

Unravelling the 'Help' in Self-Help

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*Radhika Sharma

**Ishita U. Bharadwaj

Abstract

The present article intends to explore the challenges faced by the urban professionals in reaching for the emotional and professional amidst the neoliberal marketplace, via the narratives salient in Self-Help texts. Self-Help texts embody metaphors that rely on agency bound “bootstrapping” narratives, where individuals are compelled to maximise their agency in terms of tangible profits and fulfil their calculated potential in the social marketplace of competition. The neoliberal marketplace obfuscates the existing inequalities through narratives of multiculturalism and individual empowerment. Deliberation through thematic analysis, this article intends to look into the emergence of the ‘achievable self’ through the prevalence of Self Help texts as a popular genre in the Indian scenario. It also seeks to discuss the mental health challenges faced by individuals in meeting the achievement benchmarks of the current ethos, and how Self-Help texts posit themselves as providing the means to do so. The emergent themes will be discussed in the article in detail. This article seeks to explore the relationship between the reader and self-help texts to better understand the process by which newer conceptualisations of mental wellbeing as an achievement benchmark have emerged.

Keywords: Self-Help texts, Mental Health, Self, Popular Psychology, Neo-liberalism

Introduction

“We are not what we are, but what we make of ourselves” – Anthony Giddens

Humans’ engagement with texts, symbols and language are an integral part of communication and social discourses, evolved in due course of evolution. So, it can be said that the texts part of the discourse of a given time are aptly reflective of its zeitgeist. The neoliberal economy has diversified ‘what’ qualifies as a text, as well as ‘who’ can access it. This article seeks to explore the trajectory of individuals and society through their engagement with Self Help texts. The article shall also delve deep into the dominant themes around success, happiness and achievement as constructed by Self Help books.

Self-Help according to the APA is “a focus on self-guided, in contrast to professionally guided, efforts to cope with life problems. Self-help can involve self-reliance, in which one addresses such problems on one’s own (e.g., by reading self-help books), or it can involve joining with others to

address shared concerns together, as in self-help groups.” (American Psychological Association, 2022) Additionally, the potential benefits of self-help groups that professionals may not be able to provide include “friendship, emotional support, experiential knowledge, identity meaningful roles, and a sense of belonging”.

The 1970s was a decade of intense cultural reflection in the Western context. Tom Wolfe (1976), a prominent writer even dubbed it as the ‘Me Decade’. With books like ‘I’m OK, you’re OK’ (Harris, 1969) the full effects of popular psychology were manifested in the self-help genre, positioning scientific knowledge alongside advice giving: offering an alternative conception of the ways in which Psychology could improve our lives. In the subsequent decades the boundaries between formal psychological-therapeutic discourse and pop psychological books, and self-improvement materials became permeable.

Therapeutic discourse comprises of formal and informal knowledge systems (Illouz, 2008). The

*Research Scholar, Department of Psychology, North Campus, University of Delhi, New Delhi, India

**Assistant Professor, Department of Psychology, North Campus, University of Delhi, New Delhi, India

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formal knowledge system is seen as having “distinct boundaries and rules of writing, is produced in formal organizations” and carried out by professionals. whereas the informal system is “an amorphous and diffused cultural system present in ordinary cultural practises and self-understandings.” Self-help texts are seen as the most popular and visible manifestation of informal therapeutic discourses.

Evolution of the Genre of Self-Help

Samuel Smiles (1859) book ‘Self- Help’ consisted of biographies of men who had risen from obscurity to fame and wealth. In its popularity, self help books made a powerful case for notions like individual responsibility with which one can rise above the masses to distinguish oneself. According to Smiles (1859) Self-Help is “the power of each to accomplish for himself. ‘Self-help’ was seen as *equally* accessible and exercisable by all, regardless of their social, economic or cultural background.

Freudian psychotherapy began to receive serious attention for its success with neuroses. Though psychotherapy was only within reach of the wealthy and educated, such pre-requisites ensured that the access to psychotherapy (a means for self-improvement) was in some ways guided by one’s social or economic class.

A vast industry of self-help—addressing issues such as intimacy, child rearing, leadership, divorce, anger management, dieting—now relentlessly drives home Smiles’ message that self-help is in everyone’s reach.

Such a union was made possible when the language of psychotherapy moved from the realm of experts i.e., the formal knowledge systems to the realm of popular culture or the informal knowledge systems that influence our cultural frameworks and self-conceptualisations.

Therefore, it can be said that the genre of Self-improvement materials made the contemporary western goals of self-management, self-reliance and belief in perfectibility of self within the reach of all, regardless of their economic and social boundaries. However, what still remains to be seen is how this pursuit of self-regulation / improvement impacts the collective and socio-cultural ethos around achievement, relational satisfaction and living the ‘good life’ (Illouz, 2008).

Psychological Underpinning of Social Discourse: a Dyadic Relationship

It can be said that specialised disciplines influence our understanding of the concepts they espouse, regarding our social and natural environments. This is especially true in the case of clinical psychology as it deals with concepts that exist on the interface of specialized academic inquiry and everyday lives of individuals. These concepts include “intimacy”, “gender and sexuality”, “leadership” etc. As mentioned previously, the boundary between the formal knowledge systems of psychology and informal abstractions has become porous. It is evident in the rising popularity of mental health discourses in our everyday lives. Such as, media attention to mental health, changes in school curricula, organizations reformulating their structures to accommodate in-house therapists and even the ‘happy planet index’ (Alliance, 2021) wherein a variety of happiness reports and indices that measure wellbeing within and between nations.

Moreover, over time well known psychologists have addressed the masses via the medium of their texts. For instance, Carl Rogers in *On Becoming a Person* addressed his readers - “It is my sincere hope that many people who have no particular interest in the field of counselling or psychotherapy will find that the learning emerging in this field will strengthen them in their own living” (Rogers, 1995) Since then many psychologists and therapists have written books that address the collective and promise to guide them through their ‘life crises’. The rising interest in the study of happiness and wellbeing has brought about the formal founding of the discipline of Positive Psychology (Seligman, 2022) as well.

Thus, the rising legitimacy and authority of psychology as a discipline, through structural and political changes have made mental health an active part of our discourse. All such advancements have moved us closer to adopting psychologically oriented explanations, and attributive frameworks. This research wasn’t undertaken to test the effectiveness of Self-Help books or to create dichotomies of ‘false’ truths versus ‘correct’ truths or failure/success of these books. It was to engage in the social thought on *how of* written texts (in this case, products of psy-discourse) that seem to

impact the mental and emotional makeup of individuals.

Method

The current research adopts a qualitative approach in understanding the dyadic relationship between the readers' achievable "self" and self-help texts, since texts aren't independent of their readers (Nordquist, 2020). The study sought to understand how "achievement" of mental health and emotional wellbeing is being reframed in the current ethos through the following research questions:

What kinds of self-understanding are emerging through engagement with self-help texts? What do readers seek through their engagement in self-help and improvement? If this is the case, what remains unsatisfied in this quest and within the readers?

The decision of how to collect data is a crucial one for any researcher because, as Charmaz (2006) asserted, "*how* you collect data affects *which* phenomena you will see, *how*, *where*, and *when* you will view them, and *what* sense you will make of them."

Results

Considering this, the data was collected via qualitative semi-structured in-depth-interviews, and supplementary interviews. The semi structured nature of the interviews allowed the participants to meander into a range of experiences / themes. A total of 14 interviews were carried out for this study. There were 6 male and 8 female participants, in the age range of 25-34 years. The interviewees were selected using snowball and purposive sampling. They have been given pseudonyms for the purpose of this study. The participants identified as 'avid' readers of the self-help genre of books such that they read more than 4 in the past year. In addition, they engaged with other psycho-oriented audio-visual materials geared towards self-improvement.

Thematic Analysis was used, as it enables a rich, detailed, yet complex account of data. (Braun & Clarke, 2006) In lending itself as a method of analysis, it allowed for complex themes across participants to emerge in their engagement with self-improvement. In attempting to decode the emerging themes, a detailed description has been provided.

Table 1
Five main Themes and Subsequent sub-themes

Themes	Sub Themes
Disillusionment with Current Life: The Tipping Point	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Feeling stuck ● Taking stock of life accomplishments ● Breakdown of romantic relationships ● Seeking for tangible answers ● Seeking for something 'more'
The self-aware reader: A Consumer	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Books as commodities ● Seeking to understand the 'gist' i.e. skimming ● Inability to recount significant takeaways ● Books as 'lottery tickets' ● Gratification from reading instead of applying
The seeking to understand oneself	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Primacy on relationship with self ● 'Good' relationship with self as key for 'peace' ● Self-reliance emerging out of relational collapse ● Self as destination
The paradoxical self	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Self as expert and novice ● Punitive accountability?
The 'Help' in self-help	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Psycho-education ● Sense of belonging ● Prescriptive behaviours as self-discipline ● Paradoxical Feelings of freedom

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Discussion

Disillusionment with the current life: The Tipping point

When probed about the existing life circumstances at the time of engagement with self-help texts the participants expressed a sense of disillusionment. It emerged that they felt 'stuck' and experienced disenchantment pertaining to the professional and personal dimensions of their lives.

For instance, Rohit a young venture capitalist recounted:

"I found myself being negative about certain things in life and negative about only those few things... it was like a pattern you know. I would specifically be negative about those things if something were to go wrong..."

"I would like sit and harp on it like why isn't this working out and stuff... And then I would get in a loophole and I would depress myself over it for a while"

Moreover, there appeared to be a temporal dimension to this experience. For instance, Surya, a lawyer working in real estate said that he would engage with self-help texts around "full circle" moments like his birthday or the beginning of a new year. They induced him to take stock of his personal and professional accomplishments. It can be inferred that this personal stock taking was done against the benchmark of social norms for achievement, for someone his age. Hence, it can be said that the participants' frustration was fuelled by the gap between where they found themselves to be and where they *wished* to be, relationally, professionally and financially. This was echoed by Saumya, currently a postgraduate English student who said

"there is a lot of focus on the self, and constantly wanting to improve, and be better. We are so scared of being mediocre... there is always something for us to achieve"

Participants also sought self-help texts for psycho-educative purposes. They communicated a yearning for understanding psy-oriented concepts like human interactions, relationships, the human mind and people's 'hidden motivations'.

One of the more prominent motivations that guided the participants' seeking for self-improvement was the breakdown of a romantic

relationship. In some cases, it pertained to being stuck in under-gratifying relationships, which induced feelings of loneliness and helplessness. Further it was also the repeating of 'patterns' which caused them anguish consequently leading them towards changing 'something' through self-help.

At this juncture relationship self-help manuals such as 'The 5 Love Languages' (Chapman, 2015), 'Hold me Tight' (Johnson, 2008), 'Getting the Love You Want: A Guide for Couples' (Hendrix, 1990) and so on, position themselves as providing critical aid. They do so by reframing the relational issues being faced by the readers. Despite the claims of the books to be concerned with enabling the reader to find a partner and/or sustain a romantic relationship, most of the material contained within them is concerned not with love, nor with meeting and attracting potential partners, but with the care for, and nurturance of, *the self*.

According to (Hazelden, 2003) one of the core purposes of the Self-help books geared toward coping with relational difficulties is to create an individual who is self-regarding, and who has mastered the arts of self-knowledge and emotional self-discipline. Because such emotional regulation would enable to reader to better grapple with relational stresses. Thus, it is the relationship with, and responsibility to, the self that is seen as being of primary ethical significance.

Utkarsh, a chartered accountant dealing with the demise of his romantic relationship reflected:

"Yeah definitely, I was looking at a better relationship with myself... I realised that I don't have a good relationship with myself at all... so wanted to develop that..."

Most participants reported an initial dalliance with self-improvement materials which gradually transitioned into a more directed seeking of self-help texts geared towards solving specific issues. The core of the participants' seeking that brought them to engage with self-improvement emerged this want for '*something to change*'.

28-year-old Nihit, who is a freelancing architect reported:

"the transitioning point was that through certain events in life I realised that I am focusing on the wrong things and that's why I keep landing up in the same spot.... And I just started vehemently

searching for answers I thought of reading all these books."

If looked at closely, there was something elusive that was guiding the participants' seeking. Coupled with the dissatisfaction with their lives, it was their belief that there lay something 'more' out 'there' for them. It was a yearning for tangible answers and direction. Rohit quite concisely put:

"People want to help themselves but they also want somebody to tell them how to help themselves"

According to Rimke, (2000) the many rewards promised to those engaging in self-help projects are appealing. The benefits of helping one's self, we are told, will result in 'maximizing opportunities', which will result in 'good health, positive attitudes, friendships, love, happiness, prosperity, peace, joy, faith and a sense of inner fulfilment'. The allure of such promises combined with the participants' persisting dissatisfaction appeared to have created a 'transitioning point'.

The Self-Aware Reader or a Consumer?

This theme looks at the nature of engagement with the self-improvement texts by the participants. Self-help readers tend to read 'believingly but loosely', sometimes experiencing problems trying to remember particular messages, but showing a willingness to entertain psychological interpretations of personal troubles and assuming that within self-help books, 'the categories and analyses themselves are legitimate' (Lichterman, 1992).

In concordance with his findings, it was seen that the participants reported that they didn't delve too deeply into the texts but rather aimed to understand the 'gist' of the content. This held true for majority of the participants as they reported that over time, they 'skimmed' through the content of the books, and even used apps like Blinklist that summarize the content of books into bullet points or 'Blinks'. This approach enabled them to simultaneously trust and discount the books, all the while maintaining an open-minded and experimental attitude towards their content. According to Lichterman (1992) this ambivalence stems in part from readers' recognition of books as commodities, and in part from other points of reference in their own lives as they improvise ways of coping with personal troubles. For instance Manav, Utkarsh and Surya respectively stated:

"I don't feel compelled to read a book end to end anymore... so once I feel like I have gotten it, I feel comfortable putting the book down"; "Now I believe that if the book is boring I just drop it... there are so many books out there, I've been doing this more and more this year"; "you just you just start skimming a lot more the details are not that important"

This was also found in the current research where although the participants reported a sense of 'openness' towards the teachings given by psycho-oriented content, they also acknowledged the books as being mass marketed commodities with repeating messages. For instance, Garima, a mental health professional added:

"These are the books I feel that sell the most"

Interestingly when asked to recount any of their significant takeaways from the books, the participants pointed towards an overall increase in their knowledge but could not come up with the specifics.

Manav, a law student replied:

"I don't particularly remember anything (laughs) but my one takeaway was you can only do four hours of deep work" (laughing continues) ...But also, I didn't put a lot of those things into practice and hence they did not stick with me for that long and then I moved on"

The reason contributing to the cursory engagement with self-help texts was found in participants' open acknowledgement of their ease of access and simplicity. They felt that such materials position themselves as holding the 'easy' secret to success, which *logically* should be replicable for their lives. That if they could master the habits mentioned in the books, their desired success could be within their reach. Surya, elaborated:

"if somebody can give them a secret recipe for success... in a way everyone is just trying to buy a lottery ticket and in the case of books they are available for everyone"

Moreover, there emerged elements of instant gratification that impeded the participants from experiencing 'longer lasting effects' of self-improvement. Piyush, a small business owner added:

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"I just felt accomplished that I read a self-help book and I felt amazing, that type of thing so I didn't feel the need to do anything when I already felt good. I just read them instead of actually doing anything about them..."

It emerged that reading is akin to consumption, self-improving is an act of consumerism and that the 'Self' is the end product. Moreover, the need for '*something to change*' as discussed in the previous theme was assuaged more by the act of reading, and intellectually understanding their situatedness, rather than applying the advice given in the books. And the participants (un)knowingly, settled for immediate gratification.

The Seeking to Understand Oneself

As mentioned previously when the participants first delved into the world of self-improvement, they had found themselves in a vulnerable position of 'feeling lost'. Many of them reported that through self-help texts they gathered that their relationship with themselves or lack thereof was at the root of this dissatisfaction.

On being asked the guiding factor in continuing to read self-improvement texts Mehak, a post graduate English student said *"I think it's important to know yourself and know how your mind works if you're trying to find peace or trying to be more peaceful in life"*

This statement begs the questions, what defines a peaceful life? And how did peace, happiness and fulfilment become universal aspirations?

Rimke (2000) argues that self-help literature is reflective of a broader cultural trend which prescribes subtle ways of bringing the ideals and aspirations of individuals in alignment with the wider neo-liberal political objectives like consumption, profitability and efficiency. Our current cultural ethos has convinced us that we should understand our selves in terms of psychological adjustment, fulfilment, good relationships, self-actualization, personal growth and so on.

The participants placed significant emphasis on their need / want to understand themselves as self-sufficient individuals situated in their context. This emphasis on Self-reliance could be rooted in isolation after being let down relationally. Garima elaborated:

"Honestly you can't expect someone else to sit down and explain yourself to you they don't know what's going on with you...which also often leads to a lot of disappointment right"

As part of the process of forming a healthy relationship with the self, Self-help materials urge us to 'Discover who you really are and where you are going', and to be aware that 'The measure of self-esteem is determined by self-knowledge, not the opinions of others. Hence forming a relationship with oneself is a pre-requisite to personal fulfilment and accomplishment of life goals. (Hazelden, 2003) But how do we know we have found this 'Self'? Is it a static destination or an ongoing process?

Self-help as an activity is assumed to be voluntary and individualistic. Its underlying principles are of choice and freedom and by exercising that, self-modification and improvement is brought about. However, Rose (1989) points out that the lens of individuality views the social world as constituted by autonomous self-governing individual persons. In doing so it fails to view individuals as the historical product of intersecting social processes and cultural discourses. Thus, self help texts are also seen as inducing psychic dissonance in the Indian collective context wherein the individual lives through contradiction in how to view themselves.

The Paradoxical Self

"The mind gives an order to the body and is at once obeyed, but when it gives an order to itself, it is resisted." - Saint Augustine

Self-help 'lessons' appear to teach a subject to rely exclusively on oneself, simultaneously to rely exclusively on an expert other, and then also to become an expert in some aspect of one's selfhood. (Lichterman, 1992) As a part of the process of self-improvement, the readers are encouraged to turn the diagnostic gaze upon themselves. Then the self comes to also be viewed as 'thwarting and conspiring against itself', hence the call to win the battle of the mind. (Vedral, 1994)

"it's because you are working in a pattern that constantly makes you land in those situations in those spots again and again and again, and the best part is you don't even know it."

Here Rohit is vividly elaborating on how he created the patterns that he perceived to be governing his life,

and how he was *not* aware of how he was sabotaging his own career and relationships. It can be said that self-help materials, through their psycho-educative characteristic enable their readers to believe they have acquired greater self-awareness and accountability.

Contrarily, Foucauldian critique of Self-help literature, says that Self-help materials promote the idea that a 'good' citizen cares for themselves best by evading their social embeddedness, through focusing exclusively on themselves. So, when it comes to the larger socio-political context, and their impact on our personal and professional lives self-help may fall short on its promise of emancipation. According to more recent critiques of self-help literature by (Hazelden, 2003; Rimke, 2000; Rose, 1989) self-help guides carry an implicit assumption within them that the reader *can* always *help themselves* in some way or the other regardless of their socio-economic-political context. And in case of the participant quoted above, where he would reside on the spectrum of taking-responsibility-for-one's-actions and punitive self-blaming appears to be something he is yet to grapple with.

The Help in Self Help Books: Meaning Making Process

"What is most personal is most general" – Carl Rogers

For the participants, self-help literature aside from being psycho educative made well being more accessible. A key element of this access was 'sharing' which brought a sense of community for its readers. According to Saumya:

"it can also provide a connection of other people experiencing something similar or just have felt adversity and overcome it... they can connect you in times of despair..."

Through reading about similar experiences, the respondents could find some relief in knowing that they are not alone. Loneliness has been one of the motivators that drove the seeking for self-improvement. Further growing up, the participants felt that certain topics were 'off limits' in their familial interactions and hence rendered unexplored. By reading about topics like navigating relational conflict or emotional self-regulation, they were able to find 'help' and answers to their questions.

Saumya drew parallels between religious texts and self-improvement materials. She did so, by pointing out

that they're both prescriptive, categorize behaviours in mutually exclusive categories of 'good and bad', and teach their readers how to be 'better'.

"(earlier) There were religious rituals that people could do daily, that gave them a sense of wholeness, completeness, or goodness, ki hum ache hain (we are good). But now it's not as common... So perhaps we need different outlets which are prescriptive, which do tell us how to be good. (on being probed about this 'goodness' she elaborated) We want to be good because... (pauses) we need for our existence to have meaning right...why are we doing anything you know? Umm... I know it sounds very abstract it's hard to go on without that"

The participant is also alluding to the routine prescriptive behaviours involved in both religious texts and self-improvement guides. All of the best-sellers (the term bestsellers here refers to the number of copies sold worldwide, and the diversity of languages the books are translated in) like *How to win friends and Influence people* (Carnegie, 1936), *7 Habits of Highly Effective people* (Covey, 2013), *Atomic Habits* (Clear, 2018), *The 5 am Club* (Sharma , 2018) involve self-disciplining behaviours that readers are urged to perform daily in order to achieve the desired accomplishment or relational satisfaction. In other words, the routines followed are the means to a sought-after end.

However, Rohit remarked: *"People want to help themselves but they also want somebody to tell them how to help themselves"*

The neoliberal marketplace has us believing in the ultimate desirability of freedom. Freedom to choose, freedom to self-determine and freedom to attain one's goals. At what point in being free do we move back to relying on prescriptive mediums to provide meaning? Erich Fromm aptly asked:

"Can freedom become a burden, too heavy for man to bear, something he tries to escape from?" (Fromm, 1994)

The responsibility and uncertainty of deciding one's fate and future can be too steep and isolating to bear. So the participants may have found themselves seeking a sense of belonging. And membership of a group of individuals grappling with similar issues could give that.

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Perhaps the performance of routines is gratifying in itself, such that *in doing* we feel that we belong to a larger collective. The journey to 'self-determine' is seemingly isolating. So when self-help books are marketed as "Bestsellers" or having sold a million copies worldwide, they create a *collective* way of *doing* that gives reassurance and interdependence. In conclusion, the emerging themes from the data are telling of the paradoxical and multifaceted nature of 'help' found in self-help texts. They enable their

readers to feel interdependence and belonging in the face of predicaments, yet lend the belief of control and autonomy over their lives. They thereby render the reader's self as the subject of, and the agent responsible for, its own transformation. Hence, bringing us closer to the paradox of freedom and uncertainty.

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