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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.

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 & Calhoon, 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-

help books provided little understanding of such individual differences. Ogles et al. (1991) compared the effectiveness of four books for coping with loss and found that readers with higher initial expectations of benefit reported greater symptomatic change, which they attributed to the books.

The basic purpose of the current investigation was to enhance our understanding of people's attitudes about and usage of psychological self-help books. To achieve this, we developed a needed measure of attitudes toward such books. We administered this new questionnaire, along with an inventory of participants' self-help reading behaviors in the past year. Moreover, to examine specific predictors of self-help reading attitudes, we included standardized measures of several conceptually relevant personality variables. We derived the following hypotheses, largely based on the rational congruence between certain psychological dispositions and the processes and substance inherent in self-help reading.

1. People for whom reading has greater positive reinforcement value were expected also to value self-help reading.
2. Individuals who are more psychologically minded were hypothesized to have more positive attitudes about self-help reading. Psychological mindedness entails an ability to recognize relationships among thoughts, feelings, and actions and an interest in the meaning of one's behavior (Conte et al., 1990).
3. Similarly, because privately self-conscious persons consciousness readily focus attention on their inner experiences (i.e., thoughts, feelings, motives, etc.; Buss, 1980), these individuals were expected to value self-help reading.
4. To the extent that self-help encourages people to solve their own problems, individuals with a stronger self-control orientation, believing in their own self-regulatory efficacy (Rosenbaum, 1980), were expected to hold self-help reading in higher regard.
5. Based on Starker's (1992) finding of a more positive outlook among self-help readers, we predicted that a relatively greater satisfaction with life would be associated with more favorable self-help reading attitudes.
6. Based on previous research evidence (e.g., Shapiro, 1987; Starker, 1989, 1990; Wood, 1988), we hypothesized that women would espouse more positive self-help reading attitudes than men would.
7. Finally, given their academic interests, psychology majors' self-help reading attitudes were expected to be more favorable than those of non-psychology majors.

2. Method

2.1. Participants

Students (n = 264) at a large, mid-Atlantic, public university participated in the study for extra class credit. These 190 women and 74 men ranged from 18 to 53 years of age (M = 21.6) and were racially diverse (57% Caucasians, 25% African Americans, 11% Asians, 3% Hispanics, and 3% other minorities). Most (92%) were unmarried.

2.2. Materials and procedure

Participants received a survey packet to complete at home and return in a week. The packet contained a demographic form and these questionnaires:

2.2.1. The Psychological Mindedness Scale (PMS)

The PMS (Lotterman, 1979) assesses the disposition to think about psychological processes as related to the self and relationships (Conte et al., 1990). The 45-item PMS used in this study was Conte et al.'s (1990) version, which dropped the 20-item multiple choice section of Lotterman's 65-item measure (see also Trudeau & Reich, 1995). Answered on a 4-point agree–disagree scale, the items had good internal consistency in this study (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.85$). Exemplary items are "I am always curious about the reasons people behave as they do" and "Usually, if I feel an emotion I can identify with it".

2.2.2. Private Self-Consciousness Scale (PSCS)

The nine-item PSCS (Scheier & Carver, 1985) assesses individual differences in attention to and awareness of covert or private aspects of the self (e.g., "I'm always trying to figure myself out."). Scores are the sum of items rated on a 0 (*not at all like me*) to 3 (*a lot like me*) response scale. The PSCS had satisfactory internal consistency in this study (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.70$).

2.2.3. Self-Control Schedule (SCS)

Rosenbaum's (1980) 36-item SCS measures individuals' tendencies to apply self-control methods to the solution of behavioral problems in everyday life (e.g., "By changing my way of thinking, I am often able to change my feelings about almost anything."). The response format was a scale from $+3$ (*very characteristic of me*) to -3 (*very uncharacteristic of me*). The SCS had good internal consistency with the present sample ($\alpha = 0.85$).

2.2.4. The Extended Satisfaction with Life Scale (ESWL)

The 50-item ESWL (Alfonso, Allison & Rader, 1996) assesses one's satisfaction with life in nine areas (overall, social relationships, sex, self, physical appearance, family, school, job, and intimate/marital relationship). The composite sum of items, each rated on a seven-point disagree–agree scale, had excellent reliability ($\alpha = 0.93$).

2.2.5. Social Desirability Scale (SDS)

This 13-item, true/false questionnaire (Zook & Sipps, 1985) measures self-presentational tendencies to answer questions in a socially desirable manner. The SDS had a Cronbach's alpha of 0.74.

2.2.6. Survey of reading behavior

This inventory asked participants to state the number of books (other than assigned textbooks) that they read in the past year in various categories (e.g., fiction books including mysteries, romance, and science fiction; nonfiction books such as biographies, how-to books, reference manuals, etc.). Participants distinguished between books read completely, books

started but not finished, and books read partially for reference only. Because counting unfinished books would entail a dubious and imprecise quantification of reading behavior, the reading index used in this study was the total number of books read entirely.

2.2.7. Adult Survey of Reading Attitudes (ASRA)

The ASRA (Smith, 1990) is a 40-item measure of basic attitudes toward reading. Examples of items are "I am a good reader" and "I get a lot of enjoyment from reading." Scores are sums of the five-point disagree–agree items ($\alpha = 0.92$).

2.2.8. Survey of self-help reading behavior

Respondents reported the number of self-help books read in the past year in the listed categories of addiction/recovery, behavior change, emotional change, motivational topics, parenting and childcare, personal growth, and spiritual growth (excluding Bibles). Again, only the number of books read completely was indexed.

2.2.9. Self-Help Reading Attitudes Survey (SHRAS)

Developed in this study, the SHRAS initially contained 44 items to assess specific attitudes toward reading self-help books. We rationally constructed attitudinal items to include cognitive beliefs, affective reactions, and behavioral actions and intentions. Both positively and negatively worded items were written to reflect attitudes about self-help books, those who read them, and those who write them. The content of some items was modeled after the more general ASRA. Instructions provided a clear definition of self-help books (see Appendix A). The response format was a rating scale from 5 (*strongly agree*) to 1 (*strongly disagree*). Examples of items are "Reading self-help books is one of my favorite reading activities", "Self-help books can provide genuine self-understanding", "Self-help books do more harm than good", and "People who read self-help books are losers".

3. Results

A key purpose of this research was to develop a reliable and valid index of attitudes toward reading self-help books. Initial item analyses for the SHRAS revealed that four of the 44 items had an item-total r (< 0.25) that weakened the measure's internal consistency. The poor items were conceptually unrelated and had a truncated range of endorsement. After they were sequentially eliminated, Cronbach's alphas for the 40-item scale were 0.91 for men, 0.93 for women, and 0.94 for the entire sample. SHRAS scores were normally distributed and ranged from 1.10 to 4.85 on the 5-point scale, with a mean and median of 3.10 and standard deviation of 0.59. Sixteen items that express negative attitudes are reverse-scored. The 40-item SHRAS is given in the appendix.

Regarding its discriminant validity, the SHRAS had a weak, positive correlation of 0.15 with the SDS measure. Albeit significant ($p < 0.05$), this low correlation indicates that only about 2% of variance in SHRAS scores was due to socially desirable responding.

A stronger convergent association ($r = 0.24$, $p < 0.001$) was found between SHRAS scores and the number of self-help books that participants reported reading in the past year. On

average, they had read about two of these books in the past year ($M = 2.2$, SD = 3.9). Fifty-five percent of the sample had not read any self-help books, 20% had read one or two such books, and 10% had read seven or more. A significant r of 0.33 ($p < 0.001$) was also found between the number of self-help books read in the past year and the number of all books (minus the self-help books) read during that period.

A Pearson correlation was calculated to test the hypothesis that attitudes vis-à-vis reading in general would predict self-help reading attitudes. As shown in Table 1, self-help reading attitudes on the SHRAS did correlate significantly with general reading attitudes on the ASRA. Correlational analyses were used to examine the hypothesized relationships between the SHRAS and the psychological variables. The results are presented in Table 1. As expected, more positive attitudes toward self-help reading were related to a higher degree of psychological mindedness, somewhat greater life satisfaction, and a slightly stronger self-control orientation. However, the SHRAS was not associated with private self-consciousness.

Next, t tests were conducted to evaluate the hypotheses of more favorable self-help reading attitudes among women than men and among psychology majors than non-psychology majors. Results confirmed both predictions. Women's SHRAS scores ($M = 3.20$, SD = 0.59) were significantly higher than men's scores ($M = 2.85$, SD = 0.54), $t(259) = 4.36$, $p < 0.001$. Psychology majors had more positive attitudes towards self-help books ($M = 3.24$, SD = 0.59) than did non-psychology students ($M = 3.00$, SD = 0.57), $t(233) = 3.15$, $p < 0.002$.

Because the latter difference might actually reflect a gender difference between the groups, due to more female than male psychology majors, a 2 (major) × 2 (gender) analysis of variance was performed and re-confirmed the significance of the two main effects in the absence of a Major X Gender interaction, $F(1, 231) < 1.0$, $p > 0.05$. Furthermore, because these effects of gender and major could be due to group differences in psychological mindedness (see Trudeau & Reich, 1995), hierarchical regressions were conducted to determine if each still predicted SHRAS scores after PMS scores had been entered. Both gender and major explained additional, significant (albeit reduced) variance in self-help reading attitudes (R^2 increases = 3.1 and 1.7%, $p < 0.005$ and 0.05, respectively).

In an exploratory analysis, the SHRAS scores of African Americans and Caucasians were compared. No racial differences occurred on this measure, $t(207) = 0.28$, $p > 0.05$.

To ascertain the uniqueness of the various predictors of self-help reading attitudes, a multiple linear regression analysis was carried out using a stepwise approach (see Tabachnick

Table 1
Correlations between the Self-Help Reading Attitudes Survey (SHRAS) and Individual-Difference Measures

Individual-Difference Variables	SHRAS[a]
General reading attitudes (ASRA)	0.31***
Psychological mindedness (PMS)	0.33***
Private self-consciousness (PSCS)	0.06
Self-control orientation (SCS)	0.13*
Satisfaction with life (ESWL)	0.17**

[a] *$p < 0.05$. **$p < 0.01$. ***$p < 0.001$.

& Fidell, 1996), with SHRAS scores as the criterion variable and the following predictors: ASRA, psychological mindedness, life satisfaction, self-control orientation, and gender. Optimal prediction occurred after the entry of four of these five variables, accounting for 19.4% of the SHRAS variance, $R = 0.44$, $F(4, 237) = 14.27$, $p < 0.001$. Participants with more positive attitudes about self-help books were more psychologically minded ($\beta = 0.19$, $p < 0.01$), had better reading attitudes in general ($\beta = 0.22$, $p < 0.001$), were more likely to be female ($\beta = 0.17$, $p < 0.01$), and were happier with their lives ($\beta = 0.13$, $p < 0.05$). Self-control orientation ceased to account for significant variance in SHRAS scores after the first-step entry of psychological mindedness. These findings were reconfirmed by a regression analysis that initially controlled for social desirability.

4. Discussion

Recent decades have seen a proliferation of psychological self-help books, widely consumed by the public and used in the context of treatment by mental health professionals. The principal purpose of the current investigation was to enhance our understanding of attitudes toward self-help books and individual differences in these attitudes. Accordingly, we developed the Self-Help Reading Attitudes Survey (SHRAS) and found it to be psychometrically sound — normally distributed, highly internally consistent, reasonably free of a social desirability response set, and retrospectively predictive of actual self-help reading behavior.

Who, in this sample of 264 college students, were favorably predisposed to self-help books and their use? Supportive of our first, previously untested hypothesis, we found that such attitudes were partially reflective of people's orientation towards reading in general. Individuals who enjoy reading and feel competent at it are, perhaps not surprisingly, more interested in reading self-help books. Indeed, on a behavioral level, participants who read more books of other types also read more self-help books.

We further confirmed our hypotheses that self-help reading attitudes would reflect certain underlying personality traits. Among the best of these predictors was the trait of psychological mindedness — a disposition to think about psychological processes as related to the self and relationships. Psychologically minded persons possess the ability to recognize relationships among thoughts, feelings, and actions and are interested in learning the meaning of their own behavior (Conte et al., 1990; Trudeau & Reich, 1995). The language and content of most self-help books are congruent with these mental processes and values. The absence of an observed relationship between the SHRAS and private self-consciousness suggests that a predisposition toward only an attentional focus on one's inner experiences (i.e., awareness of thoughts, feelings, beliefs, etc.) has no bearing on attitudes about reading self-help materials.

We further found that individuals with a stronger self-control orientation (Rosenbaum, 1980) held more positive self-help reading attitudes. Thus, self-help books may appeal to persons with skills and interest in the self-regulation of their emotions and behaviors. They may view such books as offering tips and techniques for enhancing their self-control and self-efficacy in managing their lives. In addition, we observed a modest association between self-help reading attitudes and life satisfaction. This result supports Starker's (1992) finding that self-help readers possess more positive outlooks on life and have more social and familial

support than non-readers. Perhaps persons who are less happy with their lives are more skeptical that self-help books could alter the breadth and depth of their discontent. Conversely, more satisfied persons may see a value-added potential for self-help reading.

Finally, we examined gender, college major, and race in relation to scores on the SHRAS. Consistent with other research evidence (Shapiro, 1987; Starker, 1989, 1990; Wood, 1988), women espoused more favorable attitudes toward self-help reading than men did. Moreover, college students majoring in psychology reported more positive attitudes towards self-help reading than did non-psychology majors. These effects were not fully explicable by group differences in psychological mindedness (Trudeau & Reich, 1995). SHRAS differences between African Americans and Caucasians were neither expected nor observed.

Because the present study was limited to a college student sample, future directions for this research entail a large-scale survey of the general population to validate further the SHRAS and the predictors of self-help book use. A larger, more diverse sample will also permit analyses to elucidate the factor structure of the SHRAS. Because individuals' compliance with self-administered treatments can be problematic and predictive of their therapeutic outcomes (e.g., Gould & Clum, 1993; Lavallee & Cash, 1997; Pantalon, Lubetkin & Fishman, 1995; Strachan & Cash, 1999), the SHRAS may have utility in explaining differential levels of compliance with and benefit from these treatments. The practical value of the SHRAS in clinical contexts that rely on the adjunctive assignment of bibliotherapeutic materials is worthy of scientific inquiry.

Appendix A. The Self-Help Reading Attitudes Survey (SHRAS)

A1. "Opinions about Self-Help Books"

This questionnaire asks about your personal opinions concerning self-help books. By "self-help" we mean psychological self-help — namely, books intended to assist or enable people to overcome behavioral or emotional problems and books to promote personal growth and well-being.

Below are statements about self-help books with which you may disagree or agree. Use the 1 to 5 scale to convey your disagreement or agreement with each item. Enter the number that best describes how you feel about each item. Please be open and honest in your opinions.

1 = strongly disagree
2 = mostly disagree
3 = uncertain or neutral
4 = mostly agree
5 = strongly agree

1. I have read one or more self-help books in the recent past.
2. I'm interested whenever my friends read a good self-help book and tell me about it.
3. I can think of much better ways to help myself than by reading a self-help book.

4. I've told friends about self-help books I've read.
5. Self-help books do more harm than good.
6. Reading self-help books could be a good way for me to learn things about myself.
7. Most self-help books are hard to follow.
8. Reading self-help books is one of my favorite reading activities.
9. Reading self-help books has or would make me feel uncomfortable.
10. Professionals who write self-help books are unprofessional.
11. My friends and I have discussed the self-help books we have read.
12. Self-help books can provide genuine self-understanding.
13. I would rather read a self-help book about how to deal with a problem than have some person tell me what to do.
14. At the bookstore, I like to look at the latest self-help books.
15. I have no desire to ever read a self-help book.
16. Self-help books are a good way for people to help themselves.
17. I would listen with interest to people talk about self-help books they've read.
18. I think that reading self-help books could be interesting.
19. Most self-help books are boring.
20. Self-help books are often written just to make money from human suffering.
21. I spend some of my spare time reading self-help books or articles.
22. I sometimes buy or borrow self-help books.
23. I think that self-help books are thought provoking.
24. Self-help books are a reasonable alternative to professional therapy.
25. Some self-help books can really help some people improve their lives.
26. Reading self-help books can lead to lasting changes in a person.
27. Reading a self-help book might enable me to feel better about some problem.
28. People who read self-help books are losers.
29. I do not think that self-help books actually help people solve anything.
30. I feel that self-help books are mostly meaningless "psycho-babble."
31. I would never read a book to help myself with a personal problem.
32. Most self-help books are written by respected professionals.
33. Self-help books are often more upsetting than beneficial.
34. Most self-help books give bad advice.
35. Most self-help books provide some useful guidance.
36. I believe that I could read a book to help myself with a personal problem.
37. Self-help books often give advice that can make matters worse.
38. People who read a self-book to solve a problem are doing a smart thing.
39. I would read a book about a personal problem before seeking professional help.
40. Self-help books provide only a band-aid for problems and don't offer real help.

Reverse-scored items: 3, 5, 7, 9, 10, 15, 19, 20, 28, 29, 30, 31, 33, 34, 37, 40.

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