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How Pop Culture Shapes the Stages of a Woman's Life

From Toddlers-in-Tiaras to Cougars-on-the-Prowl

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The Gendered Self-Help Reel:
How Romantic Comedies Instruct Women on Dating Dos and Don’ts

On 22 June 2015, the Twitterverse erupted when ABC’s latest ‘bachelorette’ had sex with one of her male suitors prior to the show’s pre-approved, pre-scripted timeline. Far from being a PG-rated reality TV program, the long-running show is well known for broadcasting a slew of make-out sessions and an entire episode devoted to speculating on whether the bachelor or bachelorette will have sex with any or all of his or her final three contestants in the fantasy suite. Yet when an episode aired revealing that Kaitlyn Bristowe, the show’s star, and repeat contestant, Nick Viall, had slept together at the close of their one-on-one date, Bristowe faced a wave of criticism from fans through social media. Over 70,000 tweets with the hashtag #TheBachelorette appeared in the 24 hours surrounding this episode and a vast majority of them were negative posts consisting of judgmental quips and derogatory slurs focusing on Bristowe’s sexual activity. These tweeters, the majority of whom were female, were quick to affix all the normal labels used to discuss so-called female promiscuity. Among the tamer tweets were chastising posts like this one: ‘Kaitlyn needs to learn how to keep it classy & not so trashy #TheBachelorette.’

Amid the caustic remarks were also hundreds of tweets defending Bristowe. For example, comedian Amy Schumer posted: ‘Oh no someone slept with a guy they’re dating and considering marrying! Showing love for @kaitlynbristowe.’ Tweets that challenged slut shaming began to fill the feed, as did posts that specifically called out ABC’s producers for the ways in which the show was participating in and encouraging such shaming. (For example, the network promoted this episode as ‘Kaitlyn’s Sex Scandal.’) The attention paid to this episode resulted in some productive social commentary both on and off the twitter feed. Social media users and journalists alike drew attention to the continued sexual double standard that exists – one that is broadcast loud and clear on this show. Bristowe and Viall both spoke out against the criticism as well. The evening of the episode, Bristowe tweeted: ‘Just remember, when you judge me, you do not define me, you define yourself,’ and Viall posted numerous tweets drawing attention to the problematic ways in which people, particularly women, are judged for their sexual activity. Through a series of posts, Viall praised Bristowe for having the courage to admit on national TV to having sex, ‘knowing that she [would] be unfairly judged by some’, and further arguing that ‘sex is not shameful’ and that ‘both men and women have an equal right to have sex without judgement.’ While some important conversations resulted from this sensationalized reality television episode, the initial social media response it provoked reveals how, even in the 21st century, expectations for single women on the dating market are entrenched in problematic sexual double standards that have remained unaltered for decades. Consider, for example, this live tweet that aired during the episode: ‘you can turn a housewife into a hoe. But you can’t turn a hoe into a housewife.’ As the negative twitter posts prove, many still believe that certain behaviors determine whether a woman is good girlfriend or wife material, and at the top of the list remains sexual activity.

Thankfully, most women escape the public criticism recapped above while going through the dating stage. But while they may not receive personalized messages informing them of whether they are behaving in socially appropriate ways that will help them to win the affections of a man, they are receiving such messages on a daily basis from countless sources. Advertisements, music videos, television shows, and other cultural products subtly (and not-so-subtly) school women as to what men are supposedly looking for in an ideal mate. The ones marketed specifically to women are often the biggest offenders in terms of drawing upon classic gender stereotypes. Case in point: romantic comedies. This genre has long been marketed to women, often depicting the relationship happenings of middle-to-late 20-something females. Recently, the desire to capture the teen and tween demographic has resulted in films featuring younger and younger stars, and, correspondingly, younger and younger audience members. Now these troubling ‘how to date’ lessons are being consumed at earlier – and more formative – ages. Although almost any subset of this genre could be analyzed to reveal rather overt messages about gendered dating etiquette, here we look at romantic comedies that take this instructional role to new heights, becoming the equivalent of modern-day, visually rendered dating self-help books.
The (new) self-help era

That self-help has made its Hollywood debut is not surprising. The past two decades have seen an increase in the popularity of traditional self-help literature, leaving scholars to question why this contemporary cultural moment has found American consumers so interested in self-improvement, prescriptive how-to manuals, and the overall 'Do-It-Yourself' mindset. This explosion of standard self-help texts has resulted in a myriad of entertainment products (fictional books, television, and movies) that take on a self-help angle. Sometimes this trend is even more explicit. Some of the films discussed here actually stem from traditional self-help, making them a sort of quasi-self-help/entertainment hybrid product. And what kind of 'help' do these filmic masterpieces offer? Why flawless advice on how to land a man, of course! Like the self-help arena they are bound to, these films ultimately reinforce stereotypical, gendered behavior patterns. Concerns about how Hollywood films assist in the social construction of gender and gendered behavior are not new. Nor are observations that many movies serve to further support heteronormative belief systems. However, analyzing these films as part of a cultural move toward the self-help model might help explain how these texts function, why they continue to be popular, and in what additional ways they might be considered problematic.

While the massive popularity of self-help may be rather new, the terminology and genre are not. Self-help was first used as a legal term in the context of personal development in Samuel Smiles' 1859 book, Self-Help. Although he apparently coined the term, the genre predated him by at least a century. Steven Starker, author of Oracle at the Supermarket, credits Cotton Mather for launching the field with his 1710 publication, Bonifacius: Essays to Do Good. While Mather touted the importance of doing good work for good work's sake (without expectations for social advancement), his contemporary, Benjamin Franklin, encouraged action that led to social mobility (a worthwhile goal that he felt could be attained by all). The genre truly gained momentum when the philosophy known as 'New Thought' arrived on the scene around the turn of the 20th century. Capitalizing on this moment were writers like Dale Carnegie, author of How to Win Friends and Influence People (1936), who wrote practical advice on achieving success. Carnegie's text is one of the earliest to bear the trademarks of the contemporary self-help book. For example, he relies heavily on personal anecdotes to reinforce his advice. The latest movement to impact the genre is 'Positive Psychology', prompting publications like Gretchen Rubin's 2009 amazon.com bestseller, The Happiness Project: Or Why I Spent a Year Trying to Sing in the Morning, Clean My Closets, Fight Right, Read Aristotle, and Generally Have More Fun. As one reviewer notes, this text is 'full of data, but humbly narrated within the framework of a memoir. It bears all the hallmarks of contemporary self-help, including its shyness about the label [...] But for all its modern pretensions, it focuses, like all the enduring best sellers, on a chronic and incurable American flaw: unhappiness. As the turn of the century certainly didn't bring about the cure for unhappiness, the genre continued to prosper and diversify under the unspoken promise that readers were just one paperback purchase away from finally ridding themselves of this emotional epidemic for good.

In his book Reading as Therapy, Timothy Aubry discusses how the therapeutic turn that impacted the publishing market across the genre divide affected fiction as well as traditional self-help. He argues that in the 21st century, 'the therapeutic has become the defining structure of thought and feeling in the United States, asserting individual happiness as the fundamental goal of life and prioritizing the private or the personal over the public or the social.' So perhaps we're not all just narcissists after all. Maybe we're all just looking for a little inner healing. But how exactly did we come to know we were in need of healing to begin with? Why the self-help books told us, of course. The genre's label, 'self-help', is even partially to blame. After all, the term suggests 'a self that can supposedly help itself, while implicitly catering to a self that is in constant need of help, a self that is in many respects understood to be helpless.'

The recent self-help craze can be attributed to various cultural shifts: the increased secularization of society, the prevalence of modern psychotherapy, and even shifts in economic stability. Concerning the latter, some researchers suggest that middle-class citizens, free of hardships they may have experienced in past epochs, now have the luxury to dwell obsessively on their psychological health – a fixation that advertising campaigns have, by associating their products with the attainment of happiness, cleverly exploited. Others argue that the trend correlates with shifts in both work and family structure. Micki McGee, author of Self-Help, Inc.: Makeover Culture in American Life, for example, notes that since the 1970s, the growth in the self-help genre has paralleled the destabilization of the labor market and of individual families. McGee points toward the declining number of people who have a lifelong profession or a lifelong marriage, and muses: 'it is no longer sufficient to be married or employed; rather, it is imperative that one remains marriageable and employable.' Hence, the need for...
books that prescribe how one can accomplish this. While the trend may be linked to the rise of certain personal struggles, many argue that the industry has only been able to thrive because of the lessening of public shame concerning such struggles and the support needed to work through them. Consider, for example, the increasing acceptance of anti-depression medication and 'the proliferation of twelve-step recovery groups.\textsuperscript{22} As a result, a burgeoning industry was born and 'these days self-help is unembarrassed, out of the bedside drawer and up on the coffee table, wholly transformed from a disreputable publishing category to a category killer, having remade most of nonfiction in its own inspirational image along the way.\textsuperscript{23}

While the public acceptance of the genre may be new, the sentiment that drives it is not. In fact, some posit that the popularity of the self-help genre within the United States represents a variation on the age-old Protestant work ethic.\textsuperscript{24} Folklorist Sandra K. Dolby, author of \textit{Self-Help Books: Why Americans Keep Reading Them}, connects this new national trend to the not-so-new philosophy of the American Founding fathers (for example, 'the pursuit of happiness' encouraged by the American Enlightenment movement).\textsuperscript{25}

And still others argue that the self-help industry is often a response to specific historical events and cultural climates. For example, the 1960s fascination with Eastern spirituality prompted self-help that revolved around Zen practices.\textsuperscript{26} The wrenching social upheavals of the era were also reflected in self-help literature.\textsuperscript{27} So what cultural factors have made American consumers susceptible to this onslaught of personal growth books in the 21st century? While many arguments could be made, one in particular comes to mind. As self-help texts provide consumers with an (arguably false) sense of control (over themselves and their surroundings), their continued popularity, in the United States, at least, may reflect the post-9/11 moment where individuals are seeking out agency and a sense of security in a time period (and environment) that does not lend itself to either.

Self-help publishing trends: critiquing a national obsession

So just how big is this industry? Big. At the start of the 21st century, 'the self-improvement industry, inclusive of books, seminars, audio and video products, and personal coaching, [was] said to constitute a 2.48-billion dollars-a-year industry.\textsuperscript{28} By 2006, a research firm estimated the self-improvement market in the United States was worth more than $9 billion - including infomercials, mail-order catalogs, holistic institutes, books, audio cassettes, motivational speaker seminars, the personal coaching market, and weight-loss and stress-management programs.\textsuperscript{29} In her 2012 article, 'The Paperback Quest for Joy: America's Unique Love Affair with Self-Help Books', Laura Vanderkam noted that the self-help publishing industry had reached the $12 billion mark, with over 45,000 self-help texts in print.

Not surprisingly, this onslaught of literature has been met with ample criticism. For example, Steve Salerno's \textit{SHAM: How the Self-Help Movement Made America Helpless}, investigates the 'Self-Help and Actualization Movement' (which ironically forms the acronym 'sham'). A former lifestyle publisher, Salerno describes the industry as 'an enterprise wherein people holding the thinnest of credentials diagnose [...] basically normal people [with] symptoms of inflated or invented maladies, so that they may then implement remedies that have never been shown to work.\textsuperscript{30} Salerno documents how the industry has infiltrated other arenas, such as the corporate world and the medical field, to detrimental effect.\textsuperscript{31} And, as a cultural phenomenon, he argues it has brought about a problematic trend of uniting American citizens 'under a common banner of victimhood.\textsuperscript{32} Other criticisms of the industry include that it 'distracts Americans from a fraying social safety net and disintegrating communities' and ultimately 'breeds people unwilling to sacrifice for the greater good.\textsuperscript{33} While these critiques are important considering how many readers are engaging with these texts, it is likewise important to extend them to the entertainment products that are functioning in a more covert self-help role: cue the romantic comedies.