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SELF-HELP BOOKS AND THE PURSUIT OF A HAPPY IDENTITY

This article is a longer version of the discussion of self-help books from the book *Media, Gender and Identity: An Introduction* by David Gauntlett (2002). For information about the book, and additional material, see <http://www.theoryhead.com/gender>

Originally this was a whole chapter. That's what you have here. It was subsequently compressed to just a few pages (which is what now appears in the book) because there wasn't enough room in the book for all of the things that I wanted to discuss.

If you want to reference this piece, I suggest you use the following:

Gauntlett, David (2002), 'Self-Help Books and the Pursuit of a Happy Identity', extended version of material from *Media, Gender and Identity: An Introduction* (Routledge), posted at <http://www.theoryhead.com/gender>.

In the previous chapters on social theorists Anthony Giddens and Michel Foucault, and the 'queer theory' approach to identity pioneered by Judith Butler, we saw the emergence of an approach to personal identities which suggests that in modern societies, individuals feel relatively unconstrained by traditional views of their place in life, and carve out new roles for themselves instead. As a person grows and develops, they typically continue to work upon their sense of 'self' – their self-identity – and gradually modify their attitudes and self-expression to accommodate a mix of social expectations and also, importantly, *what they themselves are most comfortable with*.

It is anticipated that this role freedom will become even greater in the future. The media, as we've said before, gives us ideas about gender, and relationships, and ways of living. These ideas come over in TV and movies, as we've discussed above, and somewhat more clearly in magazines and pop music, which are discussed in later chapters. The most explicit carriers of advice about gender, lifestyle and relationships, though, are self-help books – also known as 'popular psychology' and in some cases 'recovery' texts – which are the focus of this chapter.

It may not be obvious why we'd be looking at self-help books here. They may be popular as non-fiction books go – even a 'publishing phenomenon' – but a lot of people don't read them. If they count as 'popular mass media' at all, they are on the margins. But there are two solid justifications for studying self-help texts:

1. The ideas in self-help books 'trickle down' into popular culture. Note the rise of 'therapy speak' in movies as diverse as *The Mexican* and *HeartBreakers*, as well as obvious places like *Analyse This* and any Woody Allen film. When Bette Midler says in *What Women Want* that men are from Mars, we all know what she's talking about. In TV too, from the relationship-obsessed women in *Ally McBeal* to the trying-to-be-tough guys in *NYPD Blue* and obviously *The Sopranos*, the language of therapy and self-help can't be avoided. Women's magazines, in particular, both dissipate and assume a working knowledge of today's self-help clichés. And Elayne Rapping

(1996) observes that there are numerous successful TV shows, in the mould of *Oprah* in the US and *Tricia* in the UK, which have a very strong relationship with self-help publishing, using self-help authors as star experts, and directing viewers to their books for solutions.

2. As well as noting that ideas from self-help books go forth into everyday culture, we can assume that the approach of the books – and the most successful ones in particular – is in itself a *reflection* of the changes in society and the needs of (some) readers. Giddens has described self-help books as ‘a kind of on-the-ground literature of our reflexive engagement with our everyday lives’ (Giddens & Pierson, 1998: 141), and whilst we should be cautious about reading them as accounts of a universal reality, these popular publications must tell us something about life today.

The books aimed specifically at either women or men are of additional interest because they describe aspirational but reasonably realistic (as opposed to utopian) models of how we might expect women and men to present themselves in today’s society. Where academic texts on feminism or masculinities fail to actually assert how women and men should act in modern society, these books step in and spell it out – a role which they share, incidentally, with lifestyle magazines (see chapters 8–9).

Personal narratives and lifestyles

As we saw in chapter 5, Giddens (1991, 1992) argues that in modern societies, individuals have to construct a ‘narrative of the self’ – a personal biography and understanding of one’s own identity. Self-help books typically incorporate the same kind of idea, and I would argue that they typically suggest one of three challenges to the readers’ own narrative:

1. Many self-help books suggest ways in which readers can make their narrative of self more strong, coherent, and resilient, so that they can acquire a greater sense of personal power, confidence and self-direction. These are books for people who lack self-belief, and many of them are marketed at women.
2. Other self-help books are about *transforming* the self – rewriting the previous narrative, or ditching it altogether, in order to become a new, strong, positive person. These are books for people who want to overcome character flaws which prevent them from feeling fulfilled, and most of the titles for men fall into this category, as do many more for women.
3. A different kind of self-help book encourages the reader to amend their narrative of themselves and their view of others, so that the world ‘as it is’ can be accepted more happily. This approach is less common, but includes the super-successful *Men Are from Mars, Women Are from Venus*, which (as we will see) argues that men and women can get along really well as long as they accept that they are from totally different planets.

As we saw in chapter 6, Michel Foucault became interested in ‘techniques of the self’ and ‘the care of the self’ – questions of lifestyle which today are tackled by self-help books. In the introduction to *The History of Sexuality* volume two, *The Use of Pleasure*, Foucault helpfully proposes a methodology for this kind of study:

A history of the way individuals are urged to constitute themselves as subjects of moral conduct would be concerned with the models proposed for setting up and developing relationships with the self, for self-reflection, self-knowledge, self-examination, for the decipherment of the self by oneself,

for the transformations that one seeks to accomplish with oneself as object. This last is what might be called a history of 'ethics' and 'ascetics,' understood as a history of the forms of moral subjectivation and of the practices of the self that are meant to ensure it. (1992: 29).

Foucault, then, lends support to the idea that we can learn about our culture by looking at its self-help books; he was interested in the ways in which a society enabled or encouraged individuals to perceive or modify their self-identity. (More on this, including a chapter on Foucault, appears in *Media, Gender and Identity*).

Solutions to every problem

Before we begin the more in-depth examination of particular self-help guides, it's worth noting the *range* of titles available. When beginning to write about the meaning of womanhood or femininity today, for chapter one of this book, I thought it might be instructive to find a self-help book which described how one could be a happy woman fitting into modern society. But as I should have known, the books are rarely that general; instead there is an amazingly diverse market, with publications tailored to women in every possible situation. Literally thousands of new self-help titles are published every year (Stine, 1997), and during the 1990s sales of self-help, popular psychology and 'recovery' books grew to over 60 million per year in the USA (American Booksellers Association, 2001). Gaze at the shelves of any major bookstore and you will find lots of titles in all of these self-help sub-categories:

- Books on how to keep a man – my local Borders had a *huge* range of these – such as *How Not to Stay Single: 10 Steps to a Great Relationship* by Nita Tucker & Randi Moret (1996), *How to Seduce a Man and Keep Him Seduced* by Laurie Sue Brockway (1997), and *Why Marriages Succeed or Fail, and How You Can Make Yours Last* by John Gottman (1998).
- Books on tracking down a man in the first place – usually involving a cunning strategy – such as *Date Like a Man: What Men Know About Dating and Are Afraid You'll Find Out* by Myreah Moore (2001), *Get a Life Then Get a Man: A Single Woman's Guide* by Jennifer Bawden (2000), and the ambitious *How to Make Anyone Fall in Love with You* by Leil Lowndes (1997).
- Books for particular subgroups on finding a man, such as one for larger women, *Sexy at Any Size: A Real Woman's Guide to Dating and Romance* by Katie Arons (1999), one for older women, *Young at Heart: The Mature Woman's Guide to Finding and Keeping Romance* by Rachelle Zukerman (2001), and one for black women, *The Sistahs' Rules: Secrets for Meeting, Getting, and Keeping a Good Black Man* by Denene Millner (1997).
- Books on having better sex, such as *The Good Girl's Guide to Bad Girl Sex* by Barbara Keesling (2001), and *How to Be a Great Lover: Girlfriend-to-Girlfriend Totally Explicit Techniques That Will Blow His Mind* by Lou Paget (1999).
- Books on improving other aspects of your relationship, such as *Relationship Rescue: A Seven-Step Strategy for Reconnecting With Your Partner* by Phillip McGraw (2000), and the pragmatically-titled *How to Get Your Husband to Talk to You* by Cobb & Grigsby (2001).

- Books on getting out of bad relationships, from the famous *Women Who Love Too Much* by Robin Norwood (1986), to the newer and more assertively-titled *Ditch That Jerk: Dealing with Men who Hurt and Control Women* by Pamela Jayne (2000).
- Books for women starting a new life after divorce or separation, such as *When He Leaves: Choosing to Live, Love and Laugh Again* by West & Quinn (1998), and *Cutting Loose: Why Women Who End Their Marriages Do So Well* by Ashton Applewhite (1998).
- Books on how to be confident and positive, such as *The Courage to be Yourself: A Woman's Guide to Emotional Strength and Self-Esteem* by Sue Patton Thoele (2001), *You Go Girl!* by Kim Doren (2000), and *Kiss My Tiara: How To Rule the World as a Smartmouth Goddess* by Susan Jane Gilman (2001). The latter refuses many of the stereotypes of a women's self-help book, being 'designed to help women 18-35 catch a life, not a husband'. The author 'refuses to subscribe to the belief that thin thighs are more important than brains and chutzpah, and believes that if you have trouble asking for dessert you'll never be able to ask for a raise'. Good.
- Books on finding contentment through loving yourself, such as *Soul Satisfaction: Learning to be a Contented Woman* by Debra Evans (2001), *The Woman's Comfort Book: A Self Nurturing Guide for Restoring Balance in Your Life* by Jennifer Loudon (1992), and *The Heart of Loveliness: Celebrating the Joy of Being a Woman* by Emilie Barnes (2001).
- Books on renewing oneself in middle-age, such as *If Not Now, When?: Reclaiming Ourselves at Midlife* by Stephanie Marston (2001), and *Foxy Forever: How to Be Foxy at Fifty, Sexy at Sixty, and Fabulous Forever* by Noreen Wald (2000).
- Books on success at work, which typically offer some 'secrets' which can't be found elsewhere, such as *The New Success Rules for Women: 10 Surefire Strategies for Reaching Your Career Goals* by Susan L. Abrams (2000), *The Shadow King: The Invisible Force That Holds Women Back* by Sidra Stone (2000), and *Why Good Girls Don't Get Ahead But Gutsy Girls Do: 9 Secrets Every Working Woman Must Know* by Kate White (1996).

There are also many books on recovering from sexual abuse, depression, and various negative situations, illnesses and addictions. All specific niches are covered, including *How to Survive Your Boyfriend's Divorce* (Todd & Dormen, 2000) and *I'm Black and I'm Sober: The Timeless Story of a Woman's Journey Back to Sanity* (Allen, 1995).

And for the men...

Self-help books are often thought of as a 'women's' genre, and so the titles for men are less numerous and less diverse. Nevertheless, there are many self-help books for men mirroring each of the areas above, including:

- Books on finding and keeping a female partner, including *How to Meet the Right Woman: A Five-Step Strategy That Really Works* by Roger Ratcliff et al (1998), *Romance 101 for Men: Recipes for the Game of Love* by Randy J. Hartman (2000), and *How to Succeed with Women* by Ron Louis & David Copeland (1998).
- Books on sexual technique, including *Esquire's Things a Man Should Know about Sex* by Ted Allen (2001), *How to Give Her Absolute Pleasure: Totally Explicit Techniques Every Woman Wants Her Man to Know* by Lou Paget (2001), and *How*

to Satisfy a Woman Every Time – and Have Her Beg for More! by Naura Hayden (2001).

- Books on fatherhood, from *She's Had a Baby – And I'm Having a Meltdown: What Every New Father Needs to Know about Marriage, Sex, and Diapers* by James Douglas Barron (1999), to the more straightforward *101 Ways to Be a Special Dad* by Vicki Lansky (1993) and *Becoming Dad: Black Men and the Journey to Fatherhood* by Leonard Pitts (1999). There's even *Business Dad: How Good Businessmen Can Make Great Fathers (And Vice Versa)* by Tom Hirschfeld (2000).
- Books on fixing other male problems, such as *Beyond Anger – A Guide for Men: How to Free Yourself from the Grip of Anger and Get More Out of Life* by Thomas Harbin (2000), and *Men in Mid Life Crisis* by Jim Conway (1997).
- Books on intimacy and commitment, such as *She Wants a Ring – And I Don't Want to Change a Thing: How a Man Can Overcome His Fears of Commitment* by James Douglas Barron (2001) and *The Inner Male: Overcoming Roadblocks to Intimacy* by Herb Goldberg (1987).
- Numerous other books which don't say they are for men as such, but are packaged in an overtly 'masculine' style (and often have pictures of men on the cover), such as *Get Anyone to Do Anything* by David J. Lieberman (2001), *Maximum Achievement* by Brian Tracy (1995), and *Awaken the Giant Within* by Anthony Robbins (2001).

Some of the self-help books for men try to overcome the 'feminine' stereotype attached to personal emotional development by applying exaggeratedly macho methodologies to the task in hand. For example, *Being a Man in a Woman's World* by Dennis Neder (2000) applies 'tested, effective business techniques, marketing, planning and goal setting' to everyday relationships, adding a reassuring veneer of scientific method, corporate know-how and control freakery to the most touchy-feely of topics.

Transformations for all

Many self-help books are written for a general audience of both women and men who want to change their lives – not all of them address the supposedly distinct markets of 'men' and 'women'. This, of course, is a good thing, because the idea that women and men need quite different advice – whether on relationships, anxiety, assertiveness or business skills – contradicts the modern, independent 'anybody can be what they want to be' ethos of most self-help books anyway. Thus many self-help bestsellers do not claim to be for either sex in particular.

There remains an assumption amongst publishers that women are the primary market for self-help, however (Miller, 1997; Whitall, 2001), although things may be slowly changing. Harold Dawley, the founder of online self-help bookstore Selfhelpbooks.com, told me that:

Most of our book buyers are women. Women tend to be more sensitive and are always looking for explanations of the way they feel, and why the men in their life act the way they do. A growing number of men are turning to self-help books, though, and I suspect that many men have a look at the books that their female partners or friends buy... I do know on a first hand basis that the reading of self-help books can benefit men just as much as women, so I don't know why more women buy self-help books than men. (Email, 21 August 2001).

I asked Susan Radnich, the owner of *Anonymously Yours*, a self-help bookshop in San Jose, California (www.ay12steps.com), whether customers were predominantly female or male, and she replied that 'we have a wonderful balance of both men and women who shop here', although she noted that women were more likely to join various self-help *groups* with other women (email, 17 August 2001). She adds that her customers turn to self-help books because 'I think people – men and women – want to build a better life for themselves... for the most part that they are "sick and tired of being sick and tired!"'. Obie Brennan of Recovery Books in Florida (www.recoverybooks.com) gave a similar reply.

Ray Skinner of Eleventh Step Books, a self-help bookstore in Westmont, New Jersey (www.eleventhstep.com) similarly told me that their customer demographics are 'pretty well balanced between male and female'. He adds:

Most of our customers shop with a predetermined title or purpose in mind. An aspect of our customers is a desire to change and improve their relationship with the world around them by changing themselves... In our business the emergence of talk shows that address the issues of addiction, co-dependence, anxiety, over eating, and so forth has been one of the greatest factors in opening the customers mind to the possibility to seek personal change. More and more celebrities, and people in general, are talking openly about personal change. (Email, 19 August 2001)

Adam Khan, author of the book *Self-Help Stuff That Works*, told me:

I think more women read self-help books than men, but I think it's pretty even for my book. I'm basing that on who writes to me. I get a lot of email from readers of my book, and it is approximately the same amount of women as men. (Email, 20 August 2001).

On the popularity of self-help books, he says:

For most of us today, there are far more things we think we can change than there was even a hundred years ago. We are less likely to feel we are helpless pawns than we once were. All by itself, that would explain the rise in self-help books' popularity. It's not that people are more interested in changing now, it's that in the past we didn't think it was possible. And if you don't think becoming happier is possible, you're not likely to expend any time or money trying to make it happen. (Ibid).

Overall, then, we can see that an increasing number of men appear to be throwing off the shackles of tradition and taking a more direct, psychology-oriented approach to their problems, and that people in general feel a greater ability to transform the conditions of their everyday lives, and turn to self-help books for advice.

SELF-HELP BOOKS IN MORE DEPTH

In the following sections we will look at some successful self-help books, in order to consider their messages, starting with some titles for men, then some for women, and some for everybody. Two caveats, before we start:

(1) The books about men do not come first because I secretly see men as more important, but because discussion of masculinity as problematic is the more unusual and new narrative. We can then contrast that material with the advice given to women.

(2) With one or two exceptions, these books are consistently – you might even say relentlessly – heterosexual in focus. Some of them apologise for this and move on, others take heterosexuality for granted. Separate self-help books for gay people exist – such as *How to Be a Happy Homosexual* by Terry Sanderson (1999), *Reclaiming Your Life: the Gay Man's Guide to Love, Self-acceptance and Trust* by Rik Isensee (1997), the witty *Lesbianism Made Easy* by Helen Eisenbach (1998), and many other titles – but since I'm focusing on big-selling mainstream texts here, I'm afraid that I too must apologise and move on. Don't blame me, blame popular culture.

Tin men

Understanding the Tin Man: Why So Many Men Avoid Intimacy by William July II (2001) is for men who avoid committed intimate relationships, preferring superficial sexual encounters, and emotionally uncommunicative men in general. Like many of the books about men, the cover says that the book is also 'for women who want to help their men' – sensibly enough, because the very definition of a Tin Man is one who wouldn't dream of touching a self-help book.

The author begins the introduction by saying: 'Whenever the subject of relationships comes up, many women ask why so many men can connect physically or on the surface, but avoid deep levels of genuine intimacy' (2001: 1). He quickly dispels the idea that men cannot help but be that way. 'We're human beings with spirits first, then men. We are not only capable of achieving intimacy, we're equipped and designed for it' (ibid). Although the author feels that Tin Men are common, his view is not one of biological determinism – indeed, it's clearly social constructionist:

Our society has long supported the view that being a man means that we have to conquer and control; make lots of money; have lots of women. Men must also learn to ignore physical or psychological pain; we pretend we don't have emotions. We men are groomed to only experience half of ourselves. But just because we've been trained that way doesn't mean that it's right or the best pattern by which to conduct our lives. (Ibid).

Men can change, then; and change is needed:

We need a new paradigm for manhood. A new model of manhood for a new millennium. A manhood shaped by wholeness, balancing masculine with sensitivity and connection. A replacement for the obsolete idea of manhood that has left us out of balance, disconnected, incomplete, and in many cases, utterly self-destructive (2001: 2).

But July is careful not to scare off his readers, quickly adding:

While this is a major shift I'm talking about, I do want to emphasize an important fact: *This book is not a formula for the feminization of manhood*. I love being a man. I love being masculine. And I don't think women want men to be more feminine either. Just more human! (Ibid, emphasis in original).

Quite a lot of the book is spent describing 'Tin Man' symptoms and explaining why they do not lead to a fulfilled and happy life. Tin Men are not necessarily the most obvious, strutting macho men, July sensibly notes; they might just be ordinary men who work too much, at the expense of their relationships, or men who avoid taking care of their health, for example. Rather than being a distanced critic, July describes himself as a 'recovering Tin Man', having lived a former life of over-work, casual sex, and a false

sense of invincibility which led to serious illness. Unlike other self-help writers who have often spent their lives as middle-class professional therapists, July is a black man who worked as a police patrol officer in Houston, alongside other jobs, with lots of stress and a messy personal life, before turning the corner and becoming the self-assured 'bestselling author and motivational speaker' pictured on the book cover.

Part of Tin Man's problem is communication. But July doesn't just claim that men speak macho rubbish; his thesis is that the macho rubbish usually includes very clear messages which women can decode. Tin Man doesn't keep his lack of interest in commitment a big secret, but typically flags it up in clichéd phrases like 'I'm not ready for a relationship' and 'Let's not get too serious'. So, unlike some other self-help books, the diagnosis is not that men are bad at communicating *per se*; the point is that their lives are screwed up in a much deeper way, which needs to be fundamentally sorted out. (In a pleasing spirit of sexual equality, July devotes a chapter to 'Tin Women', who have more-or-less the same symptoms).

July talks tough with his male readers, reprimanding them for thinking that sex with several people will make them happy, for example, or for continuing 'the new and improved wife syndrome' where a newly successful man gets a new partner to match his new, higher status, whilst ditching the woman who supported him on the way up. For three-quarters of *Understanding the Tin Man*, though, we are told a lot about why tin-headed behaviour is unsatisfactory and destructive, but not so much on how to change it, or even what its causes are. But towards the end, some solutions and explanations emerge:

The Tin Man's avoidance of intimacy is really about fear. He's afraid his feelings will make him vulnerable and leave him open to getting hurt. He's afraid that expressing his feelings may not look masculine. [...] For example, fear causes us to take jobs we hate (or remain in), and causes us to get into relationships for the wrong reasons (or to stay in bad relationships that are not working). [...] Overcoming fear of his feelings is a tall order for the Tin Man. To do this he needs to replace the fear that imprisons him with the motivating power of love. [...] Letting go of fear and living by love is the way the Tin Man can build his bridge to intimacy. (2001: 160-161).

At points like this, it is a good job that the author is a former 'Tin Man' himself, as this would not seem to be a message likely to be readily embraced by current tinheads. July offers both ten steps to 'start focusing on more intimacy' and then '28 ways to change your life right now', so he's not exactly short of suggestions, but the *willpower* and *motivation* to carry through the changes would need to come from the reader themselves, and the author doesn't really explain how these can be developed – apart from a general feeling that change will be its own reward.

Some of July's values seem quite traditional, but – to give him the benefit of the doubt – we could say that just because some of his monogamous, sensible lifestyle advice happens to have similar content to some traditional views, it is advocated here not because of an attachment to the past, but because some of these approaches respect human feelings and seem to work. If modernity (in the Giddens sense) can be characterised – albeit rather simplistically – as being about fluidity of relationships and the breakdown of traditional ties, then we can see writers like July serving a helpful function, stepping onto the contemporary pitch and saying 'This is all very well – I like sex as much as the next man – but isn't this leaving us feeling a bit empty?', and then offering advice on how we can combine modernity with long-term happiness. Whilst

theorists such as Giddens discuss ‘the democratisation of the emotions in everyday life’ and the ‘pure relationship’ in relatively abstract terms, self-help writers like July take up the same ideas and spell out how they can be achieved, in the language of accessible, mainstream lifestyle advice. It could be said that late modernity, with its democratisation of relationships, may be a good idea, but the average male human isn’t up to the job: he needs training – hence the market for men’s self-help books.

Ordinary men

Ordinary Heroes: A Future for Men by Michael Hardiman (2000) is a rather more gentle discussion. The author’s life as a psychologist in the rural west of Ireland is a far cry from William July’s former fast-living lifestyle in a US metropolis. Nevertheless, their ideas about men have much in common, although Hardiman doesn’t make big promises or offer programmatic solutions. The book’s general approach is summarised on the back cover thus:

Most personal development books are written by women, bought by women and read by women. Men are more reluctant to engage in efforts at self-discovery: they see it as a sign of weakness. But this can have serious consequences for men’s health as well as for the functioning of society as a whole. *Ordinary Heroes* finally fills this gap: it is a personal development book written by a man for men and for the women who love them.

Hardiman’s approach, like July’s, is that men are formed much more by culture and society than by biology, and we can see that he would agree with the ‘Tin Man’ thesis:

In general, men have been encouraged and rewarded for developing and using their minds and their bodies... What they have lost, or never been allowed to develop, is what is often mistakenly called their feminine side. Sensitivity, affection, nurturing and feelings are not feminine qualities. They are human qualities that are often seen as feminine because they are less apparent in men. The inhibition of these aspects of development has created a serious imbalance in the way men experience their lives and in the way they live and behave. (2000: x).

Hardiman notes how men inherit the traditional expectation that they will be self-sacrificing providers, and the idea that their value as people, and as men, is closely related to their work – notions which persist today, despite other changes in society. His experience of working with a group of unemployed men is of moving relevance here: the men felt great despair and uselessness, because they were not employed – even though the jobs they had lost ‘were menial and often very boring and sometimes dangerous. They could not be missing the work itself, what they were missing was the value that society had placed in having a job, any job’ (p. 33).

As the book goes on we get another depressing picture of men – detached from their feelings, always having to show a tough exterior, isolated from having deep communication in their friendships with other men, not good at having genuinely intimate relationships with women, and foolishly repeating their father’s emotional distance in their relationships with their own children. As with *Tin Man*, we are well over half way through the book before description of these problems gives way to some solutions; and it’s not clear that the solutions – all nice things about spending quality time cultivating proper relationships with partner, friends and children – would be readily taken to by the kind of over-programmed masculine robots who need this help

the most. (Nevertheless, this may be the Catch-22 problem for all self-help books, rather than this one in particular). The other disappointment is that the title *Ordinary Heroes: A Future for Men* suggests that the book will present an exciting new way of thinking, by which, perhaps, men can see themselves as the heroes of their own lives whilst interacting with the world in a bright, full, new way, instead of the impoverished old way. The text doesn't really follow through on this promise.

Inside men's heads

If Men Could Talk, This is What They Would Say by psychologist Alon Gratch (2001) claims to explain 'male behaviour', again for both men and the women who want to understand them. On the book's cover, the blurb signs up to the discourse, very common on self-help book covers, that men and woman are fundamentally different:

Dr Gratch's groundbreaking book acknowledges what women have known for centuries: men don't speak the same language as them when it comes to talking about emotional issues – if they speak at all. The deep psychological differences that polarise men and women are decoded in *If Men Could Talk*.

But in fact this thoughtful book, based on Gratch's long experience as a therapist of men, argues that men and women aren't really that different inside. Men, here, are not fundamentally bad, but may act in ways that look bad because of their deep emotional traumas, often – but not necessarily – stemming back to early experiences. As if fighting a battle with the claims on its own cover, the book tells us at an early stage:

Obviously, men are different from women. But could it be that under their dull, cement-like exterior there's a world of riveting, warring emotions? Ultimately what I've learned from my male patients is that given a certain emotional environment, men can talk, and that, furthermore, what they have to say is nothing less than inspiring. This, in a word, is both the message and the content of this book. (2001: 7).

Just as in the books discussed above, *If Men Could Talk* is eager to tell men that a happy balance between 'masculinity' and 'femininity' can be achieved without them having to wipe out their proud male identity:

Differences [between men and women] cannot only be bridged, they can be integrated. That is, men can learn to accept their own femininity despite the threat it poses for their own masculinity. And they can do so without becoming 'wimps'. (2001: 14).

Gratch is gentle and sympathetic in his discussion of men, who, he suggests, may act 'masculine' on the surface, but are hiding levels of insecurity, vulnerability and fear underneath. He discusses, in turn, men's shame; emotional absence; insecurity; self-involvement; aggression; self-destructiveness; and sexual needs and dysfunctions. The approach is both considered and challenging, recognising that change may not come easily, but that if a man can arrive at a deep appreciation of his problems and their roots, he will be able to begin the journey towards overcoming these flaws and become a 'fuller' human being.

Stupid men

Ten Stupid Things Men Do To Mess Up Their Lives by well-known American radio talk show host Laura Schlessinger (2001) takes the most assertive stance of the books surveyed here, incredulously asking men 'Are you crazy?!' for their self-destructive behaviours. Her chapters on each of the ten 'stupid' behaviours give men clear advice on how and why certain characteristics will not make them happy, and her aggressively challenging radio persona – and perhaps the fact that she is female – allow 'Dr Laura' to ask provocative questions and caustically tell men not to be so foolish. (The sensitive male writers of the other books for men discussed here could not, we presume, attack other men's behaviour so aggressively, without undermining their own arguments about the need for respectful, emotional communication between men).

Unlike the books by men, which implicitly assumed that they were helping problematic men so that they could be decent partners to all the lovely ladies in the world, Dr Laura is much less optimistic about women. Like a self-help version of the (anti-feminist feminist) Camille Paglia, she believes that women should be responsible for their own problems – rather than blaming men for them, or expecting men to help 'fix' or subsidize them – and so, as the first of the *Ten Stupid Things*, she counsels men against 'stupid chivalry'. This means that men should avoid weak, 'flaky', needy, 'immature' women, because these are people with *problems*; the woman who is perpetually a 'damsel in distress' is an unrewarding partner and is 'pathetic' (pp. 1-28). Men who complain that women seem not to like them being a 'nice guy' are also 'pathetic' – 'The problem is you!' asserts Dr. Laura (p. 8), explaining that it is the men's dishonest passivity which is turning women away. In a later chapter on 'stupid matrimony', she assumes that her male readers are decent human beings, worthy of a good and mature relationship, and so gives them heavy warnings about marrying the wrong woman. Rather than becoming committed to a woman just because she was nice enough to show an interest in you, Dr Laura suggests, 'Pick your goals in life first, then pick the woman to match them'.

Other 'stupid' behaviours in the list reflect those covered by the books discussed above, such as 'stupid independence' – the failure to express emotions and intimacy, 'stupid ambition' – the failure to be a good partner and father because money, work, power and status are seen as more important, 'stupid sex' with no depth or meaning, 'stupid parenting' – the failure to be a good, involved father, and 'stupid machismo' which produces men who are selfish, irresponsible, isolated, unloving and unloved.

Dr Laura is different to the liberal male authors of the other books above; she's not keen on feminists, because she feels they have promoted an anti-male culture (p. 270-271), and we know from elsewhere that she is the subject of a 'Stop Dr Laura' campaign by gay activists who have been antagonised by her many homophobic comments on air (see www.stopdrlaura.com and www.glaad.org). She is an advocate of marriage and, in her own words, 'a staunch defender of the traditional family'; one journalist says that 'She never misses a chance to bash feminists, working mothers, unmarried or divorced parents, women who have abortions, [and] people who engage in nonmarital sex' (Pollitt, 2000). She antagonises so many people that you can find numerous anti-Dr Laura sites on the internet, including one by anarchist librarians (angered when she called for censorship of sex education material), and one called *Ten Things You Can Do To Mess With Stupid Dr. Laura*. Nevertheless, despite her conservative credentials, we can see that Dr Laura is proposing more-or-less the same programme of advice for men as the other authors. In modernity, it seems, commentators from a range of political or

ideological persuasions – as long as they are not denying the realities of modern living altogether – end up suggesting that old-school machismo is no good for anyone, and has to be eradicated, but that masculinity includes positive elements which – if balanced with the loving, giving, emotionally communicative traits which have traditionally been called ‘feminine’ – can be reworked to produce fully-functioning humans for the 21st century. (In Dr Laura’s case, alas, her sense of the need for comfortable identities does not extend to lesbians and gays, whom she has said are ‘a biological error’ – so she’s not *that* modern).

Successful men

The last self-help book for men which I’ll discuss, briefly, is one in disguise. *Success for Dummies* by Zig Ziglar (1998) repackages self-help advice into the reassuringly masculine format of a computer manual, because this book is an unusual addition to the range which rose to best-selling prominence with such non-life-changing titles as *Microsoft Excel for Dummies* and *Upgrading & Fixing PCs For Dummies*. This is one of the nicest books on ‘success’, though, because it takes a very broad and holistic view of that term, and includes much more on developing meaningful relationships, friendships, and mental health, than on careers advice. (Although not explicitly for men, the tone and style of the book, and many examples from men’s points of view, make this one of the few self-help books that could expect a substantial readership of ‘everyday guys’). Success in *Success for Dummies* is primarily about having a happy and balanced life; Ziglar is eager for readers to have a rewarding job and financial security, but emphasises ‘the security of knowing that you have the love, trust and support not only of family but of friends and associates as well’ (p. 11). The solutions involve having a positive mental attitude, and a desire to always be giving to others (‘You can have everything in life you want if you will just help enough other people get what they want’ – p. 5). And usefully, Ziglar includes a lot of advice on how to become *motivated* to make positive changes, which seemed to be lacking in the other books. He also emphasises the spiritual dimension to personal transformation, using examples from his own Christian faith – whilst politely acknowledging other religions – which could be off-putting to some readers (one user at Amazon.com complains that the book should be called *Jesus Christ for Dummies*).

The half-time score: Books for men summary

To summarise about the self-help books for men, the messages which they share are:

- Men are not monolithic and unchangeable. Men can change for the better.
- Men are not good at intimacy, expressing their more vulnerable or loving feelings, connecting with others, or admitting pain or failure. They can and should improve in all of these respects.
- Men generally place too much emphasis on work, and fail to develop a fulfilling home life. But nobody on their deathbed regrets that they spent too little time at the office.
- You may be able to ‘do what you like’ in modern society, but you won’t be happy without a mixture of love and responsibility.

- Men cultivate a tough outer appearance, distinguishing themselves from women, but inside they have a complex emotional life and needs that are remarkably similar to women's.
- As if to parallel this, self-help books typically also have a tough outer appearance – a cover which focuses on 'the battle of the sexes' – but inside they reveal men's complex emotional lives, and needs that are remarkably similar to women's.

Self-help for women

As noted in the 'Solutions to every problem' section above, there are not many *general* books for women, but rather an enormous range of titles for women with specific problems or in particular situations – women seeking confidence and assertiveness, overcoming divorce, or wanting to succeed at work, for instance. Indeed, the more popular feminist books such as Germaine Greer's *The Whole Woman* (1999) and Natasha Walter's *The New Feminism* (1998) fall partly into the self-help market, offering a mix of critical social analysis alongside an inspirational 'women can do it' message. Here, though, we'll focus on books aimed squarely at the 'self-help' market.

Go girl!

The Go-Girl Guide: Surviving your 20s with Savvy, Soul and Style by Julia Bourland (2000) is one of the most general books available on 'being a woman today', since its focus is not on any particular 'problem', but centred on general lifestyle for young women who want to enjoy life whilst retaining some control over it – the *Cosmopolitan* readers who want a slightly more sensible or realistic (but not too serious or dull) book on modern life. Key ideas in the book include:

- Modern living can be lonely, traumatic and stressful. The book suggests ways to avoid these. It's a bumpy journey, and nobody knows what their purpose in life is very quickly, so try not to worry about it.
- Your circle of friends are your new 'family', and these relationships have to be worked upon. You must also make the effort to forge *new* bonds.
- Relationships with your *original* family also need to be renegotiated as you grow up (as explained in the section 'Who are these people – and what did they do to my parents?').
- The world of nine-to-five work is a strange, alien culture which nobody will really explain to you (so you need books like this).
- Rather than recklessly trying to change our bodies, we should expel the 'body-image demons' from our minds instead.
- Life is an exciting rollercoaster journey; embrace the challenges and live it to the full.

One obvious observation is that all of this would be good advice for men too – and Bourland's witty style would appeal to *FHM* readers – but addressing an audience of women gives the book a more 'intimate' life-secrets feel, perhaps, and allows for more focused discussion of sex and relationships. We can also note that Bourland's concepts regarding modern living – about how relationships have to be maintained and renegotiated; nothing is stable; it's a world of transitory incidents, stress and anxiety –

are like a populist self-help remix of the observations of Anthony Giddens and other sociologists.

The success of books like this indicates that people do find them useful. Comments left by 'ordinary' readers at the bookselling website Amazon.com give us some additional evidence. For example, one reader from Worcester, Massachusetts, comments:

This book is not the end-all solution to all your problems. But we shouldn't be looking for some book to tell us exactly what to do! It was enough for me that Bourland so keenly touches in on all of the insecurities, self-doubts, and puzzlements that I think are so typical of us twenty-somethings. [...] The sections on personal well-being are tailored specifically to this age where we are no longer happy-go-lucky (in retrospect) little teenagers, and yet not quite needing to worry about hot flashes and middle age spread. (4 June 2001).

Other Amazon.com users agree. Tiffany from Trenton, New Jersey comments: 'This book taught me so many things I didn't really know. Now I know why I feel the way I do. This book was definitely like a best friend and I could hardly put it down' (15 August 2001), whilst a '20-something female from East Coast, USA' says 'This book has been my Bible of sorts' (14 June 2001). A slightly older reader from Ottawa, Canada, says:

What an excellent book – so well researched and comprehensive and so applicable to girls in their 20's. In fact I saw myself in virtually every chapter – I am now 35 and married with two kids, and wished this book was available when I was in my 20's! (17 November 2000).

I was able to track down another reader of *The Go-Girl Guide*, 25 year old Rosie from Cambridge, UK (via a different online bookstore), and asked her, by email, about the idea that self-help books like this one only contain obvious things that everybody knows anyway. She replied:

I know what you mean, quite a lot of it seems quite obvious, but I think it only seems obvious because they've written it down for you. I found the book genuinely helpful, about all the changes in life that occur and which you have to make for yourself, as you go through these youngish post-college years. It might seem obvious in retrospect but I don't think I'd realise all of these things, and the ways you can make life better and easier, without somebody pointing it out. School doesn't prepare you for life really, you need books like this instead. (19 August 2001).

Full marks, then, for *The Go-Girl Guide*.

Bell hooks' self-help for black women

Sisters of the Yam: Black Women and Self-Recovery is an excursion into self-help territory by renowned black feminist and cultural critic bell hooks (1993). The book is aimed specifically at black women because, hooks asserts, black women continue to face unique challenges at 'the bottom of everything' in 'white-supremacist capitalist patriarchy', even though they have made advances and positive 'interventions' in the mass media 'to offer radically different images of ourselves' (pp. 1-2). Although hooks is known for her academic writings, this book is not meant to be an 'academic' text but an authentic mainstream self-help book. Commenting on her desire to address a wide and diverse audience, hooks says:

It was the success of the self-help book *Women Who Love Too Much* [by Robin Norwood, 1985] that 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. This book, however, like many other self-help books for women, disturbed me because it denied that patriarchy is institutionalised. It made it seem that women could change everything in our lives by sheer acts of personal will. It did not even suggest that we would need to organise politically to change society in conjunction with our efforts to transform ourselves. (1993: 4).

Hooks wants to challenge the political naivety of self-help discourses, then, but admits that she has found self-help literature helpful herself, and although many of her concerns are to do with broad social inequalities, she notes the need for 'self-actualisation' as part of the struggle – 'Toni Cade Bambara reminded us that "revolution begins in the self and with the self"' (p. 5). Throughout *Sisters of the Yam*, hooks refers to several other self-help texts, including *Feel the Fear and Do It Anyway* by Susan Jeffers (which encouraged hooks to think positively, and gave her the courage to stop salaried university work and become a full-time writer), *The Road Less Travelled* by M. Scott Peck (on the importance of openness and honesty), *Do What You Love, The Money Will Follow* by Marsha Sinetar (on choosing rewarding work), *The Black Women's Health Book* by Evelyn White (on sharing painful experiences), and *You Can Heal Your Life* by Louise Hay (on care of the self). She also draws inspiration from a number of novels by black women, including those of Toni Morrison, Toni Cade Bambara, and Alice Walker – writers who address 'the deep, often unnamed psychic wounding that takes place in the daily lives of black folks in this society' (p. 11).

In spite of black people's advancement and successes, hooks argues, those working in the white-dominated world develop low self-esteem and 'become fundamentally estranged from life-affirming world views and life practices' and a sense of community (p. 10). Hooks says that women have to heal the pain of past experiences, whether these have come from racist society, or from the harshly critical words of parents who did not want their daughters to risk failure or disappointment (pp. 33-35). She emphasises the importance of love, and emotional communication. She also stresses the need for black women to have a positive self-image, rejecting the 'internalised racism' spread by television (p. 81), and in spite of the mass media's failure to celebrate black people as beautiful (p. 84). She notes the lack of positive role models for women with natural hair – a sense which led her to later produce a children's picture book, *Happy to be Nappy* (with illustrator Chris Raschka, 1999).

Critics might say that, although the terrible histories of racism and slavery should never be forgotten, hooks dwells too much on the connections with history, repeatedly reminding young black women that their people were slaves, and emphasising the connections between black people and the land, nature, and the earth (pp. 175-182). It could be said that we should look at the world anew: history should not be forgotten, but maybe should be parked at the back of one's mind as one tackles life with vigour, today – unburdened with thoughts of the past and excited about prospects for the future. Such an approach does not have to be 'apolitical', and can be uncompromisingly critical of today's problems and oppressions.

In any case, users of the book at Amazon.com find it to be excellent. Helena Romaine Henderson from Washington DC, for example, writes:

This book has altered my thought process in ways I never thought possible. bell hooks has spoken with clear and simple words about black women and our individual and collective need to self-recover – from racism, sexism, of course –but also from our own (often) self-imposed ‘isms’ carried from childhood. She’s brutally honest in a book that sits unmoved from my bed-stand. A recommended read for black women. Period. Regardless of background and circumstance. A must read for those on the never-ending journey of self-introspection that eventually encourages self-recovery. (19 December 2000).

Although *Sisters of the Yam* did not, ultimately, smash its way to the top of the self-help bestseller charts, it remains an interesting exercise which seems to have been of value and inspiration to many black women, and others.

Dr Laura again

Before she wrote *Ten Stupid Things Men Do To Mess Up Their Lives*, discussed above, Laura Schlessinger had previously scaled the bestseller charts with *Ten Stupid Things Women Do To Mess Up Their Lives* (1995). Although ‘Dr Laura’ is commonly seen in America as a voice of conservatism – which she certainly is on several topics – her opinions on women’s right to self-fulfilment are emphatic, and strongly opposed to the traditional idea that women should be passive:

[Women use] complaining, whining, anger, depression, anxiety, food, and chemicals to avoid taking active steps to improve their lot. [...] Granted, there are no psychiatric diagnostic categories for laziness, immaturity, cowardice, selfishness, and downright stupidity. Even if there were, it wouldn’t matter because no one bothers to consider them anymore. Know why? In the Age of the Victim, nothing is anybody’s fault! All the personality and behavioural traits I just listed have been swept clean away as women, aided and abetted by a torrent of apologetic self-help books, insist on rationalizing their self-destructive behaviour by identifying themselves as ‘sick’. (1995: xviii).

Dr Laura will not allow women to make excuses for their own lack of happiness:

Listen to Dr Laura! For improvement to happen, these weaknesses need airing and exercising. Until you take them on, you are a victim. And you don’t have to be a female rocket scientist to figure out who the perpetrator is! ... It’s you! ... The ultimate stupidity is withholding from yourself the respect you deserve. (1995: xviii-xix).

In a surprising reversal of expectations, here the liberal world of self-help books is seen as holding women back – by giving them the opportunity to blame men, or their upbringing, or a damaging culture for their lack of happiness and fulfilment – whilst Dr Laura, the conservative talk show host, has to encourage women not to make excuses, and to get a grip: ‘Women, rebel!’ she says (p. xx). ‘Fight your way out of misery and go take on your own life!’ (p. xxi). The book expands on these themes, telling women to put themselves first – not to tie their sense of self-worth to the man they’re with; to be self-reliant and independent – not to be interested in a man unless he is the *right* man; not to mistake sex for love; not to ‘whine and whimper’, but to express anger fully and to do something about it; and not to make excuses for an unsuitable or abusive partner, but to finish the relationship instead. Leaving aside her conviction that a relationship

can't be *really* committed unless the couple have walked down the aisle, the anti-liberal, feminist-baiting Dr Laura turns out to be the surprising champion of strong, independent, confident women who get exactly what they want.

The uncompromising *Rules*

No discussion of self-help books would be complete without a mention of *The Rules* by Ellen Fein and Sherrie Schneider (1995), subtitled *Time-tested Secrets for Capturing the Heart of Mr Right*, the million-selling phenomenon from the mid-nineties. *The Rules* are a bizarre mix of what *look* like independent 'girl power' values, plus some very old-fashioned ideas about gender relations, and an intense determination to get married. A 'Rules girl' has confidence and poise (Rule 1: 'Be a "creature unlike any other"'), but under no circumstances can pursue the man she wants (Rule 2: 'Don't talk to a man first' and Rule 5: 'Don't call him and rarely return his calls'). She has a busy life (Rule 6: 'Always end phone calls first' and Rule 7: 'Don't accept a Saturday night date after Wednesday'), but won't choose what to do on a date unless asked (Rule 17: 'Let him take the lead'). A 'Rules girl' knows when she's onto a bad thing (Rule 12: 'Stop dating him if he doesn't buy you a romantic gift for your birthday or Valentine's Day') but is generally obsessed with getting married (Rule 33: 'Do *The Rules* and you'll live happily ever after'). The books cover even boasts: 'The goal? Marriage, in the shortest time possible'. The 'Rules girl' has a Terminator-like devotion to her quest; as the authors explain,

There are many books and theories on this subject. All make wonderful promises, but *The Rules* actually produce results. It's easy to know what's going on when you do *The Rules*. It's very simple. If he calls you, pursues you, asks you out, it's *The Rules*. If you have to make excuses for his behavior – for example, he didn't call after the first date because he's still hung up on his ex-girlfriend – and you have to think about every word he said until your head hurts and you call him, it's not *The Rules*. Forget what he's going through – for example, 'fear of commitment' or 'not ready for a relationship.' Remember, we don't play therapist when we do *The Rules*. If he calls and asks you out, it's *The Rules*. Anything else is conversation. (1995: 10).

The independent – or more precisely *indifferent* – approach to courtship recommended here can appear quite positive – the *Rules* girl isn't hanging around waiting for her man – but in fact this is a 'front' for a wildly insecure identity which is desperate to get married. The book warns: 'In the long run, it's not fun to break *The Rules*! You could easily end up alone' (p. 9). This desire to tie the knot in order to fill some void in a woman's life would make even the marriage advocate Dr Laura furious. All in all, though, as a female friend advised me, 'I don't think you should assume that *The Rules* sold a million because women have no sense of humour and thought it was good advice. I think you should assume that *The Rules* sold half a million because we live in a sick, twisted society; and another half a million because women have a *great* sense of humour and thought it was mental'. Okay.

Books for women summary

To summarise about the self-help books for women which we have considered here – and disregarding *The Rules* which, as we have said, is an oddity – the messages which they share are:

- Modern living can be difficult and stressful. The solutions include positive thinking and a planned approach, in which you tackle problems in an assertive but not reckless way. Thinking about your needs, with the help of a self-help book, is a good idea.
- You should absolutely *do what you want to do*. Doing things in life just because others expect you to, or because of habit or tradition, is a very bad idea.
- Self-esteem is very important. You have to feel good about yourself.
- Don't make excuses. Take control of your life.

We can note that unlike the books for men, which focused on men's emotional tardiness, insecurity, and screwed-up inner life, the successful books for women generally encourage readers to feel that they have no problems inside, as long as they can be confident; with self-assurance and a positive approach, they suggest, anything can be achieved.

Self-help for everybody

There are, of course, many self-help books which are not aimed at either sex in particular, because their advice about life-planning, relationships or overcoming problems is intended to benefit everybody. Here we'll briefly look at a couple of those.

Intergalactic harmony

Men Are From Mars, Women Are From Venus by John Gray (1993) is one of the best-known self-help books today, often referenced (whether in admiring or mocking tones) in movies, TV shows and magazines. It has sold 'more than seven million copies in the United States and millions more in 40 different languages around the world' (www.marsvenus.com). In fact the book has been turned into a publishing 'franchise', with the same basic ideas being reworked into many more books by the same author (including *Mars and Venus in the Bedroom*, *Mars and Venus in Love*, *Practical Miracles for Mars and Venus*, and several others), plus cassettes, CDs, videos, computer software, a syndicated newspaper column, a radio show, a TV show (www.marsvenustv.com), a musical stage play (!), and even a board game, all bearing the *Mars and Venus* brand. It has spawned its own company running relationship workshops across America (www.marsvenusinstitute.com), and even a *Mars and Venus* boat cruise where unhappy couples can come to recognise their divergent intergalactic origins.

Unlike those self-help books which encourage readers to change their circumstances when they are not happy with them, *Men Are From Mars* is all about changing one's *perception* of reality so that it can be accepted more happily. 'When men and women are able to respect and accept their differences,' Gray explains, 'then love has a chance to blossom' (p. 14). (Incidentally, although I have provided a few page references in this discussion, Gray's ideas are repeated and replayed numerous times throughout the book

and, indeed, its sequels and spin-offs. This style – ‘randomly talking’ about something for ages until we feel better about it – is ironically one that Gray says is exclusive to women (p. 36)).

Where other writers would tell women to dump the tedious, insensitive robot they’d accidentally married, Gray urges them to understand and learn to love him. And he advises men that they should take time to show an interest in their wives – women might be obsessed with talking and hectoring, and have little interest in achieving anything, but it’s worth getting used to because women are like that (p. 18-19). The whole book is built on this explicit assumption that women and men are ‘completely different’ (p. 5), illustrated by the metaphor of the book’s title, which suggests that the problem with (heterosexual) relationships today is that men and women have ‘forgotten’ that they originally came from different planets. Men therefore mistakenly expect that women will see things as they do – with an emphasis on rationality and efficiency (p. 16) – whilst women incorrectly anticipate that men will share their female responses – which are characterised by uncontrollable emotions and unstoppable babbling (p. 36). Women should understand that men often appear to be ignoring them because they are mentally working on important problems; at such times, men should not be interrupted (emphasised in depth on pp. 70-78); women should ‘call a girlfriend for a good chat’ or ‘take a bubble bath’ instead (p. 77). Men also need to understand that although women’s talk may sound uninteresting, it is important to demonstrate love by listening to it anyway (unless he is particularly stressed, in which case he can say ‘This isn’t a good time for me – let’s talk later’ (p. 90)).

The whole point of *Men Are From Mars* is that we should not make value judgements about which of these character traits is best – although by asserting that women are scatty and emotionally all over the place, whilst men are more quietly thoughtful and problem-solving, you could say that Gray has cheated here. It is wrong to see the success of *Men Are From Mars* as a modern, liberal ‘touchy-feely’ phenomenon, as it is built upon these hard, authoritarian 1950s stereotypes. The aim of *Mars and Venus* is to foster relationships where a heterosexual couple are equally ‘understanding’ of each other – which sounds nice – but the couple are not actually equals. It’s no surprise that Gray is a fan of *The Surrendered Wife: A Practical Guide to Finding Intimacy, Passion, and Peace with Your Man* by Laura Doyle (2000) – he is quoted on the cover saying ‘*The Surrendered Wife* is a practical and valuable tool for women’. Doyle argues that for a happy marriage, women should not criticise their husbands, and should let the man run the finances; they should overcome the desire to have more power, and abandon the ‘myth of equality’. Women who seek control just create unhappiness within relationships, but if you give a man the chance to run things, everything will be brilliant, apparently. Feminist readers may have spotted that Doyle does not seem to be a fully paid-up member.

Although John Gray’s desire to see heterosexual couples happy together is no doubt genuine – if only for the sake of his bank balance – the *Mars and Venus* phenomenon is a bizarre, quietly anti-feminist force, peddling stereotypes which in the long run cannot be for the benefit of women or men. Although the Mars-Venus programme may bring genuine happiness and reconciliation to couples who were previously insufficiently sympathetic to each others’ character traits, it remains problematic. If a Mars-Venus couple were to procreate, for example, they would seem to be destined to bring up children whose ridiculously outdated views of gender would cripple them in the modern world.

The main problem with *Men Are From Mars, Women Are From Venus*, though, is its appalling failure to recommend real, root-and-branch change. Many of the men described in Gray's relationship anecdotes are emotionally retarded shells, unable to connect or communicate on a deep level. These cases could be read as a disturbing indictment of our culture which produces such men; but Gray's idea is that we should just accept it. He knows that change is difficult – and so he tells women to love and respect their male partners' strange behaviour. He tells men to change a little – by listening to their partners more, without responding with hurt or hostility – but it's not enough to break society's cycle of producing men and women who feel that they are from different planets (as the book's success shows). Whenever the book edges towards suggesting real change for its male or female users, it consistently shies away and seeks refuge in the idiotic mantra of its title. If a woman is frustrated that her man will not change, 'she is forgetting that men are from Mars!' (p. 104) says Gray gleefully, himself forgetting that he may, once, have wanted to write a progressive book for a better world.

Mars and Venus in cyberspace

Various interesting reflections on *Men Are From Mars, Women Are From Venus* can be found on the Web. Everyday readers reviewing the book at Amazon.com are firmly split between those who found it extremely eye-opening and helpful, and those who found it depressingly sexist and simplistic, and who feel sorry for the people who found it useful because they have resigned themselves to patriarchy. The book has so incensed some readers that they have created sites which take the book apart point-by-point – Yahoo.com has a whole category for such sites (run a search for 'John Gray opposing views' to bring it up). Those who want to check out the philosophy for themselves can find a reasonable sample of the material at John Gray's own website, www.marsvenus.com, alongside an object lesson in how to spin one simple idea into a money-harvesting franchise at his packed online merchandise store.

No excuses

Life Strategies by Phillip C McGraw (2001) – 'Dr Phil' from TV's *Oprah* – is another smash hit, having sold over one million copies within two years of its first publication in 1999. Unlike John Gray, Dr Phil does not think that one should learn to accommodate unhappy situations. If something isn't working, says Dr Phil, change it. The words 'Stop Making Excuses!' are plastered across the book's front cover. The back summarises the content well:

Whether it's a bad relationship, a dead-end career, or a harmful habit, Dr McGraw helps you wake up and get out of your rut. It is never too late to take charge of, and be responsible for, your life.

McGraw asserts that you have to be your own 'life manager', and make the same assertive demands of yourself that you would make if you had been hired to 'manage' someone else (p. 169, 226). McGraw asks his readers to consider whether they are doing what they *really* want in life, or if it is just the result of habit or compromise (p. 14). You have to be 'accountable for your own life' (p. 15), and accepting an unhappy deal is not recommended. You should work out exactly what you want, and then claim it. This is a process of introspection, tough decisions, but most of all careful strategising; it even involves making numerous lists and charts – so many that towards the end you are encouraged to make summary charts of your 'evaluation spreadsheets', which are then to be summarised in another chart, which itself is then analysed. Dr Phil's background in the legal system has perhaps made him over-reliant on paperwork.

Nevertheless, no-one can accuse his process of being vague self-help optimism: if personal transformation is a battle worth fighting, Dr Phil suggests, then battle plans are needed, and by breaking down seemingly idealistic goals into attainable steps, activities and targets, then the process of change takes a concrete, do-able form. It's all about strategy:

In contrast to the cruelty and harshness that are so much a part of the poorly managed or unmanaged life, if you have a clear-cut strategy, and the courage, commitment, and energy to execute that strategy at a project status level, you can flourish; you'll overcome the tough stuff. The world is not evil; it is just the world. It is not to be feared, just managed; and the key to managing it is having this consciously designed strategy. (1999: 176).

At Amazon.com, a few of the hundreds of people who have posted comments about this book are concerned that it may be overly 'blunt' or 'intimidating', but most are very positive. Readers seemed to appreciate the emphasis on personal accountability, the 'realism' and drive for solutions – as opposed to self-help books which would seek to persuade the reader that life is lovely, or that they are a victim – and the author's 'straight talking' approach. On the other hand, one reader suggests that the advice is all common sense, and that Dr Phil fails to recognise that life is about the *journey*, not planning its conquest.

Websites related to these books

- ⇒ William July II: www.williamjuly.com
- ⇒ Alon Gratch: www.ifmencouldtalk.com
- ⇒ Laura Schlessinger: www.drlaura.com
- ⇒ Zig Ziglar: www.zigziglar.com
- ⇒ *The Rules*: www.therulesbook.com
- ⇒ John Gray: www.marsvenus.com
- ⇒ Phillip C McGraw: www.philmcgraw.com
- ⇒ Adam Khan: www.youmeworks.com

Plenty more where they came from

There are far too many self-help books for us to cover them all here, but hopefully you get the idea. Other recent bestsellers include such self-explanatory titles as *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People: Powerful Lessons in Personal Change* by Stephen R. Covey (1990), which has sold over 10 million copies, and remains on the bestseller lists, *You Can't Afford the Luxury of a Negative Thought* by Peter McWilliams (1997), and *It's Only Too Late If You Don't Start Now: How to Create Your Second Life at Any Age* by Barbara Sher (1999). There are many hundreds of others. So what does it all mean?

Summary and conclusion

On the whole, the self-help literature proposes a quite consistent set of messages, centred around the acquisition of self-belief, self-esteem, and the confidence to change things and seek a better life. All of them emphasise success in personal relationships above achievement at work, although several of them stress that *happiness* in one's

work is important too. We have noted some cases of successful books which have a message different to the self-help norms – most notably John Gray’s compassionately worded but disturbingly stereotyped *Mars and Venus* thesis, which says that in unhappy heterosexual couplings, women and men should learn to cherish, rather than change, the behaviour which previously made them want to kill each other. This is not in line with the general thrust of self-help books, though, which are more likely to tell readers that change is *necessary* and *essential*. They are typically very clear on this point – indeed, Laura Schlessinger would say that the failure to pursue fundamental change is ‘pathetic’.

To summarise the most common self-help messages:

- Believe in yourself and you can achieve anything. Social ‘barriers’ can generally be disregarded if you have the will to overcome them.
- You can’t let the world ‘happen’ to you; instead you must take control of your life.
- It may not be obvious what would make you happy in life, and what is available to you. These things have to be worked out; and then you can strive to get them. (‘You have to name it to claim it,’ as Dr Phil says).
- Women and men are fundamentally similar on the ‘inside’, although men may have learned to be overly insular, emotionally withdrawn, and bad at communicating, whilst women may not be confident or recognise the full range of their capabilities. But in any case, both women and men can adopt new ways of thinking and behaving so that they can become fully-functioning, balanced, self-assured, emotionally intelligent people.
- Change is always possible.

As we have noted already in this chapter, these approaches and ideas are very much in line with Anthony Giddens’s view of modernity – a world of fluid relationships, where identities and personal connections have to be worked on and negotiated, and where we continually have to make choices about who we are, how we will present ourselves, and who we want to associate with. The book of tradition has been (more or less) ripped up, to be replaced with a bookstore bulging with new lifestyle manuals – some of which, like *Mars and Venus* and *The Surrendered Wife*, offer a return to tradition for those who want it, whilst others, like *Feel the Fear and Do It Anyway* and *Life Strategies* and thousands more, propose an assertive new approach where social forces are to be pummelled into submission by the independent, feisty individual.

Whilst commentators upon the self-help scene such as Elayne Rapping (1996) and Wendy Simonds (1996) are concerned that the desire for inner healing may have replaced the quest for bigger changes in society – which is a reasonable concern – I think the two are not mutually exclusive, but can go hand-in-hand. Rapping, to be fair, recognises that this might be a possibility, but she is further concerned about the tendency of self-help and the ‘recovery’ movement to lead people towards ‘shelter from the storm of modern life’, which she suggests is a weak ambition; ‘staying dry, while important for survival, is not really our ultimate goal’, she says (p. 185), meaning of course that modern life is something to be encountered and challenged, not hidden away from. This would be a good point, but I have found that most of today’s self-help bestsellers promote a forceful engagement with the world, not a retirement from it. They are very individualistic, of course – they are about finding empowerment, success and happiness for yourself, not your community or social group – but they promote values of compassion and emotional sensitivity too, so we can hope that those individuals who

reach a happy, self-actualised state will then go on to spread their good fortune, and try to help others. (That may be optimistic, but is not necessarily wrong). The books generally ignore social constraints – they do not tell readers that they will most likely not get on well in life because of sexism, racism, or other forms of discrimination and oppression – which makes them bad as social analyses; but they are not intended as sociological studies, they are meant to encourage and empower individuals to believe in themselves regardless of their social category or background, so the books cannot really be criticised on that basis.

We have considered self-help books in some detail here because they offer the most explicit expression of an outlook and approach which is becoming increasingly widespread in modern societies: the rise of emotion and communication skills; the drive for equality in all areas; and in particular the need for fulfilment and to be ‘your own person’, which is a goal at the heart of many movies, pop songs and magazines. This ethos has taken hold in the more austere corners of public life too: in the past, political leaders could be relatively aloof and unapproachable, as long as the people had faith in their abilities. Today, it is ‘emotional intelligence’ which is seen as the heart of impressive leadership. Tony Blair is said to have mastered it, and so maintains an enviable popularity in modern politics where an ability to ‘connect’ with the people has become essential, and where the public fascination is with the ‘emotions and ambitions’ that drive government, not the policies themselves (Rawnsley, 2001). Furthermore, in January 2001 the British government launched the manifesto of Antidote, the ‘Campaign for Emotional Literacy’ (www.antidote.org.uk) which aims ‘to create an emotionally literate culture, where the facility to handle the complexities of emotional life is as widespread as the capacity to read, write and do arithmetic’. So we can note that self-help, formerly a kind of popular resistance to ‘establishment’ norms of emotional conservatism, restraint and self-control (in British terms, the ‘stiff upper lip’), is now being recommended by governments – hoping that self-help discourses will penetrate culture from the ‘top down’ – as well.

A society which consumes self-help books, and disseminates their advice, seems to be both quite aspirational and rather insecure. In the following chapters, on magazines for men, magazines for women, and the ‘role models’ of pop music, we will see further layers of aspiration and insecurity come to the fore. Just like the self-help books, but a little less conspicuously, they are dealing with the same questions: Who can I be? What is an acceptable set of ethics nowadays? Will it give me what I want? Can we change now?

If you found this article useful or interesting, get the book *Media, Gender and Identity: An Introduction* by David Gauntlett (2002).

For information about the book see <http://www.theoryhead.com/gender>

If you have comments or suggestions, email david@theory.org.uk.

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