

## Brief Reports

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### Self-Help Book Prescription Practices of Canadian University Counsellors

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There is growing evidence that the professional use of bibliotherapy or "self help" books to supplement treatment has become accepted practice in American clinical psychology (Starker, 1986, 1988, and 1988b). Before empirical evidence has demonstrated the efficacy of bibliotherapy, Starker (1986) makes the claim that "—the self-help book has established a niche in the practice of psychology, psychiatry, and internal medicine" (p. 24).

Starker (1986, 1988) found from his surveys, including a national survey of psychologists (1988b), that most of the respondents considered self-help books to be beneficial and the majority (from 60.3% to 96% in the national study) prescribed them to their patients.

In a recent national survey of Canadian clinical psychologists, Warner (1990) found that almost two-thirds of the respondents prescribed self-help books to their clients/patients.

In a current review of the literature, aptly titled, *Bibliotherapy: Does it work?*, Riordan and Wilson (1989) conclude that although there are increasing numbers of studies that meet minimal empirical validation—particularly behaviourally based reading material—research results are still mixed. In addition Rosen (1987) has raised ethical questions about the unsubstantiated claims made by psychologist authors who appear more interested in selling psychology rather than "giving it away."

Dealing with the efficacy of self-help treatment for depression, however, two recent studies (not cited in the above mentioned review) appear more promising. Using Holland's RIASEC model (1985) with mildly depressed undergraduates, Mahalik and Kivlighan (1988) found that Realistic types were most successful at self-help treatment, in terms of reduction of depression scores, and Enterprising types least successful—they had the highest attrition.

Probably the most encouraging study on the efficacy of bibliotherapy to date is the investigation by Scogin, Jamison, and Gochneaur (1989) who compared behavioural and cognitive books with a geriatric depression population. The behavioural treatment book employed in this study was *Control Your Depression* by Lewinsohn *et al.*, (1986), and the cognitive book was *Feeling Good: the New Mood Therapy* by Burns (1980) with the control group receiving a delayed-treatment. The results indicated that both books were equally effective with the mildly and moderately depressed elders, and the treatment gains were maintained at the six month

follow-up. The authors conclude that "cognitive and behavioural bibliotherapy programs are potential alternatives or adjuncts to psychotherapy or chemotherapy for geriatric depression" (p. 407).

The purpose of the present study was to determine if Canadian university counsellors were similarly inclined to prescribe self-help books, and to compare the titles of the most prescribed books to those selected by Canadian psychologists.

#### METHOD

The question regarding bibliotherapy was worded, "With regard to personal counselling, do you recommend books to your clients, and if so, which book(s) have you found the most helpful?" (The complete questionnaire, which is available from the author, also included items on theoretical orientations and is reported elsewhere—Warner, 1990b.)

#### *Sample*

The survey was sent to all the members of the Canadian University and College Counsellors Association (CUCCA). Of the 155 members of CUCCA (1988), 86% were employed at universities, 11% at colleges (non-degree granting institutions), and 3% "other" employment.

Sixty-seven Canadian University and College Counsellors Association members responded, and 13 additional respondents were recruited from a subsequent annual convention of CUCCA. The 80 responses were received from eight provinces and the Northwest Territories, the percentage of distribution was as follows: west (including the Northwest Territories) 36.5, Ontario 42.5, Quebec 2.5, and the Maritimes 17.6. The province of origin was not identifiable for 1.3%.

#### RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Of the 78 counsellors who answered this question, 74.4% responded affirmatively to recommending books to their clients during counselling with 56 titles of books being prescribed. The ten most prescribed books, which are listed in Table 1 and compared with the psychologists' selections, ranged from 13 citations for the book in first place (*Feeling Good* by Burns) to 2 citations for the tenth position book (*Your Perfect Right: A guide to Assertive Living* by Alberti & Emmons).

This endorsement for bibliotherapy, however, does not address the critical question of the validity of self-help books—further research is needed for that—only the perceived utility of bibliotherapy by practicing counsellors. The fact that almost three-quarters of the counsellors in this sample and almost two-thirds of the psychologists in the previous study, make such prescriptions, suggest nevertheless, that the popularized self-help books have also taken an important place in the practice of Canadian counselling and therapy.

TABLE 1

*Comparison of Most Prescribed Books of  
Canadian Counsellors and Psychologists\**

Counsellors	Psychologists*
1. <i>Feeling Good: The New Mood Therapy</i> by D. Burns, (Guildford) 1980.	<i>Feeling Good: The New Mood Therapy</i> by D. Burns, (Guildford) 1980.
2. <i>What Color is Your Parachute?</i> by R. Bolles (Ten Speed) 1990.	<i>New Guide To Rational Living</i> by Ellis & Harper (Prentice-Hall) 1975.
3. <i>Focusing</i> by E. Gendlin (Everest House) 1978.	<i>Your Perfect Right: A guide to Assertive Behaviour</i> by Alberti & Emmons (Impact) 1978.
4. <i>How To Survive the Loss of Love</i> by Colgrove Bloomfield, and McWilliams (Bantam) 1976.	<i>Women Who Love Too Much: When You Keep Wishing &amp; Hoping He Will Change</i> by A. Norwood (Pocket) 1986.
5. <i>New Guide to Rational Living</i> by Ellis & Harper (Prentice-Hall) 1975.	<i>The Road Less Travelled</i> by S. Peck (Simon & Schuster) 1986.
6. <i>Adult Children of Alcoholics—Strategies for Therapeutic Intervention</i> by B. Wood (NYU) 1987.	<i>When I Say no I Feel Guilty: How to Cope</i> by M. Smith (Dial) 1975.
7. <i>Women Who Love Too Much: When You Keep Wishing &amp; Hoping He Will Change</i> by A. Norwood (Pocket) 1986.	<i>Adult Children of Alcoholics—Strategies for Therapeutic Intervention</i> by B. Wood (NYU) 1987.
8. <i>The Road Less Travelled</i> by S. Peck (Simon & Schuster) 1986.	<i>Male Sexuality Function: Myth, Fantasy &amp; Reality</i> by R. Milsten, (Avon) 1979.
9. <i>Cutting Loose: An Adult Guide to Coming to Terms with Your Parents</i> by H. Halpern (Bantam) 1978.	<i>Relaxation Response</i> by Benson & Klipper (Avon) 1976.
10. <i>Your Perfect Right: A Guide to Assertive Behaviour</i> by Alberti & Emmons (Impact) 1978	<i>Comprehensive Stress Management</i> by J. Greenberg, (Brown) 1983.

\* Warner, (1990)

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#### *Résumé*

Un sondage, fait auprès de conseillers du milieu universitaire, détermine jusqu'à quel point ils font usage de la bibliothérapie dans leur pratique en counseling. De plus, on leur a demandé d'énumérer les dix livres les plus souvent prescrits pour les comparer à ceux utilisés par des psychologues canadiens. Les résultats démontrent que 75% des répondants prescrivent des livres à leurs clients. A partir des 56 livres prescrits, dix de ceux-ci ont été identifiés comme étant mentionnés le plus fréquemment par les conseillers.

#### *About the Author*

Dr. Warner is a counsellor at the Centre for Student Development and Counselling at Ryerson Polytechnical Institute in Toronto. His research interests and publications have included personal recollections of life's most stressful experiences, teacher empathy and interpersonal skills training, and the status of counselling theories including the practice of bibliotherapy.