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Who reads self-help books? Development and validation of the Self-Help Reading Attitudes Survey

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Abstract

The publication and use of psychological self-help books are ubiquitous in our society. Nevertheless, little research is available concerning the public's attitudes toward such books and the psychological variables associated with these attitudes. The current investigation involved the development and validation of the Self-Help Reading Attitudes Survey with a sample of 264 male and female college students. The resultant 40-item measure was found to be psychometrically sound, with acceptable reliability and both discriminant and convergent validity. Persons with more favorable attitudes toward reading self-help books held better attitudes about reading in general, were more psychologically minded, had a stronger self-control orientation, and reported greater life satisfaction. Women and psychology majors had more positive self-help reading attitudes than did men and nonpsychology majors. The utility of this new assessment with respect to further research and clinical applications was discussed. © 2000 Elsevier Science Ltd. All rights reserved.

Keywords: Self-help; Bibliotherapy; Reading attitudes; Psychological mindedness; Self-control; Life satisfaction

1. Introduction

A visit to practically any bookstore today reveals an extensive section devoted to psychological self-help books. Each year, millions of Americans look to these books for advice,

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insight, and inspiration in solving their personal and interpersonal problems. Reading as a therapeutic technique, termed bibliotherapy, has a long history, originating in medical and mental hospitals in the early 1900s (Rubin, 1979). With the social trends of the 1970s came an influx of self-help and personal growth books encouraging the consumer to “do it yourself” (Rubin, 1979). Helping professionals often use bibliotherapy as an adjunct to treatment and catalyst for change (Pardeck, 1991a,b; Starker, 1988, 1989, 1990). In fact, a survey of 121 psychologists indicated that the majority prescribed self-help materials to their clients, and 69% believed that their clients were helped by these materials (Starker, 1988, 1989). Based on a national survey of over 500 clinical and counseling psychologists, Santrock, Minnett and Campbell (1994) published an evaluative compendium of over 350 self-help books in 33 categories.

Many consumers try self-help books as a cost effective, readily available primary source of relief, independent of a therapist (Glasgow & Rosen, 1978; Ogles, Lambert & Craig, 1991; Starker, 1990). Offering prescriptive advice in a variety of areas including anxiety, stress, diet, exercise, weight loss, self-esteem, body image, addictions, and relationships, these books are a prominent part of the current mental health care environment. In one telephone survey (Najavits & Wolk, 1993), nearly one-third of a small sample of metropolitan residents reported reading self-help books, more for factual information than for advice on a particular problem. In another telephone survey, Starker (1986, 1990) found that 65% of 186 respondents read self-help books, especially spiritual and personal growth books. Several surveys have revealed that women purchase and read self-help books more than men do (Shapiro, 1987; Starker, 1989, 1990; Wood, 1988), especially books pertaining to love and relationships, weight control, and emotional problems. In a survey mostly of men, Starker (1992) found that over half read self-help books and reported a more positive outlook on life and greater social support than did non-readers.

Can self-help materials truly be effective? Narrative reviews of research (Craighead, McNamara & Horan, 1984; Glasgow & Rosen, 1978; Riordan & Wilson, 1989) and meta-analyses (Gould & Clum, 1993; Marrs, 1995; Scogin, Bynum, Stephens & Calhoun, 1990) have found many self-administered treatments to be moderately effective, with outcomes comparable to therapist-administered treatments. Of course, these data largely reflect outcomes of controlled studies with persons recruited or selected to participate in structured programs. The results may not generalize to conditions of “customary use”, in which consumers self-diagnose their problems and read commercially available books to solve them. Critics (e.g., Rosen, 1987; Simonds, 1992; Slovenko, 1995) assert that self-help books often make exaggerated and unsubstantiated claims of effectiveness, provide little guidance for valid self-diagnosis, and cannot monitor readers’ understanding of and compliance with the material. Self-help techniques, when applied inappropriately, risk readers’ developing self-blaming attributions if the program fails. Some feminist scholars (Kaminer, 1993; Simonds, 1992) have criticized this self-help genre as particularly victimizing of women in its emphasis on individual rather than cultural change.

Who are the readers of self-help? How do they differ psychologically from persons who eschew self-help reading? To date, few researchers have addressed these questions, and those who have principally focused on who might benefit most from self-help. A series of methodologically limited studies by Forest (1987, 1988, 1991) on the effects of unspecified self-

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