through their freedom' have emerged:

In different ways, the problem of freedom now comes to be understood in terms of the capacity of an autonomous individual to establish an identity through shaping a meaningful everyday life. Freedom is seen as autonomy, the capacity to realize one's desires in one's secular life, to fulfil one's potential through one's own endeavours, to determine the course of one's own existence through acts of choice.

Two interrelated processes figure prominently in the liberal arts of government: technologies of consumption, including market research, product design, and advertising, which incite human beings to shape their individual identities through the goods and services they purchase; and psychotherapeutic technologies, including human resource management, self-help literature, and the variety of professions and quasi-professions whose practise is rooted in psychological knowledge, which encourage human beings to come to know themselves and envision the lives they wish to lead (Rose, 1999, pp. 85-93). In advanced liberal societies, individuals are no longer merely 'free to choose', but rather 'obliged to be free' and to 'understand and enact their lives in terms of choice' (Rose, 1999, p. 87).

In a seemingly paradoxical manner, Rose (1999, p. 93) argues that freedom has come to represent a new form of rule: 'In striving to live our autonomous lives, to discover who we really are, to realize our potentials and shape our lifestyles, we become tied to the project of our own identity and bound in new ways into the pedagogies of expertise'. From Rose's perspective, the rising popularity of self-help books makes sense in light of the growing mutability of the self in contemporary liberal democracies. As one's identity becomes increasingly defined by lifestyle

choices, the pressure to ‘make the right choices’ goes up, as do the profits to be made by expertly guiding such choices. As such, the question of whether self-help books help is not so much a matter of judging the quality of advice provided by their authors, as it is a matter of assessing the contribution of such books to broader processes of social control.

In this paper, I focus attention on the outcomes of reading self-help books. Through reporting the results of structured conversations with readers, the paper sheds empirical light on an informal domain of adult education which has generated substantial rhetoric, but little evidence, about the helpful or harmful impact self-help books have on those who read them.

## **Conversations**

The six conversations described in this paper form part of a larger research project dedicated to (1) describing the learning experiences and outcomes which accompany the reading of self-help books relating to health, relationships, and careers; and (2) analyzing the impact of such reading upon those who read self-help books. Further information about the “Self-Help Literature Research Project” is available at: <http://www.ucalgary.ca/selfhelp>. Participants were recruited via Facebook posts sent to sites of interest to those who read self-help books. Structured, qualitative interviews with each participant lasted about two hours. Of the women whose conversations are described in this paper, four were in their forties and two were in their mid or late twenties; five of six had completed a post-secondary program of study.

Each conversation focused on the experience of reading a particular book. The books read by these women were as follows:

1. *The dark side of the light chasers: Reclaiming your power, creativity, brilliance and dreams*, by Debbie Ford  
[\[http://store.debbieford.com/product\\_info.php?products\\_id=9\]](http://store.debbieford.com/product_info.php?products_id=9);
2. *The mindful woman: Gentle practices for restoring calm, finding balance, & opening your heart*, by Sue Patton Thoele  
[\[http://www.suepattonthoele.com/books\]](http://www.suepattonthoele.com/books);
3. *Will I ever be good enough? Healing the daughters of narcissistic mothers*, by Karyl McBride [\[http://www.willieverbegoodenough.com\]](http://www.willieverbegoodenough.com);

4. *All about love: New visions*, by bell hooks  
[\[http://www.harpercollins.ca/books/All-About-Love-Bell-Hooks/?isbn=9780060959470\]](http://www.harpercollins.ca/books/All-About-Love-Bell-Hooks/?isbn=9780060959470);
5. *Will I ever be good enough? Healing the daughters of narcissistic mothers*, by Karyl McBride; and
6. *Meditation bliss: Inspirational techniques for finding calm*, by David Fontana  
[\[http://www.amazon.ca/Meditation-Bliss-Inspirational-Techniques-Finding/dp/1844834816\]](http://www.amazon.ca/Meditation-Bliss-Inspirational-Techniques-Finding/dp/1844834816)

When asked whether there was anything that they were hoping to learn through reading these books, five women identified specific learning goals:

1. I wanted to learn more about the psychology behind my feelings of discontent, and my desire to be a better and more authentic person. This particular book includes exercises (mental and written) to help guide the reader through their self-exploration and learning. I wanted to be able to use these particular exercises to have more structure in my life around personal growth and feeling more conscious of my thought patterns and my efforts to change those patterns, which tend to be negative.
2. My hope in reading this book was to change negative thought patterns and to focus on being less judgmental and to help me 'be more present in the moment'.
3. I guess I wanted to understand why my relationship is the way it is with my mom, to better understand why she never says 'I love you' why, although I know I am loved, she never shows it. One of my goals was to figure out why, and then instead of fixing it, just learn to deal with it.
4. I suppose I was hoping to open my heart to love a bit more, and appreciate people more. I'm a very compassionate and giving person but I have been single for a long time, and I was questioning whether I was expecting grand love and not seeing anything less. So in reading the book, I was hoping to open my eyes to love in all its forms.
5. I think if anything was a goal, it was to find a way to free myself of feeling guilty about how I often feel about my mom, to validate how I feel, and to forgive the things about her that make me crazy.
6. I didn't have specific learning goals. Rather, I just wanted advice that I could implement immediately in my current situation.

In reading these self-help books, the women we interviewed used a number of distinct learning strategies. Three took notes, three kept reflective journals of their thoughts, three undertook the exercises or activities suggested in the book they were reading, two talked about the book with friends or family members, and one participated in an online course organized by the author of the book she had read.

Only one participant did not engage in learning strategies beyond the process of reading itself.

All six women identified something of significance which they had learned from the reading of the self-help book we discussed with them:

1. I learned that personal development of any kind is a life-long endeavor and that I must continue to allow for time in my life to reflect, journal and become conscious of the thought patterns and barriers I create in my mind. By employing particular strategies, I can help make this process easier to achieve. Strategies may include meditation, journaling, positive affirmations, and taking proactive steps to make change in one's life.
2. Self care is just as important as looking after my family's well being. Taking a time out for myself and getting in the moment is doable. Having a positive outlook is easier and more comfortable than dwelling in the negative.
3. There are opportunities for me to take things from the book for sure –like not engaging in her 'woe' is me behavior, like not letting her run my life. One of the things the book says is that you can simply say – when they are offering what they (my mom) thinks I should do in a certain situation – "thanks for your concern but I am dealing with this in my own way." You can be plain and simple, no other comments required, instead of being defensive.
4. Well, for one, I need to remember that love comes in all shapes and sizes, and just because I don't have romantic love doesn't mean I don't have love. And that romantic love is not the ultimate love. Second, that I should not hold on to the past. I should not keep my anger and resentment because that stops me from being able to love.
5. First, she will not change. Second, it's okay not to like that part of her, it doesn't mean I love her less as my mother, it just means that I recognize she is not perfect, as we all want to think our mothers are. Third, how her actions had an effect on me when I didn't necessarily realize it.
6. First, I learned that emotions can be managed by watching our thoughts, like clouds in the sky as objective observers. Second, meditation includes mindful eating!

In addition to believing that they learned something from reading these self-help books, most of our participants attributed changes to their thoughts and feelings to their reading:

1. I feel more empowered because I have strategies and tools to help myself grow and to maintain the goals I set for being more proactive and positive.
2. I am more patient and tolerant with my children and husband. More empathetic with friends who may be struggling for whatever reason.

3. I realize now that I am okay without a relationship with my mother. I used to try to force it or engage in it because I thought that's what 'I am supposed to do'. But now I think it's okay to have a simple, detached relationship, that it's okay.
4. I suppose I'm slowly recognizing that I don't need romantic love in my life to have love in my life. And so I feel like I need it less... although that doesn't stop me from wanting it.
5. I don't think my thinking has changed other than what I stated about the relationship I am trying to make sure I have with my kids.
6. We can transfer the negative thoughts or actions we have to personal improvement – e.g., practice our deep breathing.

Beyond thoughts and feelings, most of the women we interviewed attributed some behaviour change to having read a self-help book. In response to 'has reading this book changed anything that you do in day-to-day life?' participants said:

1. It has raised my consciousness of my thought patterns and it has helped me discover ways to maintain more positive patterns. It does not always work and I still frequently catch myself being negative, but it has helped.
2. Meditation, generally more optimistic.
3. The book also talked about calling your mother "out of guilt," and then realizing that she is only interested in telling you about her – not genuinely interested in me. So I don't call daily or e-mail daily which I was doing before. I have also learned to tell her and talk about only what I choose to – and the book taught me that.
4. I don't think it has. Not that it wasn't good information, but it was basically all stuff that I already thought about and tried to practice in my life.
5. I will not get into gossip with other people, because I don't feel it is fair to judge people on things. It has made me realize that, growing up, that was part of her control. Talk like others are bad people, but you are perfect. I no longer call her out of guilt. I will call if I have something to say, or want to tell her something, but not because 'I should'. I love her for a lot of things she did do for me growing up, but I realize now it's okay to recognize the negatives of my growing up. I try to form positive memories for my kids, every day.
6. Yes – that each thought we have should focus on the present. Adults have a tendency to slide their thoughts to the past or future. I treat every day as a voyage and an opportunity to apply a minimum of one ten-minute meditation.

Clearly, these six women believed that having read a self-help book did help them in some important ways. In response to 'has your reading of this book changed the way you think about yourself or your life?' the participants said:

1. The book helped me improve some of my thought patterns, so it helped me feel more positive about my life and myself in general. When I feel myself slipping into negative patterns, I can use the book to help redirect those thoughts again.
2. For the most part, it has given me suggestions that are easy and have an immediate impact. Sometimes I have been bogged down in negative thinking and not known how to get out of it. This book has simple, immediate suggestions and simple some common sense practices that I knew about that just got lost in the shuffle of a busy life.
3. I think reading the book has changed my perspective on my life, in that I know I am okay just being me, doing the best I can on a day to day basis without having to look or seek approval for things.... Reading the book will not change my mom but it can and will help me change the way I deal with her and others, and the way I look at myself.
4. Not really. I mean, I don't know if this is due to the book, but loving myself, listening to my body and my heart, and loving unconditionally, regardless of whether I can get hurt, are things I have tried to more actively incorporate into my life over the past year.
5. I have in the past always felt guilty for the parts of my relationship with her that I don't like, because a daughter is supposed to be close to, maybe even best friends, with her mom. And because I haven't been, I've carried a bit of guilt for that. And bitterness towards her. Now, I don't feel bad about it. I realize it is what it is, and I'm okay with that. So I guess I feel less and less like a "bad daughter" for feeling how I feel.
6. Absolutely – I feel affirmation that I am in a better place – in terms of mind-spirit-body. It has given me a clearer perspective of where I've been, what my life-altering events are, and the next steps forward.

## **Conclusions**

In summary, these female Canadian readers of self-help books do appear convinced that self-help books help. These women approached self-help books with explicit learning goals, and used various strategies to engage with the content of the books. They identified significant learning outcomes from the reading process, and they attributed changes in their thoughts and behaviours to that process.

There are several obvious criticisms of these findings. First, the sample is small and biased: it is likely that people having experienced negative or indifferent outcomes from self-help reading would not participate in a study such as ours. Second, cognitive dissonance theories in psychology would predict that once people invest time and resources in doing something, they naturally wish to believe that what they did was worthwhile. Third, our research design allowed no means of confirming

whether self-reported change in thoughts and actions actually represented real change, let alone change attributable to the reading of self-help books. Simply because a few people believe something, does not make it so.

The conversations reported in this paper would suggest that, at least according to the readers themselves, some self-help books do help. The conversations do not support the mainstream characterization of self-help books as shallow, deceptive, hollow, or harmful. However, the conversations do not refute the more subtle critique of self-help books offered by Nikolas Rose's sociology of freedom and government. Indeed, the women interviewed for this paper referred frequently to processes identified by Rose as central to contemporary forms of rule: trying to understand oneself, and making choices which would help define one's identity.

As we are in the early stages of a larger research project of which the interviews for this paper have been part, we can conclude that further research and analysis will be undertaken in order to more definitively interpret the relationship between the empirical experience of reading self-help books and the theoretical and political implications of Rose's sociology.

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### **Reference**

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What is the best self improvement or self help book you've ever read and why is it different from the rest? I know that there's not one best personal development book of all time. Different people go through different things and need a different push. Some relate to specific authors, writing styles or even niches. Audiobooks can be a great way to read and learn. If you find it difficult to finish a book, this is a great option. If you're short on time, you can listen to it while driving or exercising. This book is another tool that will help empower readers to reach a level of self-fulfillment. It doesn't matter what level they start on; they will achieve even greater results once they read this book. Over 50 million people credit Anthony Robbins with helping them change their lives for the better. "Self-help manuals are worthless. Chuck them in the bin, and enjoy what you've been dealt in life." Janet Street Porter said that, almost two months ago, in this very newspaper. Many would agree, but many more wouldn't. The only thing their books help is their own incomes. That's why I wanted to write an alternative." What he attempted to do was sift through all existing literature on the subject and identify precisely what does work, and what doesn't. ...And now: Fifteen million readers can't be wrong, can they? At best, the man's legacy is his indefatigable (if blinkered) optimism in the face of adversity. *Feel The Fear And Do It Anyway.* by Susan Jeffers. Age: Curiously, and surely deliberately, unknown. Does Ms Jeffers suffer from a fear of ageing? The books are about feeling better and living better. This was by far the largest category with 19 books out of the top 57. One should notice that in most other books self-improvement is an important theme as well, but in those other books the theme is addressed more indirectly. Reading self-help book seems to be part of an active and adequate coping style, which fits in with an individualistic culture, where individuals have the freedom to pursue happiness on their own ground. As for the Netherlands the profile of the readers of the Dutch monthly *Psychology Magazine* is known. Table 3 shows that the readers of *Psychology Magazine* are relatively well-to-do and highly educated. They work in a wide range of professions.