

Self-help as women's popular culture in suburban New Jersey: An ethnographic perspective

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Abstract

This study uses ethnographic audience research to contextualize self-help reading and investigates connections between gender, identity and the reception of self-help texts. The social context of self-help reading is more nuanced than critiques of self-help ideology and consumerism currently allow. Instead of seeing the self-help genre as exploiting individual and social problems for profit, this study describes a spiritual subculture in which self-help reading is also a source of authority and an expression of social identity. These findings challenge previous assumptions that self-help ideology minimizes the need for social interaction, discourages community building and isolates readers from the help of others.

Keywords: ethnographic audience research, interpretive communities, self-help, spirituality, women's popular culture, Oprah's Book Club, Eckhart Tolle.

On February 11, 2008, Oprah Winfrey introduced the first of ten live webcasts with Eckhart Tolle, author of *A New Earth: Awakening To Your Life's Purpose* (2005):

Welcome to our very first worldwide interactive event... Over 139 countries are represented in our class tonight... I have done a lot of things in my life, but I am most proud of the fact that all of you have joined us in this global community to talk about what I believe is one of the most important subjects and presented by one of the most important books of our time, *A New Earth: Awakening To Your Life's Purpose*. (Oprah Winfrey, February 11, 2008, http://www.oprah.com/book_club.html).

Meanwhile, in an affluent New Jersey shore town, my mother had been leading meetings at her local spa and alternative healing center, where she and fifteen to twenty women have

met each month for the past nine years to discuss the latest in spiritual growth and practice. Subsequent to Oprah's webcasts, my mother's women's group began discussing Eckhart Tolle's *A New Earth*, one chapter a month, for ten months.

Through describing one community, a self-designated "women's group," my goal is to provide an ethnographic understanding that will add insight to the way scholars theorize about similar texts, referred to here as *spiritual self-help*. Scholars have argued that self-help is worthy of scholarly attention due to the magnitude of the genre, its endurance over time (Parkins, 2001; Parkins & Brabazon, 2001; Woodstock, 2007), and a concern that its unique rhetoric is spreading from the texts, to the readers, to society at large (Askehave, 2004; Ebben, 1995; Crocker-Lakness, 2000; Gunn, 2002; Parkins & Brabazon, 2001; Woodstock, 2007). As an instrumental case study, "a particular case...examined mainly to provide insight into an issue or to redraw a generalization," (Denzin & Lincoln, 2008, p. 123) this study explores the particulars of one women's group throughout their encounter with one book, in order to think about the social and cultural contexts of self-help reading, especially as it relates to the genre's association with women. In this study, I ask: How do the Women's Group (WG) members read *A New Earth* and similar books? What social, cultural or textual contexts interact with their reading activities? How might identity and gender be connected to the reception of self-help texts?¹

This study contributes to the literature on ethnographic audience research in three ways. First, this research is one of relatively few reception studies of popular nonfiction. The few audience studies on self-help reading in particular are now over fifteen years old (Coyle & Grodin, 1993; Grodin, 1995; Simonds, 1992). Furthermore, most research on the self-help genre focuses on the rhetoric and ideology of the texts, rather than on audience reception. Second, many studies of the self-help genre have been undertaken without a consideration of its use by women (Askehave, 2004; Crocker-Lakness, 2000; Gunn, 2002; McGee, 2005; Starker, 1989; Woodstock, 2005, 2007) and the studies that have applied a feminist lens to self-help culture have shared a mostly pessimistic view of the genre (DeFrancisco, 1995; Ebben, 1995), with only a few exceptions (Grodin, 1991; Simonds, 1992). This study is distinct in the sense that it does not seek to discover whether "the self-help movement [is] recuperable for feminism or just a reaffirmation of bourgeois individualism" (Parkins & Brabazon, 2001, p. 142). Leaving aside the question of whether or not one agrees with the ideological content of the texts, this study instead contextualizes the act of self-help reading and examines possible connections among identity, gender, and the reception of self-help texts.

***A New Earth* and Spiritual Self-Help**

Author of several bestsellers, Tolle's website describes his teachings as "profound yet simple," having "helped countless people throughout the world find inner peace and greater fulfillment in their lives" (www.eckharttolle.com/home/about). During my fieldwork, *A New Earth* had already sold 6 million copies, leading The Penguin Group to announce record profits for 2008 (<http://us.penguin.com/>). In *A New Earth*, Tolle proposes that what is

considered the normal mind state is, in fact, dysfunctional. In this dysfunctional mind state, we misidentify our ego-based consciousness as our true self. Tolle explains that as people begin to realize that they are not their thoughts, but rather the consciousness that is able to observe thought, they will experience a shift in consciousness. Through this shift in consciousness (which Tolle notes cannot be initiated through reading, but must come through “grace”) it is possible for the human race as a whole to experience “a radical transformation of human consciousness” (Tolle, 2005, p. 13), which is to say, a new earth.

By definition, a genre is only a loose set of conventions. Terms like *self-help*, *new age*, *spiritual self-help*, *pyschoreligious*, *popular psychology*, *positive thinking* and *spiritual new age* are used interchangeably throughout academic writing, journalism and the publishing industry. In part, I attribute my categorization of *A New Earth* as *spiritual self-help* to interviews in which informants described it alternately as “spiritual” and “self-help.”² Its appearance on bestsellers lists also reflects its status as a sub-genre of self-help. It appeared on Barnes & Noble’s “Bestselling Self-Improvement” and “Bestselling Religion & Spirituality” lists as well as on *The New York Times* list of “Bestselling Paperback Advice.” On the inside cover of the book, The Library of Congress confers it with the subject label “Spiritual Life.”

While the Women’s Group (WG) read several other books during the year I observed them (April 2009–May 2010), my interviews focused on their reading of *A New Earth* more than on any other book in particular. My informants would likely agree with the label *spiritual self-help* to describe the books they read as part of the WG, but in order to engage with the academic literature on this subject, it is necessary to connect this sub-genre to the larger genre that I refer to as simply, *self-help*. When I make connections between studies that use a variety of terminology to describe this genre, I am making an assumption that this terminology describes texts that share similar characteristics. At the very least, my informants seem to agree that such texts, whether called *new age* or *spiritual*, for example, fit into the same broader category of *self-help*.

Liberal Feminism, “Women’s” Popular Culture and Self-Help

In general, [self-help] embodies a lethal form of oppression: that which is self-imposed. Women are told they have problems; furthermore, the sources of these problems lie within. (DeFrancisco, 1995, p. 109)

Sociologist and communication researchers have argued that the sort of American individualism advocated in self-help engenders a narcissistic self-centeredness that in turn erodes social and political life. (Woodstock, 2007, p. 167)

Everyday life for many—especially women, I would suspect—is profoundly imbued with spirituality; popular culture is suffused with it; the most-watched talk show [Oprah] is always talking about it. Cultural studies needs to get over its embarrassment and start talking about it too. (Parkins, 2001, p. 155)

As the above three quotes demonstrate, there is something about self-help that causes, to use the genre's own terminology, *dis-ease*. But like other genres marketed to and consumed primarily by women, what is at the heart of this discomfort may have as much to do with *who* is reading as it has to do with *what* is being read. Since this study focuses on a self-designated "women's group," I want to begin by making explicit the possible connections between self-help and women's studies. First, I want to argue that it is reasonable to consider self-help in the context of an ongoing conversation about other women's popular cultural forms. Second, I want to propose a historical basis in feminist thought for concern about what women are reading and consider some of the problems with such concern. Third, I want to connect scholarly criticism of self-help to ongoing ideological debates about the relative value of liberal feminism. Finally, I want to outline the ways that designating self-help as women's popular culture informs the theoretical orientation and methods used in this study.

The self-help market has consistently commanded a mostly female audience for at least three decades (Starker, 1989; Market Enterprises, 1999, 2006; "Marketing: Self-Improvement Products and Services," 1995). While women do comprise the majority of all book consumers, 64% (PubTrack, 2008), the gender disparity may be even more pronounced in this \$9.6 billion market, which includes not only books, but also CDs/DVDs, lectures, workshops and holistic institutes (Market Enterprises, 2006). Market Enterprises, Inc. suggests that the demographics of self-help consumers may mimic the make-up of subscribers to one of the market's leading magazines, for which female readers comprise 74% of the total readership. Furthermore, as exemplified by an article in the trade journal *Marketing to Women*, titled "Marketing: Self-Improvement Products and Services," (1995) this gender disparity is not lost on the industry – self-help products are often marketed specifically to women. *Marketing to Women* also reports that among self-help consumers, women represent an even larger segment of the market for "spirituality and Far Eastern topics" (1995, p.9). But self-help consumers are not only more likely to be female, they are also more likely to be middle-aged and "affluent" (Market Enterprises, 2006).

Thinking about self-help as a feminine pursuit, or put another way, as "women's popular culture," inevitably begs the question: "which women?" By bringing attention to the genre's association with "women," my intention is to consciously invoke the long-standing synecdoche, confusing *middle-class* women for *all* women. Opening up the category "women" necessitates not only looking beyond the middle-class woman, but also within that category. In order to take account of identity as it relates to the reading and social activities of a particular group of women, in the case of the present study, a group of white, middle-class women in suburban New Jersey, one must begin by asking, what is contained in

the image of a White, Suburban Woman? What does one expect to find or not find in this figure? Alternately, the classification as women's popular culture is also intended to invite reflection on self-help as a feminized activity, a genre described as "simplistic" (Woodstock, 2007), "narcissistic" (DeFrancisco, 1995), "irrational" (Askehave, 2004) and "bourgeois" (Parkins & Brabazon, 2001).

Positioning self-help as women's popular culture also provides the basis for some connections to feminist thought. For example, liberal feminism's emphasis on education and rationality has led to its abiding interest in the means to women's instruction, both formal and popular. In her book, *Feminist Theory: A Comprehensive Introduction*, Rosemarie Tong (1989) undertakes a kind of taxonomy of feminist theory, describing it in terms of seven ideological approaches: liberal, Marxist, radical, psychoanalytic, socialist, existentialist and postmodern. Although Tong admits that liberal feminism is the logical place to start in considering feminist theory, because the liberal perspective gave contemporary feminists something to react to, she rejects the notion of telling the story of feminism as an evolutionary start to finish. Thus, Tong describes liberal feminism by considering the contributions of Mary Wollstonecraft's 1792 *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* and Betty Friedan's 1963 *The Feminine Mystique*. Although over 150 years separate the two works, Tong considers them together as part of the canon of liberal feminist thought. As Tong explains, both works share many of the same strengths and weaknesses and have both been the object of ample criticism from later feminist scholars (Ehrenreich, 1979, p. 21; Gerson, 2002; hooks, 2000; Jaggar, 1983; Wendall, 1987).

Of critical importance to feminist communication scholars, especially those studying media texts targeted towards and consumed primarily by women, is the fact that, as examples of liberal feminist perspectives, both Wollstonecraft and Friedan suggest one cause of women's oppression can be found in *what women are reading*. In *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792) Wollstonecraft lambasts books that might reasonably be termed the popular culture of her day: books of *advice* and sentimental novels. In *The Feminine Mystique* (1963), Friedan, herself a magazine writer, critiqued the role of *experts* in books and magazines marketed to women, i.e., women's popular culture. In addition, both Wollstonecraft and Friedan share a particular (and perhaps paternalistic) concern for the situation of *middle-class women*.

The concerns Wollstonecraft and Friedan express about the advice of experts in women's books, the ability of language to migrate from books into everyday conversation and the ideology of women's popular culture are all the same concerns contemporary critical scholars have about the self-help genre (Askehave, 2004; Crocker-Lakness, 2000; DeFrancisco, 1995; Ebben, 1995; Woodstock, 2007). However, while liberal feminists may have begun a tradition of critiquing women's popular culture, contemporary criticism of self-help is often undergirded by a critique of liberal philosophy itself. Self-help books make a proposition, either implicitly or explicitly: read this book and your life will improve. Such messages have been criticized for contributing to a philosophy of individualism which minimizes the need for social interaction and finds personal causes for social and political

problems (Ebben, 1995; DeFrancisco, 1995; Woodstock, 2007). Indeed, ideological debates over the relative value of liberal feminism sound remarkably like debates over the relative value of self-help texts. For example, Wendell (1987) outlines three major critiques of liberal feminism: 1) it supports political equality on the basis that all human beings share certain characteristics and capacities, and thus obviates the role of society in constituting the individual; 2) it perpetuates a form of individualism that is competitive, masculine, capitalist, meritocratic and narcissist; 3) it describes the world through artificial, simplistic and inaccurate dichotomies such as mind/body and reason/emotion, *and* devalues those characteristics traditionally associated with women. Incidentally, all three of these critiques can be applied to the work of Wollstonecraft and Friedan.

In fact, reviewing the roots of feminism may well convince one that liberal feminism *is* self-help! McGee (2005) discusses Starker (1989) and Simonds (1992) designation of *The Feminine Mystique* as a self-help book, noting that this classification is made despite the fact that *The Feminine Mystique* uses none of the genre's conventions and includes historical and social scientific analysis. Even those who do not consider *The Feminine Mystique* as part of the self-help genre still mark its publication as a sea-change that caused self-help books to grow in popularity (Grodin, 1991). When Friedan asked, "where is the world of thought and ideas, the life of the mind and spirit?" (p. 36), perhaps she summoned a new spiritual woman into the realm of popular culture.

Although the rhetoric of liberal feminism has been criticized for promoting individualism, it's worth noting the distinction between ideology and practice. In her essay "What is Feminism?" Rosalind Delmar (2001) identifies "consciousness raising groups" as part of feminist practices of the 1960s. Like any political movement, collective action is integral to even those philosophically interested in the individual. This is also the case with the difference between self-help ideology and practice, as I will later show.

Furthermore, self-help in a broader sense, in relation to social and political domains including education, housing and finance, is frequently championed by an incongruent set of social actors. For example, grass roots activists may equate self-help with freedom from credentialed experts and the systematic inequalities often maintained through formal methods of obtaining authority. In the case of activists, self-help may be more aligned with *mutual*-help toward social change. Conversely, libertarians may see self-help as the opposite of institutional provision, something more aligned with rugged individualism than collectivity.

While critiques of liberalism are at the heart of most critiques of self-help, both early liberal feminists and contemporary scholars turning a critical eye to self-help share a concern about the power of texts to impact readers. Implicit in this concern is the assumption that women represent a *particularly* vulnerable population, in need of protection from the degrading influences of popular culture. This concern also assumes a simplistic cause and effect relationship between reader and text that does not account for social uses or cultural meanings arrived at through contextualization or the reader's ability to read critically (Radway, 1986). Further, studies of women's book groups have found that

participants often develop their own standards of cultural authority independent of a book's position as either "popular" or "classic" (Long, 2003).

By claiming spiritual self-help as women's popular culture, I am also aligning this study with other studies of women's genres such as soap operas (Modleski, 1982, 1998), romance novels (Radway, 1984; Parameswaran, 1999) and television talk shows (Striphas, 2003). As Striphas (2003) notes, such studies of women's genres "engage the thorny question of why women are drawn to such texts, the nature of the pleasures they derive from them, and the relationship of these texts to women's everyday lives" (p. 298). Furthermore, by classifying self-help as popular culture, I also intend to highlight the role of media consumption in the construction of social identity (Carey, 1989) and the maintenance of subcultures (Hebdige, 1979; Thornton, 1996). This orientation toward understanding an audience's relationship to a text also informed the scope and methods used in the present study, leading me to investigate a single case through interviews and participant observation.

Thus, the present study seeks to describe the social and cultural contexts that surround self-help reading and the unique process of reading in a group. My approach to engaging with readers in the context of their membership in a common community is based on the following theoretical assumptions: 1) meaning is derived from social action, through interpretive processes and through interaction with both the other and the self (Blumer, 1972); 2) meanings gleaned by individuals are culturally constructed and influenced by their membership in particular interpretive communities (Fish, 1980); 3) culture is "an arena of consent and resistance," which may be revealed through the "practice of everyday life" (Storey, 1996 p. 2); and 4) the interpretation of texts is part of an audience's attempt to make sense of the world, but also "to make a slightly better place for itself in the world" (Grossberg, 1992 p.53).

Methods

Reception analysis explores "how audiences may contribute to social meaning production and cultural patterns generally through their membership in socially specific interpretive communities" (Jensen & Rosengren, 1990, p. 222). Using in-depth interviewing, participant observation and document analysis, I investigated the experience of attending a women's group, with particular attention to their reading of *A New Earth (NE)*.

I interviewed members of a women's group that meets once a month at a spa and alternative healing center in an affluent community on the New Jersey coastline³. As compared to the general population of the state of New Jersey, the residents of this town are older, wealthier, more educated and more likely to vote Republican. Almost half are Irish-American, almost one quarter are Italian-American, and almost all are white (city-data.com). Since 1999, women from the surrounding communities have come to the spa for yoga, massage, facials, Reiki therapy, hypnotherapy and, starting in 2000, they came for a monthly meeting called the Women's Group (WG). Most members described the WG as either a "support group" or a "book group." Two informants also described the WG as a

“consciousness raising group,” saying that it would have been called that in the 1960s. Meeting topics often center around a book or books, identified by interviewees as “self-help” or “spiritual growth.” In September 2008, the group agreed to use the book, *NE*, as the subject of their meetings for the next ten months – each month they would discuss a single chapter.

I conducted two in-depth interviews with the group leader regarding the group’s history, her history as a reader of spiritual texts, her process preparing for group meetings, her experience running the meetings, and her interpretation of *NE*.⁴ I also conducted interviews with seven other women (including the owner of the spa) who attended the monthly meetings during the ten months when the book was discussed. These interviews were approximately sixty to ninety minutes long and focused on the informant’s experience attending meetings and reading the book. All interviews were audio recorded, transcribed and indexed following the methods described in *Writing Ethnographic Fieldnotes* (Emerson, Fretz & Shaw, 1995). I participated in the final two *NE* meetings and then regularly attended monthly meetings for one year after the group moved on to discussing other books. This allowed me to triangulate the experiences described by participants in interviews and to observe the group’s habits over time. I recorded fieldnotes following each meeting, focusing on the way group members interacted with one another and with the texts. My participant observation also included consuming some of the same media as my informants⁵, reading *NE* and watching the ten webcasts available from Oprah.com, in which Oprah Winfrey and the author, Eckhart Tolle, discuss each chapter of the book.

Although my position as an observer could be called “native,” I prefer to frame my relationship to this work by the notion that “‘Outsiderness’ and ‘insiderness’ are not fixed or static positions, rather they are ever-shifting and permeable social locations that are differently experienced and expressed...” (Naples, 1996, p. 84). First, like some other researchers using ethnographic methods (Adler & Adler, 1996), I find myself in the complicated position of studying a family member, my mother. My mother has been reading spiritual texts almost exclusively for the past 20 years and brings this expertise to her work as the group facilitator of the WG. This relationship afforded me intimate access I would not otherwise have had. Second, as a yoga teacher at a popular studio in Philadelphia, I spent five years “embedded” in a spiritual interpretive community. I am familiar with many of the same texts my informants are reading, and yet I am an outsider to the WG, which has been meeting monthly for over nine years. Third, I encourage the reader to consider my membership in a variety of social categories, especially as these relate to my informants. I am an able-bodied, white, married, college-educated, American female, raised in a white-collar, middle-class home in suburban New Jersey. My informants are also all female, all white, all middle to upper-middle-class and all currently living in New Jersey. Like myself, many WG members were raised Catholic and are Irish- or Italian-American.

Members of the WG range in age from approximately mid-thirties to seventies; in some cases, this makes me their junior by at least four decades. Of my interviewees, one is retired, two are semi-retired, four work at the spa, one is a nurse, one is a

bioneurofeedback therapist and one is a stay-at-home-mom. Two of the women I spoke with were widows, four were married and two were divorcees. All but one of the eight women have children. The group facilitator did not complete her bachelor's degree, though, as I will discuss, she has made herself a local expert through reading spiritual texts and has self-published her own self-help book.

Prior to beginning this research, I anticipated discordance between the “ways of knowing” (Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger & Tarule, 1997) I might encounter through this group and this book and the dominant mode of knowledge creation associated with higher education, what feminist scholars have called “formal knowledge” (de Lauretis, 1986) or “orthodoxy” in the academy (Scott, 2008). Both Scott and de Lauretis share a commitment to defining feminism as a mode of knowledge production. In *Feminist Studies/Critical Studies* (1986), de Lauretis suggests the “new” knowledge of Feminist Studies relies on both the inclusion of women as the object of study and the inclusion of self-consciousness (p. 8), identity (p. 9) and subjectivity (p. 10) as methods and strategies of knowing. In *Women's Studies on the Edge* (2008), Scott explains that the essays in her volume define “feminism as critique” (p. 6), “not just criticism but the exposure of the contradictions and inadequacies of any system of thought” (p. 7). As my informants shared their “ways of knowing” with me, I kept in mind the following advice:

Where experience does not ‘fit’ dominant meanings, alternative concepts may not readily be available ... To hear women’s perspectives accurately, we have to learn to listen in stereo, receiving both the dominant and muted channels clearly and tuning into them carefully to understand the relationship between them. (Anderson & Jack, 1998, p. 158)

On Culture

In an effort to contextualize spiritual self-help reading through its association with other cultural practices, this section describes several backdrops for the women’s reading of *A New Earth*. I arrived at these by asking questions about related activities, such as general reading practices, but also by indexing and analyzing the patterned ways in which members responded to questions such as, “how would you describe the Women’s Group?”

A Spiritual Subculture

My informants’ membership in the WG was only one marker among many of their membership in a spiritual subculture. Although they did not use the words ‘culture’ or ‘subculture’, they often presented themselves as a part of a particular *us* as clearly defined *in opposition* to a particular *them*. Benny, who joined the WG last year, said when her family found out she was studying Shamanism, “they were like, ‘are you crazy?’” She went on to explain, “I’m the aunt that does all these little things that are not in the mainstream. They

like the mainstream.” Victoria, who has attended the WG for all nine years, expressed a strong sense of the stigma surrounding her membership in a spiritual subculture:

... Especially in conservative USA over here, you know, they’re thinking I’m a witch that’s gonna wave a crystal over their head when they come in the door ... Even your good friends sometimes they look at you like, [makes a face] ‘she’s a little wiggled out, isn’t she?’

While Victoria attributes other people’s attitudes to their political affiliation, calling her town “conservative USA,” her own social status is also an important part of the dynamic she describes. While she would likely agree that she is a member of the dominant culture by virtue of her class and race, the particular ways she subverts this membership reveal something about what it means to be an upper-middle-class, white woman in America. In this case, perceptions about what constitutes rational behavior seem to threaten her reputation.

I asked Lanie, who has been attending the WG for about two years, how she might describe it to someone. Her response demonstrates a hesitance to label or name her experience of the group too tightly. I read this both as evidence of the stigma surrounding the subculture to which Lanie belongs and of the inadequacy of the language available to her. I have indicated these areas of tense, vague language with italics.

... Um, it’s interesting the reaction that you get when you talk *about taking part* and I don’t know that I’ve ever gone beyond bringing it up ... but, a few people ... if you talk to them *about having an experience and an opportunity to be with other women and share* ... and some people just sort of blow you off, like, you know, I’m really comfortable with who I am, I’ve done my share of that, or I’ve been in and out of therapy and, you know, you don’t want to ruffle anybody’s feathers ... and I’ll say it isn’t really – I’m sure that it boils down to being therapeutic for people because of *where we go*, but ... you can’t push something to people, they need to have a feeling that they need *this kind of thing*.

Each of these stories reveals a tension between the subculture and the “mainstream,” as Benny called it. Lanie’s comments also lead into another important aspect of this subculture: access to the “therapeutic,” which can be shared, gifted and, of course, purchased.

Spiritual Capital and New Age Knowledge Workers

As part of the debate about the relative power local audiences exert on mass media, Thornton’s (1995) description of *subcultural capital* demonstrates one of the ways that media products may confer power to audiences, especially in the context of subcultures.

Thornton describes how within youth subculture, “subcultural capital confers status on its owner in the eyes of the relevant beholder,” for example, in the form of “hipness” (p. 11). As compared to Bourdieu’s conception of *cultural capital* (1986), Thornton’s subcultural capital is not as directly tied to *economic capital*, although Thornton notes that there are many “occupations and incomes that can be gained as a result of ‘hipness’” (p. 12). “Spirituality,” like “hipness,” can be seen as subcultural capital within a spiritual subculture, i.e. *spiritual capital*.⁶

According to Bourdieu (1986), cultural capital exists in three forms: embodied (skills, ways of being or knowledge), objectified (material objects, including media products) and institutionalized (such as “educational qualifications”) (p. 243). All three kinds of cultural capital were apparent in my informants’ descriptions of their relationship to self-help books. This discussion of cultural capital is especially important in the case of self-help reading, as other audience studies (Grodin, 1991) have found that self-help books often challenge traditionally male domains of intellectual, religious and scientific authority, offering ways for women to extricate themselves from “patriarchal authority” by establishing “personal authority” (p. 404).

Broader discussions about reading and books naturally evolved through my conversations with the women. The exchange of media as (objectified) spiritual capital and the unique redemptive power of books were evidenced across all eight informants. Benny explained how she leverages her spiritual learning in order to help people change by giving them books as gifts:

Like I always give people who are having a hard time – Julia Cameron wrote these little books called, *Blessings*, and it has sayings in there and stuff – and if someone’s going through a hard time, I might buy them that book. You know, just try to change them, help them. ‘Cause I know how much this stuff has helped me.

Victoria explains that “a book can change your life” by validating your beliefs. She also seems to get pleasure from being able to use spiritual books to defend the subculture:

So that’s how, I think, that a book can change your life in that it gives you freedom to say ... ‘Yeah!’ ... you know, [laughter] ‘I don’t care what you think, that’s the way I think ... well did you ever read it? You didn’t read it? Oh, OK, so you don’t know what you’re talking about, so fine.’ [laughter] You know? ... If you feel like what you were thinking is validated ... in print ... it makes you feel better about yourself. That you’re not crazy.

In addition to the satisfaction of sharing and defending the spiritual wisdom gained through reading, informants also accumulate (institutionalized) spiritual capital by participating in workshops, trainings, and schools that increase their authority within the subculture. Often

this authority is gained through becoming expert at various healing modalities, including Reiki, Shamanism, Tai Chi Chuan, Yoga, Hypnotherapy, the use of essential oils and life coaching.

After hearing about each woman's quest for spiritual learning, I started thinking of the women I spoke with as *new age knowledge workers*. If the men Philippe Bourgois (2002) observed in Spanish Harlem were selling crack in search of respect, perhaps these suburban, white women are in search of authority. Still, since this authority functions within a subculture, it remains in tension with the perceived authority of the dominant culture. For example, Lanie describes the way some people roll their eyes when she talks about the benefits of Tai Chi Chuan. Later in the interview, she referred to them as, "the eye-rollers, the non-believers."

And if you tell people, 'if you have high blood pressure, [Tai Chi Chuan] can bring it down, and if you have low blood pressure, this can bring it up' ... then you get these rolling eyes like ... 'Oh, right, how can that be?' But there's the word 'balance' because, with the energy that comes into you, it provides you with what you need ... and it, [correcting herself] we believe that it helps creativity and memory ... people ... they don't like to say ... 'It's been proven that,' but there are people that have had all kinds of different issues that seem to resolve themselves.

Lanie must negotiate between her experience practicing Tai Chi Chuan and the dominant culture's rules about what constitutes causal evidence. She begins to say that the practice "helps creativity and memory," but corrects herself by inserting the phrase "we believe." Lanie hopes to teach Tai Chi Chuan and spoke at length about the requirements and the studying involved. She will know when she is ready, she explains, when her teacher tells her. This is one example of a hierarchy that exists within the subculture – the relationship between teacher and student.

Other informants revealed similar negotiations around issues of cause and effect observed in the material world and the less easily named, other world. These comments also related to their participation as authorities in the community. The first woman here is the owner of the spa where the WG meets and the second is a distributor of essential oils.

Owner: The magical thing about this place is that it draws certain people. It does. It, like, calls to them.

Researcher: How do you think it does that?

Owner: Spirit. [pause] But, the flowers in the front have a lot to do with it too. [laughter]

Benny: My girlfriend, she just moved into a new home in Arizona, and she goes, 'You know I like this house, but I gotta' paint, it just doesn't feel like my

house.’ I said, ‘Well I’m going to send you a gift, I’m going to send you these oils and when you paint the house I want you to put sage and abundance [in the paint].’ She called me a couple of weeks later and she goes, ‘I don’t know if it’s the oils or whatever, but things have changed, I feel so much better here.’ [pause.] Maybe it’s psychological...it doesn’t matter.

Is it the “magic” or the “flowers?” Is it the “sage” or the “psychology”? The women’s hedging may speak as much to the social pressure to present themselves as rational as it does to their own genuine openness to the possibility that multiple causal forces are at work, some known and some unknown. Finally, as (embodied) spiritual capital, such stories allow the women to present themselves as powerfully aware of and in concert with such forces; in other words, to present themselves as *spiritual*.

The connection Bourdieu (1986) makes between economic and cultural capital provides a good explanation as to why self-help is often dismissed as a bourgeois pastime. In fact, he describes embodied cultural capital as nothing more than self-help:

Like the acquisition of a muscular physique or a suntan, it cannot be done at second hand ... The work of acquisition is work on oneself (self-improvement), an effort that presupposes a personal cost ... an investment, above all of time ... (p. 244)

However, Bourdieu’s account of women’s roles in such activities also sheds light on the complicated relationship between class and gender. His theory of capital sees the nuclear family as an undifferentiated social unit. He especially points out “the mother’s free time” as a resource that enables the transmission of cultural capital, presumably to children. He does not, however, address the way such “free time” may be used by this hypothetical mother to acquire more cultural capital for herself.

On Reading *A New Earth*

This section addresses questions particular to the way members of the Women’s Group (WG) read *A New Earth: Awakening To Your Life’s Purpose (NE)*⁷. Why did the women choose particular media over others to access the book’s content? Why did the women continue to attend the WG? How did the group act as an interpretive community? What criteria did the women use to evaluate the book’s claims and authority? One the one hand, the answers to these questions relate to issues that are important to media and communication scholars, especially regarding the agency consumers may or may not have in interpreting and using mass media. On the other hand, I have attempted to mitigate my own scholarly preoccupation with power by focusing on the way the answers to these questions also reveal what my informants think is important about spiritual self-help reading and their participation in the WG.

Choosing the Medium

Like many of my informants, one of the aspects that drew me to this project was the fact that the material was available across multiple media, including book, audio book, website and webcast, and through social interaction in the WG. Issues of authenticity were central to my informant's decisions about how to encounter *NE* in both mediated and non-mediated ways.

Sarah's copy of *NE* looks as if it has been stuffed with extra pages – a result of too many dog-eared edges. Sarah estimated having read *NE* three to four times in total. In addition, she used Oprah.com as a resource for some of the guided meditations and discussion questions used in the group, and watched all ten live webcasts. This extensive study allowed Sarah to speak in WG meetings as an expert on the text. Sarah's reading practices also reflect a common sentiment that these books are read, not only for pleasure, but also as "work." In Sarah's case, the use of the term "work" refers to emotional work (which she does not see as monetized) as well as the "work" for which she is paid (i.e., as the group's facilitator). The common use of the term "work" in the spiritual subculture seems to support what Eva Illouz (2008) has argued: that emotional fitness may be viewed as both a commodity and a tool of social dominance. While the group members don't conceptualize emotional work as connected to the marketplace, they surely embark on this work with the same seriousness and focus as any other useful, marketable skill.

While Sarah embraced the text in all of its forms, Victoria refused to watch the webcasts, even though she felt she "should," explaining that she had read the book years before it became the 61st selection of Oprah's Book Club. Her comments reveal her identity as a member of a subculture, like so many others, often usurped by the powers that be:

Then of course, there's the all-famous Oprah factor. Which makes me gag! It's like nothing is valid unless Oprah says it is. It's really sickening. It's almost like lemming.⁸

Victoria's critical view of Oprah's power to make a text "valid" was not shared by all. Lanie's excitement about the webcast as "a first" directly echoed the show's promotional rhetoric. Lanie's further enjoyment of the "event" stemmed from the mother-daughter bonding it facilitated. By watching the webcast with her daughter, Lanie transformed the solitary act of book reading into an opportunity to share a common experience. The same could be said of attending the WG, which, as I will explain, seems to have less to do with the content of any single book and more to do with sharing an experience with like-minded individuals.

Finally, like some other members of the WG, Benny simply did not read the book (although she did *purchase* both the book and the audio book). Still, Benny attended the WG regularly, where she encountered the book's content through the interpretation of others.

Reading Together

When asked why they continue to attend the WG, none of the women made mention of the texts they discussed. Rather, they all made some reference to the sense of community and the great resource of learning from other women's experiences. This sentiment resonates with the research on book groups in general, as it is typical for groups to spend relatively little time discussing books and more time discussing personal or social affairs (Long, 2003). It is likely this history of personal sharing that leads Sarah to explain her commitment to the WG like this:

For me, the high point is seeing people's faces when they come in and seeing them hug each other and share what happened to them in the past 30 days. It's a big friendship, it's a love and a community and for me, that's the best part of it.

Despite the individualistic message associated with self-help, in this context, the genre creates opportunities for connection.

As James Carey (1989) proposes in describing the ritual view of communication, group members participate in media rituals as a means of reasserting the values of the group. The series of events that make up a WG meeting reveal some of this group's values, which include the authority of subjective experience, an interest in personal health, the importance of relationships and family, and a connection to what the women sometimes call "God," "Spirit" or "Life Force." I constructed my description of a typical meeting below in order to highlight these shared values, as well as some of the practices that led me to describe the group as an interpretive community:

As women arrive at the spa, we greet each other with smiles and hugs, point out which of the finger foods carefully arranged on the antique coffee table are not to be missed, and find a seat in the circle of folding metal chairs. The room smells sweetly of the oils displayed for purchase and used in the nearby massage and treatment rooms. After about half an hour of chatting, Sarah begins the meeting from her seat. She welcomes us and soon instructs us to close our eyes, to relax, and to "breathe in the spirit of God" and "breathe out the spirit of Man." Sarah leads us in a guided meditation⁹, which may include visualization and verbal cues designed to guide our attention to sensations, parts of the body, or our breath. When the guided meditation exercise is complete, she instructs us to say aloud the names of the people in our lives for whom we'd like to pray, send love to, or for whom we are thankful. When the quiet chorus of names peters out, we open our eyes.

Sarah then introduces the topic for the month, for example, "Discovery of Inner Space and The Power of This Too Shall Pass." Before the women arrive, something called "paperwork" is placed at each seat. Sarah will

use this to lead us in discussion. The “paperwork” prepared each month by Sarah includes the month’s topic as a heading at the top, discussion questions, guided meditations and a list of quotes. At the meetings designed around *NE*, quotes from the book are interspersed with quotes attributed to C.S. Lewis, Nietzsche, Herodotus, St. Teresa of Avila, Buddha, Carl Jung, Camus, Meister Eckhart, Indira Gandhi, “Zen,” Ram Dass, Jesus, Hafiz and Sarah’s “poet friend, Gloria.” There are no connecting sentences between the quotes, no subheadings to separate them, no attempt to impose any further meaning on them than may be added by the night’s topic headlined at the top. Although the quotes are attributed to particular authors, they are, for me, conspicuously disembodied from their context. And yet, through watching how the “paperwork” is used, it becomes clear that the women in the group provide the context. The words are only a starting point, an inspiration. Sarah reads a quote aloud and asks the group to respond to it. The effect of using words in this way is almost impressionistic. Reactions to a single quote may include a sentence or two of interpretation, a connection to another text, or a few minutes of personal storytelling. When silence comes again, Sarah reads another quote.

When our time is up, many people stay to chat and to help clean up. Women often share information during this time, writing down the names of books to buy, homeopathic remedies to try, workshops to take, and gurus to google. At the end of each meeting, Sarah sends everyone home with a single rose.

The use of the collective wisdom of the group as the primary resource for arriving at meaning nicely reflects Stanley Fish’s (1980) work on the authority of interpretive communities. However, in addition to the meaning-making authority that group members lend each other, Sarah also triangulates the truth of Tolle’s text by presenting it alongside other texts that reflect what she describes as an underlying sameness across world religions:

I do often talk about other religions [other than Christianity] and I bring in quotes from other people um, that support some of [Tolle’s] thinking. So that helps evaluate a little bit too. Cause that says it’s not only Eckhart Tolle who thinks this way.

In this way, the relationship Sarah draws between Tolle’s texts and other texts seem to add to Tolle’s authority. Sarah’s expert status as a person who is able to sort through texts and who “knows what’s good” was also mentioned in several interviews as a screening process that lends credibility to the sources she cites.¹⁰

Critical evaluation of *NE* also included light-hearted skepticism. One woman commented to the group that Tolle “must be a saint or something” and that she could never

practice non-attachment to the degree suggested in the book, asking, “who is this guy anyway?” Other women objected to Tolle’s suggestion to practice complete non-attachment, attributing his viewpoint to the fact that he did not have children. A mini-rant ensued, which included a lot of laughter and a tongue-in-cheek suggestion that they should “burn the book.”

In an interview, Victoria shared a similarly critical view. Her comments, though, demonstrate the difficulty of reading critically in a subculture that values “non-judgment.”

You have to be very careful about ... you know ... anybody can say anything in a book. You know, it’s just like the Bible ... not everything is ... what it is. You have to have personal discernment. And as with anything in life, you make your own judgment. Non-judgment and all that being a good thing.

While my observations of the WG and interviews with members often support an “active audience” model of reception (Morley, 1993), Victoria’s comments suggest that subcultural norms may cause some members to suppress critical views.

Despite Tolle’s lack of experience as a parent, the privileging of personal experience as a way of knowing did lend Tolle authority as an author in some respect. There was unanimous agreement among all eight informants regarding the source of the author’s authority. The following was Lanie’s reply to the question, what do you think about the author of this book?:

I think he’s telling his own story of ... from whence he came gives him credibility to write as he does. In fact, I heard somebody question that recently. They just said, you know ... ‘Why should I care about what this man says?’ You know, ‘What makes him an authority?’ And whoever else was in the discussion said ... he was at the bottom of the barrel and was suicidal and went for help and, and he’s lived through his own share.

Like Lanie, all of my informants described the author’s return from mental illness as a success that could be attributed to him alone, explaining: “he came out of that,” he “cleared his life,” “went for help,” “he came to this realization himself ... that it really wasn’t all that important, the stuff he was stressing over.”

This finding is very much in line with Eva Illouz’s (2003) argument that the Oprah show is indicative of a “culture of pain and suffering.” As Illouz explains, the presumed virtue of suffering lies in its ability to lead to personal growth and healing. Like the Protestant work ethic, the assumption is that work (in this case, the work of personal struggle) builds character. Stories of suffering shared on Oprah earn recognition for the storyteller, an additional reward for their overcoming.

At the local level, the privileging of personal experience allows Women’s Group members to claim their own authority amid a discussion of sacred and popular texts.

However, the uniform way in which they describe mental illness suggests that while the individual model of change may be interpreted as empowerment, with this presumed agency comes presumed responsibility. As told by my informants, Tolle's story is a personal one, not interested in the social or political aspects of mental health, the support or resources a person may or may not receive, the complex factors that impact whether or not a person recovers from mental illness, let alone how a society parses out the difference between the ill and the well. However, this is not to say that the women would dispute a claim that social factors could be included in any story of mental illness. Rather, I highlight this to give particularity to the frequent claims that self-help rhetoric finds personal causes for social and political problems, or in this case, successes.

Contextualizing Self-Help: Theoretical and Methodological Shifts in Perspective

This instrumental case study of the reception of spiritual self-help in a women's group in suburban New Jersey has implications for ongoing discussions about women's popular culture and the relationship between local audiences and mass media. By adopting a different methodological and theoretical orientation, this study provides alternatives to the conclusions drawn from other kinds of research on the same topic.

This study's theoretical orientation, which proposed that the study of self-help reading could be approached in ways similar to the study of women's popular culture, contextualized self-help reading as an activity specifically disparaged for its relationship to white, middle-class women. The connections among gender, identity and reception explored here suggest that spiritual self-help reading may be seen as a complex expression of social identity. For example, my informant's assertion of self-help reading as "work" may be a subtle form of resistance to broader cultural attitudes that denigrate the genre and "women's work" in general, be it paid or unpaid labor. As my informants described their engagement in feminized activities such as self-help reading and alternative healing, they were forced to negotiate their own identities as rational, middle-class women. Furthermore, the women's construction of their activities as stigmatized by the dominant culture may serve to refute the image of the White, Suburban Woman as boring, mainstream and passive. Instead, the women present an image of rebellion against the mainstream, which includes a challenge to traditionally masculine institutions such as Western medicine and the Christian (in many cases Catholic) churches in which they were raised. Within the subculture described, self-help reading seemed to be a source of authority, often related to my informants' employment as purveyors of alternative healing, for example. Again, the use of this authority likely interacts with the women's gendered experiences in a patriarchal society that devalues the authority of subjective experience, the use of intuition and the legitimacy of the ephemeral.

Most significantly, using ethnographic audience research allowed me to focus on what was most important to my informants about self-help texts and their participation in

self-help culture. This study challenges the assumption that self-help reading minimizes the need for social interaction, discourages community-building and isolates readers from the help of others (Ebben, 1995; DeFrancisco, 1995; Woodstock, 2007). Instead, like studies of popular culture that have examined the role media consumption plays in the maintenance of subcultures (Hebdige, 1979; Thornton, 1996), this study contextualized self-help reading through its association with a spiritual subculture. For members of the WG, self-help reading creates a basis for social interaction, community building and mutual support among members.

This study also has implications for the field of communication and media research more generally in that it demonstrates the way theoretical and methodological diversity across the discipline allows for triangulation among studies of similar topics. For example, I agree with much of the criticism of self-help ideology that has been written about by other scholars, especially with regard to the genre's overestimation of individual agency within the context of systematic inequities. However, this study adds to that criticism an additional viewpoint that contextualizes self-help reading in order to understand how it fits into particular women's everyday lives. While such results cannot be used to paint an entirely different picture of what is *probable* in terms of media reception, they may serve to *expand* and *complicate* the present picture of what is *possible*.

Biographical note:

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Notes:

¹ My use of the term “reading” refers more to the *activity* of reading than to the sense of “a reading” as “an interpretation.” I do not inquire about what informants think a particular section of a book means. Rather, I examine my informants’ reading habits and related contexts (such as their participation in self-help culture) because I am focused on what their habits and participation mean to them as social actors.

² My informants agreed that they often read “these kinds of books,” meaning those similar to *NE*, and referred to these alternately as “new age,” “spiritual,” and “self-help.” Other authors they referred to during interviews included: Wayne Dyer, Julia Cameron, Gary Zukav, Caroline Myss and Marianne Williamson. My informants reported reading these contemporary bestsellers alongside what the group’s facilitator calls “the scriptures,” meaning the central texts of Christianity, Buddhism, Hinduism, Taoism and Sufism. This insight was also important to my categorization of this reading as “spiritual.” In other words, understanding the intertextuality of my informants’ reading practices helped me conceptualize the genre under study.

³ Names of places and people have been changed to protect the anonymity of my informants.

⁴ For example, some questions included: “How did you get involved in the WG?” “What do you think of the book *A New Earth*?” “How would you describe *A New Earth* to someone who had not read it?”

⁵ During the year that I observed the WG, I also kept up with their reading, including titles such as Caroline Myss’s *Defy Gravity: Healing Beyond the Bounds of Reason* (2009).

⁶ Raquel Romberg (2003) also uses the term *spiritual capital* in her ethnography of the spiritual market developed by *brujos* (witch-healers) in modern Puerto Rico, whom Romberg sees as spiritual entrepreneurs.

⁷ While I focus here on the group’s interaction with one particular text, my observations regarding the activities of the group were gleaned from my participation in the group’s meetings over an entire year, during which they engaged with several other texts.

⁸ Victoria’s observation about Oprah’s influence is also supported by a study in *Publishing Research Quarterly*, which found that, owing to Oprah’s endorsement, every Oprah’s Book Club book from 1996-2002 spent time on the top 150 best-sellers’ list in America (Butler, Cowan & Nilsson, 2005).

⁹ Sarah is a licensed hypnotherapist (another example of institutional spiritual capital) and draws on her knowledge of relaxation techniques in order to lead group meditation.

¹⁰ The WG’s reliance on Sarah as an expert echoes Janice Radway’s (1984) findings in *Reading the Romance* in which Radway’s primary informant was the local (and eventually industry) expert on romance novels.