

# “I’m not a person that reads”: Identity Work, Adult Learners, and Educational (Dis)engagement

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## Abstract

The concept of identity has become prominent in the study of Canadian education. We further the understanding of identity by examining the ways through which adults present themselves as subjects in learning processes. We recruited 134 adults who had recently read self-help books pertaining to health, careers, or relationships, and conducted qualitative interviews that focused on the motivations, goals, and learning outcomes that they attributed to their reading. We found that, during the process of being interviewed about their self-help reading experience, roughly half of our interviewees engaged in unsolicited “identity talk”—rhetorically embracing or distancing themselves from the social role of the self-help reader. Our study provides three key contributions to the scholarship of education: a nuanced ethnographic description of the complex and diverse ways in which adult learners

position themselves as subjects in self-directed learning processes; an illustration of the theoretical utility and limitations of research focused on the identity work of individuals; and an exhortation to further research concerned with understanding the role of identity in processes of educational engagement/disengagement.

*Keywords:* identity, self-help reading, agency, distancing, embracement

## Résumé

Le concept d'identité est devenu important dans l'étude de l'éducation au Canada. Nous approfondissons la compréhension de l'identité en examinant les façons dont les adultes se présentent comme des sujets dans les processus d'apprentissage. Nous avons recruté 134 adultes qui avaient récemment lu des livres des livres d'auto-assistance sur la santé, les carrières ou les relations. Nous avons mené des entretiens qualitatifs axés sur les motivations, les objectifs et les résultats d'apprentissage qu'ils attribuaient à leur lecture. Nous avons constaté que, au cours du processus d'interview sur leur expérience d'auto-apprentissage, près de la moitié de ces personnes se livraient à des « conversations identitaires » non sollicitées—s'embrassant ou se distanciant, sur le plan rhétorique, du rôle social du lecteur d'auto-assistance. Notre étude fournit trois contributions clés à l'étude de l'éducation: une description ethnographique nuancée des façons complexes et diverses dont les apprenants adultes se positionnent comme sujets dans les processus d'apprentissage autodirigé; une illustration de l'utilité théorique et des limites de la recherche axée sur le travail identitaire des individus; et une exhortation à approfondir la recherche orientée vers la compréhension du rôle de l'identité dans les processus d'engagement / désengagement éducatif.

*Mots-clés :* identité, lecture d'auto-assistance, agence, la distanciation, l'embrassement

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## Introduction

In scholarship regarding education in Canada, identity has become a prominent concept. Since the year 2000, the *Canadian Journal of Education* has published numerous articles exploring connections between identities and educational processes, including studies of colonization and racism (Gebhard, 2017; St. Denis, 2007), gender (Rahm, Lachaine, & Mathura, 2014; Wang, 2000), sexuality (Drazenovich, 2015; Peter, Taylor, & Edkins, 2016), ethnicity and language (Aylward, 2010; Byrd Clark, 2010; Giampapa, 2010), spatiality (Corbett, 2007; Tupper, Carson, Johnston, & Mangat, 2008), religion (Ali & Bagley, 2015; Brennan, 2012), and nationalism (Lee & Hébert, 2006; Létourneau & Gani, 2017). While extensive and thought-provoking, such scholarship has not adequately addressed the ways through which human beings work to present themselves as subjects in learning processes. As students, teachers, and administrators know from everyday experience, the construction and presentation of identities is a significant part of educational interactions. In this article, we contribute to educational scholarship regarding identity by exploring learners' presentation of themselves as subjects.

We begin by presenting a conceptual framework that enables readers to think systematically about the agency of learners in the presentation of identities. Drawing on the work of Snow and Anderson (1987), we argue that the concepts of identity work, identity talk, distancing, and embracement provide a useful lens through which to interpret the active role of learners in making identity-related claims. We then review empirical research that has applied Snow and Anderson's conceptual framework, and that has explored the broader importance of identity work to educational processes. After a review of our research methods, grounded in qualitative interviews with 134 adult readers of self-help books in the areas of health, careers, and relationships, we present the results of our own empirical investigation of identity. While our interview protocol focused on engaging people in conversation about their experience of reading self-help books, our interviewees regularly worked to position themselves discursively vis-à-vis their perceptions of the social role of the self-help reader, the authors of self-help books, the content of self-help texts, and their impressions of other self-help readers. Such unsolicited identity work was striking, and led us to think about the importance of understanding learners' agency in the presentation of themselves as subjects in various learning processes. As such, our work both offers a unique case study of the presentation of identities by participants in

educational research, and poses questions for those interested in understanding the importance of identity to a broad range of educational contexts.

## **Conceptual Framework and Literature Review**

Identity refers both to one's sense of who one is, and to the inferences one makes about others. The concept of identity thus represents processes such as internalization and self-identification, through which one comes to see oneself in certain ways, and processes such as characterization and attribution, through which one comes to see others in certain ways (Brubaker, 2009; Brubaker & Cooper, 2000; Jenkins, 2008). Given the reflexive nature of social life, human beings know that others characterize them in certain ways, and as such, there is interaction between processes of internalization and characterization. Identities are inherently comparative, reflecting boundaries of similarity and difference, of commonality and otherness (Cohen, 1985). One's sense of oneself—both as an individual and as a member of various categories, groups, or communities—is based on what one perceives one shares with others, and how one perceives oneself as distinct from others.

The concept of identity invokes both the role of social forces in structuring one's experience of life, and the role of human agency in interpreting and presenting oneself to others. The power of others' characterizations has been clearly documented in many studies, including those demonstrating that African American men in New York are less than half as likely to be offered entry-level employment as their equally qualified white peers (Pager, Western, & Bonikowski, 2009). Given the ubiquity of processes of characterization, the study of identity in education has focused primarily upon the influence of social structures on shaping the experiences and outcomes of education for people across boundaries of gender, social class, race, ethnicity, language, sexuality, nationality, and religion. However, identity also involves the engagement of human beings in interpreting themselves and others, and in presenting themselves to others. Despite the constraining influence of the ways that people characterize one another, human beings consistently demonstrate agency in contesting such characterizations and presenting themselves in a favorable light. To understand the relationships between identity and education, it is

important to examine the ways in which participants in educational interactions actively position themselves as subjects in those interactions.

Understanding the agency of human beings to manage the ways in which others characterize them was a central theme in the sociological work of Erving Goffman (1959, 1961, 1963). Building upon Goffman's insights regarding the social worlds of stigmatized and marginalized people, Snow and Anderson (1987) developed an influential framework for analyzing how individuals endeavor to align the impressions that others have of them with their own self-concept. The objective of their ethnographic research with homeless people in Texas was "to advance understanding of the manner in which individuals at the lowest reaches of status systems attempt to generate identities that provide them with a measure of self-worth and dignity" (p. 1338). Snow and Anderson argued that people engage in "identity work" in order to "create, present, and sustain personal identities" that are aligned with their overarching self-concepts (p. 1348). They identified four activities as common to the practice of identity work:

- (a) procurement or arrangement of physical settings and props; (b) cosmetic face work or the arrangement of personal appearance; (c) selective association with other individuals and groups; and (d) verbal construction and assertion of personal identities. (p. 1348)

They labelled the fourth of these activities "identity talk," and they developed the concepts of "distancing" and "embracement" to help interpret two major patterns of such talk.

In their study of identity talk among street people, Snow and Anderson (1987) defined distancing and embracement as two ways in which homeless people manage the discord between the positive impression they would like to give of themselves, and the negative judgements they know that others attribute to their circumstances:

*Distancing:* When individuals have to enact roles, associate with others, or utilize institutions that imply social identities inconsistent with their actual or desired self-conceptions, they may attempt to distance themselves from those roles, associations, and institutions. (p. 1348)

*Embracement:* The verbal and expressive confirmation of one's acceptance of and attachment to the social identity associated with a general or specific role, a set of social relationships, or a particular ideology. (p. 1354)

In daily life, people regularly distance themselves from, and embrace, a variety of roles, relationships, ideologies, and institutions.

While Snow and Anderson's (1987) analysis of identity work is 30 years old, it continues to resonate with scholars engaged in the study of a broad range of settings. Anthony and McCabe (2015) examined the "friendship talk" of 68 university students, and argued that contemporary young adults construct self-identity "through verbalizing connections with or differences from friends and associations with friend networks" (p. 77). Killian and Johnson (2006) interviewed 45 North African women living in Paris, and, based on the tendency of those women to distance themselves from the social role of "immigrant," concluded: "apparently we have more room to make our own identities than was previously thought" (p. 75). King, Ross, Bruno, and Erickson (2009) interviewed 10 "street-involved young women" in Toronto who had either recently given birth or become pregnant. They found, in contrast to dominant narratives of adolescent pregnancy, that young women employ identity talk to distance themselves from their former homeless identities, and to "(re)claim a positive identity through pregnancy and parenting" (p. 147). In various ways, these authors reinforce Snow and Anderson's (1987) insight that people actively work to present themselves in a positive light, irrespective of the stigma that others may attribute to their circumstances.

Despite differences between the social worlds of homeless adults and those participating in educational institutions, there are parallels between the identity talk of Snow and Anderson's (1987) research subjects, and the everyday interactions of students, teachers, and administrators. A small number of researchers have explicitly employed Snow and Anderson's insights to examine the identity work of students and teachers. Smith (2017) interviewed 44 students enrolled in a "teaching assistant" foundation degree program. He focused on how student-mothers manage their identities at home, in the workplace, and at university, and argued that such individuals "experience particular challenges in terms of avoiding stigmatization" (p. 123). Kaufman (2003) examined the identity management strategies of 40 "first generation" college students. He found that such students engage in distancing and embracement strategies in order to support a desired

transformation from working-class origins to middle-class futures. Woods and Jeffrey (2002) examined the identity work of primary schoolteachers, in the context of significant shifts in the discourses and institutional contexts of education in the United Kingdom in the 1990s. They argued that such shifts fundamentally disempowered primary teachers, who subsequently had to engage in identity work to recapture a sense of “self-worth and dignity” (p. 98).

While relatively few scholars of education have explicitly used Snow and Anderson’s conceptual framework, the notion of identity work has been employed to advance the understanding of educational processes and outcomes. First, Carlone and colleagues (Carlone, Scott, & Lowder, 2014; Carlone et al., 2015) demonstrated that analyzing students’ identity work is essential to understanding the relationships between race, gender, and social class with engagement in science education. Second, Olitsky (2015) criticized the “acting white hypothesis” through a study of the ways that visible minority students develop “symbolic boundaries through talk”—boundaries that enable such students to escape “white versus non-white” binaries and achieve academic success. Third, various scholars have employed the concept of identity work to examine the professional socialization of teachers (Cohen, 2008; Kaasila, Hannula, & Laine, 2012; Miller, Morgan, & Medina, 2017; Nichols, Schutz, Rodgers, & Bilica, 2016).

Our empirical work extends educational scholarship relating to identity by examining a neglected domain of adult learning, and by systematically applying a conceptual framework focused on human agency. Adult educators have long recognized that much learning takes place outside of formal settings. Concepts such as “self-directed learning” (Tough, 1967; Knowles, 1975) and “public pedagogy” (Wright & Sandlin, 2009a; Sandlin, O’Malley, & Burdick, 2011) draw attention to ways in which adults access resources from popular culture and learn without the involvement of educational institutions. The *Handbook of Public Pedagogy* (Sandlin, Schultz, & Burdick, 2010) includes chapters on television, cinema, museums, video games, social media, blogs, festivals, performance art, graffiti, hip-hop music, parades, and knitting clubs. Scholars of adult education have produced notable studies of learning through activities including reading popular fiction (Jarvis, 1999) and watching television (Jarvis, 2005; Wright, 2007; Wright & Sandlin, 2009b).

Despite considerable interest in self-directed learning and public pedagogy, until recently scholars of adult education had largely ignored the widespread engagement of

adults in learning through self-help books (McLean, 2013, 2014). In a series of recent publications, we documented several key trends in the processes of reading self-help books. We elaborated a typology of three pathways of engagement with self-help texts: linear and successful learning, incomplete engagement, and incidental learning (McLean & Vermeulen, 2014). We found gender differences in the process of reading, with women being more likely to be linear and successful learners, and to take action as a result of reading (McLean & Kapell, 2015). We found minor differences in reading processes and outcomes between relatively younger and older readers (Vermeulen & McLean, 2014), and we documented different patterns of engagement between those whose reading of books relating to mental health was undertaken under the supervision of a therapist and those who read independently (McLean, 2015b). Finally, we found that women reading relationship books rarely internalized explicitly anti-feminist messages from those texts (Kapell & McLean, 2014), that men were more likely than women to express images of themselves consistent with neo-liberal values such as individual autonomy (McLean, 2015a), and that men presented narratives about themselves as readers that were overwhelmingly consistent with the tenets of hegemonic masculinity (McLean & Vermeulen, 2017).

These previous publications describe a rich portrait of interviewees' engagement with self-help reading. Our focus in this article is not upon the learning process itself, but rather upon the ways in which our interviewees positioned themselves as subjects in the learning process. We now provide an overview of the research methods that, while designed to provide data about adults' learning through self-help reading, enabled us to observe fascinating patterns of identity work as our interviewees regularly offered unsolicited comments to position themselves vis-à-vis the self-help genre and its authors, texts, and readers.

## **Research Methods**

Originally, we designed our research to explore the learning experiences and outcomes associated with reading self-help texts. We did so because, despite the contemporary popularity of self-help books and despite the highly polemical nature of claims about the vices and virtues of such books, there had been little scholarly research into the learning

experiences and outcomes associated with reading them. While we set out to engage people in conversation about their experiences of self-help reading, we found that our interviewees regularly engaged in identity talk to position themselves as subjects during the interview process. Our interest in identity and processes of educational engagement/disengagement reflected our previous work as adult educators (see McLean, 1997, 2017) and as teachers of university courses in adult education and the sociology of identity.

Readers should understand our research methods as beginning with the organization of qualitative interviews into learning experiences and outcomes, and ending with the ethnographic interpretation of the identity work embedded in narratives produced by those interviews. We conducted interviews with 134 adults who had read a self-help book, over the course of the preceding year, in the areas of career and financial success, interpersonal relationships, or health and well-being. We defined a “self-help book” very simply as any book that purports to help readers change or improve some aspect of their lives. Interviewees were recruited primarily through online advertisements placed in the “books” sections of Kijiji websites for Calgary, Vancouver, Edmonton, and Winnipeg. Since our interest was to explore the experience of reading self-help books, rather than to test particular hypotheses, we did not engage in systematic or random sampling procedures.

We conducted interviews via the exchange of e-mail messages (117), instant messaging software (10), and telephone calls (7). Interviews generated transcripts with an average length of 2,544 words, with 49 transcripts being between 1,400 and 2,000 words, 58 transcripts being between 2,000 and 3,000 words, and 27 transcripts being over 3,000 words in length. Interviews conducted over the telephone or via instant messaging had an average length of just over 70 minutes. Interviews conducted via the exchange of e-mail messages involved the completion of a structured set of open-ended questions, followed by at least one round of supplementary exchange (e.g., additional prompts and requests for clarification) between researchers and interviewees.

We organized interviews in five main sections: motivation, learning goals, learning strategies, learning outcomes, and impact. Questions encouraged participants to share their experience of self-help reading in their own words and with minimal direction. We transcribed interviews verbatim, or cut and pasted from chat software or e-mail messages. Participants completing interviews received a \$25 honorarium. We identify participants in this article by pseudonyms assigned by our research team. Of the 134 participants,

two-thirds were women. Each interview focused on the experience of reading one specific self-help book. Of our 134 participants, 49% read books relating primarily to health and well-being, while 26% read books dealing with interpersonal relationships, and 25% read books on topics relating to career and financial success. There were distinct gender differences in readership of different types of books. Women were more likely to read books pertaining to health and well-being (54%) and relationships (29%), as opposed to those pertaining to careers (17%). In contrast, men were more likely to read books pertaining to careers (40%) and health (40%), as opposed to those pertaining to relationships (20%). The average age of participants was 34 years for women, and 30 years for men. Females had slightly higher rates of post-secondary education: 67% of the women and 53% of the men had completed at least an undergraduate degree or post-secondary diploma.

We undertook data analysis by cutting and pasting passages from all 134 transcripts into an Excel database structured so that each row represented a single case and each column represented a single variable of analytical interest. Initial analysis involved the coding of each variable to enable the summary and comparison of predominantly qualitative data. The primary focus of data analysis was on the description of the experience of, and outcomes from, self-help reading. Such analysis led to the publications summarized above and published in a variety of journals.

While our initial data analysis strategy focused on describing the learning experiences and outcomes associated with reading self-help books, our previous work as adult educators and sociologists led us to notice the identity work embedded in the interview transcripts. Notions such as “distancing” and “embracement” were not part of our initial plan for data analysis, but rather emerged inductively through the process of reading the transcripts. Once these themes emerged for a significant proportion of interviewees, analysis shifted from coding variables to interpreting cases. Thematic analysis focused on reconstructing, on a case-by-case basis, the ways in which interviewees positioned themselves as subjects vis-à-vis texts, authors, other readers, or the social role of the self-help reader. While we did not engage in any formal assessment of intercoder reliability, both authors engaged in thematic analysis, and we discussed any discrepancies in our interpretations until reaching consensus.

As this overview of our research methods should make clear, it is important to note that we did not initially set out to understand identity work through a study of self-help readers. Rather, we studied self-help readers’ learning experiences and outcomes,

and realized that the process of interviewing such readers led to the generation of transcripts that contained considerable insight for the study of identity work and educational engagement/disengagement. In essence, we undertook an *ex post facto* ethnographic interpretation of interviews focused on learning, in order to understand the identity work in which learners engage. As such, our interviewees composed a convenience sample of learners, rather than a sample of learners chosen systematically to provide insight into the identity work of all learners.

## Findings

The genre of self-help literature provides a fascinating domain in which to explore identity work undertaken during learning processes, due to the stigmatized nature of the genre itself. Each year, Canadians spend millions of dollars and hours buying and reading self-help books. Publishers make audacious claims about the effectiveness of self-help books. Critics lament the vicious effect of the self-help industry on individuals and society. In this highly contentious domain, many readers are aware of the negative judgements often made of their engagement with self-help literature.

Self-help readers are not simply passive dupes of popular culture, or helpless victims of predatory publishers seeking to profit from readers' gullibility and insecurity. However, such stereotypes abound, and create a domain in which stigmatization and impression management are prevalent. Under everyday circumstances, it is easy to "pass" as a non-reader of self-help books, or to reveal one's readership of such books only to those who one believes would be sympathetic. Through our research practices, we invited self-help readers to participate in structured interviews about their experiences. About half of our interviewees did so without explicitly commenting about their position as a reader. However, about half of our research participants did, without prompting from the interview protocol, somehow qualify their own position as a subject *vis-à-vis* the self-help genre, specific texts, authors, and other readers. We organize our reporting of such identity talk according to Snow and Anderson's (1987) basic categories of distancing and embracement.

## Distancing

Interestingly, despite volunteering to participate in research about self-help reading, several of our interviewees categorically distanced themselves from “the type of person” who reads self-help books. Nate, a 43-year-old IT manager, described reading *The Five Love Languages*:

I wasn't really looking for a relationship book but since my friend recommended it highly I decided to give it a try. I'm not the type to read self-help books in general so I probably wouldn't have picked it up if it hadn't been recommended by a close friend.

In a similar manner, Robin, a 37-year-old health educator, asserted: “I'm not one to normally go out looking for self-help, this one kind of fell in my lap.” She explained that unique circumstances (a car accident and subsequent post-concussive syndrome) led her to purchase *The Ultimate Guide to Sex and Disability*, and that “the title grabbed [her] attention” since she had never seen another book about that subject matter.

The role of circumstances and other people in encouraging “non-self-help readers” to read self-help books was also emphasized by Elodie and Juliette. Elodie, a 20-year-old college student, described how she came to read *University of Success* at the urging of her boyfriend:

I'm not a person that reads so I didn't want to at first but he told me I could probably learn from it and maybe change some bad habits so I decided to read it. And also, I am very interested in business and making lots of money so I figured there's nothing to lose to read it.

Chance, rather than persuasion from others, brought Juliette, a 24-year-old graduate student, to self-help reading:

I don't usually read self-help books. Really it was because I was just hanging around in Chapters and the topic of the book caught my eye. I always felt like reading self-help book seems so silly. It's like why not go and talk to a psychologist or doctor if I need help? Or why can't I talk to someone? I think the only reason I picked it up was because it was health related.

Despite the absence of allusion (in our recruitment messaging and interview protocol) to self-help reading as a stigmatized activity, some interviewees clearly wanted to tell us that they were not “self-help readers” even though they had read a self-help book.

Other readers distanced themselves from the role of self-help reader by expressing a surprise, or change of heart, that accompanied their reading experience. Ryan, a 32-year-old musician who read *The Four Agreements*, stated: “It’s weird, I never thought I could actually take anything away from a self-help book, but I really did.” Finn, a 25-year-old graphic designer explained a similar level of surprise in reading *The Game*:

I’m naturally cynical, and this book set off every alarm bell going. I was ready to label it as bullshit, but I promised to read a small section before judging. I started reading the first chapter, and to my surprise it was genuinely engaging.

Finn confirmed that he would not publically disclose his reading of the book (“I remained fairly quiet about reading it or discussing the techniques outside of the one friend who loaned me the book”), but claimed that self-help reading had improved his self-confidence. Elisha, a 37-year-old teacher, described her impression of reading a book to which she attributed a successful smoking cessation effort: “I never believed that I would ‘fall for’ what a book was offering. I am very cynical and am still not sure why this book worked.”

Gwen, a 27-year-old entrepreneur who read *The Happiness Advantage*, also practised categorical role distancing. At the end of her interview, Gwen stated: “I’d just like to mention that I’m not really a self-help book sort of person, and I was in fact a bit embarrassed about having bought one.” When prompted by our interviewer to further explain why she was embarrassed and whether she would consider buying another self-help book in the future, Gwen replied:

I may buy another in the future, I just wouldn’t display any such book publicly. I think it’s the “motivational” part that embarrasses me, in my head I’ve grouped it with motivational speakers and get rich quick schemes, gimmicky people and annoying pitches. It’s unfair of me, as I did like this book and author, and he doesn’t belong in that category at all.

Gwen's reflection about distancing herself from the role of the self-help reader, but making an exception for particular books and authors, was a form of identity talk shared by several other interviewees.

Miranda, a 28-year-old accountant, expressed a disdain for self-help books in general: "sometimes books of this genre are very vague and all seem to regurgitate the same sort of ideas." In describing her reading of *The Slight Edge*, she claimed "this one was different" and even characterized the book as "a must read for anyone who is looking to make a positive difference, on a very small budget." Clara, a 32-year-old accountant also expressed having "a general feeling toward self-help books" as being less than helpful. She described her reading of *How to Win Friends and Influence People*:

I started reading the book with a hint of cynicism as I thought it may be over the top or that the ideas may be ridiculous. However as I started reading I found the book really useful and there were some really great pieces of advice contained within.

Clara confessed: "After reading this book, my general view has improved and I now see that a book can actually be very helpful."

More commonly, our interviewees expressed a distinction between the "types of books" which they would read and less savoury forms of self-help reading. Brodie, a 21-year-old college student read *Manvotionals*, and distinguished it from others in the genre:

The reason this was such a good self-help book wasn't because it told me exactly what to do, like some cookie-cutter self-help books. The reason this was so great is because it wasn't linear at all. It didn't just tell you how to live your life or improve it, but it told you how to figure out how to.

Gail, a 52-year-old post-secondary teacher, described the context of her reading *How to Survive the Loss of a Love*: "My neighbour lent it to me as she knew I was having a rough time with a divorce." Gail described being reluctant to read: "I was a bit skeptical as some of her other suggestions had been too 'God is there for us' type." Gail did read the book, and told us: "I liked it and found it very profound."

Three of our readers were less equivocal in distancing themselves from attachment to self-help books. Jemma, a 35-year-old medical assistant whose aunt gave her *The*

*Master Key System* as a gift, asserted: “I have not read any other self-help book and at present I have no plans of reading any other self-help books.” Kaitlin, a 51-year-old film producer, told us that despite owning two self-help books due to the recommendations of a friend: “I tend to shy away from self-help books as I find that usually it’s just common sense packaged into a book. I already have lots of common sense.” Chad, a 23-year-old unemployed man who read *Do What You Are* at the urging of his mother, stated: “I don’t think I’ll be reading another self-help book for a while. I believe that getting help from actual people is more reliable.” While these three readers did not explicitly comment about the “type of person” who reads self-help books, they clearly distanced themselves from the practice of self-help reading.

In a more nuanced form of identity talk, a couple of our interviewees distanced themselves from serious commitment to the self-help books that they had read. Roland, a 41-year-old manager who read *Think and Grow Rich*, told us: “I am not the sort of person who usually reads self-help books,” and “I heard about the book from a friend who was very satisfied with the results and passed it on to me.” Roland described his ambivalent motivations: “I was hoping that the book would bring me some motivation and possibly help me to achieve something. But it was also quite a ‘Oh, what the heck’ moment.” Darren, a 25-year-old IT analyst, expressed even less commitment to the process of reading *The Secrets of Success at Work*:

I was looking for a new job and decided to find an eBook to help kill some time and help me on my job hunt. It was pretty short and somewhat entertaining. A few corny jokes. A few diagrams. It helped that I read most of it on an exercise bike.

Expressing lukewarm commitment to the reading process helped Darren and Roland ensure that we understood that they were not the sort of people who read self-help books, even though they were taking part in an interview about self-help reading.

At times, the stigma of being a self-help reader may be compounded by the stigma associated with the substantive concerns that bring one to self-help reading, or by one’s unflattering opinions of other readers. Danica, a 45-year-old unemployed woman, illustrated the complex interaction between these various sources of stigmatization. In explaining how she came to read *When Good People Have Affairs*, she confided: “It took me several visits to the bookstore before I got the courage to buy it. I kept looking at it. Sometimes the circumstances were not right because I was not alone.” As if the stigma of

an extramarital affair were not enough to complicate the stigma of purchasing a self-help book, Danica also reported that she held an unfavourable view of self-help readers: “Most of my life I have had a hang-up about self-help books, because I saw my dad read almost every book on the market since the seventies and he could talk the talk real well, but never could walk the walk.”

While most of the illustrations above reflect one or another form of distancing as identity talk, one of our interviewees combined several forms of distancing in his narrative. Carl, a 35-year-old unemployed man, expressed lukewarm commitment to reading *How to Win Friends and Influence People*: “The reason why I decided to read it was because it has a catchy sounding title, also I have heard people mention the title before.” When asked about his learning goals, Carl stated: “I guess I kind of hope that I could learn how to make more friends. Everybody can use more friends.” However, when asked about his desire for insight, or to make change in his life, Carl replied: “Nothing particular, just wanted something to read.” When prompted to expand upon this reply in light of any past reading of self-help books he may have done, Carl explained:

I have listened to other self-help books before. Some of them are useful, some of them...[are] very cultish, some of them are just trash. [The] self-help book isn't really a normal reading of mine. I only read them when I hear about them from friends or if some of them are really popular and I am curious about what they are about.

In his narrative, Carl expresses a distance between himself and people who commonly read self-help books, a distinction between good and bad self-help books, and an ambivalent commitment to reading.

In total, of our 134 research participants, 24 readers expressed some explicit form of distancing. Such identity talk sometimes took the form of categorical role distancing (I'm not the sort of person who reads self-help books), or sometimes took more contingent forms (I only read good self-help books; I only read a self-help book due to special circumstances; or I don't take such books too seriously). Through the strategies illustrated above, nearly one-fifth of our readers worked to put some distance between themselves and the image that they attributed to the “typical” self-help reader. The implied stigma of self-help reading and the identity work undertaken to avoid such stigma are particularly surprising given that these individuals volunteered to participate in a “self-help literature

research project” and answered questions in which no judgements of the ethical value of self-help reading were expressed or implied. Interestingly, there were important differences in the proportions of men and women engaging in distancing as a form of identity talk: 27% of the men in our study did so, while only 13% of the women did so. Self-help reading would appear, from the perspective of our interviewees, to be more stigmatizing for men.

## **Embracement**

One could imply that everyone who volunteered to participate in a research project about self-help reading embraced, to some extent, the social identity of a self-help reader. Some of our readers did so implicitly, by answering our questions about their motivations, reading practices, and learning outcomes without commenting about their position as subjects vis-à-vis the texts, the genre, the authors, or other readers. Others did so explicitly, by referring to their personal history and habits of self-help reading, by extolling the virtues of self-help texts and authors, by associating themselves with other self-help readers, or by comparing self-help reading favorably with other means of addressing life’s challenges. Over four-fifths of our interviewees either explicitly embraced self-help reading, or completed interviews without problematizing their role as a reader. Here, we illustrate the four most common forms of embracement demonstrated in our interviewees’ identity talk.

Role embracement was the most common form of identity talk undertaken by our research participants. Twenty-five interviewees described their personal history of self-help reading in ways that clearly embraced the social identity of self-help reader. Some readers told us about the large number of self-help books that they had read. James, a 31-year-old chiropractor, explained his fondness for business management related self-help books: “I usually end up reading a book of that sort about once a month.” June, a 52-year-old civil servant, explained that she is a fan of the Christian-oriented self-help author, Joyce Meyer: “I have about 20 of her books and have read about 5 of them so far.” Others narrated circumstances of reading that left no doubt about their embracement of the self-help reader role. Laurel, a 26-year-old sales and administrative worker in the oil and gas industry, explained the context of her latest reading: “I was on holidays and had read all the books I’d brought with me, so I went to the secondhand store and told them the kind of books I like to read about self-help/personal journeys.”

Embracement of the role of self-help reader does not imply an indiscriminate acceptance of all books in the genre. Jasmine, a 43-year-old homemaker, illustrates the contingent nature of self-help reading even among those who actively embrace the role of reader:

I have been reading self-help books for at least 20 years. I enjoy reading self-help books and will continue to do so. ADHD will likely be a chosen topic. I also enjoy books about women from a woman's perspective, so I tend to get self-help books on a number of topics that come from that perspective. If the books are too religious or too far-out new-agey, then I am not interested.

Eli, a 25-year-old nursing assistant, claimed: "In general I read self-help when I think that the book will offer a new perspective on how to live better." It should not be surprising, in a study whose interviewees were recruited for their readership of self-help books, that more interviewees embraced the role of self-help reader than distanced themselves from that role.

Our interviewees also practised embracement by extolling the virtues of self-help texts and authors. At the very end of our interview protocol, we asked participants: "Is there anything else about your experience of reading this self-help book that you would like to share with us?" In response, we received a remarkable number of unexpected testimonials regarding the merits of self-help books and authors. Examples include:

- I trust this author and want to benefit from every insight that he writes about.
- I'd recommend it for anyone having anxiety issues.
- I honestly think that everyone should read this book at some point in their lives.
- I wish everyone would read this book!

In addition to encouraging others to read particular authors or books, some of our participants described more general benefits of self-help reading. Janna, a 34-year-old homemaker who had read *The Dukan Diet*, explained: "Self-help books—regardless of their main 'point'—offer an excellent opportunity to learn more about you." Milo, a 34-year-old unemployed man, read a time management book, and reflected: "It is the examination of self and of nature that will improve lives, and self-help books point us in the right direction." Kioko, a 38-year-old homemaker, asserted: "I think many things in self-help books are not new to the person reading them. But it does give perspective when you

can sit down, book in hand and focus on the topic at hand.” Twenty-one of our interviewees extolled the virtues of specific texts, authors, or the overall genre.

Praising the quality of particular authors and texts does not imply an indiscriminate embracement of self-help authors or books. Many of those who embraced the role of self-help reader also qualified that embracement by stating that they were careful with the types of authors and books that they would read. Maelle, a 31-year-old professional in the non-profit sector, described the importance of authorial credentials in her decision to read *And Baby Makes Three*:

Having attended a Gottman workshop, I know that his work is evidenced-based, and both of the authors are PhD-level psychologists. It is important for me to read books by those who are well-versed in their area.

Overall, 14 of our interviewees qualified their embracement of self-help reading by stating that they preferred to read books written by authors who were well-educated, held particular religious beliefs, received critical acclaim for their work, or had substantial, real-world accomplishments.

Ten of our interviewees practised embracement by associating themselves with other self-help readers. In some cases, this associational embracement was expressed in terms of reading with like-minded friends. Melina, a 34-year-old accounting manager, explained how her self-help reading was often undertaken in the context of a book club: “Our book club is a group of Christian ladies who read all types of books—fiction, current, and historical—and books like *Love and Respect*. We try to alternate between the self-help books and fiction.” In other cases, such embracement was expressed in terms of a feeling of solidarity with the many anonymous others who read the same book. Gracia, a 30-year-old schoolteacher, described her reading of *Feeling Good*:

It has helped me to feel like I am not alone. I feel like if there is a book written about my issue then therefore others must be feeling like me too if they are writing about it. Feeling like I am not the only one has helped me to feel like I am not going crazy.

While self-help reading is sometimes interpreted as a solitary and even individualizing activity, the experiences of 10 of our interviewees would suggest that such reading sometimes leads people to feel a greater sense of connection with others.

Finally, five readers embraced self-help reading by explicitly advocating for the advantages of such reading over alternative means of addressing one's challenges. Three readers were in therapy for mental health support, and described their self-help reading as helping them in ways that their therapists could not. Galina, a 29-year-old social worker, explained:

I really liked reading about my issue because I could reflect upon my issue privately. In many cases it was better than talking to my therapist or anyone because I didn't have to be clear in what I was thinking or feeling immediately. I felt less pressured and defensive because I was alone and my emotional walls were down. I think the non-threatening format of the book helped me to consider things that I may not have been receptive to on another format.

Orla, an 18-year-old student, claimed that her self-help reading enabled her to overcome the trauma and stress of having been sexually assaulted, after health care professionals of various sorts had left her feeling pressured rather than helped. Nellie expressed the view that her reading about singing techniques was more beneficial than much of the professional instruction she had received, and Rory claimed that the nutritional information he received from a self-help book was better than that imparted by physicians.

## **Conclusions**

We have presented an ethnographic account of the identity talk in which readers of self-help books engaged during the process of being interviewed about their learning experiences. Our participants expressed a range in the level of their commitment to the social identity of the self-help reader. Some eagerly embraced that identity through telling us about their strong sense of affinity with self-help books, authors, and other readers. Others resolutely distanced themselves from that identity, and ensured, despite the fact that they were participating in an interview about self-help reading, that we understood that they were not self-help readers and that they disdained the genre, its authors, and the stereotypical readers of such books. Our study of identity talk has intrinsic value through enabling scholars to understand the complex and diverse ways in which adult learners position themselves as subjects in self-directed learning processes.

Our work with self-help readers contributes to scholarly efforts to operationalize the concept of identity, and provokes theoretical reflection to connect identity with important themes in the sociology of education. Snow and Anderson (1987) argued that “the theoretical function of identity” was to serve “as a kind of interface or conceptual bridge” that would link “the individual and society” (p. 1338). This article has demonstrated the utility of Snow and Anderson’s model of distancing and embracement to the operationalization of identity. Our conversations with readers of self-help books enabled us to understand the boundaries of similarity and difference that those readers symbolically constructed between themselves and other readers. Through paying attention to the ways in which people spoke about themselves in relation to others, we were able to learn about our interviewees’ sense of themselves as learners. As such, in terms of linking the individual and society, we have shown that individuals actively work to position themselves vis-à-vis society.

There are important limitations to our focus on individuals’ presentation of themselves as learners. Most obviously, we have not addressed two key questions on the societal side of the conceptual bridge between “the individual and society.” First, how do social and historical forces both enable and constrain individuals’ capacity to construct and avow particular identities as learners? To paraphrase Marx, identity work does not take place in circumstances chosen by the individuals doing such work. Rather, individuals’ identity work takes place within historical and social contexts that set parameters upon the discursive resources available to those individuals. As contemporary social movements and identity politics make clear, symbolic resources for identity-related claims can evolve rapidly. Second, what effect does identity work have upon the social experiences and learning outcomes of those having constructed particular forms of identity? Sociologists of education have demonstrated systematic differences in educational performance and attainment between individuals categorized as bearing racialized, gendered, or classed identities. The existence of such differences implies that educational outcomes reflect how others characterize various learners, and/or how various learners approach educational interactions. While our empirical research has generated insight into individuals’ identity work, it has not addressed the theoretical connections between such work and its socio-historical roots and consequences.

Finally, our work with self-help readers may inspire research by educational scholars interested in a range of institutional contexts. We have narrated a story of

educational engagement/disengagement: how a particular population of adult learners constructs particular sorts of learner identities. While readers should not generalize from our findings to the experiences of other populations of learners (e.g., schoolchildren or post-secondary students), readers should be inspired to think creatively and critically about the relationships between identity and educational engagement/disengagement. The identity work that we have described among readers of self-help texts has clear parallels in the activities of students, teachers, and administrators in primary and secondary schools, and in a wide range of post-secondary and adult education settings. Participants in educational interactions often work to position themselves as subjects. Our study of self-help readers should remind scholars of education that learning is more than the straightforward reception of content; the reception of content is influenced by one's positioning of oneself as a subject vis-à-vis the content, the person or people communicating that content, the media through which that content is being communicated, and other recipients of that content. Future research could apply our conceptual framework and methods to the study of identity work among participants in a wide variety of educational settings. Such research could inform sensitive approaches to phenomena, such as student engagement/disengagement, by helping educators understand why identity work takes the forms that it does, and how such work influences students' responses to educational environments. Such research could also endeavour to connect the identity work of individuals to its socio-historical context, and to its implications for the educational outcomes of individuals and communities.

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