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Promises of Peace and Passion: Enthusing the Readers of Self-Help

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The rise of expertise in the lives of women is a complex and prolonged process that began when the old networks through which women had learned from each other were being discredited or destroyed (Ehrenreich and English). Enclosed spaces of expert power formed separately from political control, market logistics and the pressures exerted by their subjects (Rose and Miller). This, however, was not a question of *imposing* expertise on women and forcing them to adhere to expert proclamations: "the experts could not have triumphed had not so many women welcomed them, sought them out, and ... organised to promote their influence" (Ehrenreich and English 28). Women's continuing enthusiasm for self-help books – and it is mainly women who buy them (Wood) – attests to the fact that they are still welcoming expertise into their lives. This paper argues that a major factor in the popularity of self-help is the reversal of the conventional 'priestly' relationship and ethic of confession, in a process of *conversion* that relies on the enthusiasm and active participation of the reader.

Miller and Rose outline four ways in which human behaviour can be transformed: regulation (enmeshing people in a code of standards); captivation (seducing people with charm or charisma); education (training, convincing or persuading people); and conversion (transforming personhood, and ways of experiencing the world so that people understand themselves in fundamentally new ways). Of these four ways of acting upon others, it is conversion that is the most potent, because it changes people at the level of their own subjectivity – "personhood itself is remade" (Miller and Rose 35).

While theories of conversion cannot be adequately discussed here, one aspect held in common by theories of religious conversion as well as those from psychological studies of 'brainwashing' is *enthusiasm*. Rambo's analysis of the stages of religious conversion, for example, includes 'questing' in an active and engaged way, and a probable encounter with a passionately enthusiastic believer. Melia and Ryder, in their study of 'brainwashing,' state that two of the end stages of conversion are euphoria and proselytising – a point to which I will return in the conclusion. In order for a conversion to occur, then, the reader must be not only intellectually convinced of the truth, but must feel it is an important or vital truth, a truth she needs – in short, the reader must be *enthused*.

The popularity of self-help books coincides with the rise of psy expertise more generally (Rose, "Identity"; *Inventing*), but self-help putatively offers *escape* from the experts, whilst simultaneously immersing its readers in expertise. Readers of self-help view themselves as reading sceptically (Simonds), interpretively (Rosenblatt) and resistingly (Fetterly, Rowe). They choose to read books as an educational activity (Dolby), rather than attending counselling or psychotherapy sessions in which they might be subject to manipulation, domination and control by a therapist (Simonds). I have discussed the nature of the advice in relationship manuals elsewhere (Hazleden, "Relationship"; "Pathology"), but the intention of this paper is to investigate the ways in which the authors attempt to enthuse and convert the reader.

Best-Selling Expertise

In common with other best-selling genres, popular relationship manuals begin trying to enthuse the reader on the covers, which are intended to attract the reader, to establish the professional – or 'priestly' – credentials of the author and to assert the merit of the book, presenting the authors as experienced professionally-qualified experts, and

advertising their bestseller status. These factors form part of the marketing 'buzz' or collective enthusiasm about a particular author or book.

As part of the process of establishing themselves in the priestly role, the authors emphasise their professional qualifications and experience. Most authors use the title 'Dr' on the cover (Hendrix, McGraw, Forward, Gray, Cowan and Kinder, Schlessinger) or 'PhD' after their names (Vedral, DeAngelis, Spezzano). Further claims on the covers include assertions of the prominence of the authors in their field. Typical are DeAngelis's claim to being "America's foremost relationships expert," and Hendrix's claim to being "the world's leading marital therapist." Clinical and professional experience is mentioned, such as Spezzano's "twenty-three years of counseling experience" (1) and Forward's experience as "a consultant in many southern California Medical and psychiatric facilities" (iii). The cover of Spezzano's book claims that he is a "therapist, seminar leader, author, lecturer and visionary leader." McGraw emphasises his formal qualifications throughout his book, saying, "I had more degrees than a thermometer" (McGraw 6), and he refers to himself throughout as "Dr. Phil," much like "Dr Laura" (Schlessinger).

Facts and Secrets

The authors claim their ideas are based on clinical practice, research, and evidence. One author claims, "In this book, there is a wealth of tried and accurate information, which has worked for thousands of people in my therapeutic practice and seminars over the last two decades" (Spezzano 1). Another claims that he "worked with hundreds of couples in private practice and thousands more in workshops and seminars" and subsequently based his ideas on "research and clinical observations" (Hendrix xviii). Dowling refers to "four years of research ... interviewing professionals who work with and study women." She went to all this trouble because, she assures us, "I wanted facts" (Dowling, dust-jacket, 30).

All this is in order to assure the reader of the relevance and build her enthusiasm about the importance of the book. McGraw (226) says he "reviewed case histories of literally thousands and thousands of couples" in order "to choose the right topics" for his book. Spezzano (7) claims that his psychological exercises come from clinical experience, but "more importantly, I have tested them all personally. Now I offer them to you."

This notion of being in possession of important new knowledge of which the reader is unaware is common, and expressed most succinctly by McGraw (15): "I have learned what you know and, more important, what you don't know." This knowledge may be referred to as 'secret' (e.g. DeAngelis), or 'hidden' (e.g. Dowling) or as a recent discovery. Readers seem to accept this – they often assume that self-help books spring 'naturally' from clinical investigation as new information is 'discovered' about the human psyche (Lichterman 432).

The Altruistic Author

On the assumption that readers will be familiar with other self-help books, some authors find it necessary to explain why they felt motivated to write one themselves. Usually these take the form of a kind of altruistic enthusiasm to share their great discoveries. Cowan and Kinder (xiv) claim that "one of the wonderful, intrinsic rewards of working with someone in individual psychotherapy is the rich and intense relationship that is established, [but] one of the frustrations of individual work is that in a whole lifetime it is impossible to touch more than a few people." Morgan (26) assures us that "the results of applying certain principles to my marriage were so revolutionary that I had to pass them on in the four lesson Total Woman course, and now in this book."

The authors justify their own addition to an overcrowded genre by delineating what is distinctive about their own book, or what other "books, articles and surveys missed"

(Dowling 30) or misinterpreted. Beattie (98-102) devotes several pages to a discussion of Dowling to assert that Dowling's 'Cinderella Complex' is more accurately known as 'codependency.' The authors of another book admit that their ideas are not new, but claim to make a unique contribution because they are "writing from a much-needed male point of view" (Cowan and Kinder, back cover). Similarly, Gray suggests "many books are one-sided and unfortunately reinforce mistrust and resentment toward the opposite sex." This meant that "a definitive guide was needed for understanding how healthy men and women are different," and he promises "This book provides that vision" (Gray 4,7).

Some authors are vehement in attacking other experts' books as "gripe sessions," "gobbledegook" (Schlessinger 51, 87), or "ridiculous" (Vedral 282). McGraw (9) writes "it is amazing to me how this country is overflowing with marital therapists, psychiatrists and psychologists, counselors, healers, advice columnists, and self-help authors – and their approach to relationships is usually so embarrassing that I want to turn my head in shame." His own book, by contrast, will be quite different from anything the reader has heard before, because "it differs from what relationship 'experts' tell you" (McGraw 45).

Confessions of an Author

Because the authors are writing about intimate relationships, they are also keen to establish their credentials on a more personal level. "Loving, losing, learning the lessons, and reliving have been my path" (Carter-Scott 247-248), says one, and another asserts that, "It's taken me a long time to understand men. It's been a difficult and often painful journey and I've made a lot of mistakes along the way in my own relationships" (DeAngelis xvi).

The authors are even keen to admit the mistakes they made in their previous relationships. Gray says, "In my previous relationships, I had become indifferent and unloving at difficult times ... As a result, my first marriage had been very painful and difficult" (Gray 2). Others describe the feelings of disappointment with their marriages:

We gradually changed. I was amazed to realize that Charlie had stopped talking. He had become distant and preoccupied. ... Each evening, when Charlie walked in the front door after work, a cloud of gloom and tension floated in with him. That cloud was almost tangible. ... this tension cloud permeated our home atmosphere ... there was a barrier between us. (Morgan 18)

Doyle (14) tells a similar tale: "While my intentions were good, I was clearly on the road to marital hell. ... I was becoming estranged from the man who had once made me so happy. Our marriage was in serious trouble and it had only been four years since we'd taken our vows." The authors relate the bewilderment they felt in these failing relationships: "My confusion about the psychology of love relationships was compounded when I began to have problems with my own marriage. ... we gave our marriage eight years of intensive examination, working with numerous therapists. Nothing seemed to help" (Hendrix xvii).

Even the process of writing the relationship manual itself can be uncomfortable:

This was the hardest and most painful chapter for me to write, because it hit so close to home ... I sat down at my computer, typed out the title of this chapter, and burst into tears. ... It was the pain of my own broken heart. (DeAngelis 74)

The Worthlessness of Expertise

Thus, the authors present their confessional tales in which they have learned important lessons through their own suffering, through the experience of life itself, and not through the intervention of any form of external or professional expertise. Furthermore, they highlight the failure of their professional training. Susan Forward (4) draws a comparison between her professional life as a relationship counsellor and the "Susan who went home at night and twisted herself into a pretzel trying to keep her husband from yelling at her." McGraw tells of a time when he was counselling a couple, and:

Suddenly all I could hear myself saying was blah, blah, blah. Blah, blah, blah, blah. As I sat there, I asked myself, 'Has anybody noticed over the last fifty years that this crap doesn't work? Has it occurred to anyone that the vast majority of these couples aren't getting any better?' (McGraw 6)

The authors go to some lengths to demonstrate that their new-found knowledge is unlike anything else, and are even prepared to mention the apparent contradiction between the role the author already held as a relationship expert (before they made their important discoveries) and the failure of their own relationships (the implication being that these relationships failed because the authors themselves were not yet beneficiaries of the wisdom contained in their latest books). Gray, for example, talking about his "painful and difficult" first marriage (2), and DeAngelis, bemoaning her "mistakes" (xvi), allude to the failure of their marriage to each other, at a time when both were already well-known relationship experts. Hendrix (xvii) says:

As I sat in the divorce court waiting to see the judge, I felt like a double failure, a failure as a husband and as a therapist. That very afternoon I was scheduled to teach a course on marriage and the family, and the next day, as usual, I had several couples to counsel. Despite my professional training, I felt just as confused and defeated as the other men and women who were sitting beside me.

Thus the authors present the knowledge they have gained from their experiences as being unavailable through professional marital therapy, relationship counselling, and other self-help books. Rather, the advice they impart is presented as the hard-won outcome of a long and painful process of personal discovery.

Peace and Passion

Once the uniqueness of the advice is established, the authors attempt to enthuse the reader by describing the effects of following it. Norwood (*Women* 4) says her programme led to "the most rewarding years of my life," and Forward (10) says she "discovered enormous amounts of creativity and energy in myself that hadn't been available to me before." Gray (268) asserts that, following his discoveries "I personally experienced this inner transformation," and DeAngelis (126) claims "I am compassionate where I used to be critical; I am patient where I used to be judgmental." Doyle (23) says, "practicing the principles described in this book has transformed my marriage into a passionate, romantic union." Similarly, in discussing the effects of her ideas on her marriage, Morgan (26) speaks of "This brand new love between us" that

"has given us a brand new life together."

Having established the success of their ideas and techniques on their own lives, the authors go on to relate stories about their successful application to the lives and relationships of their clients. One author writes that "When I began implementing my ideas ... The divorce rate in my practice sharply declined, and the couples ... reported a much deeper satisfaction in their marriages" (Hendrix xix). Another claims "Repeatedly I have heard people say that they have benefited more from this new understanding of relationships than from years of therapy" (Gray 7). Morgan, describing the effects of her 'Total Woman' classes, says:

Attending one of the first classes in Miami were wives of the Miami Dolphin football players ... it is interesting to note that their team won every game that next season and became the world champions! ... Gals, I wouldn't dream of taking credit for the Superbowl ... (Morgan 188)

In case we are still unconvinced, the authors include praise and thanks from their inspired clients: "My life has become exciting and wonderful. Thank you," writes one (Vedral 308). Gray (6) talks of the "thousands of inspirational comments that people have shared" about his advice. Vedral (307) says "I have received thousands of letters from women ... thanking me for shining a beam of light on their situations."

If these clients have transformed their lives, the authors claim, so can the reader. They promise that the future will be "exceptional" (Friedman 242) and "wonderful" (Norwood, *Women* 257). It will consist of "self fulfilment, love, and joy" (Norwood, *Women* 26), "peace and joy" (Hendrix xx), "freedom and a lifetime of healing, hope and happiness" (Beattie), "peace, relief, joy, and passion that you will never find any other way" (Doyle 62) – in short, "happiness for the rest of your life" (Spezzano 77).

Summary

In order to effect the conversion of their readers, the authors seek to create enthusiasm about their books. First, they appeal to the modern tradition of credentialism, making claims about their formal professional qualifications and experience. This establishes them as credible 'priests.' Then they make calculable, factual, evidence-based claims concerning the number of books they have sold, and appeal to the epistemological authority of the methodology involved in establishing the findings of their books. They provide evidence of the efficacy of their own unique methods by relating the success of their ideas when applied to their own lives and relationships, and those of their clients and their readers. The authors also go to some lengths to establish that they have personal experience of relationship problems, especially those the reader is currently presumed to be experiencing. This establishes the 'empathy' essential to Rogerian therapy (Rogers), and an informal claim to lay knowledge or insight. In telling their own personal stories, the authors establish an ethic of *confession*, in which the truth of oneself is sought, unearthed and revealed in "the infinite task of extracting from the depths of oneself, in between the words, a truth which the very form of the confession holds out like a shimmering mirage" (Foucault, *History* 59).

At the same time, by claiming that their qualifications were not helpful in solving these personal difficulties, the authors assert that much of their professional training was useless or even harmful, suggesting that they are aware of a general scepticism towards experts (cf. Beck, Giddens), and share these doubts. By implying that it is *other* experts who are perhaps not to be trusted, they distinguish their own work from anything offered by other relationship experts, thereby circumventing "the paradox of self-help books' existence" (Cheery) and proliferation. Thus, the authors present their

motives as altruistic, whilst perhaps questioning the motives of others. Their own book, they promise, will be the one (finally) that brings a future of peace, passion and joy.

Conversion, Enthusiasm and the Reversal of the Priestly Relationship

Although power relations between authors and readers are complex, self-help is evidence of power in one of its most efficacious forms – that of conversion. This is a relationship into which one enters voluntarily and enthusiastically, in the name of oneself, for the benefit of oneself. Such power enthuses, persuades, incites, invites, provokes and entices, and it is therefore a strongly subjectifying power, and most especially so because the relationship of the reader to the author is one of *choice*. Because the reader can choose between authors, and skip or skim sections, she can concentrate on the parts of the therapeutic diagnosis that she believes specifically apply to her. For example, Grodin (414) found it was common for a reader to attach excerpts from a book to a bathroom mirror or kitchen cabinet, and to re-read and underline sections of a book that seemed most relevant. In this way, through her enthusiastic participation, the reader becomes her own expert, her own therapist, in control of certain aspects of the encounter, which nonetheless must always take place on psy terms.

In many conversion studies, the final stage involves the assimilation and embodiment of new practices (e.g. Paloutzian *et al.* 1072), whereby the convert employs or utilises her new truths. I argue that in self-help books, this stage occurs in the reversal of the 'priestly' relationship. The 'priestly' relationship between client and therapist, is one in which in which the therapist remains mysterious while the client confesses and is known (Rose, "Power"). In the self-help book, however, this relationship is reversed. The authors confess their own 'sins' and imperfections, by relating their own disastrous experiences in relationships and wrong-thinking. They are, of course, themselves enthusiastic converts, who are enmeshed within the power that they exercise (cf. Foucault *History; Discipline*), as these confessions illustrate.

The reader is encouraged to go through this process of confession as well, but she is expected to do so privately, and to play the role of priest and confessor to herself. Thus, in a reversal of the priestly relationship, the person who 'is knowledge' within the book itself is the *author*. It is only if the reader takes up the invitation to perform for herself the priestly role that she will become an object of knowledge – and even then, only to herself, albeit through a psy diagnostic gaze provided for her. Of course, this instance of confession to the self still places the individual "in a network of relations of power with those who claim to be able to extract the truth of these confessions through their possession of the keys to interpretation" (Dreyfus and Rabinow 174), but the keys to interpretation are provided to the reader by the author, and left with her for her own safekeeping and future use.

As mentioned in the introduction, conversion involves questing in an active and engaged way, and may involve joy and proselytising. Because the relationship must be one of active participation, the enthusiasm of the reader to apply these truths to her own self-understanding is critical. Indeed, the convert is, by her very nature, an enthusiast.

Conclusion

Self-help books seek to bring about a transformation of subjectivity from powerlessness to active goal-setting, personal improvement and achievement. This is achieved by a process of conversion that produces particular choices and types of identity, new subjectivities remade through the production of new ethical truths. Self-help discourses endow individuals with new enthusiasms, aptitudes and qualities – and these can then be passed on to others. Indeed, the self-help reader is invited, by means of the author's confessions, to become, in a limited way, the author's own therapist – ie, she is invited to perform an examination of the author's (past) mistakes, to diagnose the author's

(past) condition and to prescribe an appropriate (retrospective) cure for this condition. Through the process of diagnosing the author and the author's clients, using the psy gaze provided by the author, the reader is rendered an expert in therapeutic wisdom and is converted to a new belief system in which she will become an enthusiastic participant in her own subjectification.

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