

# **Self-Help Books and the Quest for Self-Control in the United States 1950-2000**

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## Abstract (ii)

The increasing popularity of self-help books is an indicator of the modern American quest to maximize personal happiness through a process of self-discovery. Self-help books – non-fiction books that offer advice for behavior modification and make explicit promises for positive change – have doubled as a percentage of all book titles since the 1970s. This dissertation explores the demographic profile of self-help readers, the marketing and advertising strategies of the self-help industry and the formula of a self-help bestseller. In addition, this research uses original time-series data to track changes in the production of self-help titles, and compares fluctuations in title output with general social attitudes of the population.

Self-help books are a response to a real and genuine hunger for psychological understanding and self-improvement and are part of the larger market of advice media. Readers buy self-help books seeking self-control – both as a good-faith attempt to increase their self-control and to elicit a temporary sensation that, in fact, the first step toward self-control has already been taken. This dissertation argues that the boom in self-help book publishing since the 1970s may be attributed to an increased desire for

control as a response to feelings of alienation and anomia. Because a crucial aspect of alienation and anomia is lack of control, and since self-help books are manuals of self-control, the boom in self-help book publishing may be seen as a manifestation of the weakening sense of self-control in America and the quest by some to regain it.

There are two main arguments: first, that people read more self-help books now than ever before; and second, that the self-help publishing industry has boomed as a response to an increasing quest for self-control in America since the 1970s.

### *Methodology*

This is a social history of the self-help publishing industry in America since 1950. It combines theoretical and empirical research under the paradigm of historical inquiry. It focuses on the United States as the epicenter of the self-help boom: While self-help books are sold worldwide, and, in fact, are becoming increasingly popular in countries like Great Britain and Australia, most international bestsellers are American imports.

Previous research on self-help books has come from a variety of different fields, including history, sociology, psychology and economics, and this dissertation draws from the findings of all these fields to support the validity of the arguments presented. In addition to reading and analyzing the texts of bestselling self-help books, as previous researchers have done, this dissertation goes a step further to explore the mode of production. By using quantitative methods in conjunction with primary and secondary textual analysis, this dissertation suggests an answer to the question many social critics have asked: Why has the self-help publishing industry risen to such prominence in

America? This research uses statistical time-series data analysis to track changes in the production of self-help books, the attitudes about self-help books and the general social attitudes of the population. Using demographic, sales and social survey data, in addition to personal interviews and the texts themselves, this dissertation explores the self-help industry broadly since 1950 and with more detail since the 1970s. Empirical information is less abundant in the earlier period.

### *Summary of Chapters and Key Findings*

The first part analyzes the industry itself: Chapter One traces the history of twentieth-century American self-help movements from religious to pragmatic advice texts, and from inner-directed recovery books to books that demand personal action. This chapter explores the whole century, with greater emphasis on the latter half, which will be the focus area of the rest of the dissertation. Chapter Two presents demographic and psychographic data on who reads self-help books, demonstrating the most common self-help reader is a well-educated, middle-class American in his or her late 30s or early 40s, who is more self-confident, sophisticated and open to innovation than the average American. People in this demographic group are in control of their lives already, it would seem, so why do they seek out self-help books? The demographic data in this chapter supports the later argument that those who have self-control understand its value and seek more of it. Chapter Three reviews the suppliers of advice and the inner workings of the publishing industry, and presents research on the efficacy of the advice self-help books sell. Self-help books are written and advertised to convince

readers that change is possible – with the right guide. Self-help authors sell their messages based on their fame and credentials, and their tools of ‘proof’ are rhetoric and promises. Despite the lack of peer reviewed studies or efficacy data for techniques advocated by most self-help authors, psychologists are generally supportive of the books, at least as a first step toward behavior change. Chapter Four is a content analysis of the number-one bestselling self-help book each year since 1950, showing that with formulaic precision, self-help authors, agents and publishers have packaged sympathetic anecdotes, religious connections and first-person accounts with prescriptive advice. Using rhetoric and repetition, bestselling self-help books ask the reader to make two critical assumptions: that he or she needs to change, and the advice in the latest self-help book will provide a competitive advantage to improve the chances of successful change.

Linking the two primary sections of the dissertation, Chapter Five presents statistical data to support both the argument that the self-help industry has grown and the argument that this growth may be attributed to a quest for self-control. Using the Bowker *Subject Guide to Books in Print*, the General Social Survey and several other sources, this chapter provides the quantitative underpinnings for the social and cultural arguments of this dissertation. Self-help books have increased dramatically as a percentage of all book titles since the 1970s. At the beginning of the boom in 1973, self-help titles accounted for approximately 1.1 percent of all titles in print. By 2000, the number of self-help titles in print had more than doubled, making up approximately 2.4 percent of all books.

The second part explores the explanations for the industry’s success: Chapter Six presents a review of previous explanations for the rise of self-help culture, including materialism, individualism, the rise of a therapeutic culture and both

feminist and Marxist readings of self-help literature. Chapter Seven argues that the purchase of a self-help book reveals a preference for self-control, but that self-help books are not the most effective tools to increase self-control because they instruct the reader to make private, and thus weak, commitments to change. Chapter Eight combines the findings of original econometric research with previous cultural critiques to argue that the boom in self-help book publishing since the 1970s may be attributed to an increased desire for control as a response to feelings of alienation and anomia.

Americans are the most optimistic nation in the world, and the modern boom in self-help titles is indicative of this optimism. Purchasing a self-help book reveals a preference for self-control, and the rise in production of self-help titles since the 1970s is a reflection of Americans' increasing interest in pursuing a hopeful future through personal control.