

Taking one's responsibilities while facing adversity: a balanced analysis of self-help books reading.

Abstract:

Self-help books are frequently criticised by social scientists, who often impute problematic effects (on individuals and on society) to their reading. This article intends to show why this phenomenon needs to be studied through a theory of practice which includes the reception process. Drawing upon 55 interviews and 297 letters from self-help book readers, the article questions the practice of self-help reading in its own relevance system to show how readers use these books with a need for effectiveness and conduct different inquiries about their credibility. I finally argue that this empirical stage not only does not impair a critical perspective on self-help books but might actually improve it.

Keywords:

Attitude towards contingencies, individualistic societies, reception studies, reading self-help books, critical perspective.

1. Introduction: beyond critiques of self-help books, self-help as an experience.

Self-help books have attracted social scientists' attention due to their great success, as shown by both their impressive sales figures (Starker, 1989) and the enthusiastic reactions of their readers, who state that such books have changed their lives. However, it is striking to observe that they have mostly been the object of worried criticism for several decades, even though some works can be singled out for their optimistic, even enchanted, remarks (Giddens, 1992; Dolby, 2005).

How can we explain that the academic approach to self-help literature tends to be so uncharitable? Besides the lack of interest in certain outputs of popular culture that academics sometimes express (Lichterman, 1992:422) and the presupposition of a poorness in this type of content (clearly expressed, for example, in the reader-response theory – Iser, 1985), it is possible to identify at least three factors to understand the disdain and the fear shown by the social sciences. The first one is linked to the difficulty of defining what self-help literature is, the second one to the cultural context and the third one to methodological choices. After briefly presenting these factors, I will make a proposal to study SHBs from a sociological perspective.

What are self-help books? Is there a set of inherent characteristics which could allow us to give a substantial and exclusive definition of them? Most scholars acknowledge that it is a problematic issue, due to the variety of the fields involved (from health to career success, from getting old to giving birth, from Buddhist spirituality to cynical materialism, etc.), and the form and quality variations of the books. Micki McGee, who wrote one of the best sociological essays on the SHBs *Self-help, Inc. Makeover Culture in American Life* (2005) says that SHBs should be « designed to help readers improve themselves and their prospects in the world through particular, practical prescriptions » (2005: 195). Other scholars, such as sociologist Steven Starker (who published *Oracle at the Supermarket. The American Preoccupation with Self-help Books* in 1989) use other criteria such as their non-fictional

aspect. In *Self-help books. Why Americans Keep Reading Them* (2005), Sandra Dolby gave the following definition combining these two aspects: « Self-help books are books of popular nonfiction written with the aim of enlightening readers about some of the negative effects of our culture and worldview and suggesting new attitudes and practices which might lead them to a more satisfying and more effective life » (2005: 38). She also tries to classify the various types of SHBs but acknowledges that this classification creates some « messiness » (2005: 44). The problem in trying to establish such criteria is the inevitable exceptions they create: what if a book contains fictional elements? What if the advices dedicated to readers are not clearly explained? Take for example *The Alchemist* by Paulo Coelho, or *The Celestine Prophecy* by James Redfield. These two books are New Age fictional novels and do not specifically explain that they want to help the readers or give specific practical advices... But who would deny their resemblance with the self-help language? Probably not the numerous readers who *used* these books to improve their life. The self-help movement is far from homogeneous and it seems unrealistic to search for an abstract definition of the SHB.

The second factor is related to worries about the ways the self-help movement supposedly promotes or perverts a kind of individualistic society. This fear can take various forms, depending on the social representations reigning in the context in which this critic takes place (Nehring et al, 2016). In the English-speaking world and especially in the US, the self-help movement is rooted in the many currents which, like the transcendentalism of Emerson, Christian Science, and the Mind-Cure movement or, more generally, a liberal political tradition, have a long-standing history of celebrating the individual and the need for individuals to free themselves from a series of social constraints (Hewitt, 1998). Classical critics consider them to be the symptoms of an exacerbated narcissism (Rieff, 1966; Lasch, 1991; Sennett, 1992), the sign of individuals' inability to withstand the messages of self-proclaimed gurus (Tiede, 2001; Justman, 2005), or the forerunners of a form of governmentality which is specific to liberal-democratic societies (Rose, 1999).

In the French-speaking areas of continental Europe, the community is readily presented as being threatened by powerful destructive forces (individualism, the market, neo-liberalism, etc). Local SHBs have adapted to interdigitate with this new context (Griswold and Bastian, 1987), mainly by endorsing these worries and sometimes present themselves as remedies for the reigning individualism (see for example, one of the most successful French-speaking SHB author of the last two decades, Servan-Schreiber, 2003). Nonetheless, the critical tone towards SHBs is very harsh, and many social science writers see the success of such books as an avatar of (neo)liberal ideas which urge everyone to behave like capitalistic apprentices in their private and work life, promoting a form of individualism with perverse effects on the individual ('diseases of autonomy') and on social cohesion ('decline of social connections') which must be exposed (see Ehrenberg, 2010 for a presentation).

Whatever their form and theoretical background, these critics have in common to suppose that the vehicle of these pervert effects is SHB's fundamental tendency to get the readers to take responsibility for their own problems and, by extension, to liken a good and mentally healthy individual to an individual able to rely on him/herself. This observation is very easy to ground empirically in a content analysis (such as Cherry, 2005), as most (if not any) SHBs support the idea that whatever the situation and the constraints, one can always do something to help him/herself, first through the use of hidden internal resources and second through a reallocation of responsibilities between oneself and the rest of the world (Marquis, 2014). McGee, for example, states very clearly that self-help literature should therefore be criticised for promoting a dangerously non-sociological view: "[T]he idea that one can make oneself,

invent oneself, is not only fundamentally mistaken but also a profoundly alienating one which implies estrangement from the social position of one's origins as well as from those individuals who fostered one's development." (2005: 8).

Finally, this overall negative discourse also stems from the way social scientists study the self-help phenomenon and attests to some controversial epistemological choices. First, most critical studies are primarily interested in the effect of SHBs on individuals and life in society at large and are therefore underpinned by presuppositions that reading such works can have an impact. Now, as various scholars (see i.a. Radway (1984), Barker and Petley (2001)) have shown, proving the existence of the effects of media's content on their receivers is complicated from a social science perspective. Next, it is striking to realise that, with a few rare exceptions (for a recent example, see Salmenniemi and Vorona, 2014), the receiver is at the same time empirically absent from these studies and inferred from the researcher's own reading of SHBs. This is particularly striking in the works of several authors inspired by Foucault's and more recently by Nikolas Rose's perspective (Hazleden, 2003, and Philip, 2009). Sociologist Heidi Rimke, for example, states that reading self-help books makes individuals 'governable, predictable, calculable, classifiable, self-conscious, responsible, self-regulating and self-determined' (2000:63). What is the scope of this kind of statement: does it only concern characters described in the SHBs or the actual readers? It is of course the latter which interests critics of SHBs willing to study the consequences of SHBs on individuals as well as on society. However, without any empirical study on the reader's role, we have no clue as to how readers use the SHBs messages (if they do use them), endorse or don't endorse these messages, and in particular, this idea of inventing oneself and being responsible for oneself which worries many scholars.

To overcome these difficulties, I propose here to study SHBs not as a discourse, but as an experience, as an encounter between a text, and a reader¹. The text has special features (which are more or less developed). Most of the time, SHBs consist of a series of convincing arguments. Even when they use fictional genres (such as parables), even when they include an esoteric aspect and call upon supernatural entities (whether chakras or Jungian archetypes, for example), they claim to convey a message, information, and truths which concern the day to day life. But it may only lead to a self-help books experience if the reader adopts what we may call with Louise Rosenblatt an "efferent" attitude. In this attitude (opposed to an aesthetic attitude focused on the journey and not the destination), the reader focuses « on what will remain as a residue *after* the reading – the information to be acquired, the logical solution to a problem, the actions to be carried out » (1994: 23). With regard to the self-help books experience, the readers are interested in the practical consequences that the reading may have, not in general, but in their day-to-day life that they want to change or see changed.

This pragmatic or transactional proposal offers several benefits. Firstly, it allows to go beyond an exclusive definition of self-help books to focus instead on the readers' experience and investment. Any novel, fictional and without any practical advice, which is read in the aforementioned attitude, is much more likely to result in a self-help book experience than a classical SHB (say a book by Phil McGraw) scholarly read by a sociologist producing a content analysis. Secondly, it seems inevitable to consider the way readers understand or

¹ Following Louise Rosenblatt's transactional theory of the literary work (1994), we may also call it a « poem » to differentiate this performance from the « text »: « 'Poem' presupposes that a reader is actively involved with a text and refers to what he makes of his responses to the particular set of verbal symbols » (1994: 12). She adds that comparing the poem to the text is the same as comparing a musical performance to the music sheet. Therefore, « We cannot simply look at the text and predict the poem » (1994: 14).

don't understand the content of the books they read. Third, this proposal certainly doesn't forbid a critical attitude towards the self-help literature, but it tries to ground it in empirical data.

This paper intends to analyse the reader's role in making sense of it, that is, what the reader does to have something happen when s/he begins reading a self-help book so that the experience can make sense to her/him, and even have a degree of effectiveness. More precisely, the focus is to question the kind of credibility readers grant to these books, or, to quote Paul Lichterman, 'how seriously or ambivalently' people take these messages (1992:423). After presenting the methodology, I will first describe the attitude the readers have during their transactions with the books, and how such an attitude is justified by their expectations of changes in their daily life (Section 3). I will then describe the type of inquiry conducted by the readers which will enable them to determine whether the books can meet their expectations (Section 4). I will finally discuss these results and show why the self-help books experience includes two levels: the microlevel of the transaction between a reader and a text, and the macrolevel of a cultural context in which reading a book to work on oneself is deemed relevant and prestigious.

2. Methodology.

The following analysis was drawn from a two-part corpus of interviews and letters from readers. The first part consists of 55 face-to-face interviews of French-speaking readers of SHBs which were conducted between 2010 and 2012 and lasted around 90 minutes each. The interviewees – 42 women and 13 men aged between 20 and 73 – were recruited via announcements placed in bookshops proposing this type of literature. From a socio-economic perspective, whilst the interviewees in general had economic and cultural capital, they nevertheless seemed to be relatively disdainful of socially established cultural genres and more generally of the legitimate cultural hierarchy (Bourdieu, 1979). The interviews focused on the positive or negative reading experiences, the reasons which led the readers to turn to such works, and the readers' self-perceived consequences of these readings on their life.

To better control this risk of social desirability due to the moral content of the subject of study (Marquis, 2015), the second part of this empirical research relied on 295 letters from self-help book readers which were written between 2002 and 2008 and were obtained from three very famous authors of French-language SHBs (Boris Cyrulnik, Thomas d'Ansembourg, and Thierry Janssen). The authors were asked to put together a set of 100 letters from readers they did not know personally. The overwhelming majority (95%) of the correspondence consisted of unsolicited letters written by people to thank the author, to share their own situations and the effects that the book did or did not have on their life, or to ask for additional information, the possibility of getting treatment, etc. A smaller number of the letters contained criticism about the authors and their remarks, attested a desire to get the recipient to take a stand in a public controversy, or were written with the idea of helping someone who was in a difficult situation. Whilst it was clearly difficult to get socio-demographic information about the writers of the letters, I can nevertheless confirm that 73% of the letters were written by women². A little less than half of the letters mentions a difficult, even very difficult (financial, psychological, family, health, or work-related) situation.

² The gendered balance of the readership has been often dealt with in literature. Illouz (2008) gives the idea that there has been a common history between feminist issues and the promotion of a psychological language where emotional aspects had been given little consideration before, for example in the workplace, until some considered that the self-help movement ultimately betrayed feminist ideals by favoring women submission and

The letters and interviews were entirely transcribed and rendered anonymous. All this material was then subjected to content analysis borrowing from grounded theories (Glaser and Strauss, 1967). A first discovery phase consisted of an inductive manual coding (i.e. identifying meaningful units) on paper of the 335 letters and interviews, with no more theoretical presuppositions than these two questions: how do readers make sense of their SHBs readings? How do they concretely interact with the book? This first phase enabled us to build a first coding grid which was made of 8 large nodes. Four of them refer to the way people interact with the books (what type of behaviour people concretely have in relation to these books? How do people put their trust in them? How do they cooperate with them? How do they act in their daily life after reading them?), while three of them deal with the way these readings affect the readers (why do readers read SHBs? What kind of supportive effects do they feel? What kind of normative worldview do they develop?). The last one deals with methodological issues, such as social desirability or difficulty to make people talk about their reading behaviour. This coding grid was inserted in Nvivo along with the interviews and letters for the second coding. In a second phase, the material was systematically coded and hierarchical nodes helped to develop the 8 first large nodes. This second coding process aimed at achieving theoretical saturation, as no significant elements (even one bringing contradictions) were left outside. The creation of codes ceased progressively as the existing nodes were proved sufficient to label further meaningful units of material ³.

Of course, this empirical material cannot make any claim to representativeness (especially with regard to those who do not take the trouble to write to SHB authors) and I am not trying here to provide a portrait of the entire population of SHB readers. I would like to show that the description and analysis of the ways these texts are used in practice are an effective way to understand the reasons for these works' success rather than looking at their content only.

3. Why do people read self-help books? Reading in touch with reality.

People read SHBs for an extremely wide variety of reasons and react in many ways to the books, which makes it very difficult to construct a typology. SHBs may provide some people with 'simple' technical support, whereas other readers willingly tell how such books changed their life completely. Some readers praise only one or two books, despising the rest of self-help movement, whereas others cannot stop exploring other books once they have started, even if they won't finish most of them.

However, beyond the many cases, reasons, and situations mentioned, one cannot but be struck by one finding: all self-help readers are able to explain *why* they began reading self-help books, using a similar script. In their accounts, the reasons for reading such works are connected to a rupture in their daily life: everything was going smoothly and then suddenly (or gradually) something was no longer 'right'. Most subjects developed accounts of how this event left them at a loss:

commercializing intimate life (Hochschild, 2003). For a non-critical analysis of this gendered aspect from a feminist perspective, see Simonds (1992). As I did not notice major differences between men and women in my sample, I won't discuss this issue in this paper.

³ The coding framework, which can be found in its French version at this address: <https://bit.ly/2IOoKpb>, eventually contained around 2000 significant units. For a complete presentation, see Marquis (2014: 201-206). For a discussion of the interest of bringing together the two datasets, see Marquis (2015).

(Man, 33 years old): It [self-help] first triggered something in me when I was 19, but the true self-questioning and true step forward took place when I was about 24. A serious relationship ended and that prompted me to be more introspective; it forced me to think, and there you are with these books....

(Woman, 37 years old): My story is a singular one, for I left Africa when I was 13 and ended up here [in Belgium]. So, there was truly a serious identity crisis, one that makes you try to understand, to go farther. I think that is what led me to read this type of books much earlier than the others [the other people whom I know].

The rupture creates an uneasiness which prompts (future) readers to turn to means or devices that they might never have considered in other circumstances but for which they now have hopes of effectiveness. Reading self-help books is thus justifiable and motivated by the uneasy situation that triggers it. Indeed, not a single person in my sample said that they read self-help literature ‘just like that’, by chance, for no reason or for pleasure. On the contrary, these readers stressed the fact that it was a lot of work (on oneself), possibly tiring, and not always pleasant. As one reader said, “this kind of reading is not what you do to relax or before going to sleep. I sit at my table with a pencil, and I have to be fully concentrated”. As sociologist Wendy Simonds has pointed out, the readers feel that the SHB make stronger demands on readers than fiction does' (1992:45). In other words, the readers do not expect the books to be pleasant or interesting first and foremost, but ‘concrete’ and ‘useful’ – in one word, ‘performative’ (Alexander, 2004), as the following excerpt shows:

(Woman, 38 years old): If it isn't concrete, it doesn't interest me...What interests me is what is practical, what I can do to myself at that moment or apply to others, of course...I read completely theoretical stuff from time to time because my mum is more theoretical. Humph, there are books that give you nothing, they turn in circles.

The readers' expectations thus all have one important thing in common, which is changing something in the specific world of everyday life, which Schütz calls (2007: 34) ‘paramount reality’. In their letters and interviews alike, the individuals constantly stressed that the only valid self-help books were those that made it possible to re-translate all situations ‘concretely’, that is, repatriating the situation to this specific world in which actions on their part were possible. The power of the self-help language game thus lies in this ability to re-translate potentially all problems into individual action. Consequently, there is no situation, however complicated it may be, with which the individual cannot theoretically cope with the help of her/his hands or mind.

4. The inquiries that self-help readers conduct

The expectation of effectiveness in difficult situations prompts the readers to carry out a common-sense inquiry about the book's credibility. Its purpose is to determine whether the book is indeed talking about the real world, that is to say, the paramount reality, in which the individual's actions are effective.

It is striking to see how extremely picky, even mistrustful, self-help readers claim to be when it comes to the credit to be given to their readings, while, if the inquiry is crowned with success, the complicity established with the works prompts the readers to accept most self-help claims. Analysing the corpus revealed three criteria used as yardsticks to measure the credibility of not just the work, but its author as well. These are, in order of increasing number of occurrences in the corpus, tradition, science, and life experience.

4.1. Tradition, scientific proof, and authentic experience

First of all, a large proportion of the readers whom I met through interviews or their letters believe that many of the themes that one finds in self-help literature are actually rehashes of common sense or ancient knowledge identified with bygone times (and often other places, such as the Far East) which led to the development of a certain art of living that we have unfortunately lost today. Accordingly, self-help manifests the fact that we are in the process of rediscovering, agonizingly but with a sense of amazement, what our ancestors knew and experienced.

(Woman, 40 years old): I definitely like to have different sources. There is one book which is a goldmine for me. It talks about the therapists of Alexandria and dates back to the time of Jesus Christ [...]. And you realise that there is nothing new today [...]. We haven't invented anything or, on the contrary, we tend more and more to forget things.

This idea that we have now 'lost' something belongs to a much broader Rousseauian perspective which is shared by almost all of these SHBs readers, namely, the idea that the world is currently 'in crisis' and that the problems we are facing today are rooted in 'contemporary society', in its creeping individualism and immoderate commodification (all themes which are perfectly in line with the French take on the 'crisis' mentioned above) which allegedly pervert the fundamentally good citizen.

The SHBs which claim to reconnect with such traditional knowledge are thus looked upon kindly by their readers: they give people access to a type of knowledge or truth about the world which can be obtained from various types of thinking and disciplines. The readers stressed the 'common subjects' that they found in various spiritual teachings from Asia or South America, monotheistic religions, and recent discoveries in the cognitive sciences or neuroscience.

(Woman, 62 years old): ... I looked into spiritual traditions a bit, those of Christianity, Buddhism and Islam, and realise that they basically all say the same thing, with some differences. [...] If you dissect them, you end up with what is developed in self-help.

This syncretic attitude is justified by the idea that even though an infinite number of ways of living one's life exist, there must be a limited number of rules and messages of universal scope, for example in the areas of communicating with others and avoiding violence. Consequently, the readers are reassured, rather than bored, by the great repetitiveness of this literature, a characteristic of which they are perfectly aware, and consider it to be indicative of the fact that they can trust in the effectiveness that the books claim to have.

The next criterion of credibility is the scientific recognition. In their letters and interviews alike, the self-help readers proved ambivalent about the importance that scientific evidence could have in their inquiries. On one hand, they use the author's scientific experience and the presence of scientific proof as criteria to reassure themselves of the seriousness or carefulness with which such books must be considered. This enables them to keep a good distance from SHBs which are in the readers' words threatening: 'sectarian' books written by gurus, a book which 'makes you turn your whole life upside down', or simply a book which will waste your time by telling nonsense.

On the other hand, while mentioning scientific recognition, readers repeatedly said that it was by no means crucial for a book's credibility. They consider that self-help deals with areas and carries messages which cannot always be re-translated easily in the scientific register, a register which in turn could be at odds with the readers' efferent criteria.

(Man, 62 years old): For me, the entire Transactional School [and] Neuro-linguistic Programming makes it possible to understand human beings [and oneself] relatively easily. Whereas psychology, the schools of psychology, the whole university curriculum with its jargon, for the layman that I am, well, understanding that psychology...Read Freud. I've read Freud. He's incomprehensible! All that knowledge, which may be good – I'm not saying it isn't – is completely inaccessible to the secretary or the accountant, whereas practically everyone can understand transactional analysis [and] the communication process. And they're true, at least for me, in any event! And so far, I've had no proof that it's false. It works. We don't know why, but it works [...]. Of course, this raises the hackles of all self-respecting academics, but that's the way it is.

This excerpt illustrates the ambiguous place that scientific evidence has in a search for what can be called an efficient meaning. In this search, the reader pits 'perhaps good' but 'inaccessible' academic scientific knowledge against self-help reference tools, which 'almost everyone can understand' and in addition 'are true for me in any event', because no one has as yet proven that what they say is wrong and, above all, because 'it works', even if we don't know why. Consequently, self-help readers say that they do not let themselves be impressed by any scientific background that the authors may claim to have but take advantage of such qualifications to confirm the quality of their readings in the eyes of those who are dubious about self-help literature's credentials. In fact, they are more interested in the possible legitimacy that a self-help author may vaunt – an author who, 'in spite of everything', is a scientist and has finally managed to convince colleagues who previously laughed at her/him – than in any scientific evidence that s/he puts forward.

Finally, the authors' hands-on, real-life experiences are incontestably the type of argument that the readers appreciate most. A book which is not inspired by actual experiences taking place in the same everyday life-world as the one the readers would like to change cannot be a good book. From the reader's perspective, the author must at least give them true stories (for example, arising out of her/his therapeutic practice), and even, if possible, her/his own story of suffering and success.

(Woman, 58 years old): [The author does not need] necessarily to be a shrink or anything else, but above all someone with experience. When I say

'therapist', that's not necessarily someone with a university degree. It's someone who has had the opportunity to see enough people to talk from experience and not theory [...]. You cannot challenge someone else's experience [...].

Having experienced the same situations described by an author is, in the readers' eyes, the 'open sesame' to accede to the status of self-help writer, because authentic, hands-on, real-life experience, which cannot lie, gives those who claim to have it the role of torch-bearers for their fellows still in the dark. Such people are able to say what something truly is (what it is 'truly' to suffer from such-and-such a disease, what it's like to break off a relationship, etc.) and can share a form of wisdom or expertise about how to 'live with it' or to 'manage to put it behind you'. The readers admitted to being won over by authors who told their own stories, who recounted their own suffering. The letters were even more marked by this search for testimony about real-life experience. Many readers effectively wrote letters to the authors to thank them not only for their books, but also for their *pathways* or *histories*, their *life experiences*.

*(letter to Cyrulnik) Dear author,
I'd like to thank you for BEING and tell you how much what you ARE, what you have LIVED THROUGH, and what you have DONE with that is important to me, a grain of sand on an immense beach.*

*(letter to Cyrulnik) Hello,
Pardon my familiarity, but it's because I feel close to you. [...] I wanted to thank you for sharing the paths you've taken, your roaming and your discoveries with the largest possible audience. I have almost finished reading your last book [...] and reading it gave me a great deal of pleasure as well as creating a certain number of tense moments that I have noted with great interest and am taking pleasure in trying to decipher.*

*(letter to d'Ansembourg)
[...] I want to write to you to tell you a few things: you make me feel good; thank you for being who you are. [...] What is more, I feel that your words are true, right, that they come out of your experience (what could be better than to share our lives, than testimony!), it's solid stuff, we can trust you.*

We can now ask why mainly these three criteria, rather than other ones, are valued, and why they are valued in the way that is described above. The description of the inquiry into the book's credibility must not give the impression that the readers are trying to de-construct (as a scientist would do) the self-help discourse. No one is going to try to check the information, to compare the sources, to challenge each of the text's assertions or propositions, or to analyse the contradictions between authors (even though they are completely able to detect them). Dewey calls this type of inquiry a "common sense inquiry" and differentiates it from a scientific survey: '...common sense is concerned with a field which is dominantly qualitative, while science is compelled by its own problems and goals to state its subject matter in terms of magnitude and other mathematical relations which are non-qualitative. The other fact is that since common sense is concerned, directly and indirectly, with problems of use and enjoyment, it is inherently teleological' (Dewey, 1993:138). The inquiries carried out by the readers, who are confronted to a multitude of self-help books which claim to help them, are indeed along such lines. The aim is to solve a practical problem which is: can I use this book

in the context I live in, or would it be better to read another one? In the readers' opinion, these three criteria are so many good indicators for considering that a book can (or cannot) change something in their life whilst avoiding having to believe blindly the promises of effectiveness given on the back cover. For that is effectively what is at work each time: it is not so much a matter of making sure that the book in question is theoretically true as that of ensuring that reading it will make a difference in the paramount reality.

5.2. Ending the inquiry to play the self-help game.

The readers in my sample readily reported that an attitude of exaggerated mistrust was likely to annihilate any possibility of having an effective self-help experience. As a result, they claimed that they were 'open minded', tolerant, and without preconceptions, even regarding materials that did not always meet the criteria of inquiry that they usually set.

(Woman, 38 years old) The Four Agreements... (A Toltec Wisdom Book, by Miguel Ruiz), it's awfully bad, it's New Age through and through. But, well, I was so down, I was too down; it did me a world of good, but then I was completely out of it.

(Woman, 54 years old) For example, John Gray's Men Are from Mars, Women Are from Venus. It's true that I read it, at the beginning, I rushed to read it like everyone else. I read it and found it...humph. Well, because there were new things in it, but well, all that American preachiness, because, good God, that stuff is clearly moralising. But the very practical stuff, ok. For example, since [I've read it], I no longer bother my husband when he has a problem. That's for certain.

The readers felt that it would be necessary to play the game and adopted an attitude that one might try to pin down with the famous words of the psychoanalyst Octave Mannoni (1985), 'I know very well, but all the same': '...I'm quite aware of the fact that Ruiz's book has a New Age side to it, but it did me a world of good' is what this researcher in economics – a woman who moreover touted her scientific positivism in the course of the interview – seemed to say. 'I know quite well that Gray's book is highly normative, with "American preachiness", but the messages that it carries nevertheless work very well in my relationship with my husband', this 54-year-old woman, who moreover described herself as a very active feminist, added. So, there comes a time when the readers put an end to their inquiries, the aim of which is less to know whether the statements are 'truly true' than to free themselves from being constantly bothered by uncertainty about the possibility that the book will make good on its promises, for such uncertainty would prevent them to take advantage of the *modi operandi* they look for in such writings. Self-help readers are not searching to establish that what they are reading is absolutely real or credible. Rather, they want to be certain that it is *sufficiently credible* and *sufficiently real* to warrant their confidence and enable them to believe reasonably in the possibility of its effectiveness in their daily life thereafter.

If the inquiry is successful, the reader can then consider that s/he can relate to the world that the self-help book presents as 'taken for granted'. In speaking of the 'discoveries' of self-help literature, the readers in my study talked about a world 'already there', one that pre-existed both the reader and the author of the self-help book, but which the latter made 'knowable' for the former. In other words, the readers gave the impression of taking the world that the book

described as a given and perceived themselves as suffering from a lack of knowledge or know-how that the self-help book could help overcome.

(Man, 23 years old): People often talk about IQ, but there is also the same thing, intelligence, on the emotional level. And [in the book], the authors explain that someone who uses their emotions intelligently can succeed better in life than someone with a high IQ. So, there's a slightly scientific aspect in that.

(Woman, 54 years old): For example, the books which helped us a bit when we [my husband and I] were having a 'crisis' are Paule Salomon's books. [...] With Salomon, what's interesting is that it's like a map. She doesn't tell you what you must do, she tells you, 'Here are what we've observed; we can tell you that couples go through this and that phase', and so what helped us was actually the fact that we asked ourselves, 'And where are we in all that?'

(Man, 62 years old): [one book that I read was] My Mother/My Self, by Nancy Friday. It dates back to the 1970s [...] it concerned what in transactional analysis is called the transgenerational script transfer. And [...] I realised that we take our ancestors' scripts on board, [...] I said to myself, 'Gee, in fact I've truly incorporated those scripts'.

(letter to d'Ansembourg): You have enlightened me about many things: the principle of alternation [of emotions], understanding what goes on inside me, guiltiness, feelings, etc. Everything has become so clear, it's all obvious now! Finally, I also wanted to be a drop in that ocean and let you know about the change to which you contributed. There you have it.

These excerpts suggest that the readers felt that the self-help texts had demonstrated what they recounted sufficiently to enable them to skip all questions preliminary to those that truly interested them, *i.e.*, 'What can I do with what is written?' The emotional quotient, forebears' scripts, phases in the couple's journey, principle of alternation of emotions, etc., are all entities for which the reality is no longer questioned. The only thing left to do is to insert them into operational plans (*working on* one's emotional quotient, *overcoming* the crisis phase, *erasing* the forebears' scripts from one's mind, etc.) which enable the readers to take control of their problems again. The readers, for their part, 'learn', 'become aware of', 'get explanations' about certain things about themselves, or come away from the books 'enlightened'.

5. Discussion: a moral context making the self-help game possible and prestigious.

The previous section showed that self-help readers develop an attitude characterised by an expectation of (sometimes urgent) effectiveness from the books. This attitude should be understood in the readers' system of relevance: an efferent reading (Rosenblatt), guided by expectations of modification in the paramount reality (Schütz), leading to a teleological common-sense inquiry (Dewey) about the book's credibility. Readers are not theoretically interested in the reality or veracity of the messages, but in what we may call an "efficient and

sufficient reality”, a reality which is related to the level of individual actions and indexed to effectiveness.

The acknowledgement of the reader’s biographically determined situation and investment helps moving away from an analysis only based on the sole text of SHBs, which leads to the construction of a theoretical reader whose principal feature is to be *transparent*, as in the classic model of the hypodermic syringe, that Adorno (2001), for example, used in his analysis of horoscopes in the dailies. In this perspective, after the message sinks into the reader (his/her mind, habitus, etc.), it controls the reader’s thoughts and deeds (Radway, 1986:7). It seems to me that the problem is not whether and how much readers “believe” in the reality of the promises made by SHBs (and in the first place the commitment to help people make themselves) or whether the book dominates readers through potential (and hard to prove) effects. We showed that readers must and are ready to play the self-help game to allow it to produce its announced effects.

My own critique of this critical perspective entails two precautions. First, I am not saying that a scholarly reading (sociological reading, *inter alia*) of a text or cultural object must be disqualified on the grounds that this reading is useless or unable to claim to generate any knowledge about the phenomenon. It is important to differentiate two operations: on one hand the content analysis and on the other hand the uncontrolled deduction of real effects from a content analysis. This second operation – and solely this second operation – is effectively what my argument strives to challenge. Second, by no means is it a matter of pitting the figure of a resistant, capable, competent reader, to see 'the reader as a hero' (Grisholm, 1993:457) *against* the incompetent reader constructed by a critical attitude. Such a position, based as much on ethical grounds (to restore the shared humanity between the average reader and the scientist) as on epistemological considerations (to emphasise the reader’s interpretative resources), has led to many reception studies, driven by 'the conviction that one will *find* an active audience' (Press, 2006:96) and which today are clearly seen to have contributed to the resistant reader mythology (Livingstone, 1994).

In a nutshell, an embodied and situated approach of SHB reading, while being essential to the understanding of what is at stake in this transaction between a book and a reader, does not automatically imply a positive stance towards this practice or towards readers’ abilities. Neither does it presuppose a limitation of the scope to the micro-situation of reading. On the contrary, this approach opens the possibility of asking what kind of social and moral context makes such a transaction not only possible (readers know how to behave in front of SHB and what to expect from them), but also meaningful and efficient in readers’ perspective.

Playing the self-help game implies a literacy, i.e., not only the cultural resources but also 'the ensemble of abilities necessary to exploit these cultural resources' (Brockeimer et al. quoted by Griswold, 2005:11). In Wittgenstein’s terms (2010), one can say that readers are familiar with the self-help language game and know how to play it. In doing so, readers rely on the assumption that, when facing problems, each of us can make a difference by acting or thinking in a different way (the paramount reality). Therefore, they share and act upon the idea that, when confronted to a problem, wondering what each of us can do is meaningful and effective. 'To take responsibility for one’s situation and not depend on someone or something else': that is precisely the message the readers like to find in self-help literature, although it is one which is criticised by many analysts. They are searching for and promoting this re-translation of any problem into an individual action. This paper showed what are the pragmatical and situated reasons for them to do so.

Nevertheless, this way of internalising responsibilities is in no way obvious or natural. It is only one ‘attitude towards contingency’ among others available in a social context, which strongly differs for example from the projective logic of sorcery where, when dealing with bad luck, one should complain and accuse other entities (Peter Winch, 1964: 319). Further research might focus on the elective affinity between the ability to play the self-help game by holding oneself accountable (Douglas, 1980: 58) and a broader social and moral context, making this attitude towards contingencies not only possible, but also prestigious. Ehrenberg (2010: 238) recently described this context as a society in which it is commonly assumed that each individual is capable of autonomy. This is a moral assumption: whatever the situation in which an individual is, he has internal resources and room for manoeuvre (be it simply to change one’s point of view on the situation). This idea is indeed repeated on each page of the self-help literature, as critics show. By using SHBs, readers also take part in valuing and simultaneously legitimate the importance of an active position (never giving up, always searching for solutions) in the face of adversity rather than a passive position (complaining, waiting for solutions, being a victim).

(Woman: 62 years old): SHBs readers are people who want to get rid of the victimization process.

(Woman: 55 years old): Why do people read SHB? Maybe because we feel even worse doing nothing instead of trying to get by, I guess. Perhaps when we do nothing, we adopt a victim status in fact: I am a victim of what happens to me [...] I think we choose what we want, and we have what we want.

Acknowledging this dimension of prestige could lead to the following hypothesis: while solving their own problems, readers also practice a form of social distinction based on a new type of capital, i.e., the quality of individuals measured by their ability to take charge of themselves. This would maybe help explaining why, as in the following excerpt, SHBs readers often present themselves as a minority group, which is ahead of its time (especially in the French-speaking context) and masters a certain wisdom.

(Woman: 35 years old): I do not know what my former friends think [of my evolution since I began reading SHBs], but I can imagine: she’s crazy, illuminated..., she will be worse off with those things... and yes it was the stuff which made me question myself. And we separated a bit. Now I sometimes see them, I still like them, even if we have far less to share. They have not taken the path I took, but either they are boozing, or they are mentally sick, ... they do not solve their problems the same way.

A moral and global perspective on SHB reading investigating the social and moral environment of this practice could thus include a critical dimension. This is not contradictory to the embodied approach developed in this paper. As Eva Illouz puts it, « my critique of the social uses of therapy does *not contradict* actors’ own understandings and uses of therapy as a cultural resource to improve their lives » (2008: 223). Holding together these two aspects would help understanding that autonomy and internalising responsibility are not just imposed social standards, but also categories and attitudes used by people to get out of their troubles, as well as shared values which confer a certain prestige to those who use them. This is the

threefold sociological significance of the question: 'What can I do myself to solve my problems?'.

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