

BY THE BOOK: WOMEN AND SELF-HELP BOOK READING

BY

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A Thesis

Submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies  
In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirement for the Degree of

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**Vycki Anastasiadis Atallah © 2004**

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## Abstract

Self-help books are a multi-billion dollar industry with women accounting as the primary readers of the genre. This research examines the experiences of ten women who read self-help books. Open-ended interviews were conducted with women who read self-help books between January and September 2001. The study was informed by both feminist standpoint and feminist postmodern theorizing.

This research found that the women in this study use self-help books in active and empowering ways. An overarching theme from the interviews is the concept of empowerment and the way in which the women who I interviewed were characterized by a high degree of agency. The main impact of reading self-help books for the interviewees lay in the power of naming and understanding the problems that they faced. This finding challenges some feminist research that suggests that self-help books are harmful to women because they pathologize their lives. The participants further described being influenced by normative discourse about the importance of keeping the issues that they were facing private. Reading self-help books allowed them to challenge this discourse which in turn gave them a broader understanding of issues that they faced such as depression, alcohol abuse, and abusive relationships. Finally, this research explored how normative discourses are sometimes reproduced in self-help books and how the women who read them were able to both conform to and resist messages about what a healthy woman should look and/or act like.

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## Chapter One: Introduction

Browsing through a local bookstore, one cannot help but notice the proliferation of self-help books. Iyanla Vanzant's (1997) *One Day My Soul Just Opened Up: 40 Days and 40 Nights Towards Spiritual Strength and Personal Growth*, Melody Beattie's (1997) *The Language of Letting Go*, and Phil McGraw's (2000) *Life Strategies* are only a few titles that adorn the self-help section of my local bookstore. Self-help books have been characterized by researchers in a number of ways. In general, self-help books refer to books that offer advice on a myriad of topics. As Grodin (1995) states:

Self-help books comprise a loose genre...At bookstores there is often a cross-referencing among the shelves labeled "self," "recovery," "inspiration," "women's studies," "parenting," and "new age." (p. 407)

Self-help books offer advice on a range of issues, from how to improve one's physical health, finances, self-esteem, and relationships to advice on how to recover from alcoholism, child abuse, and depression.

Because of this diversity as to what actually comprises the genre, some researchers have narrowed the definition to include only books that can be seen as psychological self-help books. These are defined as "popular books advising readers on personal relationships or personal well being with psychological terminologies" (Lichterman, 1992; 421). Or as Simonds (1992) states, "(self-help) books offer advice about managing or improving relationships and about achieving psychologically 'healthy' modes of behavior" (p. 3).

In the last decade – following the wake of the second wave in feminism – self-help books have become a multi-billion dollar publishing phenomenon

(Schrager, 1993: 177). It has been said that women account for 75% - 85% of total sales in self-help books (Ebben, 1995: 111). It is no wonder, then, that feminist researchers have been very interested in this recent phenomenon. In fact, many feminists have criticized writers of self-help books for reflecting and reinforcing the dominant culture (De Francisco & O'Connor, 1995), for privatizing and individualizing women's problems (Goldhor Lerner, 1990), and advocating solutions that are apolitical (Ebben, 1995). As a feminist undergraduate psychology student, I was drawn to the research of feminists who looked at the danger of conceptualizing women's problems as mental disorders. Feminists such as Carol Tavris (1992) believe that the recent proliferation of self-help books are the latest incarnation of a game she calls "Name What's Wrong With Women" (p. 174). She states:

Every few years a wave of best-selling books sweeps over the land, purporting to explain to women the origins of their unhappiness. It is time to ask why these psychological diagnosis of women's alleged inner flaws, which keep returning like swallows to Capistrano, year after year, fail to deliver on their promises. (p. 175)

Not only have authors of self-help books come under fire for labeling women's problems as internal flaws in their psyche, clinicians too have been criticized for diagnosing women with disorders that implicate either feminine socialization or female biology. Paula Caplan (1991) has conducted research on gender bias in the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (DSM). This is the standard reference book clinicians refer to when diagnosing patients and it is used by researchers who study mental illness. She has concluded that:

The process is plagued by various issues of bias and arbitrariness. Since the DSM is a primary source of power and influence in regard

to crucial decisions about who is normal and who is not, the story of this process needs to be told. (p. 162)

Faludi (1991) has echoed this sentiment by arguing that some personality disorders in the DSM seem to be *created* to pathologize women. To use an example, there is a personality disorder in the DSM called "Self-defeating Personality Disorder." Some of the symptoms which must be present in order to diagnose a patient with this disorder are: "(a) You choose people and situations that lead to disappointment, failure, or mistreatment; and (b) You like to play the martyr, sacrificing your own interests for others who do not solicit or need your help" (APA, 1987: p. 373-374). Faludi (1991) argues that:

The American Psychological Association (APA) describes only the self-denigrating sort of behavior that is supposed to typify ideal femininity. The APA panel had neatly summed up female socialization and stamped it a private, psychiatric malfunction. In fact, the APA went even further, dubbing this problem not only a pathological imbalance but a Personality Disorder, a category of mental illness that psychiatry defines as least related to social conditions and most rooted in the underlying structure of an individual's personality from early childhood and so most difficult to change. (p. 357-358)

The thought that clinicians in the mental health field may be diagnosing women with personality disorders based on subjective criteria that are outlined in a diagnostic manual was disturbing to me. Even more disturbing was the thought that self-help books – which can have a circulation in the millions – may be selling women an even narrower vision of what is healthy and normal in our society. And although I had never read a self-help book, I began to think about how I could conduct research on self-help books with the goal of helping women to challenge the messages in these books.



While reviewing existing research that has been conducted in the area of women and self-help books, namely the work of Wendy Simonds (1992) and Debra Grodin (1995), I began to change my focus slightly. Simonds interviewed women who read self-help books and she concluded that women read the books for a variety of reasons such as validation, inspiration, and to be comforted. She also concluded that the women who she interviewed read the messages in self-help books critically and were quick to reject books whose messages were overly simplistic. Grodin also conducted interviews of women who read self-help books and she looked at how women read self-help books while living under patriarchal conditions. She concluded that women not only read self-help books critically, but they do so as a way to get information about how women "should" act in a climate of ever-shifting gender roles. Both Simonds and Grodin found that women read self-help books in order to actively seek meaning in their lives by identifying the problems that they face. Rather than reading self-help books through a feminist lens and *imagining* what the impact may be on women in our society, these two researchers chose to interview some women who actually read them.

I soon came to realize that women do not necessarily read the messages in self-help books submissively, nor do all self-help books necessarily seek to blame women. Because of the fact that some feminists (Ebben, 1995: De Francisco & O'Connor, 1995: and Tavis, 1992) are very critical of self-help books and others (Simonds, 1992 and Grodin, 1995) are more willing to leave it to the reader to decide for themselves if the books are helpful, I became further

interested in exploring the varied and multiple ways that women use and understand self-help books. The goal of this research is to examine how and why women read self-help books in order to fully understand the impact that self-help books have had in their lives. A second goal is to look at the ways in which normative discourses (language that creates standards of normalcy) can shape how women understand the issues that they face in their lives and how this understanding provides a framework for their self-help book reading.

Chapter 2 will review both empirical and feminist literature in order to illustrate the need for research that goes beyond studying the content of self-help books. The work of Wendy Simonds and Debra Grodin will also be reviewed in order to lay the groundwork for my own research questions. Chapter 2 will also explore the theoretical context of this research. A discussion of both standpoint feminism and postmodernism will explore the theoretical framework I used. Chapter 3 will outline the research methodology that I used. This will include the development of my interview questions, how I recruited participants, and my approach to data analysis. Chapter 4 and 5 are committed to the analysis of the research findings. Chapter 4, "How and Why Women Read Self-help Books," describes the impact of self-help reading for the women who I interviewed. Chapter 5, "Normative Discourses: From Conformity to Resistance" looks at how assumptions about the issues that the participants faced were related to normative, regulating ideologies. Finally, Chapter 6 provides a discussion about my research findings followed by some recommendations for further research.

## Chapter Two: The Context: Perspectives from the Literature and Theory

### A Review of Empirical Research

Many psychologists have recognized the popularity of self-help books (Rosen, 1987; Starker, 1988; Forest, 1988a) and as a result, have tried to confront both the problems and opportunities that self-help books create. As early as 1978, the American Psychological Association (APA) created a task force on self-help therapies. The APA concluded that, "psychologists were in a unique position to contribute to the self-help movement" (cited in Rosen, 1987). Therefore, the potential for psychologists to write and educate consumers on various self-help treatments was seen as great. However, Rosen, one of the members of the APA task force on self-help therapies, has been very critical of the proliferation of self-help books. He says self-help books have been "marketed as do-it-yourself therapies without the benefit of clinical trial" (1987: 46). Rosen (1987) suggests that the claims self-help authors make about the effectiveness of their books are without merit because many have not been empirically tested. He goes on to suggest that when clinical trials *are* conducted, the results show a low success rate, yet authors of self-help books still exaggerate their claims. Rosen (1987) cites research conducted by Mahoney & Mahoney (1976) on obesity as an example:

Franks and Wilson (1978) cited a 1976 review paper on obesity by Mahoney and Mahoney (1976) that stated, "We remain a long way from any semblance of justification of complacency in weight regulation; significant poundage losses are still in minority, and long-term maintenance has remained unexamined" (p. 30). Yet the Mahoneys published, in the very same year, a self-help book entitled, *Permanent Weight Control*. (p. 48)

Rosen (1987) concludes that many self-help authors exaggerate the success rate of their self-help books and this should be looked at as a breach of APA ethical standards (Rosen, 1987: 49). Finally, Rosen (1987) put a call out to psychologists to include accurate claims in their self-help books and to create a system where books go through rigorous testing and are endorsed by the American Psychological Association. He suggested this in order to ensure that self-help books are professionally regulated.

Rosen's (1987) article spurred a debate that took place in the July 1988 issues of *American Psychologist*, where various psychologists had an opportunity for rebuttal. Among those was Mahoney (1988), who replied to the accusations made by Rosen (1987) regarding the exaggeration of his claims in his 1976 book, *Permanent Weight Control*. Mahoney (1988) commented that "a failure to contractually control such details as a self-help book's title, jacket, and marketing verbiage can, indeed, lead to professionally embarrassing sequelae" (p. 598).

However, Mahoney (1988) goes on to state that:

Although the book earned an honorable mention from the American Psychological Association for the accuracy of its representation of the scientific literature, it did not sell well to its competitors (primarily, I believe, because it honestly stated that significant, long term weight control is a difficult and time-consuming endeavor with no guarantees of success; books that made the opposite claim were significantly more likely to sell well). (p. 598)

Mahoney argued that although the claims on the book jacket were used in order to market the book, the content of the book itself adhered to ethical standards.

Mahoney (1988) accused Rosen (1987) of using sweeping generalizations regarding the intentions (and ethic) of self-help authors.

Another psychologist to respond to Rosen's claims was Holtje (1988), who stated that Rosen (1987) failed to consider what must be done to sell books on any topic. As Holtje (1988) states:

It would certainly be the best of both worlds if we could specify on the book jacket or in the direct mail letter used to sell the book what success readers might expect, but this just is not possible in book marketing. I might add that if therapists were required to state the effectiveness of their work before working with clients they would have difficulty staying in practice. This is not a condemnation of therapeutic efficacy, but a reality. (p. 600)

Holtje (1988) is speaking to the fact that self-help books are placed in a competitive market, and if the self-help author has important things to say, the way that the book is packaged should receive less attention than the messages that are contained in the books themselves.

Another psychologist who wrote a rebuttal was Lazarus (1988) whose book, *In the Mind's Eye* (1984) was criticized by Rosen (1987) "for misleading the public with extravagant claims" (Lazarus, 1988; 600). Lazarus simply wanted to state the fact that the publisher of his book created the book jacket without consulting him and the new printing of *In the Mind's Eye* (1984) no longer contains the claims that were previously stated. As Lazarus (1988) states, "this experience has led me, with each of my subsequent books, to insist that all advertising and promotional materials must receive my approval prior to publication" (p. 600).

Although most of the responses to Rosen's (1987) article came from self-help book authors, some responses also came from researchers who have investigated the perceived benefits of self-help books. For example, Starker

(1986) randomly phoned 1000 individuals from a telephone book and received 186 responses. He used a survey method to ask people whether they read self-help books and if they did, to evaluate them on a five-point scale from "harmful" to "very helpful." His results indicate that the majority of people he talked to read self-help books (64.7%) and that most of the participants rated the books as "sometimes helpful" (50%) or "often helpful" (33.3%). He concludes that self-help books can be seen as valuable to the people who read them (cited in Starker, 1990).

In addition, Starker (1988b) embarked on a study that was concerned with psychologists' uses and attitudes toward self-help books. Starker mailed out a survey to 268 psychologists in Boston and San Diego asking them to rate self-help books on the same five-point scale which rates self-help books from "harmful" to "very helpful." As well, he asked the psychologists whether they recommended self-help books. Starker (1988a) received 121 responses and the results indicated that "60.3% of respondents prescribed self-help books to supplement their treatment efforts. Most reported these works to be 'sometimes' (54.4%) or 'often' (38.2%) helpful to the treatment process" (Starker, 1988a: 599).

What Starker has concluded from his series of surveys is that consumers purchase self-help books in large quantities and generally find them helpful; and that psychologists are generally positive about self-help books and many prescribe them to clients (cited in Pardeck, 1991). This lends evidence to the fact that psychologists may see self-help books as valuable. In terms of

addressing Rosen's (1987) claims that self-help books should go through a regulating body, Starker (1988a) agrees with this suggestion and adds that regulations should "be extended to include the practice of prescribing self-help works to clients" (p. 599). Starker cautions his fellow colleagues about the effectiveness of *all* books in the self-help genre. In order to address this issue, Starker (2000) has recently published a book that reviews and rates over 600 self-help books to be used by both consumers and professionals. Starker reports that he has done so in order to differentiate between self-help books that provide "high-quality information versus those that may be misleading or inaccurate" (p. 2). Similarly, Joshua & DiMenna (2000) have released a resource book that summarizes over 300 self-help books in the hope of assisting clinicians who recommend books to clients. Unlike Starker, Joshua & DiMenna do not rate the self-help books, rather they simply give a synopsis of the book's subject area and the authors approach.

In keeping with the survey technique that Starker has previously used, other psychologists have tried to test the effectiveness of self-help books. For example, Marx, Gyorky, Royalty, & Stern (1992) conducted a study which looked at whether psychologists recommended self-help books to clients, whether variables such as the gender of client, the gender of therapist, and the therapist's employment setting influenced the recommendations of self-help books, and the types of self-help books which were recommended. The results indicated that most psychologists in their sample had recommended self-help books to their clients, although they did so infrequently. Female psychologists were more likely

to recommend self-help books to their clients than male psychologists, and private practitioners were more likely to recommend self-help books than clinicians who worked in an academic setting. Although psychologists had little familiarity with popular psychology books, they responded favorably to the ones with which they were familiar. In conclusion, Marx, Gyorky, Royalty, & Stern (1992) stated, "we concur with Starker's (1988b) conclusion that psychologists commonly recommend self-help books, although they may not have a sound appreciation of the books' potential benefits and ill effects" (p. 303). A similar study was conducted by Adams & Pitre (2000) where psychotherapists in Northern Ontario were sent a survey asking whether they recommended self-help books and their reasons for doing so. They concluded that most therapists recommended self-help books to their clients and the most common reason for doing so was to encourage clients to take responsibility for helping themselves (p. 645). Although Adams & Pitre did not specifically look at the efficacy of the books they recommended, they did caution therapists against recommending books that they themselves did not read.

Another example using survey research was conducted by Clifford, Norcross, & Sommer (1999). This study attempted to look at the uses of psychological as well as autobiographical self-help books. An autobiographical self-help book was defined as "first-person narrative accounts (including those co-authored with the patient) that dealt primarily or substantially with the author's mental disorder(s) or treatment" (p. 56). A survey was mailed to 1000 randomly selected members of the APA and they were asked questions pertaining to their



uses of, and attitudes toward, psychological self-help books and autobiographical materials. The results indicated that 85% recommended a psychological self-help book. By contrast, 33% of the psychologists recommended an autobiography of a person suffering from a mental or behavioral disorder (Clifford, Norcross, & Sommer, 1999:57) suggesting that this type of self-help book is less valued by psychologists. This research is also in accordance with previous research conducted by Starker (1988a) as well as Marx, Gyorky, Royalty, and Stern (1992).

A final example using survey research was conducted by Chrisler & Ulsh (2001) who asked feminist therapists whether they recommended self-help books to their clients and if they had, what books had they or their clients found helpful. Results indicated that 93% regularly recommended books to their clients and that "many, but by no means all, of the books mentioned by our participants can be considered feminist" (p. 80). Chrisler & Ulsh account for this lack of agreement about the necessity for books that are feminist because of the wide variety of definitions of feminism used by the participants. In conclusion, Chrisler & Ulsh state that feminist therapists should make sure that the messages in the self-help books that they recommend reinforce the messages given during therapy sessions.

Research using surveys points to the difficulty in assessing the effectiveness of self-help books. One of the reasons for this difficulty may be that most of the discussion in psychology has focused on the opinions of psychologists in clinical practice, rather than on the clients who use the books.

One exception is Halliday (1991) who used Starker's survey model in order to ask 100 adult psychotherapy patients about their use of psychological self-help books. The participants were asked whether or not they had read a self-help book, the name and author of the self-help books they had read, the way(s), if any, in which the self-help book helped them, and the way(s), if any, in which the self-help book harmed them. The results indicated that 43 persons reported reading such books (Halliday, 1991:678). Although the titles of the books were often forgotten, they dealt with areas such as motivation, interpersonal relationships, religion, and addictions. In terms of perceived harm or distress, four people reported experiencing harm or distress as a result of reading self-help books. For example, Halliday (1991) states, "the fourth person was reading a book about adults who were abused as children and found the memories the book evoked were too painful and was unable to continue reading the book" (p. 679). The rest of the participants reported "neither harm nor benefit from self-help books (n=5), and 37 people (86%) reported benefit from psychological self-help books" (p. 678). According to Halliday (1991), the perceived benefit of people who read self-help books is for the most part, positive, although some have reported distress in reading these books.

I take from this research that the discipline of psychology has an interest in the efficacy of self-help books as many psychologists recommend them in their practices. However, there does not seem to be a consensus in the discipline of whether they are useful or beneficial to the people who read them. One of the

objectives of this research is to ask readers of self-help books how they use and understand the messages in self-help books.

A final approach that has been used in psychology in order to further test the effectiveness of self-help books is laboratory experiments. One of the main researchers, and one who also responded to Rosen's (1987) claims regarding self-help books is Forest (1988a). He cites some of his laboratory research that has attempted to empirically test whether the claims self-help authors state about the effectiveness of their books are true. He has conducted a series of experiments where participants are given a personality test. They are then asked to read a best selling psychological self-help book selected by himself, and then they are given the same personality test two-weeks later. The control group is given only the personality tests two-weeks apart without reading the self-help book. As Forest (1987) states, "if self-help psychology books do lead to positive changes in mental health behavior, there should be corresponding changes on personality measures of mental health" (p. 1244).

Forest (1987) found in his research with 169 women that those who read the self-help book scored significantly higher on a Personal Orientation Inventory than the women who did not read the self-help book. He concludes that, "the results were consistent with the contention that self-help books can lead to positive changes in mental health as measured by self-actualization scores on the inventory" (p. 1245). In a later experiment, Forest (1988b) found that reading a self-help book did not improve test scores on either the Eysenck Personality Questionnaire or the Tennessee Self-concept Scale any more than the scores for

the control group who did not read a self-help book. This finding was inconsistent with his initial finding and as Forest (1988b) states, "the studies presented here do not support the belief that psychological self-help books, in general, influence verbal reports of personality structure and mental health" (p. 894). Although these psychological studies suggests that reading self-help books can lead to changes in mental health they have shown varied results regarding the effectiveness of self-help books.

An empirical study conducted by Delin & Delin (1994) has attempted to measure personality characteristics of self-help readers in order to see how they differ from people who do not read self-help books. This was done in an effort to investigate whether "self-help readers differed from non-readers in terms of social resources or personality" (p. 204). The practical implication of this type of research was to clarify for people in the "helping professions" the reasons why people may read self-help. The method that Delin & Delin (1994) chose was to replicate a study by Saper & Forest (1987), who found that "neuroticism measured on the Eysenck Personality Inventory related positively to interest in self-help books" (cited in Delin & Delin, 1994: 204). The Eysenck Personality Questionnaire was given to all first and second year psychology students at the University of Adelaide as part of their coursework. If students were interested in participating in Delin & Delin's (1994) experiment, they went on to complete a second questionnaire that asked demographic information, the type of books that the participants read and the extent of their reading. As well, two scales that measured social support were included with the questionnaire. The results of

this experiment indicated that, "no clear personality or social variables were found to predict reading of self-help books in terms of numbers of books read" (p. 205). However, Delin & Delin (1994) did find that neuroticism (as measured by the Eysenck Personality Questionnaire) was related positively to reading self-help books when the individual has a particular need. This result was consistent with the earlier finding of Saper and Forest (1987).

I take from this area of research that some psychologists are interested in empirically testing whether reading self-help books leads to changes in mental health. Laboratory studies have shown varied results regarding the effectiveness of self-help books. These studies have also suggested that personality measures are an adequate way to measure mental health. These laboratory experiments reflect normative research practices in psychology. They are based on *foundationalism* or "the faith that the rational scientist produces knowledge free from historical and current pressures" (Ristock and Pennell, 1996: 4). According to this approach, the experimenter is "separate" from the research that he or she is conducting and, therefore, can be "objective." The experimental method is also based on *positivism*, which maintains that "valid and useful knowledge is derived from logical deduction and empirical observation" (Ristock and Pennell, 1996: 4). Laboratory experiments about self-help books are based on the assumption that a researcher can quantify personality in the first place and then make conclusions about the effectiveness of self-help books based on those results.

Many feminist researchers have been critical of this line of research. As feminist psychologist Beverly Walker states, "central to the feminist critique is the argument that psychology is not objective, and that it and its practitioners have contributed to the oppression of women by theory and practice" (cited in Reinhartz, 1992: 98). Feminist researchers have called for an approach that does not simply quantify women's behavior, but looks at women's experiences within an understanding of the larger social context. The objective of this thesis is to approach this research by questioning, not what is the effect of self-help books on women's personalities, but how do women use and understand the messages in self-help books and how are the books relevant in their lives?

One study in the social sciences that used a qualitative research approach to study self-help books was conducted by Lichterman (1992). He interviewed six men and nine women in order to understand the helpfulness of self-help books. The participants were self-described self-help readers, who had read at least one self-help book. It was Lichterman's (1992) goal to, "find out how much and what kind of expertise readers credit their popular psychology books with" (p. 427). Lichterman (1992) concluded that readers make self-help books meaningful in their lives without a deep personal commitment to the advice in the books. Lichterman (1992) concludes that self-help reading is associated with "ambivalence, tentativeness, and making do" (p. 444). Lichterman concluded that self-help books might be seen as mass-marketed commodities that are read in the absence of other interpersonal sources. This study informs my research because it is a good example of how qualitative research can move beyond

simply quantifying the personalities of those who read self-help books. Lichterman (1992) shows that people may not put as much stock in the messages of self-help books. The objective of this thesis is to approach this research in a different way by acknowledging that women are the main readers of self-help books, and therefore, conducting a gendered analysis of the messages which are aimed at women in these books. This research will go beyond solely asking women about the perceived usefulness of self-help books, it will also look at how the messages in self-help books are understood by the women who read them.

### A Review of Some Feminist Research

In order to address this need, most of the research that has been done by feminist researchers on the topic of self-help books has focused on the content of the books. As early as 1978, Ehrenreich & English documented medical advice to women dating back 150 years, where aspects of the feminine (such as childbirth) were viewed as unhealthy. More recently, a study that looked at the messages contained in self-help books was done by DeFrancisco & O'Connor (1995). They analyzed 38 self-help books about heterosexual relationships. The purpose of their research was to "examine the rhetorical strategies used in self-help books which legitimize male dominance" (p. 217). The goal of this research was to provide a feminist analysis on the messages in self-help books. The main findings were that self-help books are full of clever language and catch phrases that use gender stereotyping in order to support their claims about heterosexual relationships. For example, it was found that the nuclear family was depicted as

the norm in self-help books and women were depicted as unassertive. These books also tended to portray heterosexuality as the only option in relationships. Another critique offered by DeFrancisco and O'Connor (1995) was that the self-help books that they analyzed offered advice to women that had little to do with the social context in which women find themselves. In other words, the main focus was on "fixing" innate characteristics within the individual. The researchers concluded that self-help books reflect and reinforce the dominant culture and they individualize women's problems.

Another feminist content analysis was conducted by Zimmerman, Holm, & Starrels (2001) who looked at the top 11 relationship self-help books on *The New York Times* bestseller list over a period of 10 years (1988-1998) to determine the degree to which the books supported a feminist approach to therapy. The researchers defined a feminist approach to include:

(1) Addressing the influences of the social construction of gender on individuals and their relationships, (2) encouraging egalitarian relationships between couples, (3) empowering clients to explore nontraditional behaviors and choices, and (4) managing the power differential between therapist and client. (p. 166)

Their study yielded three major findings. First, the number of feminist and non-feminist books tended to be equal however the books that sold the most were those with non-feminist content. In addition, best-selling self-help books appear to have become less feminist in approach over the 10-year span that they studied. This study suggests that not all self-help books reinforce traditional gender roles as some may actually reinforce feminist values. However, this research also supported some of the claims of DeFrancisco & O'Connor (1995)



that self-help books may reinforce traditional gender roles in relationships since the messages in self-help books have become less feminist over the last ten years according to the criteria laid out by Zimmerman, Holm, & Starrels (2001).

Another study that examined self-help books was done by Maureen Ebben (1995) who looked at various discourses used in self-help books in order to "map the terrain of the uneasy relationship between women and self-help literature" (p. 112). What she found was two predominant discourses. The first was a medical discourse that used language to pathologize women's problems and "exerted authority to cure 'diseased behavior'" (p. 114). One example of this was to transform routine events such as frequent shopping to "shopping addiction" or striving for excellence as "dysfunctional perfectionism." Her conclusion was that, self-help books have assisted in the medicalization of women's everyday lives. The second discourse was a religious discourse where women's problems were looked at as stemming from a spiritual weakness that the individual possessed. The solution to a woman's problem is to "seek a higher power" in order to "surrender" this weakness and subsequently, solve the issue. As Ebben (1995) states, "while the framing of self-help strategies in religious terms may drag women into self-help programs, it may be that such influences contribute to legitimizing patriarchal tradition as well as depoliticizing women's unhappiness" (p. 117). Instead of framing women's problems in the larger social context, self-help books operate to blame women for their discontent. It is important to note that although Ebben (1995) was critical of self-help books, she did acknowledge that the genre is popular among women and therefore must be

serving some sort of function in women's lives. Ebben did not dismiss the genre entirely. Instead, she put a call out to feminists to write self-help books in order to empower women rather than pathologize and depoliticize women, as the books that she analyzed seem to do.

Other feminists have also researched the content of self-help books, but they have done so in an effort to explore the extent to which self-help authors use feminist discourse. When Jimenez and Rice (1990) conducted an analysis of self-help books, they found that self-help books might be serving as a backlash against feminism. The first example they used was to show how cultural feminist assertions of gender differences have been used to oppress women in self-help books. The researchers showed that Carol Gilligan's (1982) assertion that women value intimacy and caring has been used to make women feel they are responsible for improving problems in their relationships. As Jimenez & Rice state, "the legitimacy of expecting women to make the major adjustments in relationships is undergirded by the explicitly stated assumption in all these books that love and romance are female preoccupations" (p. 17). In other words, feminists such as Gilligan, who were attempting to celebrate women's differences, have been appropriated in ways that put the onus on women to improve their dissatisfying relationships.

The second example of backlash feminism is that some self-help book authors directly attack the feminist movement as the *cause* of women's problems. Jimenez & Rice quote from Grant's (1988) book *Being a Woman* where she states that "because of the women's movement, women have

suppressed their 'feminine attitude' and now need to re-embrace traditional femininity if they are to achieve happiness with men" (p. 20). The researchers conclude that self-help books have distorted the gains of feminism in order to dispense their advice and keep the focus on individuals, rather than society. These findings are consistent with Faludi's (1991) research on self-help books as a form of backlash feminism. In her analysis of self-help books, Faludi (1991) concluded that, "one popular psychology tome after another unveiled an updated version of the masochistic female psyche - couched, of course, in the language of women's liberation" (p. 338).

Other feminists have been less critical of self-help and have tried to provide theories of why self-help books have gained such popularity among women. hooks (cited in Schrager, 1993) has argued that self-help books result from feminism's failure to provide models for meeting the personal transformations that its successes have awakened in women (p. 189). Accordingly, self-help books may be a response to the feminist movement. Johnson (1990) has argued that self-help literature has encouraged women to speak openly about their experiences. She states that "self-help books teach women to move in the direction of changing their lives but it is a 'sanitized' way of doing it because the dominant group culture is not threatened by a 'bunch of sick women getting together to cure themselves'" (1990:16). In this regard, self-help books can be looked at as a (watered down) form of consciousness-raising.

Feminist research into the messages of self-help books are important because they attempt to analyze how women's problems are not solely a product

of their individual lives, but a product of a dominant culture which operates to oppress women. As important as these feminist insights are, these critiques do not explain the interaction of the reader with the text. This thesis will explore how and why women use and interpret self-help books. This research will also look at the relationship between women's self-help book reading and feminist politics. It is also a research objective to examine how women may be using self-help books in ways that are important in their every day lives.

In my view, most feminist research on self-help books has relied on a very reductive account of women and self-help book reading. The research treats all women as complacent recipients of the messages in self-help books. Clearly, the view that all women are victims of the messages in self-help books does not account for the ways in which women may also read critically.

As stated earlier, a feminist researcher who does not seek to victimize women who read self-help books is bell hooks (1993) who wrote *Sisters of the Yam* as a response to self-help book authors who did not look at the ways in which patriarchy operates to oppress women. Generally, hooks has been positive about the self-help genre. For example, when talking about the success of the Robin Norwood's (1985) book, *Women Who Love Too Much*, hooks (1993) states that it "convinced me that women of all races, classes, and sexual preferences would read work that addressed their concerns and most importantly their pain and their longing to transform their lives" (p. 4). Therefore, hooks spoke positively of the potential for self-help books to help women with their

struggles. However, hooks (1993) also wants to make it clear that most self-help books that have been written “deny that patriarchy is institutionalized” (p. 4).

The most important contribution that hooks (1993) made in her book was to directly identify “interlocking systems of oppression” as the primary reason why women are not self-actualized in our society. In other words, women are not struggling to recover from a pathology located within the individual. Instead, the problem lies in a society where “racism, sexism, class exploitation, homophobia, and various other structures of domination operate in our daily lives to undermine our capacity to be self-determining” (p. 14). *Sisters of the Yam* (1993) moves beyond notions of women blaming, and attempts to help women “organize politically to change society in conjunction with our efforts to transform ourselves” (p. 4).

### Two Key Feminist Studies

The two studies that I will be highlighting have moved away from content-analysis and concentrate on the women who read self-help books. The first is Wendy Simonds’ (1992) study in *Women and Self-Help Culture*. In this study, she interviewed 30 women who read a variety of self-help books. These books covered topics in health, religion, as well as psychological well-being. Simonds states that “the readers I interviewed looked to self-help books primarily for validation of how they already felt, for inspiration, for comfort, and for explanations of situations they could not understand” (p. 7). She also discovered that although the participants were avid readers of self-help, they were also critical of the genre. As Simonds states, “respondents all tended to voice

dissatisfaction with books they perceived as facile. Participants were also on guard against books they considered intrusively instructive" (p. 29). In fact, Simonds found that women would stop reading a book or skim it if it became too repetitive. These results have provided some evidence that women resist some messages contained in self-help books.

In trying to address the question of whether self-help books can be viewed as a feminist activity, Simonds states that "self-help reading may be seen as a feminist activity in that readers come away feeling they have been addressed as women, but the sort of feminist inclinations that are affirmed for these readers are liberal ones" (p. 48). I argue that Simonds has oversimplified what can be considered a feminist activity. She does not qualify her assertion by mentioning that although *some* books can be feminist in their content - thus seeking to empower the women who read them - others are devoid of feminist thought. In fact, some self-help books have been shown by feminist researchers (Jimenez and Rice, 1990) to attack the feminist movement and are therefore anti-feminist in content. We cannot assume that because a book has been written for women readers, the messages and advice in the books look to systemic reasons for women's problems rather than individualizing women's issues. One of the research objectives for this thesis is to illuminate the relationship between women's self-help book reading and feminist politics.

The second key study that looked at women and self-help book reading was done by Debra Grodin (1995). This study analyzed "what self-help reading reflects about American women's lives under patriarchal conditions and how

women's psychological experiences are connected to self-help reading" (p. 124). Grodin interviewed 16 women and identified three common themes in women's self-help reading experiences. The first theme involved the way women construct meaning. That is, "women readers in this sample took pride in their active construction of textual meaning and their resistance to much of what they read in self-help books" (p. 126). For example, although many self-help authors recommend strict guidelines for self-improvement, and advise the reader to take notes while they read, many of the readers pick and choose sections that they find interesting. Readers often spoke of the act of buying a self-help book as empowering. As Grodin (1995) states, "interviewees noted that books were well worth the cost if only one sentence in a book turned out to be valuable. At times, just a book's title was sufficient because it resonated with the reader" (p. 127). This coincided with Simonds' finding that women interpret the messages in self-help books rather than accepting the content without question.

The second theme found by Grodin dealt with aspects of the self-help genre that disappointed the women who read them. Mostly the readers "struggled with the genre's emphasis on independence because it seemed to undermine the values they attached to caring and connection in relationships" (p. 127). In other words, women were disappointed with self-help books that depicted female caring as pathological. This criticism of self-help books also echoes the critiques of other feminist researchers (Jimenez & Rice, 1990; Faludi, 1991). However, the women who read self-help books are able to reject notions that pathologize women and still feel that they have benefited from the books. In

other words, "research participants clearly were drawn to but also critical of aspects of their reading" (Grodin: 128).

In order to analyze this apparent contradiction, Grodin drew upon a third theme in her research, the relationship between autonomy and connection. As Grodin states, "autonomy meant a way to *separate* from life experiences that left them feeling unempowered" (p. 128). For example, while the readers were looking for independence from patriarchal conditions, they also felt a growing insecurity by the absence of traditional gender roles. Therefore, self-help books served as a way to "acquire information about how women 'should' act in an era of shifting social and gender norms" (p. 129).

This research explains ways in which women seek meaning in their lives by identifying with problems that are shared by a whole community of women who write as well as read self-help books. As Grodin states, "these texts provide a chorus of women's voices to facilitate affirmation, courage, and support. Readers discovered affirmation of their own sense of reality through vicarious contact with other self-help subjects and readers" (p. 130).

Like Simonds (1992), Grodin (1995) has shown the multiple and varied ways in which women read and understand self-help books. By getting away from dichotomies that assume that self-help books are oppressive and women are victims of the messages portrayed in them, Grodin had been able to disrupt these categories and show that self-help books can be empowering to some of the women who read them.



Current literature in the area of women and self-help book reading has created an interesting area for research. On the one hand, feminists have provided an analysis of the messages in self-help books by looking at the various discourses used in the books. Researchers such as Ebben (1995) have shown that some self-help books may be harmful toward women because they blame them for their problems and offer "quick fix" solutions that are personal, private, and apolitical. On the other hand, some feminists such as Simonds (1992) have interviewed women who read self-help books and have shown that women are critical of books that are overly prescriptive and too simplistic in nature.

The complexity of how messages in self-help books are read and understood by women has drawn me to further explore this area. The opportunity to shed some light on how women make meaning from reading self-help books has guided the research in this thesis. I will be adding to this area of research by analyzing how the conditions of women's lives influence their understandings of self-help. In addition, I will add to the current research by attending to the ways in which the participants are influenced by normative discourses and how these in turn have shaped their self-help practices. This includes a discussion of the ways the women I interviewed talk about the messages in self-help books regarding what a healthy woman should look like. I compare these findings with those of Simonds and Grodin.

### Theoretical Framework

In this research, I use both standpoint feminism and postmodernism. Research within these feminist frameworks allows the researcher to challenge

both the way that knowledge is produced and to question the point of view that is being represented. As Kirby and McKenna (1989) state, "When we engage in research we involve ourselves in a process in which we construct meaning" (p. 25). Thus, the results of my research have been based on my *interpretations* of the findings. The process where the researcher is conscious of how she influences the production of knowledge has been referred to by Stanley (1990) as *reflexivity*. As a feminist researcher, I am well aware of feminist criticisms of self-help books and I am leery of books that seek to pathologize women's lives. Therefore, I have to challenge my own assumptions about the messages in self-help books and recognize that they may serve a function in many women's lives. What is important in this research is how the women I interview understand the messages in the self-help books that they choose to read rather than allowing my own assumptions to interfere with how I am interpreting what the participants are saying.

These interpretations are further influenced by my social location as a 30-year-old, middle-class, Canadian woman of Greek origin who is heterosexual a self-identified feminist, and someone who is interested in working with women in a therapeutic capacity. By recognizing that my social location can also influence my research findings I am creating what Ristock and Pennell (1996) refer to as *transparency*, that is, making the researcher visible in the research process (p. 116). By sharing my reflections as I have conducted the research, I will be able to illustrate how my experiences have informed my research.

Feminist research also takes a proactive stance so that the research findings are committed to changing women's lives. As Code (1995) states:

Feminist activism and feminist research have a common origin in recognition of the extent to which women's experiences simply have not counted in the malestream activities and research endeavors throughout history; and they have a common goal in their commitment to honoring those experiences and making them visible. (p. 35)

One of the key feminist epistemologies, which place women's voices at the forefront of research, is feminist standpoint. Here, "knowledge is derived from a committed feminist exploration of women's experiences of oppression" (Stanley, 1990: 27). I have used this approach to focus on the material context of women's lives and I have recognized that a woman's social location (age, race, class, ethnicity, religion, sexuality) helps to shape her use and understanding of self-help books. In this way, the events that have led the participants to read self-help books are not viewed as isolated and individualized occurrences. Instead, I explore how the social condition of women's lives can contribute to their seeking out and using self-help books. Thus, struggles that women face can no longer be looked at as internal; they must be looked at as stemming from a society that operates to oppress women. By conducting my research in this way, I have brought forth a position that critiques power relations in our society.

Although I have focused on the material context of the participants' lives, I have not assumed that the participants' experiences can be reduced to a single standpoint and as such, I will not talk about the lesbian standpoint of self-help reading, or the black woman standpoint of self-help reading, rather, I have

attempted to develop, "multiple awarenesses or discourses responsive to the diversity of women's experiences" (Ristock & Pennell, 1996: 5).

Because feminist standpoint has been criticized for universalizing women's experiences (Stanley, 1990) I also use postmodern feminist epistemology. This is an approach that accommodates difference instead of trying to provide an overarching explanation for why and how women read self-help books. One of the main contributions of this approach is the rejection of traditional assumptions about truth and reality. As Stanley (1990) states:

Feminist postmodernist epistemology has its origins in, first, a feminist skepticism of all universalizing claims, derived from semiotics, deconstructionism and psychoanalysis and their rejection of any notion of a "more authentic self." (p. 27)

Rather than exploring the "truth" about why women read self-help books, this approach allows me to explore many truths about how women read self-help books. Postmodernism allows for plurality and difference and it is an approach that can accommodate the multiplicity of answers given by the participants, which at times are contradictory.

Another contribution of postmodernism is its ability to transcend binary oppositions and reveal that power is not linear. In talking about a postmodernist view of power, Bordo (1997) states that:

We must first abandon the idea of power as something possessed by one group and leveled against another; we must instead think of the network of practices, institutions, and technologies that sustain positions of dominance and subordination in a particular domain. (p. 92)

In other words, it is not enough to say that self-help books oppress women. What is needed is an analysis of power that shows how notions of health are

produced in self-help books to look natural and how our institutions have colluded in order to sustain these notions. As Bordo (1997) states:

Particularly in the realm of femininity, where so much depends on the seemingly willing acceptance of various norms and practices, we need an analysis of power 'from below,' as Foucault puts it; for example, of the mechanisms that shape and proliferate – rather than repress – desire, generate and focus our energies, construct our conceptions of normalcy and deviance. (p. 92)

In other words, a postmodern analysis of women reading self-help books will get past the notion that the authors of self-help books are wielding power over the women who read their books. As Ristock & Pennell (1996) state in their discussion of postmodern links in feminist research:

This perspective moves us away from theories that universalize and generalize towards an analysis of the shifting power relations in any social context. Relations are not fixed as either 'power over' and 'power with'; rather, they form and re-form in various combinations (p. 4)

By showing how women negotiate and interpret the messages in self-help books, I will be interrupting the notion that women are uncritical recipients of the content in self-help books.

At the core of feminist postmodern analysis is the belief that "language (and discourse) *constitutes* subjectivity" (Gavey, 1989: p. 403). This is important to feminists because if language is the tool we use to understand our experiences, then discourse can also operate to maintain oppressive structures in our society. Using an example from my own research, it has been important for me to be aware that although the language used by self-help authors appears to be "normal" or like "common-sense," there are underlying social forces that create this feeling of normalcy. As Ristock and Pennell (1996) state:

By attending to the specific ways in which public discourse structures and limits our thought, making some thoughts unthinkable, researchers can begin to imagine how to disrupt the terms of dominant discourses so that other ideas, perhaps less oppressive in their social consequences, become thinkable. (p. 7)

As a researcher it has been important for me to be aware that dominant discourses create assumptions about how we understand our lives and by attending to this, we can challenge those assumptions. This research will illustrate the extent to which messages in self-help books reproduce normative assumptions about healthy women. It will also explore how some readers conform to, as well as resist, those normative messages.

### Chapter Three: Research Methods

In keeping with the theoretical framework laid out in the previous chapter, this research takes a qualitative approach in exploring how women read and understand self-help books. Qualitative methods were chosen because this mode of inquiry assumes that reality is socially constructed; the variables are complex, interwoven and difficult to measure; and participants have a say in the research process (Glesne & Peshkin, 1992). This method allows participants' voices to become visible in the research process, which is in keeping with feminist research principles. In this chapter I outline my approach to developing this research and the ways that I conducted data analysis.

The main goal of this research is to explore the subjective experiences of a sample of women who read self-help books and to explore three main research questions. First, how and why do the participants use self-help books? This includes how they select the books they are interested in and what the impact of reading self-help books has been for them. Second, how do the participants understand the messages in self-help books? In other words, do these women find that there are specific messages about how women should look and/or act? Do the participants feel that self-help books seek to put the onus on women to fix their problems? And finally, how do these women perceive that self-help books are understood in the larger social context? That is, how can a feminist analysis account for the reason why self-help books are particularly appealing to women at this time?

### One on One Interviews and the Evolution of the Interview Questions

I chose one-on-one interviews as my method because interviews are best suited to bring forward women's voices, focus on their experiences, and put women at the center of research. I also chose interviews because Grodin (1991) states, "the act of reading as well as other media experiences may be private and unobservable" (p. 407). Therefore, in-depth interviews are an ideal method for exploring the phenomenon of self-help reading. It is important to note that although I am interested in the act of reading itself, my primary objective is to explore how self-help books have played a role in women's lives.

From January to September of 2000, I conducted semi-structured interviews with 10 women. The term semi-structured refers to "the approach whereby the researcher plans to ask questions about a given topic but allows the data-gathering conversation itself to determine how the information is obtained" (Reinhartz, 1992: 281). I had a set of questions that I hoped to explore but there was always the opportunity for the participants to veer from a particular question and include other thoughts and experiences that I hadn't anticipated would be shared. By carefully listening to the participants, this allowed me to ask new questions as the interview progressed.

One of the main goals in feminist interview research is to reduce the power differential between the interviewer and the participant. Because I was in the role of "researcher," it was important for me to gain the trust of the participants. As Oakley (1981) states:

In most cases, the goal of finding out about people through interviewing is best achieved when the relationship of interviewer



and interviewee is non-hierarchical and when the interviewer is prepared to invest his or her own personal identity in the relationship. (p. 41)

I did this by stating in the beginning of each interview that my research is being conducted as part of my Master's degree. I stated my interest in listening to women's experiences with self-help reading and how important I felt it was to conduct research which values women's lives. When Grodin (1991) interviewed women who read self-help books, she commented that "because a woman was interviewing women, aspects of discourse approximated the trust and equality of friendship. This provided opportunities for frank discussions about personal issues surrounding self-help book use" (p. 409). I agree with her observation because the women I interviewed were very giving of their personal experiences and I felt that our interviews were free-flowing and the climate was relatively relaxed. This may be attributed to the fact that I was looked at as a "student" more than a "researcher." Comments from some of the participants regarding wanting to help me with my "project" gave me a sense that the interviewees did not sense a large power differential between us.

The interview guide that I used went through an evolution (see appendix A for the interview guide). Stemming from my research questions, I divided the guide into three sections. The first section looked at general characteristics of self-help reading. By characteristics, I was referring to the frequency and duration of self-help book reading, the circumstances that led the participant to read a self-help book in the first place, the process by which women select a self-help book to read, and the types of books read. I did this in order to establish a

context for why and how the participants read self-help books. The second section looked at how self-help books were understood at an individual level. The questions revolved around what the impact has been as a result of reading self-help books and whether or not the participants felt that their life has changed as a result of reading self-help books.

In order to address feminist criticisms that self-help books pathologize women's problems, I asked what the interviewees thought the predominant messages for women were in self-help books. In order to probe this question further, I asked the participants to describe to me how self-help books talk about what a healthy woman is. Because I also wanted to address some feminist criticisms that self-help books blame women for their problems, I asked the participants if they believed the books they read were blaming of women.

As mentioned in the previous chapter, one of the main findings of both Simonds (1992) and Grodin (1995) was that the women that they interviewed were very critical of the messages in self-help books and as a result rejected any books whose message was seen as too simplistic. In order to compare my own findings with that of Simonds and Grodin I asked my participants what were some aspects of self-help books that they enjoyed as well as aspects that disappointed them. I hoped that this would allow them an opportunity to critique the self-help books that they read. Another way to allow for some critical reflection on the participants' part was when I asked whether the books always spoke to their individual experiences.

The final section looked at how self-help books are understood in the larger social context. These questions explored why the participants think self-help books are particularly appealing at this time and if they shared the information that they read with others. This last section sought to explore how feminism might account for why self-help books are so popular among women at this particular time.

During the development of this interview guide I asked advisors and colleagues to review my questions in order to make sure that the interview questions matched well with my research questions. Once I had a guide in place, I felt that it was important to have a test interview. This would not only give me practice conducting an interview, it allowed me an opportunity to make sure that my questions made sense to someone who actually reads self-help books. I was fortunate to have an acquaintance that was interested in my research and an avid reader of self-help books. She provided me with feedback regarding the research questions and suggested that rather than asking a series of demographic questions as part of the prologue to the interview, I should hand out a background questionnaire alongside the consent form. She felt it was less intrusive to ask about age, sexuality, religion, educational level and personal income in a questionnaire than to ask these personal questions prior to any rapport being established between the participant and me. By adding the questionnaire I was still able to receive the demographic information I needed as well as to prepare the interviewees to speak about how their background influences their reading practices. During the remainder of the interviews some

of the participants started to talk about the importance of the author of self-help books. I incorporated this issue and began to ask all of the participants whether they preferred that the author was an "expert" in their field and whether or not they preferred a female author. A final question that emerged from the process of conducting the interviews stemmed from a frequent discussion of the role of therapy and self-help groups in the participants' lives. I therefore began to ask the participants whether or not they had ever engaged in therapy of any kind as part of the interview. These changes proved to be an interesting part of my data analysis.

### The Participants and The Research Process

In order to recruit the participants, I placed a number of posters (see appendix B for text of poster) at various bookstores, such as McNally Robinson, Chapters, Prairie Sky, and Genesis. I also placed posters at various resource centers in the city such as the University of Manitoba Womyn's Centre, the University of Manitoba Aboriginal Students' Association, the University of Winnipeg Womyn's Centre, the Women's Health Clinic, the Sexuality Education Resource Centre (SERC), the Immigrant Women's Association, the Chilean Cultural Association, the Fort Garry Women's Resource Centre, the Rainbow Resource Centre (RRC), and the Wolesley Family Centre. I left a pager number on the poster with a voice mail that stated, "This is Vycki. If you are calling about the research on women and self-help books, please leave your name, telephone number, and a time that I can call you back. Thank you." When a potential participant paged me, I was able to receive the message immediately as I had

the pager on my person at all times. I would then phone the participant back and introduce myself as a Master's student in women's studies who was interested in exploring how women use and understand self-help books. I assured the participants that they would remain anonymous and that I had no intention of including information that would identify them in any way. I told the participants that I would be tape recording the interviews and that the tapes would be kept and stored in a locked cabinet. I also informed them that I was the only person to hear the tapes as I was going to do all of the transcribing of the interviews. This phone conversation gave the participant the opportunity to ask me any questions she may have about my research and it also allowed me the opportunity to ask the types of self-help books that they read. I did this for two reasons, the first to ensure that the participant read books dealing with self-improvement, spirituality, and psychological well-being as it was the focus of my research. The second reason was to be familiar with the particular books that the participant had read. I made an effort to read excerpts from the books that they mentioned at my local bookstore and thankfully, I was familiar with a number of them. Although I am not an avid reader of self-help books, I have read some books dealing with self-esteem and motivation as a result of working on this project.

The interviews took place from January of 2000 to September of 2000. I initially had 12 responses however, one person dropped out of the research after our first conversation due to her schedule and a second person could not be reached after several attempts by me to make contact. I stopped trying to recruit participants at 10 interviews. Some of the reasons why I stopped at that number

were a number of themes began to emerge and repeat in the interviews, I felt that I had included a range of experiences, and for the scope of this research project I had amassed a sufficient amount of data to analyze in line with the requirements for a Master's thesis.

Arranging a time and place to meet proved to be challenging. On four occasions, I visited participants in their homes because they said they felt comfortable with having me conduct the interview there and on some occasions, because they had small children, meeting outside of the home was not viable. Other locations where I conducted interviews were at Women's Health Clinic, the Rainbow Resource Centre, the Immigrant Women's Centre, the Wolesley Family Centre, and at my office at the University of Manitoba.

Prior to the interview, a written consent form (see appendix C) was given to each participant. The form stated my identity; the general purpose of the study (including what I hoped to learn and how this related to my program as a graduate student); a description of the procedures I used; a description of risk; a description of the recording device I used; a statement of confidentiality; a statement of how the findings will be available to the participant; a statement that participation in the study is voluntary and that the participant has the right to withdraw from participating at any time and/or refrain from answering any questions without prejudice; a statement that the participant has understood the consent form which she will sign; and a statement informing the participant that the study was approved by the Faculty of Arts Ethics Review Committee, and a number where the participant could phone to complain regarding a procedure. In

anticipation that during the course of the interview, a participant may have felt mental stress, I had a list of resources and services on hand to share with the participants if necessary (see appendix D).

Although it did not prove to be necessary, I did allow for some time during the course of the interview for de-briefing. This allowed the women some time to ask further questions about my research and in some cases, we spent 5 – 10 minutes talking about their interests and topics not relating directly to self-help books. I was also able to thank the participants and share with them my gratitude in taking the time to speak with me. Some of the participants gave me their mailing addresses and I let them know that I would send them a brief report on my research findings.

The participants' ages ranged from early 20's to early 50's. Although mostly white, two identified as Greek-Canadians and one as black. There was a wide range of religious identification, four identifying as Christian, two were studying Buddhism, one identifying with Earth-based feminist spirituality, one identifying as Bahai, and two not identifying with any type of religion. In terms of sexuality, there were seven heterosexual, two bi-sexuals, and one lesbian represented. Education level did not vary dramatically as most of the participants had completed some post-secondary education while others had a post-secondary degree. Interestingly enough, notwithstanding a similar education level among the participants their annual income varied greatly. Four reported an income of under \$10,000, two had an income of between \$10,000 and \$20,

000, two had an income between \$20,000 and \$30,000, one between \$30,000 and \$40,000 and one had an income of over \$50,000.

All but one of the participants mentioned that they were avid readers of genres other than self-help and all had read more than five self-help books while some had read more than 30. The self-help books that the participants read focused on depression, relationships, grief, spirituality, body image, infidelity, addictions, alcoholism, self-esteem, abuse, anger management, motivational, sexuality, and dysfunctional families.

### Gathering and Analyzing the Data

In gathering the data, I was influenced by the work of Sandra Kirby and Kate McKenna (1989). They state that "The method of researching from the margins requires a lot of reflection on the part of the researcher. This means that in addition to the regular data records, there needs to be a place for the researcher's ongoing reflections" (p. 125). Immediately following each interview, I took notes and attempted to summarize the main content of each interview. It was at this time that I also coded each interview with a pseudonym ensuring that I would not breach the anonymity of the participants. I also went through a process of de-briefing where I tape-recorded my thoughts about aspects of the interview that were striking to me. Finally, I took notes in a journal while conducting interviews in order to engage in self-reflexivity. This allowed me a process for reflecting on how a particular interview may have challenged my assumptions on an aspect of women and self-help book reading. For example, after my interview with Jackie I was able to reflect on a number of issues:



The books that mostly impacted her were Melody Beattie's, which I thought was interesting because I had looked at her books years ago in Undergrad and I remember thinking that she was such a joke because her books completely lacked statistical backing and she actually used her own personal experience as the basis for her theories. So it was kind of odd and intriguing to hear a woman speak so eloquently about how much Beattie had impacted her life and how much she could relate to Beattie's words. It was just a neat opportunity to reflect on how far my own thinking has gone from such an empirical paradigm that looks for "facts" and "truth" to one that embraces feminist principles such as standpoint theories!

The interview with Jackie allowed me to challenge my own assumptions about certain self-help books and to remember that I had held certain biases about some self-help authors at one time.

The process of transcribing each interview was valuable as I was able to attend to not only what was being said but also the silences that took place during the interview. Transcribing also allowed me to begin to think about possible themes that were emerging from the data. Analyzing the data proved to be an ongoing process. At this stage I was heavily influenced by the work of Brown and Gilligan (1992). In their *listener's guide* they discuss the importance of centering on the voice of each interviewee. They suggest as researchers we should be attuned to, "Who is speaking? In what body? Telling what story about relationships – from whose perspective or from what vantage point? In what societal and cultural framework?" (p. 21). This allows for a feminist understanding of how women's voices can be brought to the forefront of research.

In trying to follow this method, I read the interview transcripts several times. The first time I read each transcript I tried to listen to the story that the

interviewee was sharing. My goal was to get a sense of the central themes. This is what Brown and Gilligan (1992) refer to as the “who, what, when, where, and why of the narrative” (p. 27). The second time through the interview, I attended to the voice of each woman to ensure that her story was not only at the forefront of my research but also that I was being mindful of her social location.

Therefore, issues of race, class, ethnicity, and sexuality were important. In the third and fourth reading of the transcripts, I looked at how each woman talked about relationships. I looked at their relationship to me as the researcher, and to other institutions as well as to the social world. By doing so, I tried to be attentive to differences.

Once I had a sense of the characteristics of each interview, I began to code the data in order to identify major patterns and themes. This stage was used to support my observations with quotes from the transcripts. This was done in an effort to convey how I arrived at my main themes. Kirby and McKenna (1989) outline two important strategies when analyzing data. The first is *intersubjectivity* which refers to keeping a dialogue between all participants and working with their experiences to guide the analysis. As Kirby and McKenna (1989) state, “each bit of data will be given equal opportunity to speak in the analysis, data will be linked with questions raised from the data” (p. 129). The second strategy is *critical reflection of the social context*. This refers to examining the social reality in which the participants’ experience has occurred. Concurrently, I tried to analyze my results within a feminist framework. I looked at how my research findings relate to existing work in the area of women and

self-help books. By doing so, I analyzed how my findings challenge as well as add to existing work in the area.

Because I was particularly interested in showing how women negotiate and interpret the messages in self-help books, I had to shift my focus. Rather than universalizing and generalizing the participants' individual standpoints, I had to analyze the data with a new set of questions in mind. For this, I relied on the work of Nicola Gavey (1989) and Janice Ristock (2001). Gavey (1989) states:

Knowledge is transient and inherently unstable – there are few, if any, universal truths. Furthermore, knowledge is understood to be not neutral – it is closely associated with power. Those who have the power to regulate what counts as truth are able to maintain their access to material advantages and power. (p. 462)

She goes on to say that it is through *discourse* that material power is exercised and power relations are established and perpetuated (p. 464). In other words, some discourses are given more authority than other discourses in our society and these are referred to as dominant discourses because they appear natural and they appeal to common sense. In conducting her research on violence in lesbian relationships Janice Ristock (2001) discovers that:

Normative frameworks exist about violence – about victims and perpetrators, about lesbians, and about feminism...the tendency is to go back to certain standards of normalcy, certain dominant understandings that have been part of feminist theories to explain heterosexual domestic violence. (p. 63)

Therefore, normative frameworks exist for how we understand issues such as violence in relationships and oftentimes these standards of normalcy go unchallenged. Further, they prevent other "truths" from being heard such as those that challenge racist, sexist, and heterosexist discourse. When power is

exercised through language, it operates to maintain the status quo in our society and suppresses other marginalized “truths” of how our realities can be understood.

It is the work of Gavey and Ristock that influenced how I would next analyze my data. The questions I asked my data were how do normative discourses influence the participants’ understanding of the issue that they’re dealing with and how does this relate to their self-help book practices? Do the participants talk about the messages in self-help books as reflecting normative views of what it means to be a healthy woman? If they do, how do participants situate themselves in relation to normative discourses of how a woman is supposed to be? Do the women identify with or conform to traditional discursive constructions of femininity or can they resist and challenge them? As a result of these questions, I carefully read each interview several times with the thought of revealing how normative discourse has structured and limited the participants’ understanding of the issues with which they were struggling.

### Validity

Feminist researchers have used the concept of validity to “ensure that the information we gather will ‘ring true’ – that it will resonate with the experiences of participants – and that we are accountable both to them and to the broader community that may be affected in our research” (Ristock and Pennell, 1996:50). This is what Lincoln & Guba (1985) refer to as *credibility*. This addresses the importance of conducting member checks in order to test the validity of the data with the members from which data was solicited. In order to ensure credibility, I

have checked back with two of the participants in order to verify whether my analysis and descriptions have “rung true” for them. I allowed them the opportunity to read their transcripts to ensure that I have captured their experiences in a way that is meaningful to them. Although none of them felt it necessary to read their transcripts, two participants agreed to go over some of the themes I have gathered. One participant commented that she felt that my findings confirmed the experiences that she had with reading self-help books. She found it interesting that other women used self-help books in ways that were similar to her experiences. The other participant who provided feedback mentioned that she had never thought at the time of our interview that her experiences would be very helpful but was struck with how much she was able to contribute to the research. When I asked her if she felt that the themes “made sense” to her, she told me that they had and that she felt validated because she wanted to help other women who are dealing with issues in their lives and felt that this was an opportunity to share her experiences.

Another important way to build validity into a research project is by making the research valuable to the participants and the broader community. I believe the value of my research has been to disrupt notions that women are dysfunctional in our society and are in need of “fixing”. I have also looked at the empowering ways that women have used self-help books in their lives and as such, I believe that my research was meaningful to the women who participated. In order to share the information gathered in this thesis, a report of this will be given to the participants who have requested a copy. In order to share the

information with the larger community of women who read self-help books and to service providers who use self-help books in their practices, I have written recommendations in the final chapter of this thesis and hope to share the information by writing an article about the research findings and submitting it to various community newsletters such as the one at Women's Health Clinic.

## Chapter 4: How and Why Women Read Self-Help Books:

### The Impact of Self-Help Reading.

In this Chapter I will discuss the material realities of the women who I have interviewed in order to gain an understanding of how and why they have turned to self-help books. An overarching theme that helps to structure the findings of the interviews is the concept of empowerment and the degree to which the women who I interviewed were characterized as having agency or being agents in their life. The term empowerment has been defined in a number of ways and Ristock and Pennell (1996) give a detailed understanding of this concept. They state that, "In general, to empower means to enhance our ability to control our own lives" (p. 1). A key part of individual personal empowerment is the notion of agency. That is, the extent to which a person takes action over her life. As Ristock and Pennell (1996) put it, "on an individual level, this can mean drawing on inner strength to take control of a situation and assert oneself." (p. 2). Agency and personal empowerment are important concepts in this research. All of the participants in this study drew on their inner strength in order to actively seek out self-help books, which in turn helped them to gain the knowledge to name issues with which they were struggling.

Because feminists are critical of the concept of empowerment when it remains at the individual level, Ristock and Pennell (1996) go on to look at the concept of interrelational empowerment. They refer to this as "sharing resources for mutual benefit, or working together co-operatively" (p. 2). It will be illustrated throughout this chapter that the women in this study were indeed empowered to

help themselves and in turn, some have made a commitment to help other women with the hope of changing the conditions of their lives. This is an important concept because some of these women began a process of consciousness-raising for themselves as a result of reading self-help books. By reading the books, they began to account for the issues that they were dealing with as stemming from patriarchy and not ending solely within themselves. This is a unique finding as none of the existing research in this area has looked at the relationship between feminist consciousness-raising and self-help book reading. When we look at empowerment as a process that begins with personal issues and evolves to include analyzing power and moving outside of the self, we can begin to see how self-help book reading for the women that I interviewed is far more complex than previous researchers have shown.

After analyzing interview transcripts, I identified three major themes. The first area looks at the theme of agency, namely the ways in which the women I interviewed sought out self-help books, selected the books they would read, and actively interpreted the messages in the books. The second area looks at the theme of naming and understanding issues. This includes the ways in which self-help books have helped the women define the problems that they are facing and realize that they are not alone in their struggles. For some women, they understand the issues that they face are connected to a larger social context and because of that develop a feminist consciousness. The last area looks at the theme of reaching out, namely ways in which the interviewees have sought to empower other women.



To fully understand the impact of reading self-help books, it is important to look at the context in which the women in my sample came to read these books. They were dealing with a variety of mental health issues including depression; postpartum depression; verbal, physical, psychological, and economic abuse; infidelity in relationships; and alcoholism.

For some of the women, their problems were relatively short-lived and they were able to function in their day-to-day lives while dealing with their issues. Anastasia, a 31 year old Greek-Canadian heterosexual mother of two who has dealt with postpartum depression, states:

I had gone through a little bit of postpartum depression. It didn't last very long – it lasted 3 months...but I could still get out of bed, I could still function.

Melissa, a white 27-year-old bi-sexual Buddhist said that she did not allow the issue of depression to impede her ability to function at work. She states:

Yeah, it was difficult but I still wanted to succeed at work. I was putting in like 10-12 hour days. So it was hard but I was still motivated to do things.

For Brenda, a 20-year-old white heterosexual university student, her depression was prolonged but she stated that she was still able to maintain her relationships. She states:

My partner was really supportive with what I was going through. I just needed to figure out what I needed...to get through.

For others, their issues were prolonged and debilitating. Nancy, a 39-year-old white heterosexual mother of two, was in a relationship with a partner that was verbally and economically abusive. She spoke candidly about her struggles and how she finally sought help after reading self-help books.

I was so down. I got to the point where I was drained. I just wouldn't have people over and I'm an extrovert but I had become an introvert. It was easier to just stay at home, you know? It was just easier...nothing could go wrong. I could not get in trouble, he couldn't get mad at me if I just stayed home and cleaned the house all the time...and looked after the kids. And um...so I went to Florida to visit my Aunt and she handed me this book. And it sat at the night table for a couple of nights and then I started to read it and I couldn't put it down and I'm going, "This is me...and this is him." And so on that I identified things and read more books and realized that I did not have the capacity to change him and that what he was doing was changing me.

Although not all of the interviewees faced depression or violence in their lives, it is still nothing short of amazing how they all managed to seek out information in books in order to help themselves. To further understand why the participants chose to get help on their own, we must first look at how self-reliance in the wake of silence regarding the issues that the participants faced has allowed these women to help themselves.

### Agency

#### Seeking Information

The participants in this study were characterized by a high degree of self-reliance. Most of the participants reported a lack of knowledge or understanding regarding the problems that they were going through. This was the main reason why they sought out self-help books in the first place. As Gweneth, a British-Canadian heterosexual in her late-40's and a self-described Spiritual Healer, said:

I knew that the relationship I was in was abusive...physically and verbally and psychologically – the whole kit and caboodle. So I needed some um...guidelines. I wanted to kind of get as much information about all of what was going on as clearly as I could so

that I could make decisions for myself. Like I'm – I like to do things for myself.

Phoebe, a white bi-sexual mother of two in her early 20's, talked about her struggles with alcoholism and how she used self-help books to help herself through this period:

I think with the alcoholism, I didn't talk to anybody about it. I was more – you know, I wanted to read myself and figure it out. I really just needed information on how I could improve how I felt. I think the books really helped me understand what I was going through.

Melissa, a white 27-year-old bi-sexual Buddhist, stated:

I had a hard time in academic school but when they tested me I was always at a high level. It was because I was doing all this stuff all by myself. I'm like Abe Lincoln, I'm self-teaching myself all this stuff because I have a tendency to learn quickly and then...I need space and some time to digest it.

When asked more specifically about how Melissa sought help to deal with depression, she replied:

I did it all myself. Even when I was depressed, I did everything to go get my doctor. I knew what I wanted to do and how I wanted to approach it. Like, you have to take responsibility for yourself at some point. And it's hard, though...especially when you're broke all the time and stuff. But the act of living and getting out and doing it is more important.

Others spoke of a need to seek help on their own due to the absence of role models in their lives. As Brenda, a 20-year-old white heterosexual university student, shared:

The reason why I went to books was because I was always a reader and books were just a natural thing. But also because...all of the females in my family are very close to me geographically. But when I started feeling quite depressed I didn't feel I was getting any messages from them. So I think I used a lot of the authors in the books as substitutes...for um...the wise woman paradigm that's

supposed to happen when the elders in your family help you with issues – it wasn't happening for me so I used books as a substitute.

Due to the importance of being self-reliant as well as the need to seek information on their own, the participants actively chose to read self-help books in order to make sense of the events that were occurring in their lives.

### Selecting Books

The issue of agency is relevant not only in terms of how these women described their decision to read a book, but also in the course of selecting a book itself. With the advent of "mega" bookstores that are reminiscent of department stores, some of the participants mentioned weekly outings as a way to keep up on the latest books. As Barb, a white heterosexual social worker in her early 40's, puts it:

Yeah my son and I do that. Instead of going to the library which is downtown, we just go to "Chapters." We go there and it's sort of like our trip to the library and we'll spend 2 or 3 hours just grabbing a stack of books and reading.

Nancy echoes this by stating:

I've learned that I love going to "McNally" and spending time looking through books. And actually, I take great pride when I'm in the bookstore now. If somebody's looking at these books, I go "there's a good one. I've read it...that's a good one."

Some of the women I interviewed enjoy the act of selecting the books that they will read. In actively choosing the books, some of the participants discussed the importance of packaging a self-help book. As Simonds (1992) stated that, "Covers are designed to sell books. Self-help marketers are well aware that people *do* judge books by their covers. Perhaps more than any other literary genre, self-help books feature covers that are meant to attract, meant to sell" (p.

136). Because publishing houses spend millions of dollars in order to package and ultimately sell their books, there was little surprise that the title, front and back cover, and chapter headings were an important factor in picking up a book for investigation. As some of the participants mentioned:

Red books, purple books, books that look great - they seem to draw you in. Or if they've got really neat graphics with figures of goddesses or – I'm big into symbolism so all you have to do is put some symbols on a book and I'm like, "oh, what's this?"

Barb

It is (important) and it's really a shame because there may be a lot of things that I haven't picked up simply because of the words on the title or whatever that hasn't appealed to me...but it's true, yeah.

Jackie

It depends. Sometimes you can find a book that looks really good from the outside and then the book doesn't really say much.

Phoebe

Although the packaging may attract the readers to pick up the book for further examination, it was not a predictor of whether the book would be selected. Other less apparent factors influenced whether a book would be purchased such as the writing style of the author and the actual messages contained in the books:

What's important to me is what the book has to say to me not what the pretty picture is and how the words are. I mean, it may have an impact on how I see it in a psychological way but when I think about it, the packaging is not what's important to me – it's what's inside. I usually read the end of the book to see how they're finishing up. If their conclusions fit with me, I'll know that the book will be right for me.

Gweneth

I'll flip through it and see a few things and if I see something that I can agree with or identify strongly with then I'm more apt to read the rest of what the person has to say.

Jackie

No, I don't read book-jackets and I don't read the table of contents. I will actually flip it open and thumb through it and start reading and if the writing is good...I'm halfway hooked.

Barb

The participants were mindful that packaging is used to attract an audience however they remained very discerning in the types of books they would read. This selectivity is supportive of the theme that the women I interviewed actively selected the books they would read.

### Selecting the Messages

Perhaps one of the most striking features in how the women used self-help books occurred while they were reading. Rather than complacently accepting the advice offered in self-help books, some of the books were meditated upon on a daily basis while other participants carried their books around for months and in Brenda's case, for a year. During her time with depression, Brenda read a workbook by Iyanla Vanzant (1997) titled, *One Day My Soul Just Opened Up: 40 Days and 40 Nights Towards Spiritual Strength and Personal Growth*. In that book she was encouraged to use two different colored highlighters and to highlight in one color the messages that resonated with her and with another color the messages that she did not agree with. She was also instructed to write down in the morning what she wanted to work on that day and at night to record what she had learned at the day's end. Brenda stated:

She says in the book that it's a 40-day thing, there's 40 days. But she says for most people, those 40 days last 2 or 3 years. You

might do day 5 for a couple of weeks and that's exactly how it did go for me. Yeah, it was about a year for the 40 days to go by.

In addition, almost all of the participants mentioned going back and re-reading portions or all of the books over a period of years. Jackie, a self-employed white lesbian, still continued to read Melody Beattie's (1997) *The Language of Letting Go* on a daily basis. As she puts it:

It's a day-by-day meditation type of book. It's got a reading for everyday and it is – I put it down everyday and I say, 'God, I love that woman.' There's just so much good stuff and so much that really speaks to me. It's like this woman almost knows what's going on in my life and I just find it really amazing.

The books that many of the participants were reading were not the type that offered "short and snappy" solutions. This was a striking finding, especially in the wake the criticism that has been thrust upon self-help books by feminist researchers regarding the shallow messages that self-help books contain. An example is DeFrancisco and O'Connor's (1995) analysis on the rhetorical strategies in self-help books. They state that, "Put simply, these self-help books are entertaining and 'easy reads.' Given the complex topics covered in these books, they are surprisingly short, and solutions read like quick fixes" (p. 218). By contrast, the women I interviewed spoke at length about the process of self-reflection that they went through in order to follow the advice in the books.

Another way of actively using self-help books was for the participants to engage in note taking or by keeping quotes in binders, day-timers, and in various places in their homes. Three of the participants shared with me their collection of notes that they had written over the years of self-help reading. In one binder, pages of book summaries, exercises, and quotes were collected for a period

spanning 10 years. Phoebe spoke about how writing down the information that stood out for her helped her to go back and re-visit the messages in the self-help books that she borrowed. As she puts it:

I still have a lot of stuff in there that I like to go back to. Each one – I kind of remember why I wrote it down.

Therefore, writing notes was also a way for her to connect with her past experiences with self-help books. Barb, another participant who wrote down quotes, went on at length about how she uses self-help on a daily basis. She stated that:

Sometimes I'll look for a quote and I'll write it out and stick it on the fridge. Or put it in my day-timer and just carry it around for a week or a month or a year, just this quote that...grounds me, like in a minute, you know?

The participants have shown that the ways in which self-help books are used go beyond the simple consumption of the messages that they contain. This finding was in sharp contrast to the findings of Simonds (1992) who interviewed women readers of self-help books to understand the appeal of the genre and to examine the meaning and effectiveness of self-help reading. Simonds stated that, "Reading self-help books can be a momentary means of alleviating the pressure of a certain problem and offering hope for a less stressful future, and may then be forgotten altogether – as several readers said, used as a 'quick fix'" (p. 32). Rather than viewing the messages in self-help books as a "momentary" solution, the women I interviewed seemed to actively participate in selecting the messages that they found important and kept them near for future reference.



The women I interviewed showed a good deal of agency in deciding to look to self-help books in the first place; in deciding which books they would read; and in deciding on which messages they would focus. All of these activities allowed the participants to take control of their self-exploration and this is in keeping with Ristock and Pennell's (1996) definition of individual personal empowerment. That is, the participants empowered themselves by taking control of their lives and chose when they would work on issues and how it would be done. These activities helped to elicit a sense of pride for the participants as they maintained self-reliance in the face of very serious issues.

To further understand the impact of self-help reading, I will look at other themes that emerged and that also continue to focus on self-exploration. These include the ability of self-help books to define issues, validate perceptions, and spur a feminist consciousness.

### The Power of Naming and Understanding

#### Defining Issues

Because there is still silence in our culture about issues such as depression, abuse, and alcoholism, it was an important finding that self-help books had the power to define and explain dynamics that were taking place in the participants' lives. Three of the women I interviewed shared courageous stories of how self-help books helped them to define the relationships they were in as abusive. When Barb read Robin Norwood's (1985) *Women Who Love Too Much* she talked about the revelation that occurred by reading the book. As she put it:

It was just like this flash – this dose of reality hitting me in the face. Like there it was – something to help me make sense of what I was experiencing at the moment. ‘He’s a misogynist.’ What does that mean? ‘A man who hates women.’ It was empowering – bottom line.

Two of the women I interviewed had similar defining moments with the same book by Patricia Evans (1996) titled, *The Verbally Abusive Relationship*. Nancy, who was in a relationship that was mentally, emotionally, and financially abusive, spoke of how she would hide the books that she was reading from her partner for fear that he would discover them. She stated:

Like I – I had this book and...I was hiding it and I was changing the hiding spot all the time and I was enjoying this book and I needed it...but I was scared. I was so scared – if it was ever found...the consequences that would happen...by having it. It was hidden under my bed, in the linen closet, down in the furnace room...

By reading the book, Nancy eventually began to define certain dynamics in her relationship. She stated:

I identified things and read more books and realized that I did not have the capacity to change him and that what he was doing was changing me. And it says right at the beginning of the book, ‘You are not crazy. You are in a process called “crazy-making.”

Therefore, the books helped Nancy to understand certain dynamics in her relationship as well as to define her relationship as abusive.

Phoebe illustrated another example of how self-help books can help a person define an issue they are dealing with. When Phoebe was in high school she felt depressed and she started to drink alcohol. Rather than seeking help through another means, she decided to find some books on teens and drinking. As Phoebe put it:

I read a lot of books with teenage drinking and stuff and...I didn't think I had a problem at first but after reading them, it was really describing what I was doing. It kind of scared me and I knew that I had a problem and should be getting help, you know? I could really relate to the books.

Phoebe eventually got the help of a counselor at AA and she found it to be a positive experience. She believes that reading self-help books gave her the motivation to seek help.

Perhaps what these stories illustrate is how self-help books can be used as a starting point in defining issues with which we may be dealing. Nowhere in Robin Norwood's book was there a message to Barb that she should continue in her relationship, get a bachelor's degree in Women's Studies and then end her relationship when she did. Nowhere in Patricia Evan's book was there a message that Nancy should go to a lawyer and have her partner removed from their home and nowhere in the book that Phoebe read did it tell her to go directly to the closest AA meeting and seek counseling. These were all choices that those particular women made in their lives. At the same time, the idea that self-help books can act as a catalyst for defining concepts in our lives is one that the participants certainly illustrated.

#### Validating Perceptions

Because self-help books can be used to define and bring to light issues that women face, the participants began to feel that they were not alone in their struggles. Almost all of the participants voiced a feeling of comfort in reading the books because somehow the issues that they were facing were not theirs alone. As some of the women stated:

The reassurance that you're not the *only* one who feels like that...that's a big one.

Phoebe

It was comforting to know that other women had gone through it...and made it through.

Anastasia

It was like ointment, you know, it just gave me...such comfort.

Barb

This is a theme that has also been articulated in research done by Grodin (1995) who found that:

Readers are drawn to self-help books for validation of their perceptions. These texts provide a chorus of women's voices to facilitate affirmation, courage, and support. Readers discovered affirmation of their own sense of reality through vicarious contact with other self-help subjects and readers. (p. 130)

This seemed to matter most for the participants when they were unable to share their issues with their friends or family. When Rania, a 30-year-old heterosexual Greek-Canadian university student, was dealing with the break-up of her marriage and the new-found pressures of being a single mom, she spoke about the terrible isolation she felt because she was the first in her group of 20-something friends to be married, and then divorced. Rania told me:

When you have no one else to talk to or...you know, everyone can be a good listener but until someone actually says, 'you know what? I've gone through that too.' So that's why I turned to books to make sure that I'm not the only one who made...stupid choices. (laughs)

In the absence of social support, the women I interviewed looked to self-help books to validate their experiences. In defining the issues that they were dealing with and in discovering that other women have also dealt with the same issues, the participants felt a sense of validation.

### Developing a Feminist Consciousness

A final impact of self-help reading was the way in which blame was moved away from the reader to outside of the individual. Rania began to read self-help books when she perceived that her self-esteem had declined due to her partner's infidelity. She told me:

At that point, my husband cheated on me and it was 'me,' 'me,' 'me'. I wasn't good enough, I wasn't attractive enough, it was all me. I went crazy going, 'maybe this time I didn't say that nice enough, or I wasn't...you know? I put a lot of blame on myself.

In reading self-help books, Rania began to understand that she was not the cause of her partner's infidelity. As she put it:

Well, it wasn't me. When you're the one that's been cheated on, it has nothing to do with you. It's their problem or issue...so it took the blame off of me.

Reading self-help books helped Rania to view the choices that her partner had made in their relationship and allowed her to focus on the role that he played in their marital break-up.

In some cases, the readers began to look at the social causes of women's problems and three of the women spoke about how self-help books worked in conjunction with their burgeoning feminist identities. It was by reading Robin Norwood's (1985) book, *Women Who Love Too Much* that Barb began to learn more about the concept of misogyny. As Barb told me:

Where does misogyny come from? It comes from culture and society and it made – it took the blame off me. That book was very instrumental as far as starting me on the journey of self-discovery and growth and moving towards feminism.

In reading self-help books, Brenda began to attribute the depression she was experiencing to patriarchal culture. She told me that:

It made me realize that this isn't just an arbitrary thing that happened. This happened because I was a female, young, in university, trying to do something with my life...and all of the obstacles that are out there for all women and that...it's not just an arbitrary thing like you just woke up depressed one day. This was bound to happen to someone like me because I was so...not happy with the status quo and I internalized that.

Reading self-help books also propelled Brenda into seeking feminist literature and eventually taking women's studies courses in university. Barb told me:

Yeah, I just started finding out more about women in general, women's studies, feminism. I became a women's studies major on sheer faith. I just enrolled in university and declared women's studies as my major without ever having taken a women's studies course.

Brenda too took some women's studies courses, but perhaps more importantly, she credits self-help books with helping to *create* her feminist consciousness. As she put it:

It was the vehicle for me to become more aware of myself; to get out of my depression. And also to become more aware of other people's experiences and to become more aware of social issues...and to define myself more as a feminist.

Whereas Brenda did not necessarily distinguish between self-help books authored by feminists and self-help books that were not outwardly feminist, Anita did. She spoke to me about how her burgeoning feminist identity was supplemented by the use of self-help books and how she was able to use both types of books in conjunction with one another. Anita, a Caribbean-Canadian heterosexual resource coordinator in her early 40's, put it this way:

Feminist books try to help you understand – to find my place and where women fit into the world. Because there are a lot of things happening around us that you don't really – cannot figure out why is this happening – why is it that you're feeling like there is something wrong? But you cannot really articulate that. When you read about feminist thought and the idea and the philosophy and the theories behind it...then you begin to see how your life is framed within this patriarchal system and why some of the things you're feeling and maybe the anger or frustration – there is a basis for it. It's not just in your head...it's something that's happening out there that you cannot – so that helped me put my finger on it. In the beginning, I was very militant and had a lot of anger and all kinds of things...I found I was a little bit destructive too for myself. So that's where the spiritual self-help books fit in...it's a balance. With those, my aim was to become a better person. You know, somebody who is spiritual and really a wise person.

Feminist self-help books can act to disrupt our notions and put us off balance in order to challenge patriarchal ideals and, in the case of Anita, books that focus on spirituality can be used in conjunction to rebalance or center ourselves so as not to let the anger or frustration in dealing with patriarchy become destructive.

When other feminist research has looked at the messages in self-help books, many concluded that these books do little more than blame women for their problems and pathologize their lives (Faludi, 1991; DeFrancisco & O'Connor, 1995; Goldhor Lerner, 1990). Through this research, I found that none of the women I interviewed felt that their problems stemmed from some internal problem that needed fixing. In fact, most of the women I interviewed rejected books that sought to blame women and they also seemed to be weary of self-help books that were too prescriptive in nature.

When Ebben (1995) conducted a discursive analysis on the messages in self-help books, she found that medical and religious discourse depoliticized women's discontent. That is, medical discourse views women's problems as

pathological while religious discourse seeks to view women's problems as stemming from spiritual weakness. Her findings were based on 12-step books that dealt mostly with alcoholism, addictions, and co-dependency. Although some of the women I interviewed dealt with alcoholism, they tended to reject messages that were overly dogmatic. This is especially true of women who identified themselves as feminists. They tended to read the most critically of the participants. An example is Barb's discussion of the book by John Gray (1992) entitled, *Men are From Mars, Women are From Venus*. Barb put it best when she said:

To me, it's essentialist and I reject that because I'm all about choice. Anything that smacks of essentialism, that says, "men are this way and women are this way and the best we can do is sort of negotiate how we interact..." It's too simple...too simplistic and it doesn't pick up on the nuances...and it's heterosexist too.

Some of the participants in my study had concerns that some self-help books reinforce patriarchal ideals. The women who agreed were also quick to mention that those aren't the types of books that interest them and that we should not categorize all self-help books as negative. All of the participants I interviewed stated that they would never read a book that they felt was negative towards women. As a result of this new-found ability for the interviewees to define problems that women face in our culture as well as the knowledge that women do not have to be alone in their struggles, I will turn to the theme of reaching out.



## Reaching Out

Some of the women I interviewed expressed a feeling of empowerment that they were able to work on their problems and come out of their experiences with a new-found need to help others. Presently, Anita volunteers as a peer counselor at a women's center. She states that:

When I do the counseling, we always supplement it too by giving reading from some of these same books. We might photocopy a piece that might be relevant to what we were talking about and give it to the women to go home and read it and see what she thinks and come back and discuss if there was anything in that.

Therefore, Anita's experiences with reading self-help have also translated in her recommending books to others during peer counseling sessions. Also striking is Nancy's ambition to help other women deal with their struggles. As she puts it:

I want to be in the capacity to help women. Do I want to do it as a private counselor? No, I don't. If I was counseling, everyone would like live in my house...(laughs)...Whereas, in a group...it's kind of like, "you know what? You're where I was. So now, all I'm doing is – I'm not telling you what to do. I'm giving you the tools that were given to me...to get me where I am. And what you do with the tools I provide you is up to you." So yeah, I want to write papers because, you know what? I find it *appalling* the amount of women that I'm turning books over to.

Like Anita and Nancy, Phoebe has taken to helping other women. In her case, she conducts self-help groups in her home. When our interview was over, she spoke to me at length about the groups that she runs and how they are a mix between a self-help group and a meditation session. The desire to share information with other women is in keeping with Ristock and Pennell's (1996) view of interrelational empowerment. Rather than simply working on personal problems in isolation, some of the interviewees have chosen to reach out to other

women in hopes of sharing the information that they have learned and in doing so, attempt to empower women and create social change.

What can be said then about the relationship between women's self-help reading and feminist politics? Using the example of Brenda, Barb, and Anita, we begin to understand how the concept of empowerment can be seen as a process that moves along a continuum. At the start is personal empowerment where the participants actively seek the types of help they will use to understand the issues that they are facing. It is at this point where most of the participants located their problems as stemming from an individual problem. Most articulated this by asking the question, "what's wrong with me?" For some of the participants, the ability to define the issues that they were facing caused them to see their problems as political. Because understanding the personal as political is such a key part in feminist consciousness-raising, some women move along the continuum to include an understanding of interrelational empowerment. This concept includes sharing information with other women. It is during the shift from individual empowerment to interrelational empowerment that feminism can burgeon and grow. Perhaps some self-help books can be used as a catalyst for individual change as well as a starting point for the development of a feminist identity. It certainly propelled some of the women I interviewed into pursuing other (more political) feminist activities. Therefore, it would seem that the ability for a self-help book to raise one's consciousness is highly contextual. It would really depend on the extent to which a person selects a book that does not blame women for their problems, how they read and use the messages in self-help

books, and the extent to which they are personally motivated to become political. Comments by my interviewees suggest that feminism may be in need of popular culture as a vehicle for disseminating feminist ideals. At the very least and certainly for some of the women I interviewed, it can be a starting point on the road to a feminist consciousness.

### Summary

This chapter has shown that the women I interviewed read self-help books in multiple and varied ways and this was in keeping with previous research conducted by Simonds (1992) and Grodin (1995). For some of the participants, self-help books provided the tools that they needed to define dynamics in their lives and provided them the comfort that they were not alone in their struggles. By seeing their problems as less private, some of the participants began a journey to overcome incredible issues such as abusive relationships, battling depression and the struggle with alcoholism. For a few of the participants, reading self-help books acted as a catalyst for developing a feminist consciousness. In those cases, the participants felt empowered to help other women to face the struggles that they had overcome.

In order to further delineate the complex ways that women read and understand self-help books, I will now turn to themes that explore the impact of normative assumptions and self-help book reading.

## Chapter Five: Normative Discourses: From Conformity to Resistance

Chapter Four illustrated how the women I interviewed triumphed over various relationship and mental health issues by taking action over their lives and seeking information to help themselves. Yet, in exclusively looking at the impact of self-help book reading for the participants, there is a risk of viewing their process of empowerment as having followed a simplistic, linear pattern where the participants faced an issue, read self-help books, and then became empowered. In other words, it is important to attend to the ways in which normative discourses have also played a part in the empowerment process.

I use the term normative discourse to refer to how dominant conceptions of reality and truth define for us what is normal and abnormal. Normative discourses seek to regulate the ways that we experience our lives. The discipline of psychology has been a key player in sustaining dominant conceptions of what is normal and abnormal by relying on positivist notions that science can discover facts about women that are value-free and without bias (see Maracek, 1989; Fine, 1985). However, feminists such as Burman (1996) tell us that:

The standards by which we evaluate normality and abnormality, social adjustment, mental illness or disability, are all informed by theories and technologies of assessment and testing. While these reflect particular values and orientations, they work to scientize and naturalize the particularity and partiality of their perspectives. (p. 2)

This challenges the notion that women have a "natural" or "true" self that can be researched and codified. What's more, Burman (1996) goes on to state that psychological ideas inform our lives through its seepage into, and reflection of, popular cultural forms (p. 3). In other words, self-help books (which are a form of

popular culture) can inform us of the standards by which we evaluate normality and abnormality and these particular standards of normalcy can be dangerous if they seek to regulate women's lives.

This is relevant to my research because we cannot assume that the women I interviewed read self-help books without having some prior awareness of what the prevailing discourses are in our society about who suffers from the various issues with which they were dealing (depression, alcoholism, and violence). More importantly perhaps, because self-help books are written to offer advice about achieving healthy modes of behavior (Simonds, 1992), we cannot assume that the self-help books *themselves* did not reinforce normative discourses about what it means to be a healthy and normal woman in our society.

In this Chapter I will first look at how normative discourses influence the participants' understanding of the issues that they were dealing with and I will explore how reading self-help books can disrupt the effects of these discourses. Specifically, I will look at how discourses surrounding issues of depression, alcoholism, and partner abuse have structured the ways in which the participants have sought help to deal with these problems. I will then look at how normative discourses about women and femininity are reproduced in some self-help books and the ways in which the participants have positioned themselves in relation to these discourses.

### The Public/Private Split

Since the women's liberation movement in the latter part of the 60's, feminists have sought to politicize women's private lives (Nicholson, 1997). However important the recognition that there is a split between our private and public lives, I argue that the normative discourse of keeping issues such as depression, alcoholism, and abuse hidden still remains. The theme of stigma provides a framework for understanding the pervasiveness of this silence. Goffman (1963) defines stigma as "the situation of the individual who is disqualified from full social acceptance" (preface). He goes on to say that as a result of stigmatization, a person becomes a discredited member of society. As Goffman states, "he is thus reduced in our minds from a whole and usual person to a tainted, discounted one. Such an attribute is a stigma, especially when its discrediting effect is very extensive..." (p. 3). Goffman has shown the link between being stigmatized and how this marginalizes and discredits people in our society. This particular explanation of stigma also allows us to see how being marginalized can lead to feeling silenced in our society. This is relevant to this research because the fear of stigma for some of the participants created a climate where issues such as depression and alcoholism were kept silent. The theme of stigma and the role of self-help books will illustrate how some participants were able to challenge the normative discourse of keeping our public and private lives separate.

### Depression

Societal attitudes toward depression and mental illness have been the cause of maintaining one of the last remaining social stigmas in our society. A national survey commissioned by the Canadian Mental Health Association (2001) has found that, "an overwhelming majority of Canadians say that maintaining their mental health is very important. Women are especially apt to feel that maintaining mental health is very important, 95% versus 88% for men." However, this study also determined that "Canadians are feeling less comfortable about letting others know when they are receiving treatment or counseling for depression. Only 54% indicated that they might want a friend to know, compared to 69% four years ago" (p. 1). This study reveals how aware people are of the stigma associated with issues like depression. The assumption that people who deal with mental illness are abnormal or diseased may cause people to struggle in silence with these issues (Holmes, 1998). In fact, Corrigan (1998) has found that:

Persons who hide their mental health experience from the public suffer a private shame; persons who have been publicly labeled as mentally ill suffer societal scorn; and society itself suffers from fear and misinformation regarding mental illness based on stigma and myth. (p. 201)

When we look at excerpts from some of the interviewees in my study, we begin to see how they too were influenced by assumptions of who it is that suffers from a mental health issue such as depression. Anastasia spoke in depth about how she struggled with the label of being diagnosed with postpartum depression:

I didn't understand what postpartum depression was when I first was hit with it. It was my doctor who said, "You might have a little bit of postpartum depression because you're showing the symptoms." O.K., well what is postpartum depression? Well, he's not going to have the time to sit there and so I looked up postpartum depression on the computer. I typed it in and got a list of books. It totally um...you know, *justified* what I was going through in terms of...what I was feeling.

The doctor's diagnosis seemed to give Anastasia a framework for what she was experiencing, however the symptoms associated with this disorder seemed to prevent her from seeking help. In the next excerpt, Anastasia talks about how reading other women's stories about postpartum depression makes her unsure that she is suffering from it:

You know, it's hard to relate to women who don't have the same background as you or who don't have the same experiences, so you just think, "Oh, it's her." So I didn't feel that maybe I was going through postpartum depression. Because the stories were kind of *foreign*...I don't care how depressed I am I'm getting up. Do you know what I mean?...So it kind of made me feel like, "No, these girls are going through way far worse things than I am." Then I realized that part of what they were going through was called *postpartum psychosis* which is the absolute extreme – like...you become *psychotic*. I mean, I could still function.

In comparing herself to other women who have talked about postpartum depression, Anastasia begins to struggle with a label that would have her in the same category of one who is "psychotic." This struggle becomes more evident when Anastasia talks about seeking help and not wanting to be labeled as diseased:

I avoided that route...I avoided therapy. (*Were you worried about people knowing and judging you?*) Exactly, judgments. See, because a psychiatrist – you automatically associate it with...*crazy* or *insane* or medications, like anti-depressants and stuff like that. And that's all stigmatized - I'll give you an example. Like, I know that the brain is an organ like the heart. When our heart is sick, we



take medication. Why isn't *that* stigmatized? "I'm on heart medication." "Oh, you're on heart medication? Oh, I'm glad that you're doing well on it. I'm glad you're O.K." I'm on brain medication? I'm on anti-depressants? I'm on Prozac? All of a sudden, stigmatization, you know?"

For Anastasia, it seems that the label of having a recognized disorder is both liberating and confining at the same time. By having her doctor diagnose her with postpartum depression, it seemed to validate the issues that she was struggling with, however it is the very acceptance of that label that keeps her from getting help from a therapist. It is clear that she is influenced by the normative discourse in our society that people who receive treatment or counseling for depression are looked at as "crazy" or "insane." Anastasia feels confined by the label because she sees few alternatives available to deal with the disorder. In concluding our discussion, Anastasia talks about how reading self-help books helped her to challenge the fear of being stigmatized:

You know, I can tell you that now – because I've struggled a little bit with depression and read those books – I'm more comfortable today going to a psychiatrist than I would have been 3 years ago. (O.K.) So it even helped me that way...self-help books. (*Right. The books helped you to...?*) To take some of the stigma off of it...yes.

Anastasia's example shows us how relying on normative views of what a depressed person looks like (that is, "crazy") can be problematic as it limits our options for how we can deal with our problems. To complicate matters is a normative view in our society that mental illness is a disease and therefore should be kept private. The medicalization of post-childbirth experiences dictate that we should seek professional help and the stigma associated with seeking therapy prevents us from doing so. In Anastasia's case, the only way to resolve

this was to read self-help books in order to seek help for what she was going through. The books that she read helped her to disrupt the effects of normative discourse as she was able to find books that made her feel less stigmatized. I will now continue by discussing the effects of feeling stigmatized and silenced when I discuss how Phoebe dealt with her issues of depression and alcoholism.

### Depression and Alcoholism

In order to attend to how participants were influenced by normative discourses about mental health, it was important to listen to what was said as well as what was *not* said in the interviews. It was within the first few minutes of my interview with Phoebe that I noticed the degree of discomfort she felt when recounting how she first came to read self-help books:

Um, well I think with the depression, I didn't talk to anybody about it. I was more...(pause)...you know, I wanted to read myself and figure it out. Um...(pause)...I needed information about it, you know just what I could do on my own to improve how I felt. I...(pause)...didn't want to have to go and ask anybody.

Throughout the interview, it was the slow and sometimes, disjointed responses that seemed to illustrate the struggle Phoebe had gone through in recognizing that she had issues that needed to be dealt with:

*(You were drinking and you...thought that you had a problem?)*  
 Yeah...(giggles)...*(So were you drinking while you were reading and trying to – )*Yup...(giggles)...*(O.K., no that's fine. The reason why I'm asking is because I really want to understand how the book helped you. So this is a perfect example with the drinking if you don't mind – if it's O.K. for you to talk about it?)* Yeah, it's O.K.  
*(You were drinking and reading...were there times when, what? You read something and it made you think twice about drinking?)*  
 Um...(pause)...I don't know, it's kind of hard to explain. I mean, I know while I was reading these books that I *had* a problem. I mean...(long pause)...but it was just a matter of actually admitting

it. Even though I knew it, I wouldn't actually – *(Do you think the books helped you admit it?)* I think so.

I found myself continually checking in with Phoebe to make sure that she was comfortable talking about the struggles she had faced and although she told me that the problems were long resolved issues for her, she seemed to be embarrassed when recounting her experiences. This was illustrated by the interchange of giggling and pauses throughout our interview. I attribute these awkward moments to normative discourse in our society of not openly discussing alcohol abuse and mental illness in public due to feeling stigmatized. After what seemed to be a lengthy time, I finally asked Phoebe directly why she kept her struggles a secret:

*(Did you ever hide any of your books before?)* Yeah, I have. *(Were you living at home also while you were reading them?)* Yeah, actually. My mom kind of knew that I had some of these books, but she didn't know why. *(Right. And so...since have you sort of talked about it?)* Yeah, eventually I mean...(pause)...everything kind of came out and I had to talk to my parents and...(pause)...my mom knew – she even told my counselor that I would probably know just as much as she did about alcoholism and depression because I had read so much about it. *(So um...why do you think you hid them?)* Yeah...I didn't want anybody to know. *(Actually, I've heard of that. Do you think it has to do with not wanting to be...labeled maybe?)* Yeah. *(Like do you think there's a problem with that – like being labeled as depressed?)* Yeah...I think so. *(Can you talk a little bit about that?)* Um, before I got the help it was because I didn't want anyone to know that I was even drinking...that I might have a problem...(long pause)...*(So...some shame, maybe?)* Yeah.

Though reluctant to talk about it, Phoebe shared the difficulty she had in reaching out to others for help. Throughout the interview she emphasized the importance of not wanting anyone to know that she was struggling with depression and

alcohol abuse. When I asked what the predominant messages are in the self-help books that she reads, Phoebe responded by saying:

Yeah...a lot of it is how to change your thinking about things, even getting help is a big message too. A lot of them say that you can't always do it on your own and...(pause)...with the depression and alcoholism...what I really used from the books was the message to actually go for help, you know?

For Phoebe, reading self-help books contributed to her decision to get counseling and end the silence that she faced at home. Although Phoebe did not discuss it directly, we can see how the shame that she felt may have also been a result of feeling stigmatized within her home as her problems with alcohol and depression seemed to be a family secret. Her mother knew about it but no one talked about what was happening. Feeling stigmatized may have also contributed to her reluctance to seek help, and may explain how difficult the process was for her to break the silence regarding the issues she was facing. For Phoebe, it seems that self-help books prompted her to reach out for help.

In a society where "optimum" mental health is paramount, it is easy to see why people choose to cope with things such as depression and alcoholism in silence. In Anastasia's case, the assumption of who suffers from postpartum depression limited her options of where to seek help because she felt stigmatized that she might be suffering from a mental illness. In Phoebe's case, silence and shame associated with depression and alcoholism stopped her from disclosing to her family the issues that she was facing. Normative discourse that defines our problems as disease entities may limit our choices of how to recover from them.

If we feel stigmatized, this can lead to feelings of shame or marginalization that can also lead to feeling silenced and not seeking help.

In Chapter Four, I looked at the active ways that women read self-help books in order to define areas in their lives that they were struggling with. By looking at how normative discourses of who suffers from a mental illness, we can begin to see how self-help books were used by some of the participants because of a lack of other alternatives for seeking help. More importantly, self-help books helped to disrupt the effects of normative discourse as they lessened Anastasia's perception of how stigmatizing depression is and they helped Phoebe to break the silence of dealing with depression and alcoholism. It may be through the publication of self-help books that debilitating effects of stigma and shame can be challenged. Unless we continue to address these issues associated with mental health in our society, some women will continue to struggle in silence. I will now turn to the normative discourses of abuse and how it can limit our view of what constitutes as abuse.

### Abuse

Although feminists have made important gains in furthering our understanding of partner abuse, societal myths still abound regarding what constitutes abuse (DeKeseredy & MacLeod, 1997) and who experiences it (Lachkar, 1998; Weitzman, 2000). Nancy who was in an emotionally and financially abusive relationship where she had little access to her partner's \$180,000 annual income, illustrated this when she told me about her difficulty in labeling her relationship as abusive:

I think the first one that was a turn-about for me was *The Verbally Abusive Relationship* by Patricia Evans. (*I see...and how did you come upon it?*) My Aunt in Florida – Florida and California, I know use it as a big tool in their abuse work....he would escalate whenever he wanted control. He would uh...you know, “oh, I’m going to commit suicide. You’re never going to see me again.” And of course, it did control me. (*Sure.*) Because I would cancel everything – if I was supposed to go to a movie with a girlfriend that night, I cancelled it because...he couldn’t look after the kids. And at the time, I didn’t realize that what he was actually doing was emotional abuse.

Nancy’s experience illustrates the normative discourse in our society that there must be physical abuse present in order to define a relationship as abusive. Verbal and emotional abuse are less apparent to people. The language to describe these other forms of abuse are relatively new in our vernacular (Health Canada, 2000), and thus we can begin to see how Nancy did not have the language to explain what was happening to her until she read about it. By finding books such as *The Verbally Abusive Relationship* by Patricia Evans (1996), Nancy discovered the language to help her understand the dynamics in her relationship. In other words, self-help books allowed for a wider definition of abuse.

Although Nancy had begun to see her relationship as abusive, she talked to me at length about how difficult it was for her to access services because she felt that they were not open to her because of her social status. She told me:

Another thing that really bothers me is as much as in lower incomes or different races, if there’s a problem, it’s available. The courses and programs I took...are not made aware to the middle and upper class people. Um, well...you wouldn’t think of going to Osborne House. (*O.K., I hadn’t thought about that.*) And unless you go through, for instance, family services...or uh...uh...what am I thinking? The - Legal Aid. (*Right, right.*) You are not made aware of these facilities and the programs. (*Do you think there’s an*

*assumption about people who are affluent?)* Yeah, you have an income over \$40, 000 therefore you don't need us. And maybe the assumption is too that, "Oh, they can go and pay for counseling." But I didn't have the extra money to pay for counseling at the end of it. And I don't think many women do. See if you're in a financially controlled relationship, you don't have control over the bankbooks, you don't have money put away...

Nancy illustrates how she struggles with normative discourse that financially affluent people don't have problems and if they do, they can afford to fix them. She felt that programs to help women in abusive relationships are geared towards lower-income people and do not take into account that if a relationship is financially abusive, no level of income will be helpful to the person who is being abused. It was by reading self-help books that she was able to eventually seek help at a women's shelter. Later in our interview when Nancy was comparing herself to another woman she met while utilizing services at a woman's shelter called Osborne House, she illuminated the degree to which she too depended on normative discourse based on class:

You know what the difference is? The difference is with her – and I'm not saying this criticizing – she's North End, raised with a welfare mom who raised the kids. A quarter Native...you know? And we identify this...that here I am from here and she's from here...*(stretching her arms in opposite directions)*...but we have so much in common here...*(bringing her arms back to the center)*. But the difference is that she looks at welfare and Legal Aid as an alternative to getting on your feet. My upbringing is not...(pause)...to – to – *(You're understanding of the social system is different?)* Completely different...you know? But it's cool...we talk about it. Like for her to say she's poor and has no money means something different when I say I have no money. I mean, the difference is that even when I have no money, I have friends and family in a heartbeat who would help me out.

The previous excerpt where Nancy talks about how hard it was for her to access services showed us how certain assumptions can be made toward

women of high socio-economic status (SES) which may impede them from getting services. This last excerpt shows us how a woman with a high SES also makes the assumption that women with little or no income can access services more readily than others. Interestingly enough, she assumes that there is less shame associated with asking for social assistance when one is already of a low economic status. She seemed to feel that in her upbringing as a white, middle-class woman, she was not allowed to ask for help from others. It is her perception of what it means to be privileged in our society that impedes her ability to ask for help from resources like a woman's shelter. Instead, she initially looks to self-help books in order to define dynamics in her life and it is only after she reads the books that she looks to other resources.

Nancy's example illustrates the extent to which she relied on normative discourse of what an abusive person looks like and what behavior constitutes as abuse. The normative assumptions that violence only occurs in lower-income homes and that physical abuse must be present in order to define a relationship as violent can create a climate where it is difficult for women who do not fit into this narrow category to seek help. Self-help books that offer marginalized feminist discourse regarding issues such as abuse can challenge prevailing discourses of abuse.

I will now turn to an analysis of gender roles to see how participants conformed to and resist messages in self-help books that describe what a healthy and normal woman is.



### Conceptions of a Healthy Woman

Normative discourses regarding what it means to deal with mental illness and to be in an abusive relationship have shaped the way that some of the participants in this study sought help. It was found that some self-help books challenge the dominant ways in which we view depression, alcoholism, and partner abuse. Some of these books even sought to offer other, marginalized discourses that allowed the participants to view their issues through a feminist lens. However, feminists have long described how aspects of femininity have been pathologized by the messages in self-help books (De Francisco & O'Connor, 1995; Jimenez & Rice 1990; Faludi, 1991). For example, Carol Tavris (1992) concluded that:

Many of the problems associated with women today can be considered signs of mental illness only in comparison to a male standard of what is healthy and normal. (p. 176)

According to Tavris, the definition of masculinity that is seen as healthy and normal includes self-reliance, saying no to the demands of others, independence, and being selfish without feeling guilty. This conflicts with traditional role requirements that women care for and take care of others. In order to address this criticism of self-help books, I will now look at how normative discourses about women and femininity can be reproduced in self-help books and how the participants both identified with and resisted those messages.

### Femininity as Problematic

Some of the women I interviewed talked about self-help books defining certain aspects of femininity as being problematic. They discussed how self-help

books encouraged women to abandon those aspects of femininity in favor of being more assertive and self-confident. Rania, who was working on issues of self-esteem after ending her marriage put it this way:

The message (in self-help books) is basically working on your own issues and standing up for yourself and not letting yourself be a victim or being used or...and a woman should be more assertive, strong, self-assured. And also to access your anger because a lot of women don't deal with anger because they're afraid to be on their own.

By reading self-help books, Rania identifies with the notion that the women possess a passive inclination that must be rejected in favor of becoming a strong, self-assured person who is able to use their anger. She is influenced by the normative assumption that women are passive. She attributes this to women's fear of being on their own. Another participant who discussed certain aspects of femininity as problematic is Jackie. She told me that:

Healthy means independence, self-respect...your own power, you know? As a woman, this is what you do – you're the caretaker. And you look after everybody else's needs first. And then if you have anything left, well then maybe you can look after your own...(laughs)...

The quote shows how Jackie identifies with the normative discourse in self-help books that a healthy person must be independent. From this, Jackie concludes that taking on the role of caretaker is problematic because it means you cannot look after your own health needs since you are preoccupied with the needs of others. This shows how women's care-giving roles have been reproduced in self-help books to look pathological as they impede women from looking after their own needs. A third and final example of how a healthy woman is

encouraged to be assertive and strong is relayed by Brenda. She told me that a healthy woman is defined in self-help books as:

Introspective. Um...she is quite autonomous. She's able to define for herself what she wants, what she needs – that was a big message. And the authors, I think they really speak to the fact that women are raised...to not really say what they mean and want, so I think a big message is to the reader is to develop that sense of – that you are worth being on this planet. But independent, a strong sense of – an ability to express yourself. I was struggling with what exactly I wanted and how to ask for it.

All of these women saw self-help books as looking at traditional aspects of femininity as problematic. In dealing with issues of self-esteem, they began to feel that a healthy woman must somehow become less involved in their relationships in order to embrace a role that is more independent and assertive. In some cases, this includes rejecting traditional aspects of femininity in favour for more traditional masculine traits. This does lend some validity to Tavis' (1992) research that concluded that self-help books promote a male standard of what is healthy and normal. It seems that some of the participants were partly influenced by normative discourses of what it means to be healthy. Often, being healthy meant rejecting some aspects of femininity such as caring for others. The final theme will look at conceptions of a healthy woman that values aspects of femininity.

#### Female-Centered View of Health

Some of the participants were influenced by self-help books that validated aspects of femininity. For them, defining what is healthy and normal included embracing women's lives and roles. As Barb told me:

(A healthy woman looks like) a goddess. According to the books I've read, she's capable of everything and anything...yeah...(pause)...and she has a huge presence.

So some books seem to challenge masculine norms of what it means to be healthy. In fact, other participants went further to explain how aspects of femininity such as caring and compassion are positive qualities that people should include in their lives. As Nancy said when describing the message in Robin Norwood's (1985) *Women Who Love Too Much*:

It bothers me because I don't know – loving too much isn't a bad quality...but you do have to have boundaries on it. But...there's still nothing wrong with the qualities that I have. Unless I learn to put the boundaries on them, I'm just going to gravitate negatives. And see, that's what I've had around me is just people who drained me all the time....because I'm so compassionate, loving, and caring – you know?

In the above quote, Nancy critically read the message in Robin Norwood's book and resisted the notion that qualities such as loving and caring should be looked at as negative. She was critical of a book that pathologizes women's caring roles.

Another person who resists normative messages of what it means to be healthy is Anita, who read books that look at health from a political standpoint. Anita delves into this when she discusses the messages written in self-help books by feminists such as bell hooks. According to Anita, a woman must overcome what she calls "historical pain" in order to become healthy. As she put it:

Because in-as-much as some women are at the top and they are plowing through...they still feel as though – as a woman sometimes the historical pain is there too. "Maybe I'm not – I've got to be trying harder, I've got to always be doing this thing better than a

man.” And it is the same thing with black people, they always feel like they’ve got to work harder or better than a white person in order to be valid. And so that um...you know, it’s a stress on you.

In Anita’s opinion, the messages in self-help books that talk about recovering from patriarchy and racism are the most valuable to her. She goes on to say:

I think the dominant thing in self-help books for me is that um...you know, your life is – you’re the master or mistress of your life. And you can take charge of your life; you have choices. Like before we’d think we didn’t have choices but there are choices and there are different parts that you can choose to take. I think that the main thing is to always...build your spirit so you can feel centered and you can stand on your two feet.

According to Anita then, a healthy woman is one who recognizes oppressing factors in her life and chooses to find strategies that allow her to become, as she puts it, “enlightened” despite these factors. This is another example of how some women have resisted normalizing discourses of what is healthy.

Defining what is healthy and normal is highly contextual. For some participants, notions of femininity were disparaged and a definition of what is healthy for a woman fell further in line with characteristics associated with masculinity. For other participants, notions of femininity were embraced and even defended in the wake of criticism that aspects of femininity such as love or compassion are pathological. One participant went even further to describe a concept of health that looks at recovering under patriarchy in order to become fully “enlightened.” By looking at how the participants spoke about the messages in self-help books that explain what is healthy and normal we see how self-help books can lead to empowerment but they can also resurface certain dominant assumptions of normalcy. The varying factor seems to lie in the hands of the

reader and the extent to which they chose books that do not rely on normative discourses, as well as the extent to which the reader was critical of the messages in the books that they read.

### Summary

Earlier I spoke at length about a process of empowerment where the participants took action over their lives by seeking information to help themselves. This Chapter has shown that normative, regulating ideologies in our society where people who suffer from depression or alcoholism are viewed as “diseased” have created a situation where they are reluctant to seek help. For the women I interviewed, stigma and shame associated with mental illness kept them from seeking help *initially*, but it was through reading self-help books that the stigma was somewhat alleviated. The private act of reading can bridge the gap between needing help and not being able to ask for it. A concrete example is how dominant culture defines partner abuse and how this can limit women’s ability to seek help. Normative discourse that defines abuse as occurring only when there is physical violence prevents those in emotionally and financially abusive relationships from recognizing that their relationship is in fact abusive. Marginalized discourse found in certain self-help books can allow people a broader understanding of what constitutes abuse.

By looking at how normative discourses about women and femininity are reproduced in self-help books it was revealed that there are still strong negative messages about women and gender issues that the participants I interviewed both accepted and tried to work against. It is the tension between relying on, as

well as resisting, normative discourses that shows us how we are still trying to negotiate the ways in which we seek help and try to heal ourselves in a society that seeks to regulate how are problems are defined and dealt with.

## Chapter 6: Conclusion and Discussion

This study provided a voice to women who face difficulties in their lives. It also allowed them the opportunity to challenge our notion of what a self-help book reader looks like and the issues that she may face. It allowed them to break the silence on issues such as depression, alcoholism, and abuse in relationships. By looking at the lives of 10 women I tried to gain an understanding of how and why women read self-help books.

At the outset of this study, I sought to disrupt the notion that women are complacent recipients of the content in self-help books. I did so in order to address criticism from feminist researchers such as DeFrancisco & O'Connor (1995) who dismissed self-help books as individualizing and pathologizing women's problems, as well as Jimenez & Rice (1990) who claimed that self-help books seek to oppress women because they reflect and reinforce dominant culture. Postmodern analysis is useful for disrupting the notion that authors of self-help books are wielding power over the women who read their books. What was found in this study was that self-help book reading is very complex. For the participants, the interplay between reader and text created a process of empowerment that began with personal issues only to evolve and include a social analysis of the problems with which they were dealing. Rather than blaming themselves for the issues that they faced, many of the participants were able to move outside of the self and attribute their difficulties to patriarchal systems that oppress women. Further, the participants that I interviewed were characterized by a high degree of self-reliance and it was through reading self-



help books that many of the women began to define dynamics in their lives. This finding directly challenges previous assumptions by some feminist researchers regarding the impact of self-help books for the women who read them. This research has broadened the ways in which we consider agency and empowerment. It is through the interaction of reader and text that the women in this study were able to empower themselves.

Overall, I argue that self-help books can provide the impetus for feminist consciousness-raising because self-help authors have the potential to talk about and name issues with which women deal. This is especially useful as many women struggle to find the language to accurately describe and validate the issues that they face.

In comparing my research to that conducted by Wendy Simonds (1991), she concluded that self-help books provide validation and comfort for the reader but the messages were offered as "quick fix" solutions and oversimplified the issues that women face. In contrast to these findings, I discovered that many of the books that the interviewees read were not the type that offered quick fix solutions, rather the readers went through a lengthy process of self-reflection in order to process the messages in the books. Some of the participants in this study empowered themselves by taking control of their lives and chose when and how they would work on issues.

In comparing my research to that of Debra Grodin (1995), she concluded that readers are drawn to self-help books for validation of their perceptions. My research findings were similar as the women I interviewed also found that self-

help books can be used to define issues in their lives. The ability to define these issues provided a sense of comfort because they began to feel that they were not alone in their struggles. Where our similarities end is the extent to which the participants in my study felt the ability to define the issues that they were facing caused them to see their problems as political. Although Grodin (1995) spoke about how women were active in their interpretation of the messages in self-help books, their process of empowerment seemed to remain at the personal level. Some of the participants that I interviewed moved beyond personal empowerment to include an understanding of interrelational empowerment. This concept included sharing information with other women and it was during this shift from individual to interrelational empowerment that feminism began to burgeon and grow for those participants.

Although I was primarily interested in looking at the impact of self-help books, including the creative and empowering ways that the participants used them, I was also interested in the impact of normative discourses and how they shaped the participants' choice to read self-help books. It was here that I found that self-help books act as a way to conquer the privatization that is associated with issues such as depression, alcoholism, and abuse. Some of the women I interviewed did not seek conventional help such as counseling because of the stigma associated with being labeled as depressed or alcoholic. The fear of being labeled as "diseased" caused some women to struggle in silence and not disclose to their friends or family members that they were dealing with a mental health issue. By reading self-help books, some of those same participants who

initially felt stigmatized were later able to access services such as self-help groups and counseling. This was because the books themselves challenged normative discourse related to the problems that they faced.

Finally, I wanted to explore the extent to which self-help books are selling women a narrow vision of what is normal and healthy in our society. Some of the women I interviewed talked about self-help books defining certain aspects of femininity such as interdependence and caring as being problematic. They discussed how self-help books encouraged women to abandon those aspects of femininity in favor of being more assertive and self-confident. A surprising finding was the extent to which the participants were *also* able to resist this narrow definition of health in favor of a more female-centered view. By doing this, some participants were able to reject and read against notions that aspects of femininity should be seen as pathological.

#### Areas for Further Study

Although this thesis has provided some initial opportunities for study, there remains a need for additional research about women who read and use self-help. There is a need to further address the ways in which women actively interpret the messages in self-help books. A goal of this research was to look at how a woman's standpoint frames her understanding of self-help books. Although the women I interviewed were forthcoming in disclosing the various issues that they have faced in their lives, this research focused less on the ways in which their particular standpoint, other than their gender, has influenced their understanding of self-help books. In the future, perhaps multiple in-depth interviews would be a

better method in order to get a more fulsome understanding of how the material conditions of a woman's life frames her understanding of self-help books. By conducting multiple interviews, this would give a participant the opportunity to reflect on the interview questions and this would help to further reveal the process of using self-help. This may lead to a better understanding of how a woman's identity shapes her self-help reading practices. In addition, it would be interesting to explore how in reading a self-help book of the interviewee's choice prior to the interview, the researcher can gain a further understanding of the interaction between reader and text. That is, both the researcher and participant arrive at the interview having read the same book and how this could facilitate a more in-depth understanding of how the reader utilizes self-help books in their life.

This research concluded that conceptions of what a healthy woman is depends on the books that are chosen and the extent to which a woman reads the messages in the books critically. In order to better understand how women understand messages in self-help books regarding what a healthy woman is and how they position themselves based on the messages, a more systematic approach might be beneficial. A suggestion would be to give a copy of the same book to a group of women such as Norwood's (1985) *Women Who Love Too Much* and to ask them the ways in which women are presented. In addition, they could be asked how they see themselves in relation to patriarchal discourse. A second book could follow such as bell hooks' (1993) *Sisters of the Yam*. The same set of questions could be asked. This type of research may better answer

the extent to which the choice of books influences how a participant looks at what a healthy woman is. In this example, Norwood's book does not include a feminist analysis of conceptions of health, whereas hooks' book does.

This research was also interested in the connection between the message in self-help books and feminist praxis. A future study could look solely at this factor by systematically looking at how women use books for them selves as well as in relation to others. One on one interviews are a method that could further explore this particular area of interest.

### Limitations of the Study

It is important to recognize that the results of this study are not meant to be generalizable. There are several limitations of this sample such as my inability to recruit participants from a larger variety of ethnic and racial groups as I had originally intended. Another limitation of this sample was the extent to which women of varying ability, and recent immigrants to Canada were not included in this research. I also did not recruit women from rural centers; all of the participants lived in Winnipeg. However, this study can still be seen as an initial look at how *some* women use and understand self-help books in their lives.

As I reflect on some of the limitations this research, it is important to address areas that I would improve upon in the future. Upon looking at some of the interview transcripts, the question occurred to me whether I had a set of "correct" answers in my mind that I was looking for from the participants and whether I had lead the participants to answer in a particular way. Although I am uncertain that this was the case, I have noticed some instances where I could

have asked more open-ended questions in order to ensure the answers were not being influenced by me. In the future, I would be more cognizant of this fact and leave more room for silence and pondering of my questions by the interviewee.

### A Message to Feminists, Authors of Self-Help Books, and Their Readers

This research has illustrated the enormous barrier between our private and public lives and how this split continues to allow women to deal with their problems in silence for fear of being stigmatized. This study shows that because self-help books have the ability to reach mass audiences, there is an equal potential for self-help authors to *reproduce* normative assumptions of various issues that pertain to women as well as to *resist and challenge* these normative assumptions. This is a call to feminist authors to write self-help books that challenge and debunk myths that are associated with women's "private" lives. By following in the tradition of authors such as bell hooks, we can create feminist texts that challenge mainstream standards of "normalcy" while at the same time reaching larger audiences.

The participants in this study have shown us that there is a need for books that use transparency and self-reflection, and the books themselves should encourage self-reflection. Self-help authors should also make themselves available for feedback and criticism. This will build validity in the author's text in order to make sure that their observances "ring true" to those who choose to read their books. Finally, to those who read self-help books, I would like to encourage them to continue reading critically if they have been, and to those who haven't, perhaps this study has provided the impetus for them to do so now. Critical

reading can include “asking questions” of the text in self-help books such as, who is the author? From what perspective are they writing? Are there other ways to account for their findings?

### Conclusion

This study provided women the forum to share their stories of how reading self-help books helped them to deal with the issues with which they were struggling. By doing so, we begin a process where issues that were previously kept silent become public. In giving voice to our struggles we challenge existing attitudes toward mental illness, abuse, and alcoholism specifically, and women's health in general. By showing how the participants resisted standards of health that disparaged aspects of femininity, we disrupt the notion that health is a fixed concept. This study has provided a small glimpse into the complex and varied ways that women read self-help books in order to understand health and what it means to be normal in our society. In doing this study, I have begun to understand how a concept of health must include the dismantling of normalizing discourses that view women as pathological in favour for a view of health that can only be accomplished by challenging conditions of patriarchy.

In closing, this study has provided a snapshot of the creative and empowering ways that women seek to understand issues in their lives by reading self-help books. The women I interviewed have taught me that it is a challenge to attain lives that are characterized by fulfillment and contentment without falling into the trap of normative discourse. The women I interviewed were trying to embrace a new type of social identity. These women, like most women, struggle

because we are all trying to do more than “just get by.” For the participants of this study, self-help books became a way for them to find a better path, to exercise their own agency and for some, to facilitate this process for other women. This thesis has provided a starting point for challenging normative assumptions of health and normalcy for women in our society. It is my hope that the information in this thesis is shared by feminist researchers, authors of self-help books, service providers, and most importantly, the readers of self-help books. I hope to share this information by sending a final report of these research findings to the participants in this study who are interested in receiving a copy. In addition, I hope to share the findings in this research to other readers of self-help books and service providers by submitting an article based on this research to various community newsletters. It is by hearing the voices of women who read self-help books that we can learn important ways to create social change.



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## Appendix A - Interview Guide and Background Questionnaire

### Part 1

Characteristics of self-help book reading:

1. How long have you been reading self-help books?  
How many have you read?  
How often do you read them?
2. Do you remember what circumstances led you to read a self-help book in the first place?
3. Can you tell me about the process of selecting a book that you will read?  
How important is the packaging? Do you buy them or borrow them from the library or from friends? Do you read the whole book or parts of the book?
4. What did you think you would find in self-help books? What were you hoping you would accomplish by reading the book?
5. What topics do the self-help books that you read address?

### Part 2

How self-help books are understood by an individual:

1. Was there one book in particular that stands out for you? In what ways did that book impact your life?
2. Do you feel that your life has changed as a result of reading self-help books?
3. What are some aspects of self-help books which you enjoy? What are some aspects that disappoint you?
4. Do you think these books are directed towards certain women?
5. What about your background - do you feel that these books are directed towards you? Do they always speak to your experiences?
6. What do you think the predominant messages are in self-help books?  
How do self-help books talk about what a healthy woman looks like?

### Part 3

How self-help books are understood in the larger social context:

1. Some critics have said that all self-help books do is blame women, what do you think about those claims?
2. Do you discuss what you read with others? If yes, with whom?
3. Do you recommend books to others? Do you lend your books to others?
4. Why do you think self-help books are particularly appealing at this time?

### Part 4

#### Debriefing

1. Is there anything else you would like to tell me that you think would help me understand self-help book reading?
2. Do you have any questions about this research?

\*\*\*End by thanking her for her participation and offer her a copy of the final report. Give her a copy of resources and services sheet if she wants them\*\*\*

**Background Information (Check one)****Age:**

Under 18 \_\_\_\_\_ 18-24 \_\_\_\_\_ 25-34 \_\_\_\_\_  
35-44 \_\_\_\_\_ 45-54 \_\_\_\_\_ Over 55 \_\_\_\_\_

**Racial/Ethnic Identity:**

Asian \_\_\_\_\_ Black \_\_\_\_\_ First Nations \_\_\_\_\_ Hispanic \_\_\_\_\_  
Middle Eastern \_\_\_\_\_ White \_\_\_\_\_ Other (please specify) \_\_\_\_\_

**Religious Identification:**

Christian \_\_\_\_\_ Jewish \_\_\_\_\_ Muslim \_\_\_\_\_ None \_\_\_\_\_  
Other (please specify) \_\_\_\_\_

**Sexuality:**

Heterosexual \_\_\_\_\_ Lesbian/Gay \_\_\_\_\_ Bi-sexual \_\_\_\_\_  
Other (please specify) \_\_\_\_\_

**Education Level:**

High School \_\_\_\_\_ Some Post-Secondary \_\_\_\_\_  
Post-Secondary/College Degree \_\_\_\_\_ Graduate Degree \_\_\_\_\_  
Occupation (please specify): \_\_\_\_\_

**Income (Yearly):**

Under \$10,000 \_\_\_\_\_ \$10,000 - \$20,000 \_\_\_\_\_ \$20,000 - \$30,000 \_\_\_\_\_  
\$30,000 - \$40,000 \_\_\_\_\_ \$40,000 - \$50,000 \_\_\_\_\_ Over \$50,000 \_\_\_\_\_



## Appendix B - Text for Poster

**ARE YOU A WOMAN WHO READS SELF-HELP BOOKS?**

**Self-help books** are defined as any books which offer advice on topics such as self-improvement, self-esteem, psychological well-being, improving and managing relationships (straight, gay, bisexual), addictions, and recovery.

Are your experiences reflected in these books?

Why do you read them?

How do you read them?

I am a Master's student at the University of Manitoba who is conducting interviews with women who read self-help books. If you would like to talk about your experiences reading self-help books, please call to find out more information or to set up an interview at your convenience. All information will be kept confidential.

**Call Vycki at: 949-444-4444 (confidential voice mail)**

**Thank you for your help.**

## Appendix C - Consent form for Interviews:

**Project title:** Women, Self-Help Books, and Popular Culture

**Principal Investigator:** Vycki Anastasiadis

I am conducting research in the area of women, self-help books, and popular culture. Today, I would like to interview you to find out more about your experiences with self-help books. The questions will be fairly personal. I will be asking about the characteristics of your self-help book reading, how you use and understand self-help books, and what you think self-help book reading means for women in our society. I would also like to ask you a few questions that pertain to your age, gender, race, and sexuality and how this relates to your understanding of self-help books. This information will be kept strictly confidential. At any time you can withdraw from the study or decline to respond to one of the questions without prejudice or consequence. You will not be compensated for your participation in the study, although, if you choose, a final report will be provided to you. Reference to your answers will be made in the reporting of my data as part of the requirements for my Master's thesis. Any identifying features will be removed; therefore, your anonymity will be assured. The interview will be tape recorded. The tapes will be kept and stored at my office at the University of Manitoba. I will be the only one to have access to them. I will destroy the taped records at the completion of this study. At the end of the interview, there will be time to answer any of your questions as well as provide resources for you, should you need them.

This study has been approved by the Faculty of Arts Ethics Review Committee, and any complaint regarding a procedure may be reported to the Dean of Arts (474 7321) for referral to the Ethics Committee.

I have understood the purpose of this research and I agree to participate in the interview. I agree to sign and date this form.

signature

date

witness signature

## Appendix D - Resources & Services in Winnipeg

### **Emergency**

**Toll Free Province Wide 24hr. Crisis Line**

**Klinic, 24hr. Crisis Line**

**Osborne House, 24 hr. Crisis Line**

### **Addictions Foundation of Manitoba**

### **Al-Anon/Alateen**

### **Fort Garry Women's Resource Centre**

1088 Pembina Hwy., Winnipeg, Mb., R3T 1Z9

### **Ikwe Widdjiitiwin Inc.**

Box 1956, Winnipeg, Mb., R3C 2X4

### **Klinic Community Health Centre**

870 Portage Ave., Winnipeg, Mb., R2W 4E4

### **Osborne House**

P.O. Box 397, Winnipeg, Mb., R3C 2H6

### **Women's Health Clinic**

3<sup>rd</sup> Floor, 419 Graham Ave., Winnipeg Mb., R3C 0M3

### **Winnipeg Gay & Lesbian Resource Centre**

1 - 222 Osborne St. S. Mail: Box 1661,  
Winnipeg, Mb., R3C 2Z6

## **Outside of Winnipeg**

### **Manitoba Association of Women's Shelters**

Box 337, Selkirk Mb., R1A 2B3