

Is reading a self-help book an occasion of self-help?

Scott Cherry

*Department of Social Sciences
Loughborough University
Leicestershire
LE11 3TU
s.cherry@lboro.ac.uk*

Abstract:

This paper looks at the self-help book as a publishing phenomenon and a textual form. Through a detailed empirical analysis of a corpus of classic and contemporary self-help books, including Samuel Smiles's *Self-Help*, and drawing on previous work (Cherry, 2008a; 2008b), it explores how the very activity of reading transforms the status of a self-help book. On the one hand, reading a self-help book is a requirement for a reader to complete their quest for self-help; on the other, it is insufficient for the successful completion of that quest. I consider some implications of this tension.

Self-help books:

I've recently completed some doctoral research on the topic of self-help. I wanted to find out about self-help, to get purchase. I looked in many places: in books, magazines, workshops, groups. I will show you my journey through one these sites today: self-help books. We know the sort of thing – “how to make money”, “how to make love”, “how to be lovable”, “how to be successful”, “how to be a successful lover who makes lots of money”, or simply “how to get rid of our crippling emotional pain”. So, lots of self-help books. Reading is the activity to be undertaken here – we have to read the self-help book if we want to get anywhere. But this is my point of departure; reading doesn't simply just happen. I want to argue that reading is an ambiguous, highly unstable category, in need of analysis. I begin my journey. When I confront self-help books, any of them, I find these peritextual features on their front covers:

“Over 3 Million Copies In Print”(Peale, *The Power of Positive Thinking*)

“Over One Million Copies Sold!”(McGraw, *Life Matters*)

Why, I ask, do I need to know about sales figures? This is not a straightforward announcement of the volume of sales achieved by each self-help book: a mere statement of fact. The inclusion of strong sales figures invokes a sense of publishing achievement. Recognition. High volume of sales becomes a criterion of success of the self-help book, which neatly forms a self-exemplifying, recursive mechanism for its own justification. The self-help book is of value because millions of copies have been purchased; millions of copies have been purchased because the self-help book is of value. When I think about it, maybe I do have problems making lots of money, or controlling my panic attacks or whatever, but surely, after a while, my problems will go away. But:

“Problems don’t go away. They must be worked through or else they remain, forever a barrier to the growth and development of the spirit” (Peck, 2006: 18, *The Road Less Travelled*)

“It is important to remember to confront the reality that although limitations in your lifestyle [...] may make your life more “comfortable”, in the long term such restrictions are very disabling” (Silove & Manicavasagar, 1997: 48, *Overcoming Panic*)

Oh dear. If I disregard the self-help book and reading, not only will my problems not go away, they will get worse. Things will become disabling. Naturally, I am concerned. I consider reading.

“If you read this book thoughtfully, carefully absorbing its teachings [...] you can experience an amazing improvement within yourself” (Peale, 1952: x, *The Power of Positive Thinking*)

By reading, then, not only will my now disabling problems be dealt with, I will feel “an amazing improvement within” myself. This is encouraging. Something important: what I have been doing up to this point is not reading, but rather being persuaded to read; I see the justification for why reading is necessary. Something even more important: the resolution of my problems is to be found in reading, which is no longer optional but required for me to achieve my quest for self-help. I decide to read the self-help book.

“Think one way and you attract the conditions which that type of thinking indicates. Think another way and you can create an entirely different set of conditions. Conditions are created by thoughts far more powerfully than conditions create thoughts” (Peale, 1952: 169, *The Power of Positive Thinking*)

The status of reading, which I have only identified through reading thus far, emerges when it is established that the source of the problem (and therefore the solution, too) is thought. A shift is taking place: from reading to thinking. Reading will not be satisfactory because a different ontological category is now made relevant – written text gives rise to ways of thinking. It is not how, or even whether, readers pursue reading, but how they think. Readers are required to *do* something with thinking; and merely reading will not change thought. And: it is change that needs to happen. The self-help book represented such a powerful contingency on the successful completion of self-help, possessing a “natural” value that could only be extracted by reading. We have seen what has happened: looking at it, touching the pretty font designs on its front cover, opening its first page, and then, finally, reading it. No matter how close I get to it – and reading is the height of proximity to it – the self-help book becomes inadequate. Its status, like reading it, has changed, such that the self-help book is no longer prioritized as part of the work needing to be undertaken by readers. The required adjustment is a specific change in thinking. Cognition is at fault. For my quest to be successful, I need to think differently. Affirmations are a good thing to practice. But:

“When saying affirmations, speak them aloud whenever possible, while using an appropriately positive and assertive tone” (Lindenfield, 2000: 69, *Self-Esteem: Simple Steps To Develop Self-Worth and Heal Emotional Wounds*)

Reading affirmations is no good; but saying affirmations is no good either. Affirmations must be spoken aloud. Speaking them, as the authors of them in their speaking, is a *display* of positive thinking. There is significance to the act of *saying* – readers are *doing* something with the written text. I see that I am now required to undertake exercises, tasks, and extra-textual, non-reading and non-thinking activities as I proceed through the self-help book. And, just make things absolutely clear:

“The difference between thinkers and doers is what they do at this point. Revving up your psychology will only take you so far. The next step is doing something. Demonstrate your commitment to your desires and plans. Get busy. You know what you need to do, so just do it!” (Harrold, 2004: 69, *Reinvent Yourself*)

The self-help book could not provide what was required for readers to undertake self-help: to think differently. Readers had to do that for themselves, outside of reading. And they did, we can suppose. But thinking now suffers from a similar insufficiency; it will not indicate the performance of self-help. Thinking must be replaced by action, and therefore abandoned. It can be divided, as the author of this last extract, Fiona Harrold, does here, into thinking and doing. Or better, thinking is not doing. Readers need to get busy because thinking is inactivity. So: thinking is subverted, and reading has all but disappeared. The self-help book is being pushed into the background, no longer relevant. Here’s an extract from a dear friend:

“Our own active effort is the essential thing; and no facilities, no books, no teachers, no amount of lessons learnt by rote will enable us to dispense with it” (Smiles, 1859: 210, *Self-Help*)

I have not accomplished self-help by reading a self-help book, but rather the knowledge that reading has deferred or postponed that accomplishment. What I need most is what the self-help book is unable to give me – there is a self-confessed inadequacy of the self-help book, and therefore reading and writing. It’s as if the whole project of written communication is being put into question. I feel in the mood for some more Smiles: “The possession of the mere materials of knowledge is something very different from wisdom and understanding, which are reached through a higher kind of discipline than that of reading - which is often but a mere passive reception of other men’s thoughts; there being little or no active effort of mind in the transaction” (1985: 217-8).

So I must abandon the self-help book as a legitimate quest, being parasitic inasmuch as it’s “a mere passive reception of other men’s thoughts”. The self-help book cannot supply me with the active role undertaken by interacting with the world, to pursue a “higher kind of discipline”.

I part ways with the self-help book, but my journey is still incomplete. And here we see the paradox of the self-help book. On the one hand, it announces itself as self-sufficient, an object whose value is extracted through reading, and on the other, reading is insufficient, and the self-help book admits its own insufficiency by pushing readers increasing further away from it, out into the world. It is denying itself the ability to contribute to the most critical part of the process – actually performing self-help.

The trouble is: I return to another self-help book, and then another...and so on. I begin a cycle of reading. That is to say, I become part of a culture of self-help book reading. This is puzzling. If the self-help book cannot help, then why is the genre so amazingly popular? I have a few remarks. We read self-help books because we want to be individuals - we seek individuality. We are unfulfilled in some variably specified way. But individuality is a funny and amazingly slippery concept. It is not about separation from others, uniqueness, but being together, belongingness with people. This is bewildering. And the nub of the issue: readers seek refuge from the loss of self and bewilderment from living in a culture where individuality is submerged - that is to say, as we are forced to separate ourselves from others to find ourselves - but reading self-help books simply throws them back into the sinking wreckage. They are told to remove themselves from the very source of individual freedom: embodied connection with other people. Reading is an answer; but it is superficial, merely a diversion, not a solution. Readers buy self-help books because they are desperate to regain a sense of self, not because they embrace what the books seem to offer. This opens up for consideration the whole category of self – we need to respecify how we understand it, how it lives.

References:

Cherry, S. A., 2008a, 'Parody as a Performative Analytic: Beyond Performativity as a Metadiscourse' [50 paragraphs]. *Forum Qualitative Sozialforschung/Forum: Qualitative Social Research*. 9(2), Art. 25, <http://nbn-resolving.de/urn:nbn:de:0114-fqs0802258>.

Cherry, S. A., 2008b, 'The Ontology of a Self-Help Book: A Paradox of its Own Existence', *Social Semiotics*, 18(3), 337-348.

Cherry, S. A., 2009, 'The Promise of the Hyphen: An Ethnography of Self-Help Practices'. Unpublished PhD Thesis, Loughborough University.

Harrold, F., 2004, *Reinvent Yourself: 7 Steps to a Fresh You*. London: Piatkus Books Ltd.

Lindenfield, G., 2000, *Self-Esteem: Simple Steps to Develop Self-Worth and Heal Emotional Wounds*. Berwick upon Tweed: Thorsons.

McGraw, P., 1999, *Life Strategies: Doing What Works, Doing What Matters*. London: Vermilion.

Peale, N.V., 1952, *The Power of Positive Thinking*. New York: Fawcett Crest.

Peck, S. M., 2006, [1978] *The Road Less Travelled*. London: Arrow Books.

Silove, D. & Manicavasagar, V., 1997, *Overcoming Panic: A Self-Help Guide Using Cognitive Behavioural Techniques*. London: Robinson.

Smiles, S., 1859, *Self-help: With Illustrations of Character and Perseverance*. London: Institute of Economic Affairs.