The promise of the hyphen: an ethnography of self-help practices

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The Promise of the Hyphen:  
An Ethnography of Self-Help Practices

By

Scott Cherry

A Doctoral Thesis  
Submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirement for the award of  
Doctor of Philosophy of Loughborough University

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Abstract

This thesis is an ethnography of the phenomenon of self-help. It begins by noting a problematic at the centre of the topic: the term self-help connotes, on the one hand, an autonomous agent ("self"), and on the other, a reliance on other agents ("help"). More substantively, the term attaches itself to two opposing ideological positions, individualism and collectivism. This strange splitting of the term is reproduced in a contemporary context, where we see the genre of self-help books, which is built around the highly individualistic activity of reading as a quest for self-help, and self-help groups, which are built around the collective, co-presence of members as they mutually help one another. But the phenomenon is engaged by separate, non-overlapping literatures that treat self-help books as having a status independent of self-help groups; one attends to self-help books, but disregards self-help groups, while the other attends to self-help groups, but disregards self-help books. Thus self-help books and self-help groups get polarized. This effectively makes the original problematic around the term itself disappear, because it simply ignores it.

This research turns this character of self-help into a topic for study. It looks at what holds the term together, that is to say, self-help books and self-help groups, when they appear to be entirely independent phenomena, and yet still share the term self-help. It is interested in the significance of the term, why it gets invoked as a description of particular activities and what that entails as a practical matter. It wants to see how self-help is performed. It identifies a hybrid of self-help books and self-help groups – a self-help workshop. This third site of self-help brings individual readers of self-help books into a context of collective, social activity. It uses this as a strategy with which to examine the relationships between self-help books and self-help groups, self and help. It undertakes a detailed empirical analysis of a corpus of self-help books, a self-help workshop and a range of self-help groups, drawing on textual, discursive and ethnographic modes of inquiry. It then uses this empirical work to map self-help and engage it as a wider, cultural phenomenon in the modern period.

Keywords: self-help groups, self-help books, life coaching, ethnography, epistemology, conversation analysis, practice theory.
This thesis would simply not have materialized had it not been for the continued support of my supervisor, Dr. Malcolm Ashmore. His guidance has been my primary source of inspiration. I have benefited from his enthusiasm for the topic of self-help, his breadth of insight, and his desire to engage the details - the situated, and the local. But most of all, I have benefited from his willingness to play outside the circle, to embrace the ad hoc and the contingencies in practice. I only hope that I will carry some of his innovativeness and originality with me, as I consider this to be the key to producing engaging work. Only time will tell. I am surely in his debt.

I extend my gratitude to the members of the self-help groups I visited during my fieldwork. Travelling to all these groups took me to many parts of the country, and kept me up late, but they enriched my work in so many ways. My thanks.

Finally, I must recognize the two people who have provided a congenial living environment for me to undertake this study - my mother, Eleanor, and my older brother, Steven. Their overwhelming support in the years since I returned to higher education has been of such general importance that at times it has simply been forgotten; my love to them both.
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Chapter 1

Self-help as “self”, “-” and “help”

Self-help: “The action or faculty of providing for oneself without assistance from others”

*Oxford English Dictionary*

1.1 Introduction

It is a funny term. There it is, just two little words: “self-help”. What makes it funny is that it seems to point in different directions, at different things. Look at the *OED* definition, at the top of the page. Self-help implies some inner faculty, an ability to perform some action on one’s own, without external assistance. But where does the “help” fit in? Look again: self-help. Help is different from self. It implies the requirement of some outside agency, assistance from others. So self-help is an internal capacity and an external capacity; sufficiency and insufficiency; independence and dependence; autonomy and sociality. What does that mean? Surely there is a tension. But the two words fit together happily enough; they appear in the dictionary like that. See: self-help. Or do they? You see the hyphen — the small line, almost unnoticed, between self and help. What is its function? Is self-help one phenomenon, or two phenomena being brought together, with a hyphen? What is happening, in the name of self-help? What is embodied in the term? And what does it mean to practice self-help?

I thought the term appeared noticeably strange. And it is. Engaging the topic of self-help plays out the classic conflicts in the culture wars (see Curran, Gaber & Petley, 2005). There are two versions of culture here, conflicting views of moral authority on human existence. Like most wars, a tension exists; a paradox:

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1 Is this hyphen part of a coupling of terms that rearticulates, or at least invokes, the classic individual/social divide? Look: we have two things, each one insufficient, in need of continual explanation in terms of the other; there are back and forth movements between self and help, across the hyphen, where focusing on the first leads us to the second, which in turn leads us back to the first *ad infinitum*. Latour (1999a) has challenged this use of a hyphen, in any case, as implying just this kind of relation between “actor” and “network”, an analogue for self and help, in actor network theory.
Like all living creatures, *Homo sapiens* initially seeks to satisfy his biological needs and to ensure his personal survival. But biological survival depends largely upon the cooperation and assistance of other human beings, and man, who is also a social being, is committed to living in a society through which he and his fellows attain individual and common goods (Katz & Bender, 1976: 14 original italics)

So, man [sic] is at the centre of the culture wars. Does he derive his sense of self, that is to say survive in the world, as an individual or as a member of a collective? What is his identification? Is he autonomous or not? Self-help, then, embodies two predominant ideological currents in Western thought: individualism and collectivism (Williams, 1989). History provides us with a picture of this tension. In primitive cultures, cooperation was readily practiced. It had to be; life was amazingly harsh, with only the strongest surviving. Tribes would group together, and engage in communal activities such as food gathering, child rearing, cultivation of land and resources, protection against “outsiders”, rival tribes (Kropotkin, 1989). Then there were medieval guilds, early associations of craftsmen: masons, carpenters, glassworkers. They were enjoined by “conjurations”, oaths obliging artisans to support one another in times of need or in business ventures. They organized funds, to support elderly or infirm members and their families, maintain tools and secure employment. Trades would be learnt, passed down from master craftsmen; apprentices would be required to produce evidence, a “masterpiece”, to display their abilities to the guild, who would decide, collectively, their eligibility to practice. They did things together.

The Industrial Revolution tells another story too. It brought about a huge rise in the population through industrialization, where people had to adjust to the demands of industrial economic life; things were competitive, and highly fickle. Friendly societies emerged - mutual associations of individuals who grouped together for financial and social services (Neave, 1991). A regular membership fee ensured that, if members became ill, or even died, they or their families would receive an allowance. Times were hard. But the societies were social occasions too: members would regularly meet for
ceremonial dances, engage in team activities and have annual feasts (Katz, 1993). It might seem odd that, given the prevalence of unemployment, and the considerable domestic costs of living, especially among the working classes, people would carry the burden of ongoing costs for society membership. There was a good reason: membership in these collectives prevented the threat, never too distant, of having to go to the workhouses. Nobody wanted that.

The guilds and the friendly societies were related to another strategy of mutual aid: trade unions. Peoples’ livelihoods in the heavily inhabited towns depended on the industrial economy; but employment was notoriously insecure, and working conditions highly unsatisfactory (Hopkins, 1995). There were no safeguards in place against unemployment, and employers were not about to change things. Workers were vulnerable to exploitation e.g., exhausting piecework, long working hours and threats to wages in times of depression in trade. With the inception of trade unions, workers began to participate in the decisions affecting their working conditions. Employers took notice; they did not want ongoing strikes, violence and disruption in the workplace. That was bad for business. Besides: happy workers meant more industry. But things did not improve immediately. There was a need for political change, to obtain trade union representation in parliament. Workers wanted to change policy on employment, and elected working class men to stand in parliament as independents, to break away from the current political parties. Workers sought public ownership and nationalization of the means of production, as well as equal partnership, with employers, in their contracts of employment. The capitalist system was insensitive to the needs of the ordinary, working man. Thus: it was through the socialist thinking of working class self-help, that is, trade unionism, that the Labour party was created, a political party for the working classes which promoted the interests of labour. So this is collective self-help: achieving social and cultural goals, or goals that impact and effect society and culture, through mutual aid. There is a strong social ethic.

2 These were highly visible in England from the seventeenth century onwards, and set up to support those who were unable to support themselves. Food and accommodation were provided, in exchange for labour. Interestingly, the Poor Law of 1834 was brought in as a deterrent from the workhouses. Conditions were deliberately made as degrading as possible, to deter people from applying. The law stated that the work conditions in the workhouses had to be worse than the poorest job outside, before one was eligible to apply.
But self-help was not just about mutual aid. On the contrary, the notion of self-help referred to an individually organized way of life, seen contemporaneously with mutual aid. It is mistaken, therefore — and leaves unexplored the visible tensions — to subsume these elements under a single “self-improving caste” (e.g., Rodrick, 2001: 39). Self-help pointed somewhere else, away from the conditions of the domain of “the social”, and away from associations with other people. History once again affords us many points of entry; the Renaissance and the Reformation, from the fourteenth century onwards, will give us plenty to work with. Up until this point, medieval Christianity was the orthodoxy, asserted through the Roman Catholic Church. But reliance upon faith and especially God were beginning to weaken. People began to question the unity of the Church; other theological categories were being introduced. Whereas the Christian orthodoxy had largely ignored man and nature, focusing instead on the supernatural and the eternal destiny of the soul, people were increasingly focusing on human experience, at a practical level, and in the present. There was a recovery of the secular and humane philosophy of Greece and Rome. Humanism returned, slowly at first. Martin Luther (1483-1546) suggested that salvation emerged, not by submitting to the authority of the priesthood or the Church, but from the unique presence of God in the conscience of individuals. This meant individual freedom to worship. Others — John Locke (1632-1704) is a good example — made it clear that one’s religious confession is a matter of individual choice, not institutional obligation. Besides, the reason for existence had shifted, from an otherworldly quest, to an intimate and direct, personal appreciation for the good life, on earth.

Something important happened. The Renaissance and the Reformation displayed a period of the increasing power and right of the individual. The individual possessed the ability, within himself, to determine greatness, to become a “holy being”, which is to say, each individual decided on sources of truth and salvation, not the establishment. The individual had agency; and the individual was self-determining. It was no longer Catholicism as an establishment ruling the masses, but a collection of people empowered by their individual faith. This was the force of the Protestant revolt. Authority now came
from the Bible, or better: Protestants interpreted the Bible for themselves. They were on their own; salvation or damnation would be down to the individual. Later, the Industrial Revolution came along. And this is where the individual became the basic value of society.

We know what things were like then: opportunities were great and many, but it was fiercely competitive. The Protestant work ethic emerged – this is where salvation was to be found, in the competitive context of work, labour. Industrial capitalism was contingent on one's freedom to act as an individual. New markets were rapidly expanding. People were working to compete in the interests of free trade. It was all about efficiency; profits would be sacrificed for an increasing stake in the market. Power was transferred to the individual, and their rights to compete against other individuals. But this: a way of understanding the world, and one's place in it, derived from this activity of competing. The more one could rise above the competition, that is to say, the more “individual” one could be, the better, economically and socially. Self-help – the work ethic as one’s method of salvation – embodied the extreme application of individualism. Social conditions were reconfigured, and became the consequence of personal action. If things went wrong, specific kinds of questions were asked: What can I do better? Where did I go wrong? It was self-interest that achieved the welfare of the individual, to which success, like failure, was attributed. Samuel Smiles’ *Self Help* would engage the converted, despite criticisms from the socialists, with his recommendations: “Daily experience shows that it is energetic individualism which produces the most powerful effects upon the life and actions of others, and really constitutes the best practical education” (1859: 4). This is individual self-help, the opposite of social – anti-social.

1.2 Self-help as a contemporary phenomenon

History tells its story of self-help. And that was a long time ago. We moderns have come along since then; we do things differently now. But history has a habit of reminding us that things do not really change that much; that the past lives on, in the present. Self-help lives on too. Many consider Samuel Smiles to have published the “first” self-help book; as we all know, since his time, self-help books have become a hugely prevalent,
contemporary cultural phenomenon. There could not be a stronger cultural indicator of modern times. And recall, in the old friendly societies, we saw people working together, supporting one another – being social. These collectivities may be historical now, but we are still seeking the support of other people, when we cannot do things on our own; let us use the modern vernacular, and call them self-help groups. They are widely distributed, culturally. So: modern times play host to two versions of self-help – reading self-help books and membership in self-help groups, one individual, the other collective. However, self-help books and self-help groups are not culturally equivalent. Thus, what has also been carried forward, then, is the problematic status of self-help; this separation of self-help is a way of managing this paradox. Self-help in the modern age is so puzzling, so awkward, and so problematic, that it deserves to be investigated.

1.3 Self-help books: the “self” in self-help

“You don’t have any outstanding qualities. It’s safe to say that you’re pretty much just like everybody else”. This is one of the more direct nuggets of wisdom that Pratt & Dikkers (1999: 4) offer in, You Are Worthless: Depressing Nuggets of Wisdom Sure to Ruin Your Life. They have plenty more: “When was the last time you did something you were proud of? Keep thinking. I bet you’re stumped” (p. 21). Oh, you laughed too? Good. But why did we both laugh? This is depressing, not amusing – a generation encouraged to settle for second best, being nothing special or outstanding. But, typical of satire, this at least takes us straight to the target: the self-help book. Pratt & Dikkers, satirists, know about it; and we know about it too, sharing in their joke. It is this. The self-help book rests on a model of success. Just look. It thrives on it. Achievement. It attaches itself as part of the cultural prevalence of celebrity. Success is present, or expected, or sought, at all points. Fame, being famous; that is part of success. Look on the front covers of self-help books: glitz and glamour, bright colours and elaborate detail. They perform, even here, just like celebrities in front of the camera’s eye. They have something to say, and they want people to listen. Look at self-help book authors: they are so well known, looking out from the front covers of their books, grinning from ear to ear, so people can see. They celebrate their popularity, where popularity is a virtue, through their books. And look again: we see that these books are “bestsellers”. The sales of these books, aside
from the topics they engage, are a celebration of success. Popularity – that is another word for success. Just look at this: in 2000 Americans spent nearly $600 million on self-help books\(^3\), while in 2008 the genre returned more than $2 billion\(^4\). And then: Dale Carnegie – granted, more popular than most self-help book authors – has sold over 50 million books\(^5\).

Success relates to something else, even more important. The self. The self-help book is a celebration of the self, or the self as success. We are important, special: we have outstanding qualities. We can do it, where "it" means anything and everything. We should be proud. And we need to embrace positivity – *being* successful. This is what happens when the self-help book is picked up: it gets read. This is critical. It means that readers are taking control, or better, the very function of reading a self-help book is instantiating an importance of the self. Something very big is being pushed to one side, not made to matter: private practice, therapy, doctors, in short, professionals. The self-help book is endorsing the self as an active agent; reading becomes self-initiated, self-determining action. It is self-help, a self-made self. Self-help books, then, appear to be anti-professional. It is power to the people, to the readers of self-help books. So: where the self goes, the self-help book follows. It helps manage your finances, brings you closer to God, enables you to be a responsive and satisfied lover, a snappier dresser, more competent at fly fishing, or just helps you to reach enlightenment. It makes you a better self. Something important: it speaks from within the practicalities of readers’ lay understandings. The self-help book is the vernacular, the everyday. It celebrates the domain of the self, what it is and where it takes place. And, if the prevalence of the genre is anything to go by, we want the small things in life to matter.

Pratt & Dikkers’ book serves a more important purpose. This is not just a couple of satirists indulging themselves, and fulfilling a writing contract. Something far more remarkable is in play: their parody self-help book is indicative of a widely distributed, established critique of the self-help book genre. A whole industry is put in question. The

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\(^3\) See Paul (2001).


character of this critique is just as remarkable. It forms around particular disciplinary allegiances, and gets embroiled within strong disciplinary-based rhetorics. There are namable barriers, separating the arguments, which might be glossed as, and converge around, sociology, on the one hand, and psychology, on the other. Of course, things are messier than that. Official terms are not always used. At times it spills into cultural studies, politics, journalism and the media; other times into psychiatry, clinical practice and medicine. Nonetheless, the quality of these evaluative formulations is informed by strongly sociologically- and psychologically-oriented arguments. That gives us a clearing, somewhere to see things, and place them. We can discuss the self-help book through these lenses. I will track three.

A defense of Sociology: rejecting hyper-individualism

Reading a self-help book is a quest for readers to develop themselves in variably specified ways. Fair enough: personal development is good. It sounds so simple too, just reading. Well, yes and no – but mostly no. There is a problem, a big problem, the critics cry. And their cries can be heard loudly, even from across the waters, when they all gang together. “We should worry about the willingness of so many to believe that the answers to existential questions can be encapsulated in the portentous pronouncements of bumper-sticker books” (Kaminer, 1992: 7). Tiede is far less diplomatic, cutting straight to the quick: “It tempts [sic] legal retaliation to mention the gop [sic] in these spineless publications” (2001: 9). And, giving a history of his journalistic career, Salerno (2005: 2) goes on to say that, “[n]ever have I covered a phenomenon where American consumers invested so much capital in every sense of the word – financial, intellectual, spiritual, temporal – based on so little proof of efficacy. And where they got such spotty, if non existent, returns”. This is from his latest book, SHAM: Self-Help & Actualization Movement. Salerno is surely grateful that words have more than one meaning, especially acronyms; sham may be a convenient way of abbreviating a hefty title, but it also means a counterfeit purporting to be genuine. A picture is forming. Suddenly, Pratt & Dikkers’ parody seems to make more sense, among all these allies. Besides, we should not snigger, looking from the outside; we tell jokes to our friends, in jest, about self-help books. The self-help book is popular, but so its parody, that is to say, its critique. Even we know that.
What is all the fuss about? Where, exactly, do self-help book authors and their critics converge? What enables the conflict to take place? The self is a serious matter; self-help book authors and their critics agree on that. But this is also where they both part company. The self-help genre is a triumph of the self: it is all about the individual. This needs a little more focus. The concept of "codependency" will do the job. This is better. It neatly collects together the broad aims and contexts of the genre, crystallized in Melody Beattie’s (1987) hugely popular (and criticized) *Codependent No More*, as well as capturing the central dissatisfactions of the critics. Before the 1980s, so the critics tell us, codependency did not exist. Its inception, and broad distribution through the self-help genre, recommended that we isolate ourselves from other people, and from society more generally, and concentrate on ourselves. Being social, to whatever extent we are, is self-destructive: any form of relation with others displays weakness, dependency. So we are “urged to develop a new form of social responsibility, one that is not socially oriented at all but, rather, is one that produces a hyper-individuality for which an inherent, responsible relationality with others is actively discouraged and pathologized” (Rimke, 2000: 67).

Salerno (2005) characterizes the genre as oscillating between victimization and empowerment. We have learnt, presumably through socialization, that things are beyond our control, that there is some higher, external power pulling the strings, making the world spin on its axis. Things just happen; and when bad things happen, particularly to us, it is not our fault. So the genre promotes a victim narrative. We are victims. But it proffers another: empowerment. It asks us to question external reality; society owes us for all that it has done. It has robbed us of the single most powerful agency, the self. It did not tell us that we are self-sufficient, self-determining creatures. We need to take care of ourselves; the self needs to learn to love itself (Hazleden, 2003) and to satisfy an

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6 The term has expanded from its origins in e.g., Alcoholics Anonymous, and the ways in which family members of alcoholics become dependant upon the alcoholic, and, in using their energy in trying to help them, deprive themselves of the care the require for themselves.
obligation to itself (Justman, 2005). We can determine our own destiny, and take control of our problems. We are responsible. But this realization of the “eternal” agency of the self in resolving its problems brings another burden of responsibility, hitherto unrealized, that “[we] must, to some extent, accept that [we] have played a part in creating them” (Simonds, 1992: 177). So problems are lifted from some mystical, unspecified agency, and external reality disappears, as the Self must take responsibility for itself as the single, transcendental ontology. It gets worse: because the self has inherited what “society” was previously responsible for, it is now responsible for the world’s problems too. And it cannot deny responsibility, for “[t]here is no such thing as luck (positive thinkers don’t generally believe in luck), which means that there are no hapless victims, only assholes who invite their own abuse” (Kaminer, 1992: 65). If a problem is unresolved, or better, if the world does not spin freely and smoothly, for whatever reason and of whatever magnitude, the self is accountable.

The self now has to carry a heavy burden. All our actions, whatever they might be, are symptoms, and they have their origins in the self, the diseased self (Peele, 1995). We may smoke, or drink, or live in a ghetto, or be unemployed, or be single, or whatever; they are all symptoms of personal deficiency. It is our disease. We become, Kaminer would surely agree, assholes. The cure: retreating further inward and embarking on a mission of the recovery of the self, from the self-imposed life circumstances that are obscuring our path to happiness. Fear has its part. “The more we fear a problem, the more we worry and warn people about it, the more instances of the problem we find and the greater our perception of the danger. The process is one of a progressive sense of loss of control; the greater the number of things we discover to be afraid of, each of which individually inspires progressively more fear, the more depressed and frightened we become” (Peele, 1995: 239). And now our problems, or rather our disease, justify the presence of self-help books. They are just trying to help.

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7 This process has a naturally positive orientation to it, the self-help book authors tell us. Detaching oneself from society, and being an individual independently of others, is part of uncovering, and embracing, a “simple self” (Greenberg, 1994). It makes things easier for us all, that is to say, simple.
The critics are now spitting blood. The self-help genre, they tell us, simply cannot be an innocent party, watching from the outside; it does not merely represent the self, but produces it. And now the genre commits the worst crime of all — by providing, and endorsing, a particular version, it asks readers to narrate their lives in its terms, to internalize its way of telling about the world (Brown, 1999; Whelan, 2004). It gives us a "master narrative" by which to live our lives (Rapping, 1996: 135). But the satirists are no longer laughing. Things become very serious. The self-help genre is now seen as a moral discourse; it envisions the good life, what is healthy, the right thing to do. It is: morality as absolute independence from the Other, all otherness, or that which is not self (Greenberg, 1994). Heads begin to roll — the critics consider this a wholly inappropriate narrative. The genre has made an elementary mistake; it is looking in the wrong place, in the psychology of the reader, the self. It treats the self as prior to, and in isolation of, all that shapes its existence.

There is a word the genre tries hard to forget: society. All that contributes to the formation of the self, which is to say, enables it, restricts it, embraces it, supports it and otherwise performs it, gets concealed. Society is pushed aside. The genre only sees a celebration of the self, not its increasing problematization in modern bureaucracies and the unnecessary “psychologization” of specifically “non-psychological” concerns:

Instead, in this milieu, that crisis of subjecthood is not articulated but enacted — demonstrated in ever expanding self-help book sales and, presumably, enacted in the lives of subjects who find that it is difficult or impossible to manage mastery of themselves and their life courses in the face of volatile social and economic forces. For these individuals, the self is belabored: caught in a cycle of seeking individual solutions to problems that are social, economic and political in origin (McGee, 2005: 177).

8 This certainly makes an impact, but it is too strong a word. Self-help books, like any other activity, do not have the power to construct something on their own. They are part of an assemblage of work, and as such, are able to determine the practices that move the self. Mol’s (2002) proffered word for these micro-analytic activities, “enact”, might better describe this.

9 This is a term Rice (1996) uses to describe the way in which the discourse of self-help, which includes codependency, addiction, Inner Child, self, recovery, psychology etc., is used to explain (and inhibit) wider, social matters.
There is a high price to pay for reading self-help books. They cause readers to retreat from the politics of identity and selfhood, pacifying them from challenging political and social imperatives that determine who they are and what they can be (Hochschild, 1983; 2003; Lasch, 1991; Rose, 1996). The self is inherently socially, collectively contingent, as "[o]ne can 'get one's life in order' as best one can, through therapy, self-help and so on. But that life will still be lived in a context of social reality which therapy, alone, does not address, except – and this is not insignificant of course – indirectly. More, and different, activities are needed" (Rapping, 1996: 165). These activities are where the self is to be found, and secured, and that means participation in the domain of the social. There are political struggles for the self. “Feminist groups were among the first to recognize that personal change was crystallized by group participation, while group participation could also forge larger social and political agendas. That these groups were able to wed a culture of collective self-help with political actions offered a model for other social movements” (McGee, 2005: 187-8). The self means a culture of collective action, doing things together, in the social.

A defense of professional Psychology: rejecting anti-professionalism

Self-help books get around. We see them in the bookstore, and later scattered in the home, where buyers read them. But they travel further than that. They go to other places. We know about psychiatrists; they work behind desks, seeing patients and writing reports. But what is that, beyond the desk, up on the shelves? It is a self-help book, lots of them, next to all that medical reference material. And they are there for a good reason: they have been heavily incorporated into (predominantly American) medical practice,

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10 McGee notes that the trouble with characterizing the self, and self-fulfillment, through work and economic activity, as in capitalism, is that it entirely ignores the economic, and not individual, inadequacies. “For the most part, self-improvement culture continues to operate on a belief that wealth is a sign of industry, intelligence, competence, or attunement with the universe. Poverty, bred of economic injustice, remains a market of laziness, stupidity, immorality, or some sort of cosmic dissonance. As with much of American culture that finds its roots in Christian traditions, self-help culture suggests that inequitable distributions of wealth ought to be remedied through charity rather than through any process of distributive justice. Charitable foundations, rather than a progressive tax code or the elimination of untaxed wealth transfers through inheritance, are offered as the solution to the social problem of economic inequity” (2005: 183-4).
prescribed to patients, since at least the 1970s (Rosen, 1976). This trend has been widely reported among practitioners too (Starker, 1986, 1988). And this use of self-help books has crossed the waters, as many “Americanisms” do, and is now embedded in clinical applications within UK medical settings. The self-help book is a professional resource for general practitioners, just like a stethoscope or stretchy latex gloves. One pioneering initiative has been the development of the Cardiff Book Prescription Scheme (see Farrand, 2005; Frude, 2004). This has since been extended across the UK, and is now part of common practice in many doctors’ surgeries. In many cases, self-help books are prescribed in preference to tablets or drugs. So: the self-help book has established itself at the centre of psychiatry, psychology and medicine. It has become an agent in medical practice. It has, then, received medical endorsement.

But hold on. What is going on here? The critics have told us about self-help books, time and again. Have the psychologists not been paying attention? Yes: some do claim that self-help books have positive effects on their patients (e.g., Starker, 1988). However, this conceals a far greater concern among clinical practitioners. The critics are still very much present; and they have the same deeply felt skepticism of self-help books. Rosen (1981: 189) is perhaps one of the most vocal:

Unfortunately, the involvement of psychologists in the development, assessment and marketing of do-it-yourself treatment programs has been less than responsible. Psychologists have published untested materials, advanced exaggerated claims, and accepted the use of misleading titles that encourage unrealistic expectations regarding outcome.

Self-help books represent a potential threat to professional practice. As Rosen continues: “Even more discouraging, the quality of do-it-yourself treatment books is decreasing while their number is on the rise” (Ibid.). We can guess what Rosen is pointing to, even more clearly nearly thirty years on: the mass-market, glitzy front covers, adorned with various extreme formulations of authenticity. It is all on the front cover, literally, for Rosen; there is nothing to substantiate it – just more bright, garish colors, and more
recycled claims. The empirical status of self-help books is undetermined. They are used when they are unaccredited; it is not known if they use established procedures and techniques, or simply the preferred methods of individual (unaccredited?) authors. Worse, their prescription by practitioners is driven by commercial factors at the expense of professional standards. So much can potentially go awry, critical therapists say: there is no provision to monitor if, or whether, readers are “correctly” following instructions; readers may incorrectly administer particular advice, or misapply techniques. Self-help books can have an unintended effect, and actually cause harm to readers. When claimed results are not forthcoming, after instructions have been followed, readers can see things negatively, and self-blame unfolds (Rosen, 1987, 1993). So: self-help books pose a threat to readers; reading can put them in harm’s way. Judgments need to be made. Evaluations are required. And the public is not granted the expertise to be able to establish the quality of a self-help book:

No other professional group combines the clinical and research experiences that form the educational background of a clinical psychologist. Unlike the typical author, clinical psychologists are in a position to assess do-it-yourself treatments systematically and to educate consumers in the proper use of these programs (Rosen, 1987: 46).

This is powerful rhetoric, and very revealing. It is a defense narrative. Self-help books are dangerous, not just to their readers, but, perhaps most importantly, to the discipline of psychology. The foundation of the psychological professions is being undermined. Self-help book authors, unlike clinical psychologists, are bypassing the “educational” process. They simply do not have the training to deal with their subject appropriately. There is an “elitist” fear that standards are at stake. Self-help books are generally an inadequate alternative to professional intervention in psychological matters; that is part of it. But this too: the very notion of leaving people to take control of their own lives in a domain whose knowledge and judgment has always been the privileged right and property of the psy disciplines (cf. Rose, 1985). There is more going on here. It is not only that the therapeutic value of self-help books is unspecified; it is, rather, questionable whether it
ever could be. Could popular psychology ever be allowed to entirely subvert psychotherapeutic practice? Things have not changed. Clinical practice is still being defended, and self-help books are still compromising professional standards (Bergsma, 2008; Ehlers, Clark, Hackmann, McManus, Fennell, Herbert & Mayou, 2003; Gellatly, Bower, Hennessy, Richards, Gilbody & Lovell, 2007; Lilienfeld, Lynn & Lohr, 2003; Rosen, Glasgow & Barrera, 2008).

A defense of Culture: rejecting the popular and the lowbrow

The critique of the self-help book does not just defend particular disciplinary arguments and commitments. It travels further, taking many of its arguments with it. It objects to the self-help book at another level – as a value of culture. We still sense the elitist fear of a drop in standards; the self-help book is destroying culture. It points to its own lack of value. It promotes itself through what is basically pulp; cheap, mass produced paperback products, pressed out in the millions (Rapping, 1996: 134-5). The content of the self-help book reflects this inadequacy. We see self-help book authors unashamedly hiding behind unaccredited qualifications, dispensing with untested theories that delimit or preclude most of our habits of living, or worse, reformulate what most of us know anyway (Tiede, 2001). It is a farce: charlatans are trying to deceive us, offering us answers to questions that we never asked. There is nothing of quality here.

And things only get worse. Adopting the self-help narrative comes at a cost: it threatens our cultural sensibilities. It is selling us down the river. In making us feel as though we require the wisdom of the self-help book, to narrate our lives in its terms, it has essentially bargained with our most valued faculty – thought. What has been traditionally responsible for cultural production – creativity, intellect, resourcefulness, originality – has been actively subverted (Kaminer, 1992; Simonds, 1992). The self-help book offers no reward, no cultural development, only distraction. Worse still, it indicates the demise of culture – it causes cultural degeneration. Salerno points out that, despite the existence of the genre, people have become even more dependent, as “we live in culture in which some of our most profitable products are made by Prozac, Paxil and Xanax” (2005: 12). We are as addicted, if not more so, in the presence of the self-help genre and
the self-help industry more generally (Peele, 1995). Some call this the Humpty Dumpty Syndrome, a tale that also gets told in many areas of professional health care: all was fine, until we fell into the hands of the self-help book authors, who break us into a thousand pieces but are unable to put us back together again. Other interests are being served and nurtured. Self-help book authors have one thing in mind, which is heavily shrouded, and thus overlooked, by their humanistic pretensions: they exploit the human condition. “We all want so badly to believe in miracles. That’s what makes us vulnerable. And that’s what makes them rich” (Salerno, 2005: 251). It is all a marketing strategy, and we are the bargaining chips. And the irony, just one of them, is that the self-help book promotes individual freedom, above all else, but imprisons us in its own highly conformist, conservative politics.

This awareness of the “trashiness” of the self-help book can be seen elsewhere. The objection is not always explicit; it can emerge from within the genre itself. Look at Butler-Bowdon’s (2003) 50 Self-Help Classics. What is going on? Is Butler-Bowdon celebrating the same genre that has been in battle with critics internationally since the 1970s? The modern, mass-market paperback: huge sales figures, popularity, the exaggerated claims, the glitz – all qualities of “classics”? Butler-Bowdon includes in his selection of classics modern titles like Phil McGraw’s Life Strategies and John Gray’s Men Are From Mars... We know the sort. But he reveals hidden candidates from the genre, digging up The Bible and Boethius’ The Consolation of Philosophy from the sixth century. Are these self-help books? Others have documented how the changing character of the genre – if it has managed to hold together at all as a “genre” – makes it difficult to trace a lineage (e.g., Salerno, 2005; Starker, 1988). But Butler-Bowdon is having none of it; he has other plans. He is aware of the critics. He knows about the glitz, the widely felt cultural skepticism of these “bumper-sticker” books, as Kaminer had earlier called them. He might even know that the genre is ashamed of itself, ongoingly reproducing the same dross, only with new colours and different faces. No Matter. He desperately

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11 This much is certainly true. Butler-Bowdon’s book strongly resembles a self-help book, with its bright colours, elaborate front cover text, endorsement by other self-help book authors, shameless use of textual devices from other self-help books and the rest. One reviewer claims it will soon become the “51st self-help classic”.

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wants to rescue the genre, revive it. That is explained through his amazingly disjointed selection of self-help titles, mixing modern, bestselling and mass-market paperbacks with ancient works of philosophy and academic psychology. He attributes the status of classic to the genre, lifting it from the pits where it receives, for him, unjustified attention from the critics. Butler-Bowdon says “the self-help ethic has been with us through the ages” (2003: 3), and not, we might argue, a recent (fleeting, irrelevant) publishing phenomenon. He wants to give his readers “a sense of the huge diversity of the genre” (Ibid.), and not, we might argue further, the generic, familiar and recycled material at which the critics have targeted their attacks. The genre exceeds the critics, and as such, should not be seen in terms of them. The genre needs to be excused, and Butler-Bowdon kindly obliges.

1.4 Self-help groups: the “help” in self-help

“It was a beautiful morning. We walked around our neighborhood, passing the old church on Milton Street, and around the play area. She recognized David’s house. When we got back to our house, and opened the gate to go inside, she got confused. I have to tell her we are home”. “Yeah, my wife forgets too”. “My husband does that”. This is part of a conversation from an Alzheimer’s self-help group I visited during the early part of my ethnographic fieldwork. But you are not laughing, like you did at the self-help books? And neither am I. The satirists do not have much to say either. We do get a good picture of things: people sitting together in a group, sharing stories and supporting one another. There is lots of talking. Bonding. Exchange. Relationships. And: it can be very serious. It is not about big smiles, positivity and affirmations. Members engage in matters close to the heart – terminal illnesses, the death of spouses and family members, long-term emotional problems. There can be lots of tears. Things hurt. And that is nothing to joke about. Even so, self-help groups do not get reduced to a cheap laugh, simple lighthearted comic relief, like self-help books. Self-help groups are not promoted in the same way as self-help books; membership in a self-help group is not a function of popularity. We rarely see members of self-help groups on television, like we do self-help book authors, the gurus. It is simply not done that way. They have to be sought, and you need to know where to find them, and who to ask, or you will probably miss them. Whereas self-help books are in plain view, everywhere, self-help groups are hidden away, below the
surface. But: they do share with self-help books a rejection of someone else – implicitly professionals – calling the shots. It is power to the people again; it is self-help. Only here it is the collective power of the self, a plural “we” and not a singular “I”. Membership in a self-help group is the activity of agents taking control of their own lives. Similarly, they are embedded within the understandings of folk in their everyday lives. It is based in, as and for the vernacular. Professional knowledge is not needed; and nor is it required, not for what self-help groups wish to attend to.

This indicates something important. There is a noticeable absence of any critique of self-help groups. To the contrary, we only see appraisals, endorsements, and accreditations. The critics have packed their bags and long since staked out their next assignment. And professional psychologists simply leave self-help groups for the sociologists to deal with, while they continue looking at “proper” psychological phenomena. At any rate, this is a serious, intellectual topic, of considerable cultural and sociological significance. Sociologists spend their professional careers investigating self-help groups; academic funding continues to support this research. And although interest extends across disciplinary boundaries, there is a strong case that self-help groups are engaged because of their sociological character, or because of the need to locate them as sociologically relevant. They are important. So: the self-help group is everything that the self-help book is not. This makes things easier; to tell about self-help groups, we can simply reverse the arguments against the self-help book genre. We can track the same three arguments, but for different reasons, and with different commitments.

**A defense of the sociological: endorsing collectivism**

We are an integral part of our surroundings. When we act, we monitor our behavior, reflecting on it, retrospectively looking at how it has been shaped by prior actions, and prospectively looking at how it will shape our future actions. This is the reflexivity of action; how the situated circumstances of action change and modify its course. Now, let us go back in time, before the modern era. A few centuries will do — to tradition. “Tradition is a mode of integrating the reflexive monitoring of action with the time-space organisation of the community. It is a means of handling time and space, which inserts
any particular activity or experience within the continuity of the past, present, and future, these in turn being structured by recurrent social practices" (Giddens, 1990: 37). Tradition ordered action. Not much thought was required, as it was tradition and custom that determined what actions were appropriate. Now go forward a few centuries, to modernity, the post-traditionalist period. The reflexivity of action takes on a new character. Action is no longer guided by the local circumstances of its production, that is, tradition, because time and space have been disembedded; there is "time-space distanciation" (p. 14).

Activity gets removed from local contexts, where it was once ordered in the presence of tradition, and extends across large time and space distances. It gets reorganized and spread over new and increasing social relations, where there are gaps in the absence of tradition. Connections between contexts are stretched. Action means different things, in different temporal and geographical locations. This is globalization. Modernity has left its trace, everywhere, as social life moves away from tradition. There is the disappearance of the tightly knit, multigenerational bonds of family. The longevity of marriage is no longer prevalent. Then there is industrialization, the capitalist market, and the economy: this brings about the depersonalization of institutions and social life. There is no history: only the present. Giddens argues that modernity has brought great "ontological insecurity" (p. 92). With the passing of tradition, safety (as security) also disappears; it is difficult to know whom to trust. There is far greater risk in acting, in obtaining reliable knowledge about how to go on, as the trust relations built on tradition have dispersed, across time and space. The knowledge that once brought security is now contested. And as knowledge passes through and is taken up by so many agents, human and non-human, through abstract social systems, it is no longer fixed. It has no base. There is no certainty.

The basic development of the self emerges out of personal trust, and the establishment of trust in others: “faith in the integrity of another is a prime source of a feeling of integrity and authenticity of the self” (p.114). Modernity has profoundly affected the self; it is has made it a focal ontology in its own right. We see a breakdown
in the communal character of tradition, and the rise of the impersonality of modern, bureaucratic life. Community has been eroded, at the expense of personal relations. Where does the self find security now? And trust? In the absence of others, of traditional, personal relations, it retreats inward. The self becomes preoccupied with itself, looking for security through self-improvement. This is individualism. Look: we see a cultural obsession with reading self-help books. Doing things on our own. The prevalence of reading self-help books, perhaps the modern archetype of individualism, is profound. Self-help book authors exploit our reliance on experts – who replace the collectivity of tradition, at any rate, those who know – to tell us how to live, to guide our actions, and give us narratives and social roles by which to live our lives. Now there is more to analyze, to consider; and now we have to be even more reflexive (Giddens, 1991). But: rather than satisfying our personal need for certainty, and reinstating ontological security, this simply adds fuel to the fire. It increases our sense of insecurity, makes us more uncertain. Rather than invoking control, it takes it away. It turns us away from those who used to be our family, our friends, and our fellows. Further still, it does not ask us to question the cultural mechanisms that support this ideology, but instead encourages us to passively follow. The critics of self-help books have already pointed to this. It marks the demise of civility, what it means to be human – social creatures. What we need is a sense that we are connected to other people in intimate and necessary ways, that we participate in and share a collective world (Hermans & Kempen, 1993; Hermans & Dimaggio, 2007; Sampson, 1993; Shotter, 1993, 1999).

We see self-help groups. They can be considered as part of a process of “dialogic democracy” (Giddens, 1994: 112). They perform a crucial function: allowing the open discussion of things no longer discussed, or that were normatively settled by tradition. Things become personal again. Self-help groups contribute, in important ways, to reassembling social solidarity; they represent a reembedding mechanism. The Other is reintroduced to the self. Communication with others, in a collectivity, becomes a requirement for engaging the problems around which self-help groups form. To interact,

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12 This is Giddens’ primary focus in his book Modernity and Self-identity - how the modern self is a “reflexive project” (1991: 32), that is, how, in the absence of a collectivity to provide our self-identities, we must make (or find) them ourselves. This self-fashioning is a function of the constant reflexivity of the self.
face-to-face: this is the revival of the fundamentally social and collective practices of tradition. It regenerates community. Self-help groups are about regaining the control of matters in which the self is intimately involved. It means confining how far things travel, not letting them escape personal relations, into the impersonal network of the beaurocracies and abstract systems. Expertise is developed, or reclaimed, by members of self-help groups — knowledge that is owned and controlled (see below). Self-help groups provide narratives that include members in a collective story; they attain a meaningful social role (Kurtz, 1997). Trust is present, the basis of security; we know that sharing ourselves with our fellows, our collectivity, carries little risk. In so doing, we learn to trust ourselves. We know where we stand, in self-help groups. This invites certainty. Here we see the return of what has been taken away by modernity. So, self-help groups: a celebration of collectivism. They produce what individualism never could: a stable, secure self. Self-help groups give what self-help books are incapable of giving. This is paradoxical — that we need others to be ourselves, before we can be a self and have selfhood, at least in the modern age, as Giddens has charted. I will develop this later.

Self-help group scholars like self-help groups. But then, they would. Still, like all good sociologists, they see the denegation of collectivism in the modern age. They do not like individualism, not even slightly. Self-help groups are special; at times, they get romanticized. But: they are fundamental. We have seen that modern times invoke in the self a profound sense of emptiness, of uncertainty. When this sense is heightened, then it only gets worse. The global, social systems and hyper-individualistic strategies of living seem to be incapable of meeting the basic needs of individuals. The universal and indiscriminate is no substitute for the local and the situated. What is needed is basic, primary, firsthand experience – the corporeal, the felt, and the embodiment of human relationship (Reed, 1996). Self-help groups provide for this human need for personal connection, for sociality (Katz & Bender, 1976; Borkman, 1984). They promote a caring society, and civility. Membership encourages the support of members from family; other people get involved, together. It widens participation, outside of group meetings; people pursue social friendships. Victimization is replaced with participation in decisions that impact a shared, collective life (Borkman & Parisi, 1995). Self-help groups are like
families: “these support networks substitute for the geographically based small town or neighborhood communities of the 1800s and early 1900s about which so many are nostalgic” (Borkman, 1999: 69).

A defense of everyday psychology: endorsing anti-professionalism

Self-help books threaten the status of professional expertise. But more: they imply that such expertise is not required in the service of everyday problems. Psychologists want to preserve their discipline against insufficiently qualified self-help book authors. In the absence of professional training, informed by a whole body of technical, disciplinary-driven knowledge, all we have are pseudoexperts. Or worse: charlatans. So a division of knowledge is erected, and defended: professional Psychology as against everyday psychology. People are seen to be incapable of helping themselves, without professional knowledge, and especially without professional training; that is why professionals provide their services. But self-help groups are different. Psychologists do not mention them, in their disciplinary attacks against self-help books. Self-help groups remain intact. To understand this we need to dismantle this division of knowledge – professional vs. lay – and introduce a third category (Borkman, 1990). Members of self-help groups are informed; they know about treatment strategies, pain alleviation, what makes things feel better, or worse, that is, in short, what it is like to live with a problem. The knowledge they have acquired, in living with a problem, is not some inferior version of “professional knowledge” (Kerr, Cunningham-Burley & Tutton, 2007). Its formulation is unable to be captured through formal contexts, in professional practice. So the hegemony of professional authority is questioned. It does not adequately engage how knowledge is co-produced and ongoingly distributed among those who live with problems. Self-help groups are about democratizing everyday life; they are anti-elitist (Archibald, 2008). Besides: the knowledge that members of self-help groups share serves

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13 Here I borrow Richards' (1996: 1) capitalization of Psychology to refer to the discipline, and the lower case psychology to refer to its subject matter.
another function. It is used to do different things. It does not compete with professional knowledge, because it takes a different trajectory (Hart, 2001).  

It has a name. It is called "experiential knowledge". This is "truth learned from personal experience with a phenomenon rather than truth acquired by discursive reasoning, observation or reflection on information provided by others" (Borkman, 1976: 446). This is expertise as knowing how. It is not propositional, but practical. Things are engaged in practices: managing with things. It gets produced in the first person, in the here and now, as situated activity; and it develops through its "usability" (Caron-Flinterman, Broerse & Bunders, 2005: 2577-2579). So experiential knowledge is another term for lay-constituted living — it is heavily embedded in everyday vocabularies, activities, and techniques. It is found in the small details, the subjective and personal. This is what gets celebrated in self-help groups, the power of the everyday. The domain of the lay is endorsed, embraced. Sociologists like self-help groups. They have developed a substantive body of academic work charting the phenomenon (Borkman, 1999; Denzin, 1993; Katz, 1993; Katz & Bender, 1976; 1990; Reissman, & Carroll, 1995). Members of self-help groups own experiential knowledge, and have entitlement to speak about it as the producers of it. As Munn-Giddings & Borkman (2005: 142) make clear,

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14 This can be described in terms of the classic distinction, made by Feinstein (1967), between "disease", the pathology and the objective domain of professional expertise, and "illness", the subjective processes that occur as a result of pathology, from the perspective of the sufferer.

15 Personal experience has been investigated as "lay expertise" in a number of empirical sites. Arksey (1998) has explored the way in which lay groups with Repetitive Strain Injury (RSI) challenged the medical profession, and its domain of expertise, to eventually change its views about the status of RSI as an objective, medical disease. Epstein (1996) has shown how AIDS activists, through their own experience with the disease, have challenged the construction of knowledge and expertise and fought against biomedical hegemony in its professional management. Similarly, Wynne (1996) found that Cumbrian sheep farmers know a great deal, often just as much if not more than government agencies, about the ecology of sheep, and the environmental circumstances under which they are kept so as to reduce the impact of radioactive fallout. Drawing heavily on Polanyi's work on tacit knowledge, Harry Collins' (1990, 1992, 2001; Collins & Evans, 2008) extensive studies have shown that knowledge is acquired through sustained experience in a field of practices. It is a skill and, as such, is not transferable through formal instruction. To arrive at such understandings means to have lived within, and developed, the tacit modes of learning, which are not always available for explicit inspection, either by self or others. One substantive channel through which knowledge is to be found and transmitted is personal experience, which is not, and should not be, formalized, and displayed as propositional knowledge. And hence Polanyi's famous aphorism: we know more than we can tell. Although people cannot tell about it, they can show it; and this is where we find knowledge — in practices, habits, routines etc.

16 Members of self-helps have a stake in the constitution of experiential knowledge to the extent that they can claim ownership for it. Thus the "name [of knowledge] is never intended to describe the persons
ownership for the self-helper arises from the sharing of personal experience and the experiential knowledge generated from such activity within a context where peers lead and control their own group. Experiential knowledge travels in self-help groups; members do not keep it to themselves. It travels through stories, where the "sociological process of several phases is started when individuals tell their stories to their peers in the first person, sharing their experiences, especially their pain, struggles, and feelings" (Borkman, 1990: 24).

So self-help groups are about telling stories. Sharing selves. We see narratives - about self, others, bodies, experience, life. This is from the perspectives of lives-in-their-living, as experienced. Now the phenomenon travels even further. It is not just academics in health care settings (McCreight, 2004, 2007) or those whose careers are embedded in the development of self-help group research (Elsdon, Reynolds & Stewart, 2000; Munn-Giddings, 2002; Munn-Giddings & McVicar, 2007) that are interested in these stories. Others want to know more; other disciplinary contexts get involved. Thus, self-help groups are increasingly prevalent among academics, as a topic of inquiry. They now appear across the social science literature, reaching those "outsiders" who engage the topic through their variable and interdisciplinary research interests. Discourse researchers have welcomed self-help groups into their research communities. They want to see what the stories are about, how they get assembled between members of self-help groups and what business they perform in meetings. Self-help groups may be sociologically relevant, but self-help groups are also discourse relevant; they become a discourse phenomenon, of interest discourse analytically. Researchers look at these narratives as a rich site in which members undertake identity work. For instance, they consider how members' narratives display entitlements to knowledge categories (Horton-Salway, 2001, 2004, 2007), and how they provide interactional resources for building solidarity, affiliation and the mutual relevance of members in a group (Arminen, 1996, 1998, 2004). In short, they look at how self-help groups, and so the members of which they are comprised, are storied into being.

amongst whom the corpus has currency but, instead, to specify the relationship which that corpus has to the constituency, a relationship which seems analogous to that of ownership" (Sharrock, 1974: 49).

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Something remarkable is happening. Professionals are increasingly looking to the anti-professional sites of knowledge production found in self-help groups. This orientation has a noticeably medical focus; it surrounds the health and illness of the body. Still, it is instructive; and experiential knowledge is taking priority. Professionals have something to learn, as patients challenge the management of illness by health care systems. Patients are empowering themselves: their expertise extends to the identification of symptoms, the delivery of diagnoses, the functioning of medical consultations, effects from medication, arrangements of care, patient entitlements. It all happens in a self-help group, where people get together, and share stories. Here we see expert patients, telling about their everyday experiences. The government has now recognized that lay-derived expertise yields greater influence among patients than does professional expertise. An Expert Patients Programme has now been implemented, and is making great strides. This is composed of lay-led groups that disseminate their expertise of living with problems among fellows, away from professionals. So: professionals embrace self-help groups, the power of the self as everyday psychology.

*A defense of Culture: endorsing the everyday as cultural production*

Self-help groups are about everyday life. Just living with problems, in everyday ways. And yet, professionals have endorsed them. Academics take them seriously as an intellectual topic of inquiry, and want to know more. The critics are not seen; they parted company earlier. How remarkable: a phenomenon based on the domain of the anti-professional, the anti-elitist and the anti-intellectual, which has received endorsement from the professionals, the elites and the intellectuals. Self-help groups are about something important; they indicate a value of culture. Yes, they represent a history of self-help - self-sufficiency and self-reliance. But it is a particular kind of self-help: mutual self-help. This is about people - interacting and doing things together. This means sharing, dialogue, and collective practices. Their endorsement is an endorsement of a certain vision of culture, a certain cultural ideology.

17 This has been identified in a number of papers and reports. See Department of Health (2001, 2004, 2005).
They can be seen as a social movement (Archibald, 2008; Giddens, 1994; Katz, 1993). Wages are not at issue, or even working conditions, like in the olden days of the trade unions. It is not about politics, at least not substantively. Self-help groups are protective of a version of culture, a way of understanding self, and of relating to others. It is about changing the status of the individual in cultural life. Identity: what it means to be a person. Members in self-help group are “persuading others that they are authentically expressing the identity of particular subgroups while at the same time successfully signaling membership in the larger group identity” (Armstrong, 2002: 372). Questioning professional authority redistributes power, giving more to individuals. This is empowerment, liberation. But it does not burden the self with the world’s problems, so we become the centre of reality, totally inward looking and disregard our selves at a cultural level. On the contrary, it opposes the individualism that such a position entails, when taken to extremes. That would not protect culture, but erode it. It means, rather: promoting a sense of self that participates in culture, and is derived from, and embedded in, social practice. This version of self-identity is about engaging the domain of the Other: collective relationships with other people. Traditions now get preserved, practices that require sharing and mutuality. We come to understand ourselves by our membership in a group. This is self, but it is culture too – a mutually-constituted-cultural-self-fashioning.

1.5 Engaging the “poles” of self-help: investigating the hyphen

There it is, just two little words: self-help. I have charted practices of self-help, first looking at its historical applications; there, the phenomenon broke apart, separating into two phenomena. Self-help meant helping yourself, on your own, without the assistance of others; but it also meant a requirement of assistance from others. There was a highly noticeable division of individualism and collectivism. I left history behind, and tracked the term in its contemporary contexts, looking at self-help books and self-help groups. Here, the polarization of self-help is reproduced: self-help books are highly individualistic, and self-help groups highly collective. But more: self-help is engaged in two separate, non-overlapping literatures. Self-help books do not get discussed alongside self-help groups. Also here, the polarization of self-help is intensified, as if the two

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phenomena being discussed are entirely independent. We can state it more strongly. Self-help books are the polar opposite of self-help groups; each one is positioned at either end of a spectrum. The polarization is noticeably transparent. Self-help books and self-help groups: one individual, the other collective; one bad, the other good; one ridiculed, the other valued. When we engage self-help, we engage two "poles" of self-help activity. One term splits into two objects.

Self-help attaches itself to two opposing sites of practice. If nothing appears to hold them together, as each pole has a status independent of the other, then why do they share the same term? Is this mere contingency? Has the term been arbitrarily applied? One thing is certain: the literature will not tell us. It breaks into pieces, just like the term itself. The critics of self-help books walk one way, while the promoters of self-help groups walk the other. And they never look back. The separation of self-help is treated unproblematically, as if the polarization is natural; or better: the tension is made to disappear as each side ignores the other. I will have to confront it without the literature, then. Where to get purchase, if indeed purchase can be obtained? Maybe if I look one more time. There: self-help. But no, not a chance. The ground is as slippery as it was when I ventured into history, and looked at the Reformation and the workers' trade unions. Is it a term that is supposed to elude us? Surely not. This tension at the centre of the phenomenon does not appear to bring things to a grinding halt. Self-help still gets done. So: there must be something that is concealed, not made visible. How are the poles handled, out there in the world? But more: how is self-help done? Where does it go, and what does it connect to? Can there be something the critics and the promoters have missed, trodden over in the battleground?

We do get a suggestion of overlap. There are places where self-help books and self-help groups display less resistance to one another. We see "hidden" similarities. Both self-help books and self-help groups fully embrace the extreme power of the self; they are

18 Borkman (1999: 4), a leading self-help group scholar and advocate of the collective pole of self-help, uses this device, when she distinguishes self-help groups from "an individual's taking action to help him-or herself, often drawing on latent internal resources and healing powers within the context of his or her lived experience with an issue or predicament". Thus, she is rejecting self-help books, the individual pole of self-help, and making it disappear, to leave only self-help groups.
both embedded in the do-it-yourself philosophy of self-help. The triumph of personal agency is in contradistinction to that which is not self. And: not self is another way of saying not professionals, and professional knowledge and expertise. Self-help books bypass professionals and let readers help themselves, while self-help groups "reject" professionals as legitimate producers of the required knowledge for self-help. Self-help books and self-help groups form a relationship; they are in agreement. The self must help itself by avoiding professionals.

*Self-help workshop: naming the hyphen*

This relationship between the self and professionals must be tacked down. This is a site that reproduces the tension between self-help books and self-help groups; that is, between self and Other. But here the tension has been relieved. It has given me some purchase on discussing self-help books in terms of self-help groups. We have managed to get self-help books and self-help groups in the same room together, so to speak, without fighting. There is a connection, a bridge forming between the individual pole, self-help books, and the collectivist pole, self-help groups. Can we tease this relationship out? Does it have a name, anything substantive? I want to introduce an emergent phenomenon, a hybrid of self-help books and self-help groups. It is the self-help workshop. It is not the self in self-help, because it is not entirely individual; but neither is it the help in self-help, because it is not entirely collective. It is something in the middle. There it is, that small object connecting self with help, the hyphen: self "-" help. Perhaps it is small, almost going unnoticed, but might it be doing critical work? A self-help workshop is a massively complex phenomenon, much more so than the appearance of a little hyphen implies. Now, my spatial metaphor for the two poles of self-help, where they meet and enjoin, is doubly handy. It describes the proximal character of a self-help workshop. A self-help book author is the "star" of the show; people come to see the artist, their idol. But look what happens, and how such an occasion is organized: readers of self-help books (the individual pole) share the experience of the workshop in terms of membership in a collectivity of readers (the collective pole). This is what a workshop does - fuses individual reading and social interaction. It looks like a site where we have self and help, together: self-help.
A self-help workshop is nothing new. Self-help seminars have been part of American culture, and a manifestation of the colossal self-help book genre, for years. We can recall some of the gurus – the ones we try to forget. John Grey, with his hugely popular *Men are From Mars, Women are from Venus* series of books – he conducts workshops. And Tony Robbins, the unforgettable giant, standing 6ft 7in tall, with chiseled jaw line and hypnotically white teeth – he does too. Most of them do. And it is not just an American phenomenon; these seminars are sweeping across the UK these days. We have our own self-help gurus now, as British self-help book authors are taking a slice of the pie. The name changes – where self-help seminar spills into things like “motivational seminar”, and “strategist”, and “spirituality”, and “personal development”, and “life coaching” – but it retains exactly the same character: readers of self-help books joined together in a group for the purposes of social interaction. So self-help lives as a multi-headed beast in modern culture; it has many tendrils. I have identified three.

Whereas the critics of self-help books and promoters of self-help groups have unproblematically separated the term, treating it as two independent phenomena, I feel this is an oversight of profound significance. There is clearly a site of relationship, where each pole of self-help speaks to the other: it is the hyphen in self-help, a self-help workshop. We need to respect the hyphen, and tell about it, as it might inform us of the self and help. But: we must not romanticize the hyphen, and pay too much respect. For it is built on the idea that linking self and help is entirely unproblematic. We know the promise of self-help is undermined by this paradoxical tension, the polarization of self-help – individual and collective, self and Other, good and bad, etc. Self-help is intact, used as a legitimate and meaningful word in everyday discourse; but it also crumbles, splits and breaks in practice.

I have arrived at the purpose of this thesis. I must attend to a new phenomenon: those forces that are repelling and attracting the phenomena of self-help, that is to say, that empirical domain which has hitherto been concealed, or ignored, but is otherwise active and performative. This means going out into the world, and looking at the three
sites of self-help, seeing how they get enacted. We know that the self is victorious in self-help, the agent doing the self-help. This suggests one thing: in the interests of authenticity, and proximity to my topic, I need to become a particular kind of person in relation to it. I am not looking at self-help entirely from the outside; I am relating to it as a consumer of it. I must become a participant in these sites of self-help, to understand how self-help is received through their activity. I have research questions. But questions are abstract, disconnected from the activity of answering them. Besides, they are an integral part of the person asking them, at least here. It will be clearer to formulate them in terms of what I must do – who I will become by engaging my research topic. Three identities: the reader of a self-help book; a member of an audience of a self-help workshop; and a member in a self-help group. And three related tasks. First, to undertake the activity of reading self-help books, to see how it performs self-help and what that performance consists in. Second, to participate in a self-help workshop and examine the role of the self-help book author/speaker and other readers, for the purposes of self-help. And third, and finally, to become a member in self-help groups, and see what the collective co-presence of members invokes, and how that relates to doing self-help. By entering these sites of self-help, one at a time, I want to look at relationships and connecting lines – where travel is undertaken, and things get brought together, or where things stand still, and do not move at all. I want to understand self-help. Next, then: to begin my own travelling, and conduct some empirical research. I will discuss what I find later.

19 I use this term in the ethnomethodological sense; that we must understand the emergence of the phenomenon of self-help in and as the orientations to it by the people who are performing it, doing it as a practical matter.
Chapter 2
The methods chapter

2.1 Introduction
I have been extraordinarily busy. My topic of investigation has been engaged, in detail and exhaustively. It began with the work of accessing my research sites. There were conversations, meetings and ongoing correspondence. Certain resources were used; others were developed as I went on. Choices were available. Decisions had to be made, ongoingly, so the research would proceed and not grind to a halt. There were quiet moments, when not much seemed to be happening. Other things needed to be tried, to move things on again. Some things were attended to, and unpacked; other things were ignored, or put to one side. Some things worked well, and were employed again; other things fell to the ground right at the start. Connections were established that allowed me to travel to other places, and enable me to explore different parts of my topic. Materials were collected, looked at and compared. Parts of the topic were brought into relation with one another; they were examined carefully. A trajectory emerged out of this pattern of activity, on which the development of the research travelled. It was out of this bundle of activity that the analysis of the thesis was produced, to follow in the chapters to come. So much happened, out there, doing the research.

This does not really tell a story. It just points to something that still needs to be told. This activity, largely unspecified, provided for the analysis in the later chapters, itself part of the activity, and thus produced the “original contribution” this thesis is making to knowledge. But what is the status of this activity? What, exactly, did happen out there, and how is this bundle of activity to be characterized? What explains, in other words, the passage between setting out my research trajectory, and substantively and practically pursuing it through empirical, analytic work? This is the inevitable task faced by every social science researcher: the rational accountability of research activity. And this is the substantive function of a chapter like this one, the methods chapter.
2.2 Social science method

This is a social science thesis, and my topic is clearly within the interests of social science analysis. But what happens when I describe the production of my thesis as an activity of social science? This becomes especially important, given the current task of accounting for my research activity. I am conducting qualitative research within the social sciences; there is no tiresome number crunching, or wavy graphs, or tables. But whether quantitative or qualitative, social science provides me with its most treasured possession: Method. I must deal with my research activity as an application of social science method. Method is part of a normative, standardised practice of doing social science research. If there is one place where method is most appropriate, then it is here. This is, after all, the methods chapter; the title says so. Suppose I adopt the resources the social sciences make available to me, and tell about the emergence and development of my research that way.

It goes like this. Method is a specific commentary on action; it endorses a mechanistic and rationally traceable account of what it means to act. Purposeful action is ultimately the result or effect of some prior, underlying plan (Suchman, 2007). Action derives from, and is rational to the extent that it functions according to, a plan-of-action. The plan exists prior to, and independently of, the action that it determines. The significance of action is to be located in its cause: the plan. This has devastatingly strong implications, both for what it means to "act", and to act "intelligently" and "purposefully". Take the bundle of activities out of which my analysis emerged, the one I am deciding how to account for at the moment. What does it mean to say that it occurred as a plan, a method? It means that things get put into an order. The messiness of the activity is replaced with pattern, coherence. It gets rationalised. It makes those activities accountable as particular kinds of activities; they become specifically methodological activities. There is a script that method embodies: how it organises and specifies the character of that activity, out there. Because it has a temporal, sequentially prior relationship to action, it projects what action will be like, as some future instance of

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20 The following account draws heavily on Suchman's (2007) effective challenge to the orthodox view, derived mostly from a philosophical, and later cognitive science, perspective, that intelligent and purposeful human action can be sufficiently explained by a wholly rational, computational model of action.
activity, in terms of the script. Action is retrospectively accounted for, not in terms of what happened, but in terms of what happened according to the script. Method deals exclusively with what has been pre-specified in the plan; action can only be accounted for as a telling of method. It does not recognise any action that exceeds the action-as-accounted-for in its prescriptive representation.

When we write about research activity as social science practice, as I am, it undergoes transformation (cf. Berg, 1998). The method that determines it now replaces it. The context of the activity becomes the context of methodological formulation. In other words, the particulars of research practice belong to a more general species of method. Those practices of research activity are to be named by and as a method account. Method is heavily packaged within a theory of action. This is where it gets complicated for the researcher, as other things need to be understood. Method gets attached to epistemological and ontological concerns; and now it is philosophical. What might be seen as a situated occasion of research activity is the result of a dense, theoretical lineage of work. We need to know about these things, before we can go on. Now method is totally separated from its situated occasions of practice. It displays a level of generality such that it can be discussed in the abstract, to account for all points of its application. It is a topic of social science, not just a resource. Dedicated journals and international conferences, and many other sites besides, provide a surrogate home for method, as it now occupies specialised, theoretical discussion. Debates take place, and endure; sometimes more theoretical resources are added, as method is placed deeper into the literature. Where it starts and where it ends is unclear; it gets nestled between so many argumentative contexts, so many debates, that one just cannot say.

One thing is certain. The researcher needs to know how to act before action is undertaken. Social science provides just the tool: the "canon" of social science, the methods textbook. It is surely not the same as being apprenticed to an accomplished researcher for an extended period, but nevertheless a hugely popular and legitimate surrogate. I noticed this in the library. It is overwhelming: one textbook next to the other, row upon row, some slim but most bulky, constantly updated, and many new editions of
old classics with perhaps only an updated foreword and a new cover. So my task, as a first priority, is to learn about method. I need to know how to act. This is a civilizing process (cf. Elias, 1994). The methods textbook is intended to produce order, to tell about the “do’s” and “don’ts”, the acceptable and unacceptable ways of acting. Method tells me how to go on; it tells me what to do. It performs its function through the form: “if...then” (Berg, 1998: 232). So, in the case of A, then method instructs me to do B. That is the principle on which it is based, to induce from the particular to the general, from specific activity to methodical practice. It turns one thing into another: something specific into something general. Part of the civilising process is to develop “competent” researchers, and then “good” research; produce the first, and the second will follow. Social science method is there to take away disorder and mess. It makes things simple, so we can look at what is important. It has a naturally positive quality to it; the vitality of method as a label or description of specific activities is drawn on. Practicing social science method reflects a healthy research life. Everything is in order. Method just needs to be understood. Then I can proceed. And then I will know what to do. This means reading the methods textbook(s), and internalising a set of representations of action.

So social science method endorses my development as a “knowing” researcher, equipped with knowledge of method and ready to set about my topic. My research will proceed along a methodological path; the questions it raises, the objects it studies, the various phenomena it priorities and those it conceals, will be engaged as an occasion of method. There I am: my methodological “toolkit” swinging confidently in hand, ready to deal with my topic as I begin my investigation. This presupposes that, now I have knowledge of how to act, I follow a script of what it means to act. I respond to environmental conditions with the appropriate (and pre-defined) sequences of actions. I will know how to identify typical situations in which a given script will be applied. The extent of this “background knowledge” is supposed to explain the action it determines. Every action is accomplished because the actor has a whole stock of background knowledge of similar situations of action that gets selected from to fit single occasions of action. I am supposed to know more than I can tell in any one situation because of my background knowledge. There is a remainder, an excess of knowledge, not applied but
nevertheless relevant to the action that is undertaken. This background knowledge (which *can be* left totally unspecified, assumed) explains how one course of action is taken and not another (Suchman, 2007: 64-68). Every action is the deliberate effect of the plan, or, in this case, the script or the knowledge.

2.3 Practice theory

This is one story, the official story. But it is a tale told by social science, handed down from one generation of researchers to another. Like all tales, it sketches a romanticised image; things are almost too perfect. There is a problem. I did read one of the leading methods textbooks, more than once; I even carried out the exercises at the end of each chapter. But my research activity did not proceed as it was *meant* to, like social science intends it to. I kept returning to the now troublesome relation between formal instruction and practical action; there was a bottleneck, something preventing the flow of traffic. I simply needed to apply method. Fine. But this is what was in question: getting method from the pages of the textbook to the activities of my research. What counts as *doing* method? Let us call it x. How do I know I am doing x? How do I know (when) I am performing a class of activities known as x-ing? Well, it should consist of this or that. But then what does that mean?

Perhaps another methods textbook might make a clearing, I thought, and show me how to go on and distinguish this from that. Another trip to the library, another methods textbook borrowed. That did answer some questions; but it raised new ones too, or perhaps modified the old ones. I read some of the sections repeatedly, to try to get a grip on things. It helped, but only slightly. I was still unsure how to go on. So another trip to the library... This cycle of reading was now becoming compulsive\(^\text{21}\). The research methods textbook, taken as a canon of social science, was supposed to prepare me for conducting research, but it was simply preventing me from doing so. Reading became a matter of task avoidance. While I was reading, I was not doing my research; and that was bad. I had to stop reading, or my thesis would fail to develop. I realised this. No amount

\(^{21}\) This cycle endured for sometime; suffice it to say, with hindsight, it interfered with the development of my research.
of instruction, however specified, made things any clearer, at least not clear enough for me to feel comfortable to leave the site of instruction, and venture into the site of research activity. Any new or modified instruction took me back to where I was before: asking what that now consisted in. Then there was my topic. How did I know where that began and ended? To reiterate the “if...then” form of method, what might the world look like, and how might it be recognised as such, so that I apply “B” to its study, and in this way?

There is a story not being told here. My research could not be described in terms of the application of method, not by a long way. I did not know how to apply method, nor what I would be applying it to. These things did not present themselves to me, with names, and as self-evident. And so I abandoned the activity of reading the methods textbooks. The problem is the formalisation of social science method into abstract, representational plans of action. Method deals with research activity theoretically, and has no regard for what happens outside of theoretical accounts of action. Method and research activity are at variance; one does not reflect the other. But social science tends to gloss over this, mostly with calls for greater rigour, and adjusting theory. Wittgenstein made it perfectly clear in his later writings (e.g., 2001), that a rule (or instruction, or plan, or method) could not provide the rules of its own application. So: what if the meaning of action does not derive from a theory of action, but from the context in which that action is performed? This is the principal argument of Wittgensteinian language philosophy: to override generality with specificity. This changes things. If we do not perform an action because we know what it means to act, where the action has some prior and determinate meaning for action, but instead arrive at a meaning in context and in situ, then we need to change how we talk about action.

Wittgenstein was not alone. Ethnomethodology soon followed. Garfinkel made it abundantly clear, right on the first page of Studies in Ethnomethodology, that the invocation of rules is not the solution to the problem of the meaning of action. Thus: “the activities whereby members produce and manage settings of organised everyday affairs are identical with members' procedures for making those settings “account-able” ” (1967: 1). A much cited extract from Studies, and for good reason: it provides the clearest
argument that any formulation of a practice (esp. Epistemology) is inseparable from the order of activities it formulates. Suppose we take method to mean the practical activity that produces an emergent course of action. In this sense, it deals with and engages “what happened”. The practical adequacy of method is very specific. For ethnomethodology, method is not an inadequate representation of practice, as though there were some adequate alternative representation; but neither is the case that activity remains meaningless until it receives a representation. On the contrary: method is an expression in, as and of the activity in which it occurs. It depends heavily for its sense on the organisational occasions of its use. It is an indexical expression; and there is another celebrated term from Studies.

The indexicality of the meaning of action has generated a paradigmatic shift in contemporary theoretical discussion. We have now undergone, and are working within, a “practice turn” (e.g., Schatzki, Knorr Cetina, & Von Savigny, 2001). Wittgenstein gets heavily drawn on, and the ethnomethodologists too. But it is far broader than that. The emergence of a “praxeological” understanding of the world has been heavily deployed in the philosophy of science, social theory and social sciences for sometime now. The sociology of scientific knowledge, and later, social studies of science have been particularly visible areas of work. They have adopted the idea that the best way to look at science is as practice. Look to other, long-standing traditions of inquiry too;

22 Garfinkel does return to this point (as if he ever departed from it), with an equally lucid exposition, in his recent Ethnomethodology’s Program. As he says: “...in descriptions of order in ordinary society that respecify the concreteness of social facts of ordinary activities so that local actual concretely detailed circumstantial workings of immortal ordinary society are absent of orderliness until and only in case concreteness is respecified by the social sciences: displayed in details of orderliness of formal analytic methods and generic representational theories” (2002: 65).

23 Ethnomethodologists make heavy use of the words “practice” and “practical” to show that the nature of any phenomenon is produced for practical purposes, out of local, located, actual, concrete lived-work (cf. Livingston, 1987: 57-8).

24 The sociology of scientific knowledge has shown that science, the “hardest” case for a social constructionist argument, is socially constituted through and through. However, to say that science is socially constructed does not get close enough to what scientists actually do in the laboratory; it leaves too much room for social theory. “The social”, that is to say, the so-called descriptive and explanatory framework for understanding science, becomes another topic in need of description and explanation: how does the social get there in the first place? What makes it social? To view science as specifically a practical enterprise allows us look at what happens at every step - in experiments, in the use of instruments and technical equipment, in scientific reportage, in protocols and so forth. This specifically “practice turn”, succeeding “the social turn”, allows us to view all of this, all those things that make up scientific activity,
anthropology is a good example, and cultural sociology and cultural studies. The foundation here is based on the idea that culture is practice. It is localised within practices. A recent manifestation of "the praxeological" has been explored as "performative social science" (e.g., Denzin, 2001; Gergen, 2001; Jones, 2006). So many topics, then, and so many objects, spanning various temporal, geographical and ontological sites: some relate, but many do not; many do not share anything in common. Or do they? This is only one way of looking at heterogeneity; there is another. A preferred way of dealing with heterogeneity is by the use of a single repertoire for its elucidation: something that collects all the pieces together, however messy the collection might be. One candidate repertoire to emerge has been "practice theory" (Schatzki, 1996, 1997, 2002, 2007; Schatzki, Knorr Cetina, & Von Savigny, 2001). As Schatzki (2001: 2 original italics) explains:

...practice accounts are joined in the belief that such phenomena as knowledge, meaning, human activity, science, power, language, social institutions, and historical transformation occur within and are aspects or components of the field of practices. The field of practices is the total nexus of interconnected human practices. This 'practice approach' can thus be demarcated as all analyses that (1) develop an account of practices, either the field of practices or some subdomain thereof (e.g., science), or (2) treat the field of practices as the place to study the nature and transformation of their subject matter.

so to speak, on the ground (see esp. Latour & Woolgar, 1979; Latour, 1987; Pickering, 1991, 1995; Pickering & Guzik, 2008).

25 A recent Special Issue of Forum Qualitative Social Research On-Line on Performative Social Science (http://www.qualitative-research.net/index.php/fqs/issue/view/10) has explored the possibilities of performativity for social science. I contributed to the Special Issue, outlining the importance of showing how the world is performative, beyond our representations of it (see Cherry, 2008a). The thrust of my contribution, and the Special Issue more generally, was to challenge the restrictions that traditional social science methodology places upon its practitioners, and the ways in which social science topics subsequently get framed within such restrictive frameworks.

26 Callon calls this a "generalized symmetry" (1986: 200). This concept indicated the emergence of actor network theory and suggested that all elements in a network, that is, humans and non-humans, should be described in the same terms. The difference between them is to found in the relations in the network, and not presupposed.
Something very profound is happening. Practice theory is the result of a respecification of topics normatively seen in terms of those listed by Schatzki: knowledge, meaning and so forth. Epistemology is another topic; we can add that to Schatzki’s list. Think of some more: discourse, interaction, objects, subjects, things, and all the others — they are each “re-ontologized”. The shift is from being to doing, from product to process. And practice becomes the “core” ontological phenomenon, the basic unit of analysis. I do not want to get embroiled in the debates within practice theory (see Lynch, 1997; Pickering, 1997; Rouse, 2002, 2007; Turner, 1994, 2002, 2007). The importance of practice theory for me is that it is instructive. Now, it is true that practice-talk is not particularly novel, as we have seen. But all this talk has not been articulated in the same manner, that is to say, made the identifiable “move” of the emergence of “practice theory” as such. Concern is no longer restricted to philosophy and its topics, or culture or science and their topics. It is not only these that are praxeologized. This is what practice theory allows: it extends beyond discipline, and beyond topic, and opens the world for inspection as a practical phenomenon. What does that mean? One thing at a time. The world: that just means that everything (another usefully vague term) is available for inquiry. And practice: that just means that something will happen, or has happened, or might happen; an event, no more and no less. This is vague, but it is precisely the appeal of the practice approach. Look:

...the bounds of a practice are identified by the ways in which its constitutive performances bear on one another, rather than by any regularities of behavior or meaning that they encompass. One performance responds to another, for example, by correcting it, drawing inferences from it, translating it, rewarding or punishing its performer, trying to do the same thing in different circumstances, mimicking it, circumventing its effects and so on (Rouse, 2007: 49).

Things are left open. What counts as constituting a practice is to be arrived at through its actual circumstances. Things certainly multiply, and become displaced. Different things are brought into relation with one another, in the plane of practices. As a practice unfolds, more things can be added, others can be left behind; maybe discourse and materiality co-participate, or perhaps institutions and subjectivity (Reckwitz, 2002). Material
arrangements can get modified, through contingency, and in turn effect other things; human agents can modify, and in turn be modified by, these performances too. We do not look in one place, but many places. And when many things are involved, changing hands and moving around, things are always subject to change and respecification. Something happens to action, when we see it as practice. Theory will no longer do. Grand narratives are simply ruled out of court. This shift in perspective meets a shift in the phenomenon: attending to practices means moving from epistemology to ontology. It is not devoted to finding a single object; this would be a question of knowing as the only way of relating to the world. This simply asks to what extent, and whether, representation is accurate. Here, we just need the right method, the appropriate way of knowing. To clarify, then: ontology, not as a preexisting object, as preceding everything else and which epistemology looks at from a distance, but rather as located in practice (Mol, 2002; Woolgar, 2005, 2008). This deflates ontology as an abstract concept, and makes it visible as activity, as emerging out of doing.

The only robust and enduring feature of practice is its “internal” accountability. The moves it produces, the directions it takes and the elements of its production are all accountable to each other (Rouse, 2002, 2007). They are locally negotiated, in situ. This is messy. But it is where action gets meaning, and has its life, which has been so nicely characterized as “the mangle” of practice (Pickering, 1995; Pickering & Guzik, 2008). A practice becomes adequate to itself. The stakes involved, and the issues it raises, become part of the mangle; they feature as its unfolding relational dynamics. So: practice, as a mangle, is an emergent phenomenon. It is an unfolding ontology.

This changes how we see research activity. It respecifies the priority given to plan over action, method over research practice. We have seen what happens when social science method gets involved: its devotion to orderliness and rigor is passed on to its practitioners, so they ignore most of what happens in the actual experience of research.

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27 This points to the importance of Suchman’s (2007: 70) wonderful term “situated action” for beginning to unpack the situated, locally produced and contingent character of action.

28 It makes much more sense to consider the local and emergent conditions of practice, and not the “behind-the-scenes” explanations of classical social theory, as setting the terms under which it is to be described. This intersects with central debates within social theory, and practice theory itself.
practice. They just tell of a “clean” story of research — of method. Most of “what happened” gets “tuned out”. Practice theory, in contrast, respects the importance of everything that happens as part of the practical business of doing research. Research as practice cannot be subsumed under the auspices of social science method. Adopting practice theory means that you only engage with specifics, with detail. Practice can only ever deal with specifics, those circumstances which are fixed to the various forms of relation that emerge through contingency and their connecting forces. Without the detail, the emergence of the ontology of research in and as practice disappears. It abandons the general, the representation of action as plan. So practice, then: substantiated by emergent activity. Mess gets embraced; that is where the detail is to be found, in the connections, the displacements.

2.4 From epistemology to epistemics

I am unhappy with the function of social science method, as it is officially applied to research activity. I have sketched out the contours of an alternative view of research activity, which has been identified as practice theory. This is much more encouraging; but I am not completely happy with this, either. Let me explain. The place to study the nature of our (or: all?) subject matter is in the field of practices. The world is supposed to stand or fall on its strength as a practice. Our domain of phenomena gets located in “actual” occasions and “concrete” circumstances. Its features and qualities are “recognisable” and “observable”. Those sites of practice are assumed to perform a substantive duty of self-presentation; they unproblematically display their status to us, so we can say what they are, charting their characteristics as they are shown. Practices, because they are practices and are therefore recognisable and observable, take on a transparent form. They are “internally” stable. And more: practices are self-actualising, self-contained, self-sufficient, self-supporting, and self-evident. Because a practice is something done, performed, it is assumed that the work of its production has already taken place. All that is required to understand the practice is the practice “itself” — everything that makes it concrete, and observable as a practice, is enclosed within it.
The argument gets stronger too. A practice-approach is certainly about ontologies, not as things but as doings. But in replacing products with processes, it nonetheless retains a strange sense of ontology. It privileges practice as a value of invariable presence. There is something we name as practice that is present to itself, in and of itself. There is a centre: an essence. Despite its commitment to detach ontology from its philosophical past, it preserves a ghostly residue. A realist ontology, in its traditional, philosophical sense, is what can be drawn out, when we look close. Practice is a name given to a set of investigatable, nameable phenomena, something performed which gets enacted as the thing that it is. It does not reside in anything a priori to, or preceding, its own performance. It has boundaries. This is the “swan song” of practice theory; nothing else is required to provide for its articulation. Anything that might conventionally be understood to describe, formulate, unpack or speak on behalf of the practice can be discarded. The practice is supposed to do that itself; it is self-descriptive, as part of its practice-constituting activity. We simply need to join the dots.

So the practice-approach parts ways with any theoretical, explanatory discourse that accounts for it on its behalf. But more than that: because a practice does not require methodological means to describe or otherwise elucidate it, the practice-approach is antiepistemological too. The gap between word (theory, description, representation, method) and world (practice, object, reality) is made to effectively disappear when we discard one of the poles upholding the binarism. Take away words, and we are left with the world. Practice is purity, the real thing; words, descriptions, are just contrived. They create distance where proximity is preferred. The work that is carried out to render this world-as-practice visible is itself transparent. Description is made to have two functions. For a practice itself, description is productive; it makes the practice what it is. But for someone describing a practice, such as an analyst, description is representational; it simply conveys the practice, and takes no part in its production. There is asymmetry, and I am finding it very puzzling. It is as if, as part of this work of revealing a site of practice, we can avoid any form of productive activity: words, descriptions or formulations get robbed.

This understanding can be attributed to Derrida (e.g., 1976, 1978), and his critiques of structuralist thought which was committed to a realist ontology—a centre which is self-evident, and serves as the origin of meaning, such as consciousness, the subject, God or whatever.
of their constitutive role\textsuperscript{30}. The world exists independently of our efforts to know it. There it is, out there, being practised. We have no problem seeing it. A practice-approach wants a world without description. So: it is all \textit{in} a practice.

But what if we do have a problem seeing the world? How do we see one kind of practice and not another? What makes a practice \textit{this} kind of practice, and not \textit{that} kind of practice? Practice theory suddenly becomes silent, unable to help us with specification. “But for all its merits the relevant literature remains unsatisfactory, even in the most elementary aspects. It fails to make clear just what social practices are. And its vision of the scope and power of ‘theories of practice’ is nowhere adequately justified” (Barnes, 2001: 18)\textsuperscript{31}. If a practice is a constitutive process, producing one practice and not another, and there is nothing but practice, then our analysis of practice is itself a practice. It too is a constitutive process (Livingston, 1987; Pollner, 1991). The world does not exist out there, left untouched and preserved, as our descriptions of it, however transparent they claim to be, merely reflect it. There: one practice, a description of the world, but then another practice, a description of that description, and then another...\textit{ad infinitum}. I am asking this form of “radical” reflexivity to display two critical points, each related.

Words, descriptions, and any kind of formulation cannot be avoided when delineating a practice; that is my first point. And any practice is contingent on this work of “wording” that takes place, so we see one thing and not another; and that is my second. There can be no practice in and of itself, without description, and without words. To see the world as practice and not as, say, linguistic, textual, narrative, or any of the other paradigmatic “turns”, is to create a certain type of world. Practice is a particular description of worldly activities. To discard those kinds of descriptions is to discard that kind of world.

\textsuperscript{30} Garfinkel (2002: 170-1 original emphasis) makes this point rather strongly, when he recommends discarding words in favor of practices: “It is a procedure of not \textit{needing} to consult the corpus of classic methods and findings with which to carry out the tasks of EM research. For this time being we’ll carry out the tasks of our research while abstaining from the use of the classic corpus of findings, policies, methods and the rest”.

\textsuperscript{31} Although I agree with Barnes, and his effort to interrogate the notion of practice, I see its lack specificity as precisely its value. It is unspecified, and largely unexamined, but certainly specifiable as part of its involvement in particular circumstances of action. Something so flexible and applicable to situated activity is what must be of value for those embracing a practice-approach. I thus take Barnes to be referring, in part, to the over-theorization of practice in practice accounts, at the expense of specification of particular practices. This is a valid point, and I will return to it shortly.
Look at it like this. Sheep farming is one practice; fire fighting is another. But they are profoundly different kinds of practices. Take description away, and the sheep farmer might have difficulty telling you what he does. Take the range of descriptive resources that the fire fighter uses, to describe his work, and he too will have problems. The practice itself, however concrete and actualised it might be, whatever that might mean, fails to compel. It does not tell a story. And things simply become unacceptable when we say that the world really is practice, or practice-based, beyond our descriptions of “it” as “that” kind of world. Like our sheep farmer and fire fighter, deprive us of the descriptive work, and all of the resources on which it draws to produce its accounts, and we lose a practice. One thing becomes another, or perhaps nothing at all, or remains unspecified: that is what description does.

There is another problem. Practice theory promises so much; it moves us away from the rational reasoning and prescriptive framework of Epistemology, towards the knowledge-productive, constitutive activities that contribute to sites of everyday life. Performativity is embraced. Doings, enactments, and processes: all of that too. But there is something missing; and there will always be something missing. What is promised is the detailed exposition of particular, practical actions, a rich unfolding of currently tacit, only vaguely understood, areas of practice. But what is given is only the abstract character of situated, practical actions. In attending to the specifics of a set of practices, we must make do with a generic set of terms, such as “actual”, “concrete”, “practice”, “practical”, “actual activity” and the more specialized, jargon-laden “practical objectivity”, “indexical expression”, “demonstrable achievement” and the rest. Those terms are inadequate when used as a description of activities of a particular practice. I want to say something about what I am doing, here and now, in situ, that makes whatever it is that I am doing this kind of practice and not that kind of practice; but the resources of a practice-approach only conceal that specificity with its generic set of account-giving terms.

32 This looks very similar to the great “craving for generality” which Wittgenstein (1965: 18) so adamantly condemned in his later writings.
It can be stated clearly enough. Adopting a practice-approach retains the same set of problematics from which it is attempting to depart, when it separates itself from Epistemology. Situated, particular occasions of activity get recognised not in and as situated, particular occasions of whatever they might be, but in the discourses in which those activities get embedded. Practice theory does not tell about particular practices, or of the particulars of a practice, or what produces a practice and its situated features. It just tells of all practices – practices in general. It becomes the theorising of practice, and encourages abundant citation of many practice theorists, and, because it is doing theory, avoids the specifics of “practical” practice. And because its mode of engagement is theoretical, it has a very limited vocabulary for those wishing to pursue description. It cannot give a rich description of the specifics it wishes to point to in theory. And so I am returned hastily to where I started, seeking a way of accounting for the particular, and the local practices of my research, but with nothing making itself available.

I still need some way of describing my research activity. Otherwise you will not know what happened, and I will have no methods chapter. I need to do formulation; that cannot be avoided. It is part of being a social science researcher. Besides, social science method offers perhaps the richest resource available for accounting for social science research activity. Social science manages to survive with it. To reject it because of my current dissatisfaction with it, which is certainly not irresolvable, would be like throwing the baby out with the bath water. If we could just domesticate social science method, remove it from the methods textbook as a rational, ordered plan of action, and utilise it as a practical way of account-giving of research activity. How to go about this? Research is a deeply practical activity; we do not need a theory of practice to tell us that. What we do need is a set of resources that will allow us to tell about the detailed, situated occasions of

33 Lynch makes this point, when he discusses the work of Turner, a leading social practices commentator. Lynch (1997: 343 original italics): “But, by focusing on such lapses and failures of nerve, he [Turner] never fully comes to terms with the possibility that a “practice” might be described as something other than “a fact in a causal world” or a moment in a theoretical explanation. Although Turner presents a strong challenge to contemporary efforts to theorize practices, in the end he provides few, if any, suggestions about how we might investigate them.”
that activity. A vocabulary. A voice. This means abandoning the devotion that social science method has for order and stability: otherwise it disregards those circumstances that are messy, fluid, ephemeral, that do not hold together securely (Law, 2004). We are not pointing to a single object in research, but many. We are not telling of one story, but several. So social science method needs to be broadened, stretched, added to, mixed together. It needs to be modified.

I want to retain Epistemology, not with a big e but a small one: epistemology. Epistemology (big e) proffers propositional forms of knowing, “knowing that”, while disregarding the more local, situated forms of “knowing how”. I want to unpack knowledge-production, but not as Epistemology. Another term would be useful. “Epistemics” will have to do for now. I want to put to one side the idea of action as knowledge identification, simply retrieving what is already there, and prior to action. Instead I shall be interested in knowledge production, something that arises from and emerges out of circumstances of action. The stuff we can point to, and say has played a part in producing some practical situation; that is what I want. Social science method claims this of itself, but conceals the knowing-how with the knowing-that. Method covers up the practices it claims to describe.

2.5 From multi-method to method assemblage
Is what happens in one place, as one part of a practice, the same as what happens in another? Is it just one object we are tracing all along? What happens when things splinter off, and spread into lots of bits? Which parts do we attend to? What do we call them? And what about the bits that are left? This is multiplicity (Law & Mol, 2002; Mol, 2002). Social science method sets limits on what it can find; anything that falls outside gets missed. Multiplicity is sacrificed for order: singularity. Mol (2002) takes us to a hospital in the Netherlands, as she traces the diagnosis and treatment of atherosclerosis, a disease of the lower-limb, in daily practices. She does not find it in one place in the hospital, but in many; and she does not find one atherosclerosis, but several. Each is enacted in different parts of the hospital, and in different parts of the diagnosis and treatment process. In the consultation room, on the operating theatre table, in instruments, in legs,
in documents, in patients' reports: different atheroscleroses are everywhere to be seen. A change is required, to see this, from singularity to multiplicity:

For somewhere along the way the meaning of the word ‘is’ has changed. Dramatically. This is what the change implies: the new ‘is’ is one that is situated. It doesn’t say what atherosclerosis is by nature, everywhere. It doesn’t say what it is in and of itself, for nothing ever ‘is’ alone. To be is to be related. The new talk about what is, does not bracket the particularities involved in enacting reality. It keeps them present (2002: 53-54)

An “is” might have a name, but it does not refer to a single object, or a single site of practice. It gets produced as part of a bundle of activities. There are arrangements, associations, and relations. My research activity can be seen as an “is”; but to name it with the official descriptions that social science method provides retains singularity. Perhaps a new way of telling is needed. I have introduced one new term without stepping on too many toes; I am going to risk a second. I shall be careful. It is clear that actions come into relation with one another, both temporally and spatially. Research involves interaction between people, objects, processes, knowledge and artifacts, all through their co-production; there has to be, for it to move forward. How to deal with these collections of actions? The idea of methodological pluralism\(^4\) is certainly welcome (Morse & Chung, 2003). But I must confess my ambivalence. At least in current discussions of social science method, this means little more than adopting a mixed-method or multi-method approach, even if the focus is on qualitatively driven or oriented multi-method (e.g., Greene, 2007, 2008; Johnson, 2008; Woolley, 2009). Granted, this means more to play with, more ways of seeing and knowing; and more is always better. But method, albeit multi-method, is now advanced as a “third paradigm” of research (Denscombe, 2008). This implies that it has a stable, established status; it is known as an(other) “approach” to doing research. There is more. A multi-method approach now replaces a single-method approach, and yet, it retains the same function: it is still placed at the

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\(^4\) This term can be traced back to the “anarchic” recommendations of Feyerabend (1975) for an open approach that embraces and utilizes whatever is available to shed light on a given phenomenon.
beginning of research activity, used to account for what happened before it happened. “The research topic is multi-layered, so a multi-method approach was used”, a multi-methodologist might say, justifying its use. My concern: method is still privileged over the practical activity of research. Only now there are more (abstract, theoretical) terms to use. And now there are even more methodological discussions in which to get embroiled. There: even more to add to a plan of action.

It is not all bad. I welcome the richness and variety of methodological pluralism, any pluralism; just not the rationality in which it gets framed. I want looseness, fluidity, flexibility, and overlap, without having to subscribe to, or endorse, the heavily saturated “all or nothing”, “either/or” basis on which method gets handled in social science. I am drawn to the idea of “method assemblage” (Law, 2004)\(^35\). This is a nice term. It is sensitive to the local contingencies of situated actions in research. It is “a process of bundling, of assembling, or better of recursive self-assembling in which the elements put together are not fixed in shape, do not belong to a larger pre-given list but are constructed at least in part as they are entangled together. This means that there can be no fixed formula or general rules for determining good and bad bundles” (p. 42). This is promising: it offers the spatial (the where) and temporal (the when) flexibility of multi-method, without the limits it sets on having to follow methodic practice, step-by-step, as a rational course of action according to a plan\(^36\). It asks us instead to point to, and describe, what happens in practice. Things can be loose. They can be fixed together only for the purposes at hand, without having to reflect a determinate set of laws or orders of meaning, or be placed in a wider, fully interpreted “program” (Turnbull, 2000).

We can develop this. Method assemblage is about crafting certain realities in research; it is productive. Part of its value is its economy. It cannot deal with the world in one go, so as it engages some things, condensing them into manageable forms, it leaves

\(^{35}\) Law draws on Turnbull’s (2000) use of the term “assemblage”, who in turn adopts it from Deleuze & Guattari (1987). Turnbull says of assemblage: “it implies a constructed robustness without a fully interpreted and agreed upon theoretical framework, while capturing the inherently spatial nature of its practice and their relations” (2000: 44).

\(^{36}\) This resembles what Billig (1988) calls “traditional scholarship”: following hunches, using tacit knowledge, drawing on individual, specialist forms of knowing etc.
other things aside. Or rather, as it is dealing with certain things, making them present and available, it is also forcing other things out, making them disappear. It is partial. It too deals with singularity; it must in order to say anything. It places some things “out there”, as prior to the things it deals with “in here”, the things it makes present. The very act of attending to something, making it present through descriptions, representations, conversations and so forth, is also making other parts of it, and things related to it, absent as contexts and other phenomena not present. This is the function of method assemblage: it tunes in and out of different realities, or parts of a reality, as it develops through practice. But I am asking method assemblage to carry out an additional task: to relate itself to social science method, and to use that as part of its accounting procedure. This allows us to dip in and out of social science method, to take from it what we need to help articulate what happens in practice (Henriksen, 2003).

I want to tell more. The potential of method assemblage, and what I see as the substantive contribution of multi-method to current discussions of social science method more generally, is its resourcefulness in the practical task of method account-giving. I do not take social science method to be an inadequate version of what “actually” happened in research practice. Or: at least not entirely. This would mean discarding it, because of its inadequacies; and that would be needlessly unhelpful. We would then be back to practice, and we would still have problems. Rather, social science method becomes a critical part of the practical reasoning of research activity. This is important. For “as projective and retrospective accounts of action, plans [or: methods] are themselves located in the larger context of some ongoing practical activity” (Suchman, 2007: 69 my italics).

That is it: social science method as retrospective accounts of action. I am inverting the normative and temporal direction of method in social science research. Research activity is no longer represented as the unfolding of a rational plan of action, normatively accounted for by method as an abstraction, before any research activity has taken place. On the contrary, social science method becomes part of the post hoc reconstruction of what actually happened. And what happened does not sit out there, able
to speak for itself all along, perhaps with a language of its own; its status as a practice is currently unarticulated. That is the function of this chapter - to articulate it. It does not have a name, especially not any official name. I drew on various modes of tacit knowledge when I was researching. I could not articulate much of what was done, as a rational plan before its performance; and I did not articulate what I was doing as I was doing it. Its passage was “occurrent” to me, happening without much conscious attention to it, or of it (Dreyfus, 1991)37. But: my research activity did take place within practical circumstances. Actions were involved, lots of moving about. Social science method becomes part of the rendering of these circumstances, currently vague and unfinished. It is a retelling of some prior activity, part of action’s interpretation. Thus, that activity was not determined by method, out there in the research field, but is rather being brought into relation with it, in here as its account (Sharrock & Button, 2003). The task I have set myself, in trying to engage social science method as a practical part of doing research, is to modify its function. It is a resource for social science research, but I want to “defuse” it so that it can be materialized, distributed, stretched and variably brought into positive interaction with the research process.

2.6 Ethnography
This is a nice word. I like it because it is unbelievably flexible, like a piece of elastic. You can do so many things with it, without it falling to pieces and losing its shape. And yet, it seems to get produced without any general form; it is in the absence of an essence, a modus operandi38. Even nowadays, it looks like there is no consensus, no “real” ethnography (Agar, 2006). Some ethnographers travel to the depths of non-western cultures, far afield and on their own; in a small village in Samoa, like Margaret Mead, or to southern Sudan, like E. E. Evans-Pritchard. Others go to laboratories, talk to scientists,

37 My research activity points to a whole body of activities that are enacted tacitly, invisible because it both happens without needing to know how it happens as a formalized set of actions and because it does not have a precise descriptive vocabulary with which to describe it (e.g., Collins, 1992, Polanyi, 1958, 1967).
38 That said, ethnography does have the qualities Wittgenstein alluded to in his aphorism about games: “What is common to them all? - Don’t say: “There must be something common, or they would not be called “games”” - but look and see whether there is anything common to all. - For if you look at them you will not see something that is common to all, but similarities, relationships, and a whole series of them at that To repeat: don’t think, but look!” (1953: § 66 original italics). Thus, ethnographic studies share a family resemblance.
and meddle with the equipment (e.g., Collins, 1992; Latour & Woolgar, 1979; Lynch, 1985). Still others stay in their offices, with their computers to hand and their telephones ringing, and go home at the end of the day. Some ethnographers are interested in tripods and microscopes; all sorts of technical instruments used in laboratory work or medical procedures in hospitals. Others interview tribal members about their daily rituals. Some even like to examine those canonical literary works and dip into areas of poetry, and look at the activity of reading. We see different locations, topics, activities, people, and objects: so many differences. But that does not matter. Ethnography is flexible; but it is robust enough to point to all of these things. We understand what is going on. Besides, ethnographers are not that remarkable; they are just like anyone else. As Garfinkel (1967: 9-10) himself pointed out, members, in using everyday methods for their accomplishment of practical action and practical reasoning, make heavy use of ethnographies. This is just what members do, and it is done with familiarity and goes without notice. And I am a member, just like other members.

Ethnography does have a language, a set of descriptive terms, and that situates it within social science method. There are methods textbooks on ethnography, and plenty of them. But ethnography is an unusual beast; like Garfinkel alluded to, it does not require a technical, formal and rational repertoire to perform it. And it does not require that you know how to do it before you do it. It is emergent. Then there is its vocabulary. That

39 Unlike many other “methods” which have prescriptive and rule-based routines for practice, knowing how to do ethnography is vastly contingent on what happens in the field. Much of it emerges out of vernacular understandings, and not technical ones. Polanyi made a compelling case for riding a bike. He said you do not need to know how to do it, as a rational, rule-ordered action, to successfully ride a bike. Polanyi: “The rule observed by the cyclist is this. When he starts falling to the right he turns the handlebars to the right, so that the course of the bicycle is deflected along a curve towards the right. This results in a centrifugal force pushing the cyclist to the right. This manoeuvre presently throws the cyclist out of balance to the left, which he counteracts by turning the handlebars to the left; and so he continues to keep himself in balance by winding along a series of appropriate curvatures. A simple analysis shows that for a given angle of unbalance the curvature of each winding is inversely proportional to the square of the speed at which the cyclist is proceeding. But does this tell us exactly how to ride a bicycle? No. You obviously cannot adjust the curvature of your bicycle’s path in proportion to the ratio of your unbalance over the square of your speed; and if you could you would fall off the machine, for there are a number of other factors to be taken into account in practice which are left out in the formulation of this rule. Rules of art can be useful, but they do not determine the practice of an art; they are maxims, which can serve as a guide to an art only if they can be integrated into the practical knowledge of the art. They cannot replace this knowledge” (1958: 49-50). Much of “knowing” in ethnography is embodied knowledge, picked up as you go on, and certainly never formalized; it is also about using embodied skills, sometimes not doing much more than deploying the “practical knowledge” found in everyday interaction.
largely gets deployed and decided as part of fieldwork activity, and not before, in pre-formulated plans of action. Even then, its terms will mean different things, depending on the topic and the nature of the ethnography. This is why ethnography’s relevance is not restricted to specific topics or discipline-bounded concerns. It is interdisciplinary. This is a good thing. It means you have friends in many disciplines; some colleagues might be sociologists or anthropologists, and they usually are, but others might be geographers or philosophers. This means more resources, to add to a voice, a way of doing formulation. But ethnography does more than that. It is a way organizing my activities, making them recognizable to others as familiar kinds of activities. Recall how Mol approached a lower-limb disease, atheroscleroses, in the hospital: she says it is an “is”, but does not have a single referent. It is multiple, found in and as different sites of hospital practice, and yet it hangs together as if it were a single disease. It is “more than one - but less than many” (2002: 55). Just as atheroscleroses is a stable phenomenon in the hospital, so my activities become stable when I catch them with ethnography. A name does a lot, a term of engagement; it is a coordinating mechanism. It ties together the various contexts over which my actions get distributed.

My research is not composed of lots of individual activities, producing separate things, all in need of names; it produces them as part of the same thing. Differences and anomalies get pacified. I no longer need to worry about how to describe an action, and then another action, as they will get interpreted in terms of the rest of the actions. It is all in a name: ethnography. My activities can be seen as ethnographic activities. All my actions become related; they remain situated, and seen in local sites of practice, but cross over and correspond to become part of an assemblage. Citation of other ethnographers and their work is part of the work of this coordinating mechanism; it displays the distribution of the phenomenon, its community-wide legitimacy (Latour, 1987). It turns it into something stable, singular, pointable to and uncontestable. And because it is “out there”, beyond my practice of it, who can argue with that? With ethnography I fit in, can talk to colleagues without fear of rejection; they will understand me. So it provides a way of telling a story that is composed of many elements, that travels across multiple sites of activity, that draws on many resources, and that works within heterogeneous spaces
(Hine, 2007; Marcus, 1998; Mol, 2002). But it never falls apart, into lots of indiscernible pieces. It is manageable. Yes, I do like ethnography. And then there is one of its more endearing features. It points away, or can be made to point away without too much trouble, from the rational, representational plan-of-action found in the methods textbook and the methodological debates in the journals, to the world where its work gets enacted (cf. Cherry, 2008a). It is not endorsing multiplicity for its own sake, then; it is pursuing it because it best allows us to engage, negotiate and account for the messy, hybridized character and forms of our own research and its topics (e.g., Atkinson, 2005; Holloway & Todres, 2003).

Ethnography might be about method, and it probably is. Certainly, it is a model of action, of taking specific kinds of actions. We call these actions doing ethnography. But it is also about being a particular kind of person; there is someone behind the ethnography, doing the actions and undertaking the work. I did not read a collection of self-help books in a personal quest for self-help. I did not attend a workshop of life coaching to receive coaching in my own life. And I did not spend a large part of my research visiting self-help groups because of a personal problem. My presence in each of these settings had an ethnographic function, and nothing else. I was a "professional stranger" (Agar, 1996). I was present as an ethnographer. This is difficult to define in the abstract, and can quickly return us to general, methodological accountings. Another direction is needed. Geertz (1973) indeed reminded us, all those years ago, that we should judge a discipline by what its practitioners do in the field. So I must not get bogged down in jargon, and instead remain faithful to my time in the field, the lived experience, and draw from that (Murphy, 2002; Sharman, 2007). In the Goffmanian sense I was enacting a role; my relationship to my topic was such that I needed to fulfil various role-accomplishing activities. I could talk ethnographically, and tell about my research through ethnography. That would be method description. But that is not enough. It leaves out important details. I undertook a role, and adopted a specific persona in my relationship to my research sites: the duty of this methods chapter is to do role description. What is required is a description of self.\textsuperscript{40}

\textsuperscript{40} The status of self must be demarcated from other, similar notions such as "the ethnographic self" (e.g., Coffey, 1999), and the recent ethnographic debates that embrace autoethnography, which introduce any
This is the contribution of social science method; using the resources that one of its domains of practice, ethnography, provides to tell about a narrative of self in research activity. Method and practice overlap and get hybridized, out of which arises a narrative retelling. Part of the adequacy of this ethnographic retelling is how I want to retell. I want to draw on "thick" description to engage and deal with my research activity. The target is detail and empirical fruitfulness (cf. Callon & Latour, 1992). So: let us get down to specifics, and let me tell my story from the field.

Site one: self-help books

I spent time browsing the bookshops, negotiating the small pockets of people usually dotted about the popular psychology and self-help sections. Most books were easily viewable, and conveniently to hand, but a firm push was the only way to clear the more engaged browsers and get to the best stuff. There are thousands of self-help books: so many titles, so many authors, so many topics and so many editions of titles. Not all of them identify themselves as "self-help books", either. Self-development books, self-improvement books, spirituality books and life coaching books: just so many books. Does each book perform the same job, in its respective topic, I wondered? What is the difference? I did not know, not just by looking. If only I had some form of expertise to guide me, and help with the selection process. Then I saw something glistening, up there,

number of identity categories or descriptions of self as being important to, if not determining, the research setting. This is a common enough argument: there is no reality, no world out there, beyond my representation of it in and as my text, my interpretation, or, here, my identity and ethnographic self. This strong claim comes with all sorts of unnecessary problems if it is not appropriately justified. In what sense does a particular ethnographic self contribute to accomplishing, or determining, the setting in which the ethnographer is located? Potter (1996: 135) made it clear: 'The test is whether the interaction [or setting, or topic, or phenomenon] would have taken place, and would have taken place in the form that it did, had the researcher [or ethnographer] not been born'. If the ethnographer were run over by a bus, for instance, on the way to the setting, would the setting still have taken place as it did? (e.g., Potter, 2003; see also Potter, 2002; Potter & Hepburn, 2007). If a given identity or description of self is to be introduced as a non-trivial matter, that shapes the emergence of the topic, then it must be shown to be demonstrably relevant and consequential (Schegloff, 1991). This would be the function of reflexivity, and it would be fully justified. My description of self is not making a claim for the way I determined the shape of my topic. Rather, it is a pragmatic device for describing what happened, based on my situated actions in fulfilling my professional role, and not relying on abstract, disengaged discourse about method. It just distinguishes me, based on my role, from the members of my settings. I become somebody, with a particular role to fulfil, who is not a "self-help book reader", or a "life coaching workshop member" or "self-help group member". The distinction arises out of my role-fulfilling activities, not how such activities shape the settings.

41 This term derives from Ryle (1968), later to be famously popularized by Geertz. See Cromdal, Osvaldsson & Persson-Thunqvist (2008) for a recent exposition.
wedged between the latest edition of Dale Carnegie's *How to Make Friends and Influence People* and Gloria Arenson's *Five Simple Steps to Emotional Healing*. There: Tom Butler-Bowdon’s (2003) *50 Self-Help Classics*. It was quite a hefty book, and a little more expensive than the others, but that did not matter; I was too busy looking at my reflection in the shiny, mirror-like gold italics on its cover. *50 Self-Help Classics* collects together the self-help “classics”, the books that most represent the self-help book genre and define its boundaries. It is even endorsed by several self-help book authors for its range and depth of coverage. Sold: I would draw on Butler-Bowdon’s expertise of the genre and use his *50 Self-Help Classics* as a selection device.

Self-help books are used in a professional context, I recalled. We have already seen in the opening chapter how they have received medical endorsement, as doctors prescribe them to patients. The Cardiff Book Prescription Scheme, which I also pointed to earlier, provides practitioners with a list of thirty-five “high quality” self-help books which address a range of psychological problems e.g., stress, depression and panic attacks. In compiling the list, therapists and counsellors were asked to recommend specific self-help books from their professional experience; the ones that work in practice. So the scheme has chosen those canonical self-help books from the genre. There: another selection device.

Two forms of expertise of the genre of self-help books, one at the core of the genre itself and the other at the core of professional health care, united in their commitment to what a self-help book is supposed to be like. There is a model here, and each title conforms to it, or is an instance of it. The genre has been reduced to a manageable form, conveniently awaiting my selection from it. Any of the titles would do, but I chose ten titles for analysis, six from *50 Self-Help Classics*, four from The Cardiff Book Prescription Scheme (see appendix I). This selection would represent the basic source of my analysis of self-help books. It would provide for the analytic work ahead, but remain “open” so that other titles could be added as analysis developed, either to further unpack, or better explore, specific analytic phenomena of interest.
A self-help book is an object: it travels with other self-help books in large boxes from the publisher; it gets displayed in bookshops, one stacked on top of the other, or sometimes stood upright. And it gets picked up and moved around while it is there. That is one object, the text. But the object I am dealing with is not the sort of object that can fall on your toe. It is not really an object at all. Readers do not just look at self-help books: they read them. Reading is part of the process undertaken by every reader of a self-help book, and yet, because it happens so intuitively, its significance is overlooked and the object read is all that remains:

Reading [...] is construed as an operation performed on such objects, the "processing of information" found in the text. Yet, whatever a text’s ultimate properties, it takes on its observed properties from within the work of reading. Reading consists of work that is always done in conjunction with a particular text. Rather than having two separate things – texts and reading – the two together constitute one object – a "text/reading" pair (Livingston, 1995:14).

A self-help book does not exist before and independently of the situated activity of reading. Self-help books are read; that is an activity, and work is involved. Livingston suggests that any text, just like any stretch of talk, has a "natural analysability" (p.32), that is, analysis is already embedded within it by the way it is produced through reading’s actual work. A text draws readers in through reading – the activity needing to be pursued if the text is to be instantiated as a phenomenon. Arriving at the meaning of a text is an achievement. But it is not achieved by the text, a combination of tightly compacted fibres of wood and liberal quantities of printed black ink. And neither does the reader determine this achievement, by something taking place inside their skulls; as an experience and activity available to any reader, the achievement derives from reading. The text is an effect of reading and a conclusion drawn from reading’s work.

My task was set. I undertook a detailed reading of my corpus of self-help books. I became a reader of these texts, placing them in the situated occasions of reading in (and as) which they are produced. Whereas a lay reader would have read quite happily,
ploughing through the whole corpus perhaps even faster than I had earlier collected it using my handy selection devices, I did not. I pursued an analytic reading, which is another way of saying additional work was required. From the start of my reading experience I paid close attention to how the very process of reading emerged, what features of the text/reading pair contributed to its achievement. I looked at the work involved in constituting the identity of the reader of a self-help book, and what it meant to have or assume such an identity. I charted what commitments were required in attaching oneself to this identity, either to maintaining or developing it: what things were prioritised or negated. These commitments also related to the status of the self-help book; to be a certain reader was to take a certain stance towards the self-help book. That was examined too. There was a trajectory – from becoming a specific kind of reader to the work that this kind of reader does as part of reading’s work. This connected with an understanding of self-help. I unpacked the situated details of the practical work undertaken by the reader, to explore what counted as fulfilling the work of self-help. A process had been completed: reading a self-help book. A journey had been made, from one point to another. I inquired what this process had represented, and amounted to, for the reader.

I drew on various theoretical resources in my reading work. Genette’s (1997) insights into the role of paratext in reading practices were critical. He saw those textual features that were added to a text during the distribution process by editors, after the author has completed the writing of the main text, such as front covers, titles, imagery, font, colours, etc., to be performative of the reading process. This provided for analytic attention being paid to how those elaborate paratextual details on the front covers of the self-help book institute or, as it were, get reading underway.


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42 One could just as easily say “hypertext”: the prefix, hyper, is derived from the Greek “above” or “beyond”. It is any text that appears in addition to, or outside of, the main text.
(secondary) meanings out of the text, by moving across it, between the codes. Connotations are not, then, relationships between the text and experience separate from it, located in the mind of readers say, for "connotation is a correlation immanent in the text, or texts; or again, one may say that it is an association made by the text-as-subject within its own system" (Barthes, 1974: 8). Connotation is related to an ethnomethodological understanding of reading practice: the documentary method of interpretation. To enable text comprehensibility, readers employ readerly sense-making procedures; what the text is about, its underlying pattern of meaning, is constituted out of individual textual evidences, while such evidences in turn receive their sense through their relation to an overall pattern (McHoul, 1982)\textsuperscript{43}. The meaning of a text is made to fit each to-be-read line or evidence as it is engaged and is thus ongoingly modified or extended, and in turn each new evidence receives meaning from a general pattern produced thus far\textsuperscript{44}. Connotation was of such general importance to my analysis that, although it was not always made explicit or pointed to, it nevertheless acted to produce a sensible and rational reading of the self-help book. The normative procedure for finding meaning, by establishing it as the result of reading and connecting specific evidences to a general pattern, enabled me to see that the process of reading was also a product of the very order of events that it helped to produce, which is to say, the self-help book.

Eco (1979; 1992) has shown how the experience of the reader, as a reflexive agent of the work of reading, and someone coming to the text and produced by it, is made available for inspection in textual material. His concept of the Model Reader is a way of characterising how a text anticipates its own reading, and its readers, by encoding certain pathways on which reading should proceed, delimiting the range of interpretation required for readers to render intelligible its narrative. Like connotation and its regulation by the system of signification in which it is invoked, Eco was underscoring how a reader,

\textsuperscript{43} McHoul's breaching experiments have provided important empirical evidence of the reliance on the documentary method of interpretation for normatively produced reading practices. He interfered with or "troubled" these normative practices, by taking lines from a poem and reconfiguring them randomly to produce a new "poem", which had no author and was neither intended as sensible nor rationally produced. It was, rather, irrational, where its narrative had no coherence or pattern. And yet, readers, after being requested to read it, still attempted to make sense of it, by reading it as an orderly, authored and legitimate piece of writing: a poem. Readers found meaning by producing it through reading.

\textsuperscript{44} This is what gives a text a "gestalt texture" for reading's work (Livingston, 1995: 12).
so as to control the plurality of meanings s/he makes when reading, is constrained by the work they are asked to perform when reading. Eco was interested in how a text constructs its readers. This concept of the reader, in and as reading, again held such importance for how reading a self-help book unfolds, and the positioning work it instantiates, that it was drawn on largely and substantively in my reading. Finally, Adorno’s (1994) analysis of an astrology column in a Los Angeles newspaper provided valuable insights into how certain ideologies operate across mass culture. This analysis was particularly relevant for the way in which it unpacked how notions of individualism were invoked, managed and endorsed as part of “the good life” for the reader of the self-help book. Understanding how this ideology pervaded the self-help book proved critical.

Site two: a life-coaching workshop
Something to emerge from the detailed reading of these self-help books was the appearance of an alternative site of self-help. There was a shift away from reading self-help books as a method for doing self-help, but this was not a turn to self-help groups. One of the self-help book authors from my corpus does not just write self-help books; she hosts and “stars in” self-help workshops too. This is important: these workshops are a hybrid of self-help books and self-help groups. This author is recommending the readers of her self-help books to take out membership in a workshop with other people, other readers. Whether simply invoked, or strongly embraced, this looks like a meeting point of the individual and collective dimensions of self-help, that is, my main ethnographic sites of inquiry. What might this tell us about the relationship between individual and collective modes of self-help? What connections might be established, maintained, or even broken, when this site of self-help is enacted? I needed to attend one of these workshops, to see what happens. It is obviously a different context from reading; other people were present. What is the purpose of attendance? What role does the author perform in a group setting? And why are others present, the audience? A polite telephone conversation with the author and host, Fiona Harrold, secured a place at the workshop as a guest. There: a coach trip to London for the day; and I would get to meet Fiona Harrold too.

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I sat at the front of the workshop, where I could see Fiona Harrold. I entrusted my audio recorder\textsuperscript{45} to evidence the spoken interaction in the workshop, while I focused on making additional notes and speaking with other members of the audience. I just sat there, listening and recording. So: a workshop largely composed of spoken interaction, all conveniently recorded; later, it was all transcribed, ready for analysis\textsuperscript{46}. Talk was important in the workshop; now, transcribed, it was important for analysis. It made things happen in the workshop, and everyone was doing it. I drew largely on conversation and discursive analytic techniques to engage the material. The theoretical underpinnings of these analytic approaches take seriously the importance of context as locally produced in talk\textsuperscript{47}. This enabled me to get some purchase on how the patterns of interaction in the workshop were producing and sustaining this site of self-help. So much was considered; so much interested me from my earlier reading of the self-help books, especially Fiona Harrold’s books. I examined the addressing functions of Fiona Harrold’s talk, the way she engaged the audience. I looked at the ways in which “the reason for attendance” was variably formulated and dealt with. I examined other things, as well: those heavily featured moments when Fiona Harrold interacted with individual members of the audience. The character of the prescriptions produced and offered for satisfying these

\textsuperscript{45} Fiona Harrold gave her consent for me to record the workshop (see appendix 2).

\textsuperscript{46} I include a copy of the workshop transcript on a CD, which accompanies this thesis. I followed a basic version of Jeffersonian transcription conventions (see appendix 3).

\textsuperscript{47} A few words are in order. Context is a highly problematic and contested term. It has been the topic of substantial, even colossal, debate among those using a range of analytic techniques for the analysis of discourse (e.g., Billig, 1999a, 1999b; Duranti & Goodwin, 1992; Hammersley, 2003; Griffin, 2007; Moerman, 1988; Lynch, 2002; Potter, 2002; Potter & Hepburn, 2007; Schegloff, 1997, 1998, 1999a, 1999b; Speer, 2002; Stokoe & Smithson, 2002; Wetherell, 1998). (You will forgive my extensive use of citation here; it is deployed simply to point to the “substantiality” of the debate). There are two arguments. The first, largely coming from conversation analysts, is this: speakers produce the relevant context by their orientations in and as talk. Context is made “demonstrably relevant” and “consequential” as a function of talk. Anything not oriented or attended to by speakers is to be considered “irrelevant”. The second, drawn mostly from critical discourse analysts, ethnographers, multi-methodologists, and some discursive psychologists, is this: that talk is always embedded within a “wider” argumentative context, which provides resources, both for speakers and analysts of speakers’ talk. Analysts have to rely on extra-textual details to say anything; talk has to necessarily be analyzed as part of this. Additionally, especially for ethnographers, other things besides talk must be made to say something, through ethnographic description, that have a bearing on what is being said by speakers. I really do not want to engage the debate here. I will say this. The substantive material I have in front of me in the life-coaching workshop is talk. I take seriously, purely for pragmatic purposes, the idea that speakers help analysts to restrict and manage what “context” might mean. It removes so much of what might otherwise be explored by attending to (more) “extra-textual” material. If we were to pursue such material to its logical limits, we would eventually lose the phenomenon and slip back into social theory. The “situatedness” would be lost. My current exploration, in this chapter, of method and practice might better account for my position on talk; it reflects, conveniently and quite by coincidence, the terms of this debate well.
reasons for attendance; I looked at that. And then there was the co-produced evaluative work of these prescriptions; that needed to be examined too.

*Site three: self-help groups*

Things were busy. I was completing the final phases of analytic work on the self-help books. I was still heavily involved in the analysis of the workshop too. And now, after several months of preliminary searching, I was still trying to enter the other main site of self-help: self-help groups. I had been struggling to establish a point of entry, a trace, anything. My earlier strategy of regularly searching notice boards in shops, hospitals, doctors' surgeries, and then later, contacting social services, had proved to be amazingly unsuccessful. Nothing had been revealed, not a single thing. I had self-help books piled all over my desk, some concealing other work I thought I had lost, others now supporting my elbow as I wrote on my laptop, but my diary was totally absent of appointments to visit with self-help groups. I had to do something differently or I my thesis would have no chapter on self-help groups.

I recalled someone, perhaps a social worker, suggesting I contact my local community and voluntary services. I did not pay much attention at the time; I was sure something would turn up on one of those notice boards. I decided to contact them. “I'd like to find self-help groups in the area”, I asked one volunteer, the chairman of a local volunteer bureau. “What do you mean by self-help groups?” he replied. “I am not concerned about specific problems”, I said, “I just want to meet self-help groups, to try to understand how they work”. The chairman looked slightly puzzled, exhaling loudly, reaching down to the bottom draw of his desk, and retrieving a raggedy old directory. “There you go”, he said, “look through that”. The label on the front cover said, “local groups” but many of the groups listed did not specify what kind of group they were: “self-help group” or “support group”. I contacted many groups by letter, maybe fifty or sixty, but received fewer than ten replies. Some groups had disbanded, they told me, and were unable to help; others simply felt that my presence would be inappropriate.
I did receive invitations to meet with an arthritis group and a visual impairment group, however; both were based in the north of England. I visited as regularly as my schedule would allow – usually once every meeting, or every second meeting. I began just sitting quietly in meetings, not saying anything unless asked, although happily spoke to anybody who was brave enough to approach a stranger who kept scribbling things down and looking around everywhere48. Members came over to ask questions, mostly during tea break. We got talking. We drank tea and ate homemade biscuits brought in by one of the members. Eventually, after a few meetings, I elected to push the tea trolley and serve drinks – I now wanted to meet the members. I joined in with group activities, played games and even went on trips. Before long, I could recall members’ names, all of them. I continued with my visits. I continued to scribble down notes too, documenting whatever caught my attention. As well as receiving regular group newsletters, I collected a large corpus of archived newsletters from each group. After a while, after seeing the same patterns of activity and interaction beginning to be repeated during meetings and across meetings, I had new questions to ask. I wanted to know about other things that were not told during meetings, at least not to me. I arranged to talk with each group during meeting time, rather than speak with individual members outside of meetings. I wanted to preserve, and engage, the main quality of this site of self-help: the co-presence of members, the “groupness”. I wished to ask them about things that seemed to be disregarded during meetings – the purpose of group membership seemed to be missing, no matter how carefully I observed meeting activities (see appendix 5 for my basic interview schedule). I got answers; members told me all sorts of things. I began looking at the groups differently, reflecting on, and trying to consolidate, what they had told me. I continued to observe, sometimes asking more questions; I continued to document my findings in my tattered old notebook. And I continued to join in.

I was visiting two groups, each as friendly as the other; but still only two groups nonetheless. I wanted to know if other groups were conducting themselves in this

48 I ensured that all members of these groups read and signed a consent form, allowing me to visit, observe and record group meetings (see appendix 4). Consent forms would be issued to any further groups I visited. I include all recorded material from these self-help groups, that is, interviews and naturally occurring meeting talk, on the accompanying CD.
fashion. Could I be identifying a substantive phenomenon here, I wondered, with my scribbles, observations and increasing fondness for homemade biscuits? I contacted the community and voluntary services in a county in the Midlands. Another directory of local groups was examined; another twenty or so letters were dispatched. An even less impressive response this time: only a single reply from an established Parkinson’s disease group. I gladly accepted the invitation to visit their group. I began making notes in the corner of the meeting venue — my usual activity — but at least now I had something with which to compare my observations. Meetings were very busy, starting promptly and often running past the designated finish time. It was more challenging to make my presence felt, to get people interested in my work. I was determined to get involved.

The Parkinson’s group had a large tea trolley, with a mobile water boiler on top and separate shelves for cups, saucers, spoons, biscuits and even the raffle ticket box. Sally took care of vending refreshments. I became her apprentice; I was slow, but determined. Hold the cup at an angle, twist the release switch down hard and let go just before the water covers the tea bag: check, check and check. I was learning fast. Tea quenches thirst, but it has another endearing quality; it makes people talk to you. I left my field notes behind and engaged as many people as I could on my rounds. One member seemed interested in my research: “I go to another group too, just around the corner from here”, he said. He comes to this group because of the muscle rigidity and tremor from his Parkinson’s illness, and goes to a lymphoma group because of problems in his lymphatic system. He offered to take me to the next lymphoma group meeting. I followed. And so I began visiting another, fourth group. This meant more tea. And more names to remember too. It was after a few visits to the lymphoma group that I began speaking with an occupational therapist. Being attached to the hospital, of which the venue for these meetings, a day care center, is a part, she attends most meetings and provides treatment advice and information about services. “There are support groups listed in a newsletter given out by local voluntary services”, she told me. “Over there”, she said, pointing to a display of leaflets hung above a workstation for the staff of the day care center during the day. I grabbed a copy of the newsletter. I contacted the chairperson of a stroke group, which met locally. Good: another group to visit.
My visits to each group represented a different phase of fieldwork activity. Some visits were in the early stages, where detailed observations and notes were still being made; others were coming to an end, with little left to document. I felt I had attained a level of familiarity with the first two groups, the arthritis group and the visual impairment group. I had collected an abundance of fieldwork material, followed up specific analytic phenomena of interest with questions, discussion and further observation. I was beginning to reach, if I had not already reached, a point of diminishing returns; my visits were no longer adding anything to what I already knew about the activities of the groups. I was achieving saturation, as the grounded theorists would say (e.g., Glaser & Strauss, 1967). So I parted company with my northern friends, to focus on the remaining groups. The knowledge I had generated from conducting fieldwork with these first two groups became a template, to be used and modified where necessary, for the fieldwork ahead.

I had been with the Parkinson’s group, the lymphoma group and the stroke group for a while, and begun to see a familiar pattern emerging, during meetings and across meetings. A similar structure, a similar method of organization and similar activities: all present and there to be documented. Like before, I arranged for discussion during group meetings, to talk about membership. Group meetings are a valuable time for members; I had to fit in where I could, sometimes booking space months in advance just to address them in the group setting. I adapted my fieldwork to the situations that came to hand. Sometimes I spoke with members as we washed teacups together at the end of meetings. And sometimes I simply greeted members as they arrived at meetings. Standing at the entrance to the venue of a meeting is a rich site for hearing people talk. They tell of all sorts of things, all relevant. Arranging chairs at the beginning of meetings is another site: members always talk when they sit together. I learnt a lot, just being around and fitting in. Still, although I heard different stories, and in different places, I began to see the same function being performed. Activities were getting repeated. Meetings were being reenacted each time, so it seemed. It was time for me to say farewell to these last groups, one by one, as I had done with the first two groups.
Now I had even more on my desk, scattered about: transcripts of meetings and focused discussions, newsletters, field notes, pictures, quickly scribbled anecdotes, leaflets. It all had to be analyzed. I would draw on the activity of remembering my visits, bringing them back to visibility and uncovering the details of the things that did not get jotted down or recorded. Recollecting the phenomenon from my firsthand experience in the field became a "primordial" resource, felt so deeply but quickly forgotten unless effort was made to retrieve it from memory. Just because it was not written down, and inscribed, did not mean that detailed features of the meetings were irretrievable. This acted as a first source of analysis, being substantiated by, and in turn substantiating, field notes written in situ. Then the corpus of newsletters; they required a close, detailed reading. I would draw once again on conversation analytic techniques, as and when required, to look at the transcripts, some of meetings as they naturally unfolded, others of organized discussion between members and I.

I looked at what could be identified as contributing to the organization of group meetings. There were situated instances of activity, within and across meetings, and across groups, but what was being performed that was of thematic importance? These groups had a purpose, which the literature had described already: the common problem. How did arthritic joints become the relevant thing in an arthritis group? What about bodily tremors in a Parkinson's disease group, or poor speech in a stroke group? What was the function of illness and disease, for the practical instantiation of a meeting? I looked at how, and when, these features were performed. Contexts were being produced; all done by talk, text and activity. So much became interesting: how membership was invoked; what it entailed; what was shared in membership; how, and if, connections were made with self-help books and their relationship. My visits were the occasions of group meetings. A temporal order unfolded in front of me, every time: from receiving members at the start, when jackets were hung up, to bidding them farewell, when jackets were returned at the end. I borrowed this temporal order as a strategy for analysis, arranging my analytic work around the performance of a group meeting, just as I had followed the self-help book through its reading, from start to finish. I saw patterns across my visits; but a particular pattern was emerging in my analytic work. By juxtaposing occasions in
meetings, and across groups, into a single, unfolding narrative, I was able to tell about this pattern, to reveal its performative functions.

Five groups, each one with a different common problem: arthritis, lymphoma, visual impairment, Parkinson’s disease and stroke. They did share one thing – the reason for membership in each group has its origins in the body. There were many problems: involuntary shaking, immobile limbs, blood transfusions and regular physical exhaustion, joints that will not move freely, trouble formulating speech and residual vision. I have already discussed in the introductory chapter the ways in which self-help groups can be seen as dealing with de-politicized problems. These groups are a case in point. The common problem is not available outside of the medical context in which it is handled by doctors and professionals. Long-term illness and disease has been located in the body, having physiological origins. It is medicalized. More: it is not available outside of the body, the individual. This “collective” self-help is in the service of individual problems, not social and especially not political ones, and should not be seen as such (Archibald, 2008; Duyvendak, 1995a), as I have discussed too. The only reason why these members are together is to deal with their individual problems: poor vision or weak and trembling limbs. And more: no amount of “membership” in these groups will make these common problems go away. Membership in these groups, then, differed from membership in other groups, where the reason for membership is the increasing “removal” of the common problem, to the point where membership in the group is terminated. Members must move on from the group.

49 These self-help groups are depoliticized to the extent that they operate in contrast e.g., to the old trade union mutual aid groups of the 19th century, which emerged exclusively to deal with political issues. These self-help groups, then, meet for another purpose: it is identity focused, based around identity formation (Duyvendak, 1995b). As such, it might be more appropriate to say they are part of an “identity movement” as against a political movement (Duyvendak & Nederland, 2007).

50 What I am referring to is the classic pattern of membership to non-membership as part of the process of attendance in a self-help group. Alcoholics Anonymous is prototypical: the reason for membership is increasing abstinence from alcohol, to the point where drinking is controlled, at which point attendance has served its purpose and members are encouraged to leave. Leaving is important; it displays the success of group attendance. Gamblers Anonymous is another case in point; there are plenty of others.

51 This must be at least be pointed out, simply because of the physical character of the common problem in my selected groups; it will shape what I will come to find in the groups, which may be different in other groups.
I have told my story. It is a reconstruction of my research activity in the frame of ethnography. I have managed to complete the methods chapter, giving a sense of the situated character of the emergence and development of my research, without it falling to pieces or slipping back into disembodied method discourse. We should move on now, and proceed to the analysis. But: one final comment. There will be no intermission between analytic chapters, no accompanying narrative, and no further introductions. One analytic chapter will blend seamlessly into the other: from self-help books, to the life-coaching workshop, to self-help groups. This is deliberate. It is a device to allow you, my reader, to experience the phenomenon as a whole, and to see the relationships being pointed to, and engaged, as a thematic and integral part of the analysis. You can develop a sense of self-help from the first chapter, and retain it, carry it along with you as you proceed, without losing the rhythm. Maybe you can think of it as one long journey through self-help, passing different sites as you go along. We had better start, then.
Chapter 3
Self-help books and the activity of reading

3.1 Introduction
Self-help books are a rare treat for the ethnographer. They provide an abundance of material, all readily available. They are inexpensive. And you can fit them neatly inside your pocket, away from prying eyes. But even here, before a single page has been opened, we have confronted the very qualities that form their critique, which I have discussed at length in the introduction (e.g., Peele, 1995; Salerno, 2005; Tiede, 2001). It is simple: self-help books are fraudulent. They are bogus. Something is promised, but not delivered. In short, then, self-help books are "inauthentic". This does not relieve us of the duty of asking how this is so. If self-help books do represent the excesses of capitalism, as many suggest, and articulate all that is wrong with the world, then why do they attract such an immense readership? Why are they so extraordinarily popular? How, exactly, does this whole publishing phenomenon manage to hold together? This is where it gets cloudy. The critique, so quick to speak, now falls silent; it does not provide any substantive detail of this inauthenticity. The self-help book, as a publishing phenomenon and as a textual form, simply gets crystallised. It just is. It becomes an object where all signs of its performance disappear. So we are deprived of seeing how the self-help book manages to do what it is. This is unfortunate. However, we do know this: the self-help book makes arguments and proffers certain versions as part of its task. It is, then, a site of rhetoric. It makes assumptions; it engages different actors; it deals with locations and origins, causes and effects. What is the function of such arguments? And what is their import for readers?

This chapter takes up and develops earlier work that began to unpack the self-help book as a performative context of textual practice (Cherry, 2008b). My analytical task here is to approach the self-help book as functional, which is to say, through its activity of production. This requires shifting our considerations of the self-help book as an object, which is located in the bookshop, to the process in which it is demonstrated, which is
located in its reading. Following Barthes (1977: 157), who proposes this move as one from “work” to “Text”, this respecifies the self-help book as constituted through an operation that “only exists in the movement of a discourse”. Activity is involved. This activity is what needs to be described. The preferred strategy is to “slow down” the activity of reading so as to make visible those movements of the discourse of self-help books, bringing them to analytic attention (Fish, 1972: 389 original italics). Put simply, this means specifying those methods by which a self-help book is instantiated as part of its normative — recognisable, showable, reportable — practice. One must, as a result, elucidate the processes undertaken and the constitutive work performed along the course of its movement. This involves tracing the textual strategies used for the inscription of a readership, how this inscribed readership contributes to its readability and the process undertaken to “transform” a readership through the process of reading (cf. Suleiman, 1980: 12). This means, put plainly, identifying those features through which a genre is produced. So: does each self-help book, as a particular instance, conform to a general model? And, if identified, what does this model consist in? These questions require to be answered in an empirically sensitive and expansive manner. Such is the task of this chapter.

3.2 The peritext

Jackson (1998) suggests that we have become habituated in our reading practices. We focus on certain textual conventions assumed to comprise “the work”, while brushing over, not endowing with any particular significance, those various productions thought to be “external” to it. He calls these external productions “invisible forms” — those “minor elements and dressings which help serve up the principle content of a book to its readership” (p. xv). Although these productions may not contribute to the work as a whole, they certainly guide reading behaviour and arrange reading experience. They make that work available; literally, they render it present. Thus, these paratextual elements not only provide a transition to the work, but a transaction, that is, “a privileged place of a pragmatics and a strategy, of an influence on the public, an influence that is

Fish (1972: 386 original italics) makes a similar case in his seminal article Literature in the Reader, conceiving the meaning of a text “no longer as an object, a thing-in-itself, but an event, something that happens to, and with the participation of, the reader".

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[...] at the service of a better reception of the text and a more pertinent reading of it” (Genette, 1997: 2).

Although the contexts in which a self-help book will be selected for consideration may vary from reader to reader, empirically they share that first critical point at which it is made available, or “received”. The bookshop is a good example; that is where we find people browsing self-help books on the bookshelves. They pick them up, and engage the “blurb” scattered across the outer dust jacket. This is part of the dressing of the text to which Genette gives the name the “publisher’s peritext” (p. 16 original italics) – the responsibility of the publisher to advertise that the text is published and “on offer” to the public. Already we have available a rich site of textual practice. We can consider how these features “serve” the self-help book. Thus, we can inquire, at this peritextual level, how a self-help book relates to other self-help books – whether it is constituted by recognisable “codes” which might indicate membership in a “genre”. By genre I mean:

...a class of communicative events, the members of which share some set of communicative purposes. These purposes are recognised by the expert members of the discourse community, and thereby constitute the rationale for the genre. This rationale shapes the schematic structure of the discourse and constrains choice of content and style. Communicative purpose is both a privileged criterion and one that operates to keep the scope of a genre as here conceived focused on comparable rhetorical action. In addition to purpose, exemplars of a genre exhibit various patterns of similarity in terms of structure, style, content and intended audience (Swales, 1990: 58).

I had better show the peritextual productions on a range of examples from my corpus of self-help books:

53 Although not part of my original selection of self-help books, I will be analyzing a number of titles from the author Fiona Harrold. She is a professional life coach, and a life coach book author, but given that her books are located in the same sections in the bookshops as are self-help books, and given that the covers of her books display a striking resemblance to the other self-help books in my selection, at the peritextual level, I will include them for further analysis. Her membership to a possible genre of self-help books is strongly invoked, seen here as she comments on the remarkable influence of her father. “My father was in
Swales' definition of genre can be applied at the level of peritextual detail of the self-help book, as we can point to a “schematic structure” and develop analysis of the “comparable rhetorical action” of the features presented. Comparison of the different front covers is possible due to the highly generic style of each example. Importantly, however, “generic” does not mean each example is identical. Rather, they exhibit an overall similarity; they share a family resemblance (cf. Wittgenstein, 1953). There is an adornment of textual material, lavishly arranged across each front cover; the bulk of this space is occupied by text. We see the concurrence of standard and italicised typeface. There is lower and upper

his element and he became fascinated by the psychology of selling and of human potential and success. He began reading everything he could find about these subjects and attended Dale Carnegie workshops. Dale was trained by Norman Vincent Peale, the founding father of American ‘can-do’ philosophy whose book *The Power of Positive Thinking* has sold over thirty million copies. He believed that anyone can be anything, regardless of circumstance. From the age of eleven onwards, I was introduced to early self-improvement pioneers such as Napoleon Hill, Clement Stone and titles like *Stop Worrying and Start Living*, *How To Win Friends and Influence People*, and *Grow Rich While You Sleep* (Harrold, 2001: 2 original italics). This is a noticeable gesture to a distinctly self-help book genre.
case, bold and non-bold type and protruding, three-dimensional type design. On each cover the text includes conventional features, such as title, sub-title and author name, as well as details of previous work by the author. Then there are sales figures, reviews and various statements of its purpose and aim. These details, particularly the latter details, are not a representation of the self-help book as a discrete part of the world. They have a rhetorical purpose. Consider sales figures:

"Over 3 Million Copies In Print"\textsuperscript{54}

"Over One Million Copies Sold!"\textsuperscript{55}

This is not a straightforward announcement of the volume of sales achieved by each self-help book: a mere statement of fact. The inclusion of strong sales figures invokes a sense of publishing achievement. Recognition. High volume of sales becomes a criterion of success of the self-help book, which neatly forms a self-exemplifying, recursive mechanism for its own justification. The self-help book is of value because millions of copies have been purchased; millions of copies have been purchased because the self-help book is of value. Sales status is also formulated as part of other, related modes of success whose rhetorical effect remains unchanged. Popularity as mass appeal is the measure of evaluation:

"The International Bestseller"\textsuperscript{56}

Identifying the international success of a self-help book attributes to it a kind of transcendence from the boundaries of place. It has a universal application. Its international appeal demonstrates that it continues to apply despite the different (cultural) contexts of its application. It retains its applicability, its demand. Furthermore, a measure of this success is "rank" in a competitive marketplace with other self-help books. That this self-help book "outsells" competing self-help books upgrades its status, as a

\textsuperscript{54} From Peale (1952) \textit{The power of Positive Thinking}.
\textsuperscript{55} From McGraw (1999) \textit{Life Matters}.
\textsuperscript{56} From Carlson (1997) \textit{Don’t Sweat The Small Stuff...and It's All Small Stuff}.
competitor; its popularity derives from a "discerning" readership. It is selected in preference to other self-help books. Here, bestseller is a quality conferred upon the self-help book as a result of its market performance; it is not a feature an author or publisher can attribute to it in lieu of that performance. Membership in the category "bestseller" thus represents an impartial criterion of success. And its status, not being attached to anything specific, has an inherent value. Thus, the category "bestseller" is beautifully vague; it only needs to convey that it is successful, not the circumstances under which it attained that success. A bestseller of what, we might ask? Self-help books in general, perhaps? We will not get an answer, as that does not matter. It is a bestseller: that is enough. And look, the placement of "the" instead of "a" precedes the category bestseller. The self-help book is not simply a bestseller, but the bestseller. That prefix, "the", assigns this self-help book a singular character, as in the best, only or most remarkable. The reader has no discernable reason to search for other, alternative self-help books. They already have the "best".

A newly published self-help book does not have at its disposal sales figures as an indication of its success. We do not know if it will be successful. This is where we see a shift, beyond sales figures. Authorship is important:

"Bestselling author of Be Your own Life Coach"57

Although the self-help book on which this inscription appears is not a bestseller, the previous book published by its author is. That work was a bestseller. The logic is made plain for everyone to see: if the author has done it previously, then the author can do it again. This book, the one in your hand, will likely become a bestseller. It is a safe bet, if reputation is anything to go by. The overall rhetorical action being performed remains the same: popularity is an indication of quality. That is how we sort the wheat from the chaff. So, there are “good” self-help books, and there are “bad” self-help books.

57 From Harrold (2004) Reinvent Yourself
The notion of genre provides a framework within which any given piece of work can be understood; it brings individual instances into a collectivity. When books have reviews inscribed on them, we see a genre being invoked. In specific areas of published writing – academic research being an obvious, if broad, candidate – those who share a professional interest in a field typically review the work of their peers, and whose reviews appear on that work. Look on the back cover; a trace of activity is left for us to follow. We see names of reviewers, academic institutions, professional identities and disciplines of study. This peritextual production says: this work is not self-sufficient. It is informed by, relies on and fits within a whole field of practice. Colleagues, peers, institutions, the development of areas of disciplinary inquiry, careers – so much activity is undertaken and coordinated in the production of a work. And that work is a contribution to this wider network, this genre.

I do not see reviews on my corpus of self-help books, no matter how carefully I look on their back covers. In fact, I do not recall seeing reviews on the other self-help books I browsed on the shelves, back at the bookshop. A pattern: an absence of peer reviews on self-help books. This does not mean that a self-help book genre cannot be identified; clearly the shared absence of reviews is fulfilling one of the criteria of genre membership. But the rhetorical work this kind of genre membership is carrying out is quite different from our example of academic writing. The absence of peer reviews means colleagues disappear. Other, related work is not relevant. No field of inquiry is acknowledged as shaping the production of the self-help book, or to which it is a contribution, or to which it is indebted. We only see the beginnings of a self-help book genre, at the level of peritext, when we look at many self-help books; it is only then that we see the connections it has with those other self-help books, e.g., the shared absence of reviews. Let us return to the bookshop, and see how this has its effect. We notice a shiny cover on one book, and decide to pick it up. All we see is a self-help book. We turn it over, examine the back, but just see a single piece of work. It does not gesture to anything beyond itself. It makes no connection with the self-help books next to it, nor does it acknowledge any influence from the body of work in which it is located in the bookshop and from which it has been selected. Even although it shares peritextual features, each
self-help book does not draw on its co-existence with other self-help books as part of its own (e)valuation.

Without these reviews, so helpful in telling us how well a work has dealt with a topic or fits with a body of inquiry, we have no immediate, here-and-now, way of judging the value of a self-help book against other self-help books. We must rely on sales figures, which tell us that the individual self-help book appeals to a greater number of people than do other self-help books. The argument is a familiar one. We can read the publisher’s peritext, substituted for reviews, which briefly cites extracts from the main text. It points us to the “internal” value of the self-help book. So long as we do not look beyond, to the shelves where the other self-help books await our gaze, there are no other self-help books. There is one proffered course of action. Select this book. Purchase it. Read it. For practical purposes, there is no genre, just this self-help book. This is performing critical work for the instantiation of reading, of which more shortly.

Self-help book authors do not just write self-help books, locked away in their studies and only appearing in the text. They feature on their book covers, where we see the person behind the text. They look like this:
Now we know what self-help book authors look like. But the presence of a visual image alongside the text, in a space that comes at a premium, is not merely for readers to get a glimpse at self-help book authors, however endearing they might be. Let us deal first with Paul McKenna, Anthony Robbins and Phil McGraw. Like the text on the front covers of these self-help books, the visual image of the authors is saying something. When I look, my attention is first drawn to the images; I read the text later. Why divert attention from the text, to the face? Each of these three authors regularly appears on television; we recognise their face, not their identities as authors, or perhaps even their name. Recognition is immediate – like when our attention is arrested as we rush by the author’s book in the bookshop. So these authors, identifiable by their television appearances, broadcast internationally to millions of viewers, and whose recognition, at this visual level alone, by viewers, confirms a popular interest. A television viewing public follows these authors. Thus, these self-help books are being offered, on the basis of the popularity and public image of their authors, to a mass audience of viewers. A connection is being invoked. Or: presupposed. The same viewing audience that follows these authors on television is likely to follow their published work. We begin to understand how popularity is instantiated as an embedded feature of these self-help books, as seen earlier with the device of sales figures. Popularity informs how they sell, how they relate to their readership, and in so doing, gives us an image of that readership.

Let us not forget Gael Lindenfield and Fiona Harrold, the other two self-help book authors. They do not host television programmes: no guest appearances on Oprah,
no televised seminars. We would not recognise them if they walked past us in the street; we would not recognise them, and be inclined to stop, if we saw their image on the front cover of their self-help books. Their identities do not work like those of Paul McKenna, Anthony Robbins and Phil McGraw. They do not have the public image. Nevertheless, they may be hidden away on the back covers of their books, but they are still smiling. All of the authors are smiling. The function of this endearing facial gesture is apparent the very second we see it; it happens immediately. Will these self-help books cause us to smile too? Will reading be fun? We do not know, but it does say something about the topic of the books, the way one approaches it. These authors are motivated, passionate about their craft; you should be too. You may have problems, but that is no need to be glum. They are approaching the topic positively. This proffered approach to the self-help book is crucial for what happens later, when we unpack the activity of reading. It is plain to see: were this same gesture to be conveyed in textual form, it would not perform the same function. For one thing, it would take too long to read, and likely be disregarded or overlooked. It might even be treated as being too pompous, making unnecessarily strict demands on readers. Strangely, then, the visual image is nicely ambiguous: it is sufficiently suggestive, without saying too much. It is just a smile, after all.

The peritextual productions considered here are not exclusive to self-help books; a genre is not defined in isolation of other genres. Other publishing fields share peritextual productions. Thus, in developing analysis of a self-help book genre, it is fruitful to consider how it might relate to, and contrast with, other genres. Consider the "mass-market" novel:
We see the heavy use of text across the front covers: the bright, protruding use of typeface design and the familiar textual devices — “#1 Bestseller”, “#1 New York Times Bestselling Author”. Novels, we know, represent a hugely popular genre of writing, with large numbers of copies sold; they are sold in paperback, an inexpensive processing method for the high levels of production. They are recognised for being widely available, perhaps more than any other genre. They are sold in airports, train stations, supermarkets and convenience stores. Novels are appealing to a similar demographic as are self-help books: critically, readers who want a text that is inexpensive and easily attained. Such is a popular readership. We see a commonality when we consider other genres of writing too.

Some recent examples of the autobiography:

Look at the person whose autobiography the book features. They are depicted, with the depiction occupying most of the space on the cover. The kind of image of each person here corresponds with the kind of “personality” for which they have become known or recognised. We recognise their faces, but also what they are recognised for in the expressiveness of their image. Richard Hammond, shown in deep, reflective thought, famously survived a high-speed motoring accident; Sharon Osbourne, always spirited and flamboyant, is renowned for appearing with her Pomeranian dog on “The Osbournes” and “The Sharon Osbourne Show”; and Jordan is famously known for “baring all” with her glamour modelling. The identity of these personalities – that feature by which they are most readily (commonly, typically) identified – is entrusted to their image, which
distinguishes them through a mode of visual recognition. Here, the function of the image operates according to the wider context in which they are known: the popular media. Each personality is reflective of the audience to which they are addressing their autobiography. You will have seen Sharon Osborne on television, of course. Richard Hammond will be there too, but he will also have appeared in the Sunday supplement of your newspaper. And Jordan, well she will have appeared in any number of places. Thus they need no formal introduction; their face will suffice. So each autobiography does not have to be searched for, located by readers in the same way as those books whose authors are not inscribed at the level of their image. Each title can be identified quickly and with ease, almost in passing. Maybe you notice it in the supermarket, when paying for your groceries; or perhaps at the airport, when you are rushing by the convenience area to catch your 8.30 morning flight.

Finally, let us consider the peritext on the front covers of another genre of writing. Selected at random, here is a group of unrelated “academic” texts on astro-hadron physics, philosophy of science and history of psychology:

We do not see any images of the authors. These authors are not known for appearing on television, or featuring in your morning newspaper. Their faces are not important; they will be recognised as professional writers, with all of the recognition devices therein (see below). As compared with my selection of self-help books and other books examined, these books are sparsely decorated with peritextual productions. They only present a title,
subtitle, author name and, with _When Species Meet_, a picture. The author of this latter book, Donna Haraway, was awarded the J. D. Bernal Prize, a lifetime achievement award for her professional — that is, published — work and contribution to a genre. But that is not lavishly displayed across the front cover, where it would surely promote the value of her book. We have to venture to the back cover to find this information, and only the more interested browsers will do that. Each book is certainly invoking a message through its peritext, but I simply want to point to that fact that what it is invoking is quite different from that of self-help books. These academic books are not trying to “sell” themselves; they are not pointing to their value, above that of other books in their genre, in the peritext they use. We just get the essentials on the front cover. That is all.

There is no “glitzy” typeface design. There is no mention of the sales success of each book, or author; and there are no appraisals on the front cover for the purposes of promotion. There are no other features that indicate what genre to which each book belongs. Together, they might be considered generic in the sense that they do not feature the peritextual productions present on self-help books, novels and autobiographies. Each book here does not offer itself in the same way as does a self-help book. The style of peritext that organises an academic book and a self-help book differs in terms of who is being addressed. Each style will include _and_ exclude certain readers. The readership of one of these academic books would need to have some reason for browsing the sections in which they are located. Readers may well have specialist knowledge of the field: doctors, students, researchers etc. They _will_ at least have an established interest in the area or topic, and may even know the author specifically from the literature and choose a book on that basis. Interest in the topic drives the job of book selection; the various “persuasion” devices are not called for, or not quite so explicitly. At least one of these titles, _On Psychological Language_, is only available in hardback; at any rate, it is no longer in print (in demand). The other two, although available in paperback, are more than double the cost of an average self-help book. These books do not sell large numbers of copies; they do not appeal to a popular (mass) readership.
By underscoring some of the peritextual productions across a selection of self-help books, considering their situated presence and absence across a range of genres, I have begun to develop analysis of those defining features of a self-help book genre. What has been revealed is the highly generic use of peritextual devices that indicate certain genre markers with which each self-help book is inscribed. There is a “comparable rhetorical action” performed by each self-help book by its displayed use of a shared set of genre-defining practices. Two themes are noticeably transparent. The notion of popularity is a heavily relied upon value of a self-help book; more copies sold means more value. But the idea of genre membership is performed in a remarkable way. That every self-help book is a bestseller and/or the work of a bestselling author, and yet the only book that should be selected is the one you have in your hand, is a paradox that is never seen by our uninitiated browser. The self-help book treats itself as definitive of genre, as the genre itself, and entirely self-sufficient. It is the best at what it does, and the only single book of any substantive value. The rhetorical work being carried out is part of the development of a larger rhetoric of the self-help book. It is all about getting the activity of reading underway. As a purely pragmatic device, it has eliminated the competition, and in so doing, gained the attention of our browser. This is the best possible start for reading to begin.

3.3 Crossing the threshold
The rhetorical action performed through peritextual productions, which emphasises the individual value of the self-help book, is now clear. It works to summon a reader to cross the threshold of the text: to progress from the peritext into the Text (Genette, 1997). This is part of what I shall provisionally call “hooking the reader”\(^8\). Different things happen when we get inside. Self-help books typically open with a narrative variably formulated around research findings, personal experiences, theories, vignettes and so forth. There is a common aim: the identification of “problems” which are located out in the world, existing independently of their formulation by a self-help book and its author. For example:

\(^8\) Here I take up, develop and extend Simonds (1992) important analysis of the range of devices that self-help books authors use to invoke reading.
Study after study shows record levels of dissatisfaction with modern life. Young people, in particular, enjoying the highest living standards since records began, are often deeply miserable during the proverbial ‘best years of their lives’. Two-thirds of Britons aged between 18 and 35 feel depressed or unhappy, according to a major survey carried out a few years ago by analysts Publicis.59

This author, Harrold, points to an external and identified matter of concern, of endemic proportions – the declining psychological health of the British public. What makes this a problem, a reportable matter, is that it should be considered relevant to readers; however much it might appear not to apply to them. If young people, those “enjoying the highest living standards since records began”, are experiencing problems with psychological well-being, then all those others who do not have at their disposal the best opportunities for living in modern life should be concerned. This problem is deliberately not imposed on readers, in any specific way. But complicit in its presentation is the suggestion that “modern life” – whose most prosperous demographic is depressed and unhappy – might effect, or be effecting, them too. It is this potential problem (of becoming a problem, or a latent problem) that is being underscored. Consider:

Life is difficult. This is one truth, one of the greatest truths. It is a great truth because once we truly see this truth, we transcend it. [...] Most of us do not fully see this truth that life is difficult. Instead, they moan more or less incessantly, noisily, or subtly, about the enormity of their problems, their burdens, and their difficulties as if life were generally easy, as if life should be easy. [...] Do we want to moan about them or solve them?60

This author, Peck, formulates an account that “life is difficult”, which is “one of the greatest truths”. It applies irrespective of situation or circumstance. It is a natural condition of life that people continually fail to appreciate because they expect that this

60 From Peck (2006: 3) The Road Less Travelled.
condition should not apply to them. The response to this kind of life is resistance – a pattern of moaning about problems. Peck makes use of various extreme case formulations to substantiate these claims: “greatest”, “truly”, “fully”, “most” and “incessantly”. These markers of extremity strengthen the claim that this is a matter of fact; life is difficult, people do moan about their problems (cf. Pomerantz, 1986; Edwards, 2000). With Peck, as with Harrold, we have, on the one hand, the acceptance of the stated character and prior existence of the world, and on the other, those upon whom this world exerts its difficulties. This categorization assembles a fixed point of location: the real world out there, which is problematic. Two things are critical. The world; that is the first. And people; that is the second. Although separate, and separated, they relate in specific ways.

This narrative is not so much characterizing as informing the reader. S/he has not been addressed specifically. So when Peck refers to “us” – “Most of us do not fully see this truth that life is difficult” – he is not referring to his readers, but to a generic population whose moaning strategies conceal the truth; that life is difficult. This is made especially clear when reference to this population is modified, now referred to as “they”. Thus, “they” (that is, most people) are located beyond the self-help book, those who will continue to be presented with problems and, failing to see them as an inherent part of life, continue to moan about them. Peck’s subsequent question, “Do we want to moan about them or solve them?” is not incidental. The category of reference has once again shifted, moving from “us”, then “they”, to “we”. The question is directed to a different population. Another self-help book author deploys this pronoun shift:

They go struggling, perhaps even whining, through their days with a sense of dull resentment at what they consider the “bad breaks” life has given them. In a sense there may be such as thing as “bad breaks” in this life, but there is also a spirit and method by which we can control and even determine those breaks. 62

61 We might see this as a “social fact”, a Durkheimian term, coined to describe phenomena that have an existence in and of themselves and are not contingent on the actions of individuals.

Here, Peale’s use of the plural pronoun “they”, like Peck, is pointing to a category of people “out-there” in the world against which a more specific, “we” category is being prioritized. This “we” category is being invoked as part of a collection of people wishing to pursue that quest to “solve” its problems. This is a group who wants to “control” and “determine” the “bad breaks”. The pronoun shift is restricting the applicability of this self-help book, to those occupying the “we” category.

Barthes’ (1974) textual analytic work has drawn attention to the use of “connotation” as a strategy with which the meanings of texts are determined. This is a resource, invoked by the text and deployed by readers, to correlate parts of text into an orderly narrative. It is articulated by a hermeneutic code, or “a sequential space, a series of orders, a space subject to the successivity of sentences, in which meaning proliferates by layering” (p. 8). Because Barthes’ remarks point to the way in which reading is regulated by specific networks of signification in a short story – he analyzed Sarrasine – and do not intend a system of classification as such, they need to be adapted so as to bring out the specific character of this regulation in self-help books. Thus, self-help books, through their sequential path thus far, have invoked readers’ use of connotation insomuch as they have created an enigma. They have raised questions: Where is the text leading? How does the narrative relate to me? What is the character of this “we”? This code is driven by expectation, which “becomes the basic condition for truth: truth, these narratives [self-help books] tell us, is what is at the end of expectation” (p. 76 original italics). So: the hermeneutic narrative maintains reading, upon the completion of which readers expect to reveal the enigma. Answers will be uncovered. Importantly, at this point, things proceed so as to establish the subject and predicate of reading.

One of the problems faced by self-help book authors is the specificity with which they communicate to a readership. They need to establish that they possess knowledge and are knowledgeable about the claims that they make, to the satisfaction of all of their readers. They are required to formulate claims which are general enough to appeal to millions of readers and yet specific enough to appeal to the individual reader. Self-help book authors obviously do not know their readers personally. They are unable to
distinguish one reader from another. And they are clearly absent from readers in the
case of reading. Thus: self-help book authors need to manage (compensate for?) this
absence created by reading, and invoke a sense of presence. One way to do this is through
forms of address. Consider:

[Y]ou face challenges and problems each and every day. You [...] may feel that
what is happening to you simply is not fair. If a problem is important to you, then
that's enough; that qualifies it as worthy. It's important, because you are
important.63

Analytically, this is an especially important extract, arising at a critical juncture in the
narrative of the self-help book. I want to set aside some time to develop analysis. The
general, third person plural form has now disappeared; but so has the first person plural
form “we”. Substituted is a singular form, a specific individual: “you”. The recipient of
this form of address is an “I”. This pronoun shift introduces the self-help book as a form
of engagement with an individual reader, as against categories of people to which a single
reader belongs. McGraw, the author of this last extract, may be addressing an individual
reader, but he is also beginning to address individual problems. This is how the self-help
book works: varying the levels of specificity of its argument. The general and the specific
enjoin, almost without notice. First, there is a reiteration of the general state of the world,
here normatively experienced by everyone (readers included): “you face challenges and
problems each and everyday”. Well, no one can argue with this; we all face problems.
Not very specific, certainly; but then look: “if a problem is important to you, then that's
enough”. This is far more specific; there is now a possible, candidate single problem.
Readers have to decide here - whether a problem is deemed as important to them. This is
part of the fulfillment of the “if” clause. But McGraw has presupposed this decision: “It’s
important because you are important”. Readers have decided, as far as McGraw is
concerned, that there is a problem. The problem is now an entity: it is an “it”.

A lot has happened in this extract. McGraw has introduced presuppositional content; he has not simply stated things "as they are". How has the existence of a problem been constituted, now identified as an "it", all in the space of a paragraph? McGraw does not know his readers, not personally: how does he know that they consider a particular problem, isolatable as a "problem", to be important? This is part of reading's work. Readers want to make sense of the text, to bring coherence to its narrative. In so doing, they must follow the thread or pattern. They must find meaning. There is a "natural" sequence here: the instantiation of a problem occurs across consecutive sentences. As McHoul (1982: 71-75) has observed, a feature of such sentences that is available as a resource for readers is that, because one follows from the other, sequentially and temporally, they are accounted for in the text in the order of their happening. This gives coherence to the work required to give shape to the narrative. As there is nothing causing an "interruption" to this order, each sentence, after the first, is explained by the prior sentence. Look at this last sentence again: "It's important because you are important". Notice the conjunction "because". This word is bearing a lot of weight. It infers that the topic of McGraw's prior sentence was generated from the knowledge he has claimed of it in his subsequent sentence. It is assumed that, in following this order and doing what it requires, readers will have participated in this temporality so as to make sense of the text. They will have been able to select from a number of "problems", to identify a specific problem in their lives. This has an effect: although McGraw does not know the nature of the problem, he can identify its existence because it is there to be identified. A problem has arisen in and as reading.

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64 McHoul draws on the appearance of this same phenomenon in conversational interaction, and points to Sacks (1972: 331), who says "While it is quite clear that not any two consecutive sentences, not even any consecutive sentences that report occurrences, are heard, and properly heard, as reporting that the occurrences have occurred in the order in which the sentences have, if the occurrences ought to occur in that order, and if there is no information to the contrary (such as a phrase at the beginning of the second, like 'before that however') then the order of the sentences indicates the order of the occurrences. [...] Hearing it that way, the second sentence is explained by the first; hearing them as consecutive or with the second preceding the first, some further explanation is needed, and none being present, we suppose that it is not needed".

65 Wooffitt (2001) draws attention to the ways in which this same conjunction is embedded within sequences of interaction in mediumship sittings. Psychics make use of it to display that they have knowledge of a preexisting relationship between sitter and spirit. As talk between both sitter and psychic progresses, it is assumed that it is progressing on the grounds that the psychic's prior talk was generated by the powers of his knowing in his/her ongoing talk. The interaction develops because there is a spirit there, wishing to speak to this particular sitter about this particular concern (see especially pp. 355-7).
So we think semiotically. We make sense of any given phenomenon in terms of its relationship of similarity and contiguity to any other phenomenon (Eco, 1977; 1979; 1992). Readers routinely accomplish the work of reading by drawing together different parts of material, sometimes completely unrelated, so as to render it coherent. They give an overall meaning to it (e.g., McHoul, 1982). Readers apply this kind of method of reading by “treating an actual appearance as “the document of”, as “pointing to”, as “standing on behalf of” a presupposed underlying pattern” (Garfinkel, 1967: 78).

Suppose, for a moment, that a reason for reading a self-help book is due to a lack of knowledge concerning the nature of some “problem”, particularly how to solve it, then it must only be vaguely specifiable prior to undertaking the action that is intended to bring about its solution. In other words, the character of that problem, and, for that matter, the reader, can be (re)constructed and modified according to the context in which they are formulated. The self-help book is, then, produced around the ongoing function of connotation, the work readers undertake in bringing sections of the text together, making determinations across its narrative. Connotation reaches across textual/extratextual relationalities, “where certain areas of the text [correlate] other meanings outside the material text and, with them, forming “nebulae” of signifieds” (Barthes, 1974: 8; see also McHoul, 1982).

Understanding the self-help book does not simply mean follow its unfolding narrative and accruing the sum of words so as to establish meaning. Rather, it is a function of levels of meaning. One level, say a word, is only meaningful in terms of its correlation with another level, say a sentence, which in turn is only meaningful in terms of another level of the narrative (e.g., the subject, a plot). Thus, readers move across the text, traversing it from one level to another (Barthes, 1977). In addition, as readers ongoingly search for meaning, any current remark of the self-help book can alter the sense of prior remarks, so that reading is not just cumulative and prospective but reassembles current material retrospectively.
The self-help book, at this point in its narrative, requires the reader to search for those problems which, having been previously specified by the author as worthy of attention, are reportable. Problems are present and exist prior to reading; they are treated as if recited, pointed to and referred to by, not as, reading. By connotation, the reader is encouraged to self-identify whereby his/her extratextual life at once becomes a resource with which to understand the narrative of the self-help book. Self-diagnosis is required. Simply by the fact and manner of this self-identification, readers’ problems become explicable in the same terms as those general problems and difficulties of life thus formulated in the self-help book. Those extratextual problems of the reader, perhaps selected on an individual basis, “stand on behalf of”, and “point to”, that general-pattern-of-problems arising from the difficulty of life. The reader, reaching this point in the self-help book, has revealed part of its enigma; by placing their extratextual, material world in the text, so that it provides a reflection, the reader has made it personal. S/he is the Reader. New questions obtain: How can I transcend the difficulty of life? How do I solve my problems? What are the methods by which I can control and even determine those breaks?

3.4 Seducing the reader into reading
A task for an author is to develop a rapport with a reader; like a relationship between happy lovers, certain strategies remain close to securing the covenant of trust. In short, the author must seduce the reader (Barthes, 1974; 1975; 1977; du Plessix Gray, 2003). According to literary traditions, the act of seduction of the text corresponds to the way in which its unity can be ongoingly reestablished by its indeterminate composition; the sliding of codes, which allow its reader even to write it anew and to break out from his/her subject position. The effect of this text creates bliss in the experience of reading (cf. Barthes, 1975). This kind of text develops, where reading “instinctively” unfolds, through stimulation created by uncertainty and novelty invoked by the work (if that is the right word, when bliss is involved) of reading. Here, seduction operates to suppress the identity of the reader as “the text imposes a state of loss, the text that

66 This appeal to the seduction of a text is found, too, in Barthes’ (1974) “writerly text”, Eco’s (1979) “open text”, Fish’s (1972) “dialectical text”, and Rosenblatt’s (1938) “aesthetic text”.

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discomforts...unsettles the reader’s historical, cultural psychological assumptions, the
consistency of his tastes, values, memories, brings to a crisis his relation with language”
(Barthes, 1975: 14). Things are different for the self-help book. It seeks to delimit the
configuration and range of the reader through a specific act of seduction.

Adorno’s (1994) analysis of an astrology column in the Los Angeles Times, first
published in the 1950s, spelt out the motivations and underlying psychology to which the
columnist appealed in his horoscopes. Adorno considered the attitude adopted by the
column, like other popular psychological writings, to be one that seduced its readers. It
drew on a wider, established ideology, firmly embedded in the cultural context in which
the column was written. There are no surprises here: this is unadulterated individualism.
Importantly, the mode of this seduction meant that the column was not articulated, so to
speak, at a distance from readers, where certain kinds of work were required before an
understanding was reached. Quite the contrary; it spoke directly to them, telling them
what was already familiar. The fundamental point of entry, for the columnist, is reaching
readers on their terms: For “[t]he columnist, even if he were equipped with a complete
knowledge of Freud, cannot hope to change psychologically any of those to whom he
speaks, he has to keep within the external zones of the personality. What really
distinguishes “world-wise” institutions like the column from real psychology is not so
much observations and possibly not even the columnist’s underlying interpretations, but
the direction in which he moves and manipulates his reader’s psychology” (p. 53).

Coincidently, it is clear that Freud himself had realized this in the psychoanalytic
context, where he spent time with his patients. A doctor has no problem in “[m]aking him
[the patient] a supporter of some particular theory […] but this only effects his
intelligence, not his illness. After all, his conflicts will only be successfully solved and
his resistances overcome if the anticipatory ideas he is given tally with what is real in
him”(Freud, 1966: 562-3). The patient, like the reader of the astrology column, in
overcoming his conflicts, needs to be “touched”; he needs to be “effected” in a way that
is familiar to him before we say he has been “moved in his person”. Part of how readers
are "moved in their person" is exactly this appeal to their "illness", or, to follow Adorno, "external zone of the personality".

I return to how McGraw, in the last extract, plays on the separation established on the beginning of a self-help book. You remember: the world, on the one hand, and those upon whom it has its effects, on the other. The reader is situated in the "inevitable" position of facing those problems which life throws at them. It remains unclear where the agencies responsible for these problems are located, or even how they operate. Suffice it to say that readers have identified that problems exist for them. By identifying a particular problem, a favorable assessment of readers is thus given: "It's important, because you are important". It gratifies the reader. What of the detail of this import of gratification? The reader is confronting their problems. This is what makes them important. They face their problems; not like other people, the non-readers. This sets the whole thing up. Problems need to be present to allow reading to proceed. But this logic is reversed. That the reader is important is a prerequisite for identifying problems. So: the reader is important, first and foremost. Then there are problems, which come later, after or because of the importance of the reader. (Would the reader still be important if s/he did not identify any problems, simply ignored them?). This works to seduce the reader, putting them into a state of bliss (however transient it might be):

I will think of you, speak to you and work alongside you with absolute faith in you and your abilities. I will have high expectations for you and will want the very best for you. I will believe in your phenomenal potential to do, have and be whatever you want.\(^67\)

Like the readers of the astrology column, the readers of this self-help book receive the narcissistic gratification that they are important. They are special. There is no limitation imposed on the possibilities of their "phenomenal potential" and literally everything (the range within which readers interpret "have whatever you want" being limitless) is within reach. Eco's (1979) analysis of the ideology implicit in the construction of Superman, the

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\(^{67}\) From Harrold (2001: 5) Be Your Own Life Coach.
comic book superhero, makes clear how its devoted readers are asked to identify with the character, or rather, that part of his changing identification. Superman is of course the superhero, whose superhuman powers are unlimited; but Superman also masquerades as the mild mannered reporter, Clark Kent, an identity enacted to conceal his "real" calling. Clark Kent, then, is invoked as the "average" reader of Superman. He is restrained by context and social circumstance, but whose "real" nature awaits presentation. Similarly, the self-help book anticipates another level of existence for readers, that something like perfection, that is, the height of potential, is achievable. In orienting to that achievement, readers represent those persons "who [are] capable of redeeming years of mediocre experience" (p. 108).

By seducing readers in this manner, ostentatiously "flattering" them by catering to their ego identities, self-help book authors, like astrology columnists, are aware that "vanity is nourished by so powerful instinctual sources that he who plays up to it gets away with almost anything" (Adorno, 1994: 53). Self-help book authors are aware that appeals to narcissism are unlikely to be questioned by readers, being received with ease and gratitude. This mode of seduction, then, does not so much work towards bliss as pleasure; it is the text "that contents, fills, grants euphoria; the text that comes from culture and does not break with it, is linked to a comfortable practice of reading" (Barthes, 1975: 14 original italics). Paradoxically, this readership is being seduced into the very same ideology from which it is being addressed. It knows about individualism, about being unique. But then most things will be accepted without question, if they do not rock the boat. In meeting a readership at its "external zone of the personality", this seduction requires it to affirm, agree, endorse. In short: to follow. And it will.

Investing readers with "phenomenal potential", some largely unspecified quality to undertake actions ("to do, have and be"), which is currently concealed and not totally visible (to readers), affords certain allowances. But it withholds others. Although readers have been granted ownership of the potential to act so as to accomplish these personal goals (again, unspecified), they are not allowed to consider their present actions as meeting those goals. Thus, and this is important, readers are conceived as already having
what is required to accomplish their goals – we might say an essence – but which is insufficiently developed, not “apparent” or “available” to them. Carnegie goes on, only more forcefully:

Compared to what we ought to be”, said the famous professor William James of Harvard, “compared to what we ought to be, we are only half awake. We are making use of only a small part of our physical and mental resources. Stating the thing broadly, the human individual thus lives far within his limits. He possesses powers of various sorts which he habitually fails to use.68

He uses the reported speech of Professor William James in offering an account of the “human individual”. The content of the reported speech might be considered controversial, even derogatory. Its credibility, which will have consequences for subsequent remarks by Carnegie, might be open to rebuttals. A function of this reported speech, however, is that it displays the compelling force of the original speaker, “the famous professor William James of Harvard”. This is not merely a professor but “the famous” professor, that is, the renowned, esteemed, credible; and the famous professor is located at Harvard, the most prestigious university in the world. Thus, the reputation of the speaker of the reported speech is entrusted in the reported speech itself, not only making it reportable, but robust, reliable. Carnegie, only being the reporter of the speech, or the “principal” (cf. Goffman, 1981), protects himself against rebut, which, in any event, should be directed to the producer of the speech (Buttny & Williams 2000; Holt & Clift, 2006). However, given this reputation of the original speaker (we can see now clearly the reason for reporting his speech), rebuttals are unlikely. Furthermore, reporting (controversial) speech, as against stating it as if it were one’s own speech, is rhetorically more defensible as it acts as a demonstration (e.g., Clark & Gerrig, 1990), providing an evidential base to claims made (e.g., Holt, 1996; Stokoe & Edwards, 2007).

Look, the singular form, “you”, the subject of the reported speech, has widened to the plural form, “we”. This is a meta-account of human nature again. What is happening?

68 From Carnegie (1936: xix) How To Win Friends And Influence People.
This pronoun shift makes the formulation deliberately ambiguous whether the condition applies to the individual reader. Nevertheless, part of the ambiguity connotes that this will be the case. Thus, the reader determines its applicability, through the connotation of the text, by choosing whether to impose it upon him/herself. In any case, whether the reader is aware of his/her limits, or has even reached them, is neither here nor there. What is being invoked is the possibility that an additional set of resources is available, in reserve, which “ought” to be attended to further. There is an implicit issue of accountability: the reader is betraying those resources if she “chooses” not to uncover them. Given that we (the reader?) are “making use of only a small part of our physical and mental resources” which is a “natural inclination of the individual”, reading is a candidate action against this inclination. It displays a choice not to be like the (average, ordinary) “human individual”, but to be like a unique, extraordinary reader. Just like Superman. Reading the self-help book is like donning that special red cape. The polarization of “us” (this reader) and “them” (all those non-readers) is thus invoked to move the reader in a certain direction. Yes: towards the self-help book.

Reading as a requirement

The self-help book is configuring an argument which comprises a tension. Like the astrology column, concomitant with narcissistic gratification is the suggestion that something is compromising the reader’s individuality, preventing the realization of their phenomenal potential. Thus, “[t]he idea that the reader is somehow threatened must be maintained because only if some mild terror is exercised, he will seek help” (Adorno, 1994: 53). It is assumed that readers will feel threatened, presumably by their problems, and as such, the self-help book “reaches them only if it establishes an intelligence with the reader in the zone of that threat” (Ibid.). And the “zone of that threat”:

...is the hope that problems will go away of their own accord. Problems don’t go away. They must be worked through or else they remain, forever a barrier to the growth and development of the spirit.⁶⁹

Readers are engaged in terms of the character of the threat with which they are confronted. Furthermore, readers have been laboring under the misapprehension that their problems, worthy of attention, will simply disappear of their own accord. That some other domain of agency will “take care of them”. As victims of circumstance, an inferred strategy for readers, then, is the mere “suppression” of problems, which avoids the necessary action: “work”. Task avoidance, the lack of work completed by readers, becomes the obstruction for “growth” and “development”. Thus, it is made clear that some course of action is not being pursued, but pursuable, and in not pursuing it, readers are imposing a restraint on their potential to grow, develop. Take another excerpt, written by a clinical psychologist and a clinical psychiatrist, which is recommended as a “high quality” self-help book and appears on the reading list of the Cardiff Book Prescription Scheme. This self-help book is prioritized over the commonplace, generic self-help books whose authors are not “professionally trained” (presumably all those self-help books which I have been spotlighting thus far):

It may seem safer to keep things as they are – indeed the very thought of change may cause a temporary increase in anxiety! It is important to remember to confront the reality that although limitations in your lifestyle [...] may make your life more “comfortable”, in the long term such restrictions are very disabling.

Recognize the similarity in linguistic style and rhetorical strategy with those excerpts from other, “low quality” self-help books analyzed hitherto! Look at the threat posed to readers, and the location of responsibility for those effects. One specified method used by readers, to “keep things as they are”, does not simply prevent development, growth etc. On the contrary, it is considered a “limitation” and “such restrictions are very disabling”. The threat, then, is not posed merely as the lack of action undertaken by readers to achieve their potential, but is conflated with the inadequacy of readers’ current methods of dealing with their problems. The “status” of readers, before any discussion of a self-help book, is diminishing. Their lives are becoming even more uncomfortable, simply by

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70 A term used by the clinical psychologist who generated the Cardiff Prescription Scheme (see Frude, 2004).
taking the view that their “problems will go away”. This has implications for how readers are positioned and what responsibilities they display to their problems:

You are [...] accountable; you have always been accountable; you will always be accountable. That is how it is. If you are not happy, you are accountable. Whatever your life circumstance is, accepting this law means that you can no longer dodge responsibility for how and why your life is the way is it.\textsuperscript{72}

There are a number of important shifts undertaken here by McGraw, to do with agency and responsibility, which configure readers in very consequential ways. The agency of the problems with which readers are presented, on a daily basis, has been relocated. The general conditions of life give way to the specific ways in which readers accept or deny responsibility for them. The seeming inevitability of those problems in life becomes the intentional consequence of readers' present actions. The solution to problems derives from whether readers assume personal responsibility. This self-help book has pointed to a mechanism that imposes an agency upon readers. Acting according to the principles of a law and applicable to all circumstances, readers are accountable for every action they perform. Readers, who may have previously considered themselves unable to change the circumstances in which they find themselves, can “no longer” be victims of external agencies that operate beyond their control. Readers, because they have “always been accountable” for their actions and routinely exercise an agency to control “how and why” their lives are configured as they are, can exercise this control to bring about the life they want. That is, the life they desire. McGraw continues:

While everybody else is still out there blaming those who aren’t responsible for the results in their life, you can be as on target as a laser-guided missile, and therefore, work only on those things that will truly change your life. That gives you a tremendous head start in the solution category.\textsuperscript{73}

\textsuperscript{72} From McGraw (1999: 57) \textit{Life Strategies.}
\textsuperscript{73} Ibid. (p. 59).
Making readers aware that they are able to determine their own breaks, to get the results they want of their own accord, further distinguishes them from those unaware of such matters. You know the ones – those non-readers, everybody else. What McGraw has given to his readers, in making them aware of their own agency, is a sense of privilege and a mark of distinction. They have risen above the crowd: they are reading his self-help book. Furthermore, part of this separation is the aim of a refinement of an individuality that seeks to be become even more individualized. Like a finely crafted machine, readers can precisely “work” on themselves, as accurately as a “laser-guided missile”. McGraw, like the other self-help book authors, assumes that the endorsement of this hyper-individualism, being part of wider ideology within which readers are so deeply embedded, will be accepted without question, even craved.

The acceptance of an institution manifest in the “information” tendered by a self-help book has its charm. It satisfies a readership in the pursuit of a certain kind of knowledge of itself. There is something important about receiving knowledge, however unspecified, connected with the academic discipline of psychology. Normatively, like most academic fields, psychology is impenetrable to those outside its boundaries. Self-help books assimilate psychology in such a way that non-intellectual readers can identify with it. They can apply it at a personal, practical level. The knowledge in a self-help book is attractive to its readers because the popularization of psychology, through self-help books, appeals to the “everyday psychology” of its readers (Jones & Elcock, 2001). People mobilize their lives through arguing, guessing, interpreting and reasoning about themselves and those around them. It is all about people, so they say. It is all psychology; you do not need to ask a psychologist to know this. Thus, each reader is semi-erudite to the extent that s/he “vaguely wants to understand and is also driven by the narcissistic wish to prove superior to the plain people but is not in a position to carry through complicated intellectual operations” (Adorno, 1994: 45). This is not academic psychology, after all. Readers want self-help books, not psychology texts. In other words, the self-help book “provides a short-cut by bringing the complex to a handy formula and offering pleasant gratification that he who is excluded from educational privileges nevertheless belongs to the minority “in the know” (Ibid.).
This self-help book is securing its presence in the life of the reader. It becomes the candidate "next action"; it affirms its own efficiency at supplying what is required:

The rules we have set down are not mere theories or guesswork. They work like magic. Incredible as it sounds, I have seen the application of these principles literally revolutionise the lives of many people.\(^\text{74}\)

The required results will be obtained because of the nature of the method employed. This self-help book represents more than simply the inscription of a few interesting ideas scribbled down by its author. It is informed by something more important: rules. Thus, rules have a transparent character insomuch as they describe some direction of conduct that operates according to general principles, true in most or all cases. Specific details, such as the specific contexts of their application, do not matter. The effectiveness of these rules is contrasted with "theories and guesswork", which are, comparatively, imprecise. Theories can be fuzzy; guesswork is often wrong. There is a sense of exactness: this self-help book demands total control. This is just the precision specified earlier by McGraw ("you can be as on target as a laser-guided missile") for readers to successfully solve their problems. So, readers require a precision tool, and this self-help book is as precise as they come. The exact nature of how reading this self-help book will benefit readers is unclear; suffice it say that, whatever its specificity, it will "work like magic". To follow this metaphor, to the extent that reading represents a performance of magic, then we do not need to know how it works (like magic, its effects are unexplainable) only that its effects are undeniable. It is hard to believe, even incredible. The magical nature of the self-help book (its inexplicability) is substantiated insomuch as its author has observed its results. And they do not just change, but "revolutionise the lives of many people". In short, the rules have been demonstrated to work. And there is no need to question what works, is there? Their value is placed beyond the announcement of the claim of their value. Rules exist out there in the world. People apply them. They just work.

\(^{74}\) From Carnegie (1936: xvii) *How To Win Friends And Influence People*. 
So change happens when a self-help book is read. A transformation. Readers are again told this much:

If you read this book thoughtfully, carefully absorbing its teachings [...] you can experience an amazing improvement within yourself. 75

This is reassuring. It is convincing too. Even if reading (the details of which are yet to be specified) means fulfilling the “if” part of the clause — reading the book “thoughtfully, carefully absorbing its teachings” — the reader can still enjoy an “amazing improvement”. But this is an ambiguous, underdetermined formulation: amazing improvement. It implies so much, yet does not identify what it implies. What happened to the precision we saw with the application of those rules? And what exactly will be improved? This is left to the reader: s/he must once again employ connotation. It must refer to improving the problem. At any rate, an amazing improvement sounds like it will be just what is needed. Importantly, it is through reading that this amazing improvement arises. The self-help book is needed for this task; it is critical to the improvement of the reader.

The self-help book proceeds along a linear path, which is part of the sequential character of the hermeneutic code. There are only two possible courses of action set. The first, discarding the self-help book and keeping things as they are, is discouraged, it being personally hazardous; and the second, reading the self-help book, being the “opposite” of not reading, must therefore be personally beneficial. Thus, reading the self-help book becomes preferable. Better: it is a requirement for readers. The endorsement of a process of becoming a self-sufficient individual through reading a self-help book operates in the absence of any critical perspective. Readers readily attach themselves to this individualistic ideology in which they embrace their own distinction from other people, their uniqueness, but nevertheless fail to appreciate that a similar quest is pursued by millions of other “individuals”. This much is made plainly clear. Look, it was scattered across the front cover of the book you are reading. But readers also happily betray their own sense of identity by accepting that the authors of self-help books are able to know

75 From Peale (1952: x) The Power of Positive Thinking.
what readers are like and to have knowledge of what, to follow the ideology, does not belong to them, cannot belong to them. It is in this sense that self-help books may be characterized as irrational, or represent the manifestation of pseudo-rationality, just as Adorno characterized the astrology column. This is not simply a reversal of rational behavior, operating beyond rationality, but the “result [of] the process of self-preservation ‘run amuck’” (Adorno, 1994: 34).

Reading as problematic
The narrative of the self-help book accepts that the world functions according to its own independent criteria. Because it is “external” to readers, who are only able to experience its effects, it is unable to be changed. In short, the world becomes a static object experienced variably from one reader to the next. What the world means depends on how readers experience it. Thus, these self-help books locate individual readers as the site of modification: the world cannot be changed but how readers interpret it can. Not surprisingly, given the individualistic ideology by which these self-help books are informed, they adopt a highly normative, psychological profile of each of their readers (e.g., Danziger, 1990). The “work” required to be undertaken by readers in the quest for self-help, so as to “activate” individual agency, solve problems and determine the breaks, comprises an adjustment in their “psychology”:

It has been said that thoughts are things, that they actually possess a dynamic power. Judged by the power they exercise one can readily accept such an appraisal. You can actually think yourself into or out of situations. You can make yourself ill with your thoughts and by the same token you can make yourself well by the use of a different and healing type of thought. Think one way and you attract the conditions which that type of thinking indicates. Think another way and you can create an entirely different set of conditions. Conditions are created by thoughts far more powerfully than conditions create thoughts. 76

What is happening to the activity of reading, the essential requirement for readers to accomplish their quest for self-help? The status of reading, which readers have only identified through reading thus far, emerges when it is established that the source of the problem (and therefore the solution, too) is thought. A shift is taking place: from reading to thinking. Reading will not be satisfactory because a different ontological category is now made relevant – written text gives rise to ways of thinking. It is not how, or even whether, readers pursue reading, but how they think. Readers are required to do something with thinking; and merely reading will not change thought. And: it is change that needs to happen. Look again. The self-help book represented such a powerful contingency on the successful completion of self-help, possessing a "natural" value that could only be extracted by reading. We have seen what has happened: looking at it, touching the pretty font designs on its front cover, opening its first page, and then, finally, reading it. No matter how close readers get to it – and reading is the height of proximity to it – the self-help book becomes inadequate. Its status, like reading it, has changed, such that the self-help book is no longer prioritized as part of the work needing to be undertaken by readers. The required adjustment is a specific change in thinking. Cognition is at fault. For their quest to be successful, readers need to think differently. The self-help book relocates the problem, and sacrifices its self-sufficiency, as readers must now modify the way they think. The focus, and potential value, is turned to what readers do, not what the self-help book represents.

Thinking, a practice located at the level of the individual reader, is isolated as the primary, or only, mechanism of individual action. A paradox is present but nevertheless concealed. Although the "conditions" of culture – social interaction, rules, customs, authorities, institutions, for instance – impose problems, they do not delimit or "create" readers as much as readers create those conditions. Thus, no explanation is available how readers arrive at thought and what stimulates thinking in the first place. To ask these questions, or to point to their explication, would be too erudite. It is best left alone; that is what professionals are for. Things may be cloudy, very unclear, but as we know, narcissism covers up most things. So it is assumed that thinking is self-serving: one thought produces another thought. The reader is an isolatable object, working much like a
machine. To change the output, you need to change the input. It all happens in the mind, the processor. As part of this shift, from reading to thinking, the self-help book retains a specified value; it provides insight into how thinking is to be modified. This insight is simple. Readers are encouraged to adopt a habit of positive thinking, a defining feature of the genre which other textual analytic work has charted so clearly (Hazeldon, 2003; Woodstock, 2007). Positive thinking, which is to be substituted for a habit of negative thinking, generates an awareness of the agency of readers and allows them to create those preferred, self-created conditions for action:

But practice thinking confident thoughts, make it a dominant habit, and you will develop such a strong sense of capacity that regardless of what difficulties arise you will be able to overcome them.  

Practice thinking: that is the activity to be undertaken. What readers are required to accept is what I shall call “the endorsement of yes”, which is to say, the adjustment to positive thinking as a strategy with which to respond to the world. This preferred method of thought converts every “negative” into a “positive”. This endorsement of yes means the construction of an external world takes place in the mind of readers. The world can be whatever readers want it to be; it just means thinking in specific, positive ways. A powerful technique for positive thinking is for readers to use positive statements with which to describe themselves. Affirmations are recommended. They like something like this:

\[ I \text{ like myself} \]
\[ I \text{ am good enough} \]
\[ I \text{ approve of myself completely, and in the presence of others} \]
\[ I \text{ now choose to like and trust myself and to treat myself with the utmost respect.} \]

77 From Carnegie (1936: 23) *How To Win Friends And Influence People.*
78 From Harrold (2001: 39-40 original italics) *Be Your Own Life Coach.*
Accepting this endorsement of yes, by describing not only themselves but also their approach to life affirmatively, means that all things become attainable to readers. Anything can be achieved if they affirm it. If they just say yes. Repeating the affirmations from this self-help book is not reading, as we have understood it, even although words are being followed on a page. There is a deeper level of work involved, which reading had not allowed. The words need to be taken from the page, and dealt with through a more intensive, engrained process of thinking. The affirmations must travel further, and connect with the source of readers’ problems. They must do something to change thinking. But how do readers know when they are thinking? Look at the first affirmation: what would satisfy the requirement of liking oneself? Reading these affirmations is inadequate. How about saying them? But what is the difference between reading and saying? What is, then, the status of thought? So many questions; but they are questions nevertheless that the self-help books deal with pragmatically. There is a preferred method of the use of affirmations, as Lindenfield, the author of another “high quality” self-help book on the Cardiff Book Prescription Scheme, makes clear:

When saying affirmations, speak them aloud whenever possible, while using an appropriately positive and assertive tone. Relax and smile as you are speaking. Often people say them aloud routinely when they are alone [...]. If you do this, you will find that the affirmations are more likely to leap easily to mind when you need a boost of silent positive self-talk in a difficult or depressing situation. 79

Reading affirmations is no good; but saying affirmations is no good either. Affirmations must be spoken aloud. Speaking them, as the authors of them in their speaking, is a display of positive thinking. There is significance to the act of saying – readers are doing something with the written text. When readers speak, they use their voice: the affirmations become part of an embodied experience. Readers are actively involved in the expression of their thoughts. Why the need for the verbalization of thought?

Thinking as problematic

Positive thinking is absolutely necessary in the quest for self-help. That is why reading is no longer being pursued. And yet, thinking itself has become a grossly ambiguous category. What are readers doing in their minds, with their thoughts? The self-help book authors do not know. But then neither, so far as we can tell, do readers. It is difficult to know what counts as thought. We know this: thoughts need to be verbalized; affirmations need to be spoken. The status of thought is being problematized. Thinking is becoming as unsatisfactory as what it was designed to replace, which is to say, reading. This much is made clear when readers are given exercises to undertake:

You should go through each exercise in the order given and you should write down your answers. Some people have tried to avoid the bother of writing down their answers, thinking that it is the same if they just do the exercises in their head. It is not. [...] If you just think about your answers, you will never need to confront what you really believe about yourself and your life. You will never surprise yourself, never move on.  

Simply thinking will not help readers confront what they really believe about themselves. It is important to scribble things down. What is the status of these written notes, and (how) do they differ from thinking? It is like the difference between reading and speaking affirmations. It can be seen as a tension around activity versus inactivity. Thus, although thinking is seen as driving the actions of readers, it is nevertheless difficult to evidence it; it requires, for its visibility, to be translated into action. Without readers performing the work which translation requires – e.g., writing down answers and not keeping them in their “minds” – there is no activity, or rather, no proof against which thinking can be measured. More importantly, however, this respecification of thinking also respecifics what is required to accomplish self-help. It is difficult to document whether positive thinking has been achieved, or, more precisely, is being practiced, without being able to

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81 Translation is a technical term originating in actor network theory (particularly the work of Latour), and describes how the status of a given process, in its relation with another process, is altered or changed as part of its ongoing relationship with it, or because of it.
point to it. But the need for this pointing displays the inadequacy of thought as a method by which self-help is fulfilled. Action is required if self-help is to be undertaken. Another shift, another ontological category prioritized: from thinking to the practical circumstances of doing self-help. Just ask these two self-help book authors:

But it is not sufficient to apply to the mind even such an important affirmation therapy...unless throughout the day you also base your actions and attitudes upon fundamental principles of happy living.\(^{82}\)

The difference between thinkers and doers is what they do at this point. Revving up your psychology will only take you so far. The next step is doing something. Demonstrate your commitment to your desires and plans. Get busy. You know what you need to do, so just do it!\(^{83}\)

The self-help book could not provide what was required for readers to undertake self-help: to think differently. Readers had to do that for themselves, outside of reading. And they did, we can suppose. But thinking now suffers from a similar insufficiency; it will not indicate the performance of self-help. Thinking must be replaced by action, and therefore abandoned. It can be divided, as the author of this last extract, Fiona Harrold, does here, into thinking and doing. Or better: thinking is not doing. Readers need to get busy because thinking is inactivity. The best way to overcome panic attacks, for instance, as the authors of this next “high quality” self-help book suggest, is to do something about it:

Wear a rubber band loosely around your wrist. When you feel a panic attack starting, stretch the rubber band out and let it snap back on to the inside of your wrist. Often, the short, sharp sensation of pain will be enough to redirect your attention away from the beginning of panic symptoms.\(^{84}\)

\(^{82}\) From Peale (1952: 71) *The Power of Positive Thinking*


\(^{84}\) From Silove & Manicavasagar (1997: 85) *Overcoming Panic.*
Wearing a rubber band, stretching it and feeling its impact on the wrist in controlling a panic attack – these are very practical actions, extratextual activities. Importantly, like the verbalization of affirmations and the physical act of writing answers down and having material “facts”, these actions differ from thinking. We see things happening; readers are doing something. Action is the opposite of thinking: activity as against inactivity. While readers are thinking, they are not doing. The relationship of readers to the self-help book is undergoing the last of a series of shifts. Thinking is now subverted and action is encouraged, while reading has all but disappeared entirely. Everything that is required for readers’ quest for self-help is pointing way from the self-help book. Although the self-help book may be implicitly confessing its limited capacity, as an agent in readers’ quest for self-help, it is nevertheless assuming that things have developed according to plan. Concomitant with the initial process of self-identification, where the self-help book relies on readers successfully identifying themselves in its narrative, here we see a similar connotation. Self-help book authors are anticipating that readers will, first, complete those various extratextual actions, and second, will do so in ways already known or predetermined:

Are you letting yourself be dictated to by your chronological age, and the preconceptions you have about growing old? Take a pen and answer these questions:

1. How old do you feel?
2. How old do you look?
3. How often do I talk about growing older, or blame my inability to do something on my age?
4. Do I expect to become ill/infirm/put on weight/move less easily as I become older? [...] 

Well, do you look or feel older than you are? Did you discover a few horribly negative preconceptions that you have about old age? Great. Better to get them all out and have a good look at them. Then we can nail them for good.85

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85 From Harrold (2001: 239) Be Your Own Life Coach.
We can suppose that readers will not have any problems answering the first question posed by this self-help book, "Are you letting yourself be dictated to by your chronological age, and the preconceptions you have about growing old?" However, the way in which this question is likely to be answered is problematic; it is insufficient to retain the answer. Thinking about it is no good. The answer needs to be written down, made public, but answered according to specific other questions. This requirement, to answer these other questions, is not so much because readers are not to be trusted to answer the first one as they wish, but because there is a preferred answer. Readers' answers to these questions (1 to 4) are to be recycled so as to supply further answers to some closing questions. This self-help book author is expecting these closing questions to be answered affirmatively. She even provides a receipt for them: "Great!" Readers are assumed to have written down something approximating: "yes, I do have a few horribly negative preconceptions about old age". In other words, readers are being asked to follow a predetermined path as this self-help book displays its ideal effects by responding with specific remarks and eliciting those expectations that further reading will satisfy. Importantly, these latter answers derive from evidence, written answers to the previous questions, giving not only readers but also this self-help book author, something at which to point. So: there is something "factual" and undeniable, and readers can see what authors are pointing to.

Analytical interest, then, is not with the "empirical" reader of a self-help book, the "actual" or "real" reader. It is the reader as an encoded subject, made available semiotically in the text. Part of the interpretive work of reading is for the (empirical) reader to pick up the ensemble of codes, to decode them and follow the path thus generated. It is assumed that both self-help book author and reader share a sense of the codes. Thus, the self-help book author must "foresee a model of the possible reader (hereafter Model Reader) supposedly able to deal interpretively with the expressions [of the self-help book] in the same way that the author deals generatively with them" (Eco, 1979: 7). Although this model assumes certain competencies and preferences on the part of the reader, the text also "creates" them through its use of a specific literary style, narrative organization, specific linguistic codes etc. (ibid.). The invocation of an
individual reader is not the summoning of a specific reader (the empirical reader) outside of the text; it simply marks his/her textual instantiation as a recognizable "idiolect" – part of a genre, group or, perhaps best, role (p.10 original italics). This kind of involvement of an "isolatable" subject, is concomitant with the activation of this Model Reader, "whose intellectual profile is determined only by the sort of interpretive operation he [sic] is supposed to perform" (p.11).

The task of reading a self-help book, from its opening narrative onwards, for readers, has been to identify (with) this Model Reader, and in that identification, agree to its terms, its conditions of reading. Readers are obligated contractually, in the sense that they are required to follow the path of the self-help book, and only that path, to bring about the prescribed results. So: reading represents the configuration\(^{86}\) of readers, as it delimits the boundaries within which they understand themselves. It sets constraints on their future actions. Although we can see this throughout the narrative of the self-help book, it is particularly transparent from the preferred sequence of actions in this last extract. At any rate, assuming the role of the Model Reader is not a matter of identifying some intention, finding the meaning that self-help book authors have implanted; nor is it the extent to which such correspondence between reader and author is successful. Instead, the series of actions being undertaken, in trying to make their movements as transparent as possible, emerge from "the intention of the text" (Eco, 1992: 25 original italics). This intention, which makes way for reading, is not a "dormant" feature of self-help books, objectified on the page; readers have to decide to render it visible. Textual interpretation, the ongoing conjectures of readers, reveals the strategies that are intended to produce a Model Reader. Resembling the process of the hermeneutic circle, any interpretation of the text is confirmed by the text, which in turn is confirmed by the interpretation thus far. So, "more than a parameter used to validate the interpretation, the text is an object that

\(^{86}\) Woolger (1991) provides a useful account of how the design and production of computer technologies configure their users, delimiting the ways in which they respond to, and thus how they see themselves as entities in relationship to, those technologies.
the interpretation builds up in the course of the circular effort of validating itself on the basis of what it makes up as its result” (p. 64).87

In nearing the end of the self-help book, the accomplishments of the Model Reader should be noted. We can be reasonably certain in detailing these accomplishments because they are present in the text insomuch as self-help book authors have constructed them to be followed. As for empirical readers, to the extent that they have achieved identity with the Model Reader, they will have followed them accordingly. Consider:

You are now equipped to make a life strategy that allows you to begin changing your life, one step, one goal, one priority at a time.88

This self-help book author assumes that readers have successfully followed the path so carefully set out for them. They have completed the various tasks as part of the work of reading, just as they have been told. Perhaps most importantly, this author has assumed that, in following this path, readers have had no reason to disagree or dispute its legitimacy, or experienced any problems arising out of its applicability. To the contrary, it is expected that readers have unconditionally endorsed the whole process. Readers, then, have aligned themselves to the self-help book and its aims in “promoting conventional, conformist and contented attitudes and that any insights into the negative aspects of reality [be] kept under control by making everything dependant on [them] rather than on objective conditions” (Adorno, 1994: 65). Paradoxically, in appealing to the narcissistic tendencies of readers, and promoting the importance of their individuality, the self-help book has prevented its expression, or rather, allowed it to the extent that it submits to the conditions as set out. Readers can express their individuality provided it remains passive and uncritical. They must, at all costs, continue to affirm the ideology of the self-help book; they must keep saying yes. In short, by discouraging thought

87 Respect for the text, which is needed for this process to unfold, should not be misplaced, or redirected to the domain of the author/reader as the actors making possible this process. Eco’s argument, in this respect, offers a more empirically based account than does Booth’s (1961) “Implied Author” and Iser’s (1974; 1978) “Implied Reader”; these categories are actively configured textual manifestations, not metaphysical, “ghostly” presences that cannot be pointed to by the text itself but nonetheless make it so.


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generally and "independent" thought specifically, clearly displayed by its preference and prescription of practice (doing), the self-help book also discourages any substantive notion of "intellect". It is not so much that what it offers, and recommends, is non-intellectual as anti-intellectual (Claussen, 2004). Readers can have or pursue intelligence, and in fact that is encouraged as part of the narcissistic quest, but not intellect; the one is antithetical to the other. Hofstadter (1962: 25), discussing the prevalence of anti-intellectualism in American cultural history, makes this clear:

[i]ntelligence is an excellence of mind that is employed within a fairly narrow, immediate, and predictable range; it is a manipulative, adjustive, unfailingly practical quality [...] works within the framework of limited but clearly stated goals, and may be quick to shear away questions of thought that do not seem to help in reaching them.

Intelligence (activity) as against intellect (inactivity): dealing with the practical circumstances of goal-oriented tasks, not merely thinking about doing them. Practicality is the criteria for assessing what readers do and, in turn, who they are and who they become. "Whereas intelligence seeks to grasp, manipulate, re-order, adjust, intellect examines, ponders, wonders, theorizes, criticizes, imagines. Intellect evaluates evaluations" (Ibid.). More seriously, in suppressing thought, or anything that resists acceptance of its discourse, the self-help book is also suppressing critical inquiry, devaluing the rewards from e.g., "speculation", "creative novelty" and "reflection". The message: arguing, especially arguing for the sake of arguing, does not do anything; it does not further readers' quest for self-help.

What we observe, with the shifts from reading, to thinking, to action, is a return, from the temporality of the reading experience of the self-help book, to the general, temporally unspecified and "continuous" unfolding of life. Readers are being reoriented, placed back into a life beyond the self-help book from whence they came. Through the process of reading - which the self-help book has assumed has been carried out as prescribed - readers have undergone a transformation. The result of reading, or at least
time with the self-help book, a fixed period of work defined by its ability to "change" its readers, has discarded a set of relations, principally the relations of the self-help book with its readers. And in so doing, it has introduced another set of relations, between readers and the world. The self-help book disappears as the world reappears. The ontological status of the self-help book, then, has changed in terms of what it represents to readers. Like Plato’s famous ladder of knowledge, which the philosopher ascends in his search for truth, readers of the self-help book, in searching for self-help by the effort of reading, advance the rungs of the ladder, passing from ignorance to knowledge.

As far as the self-help book considers its own purpose, following Fish (1972: 2), the outcome of its reading is quite literally a "conversion" for readers. In reexamining and even discrediting their own assumptions about themselves, readers have reached the point beyond which rational thought can assist them. They can no longer rely on the self-help book, for it has been "consumed" by the operation of its own effects. It becomes "the vehicle of its own abandonment" (p.3). In other words, in transferring readers to another "level" of insight (or action, thought, consciousness etc.), using itself up by imparting its value and encouraging readers to seek further inquiry beyond its own boundaries, the self-help book invalidates the basis on which it has been proceeding. Thus, like Plato's ladder, "[t]he final rung, the level of insight that stands (or, more properly, on which the reader stands) because it is the last, and is, of course, the rejection of written artifacts, a rejection that, far from contradicting what has preceded, corresponds exactly to what the reader, in his repeated abandoning of successive stages in the argument, has been doing" (p.13). Or, in another sense, because the hermeneutic code of the self-help book involves a move from a question to an answer, from how to determine and control the breaks, to controlling and determining them, it is "irreversible." Once the code has been revealed, it cannot be unrevealed; readers, if the code is to have full effect, must follow its logico-temporal order, which means completing the quest for self-help now being set out (cf. Barthes, 1974: 29-30). The self-help book is now the point of departure for readers:
Emotional control [...] cannot be gained in any magical or easy way. You cannot
develop it by merely reading a book. The only sure method is by working at it
regularly, persistently. 89

The possession of the mere materials of knowledge is something very different
from wisdom and understanding, which are reached through a higher kind of
discipline than that of reading - which is often but a mere passive reception of
other men’s thoughts; there being little or no active effort of mind in the
transaction.90

Resolving the code of the self-help book means parting ways with the specified activities
of reading, thinking and acting. What has been achieved – continuing with the Platonic
metaphor – in reaching the last rung of the ladder, has not been the accomplishment of
self-help, but rather the knowledge that reading the self-help book merely defers that
accomplishment. The tension arising from reading, the lack of opportunity it affords
readers in the practical business of doing self-help, even when compensated by
extratextual work, nevertheless falls short. Reading thus needs to be abandoned as a
legitimate quest, being parasitic (on self-help book authors) insomuch as it is a “mere
passive reception of other men’s thoughts”. What is necessary for readers, to successfully
produce and not merely receive self-help, is that which the self-help book cannot supply,
which is to say, the active role undertaken by interacting with the world: “working at it
regularly, persistently”. Readers, then, are forced to return to the world beyond the self-
help book to pursue a “higher kind of discipline”. The remarkable, highly specified
character of self-help constructed in the self-help book is reconfigured as the mundane,
highly unspecified practice of everyday life.

3.5 Concluding remarks
The self-help book has undergone the activity of reading. It has been revived: we have
seen it through the movement of its discourse, from the first page to the last. The

89 From Peale (1952: 89) The Power of Positive Thinking.
battering social critique may have told us to beware of the self-help book, to treat it with caution. However, it did not inform us that the self-help book could possibly provide its own critique. Or better: that its textual form is composed of the very arguments used against it by the skeptics. This is revealed through a tension, visible throughout the self-help book. On the one hand, it characterizes itself as self-sufficient (or self-contained), where the work of reading alone is the single requirement for readers to accomplish their quest for self-help; on the other, the invocation of reading itself is insufficient for self-help. The tension becomes noticeably transparent when the work of reading is specified. This means extending beyond the self-help book. There it is: a self-refuting attack of the very method through which the self-help book is articulated, writing and therefore reading. The whole project of textual communication is renounced. The self-help book is to be abandoned as a site of self-help.

But let us not be so hasty. This tension is concealed in various ways; the self-help book is too clever a beast to admit defeat that easily. Let us return to Fish for a moment. He conceived of two texts. The "rhetorical" text, like Eco's closed text, delimits the experience of reading to that with which readers are already familiar; it tells them what they already know. The "dialectical" text, like Eco's open text, requires its readers to establish knowledge for themselves, to question everything they currently live by. Fish had considered only the dialectical text to undergo its own denouncement during reading. Thus in assisting its readers to experience it to a point at which it no longer provides the assistance it did before that experience, the dialectical text becomes inadequate. It has moved its readers, but in so doing, has expended itself; it has been, as Fish describes, a self-consuming artifact.

We are unable to delineate the self-help book as simply as this: rhetorical or dialectical. This is because it has assumed the status of both types of text. Encouraging the ongoing production of reading in terms of the mutually derived understanding of readers' problems — generally suggested by authors, specifically connoted by readers — the self-help book satisfies the needs of its readership. It reaches them through intersubjectivity. In tandem, in addressing these problems, the self-help book
progressively points away from itself, as things are required to be done beyond reading. Speaking is required. Thinking needs to be done. And actions too. But in pointing away from itself, to the world out there beyond reading, the self-help book has assumed that such pointing is part of the “working through” of problems, and not the insufficiency of reading as part of that work. The questions have been answered. The exercises have been done. Nothing else matters, no other contingencies apply, so long as these tasks have been completed. Their successful completion is presupposed. Readers’ problems do not change according to contingencies. Their status remains fixed and knowable; these are the terms in which the self-help book engages readers. Problems have been isolated and reconfigured through the reading, thinking and acting shifts.

What is being transferred into the world, beyond the self-help book, is not the sum aggregate of problems. No: that has already been addressed, or will be addressed if the guidelines have been followed. There is of course a temporal dimension. Problems will routinely arise in everyday life, and the self-help book knows that readers have to return to a life beyond reading. Life amounts to more than this transient relationship. In other words, readers will need to ongoingly manage their problems (the reemergence of old problems or emergence of new ones) and so will need to reapply the “rules” of the self-help book, as and when circumstances dictate. So the self-help book has done all it can; it has been expended. As the self-help book disappears from view, it is now down to readers. Do you see what has happened? What was a rhetorical text, aligned to the zone of the personality of its readers, is now, having served its function by implanting its knowledge and wisdom, and getting readers to face the world beyond reading, a dialectical text. Before reading, it was a requirement; after reading, it must be forsaken.

So there is a tension, but it is revealed later, after reading. With the quest for self-help still to be completed, beyond “mock” exercises, readers go out into the world. They want to apply those rules. They do of course face contingencies, which raises new problems. But at least they can control and determine the bad breaks of life. They have agency. Everything ought to go according to plan. The world should serve the will of readers. But: with nothing to account for all of those unspecified, undetermined
contingencies in everyday life, which are nevertheless confronted, things get messy. Controlling for contingency is difficult. Other agencies, other things, impose themselves. Readers are faced with the world, with new problems, composed of ongoing contingency. Uncertainty arises. Personal agency is not always effective. What do readers do? They select another self-help book, of course. Agency must be re-affirmed. Some way of dealing with those damned contingencies must be available. Readers have control, so they are told, but no way to guarantee its successful application in the world. The self-help book, they remember, will provide answers. Unlike the world, it will meet them in the zone of their personality. It will comfort them, in the sense that Barthes has given to the term. The status of problems has changed; but it is just a question of getting the “right” self-help book. So: the cycle of reading once again continues ad infinitum. We see the enactment of a culture of repeated self-help book reading91. But readers will be pushed away again, out into the world. So where do readers go for self-help? How is the cycle of reading broken?

91 Some reader reviews of the self-help books I have been analyzing (Source: www.amazon.co.uk Accessed 23/01/08): On Life Strategies: “I have read many self-help publications in my life in an effort to improve my understanding of human characteristics to enable me to interact with others in such a way to minimize friction. To be honest I found and learnt much of interest from the majority of these books, but too often the advice and suggestions given miss the point which is that it was me who needed to change most of all” 26/11/01. On How To Win Friends and Influence People: “Once you have read and digested this then I thoroughly recommend the next level, Dr. Covey’s ‘7 Habits of Highly Effective People’, though that work...clearly benefited enormous from the early groundwork done by Carnegie, it is in a different league altogether” 5/5/06. On Don’t Sweat The Small Stuff.... And It’s All Small Stuff: “I read a lot of self-help books (did I just say that?) and they are often repetitive and rather patronizing in tone – this book was a refreshing change” 15/06/03; “Being a keen reader of self-help books (which normally fail utterly to impress me) it was a delight to find this brilliant little book” 12/06/01. These are seasoned self-help book readers, moving from one to another.
Chapter 4
Reinvent yourself with Fiona Harrold

4.1 Introduction
If readers want to complete their quest for self-help, then they will have to part ways with the self-help book. But there is a problem: self-help does not follow from the disappearance of the self-help book, as it is expected to. Readers return to the self-help book, as a site of self-help, from which they have recently departed, and repeat the reading process. This is a widespread occurrence. Thus we see the self-help book genre still thriving, continuing to dominate bestsellers lists (Hansen, McHoul & Rapley 2003; McGee 2005). Nevertheless, if we read the self-help book carefully, this admission of inadequacy, progressively made clear as reading is undertaken, is displayed in a most explicit manner. And it derives from the core of the genre itself; the critics do not even need to open their mouths. Please meet Fiona Harrold; she is a bestselling life coaching book author. Two categories: self-help and life coaching. The first one we know about; the second one we want to know more about. Harrold likes life coaching, not self-help; this much is known. But, at least from my analysis of her books in the last chapter, these categories get blurred. They collide and rub together. Sometimes looking beyond a category, to the substantive work being carried out to support it, is the only way to see what is going on. So two different categories, but they each gesture to, or even share, a common meeting place.

We decide to read Harrold’s life coaching books; any one of her bestsellers will be quite sufficient. We follow a familiar trajectory: from reading, to thinking, to action. But then it happens. Those careful readers will spot it at the end of Harrold’s books, sometimes written by her, sometimes by her publisher – a specification of what is

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92 Harrold has many bestsellers: Be Your Own Life Coach (2001), Reinvent yourself: 7 steps to a fresh you (2004), Indestructible self-belief: 7 steps to getting it right and keeping it (2005a), The 7 Rules of Success: Follow the strategies, experience the results (2005b).

93 Harrold would most likely deny affiliation with a self-help book genre, substituting another category such as “personal development”, “self-improvement”, or best, “life coaching”. Having developed analysis of her books, we see the range of features they share with self-help books; and yet, Harrold is obviously uncomfortable with the category self-help. She is well aware of the skeptics, and, in a way, in denying membership in the genre, but nevertheless writing within it, she provides a point of departure for her “own” work (we have seen this strategy too; it is a favorite of the self-help book!).
required, in addition to, and particularly after, the book has been completed. It looks like this, taken from the back pages of *Reinvent Yourself*:

Her [Fiona Harrold] intention is to take the principles of personal responsibility, individual self-help and mutual support to the widest public through The Next Level Club, and its wide range of motivational services and courses. [...] Fiona says, 'To be a success at anything in life you need high levels of self-confidence and the right people behind you. The Next Level Club's combination of expert coaches and the camaraderie of like-minded people will guarantee that you feel able to achieve anything you really want and put your mind to. Life coaching is not the same as having someone tell you what to wear or how to apply your lipstick. It's about having someone behind you giving you the confidence and self-belief that you can have the life you have always dreamed of' (2004: 129-131).

At least Harrold is being associated with the category self-help! The course of self-help has changed again. This extract arises whilst undertaking reading, but notice how the activity of reading has disappeared. There is no mention of reading *Reinvent Yourself* as a value of work completed; and what is now being set out has no linkage with it. It is as if reading has served no purpose, other than to point readers somewhere else. This author, Harrold, is endorsing the abandonment of reading as a satisfactory prescription for self-help. We see a proffered terrain on which readers are to travel: contact with other, like-minded people, and, we must stress, life coaches. Self-help becomes mutual support. It means attaining membership in The Next Level Club – being with other members. The reader is addressed and asked to consider him-/herself, not as one, as unique, but as a member. So self-help is now situated in an assemblage of people. And this membership is not incidental; it places a condition under which self-help will be successfully completed. Other people, and particularly life coaching and therefore a life coach, are required to perform self-help. What was supposed to result from reading a self-help book will now only obtain from being around the right people.
The Next Level Club organizes regular workshops for its members. There is a life coach; Fiona Harrold is her name. Life coaching takes place. Simple. But I still have questions. What is being produced in a self-help workshop that is not being produced in a self-help book? What accounts for the variance, if there is any? To answer these questions thoroughly enough, I did what anyone in my position would do: Harrold received a polite telephone call from a young ethnographer, expressing an interest in the activities in her workshops. A little indelicate as a strategy to obtain free admission, but Harrold agreed. I became a member of the club; and I had already read Harrold's books too. The workshop to which I was invited had a provocative title, just like her book of the same name: Reinvent Yourself. I took my crumpled old notebook, along with my voice recorder, and documented what I found.

I arrive slightly early on the morning of the workshop, only to find I am in the company of another 300 members. There is a lively, energetic atmosphere before things unfold, as folks talk amongst themselves. Harrold is introduced by one of the organisers of the workshop. "She is probably Britain's best known life coach", he says, "the author of Reinvent Yourself". This is the title of her current bestseller; it is in here, right on the back pages, that readers are told about workshops like this. This introduction by the organiser has a function: it is paying tribute to her achievements as an author. This is the relevant identity – it is what she will be known for. That the audience is interested in her writing is presupposed once again; advance copies of her upcoming book, they are told, are available at the workshop. Folks were snooping around the sales stall at the rear of the hall earlier, when I arrived. So her audience is largely composed of her readership. But: something does not add up. Are they dissatisfied with her books? With her bestseller, Reinvent Yourself? Have they been deprived of something from the reading experience? Why their presence at this workshop?

Ethnographers have all sorts of tricks up their sleeves; flattery, so long as it is genuine, remains one of the best.
4.2 Dialectics of the soul

There is a special character to speech. This has its origins in the history of philosophy, particularly the hierarchy of speech over writing. Aristotle recognized a “purity” of speech: “Spoken words are the symbols of mental experience and written words are the symbols of spoken words. Just as all men have not the same writing, so all men have not the same speech sounds, but the mental experiences, which these directly symbolize, are the same for all, as also are those things of which our experiences are the images” (On Interpretation, I). Speech is the direct expression of mental experience, the highest level of, and pathway to, knowledge and reason, while writing, which is derivative of speech and twice removed from mental experience, separates that which is written from the mental experience which it represents.

Plato thought that the spoken word was a more appropriate vehicle for philosophy too. His philosophy, and in fact the tradition that stems from it, which is to say, Western metaphysics, is built on the prioritization of speech. This is made clear in Phaedrus, a dialogue between Plato’s main protagonist, Socrates, and Phaedrus, when they discuss the inferiority of writing to pure thought. Reading as against reasoning. Rhetoric as against dialectic. The soul, like mental experience for Aristotle, is central to this hierarchy. Socrates says to Phaedrus: “No, it is plain that if we are to address people scientifically, we shall show them precisely what is the real and true nature of that object on which our discourse is brought to bear. And that object, I take to be the soul” (270e). The distance created by writing, from the author to the reader, denies the possibility of “proper” communication at the level of the soul. Knowledge is not attained. As the dialogue ensues:

SOCRATES: You know, Phaedrus, that’s the strange thing about writing, which makes it truly analogous to painting. The painter’s products stand before us as though they were alive, but if you question them, they maintain a most majestic silence. It is the same with written words; they seem to talk to you as though they were intelligent, but if you ask them anything about what they say, from a desire to be instructed, they go on telling you just the same thing forever. And once a
thing is put in writing, the composition, whatever it may be, drifts all over the place, getting into the hands not only of those who understand it, but equally of those who have no business with it; it doesn't know how to address the right people, and not to address the wrong. And when it is ill-treated and unfairly abused it always needs its parent to come to its help, being unable to defend itself.

PHAEDRUS: Once again you are perfectly right.

SOCRATES: But now tell me, is there another sort of discourse, that is brother to the written speech, but of unquestioned legitimacy? Can we see how it originates, and how much better and more effective it is than the other?

PHAEDRUS: What sort of discourse have you in mind, and what is its origin?

SOCRATES: The sort that goes together with knowledge, and is written in the soul of the learner, that can defend itself, and knows to whom it should speak and to whom it should say nothing.

PHAEDRUS: You mean no dead discourse, but the living speech, the original of which the written discourse may fairly be called a kind of image (275d-e; 276a).

Writing is but the seeking for knowledge, or a reminder of what is already known. It simply mobilizes a state of knowledge, reaffirms it; the actual genesis of knowledge is located somewhere else. Reading is parasitic on writing, which in turn is parasitic on speaking. The written word serves as the abandonment of knowledge, being, as Derrida would later call it, the original sin. Writing does not allow for the very process by which knowledge is constituted, how it is put into a shape acceptable to others. Speaking is to writing as original is to copy. Writing is, then, a copy, an image of the soul. Abandoned from its parent, the written word, unlike the spoken word, is frozen in time; it has no

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95 This is actually part of Derrida's hugely impressive and sustained critique of this prioritization of speech over writing. Here is not the place for an exposition of his arguments; suffice it to say that he questioned the nature of "voice" as a value of presence: the presence of the object and self-presence in living speech. This rendered problematic the idea of speech serving as the origin of meaning. I can only point to the "original" arguments found in, for instance, *Speech and Phenomena* (1973), *Of Grammatology* (1976) and, perhaps best, *Writing and Difference* (1978). I am interested, here, to pursue how speech is being prioritized at a practical level, for practical purposes; Derrida tended to be overtly theoretical, at the expense of practical exposition (though see his classic exchange with Searle: e.g., Derrida, 1977).
means of defense against those who question it. It is dead. The alternative is dialectic, to which writing must be subordinated. And it derives its legitimacy as it speaks from, and to, the soul itself. Speaking is its closest sibling.

At the centre of Platonic philosophy is the notion that knowledge is to be located in the encounter of the soul with “true being”, which, based on intuition, is inexpressible, and which, if it can be communicated at any rate, requires the living presence of speaker and hearer. Only within this presence is it possible to appropriate knowledge from, so to speak, soul to soul. Phaedrus goes on to suggest that through this dialectic a speaker “plants” his words of knowledge, “sows” them in his listener, and from whom new words “grow” (276e). This immediacy of communication imparts knowledge. Truth is preserved in words in their speaking. Dialectics is an activity, then, a movement between one speaker and another. Knowledge is acquired through this movement, whereby, as Socrates characterises it, as a speaker, you must have “a corresponding discernment of the nature of the soul, discover the type of speech appropriate to each nature, and order and arrange your discourse accordingly, addressing a variegated soul in a variegated style that ranges over the whole gamut of tones, and a simply soul in a simple style” (277b-c). This movement, which is knowledge-productive, changes shape and trajectory during the activity of speaking. Things arise which need to be engaged in situ: as and when they happen. What will be accepted, and acceptable, as knowledge will arise through the lived embodiment of speaking contexts. This is the “art” of dialectic. This is what makes the situated activity of dialectic important.

We are present in a workshop. Harrold is prioritising her own speech over her own writing. Reading her books was considered unsatisfactory in successfully completing self-help; that is why we are all here now. And as her books fade into the background, never to be mentioned again, the person behind them appears. This is what the audience wants: Harrold, the person, not the writer. We had better be quiet – she is

96 We have already seen how the self-help book attributes to itself an inherent shortcoming as a written form of communication, and the strategies it deploys to compensate. Self-help book authors are deprived of the presence made available through speech, as one author makes clear: “Don’t let this be some dry rhetoric in a book. Read this as though I am speaking directly to you” (McGraw, 1999: 58).
approaching the stage now. A huge round of applause fills the hall, gradually falling to silence. Harrold starts. A few formal introductory remarks notwithstanding, she begins with a personal story:

Harrold: about twenty years ago I was the most miserable person on the planet (.) probably (.) in all truthfulness (0.2) and I decided there was a particular point I got to in my life (.) and I >d'ya I just got bored< with being so dull (.)

Audience: hehh hahh hehh hahh hehh(.)

Harrold: and that's the absolute truth (.) <I bored my self to death> I couldn't have a conversation (.) (but) I got bored (.) and I decided there and then >y'know< (.) enough is enough (.) and sometimes you do have to get to that point (.) sometimes you have to go low (.) low and a little bit lower (.) and then go d'ya know I’ve had this (.) <I have had this> up to here (.) .hhh (.) <so> what I did was a <massive (.) radical (.) drastic reinvention (.) that (.) possibly some of you have already doing your’elves (0.2) possibly some of you might not have to (.) do (.) but for me everything had to go I had to change the way I looked at <the world> (.) so at that point I was very heavily involved (.) in <political things> (.) <uhm (.) none of which seemed like they had worked out (.) so y’know the miners strike was not successful cruise missiles did ( ) ( ) women’s hospital did get closed (.) [...] so everything that I was involved with >Ken Livingston’s fairs fair policy did get crushed< (.) .hhh so everything so I got very discouraged but I also started to look at
life and (.).
<the world> (.)
in a very sort of
powerless victim like way (0.2) and uhm (.).

y'know

that we'd have to wait for the revolution to come
before we could be happy [...] so I had to really
excavate (0.2) I had to dig deep (.).
<change (.)

everything> I had to change the way I looked at <the
world> (.)
I didn't wanna be right anymore (0.2) I
just wanted to be happy (.)
cause at that point I was

RIGHT about everything (0.3) I knew my position on
everything (.).
hhh and it made me so miserable (.)

I lived in this house with (.)

uhm (.)

it was a sort of
feminist collective [...] one of the things that we
did to educate ourselves about (.)
the real truth of (.).
<the world> (.)

it was probably me that did it

more than anyone (.)
truthfully (.)
is (.)

I covered
every spare space of wall in our four story shared
household with (.)

<uhm> (.)
articles from (.)
y'know (.)
every radical newspaper you care to think

about (.)
about y'know pretty depressing stuff really

(.)

how many people who'd died there what was
happening there (.)

>so< (.)
everywhere you looked it

was (.)
complete doom and gloom (.)
and I also

realised (.)

>in that same second<(.)
that I couldn't

reinvent myself (.)

and <stay in the same place> (.)

This is a lengthy, but richly contextual, experiential report of Harrold's own reinvention.
This is powerful stuff: an extreme example of reinvention. We see a requirement for change. Look at the context. Prior to her reinvention, Harrold's political consciousness had formed a substantive part of her identity. She lived with a feminist collective;
surrounded herself with overtly political issues. Maybe she was a political activist? We
do not know; but we do know that her political interests were proving unsuccessful.
Iconic events in left-wing politics were failing. And so the world was not going to provide what she wanted — to be happy. The results of so many contingencies, left entirely inarticulated, were nevertheless attributed to a lack of personal agency. Harrold interpreted this as a loss of control to make determinations in her life. She became a victim. If politics could not help, then she would have to step in. But reinvention did not emerge because there was anything noticeably “wrong” with her political persuasion, or the lifestyle through which it was expressed. To the contrary, she was upholding what she thought was “right”. The point of departure, then, was not disrespectful of her feminist lifestyle up until that point. Her reputation, then, would remain intact. Harrold was simply personally unfulfilled. She wanted to take control of her life; she wanted to be happy. And departing from such an embedded lifestyle, far more significant than, for instance, a mere wish to be thin or exude more confidence or whatever, required this radical kind of reinvention. She abandoned her political lifestyle, where “lifestyle” connotes a whole “way of life”. This is why she had to undergo a “massive, radical, drastic reinvention”. A new life would need to be built.

Being happy is a subjective assessment. You see, it comes down to individual choice; ask any individual. Harrold is embracing the notion of freewill and individual agency. This is a widely distributed understanding; it is, we know, the dominant mode of thought of Western culture. Individuals are what matter. Harrold is assuming and reproducing a view of the individual as enfeebled, in constant need of support and improvement, particularly through reflection and self-analysis, using a psychological, therapeutic discourse. There is a fixation on the well being of self. Everything “external” disappears: that does not matter. We do not need to ask the audience to know that each of its members shares this image of themselves. Of course not: they live within, and are addressed from, an established ideology of individualistic thought. Harrold is reaching them, just as the self-help books have done, from within their zone of personality, just as Adorno described.

97 For classic expositions (and critiques) of this view, Rieff’s work is indispensable (see particularly 1966), as is Furedi (2003).
Reinvention produced this: Harrold has taken control. She is now happy. She has demonstrated the power of individual agency and the ability to, as one self-help book author put it, determine the breaks in life. Yes, this is self-help. But the demonstration is not simply in this narrative recounting; there is something more powerful. Harrold is telling as a professional life coach, author and consultant. She has her own consultancy in London. So: one of the results of this reinvention is the development of expertise; she is teaching, at a professional level, the principles of her own reinvention. Her expertise will likely exceed the instances to which it will be applied. Members of the audience are unlikely to have to undergo such “drastic” reinvention: from feminist radical to professional life coach. So Harrold is more than sufficiently qualified to deal with the demands of her work. This is a narrative of expertise, then. It is her narrative; she is entitled to speak about reinvention, to own that experience (Horton-Salway, 2004; Sacks, 1992: 243). It is authentic to the extent that it is based on actual events, which are reported in/as the first person singular (Hutchby, 2001; Van Leeuwen, 2001).

Wait a moment. This is the same story that appeared in the book Reinvent Yourself. The bit about her political endeavours, then the feelings of victimisation, and finally the feminist collective: yes, it is all here. So this is familiar to the audience, simply repetition? No. There is a greater authenticity being pursued by the audience, besides simply being the recipients of Harrold’s personal story. We must recognise that they are undergoing their own experiential encounter. They have read the book, but Harrold was not “present” during reading. There was a distance between author and reader; writing got in the way. The workshop closes that distance. The clue is what is happening in the room. Look, there is interaction. The audience is responsive to Harrold’s speech; they laugh, gasp and move in their seats when she tells them about her feminist friends. Harrold is responsive too. There is intonation in her voice, as she speaks. She stops when the audience laughs. Then she continues. This is dialectic. Already, at this early stage of an introductory story, Harrold is showing a “discernment of the nature of the soul”. There is proximity. The story is being produced for, and in response to, the “movements” of the audience. Thus, the audience is in the presence of the narrative in its basic form: as it is spoken. It comes from the soul, not from text, which mediates this form. This workshop
may be more expensive than the book, but there is an immediacy of what was delayed in reading. The audience has made contact with the soul of Harrold. And this proximity will only get more acute.

4.3 Problem formulation

Members are at the workshop to do something about their problems. They want something practical, besides reading. They were off to a good start when they were talking to other people at the beginning; now they are listening to Harrold. She tells us that reinvention involves discarding something that is no longer “productive”, and replacing it with something that “works for you”. She says it is not about becoming a different person so much as returning to, or renewing, “the real you”. Things happen, she says, which prevent or conceal our “original spirit”. Reinvention is respecifying an identity, which has changed shape in light of life events. Adjustment is necessary, back to the original. In removing the “debris” (a Harroldian term; “sludge” is another) concealing the original, and in pointing to the authentic, reinvention is positioned as itself part of that domain of authenticity. We are told that childhood is important here. “Those around us influenced us when we were young”, Harrold says. She tells how her schoolteacher had labelled her in certain ways. It is during those formative years, we are told, that we pick up “unproductive” labels. These can hold us back; they prevent us from being who we want to be. Reinvention means overcoming these labels. Although events happened over which we may have had little control, we can step in, like Harrold did, and change how they affect us.

We must use our pen and paper. Harrold folds over the first page of her flip chart, neatly resting on a tall stand so everyone can see. Our first exercise: scribble down our unproductive labels. She asks for five, but two will do if you have trouble. Members know how to follow instructions and make lists; it follows the path of the self-help book. It is all the more familiar as it was required activity when reading Harrold’s Reinvent Yourself. We must not keep these labels to ourselves: that would defeat the point of a workshop. So Harrold asks for members to share one of their labels. Charles volunteers:
Charles: indecisive (0.3)
Harrold: <indecisive> (0.2) so Charles do you know where
that came from (.)
Charles: <u:h> (0.2) probably from (.). >u:hm< (0.3) previous
job or u:h=
Harrold: =>no< earlier (0.5) unless you were working at n:ine
(0.2)
Charles: from parents=
Harrold: <=right (0.3) what can y- (.). can you <rem:ember> (.).
a <mother uh (0.4) your father> (.). actually saying
that to ?you (0.2) h:ow did that come about (0.2)
Charles: >yes< (0.2)
Harrold: and was it a regular thing (0.3)
Charles: "it happened quite a lot" (0.2)
Harrold: got it (0.2) okay (.). hhh and can you see that i- it
(0.5) HAS it sort of shaped the way you see
yourself (0.4)
Charles: yeah (.)
Harrold: allrighty (0.2) now would you like to drop that
label Charles (0.3)
Charles: "ye:ah" (0.2)

Charles has provided Harrold with his label. Harrold has inquired about its origin and its influence in his life. She asks if Charles would like to change things: to drop the label. So personal experiences are being confirmed, known only to Charles and reported so Harrold knows too. She has given Charles the opportunity to display his agency of the problem by specifying its features and his relation to it, in his terms. This is his problem. It is formulated with his words, his voice. And he wants to do something about it. Thus, plainly communication has been successful; Harrold has been informed that Charles wants to drop the label. This is the appeal of dialectic; Charles and Harrold defend and modify their contributions in response to the other. Harrold is applying her expertise, to
specifics, to an individual: Charles. He did not get this personal address at his particular problem when reading Reinvent Yourself. Harrold wants to know things; Charles tells it how it is. Charles wants to drop a label that has its life “out there”, away from the workshop, and Harrold can help, by engaging it “in here”, in the workshop. Here is the attraction of the workshop: things can be brought in from out there in the world and dealt with in situ. Right here, where everyone can see. So far, so good: Harrold is finding out what things are like. And everyone is sitting comfortably, in the warm.

Let us not get sentimental, just because we are in the company of a professional. This is not a simple and unproblematic procedure that “accesses” an unproductive label. It is not mere knowledge confirmation. Rather, both parties are co-producing a specific interactional order. Charles responds to Harrold in a way that attends to her talk as questions. Harrold treats these prior turns as satisfying what she has made “conditionally relevant”, which is to say, answers (cf. Schegloff, 1968). Moreover, the grammatical form of these questions, as part of their design, expects not simply any answer, but a preferred answer (cf. Pomerantz, 1984), or a “type-conforming response” (Raymond, 2006). This is what Charles does. His turns are short, with no elaboration; he is treating this as part of a chain of questions. Each answer affirms what Harrold has put forward to be affirmed with her questions. His turns are agreeing to the terms of the questions to which they are a response. Things proceed with a line of common activities: question and answer sequences. Harrold’s questions set the terms by which Charles is to respond. In other words, these questions “maximally exploit the agenda setting and subsequent conduct constraining potential of initiating a course of action” (p. 119). We see indecisiveness, but it does not follow from what Charles is like, beyond this occasioning in which it is present. It is produced as a specific kind of problem, arranged according to the conditions of Harrold’s questions. This is the power she exerts, and the control she commands, by her use of interrogative syntax. Is this the substance of expertise?

The problem “in here” is different from the problem “out there”. In the workshop Harrold is making the problem fit a specific set of conditions. It is presented with the resources “in here”, and is produced as a specific domain of phenomena. Specific
agencies, actors and circumstances get ignored, while others become relevant. Problems are produced in a similar way in medical settings. Heritage & Robinson (2006) note that, during health consultations, patients typically have an opportunity to present their medical concerns. This is where we see the work of “problem presentation” (p.89). However, it is physicians that typically initiate and terminate problem presentation. Physicians ask questions. They want to know about problems. When they ask questions, physicians go “first” in the interaction, while patients, who provide answers, go “second”. Physicians’ opening questions, and what they make conditionally relevant as an answer, heavily constrain what patients can say. These questions of inquiry “frame” the character of the problem, restricting how patients explore their condition. Because the interaction always returns to physicians, due to the sequential organisation of this interaction, they can select to, and routinely do, terminate a topic, initiate a new topic, or otherwise move the interaction on. They have the ability, then, using interactional resources not available to patients, to determine the status of patients’ problems. Here, then, problems emerge out of the design of the interaction, and the extent to which physicians and patients are aligned to the work it is designed to perform. They become problems as a performance “in here”, in the consulting room. The context of the “out there” disappears.

*Asking known information questions* 98

Harrold is like a friendly physician, always asking questions. When Harrold conducts her workshop, like the physician in the context of the consulting room, she plays a vital role in how problems are produced. Dislocated from “out there” and relocated “in here”, Harrold becomes an agent in the activity of problem formulation. There is something else, aside from the asymmetry arising from the distribution of questions and answers. Harrold had earlier spoken about how we acquire unproductive labels early in life. This has negative effects. It prevents us from being who we want to be, she said. Look at some of her questions: “can you *(remember)* (. ) a *(mother uh (0.4) you father> (. ) actually saying that to †you (0.2) how did that come about”. Does this seem to be a question

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98 The notion of “known information” questions is taken from Searle (1969). Such questions, as the name suggests, are posed when the questioner already has the answer. We find these questions in classroom discourse, where the teacher, already knowing the answer, uses them for evaluative purposes (see Koshik, 2002; Lee, 2007; Mehan, 1979).
whose answer is ostensibly already “available”? Has it not been assumed by Harrold’s earlier remarks, even given in the content of the question? Surely parents are the single largest influence on a young person’s life? And this: “HAS it sort of shaped the way you see yourself”. Again, a candidate answer, “yes”, which is given, has been proposed by virtue of the label being an “influence” in Charles’s life. Its “unwanted” influence talks directly to the reasons for Charles’s presence; he already knows he wants to drop the label. And another one: “would you like to drop that label Charles”. Could this possibly be simply a redundant question whose answer is utterly presupposed, given that Charles is present, wants to pursue reinvention? These questions continue:

1. Harrold: → so what do you need- (. ) what’s the belief that you need to replace: (. ) what do you need to put <in place> (. ) that allows you to see yourself ṕ as (0.3) the opposite (. ) decisive (0.3) so what’s the opposite of (0.2) uhhm (. ) indecisive (. ) >to you< (. )
2. Charles: "I need to be decisive" I need to make decisions (0.4)
3. Harrold: o: kay (. ) well Rita has a microphone so you might as well use it (0.6)
4. Charles: >oh< (0.2) hehh hehh (. ) yeah (. ) ṕ I (. ) I need [to make]
5. Harrold: → [so you’]re sort of indecisive (. ) <you’>=
6. Charles: =yeah (. ) I need to make decisions (. ) a lot of them we- whether the- (. ) > you’ know< (0.4) I shouldn’t be afraid of making mistakes (. ) y’ know (0.2)
7. Harrold: >got< it (. )

Harrold has provided an answer to her own question – look at it, repackaged with a bunch of other questions as if it is presenting something new. The opposite of indecisive is of course decisive; we all know that. Harrold knows it too. She then repeats what is already known, formulated as another question: “so you’re sort of indecisive”. As Charles
provides an affirmative, type-conforming response, it is receipted with a “got it”. Harrold now has something she did not have before: she has got it. But what has Harrold got? Whatever it is, Harrold is trying to get it from someone else too. Later she asks for a label from Sophie, another member of the audience. Sophie has trouble reporting her label, so Harrold helps out:

1 Sophie: °I'm not (lov.)
2 (0.6)
3 very loveab. (0.4) I'm not (. ) very (f:eel)° (0.2)
4 Harrold: sorry (. ) hold the microphone up ( . )
5 Sophie: [ohh]
6 Harrold: → is it I'm unlovable (. )
7 Sophie: yes (. )
8 Harrold: → is it< (. ) I'm not good enough to be loved (. ) >is it< (. ) I'm not worthy (0.2)
9 Sophie: all of that (. )
10 Harrold: → <ok:ay> (0.2) >so< (0.4) is that still running through you (0.2) are you still wearing that (. )
11 Sophie: yes (. )
12 Harrold: → is that a drag (. )
13 Sophie: yes (. )

Even although Sophie has affirmed what the label is – unlovable – Harrold poses new, modified questions: “>is it< (. ) I'm not good enough to be loved (. ) >is it< (. ) I'm not worthy”. We suppose that Harrold just wants to be sure, in asking if her candidate answers are what Sophie “had in mind”. So in “completing” Sophie's turn, Harrold is simply bringing to light what Sophie has failed to, on her behalf (cf. Antaki, Diaz & Collins, 1996). Sophie then agrees: “all of that (. )”. Harrold has now got it; she receipted it with “okay”. But there are more questions whose answers, like Charles’s answers, are presupposed, namely by the fact that Sophie is present in a reinvention workshop. The label is still running through her; it is a drag. The questions are bringing nothing new to

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the table. They are repeating what is already known. Given that the presence of the audience indicates an admission that they wish to undertake reinvention, to some yet to be determined extent, and that Harrold has specified how labels "cause" what reinvention is supposed to repair, what is the function of these questions?

Look again at the sequential development of these interactions. We have topic initiating questions. Then answers. More questions, sometimes revised or modified, follow. To a large extent, then, these answers are providing resources for Harrold to reformulate or develop further the agenda, by asking more questions (cf. Atkinson & Drew, 1979; Hutchby, 2006; Wooffitt, 2006). Harrold is building a case, or an argument to be used later, by simply using the resources from prior answers, even when they are single turn affirmatives. Her questions transparently draw on, and are an extension of, prior remarks to prior questions. That these questions are receipted with answers, however obvious are those answers, gives them a self-evident significance. Although these questions may give the impression of being impartial, neutral forms of inquiry—simply finding out what Harrold’s members “think”, “feel” or whatever—the fact that they seek preferred and specifically expected answers means they are nothing of the sort. They are embodied with presuppositional content about aspects of members’ actions, interests and so forth (Heritage, 2003).

Harrold’s questions provide the motivational content for the answers they receive. Members’ knowledge of, and experience with, an unproductive label, for instance, becomes the foundation for answering. That the format of the interaction has produced that version of events is entirely concealed\footnote{This is of course a candidate instance of mundane reason’s assumption that an objective reality exists and is external to, and unconnected with, the contexts in which it is produced (Pollner, 1987). Members’ problems belong “out there”, in the world, not “in here”, in the workshop. Harrold is not producing, and neither, for that matter, are members, the reality that they are merely describing, remarking on or representing.}. So: Sophie considers it a drag to be carrying the label "unlovable" because she is unlovable, not because the terms of the question, that is, “is that a drag”, specify that response as the expected answer. No matter. This way,
knowledge is established and work is done quickly and economically. Harrold’s questions are designed to retrieve “no problem answers” (Heritage, 2002a) and more generally to avoid and guard against “troubles” in answering (Houtkoop-Steenstra & Antaki, 1997). And Harrold gets what she is looking for. Her questions privilege this type of experience of unproductive labels, which are known in these situated terms, as answers to these questions. At any rate, due to their routine production, these answers act as the audience’s understanding and evaluation, which is to say, the reason for their import (cf. Heritage, 2003: 65). Each question is legitimated and seen to have relevance for the unfolding interaction. Harrold keeps asking questions. The audience keeps providing answers. Each respective role is secured. The reason for each next question is to be found in the answer a prior question received. There is a cycle. Both parties are tied to this cyclical motion, and their talk makes sense within it. Is this the attraction of dialectic, which was absent when reading a self-help book?

**The omnirelevance of the workshop**

Posing known answer questions serves a specific function. It performs institutional business, or better: it is part of the performance of Harrold, the professional life coach. This is doing life coaching. How to get closer to this? Atkinson & Drew (1979) have shown convincingly how specific questioning formats – particularly asking known information questions – perform institutional work in courtroom cross-examinations. When defendants are asked questions whose answers are either known to the counsel beforehand, or are ostensibly already known from prior answers, it is for a good reason. These answers, given in response to questions by defendants, display for the court the public commitment to a version of events. It determines facts. It confirms to the court what “really” happened, and how defendants should be placed in terms of those facts. Prosecution is based on whether a defendant committed the crime. Questions are a device for determining the basis of that commitment. Their obviousness makes the process of the institutional work being carried out as straightforward as possible. It simplifies things by discarding all of the unwanted, or irrelevant details, leaving nothing but the facts. Just answer the question as stated, so everyone can hear: innocent or guilty. That is all the court wants to know.
We can get closer still. Edwards & Stokoe (2008) have noted how the use of known answer or “silly” questions during police interrogations is designed to determine the “knowledge state” of a suspect at the time of the crime. These questions, and more specifically the answers they obtain, are criminally implicative; they are carrying out specific, institutional work. Thus by posing questions related to the crime to which suspects have already admitted, police officers set about eliciting and confirming testimonial accounts. They wish to determine the intentions of the suspect: whether they meant – intended – to commit the crime. They pursue criminal intent. Suspects’ answers to silly questions are official statements of commitment to a course of action; in confirming whether a crime was planned, for instance, they can be recorded, as Edwards & Stokoe (p. 93 my italics) remark, “for the record”.

There it is, right there. Harrold’s known information questions are designed to produce public commitment to a point of view. Or again, we might say that, in answering these questions, members are committing themselves to a perspective. They have done so, when Harrold has so courteously allowed them to speak for themselves, with their own voice. Those questions act to “reveal” the soul, to bring out what needs to be brought out. And right into the open, so the audience can see. This is truth, as it comes from speaking, which comes from the soul. “Who am I to argue”, as Harrold will say, “if that is your truth”. Is it a drag, being unlovable? Do you want to drop that label? Harrold must know what the problem is, and whether these members want to do something about it. That is all she wants to know. Precision is needed; all “surplus” detail must be removed. And we must remember: all of this is not taking place in a quiet, confidential office at Harrold’s consultancy in London. There may not be a jury, or a prosecution, but other people are here, lots of them, listening with interest. An ethnographer is present, conspicuously recording every word. Although we may only hear one, or perhaps two people speaking at once, no doubt Harrold and her recipient, we can see the audience. Look:

1 Peter: I’m saying this as u:hh (.) something I’m w:orking
on (. ) this isn’t something I am< (. ).

Harrold: okay peter (. ) sit up straight there (. )

→ lift the microphone up (. )

Peter: yeah (. )

And this...

Harrold: no (. ) just let her talk (. ) cause I wanna get it in
her words (. ) so (. ) what’s the label (. ) the
label will be something like (. ) ‘I’m something or
other (. )

Sophie: ‘I’m not (firm) (. ) (very love) (. ) (I’m not (. )
very feel)’ (. )

Harrold: → sorry (. ) hold the microphone up (. )

Sophie: ["o:hh"]

And this...

Harrold: don’t make it difficult (. ) trust me (. ) the evidence
is there (. ) I just want you to relax (. ) allow
for the possibility that the evidence is there (. )
→ and I want you just to give me the evidence (. ) hold
up the microphone so we can hear you (. ) just look
at your "life (6.0)

Can you hear the microphone? It is simply a piece of technology allowing the voice to be
amplified so other people can hear. Yes, but why its presence? Harrold is addressing each
person individually; they, in turn, are addressing Harrold, not the audience. Why does
Harrold not simply stand closer to Charles when they speak about his label? Then there
would be no need for the microphone. This is why: “What did Peter say to Harrold?” “I
did not hear Sophie’s unproductive label” etc. Members of the audience would be deprived of the content of the interaction, the *in situ* details. And Harrold wants them to hear. So the microphone is a rhetorical device; it is building an argument for the relevance of these stretches of talk beyond the two-party interaction in which they occur. It is important that Peter lifts the microphone up. The audience has to be able to hear what he says. Sophie might be an individual, but that does not matter here. The audience does not want to know about her uniqueness. The details of how she has been influenced by an unproductive label must be comparable; they must be recognisable by the audience. However specific her case, it is being made to travel across the audience. Identities are being compared. People are encouraged to look for similarities, not differences. A microphone is one thing, but:

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1  Charles:  yeah (. ) from parents (. )
2  Harrold:  → right (. ) cause y ’ see (. ) < here’s > the fri: eaky
3       thing (0.4) that if we really get att: : ached (. ) to
4       <some>↑thing (. ) a label or a bel: ief (. ) about
5       ourselves ↑then< (. ) life is one great big self
6       fulfilling prophecy (. ) we go out there and we
7       acc: umulate evidence (0.4) to support that bel: ief
8       (0.3) we tend to ↑find (. ) other people perhaps (. )
9       reinf: orcing that original <idea> (. ) > are you ↑with
10       me< (0.3). hhh > so< (. ) parents (. ) Charles (0.3)
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Harrold is speaking with Charles again. She then turns, moving her eye contact, to address the audience, abandoning her exchange with him. This is the production of a meta-account of “what people are like” (arrowed). The pronoun has shifted from singular to plural, from Charles to some generic plurality, “we”. This refers to all people; this is everybody in the workshop. Charles may be a specific instance, but his story is relevant to the audience because he is an instance of a general phenomenon, which is applicable to everyone. We all hold beliefs; we, like Charles, can find evidence to support our beliefs. But beliefs can be unproductive, and this can be a problem, no matter who you are.
Labels then need to be discarded. So people have these labels, and lots of them are here, at the workshop. It is no different for Lilly, someone else who offered a label at Harrold’s request:

1  Harrold: that’s— (0.2) <gr:ea[t>] I mean that may
2       [u:hm]
3  Lilly: well be the case (.)
4  Lilly: uhm (.)
5  Harrold: y:ea[h]
6  Lilly: [u:hm (.)
7  Harrold: .hhh can I just <process> you a tiny bit
8       further on this (.)
9  Lilly: [u:hm (.)
10 Harrold → >okay< (0.2) this is a good way to <u:ncover> any
     (0.5) resistance that you have to making changes in
     your ;life (.) so whether it’s a >weight< issue
11 whether it’s a <boyfriend> issue (0.3) >uh< (.) like
12     getting one (.) not having one that sort of thing (.)
13     whether it’s your j:ob or whatever (.) see sometimes
14     people say they want something (.) and then they come
15 to me because they’re not getting the result that
16     they (.) <s:ay they want> and I process them fo- for
17     about one minute (0.6) and they realise d’ya know
18     (.).I don’t want a boyfriend at all (.) am I cr:azy
19     (.) do I wanna come home at the end of an
20     exha:us[ting day to hajve to talk to somebody (.)
21 Audience: [hehh hahh hehh]
22 Harrold: are you <m:ad> (.)
Harrold has just spent the last fifteen minutes speaking with Lilly, “processing” her about her beliefs about her weight. So we have another two-party interaction: Harrold and Lilly. But look, like her interaction with Charles, Harrold departs from her exchange of turns with Lilly, and begins her meta-narrative again (arrowed). The rest of the world is now the recipient of her talk. Lilly has problems with her weight, which is specific. Harrold has been asking her to look at her beliefs, so Lilly will see things differently. What Harrold has been doing, while talking to Lilly, is not specific to this case: “this is a good way to *uncover* any (0.5) resistance that you have to making changes in your *life*”. She is talking about a general principle, applying it in Lilly’s case and making sense of this specificity in general terms. The general, because it is general, is expandable and can be applied to all of us. Weight, relationships, employment: everything. It does not matter about specifics. It all follows a common pattern. There you go: people are being asked to abandon their sense of uniqueness, and enjoin in sharing a common problem. But why? What is the function of this import of a collective identity?

4.4 An expert prescription

There is an audience present. That means one thing: a performance has been taking place. There has been a performer and her name is Fiona Harrold. This is not simply questions and answers, like you might see elsewhere, but part of her script. This is Harrold doing her job, applying her expertise. She is life coaching. The expertise she has developed from her own reinvention, the years of managing a life coaching consultancy, all of those places “out there”, is now present “in here”. It is being performed, here and now. The situated use of questions, the respect for asking individuals about individual problems – it all plays a part.

*Her expertise has been revealing. There cannot be total specificity in this self-help workshop, absolute individuality. For one thing, Harrold needs to be able to comment on Charles’s indecisiveness, while moving to Lilly’s weight. Then there is Sophie; she is unlovable. How to deal with these things? Commonality deals with them. Charles might have trouble making decisions, and Lilly might have difficulty seeing herself as naturally slim, but it is all about beliefs. These separate threads are engaged as a homogeneous*
unity in order to unify the differences. Each member shares a problem in what they believe in, how they think. We see that beliefs do get specified. But they are not Lilly’s beliefs; they are not Sophie’s, either. What is specified is a conceptual, or idealised version: a general class of belief. This has a universal quality. Harrold identifies this as an original spirit, or the real you. Charles is made to fit to it. That is what prevents him from being more decisive: not fitting. Sophie has deviated from it; she needs to love herself again, on the inside. Vicky, who we will see later, fits it perfectly; she has self-belief, and has developed courage from having to live with a strict father. She does not need to do anything.

What distinguishes the members of the workshop, their uniqueness, is now what brings them together: they all have beliefs in need of modification. There is a common problem. Harrold can point to it; the audience can point to it too. But each party has to do work to see the same thing, to see the common problem. For members, the problem is out in the world; for Harrold, the problem is the answers to her questions in the workshop. She is making sense out of something that the audience is having trouble with, using a normative, generalised model as the explanatory framework. This model provides the gloss; it covers all of those things which have been unspecified, unarticulated. These things are left “out there”. And members are being encouraged, for their own understanding, to work towards it. We need to note that, thus far, a problem with self-belief is a strategy simply transferred from the self-help book; just select anyone of them at random and see for yourself. Try Harrold’s own Reinvent Yourself, starting at page twenty-nine. Members are familiar with the script; they have read the books. The question is: what does expertise tell Harrold to do next? What is the prescription for unproductive labels, Ms Harrold? We are at a workshop, after all. Charles wants to be more decisive, so:

100 Antaki (2007) has discussed the ways in which “problems”, as clients are reporting them, get glossed by therapists with the use of idiomatic expressions (universal, generalised accounts of the state of the world, people). The inference is that the problem becomes reportable and thus manageable; it becomes knowable as an instance of a general phenomenon. But it implies that the “problem” is being “volunteered” by clients. Here, idiomatic expressions are simply summaries of what clients have said. What this does is fit “an emerging general pattern of idiomatic normalisation of unhappy experience” (p. 534).
Harrold: an affirmation for you to work with (.) >to help<
that transition (.) and if somebody next to Charles
(.) writes it down for him (.) i:s (0.5) I’m now
ready to trust myself (0.9)

Charles: "u:hm"
(1.9)
I’m (.) >nAT<urally (.) let’s get r::eally >really<
outrageous here (0.2) I’m >naturally (0.8) <decisive
(2.0)

Harrold: does >that lift your spirit (.) when I say that (0.3)
I’m naturally decisive (.)

Charles: (swallows) <yes>

Harrold: [th]at you Charles are (.) naturally
decisive[e]

Charles: ["yes" (.) yes (0.2)

Harrold: .hhh (.) thanks Charles (.)

Harrold’s prescription for becoming more decisive is the production of an affirmation. Charles is required first to listen to the affirmation as Harrold produces it; someone else must write it down for him. He needs to concentrate, as this is important enough to warrant total attention. After all, this is going to help. Harrold asks if the affirmation has lifted his spirit, just to get confirmation. “Yes”, Charles says. So the affirmation is delivered: job done. Charles can get on with becoming more decisive. He will have to use that scribbled down affirmation when he gets home, perhaps speaking it aloud in front of the mirror. Harrold is satisfied that the affirmation has worked, as Charles has endorsed it, and so moves on; there are more people to help. But hold on. The affirmation helps, but how? Firstly, and perhaps most importantly, there is the interactional organisation in which the affirmation has been produced. Charles’s response was built into the design of the question. He was aligned to the activity being performed in Harrold’s question, and
gave a type-conforming response\textsuperscript{101}. This is a phenomenon in itself, the way the "internal" structure of talk determines what is said, and much has been said of that\textsuperscript{102}.

Harrold is concealing so much detail with the style and manner of her interaction with Charles. How does Harrold know that Charles is naturally decisive? What is this based on? In what circumstances does Charles display indecisiveness? And in what company? What are these decisions, exactly? How accurate is the prescription? Is it the "right" one? Specifics are disregarded. We are not told about them; and Harrold does not ask, either. As we have seen, they do not matter anyway, because we need only concern ourselves with generalisations. The affirmation is being prescribed to "mop up" and account for particulars. There is other detail that we do not see: the contexts of the application of this affirmation. The mistakes. The successes. That is to say, doing being more decisive. We do not see what those two little words, and the hyphen, refer to: self-help. There is a good chance Charles has already used affirmations. He has read the book, and is now at the workshop, because the book was not enough. Harrold has finished but Charles still needs to perform self-help. His quest is still pending. It is placed back "out there", away from the workshop, reunited with the details we were not told about in the formulation of the problem. Harrold told us that simply "receiving" an affirmation is not sufficient; it will have to be applied. She says so in Reinvent Yourself\textsuperscript{103}. And we know she had to work hard to reinvent herself, as she has carefully told us. Old beliefs may

\textsuperscript{101}There is a normative pattern for second pair parts: requests are granted, invitations are accepted and confirmation of what is proposed in the grammar of questions is normatively preferred, except, for instance, when what is proposed includes self-deprecations or accusations. We must be sure that this is not the expression of the individual as such, a psychological preference, but a normative structure of the design of adjacency pair turns. This has been called a "grammaticalized normativity" (Heritage, 2002b: 1427).

\textsuperscript{102}Conversation analysis has been established as a field of sociological inquiry, better equipped than any other, to describe the fine details of the machinery of talk in interaction. Talk is its topic and domain of phenomenon; everything else (the world, people, things) arises out of, and emerges from, talk.

\textsuperscript{103}"Practise, Practise, Practise. Take every opportunity to practise your new persona. Get those new habits in place. Be real. Get them booked into your diary. They won't happen automatically or overnight - that's not the nature of habits. They need to be adopted and followed. If you want to be 'an exerciser', get those classes and runs built in to your diary. When you falter, get back into it again. Good habits are for life, not just for now" (Harrold, 2004: 35). "Once you know what you want and have aligned your perspective, you have to do something to make things happen. The difference between thinkers and doers is what they do at this point. Revving up your psychology will only take you so far. The next step is doing something. Demonstrate your commitment to your desires and plans. Get busy. You know what you need to do, so just do it!" (p. 69-70). "Think less and be more the person you want to be. [...] The more you behave as you are confident, cheerful, happy and optimistic, the more you'll feel it and become it" (p. 88).
have been replaced with new beliefs, but that was not enough. A whole lifestyle was abandoned, replaced with a new one. Then there were new friends, a new house and, reflecting her desire to be happy, a new profession. So many things contributed to her reinvention, so many details. Charles is given an affirmation to work with. That is all.

Resistance to prescription

The internal structure of talk does not always determine what is said. People do not always align themselves with what other people say. It looks like this. We see that Sophie is not excluded from the power of an affirmation:

Harrold: Sophie (.>)okay< (.>) okay (0.3) °I’m Sophie (.>) I’m innocent (0.5) I’m Sophie (0.2) I’m a loving (0.3)

lovable (.>) person (.>) I deserve to be loved (0.4)

Sophie (.>) am a loving (0.2) lovable person (0.3) I
deserve (0.2) to be loved (.>) I love (0.4) and

accept myself (0.2) exactly (.>) as I am (0.9)

>is that< (.>) any of that (.>) hitting home (0.2)

(S) is any of that (.>) hitting home (0.2)

Sophie: <yes> (0.4)

Harrold: which (.>) which ones (.>) which words(0.6)

Sophie: °I accept myself° (0.7)

Harrold: I >LOVE< (.>) and accept myself=

Sophie: =I love and accept myself (1.2)

Harrold: <exactly> as I am (.>)

Sophie: exactly as I am (0.5)

Harrold: let me ask you this (0.2) do you love yourself

do yourself (0.2) find yourself (.>) lovable

(0.6)
We have seen this procedure before, with Charles. Harrold wants the affirmation to be carried out; she wants Sophie to repeat it back to her, verbatim. And Sophie does. But when Harrold asks if Sophie loves herself, as repeating the affirmation should confirm or restate, she says no (arrowed). Is this a retraction, saying yes to the affirmation, then no to the question? No. Sophie is required to say yes: the affirmations do hit home with her. The problem is that Sophie will not be won over by the work of the affirmation. Sophie’s resistance to the affirmation is not evidence, for her, that she is unlovable. We must acknowledge Sophie’s sheer honesty here; the affirmation will not simply “wash” over the problem and she is not going to follow the endorsement of yes. Things are more complicated than that. However, for Harrold, whether Sophie loves herself is a function of the affirmation. It is and can be the only evidence available and needed to confirm (or deny) her “lovableness”. So Harrold suggests several reasons for this denial; she accounts for that non-conforming response. Harrold says this is an instance of a lack of self-awareness, Sophie being unable to see the label needing to be replaced. This means another label is not forthcoming, and therefore there is no evidence to justify why this new label should be present. This generalised account is being used to explain a specific case: Sophie’s “no”. Resistance to the affirmation is a problem attributed to Sophie, and not an inadequacy of the affirmation as a prescription. Harrold assures Sophie that the evidence, that she is lovable, is there – it just needs to be uncovered. Harrold searches for it, with more questions:

1 Sophie: "u:hm" (.) I I give my husband three children (0.2)
2 Audience: hehh hahh hehh h[ahh hehh hahh
3 [((clapping)) (4.0)
4 Harrold: and that (.) <to you> (.) demonstrates (0.4) to
5 you being a lovable person (0.2) I just need to
6 understand the way you’re seeing this (1.0)
7 Sophie: → y:e (.) yes (0.2) or no (.) because (0.5) I’m
8 confused about that (.) ↑if my husband really loves

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Sophie has provided evidence: she has given her husband three children. But look what happens when Harrold asks if this is demonstrable evidence. A type-conforming response is given, which is then modified with a non-conforming response (line 7, arrowed). Sophie has departed from the constraints of the preferred response option—a "yes"—made relevant by the question, introducing other, relevant material: the status of her relationship with her husband. One of the features of marriage, which Sophie is pointing to, is having children. It indicates part of a loving relationship that husband and wife share. But Sophie is not sure if her husband loves her; this is evidence that she is not lovable. Harrold dismisses Sophie's uncertainty but, once again, Sophie does not accept the terms and presuppositions embodied in Harrold's question (line 13, arrowed)\textsuperscript{104}. The question did not permit her to include the details of her marriage. These contingencies, not accounted for in the design of the question, are once again rejected as relevant to the job at hand: finding evidence of Sophie's feelings toward herself.

\textsuperscript{104} Even when a type-conforming response is preferred, recipients in talk often provide a non-conforming response, displaying their departure from the constraints embodied in the initial speaker's turn (e.g., Heritage, 2003; Raymond, 2006). Consequently, recipients, in their turns at talk, often introduce additional or new information which was not made relevant, or allowed for, in the first speaker's turn/inquiry/question etc. We see this with Sophie.
Things were far simper with the affirmations. And there was obviously a preference for them as a device with which to establish “loving oneself”. The beauty is that they were not evidence-based: they did not require the resources of these “others” (her husband) for an answer. But, since they did not work, or were not endorsed by Sophie, Harrold is searching for and has found alternative evidence, but it is getting too complicated. It is missing the point, the source of the problem. So in an effort to erase unnecessary details, to get to the fundamentals, (to return to the simplicity of the affirmations?), Harrold is discarding the relevance of Sophie’s relationship with her husband. These other details can be, so to speak, stricken from the record105. Harrold tries again, and asks more questions about Sophie’s role as a mother:

1 Harrold: so (.) can you s:ee (0.3) that you were a good

2 *mother (.) that you we- (.) that you are (.) a good

3 mother (.) that you are *generous (0.3)

4 Sophie: → "no" (0.2)

5 Harrold: "S:ophi:::e" (0.6) are your children very different

6 (.) from (.) other peoples (.) childr[en (0.2) *like

7 Audience: ["hehh hahh"]

8 Harrold: (.) did you have to get up in the middle of the night

9 and f:eed them an all that *stuff (0.9)

10 Sophie: → "yes" (.) but it wasn’t difficult (0.3)

Harrold is offering a version of childrearing – what mothering is like. She is producing a gloss of what a mother’s work should entail; it ought to provide the evidence of Sophie’s loveableness. Sophie does not buy this as an adequate description of her own experience. She first offers a non-conforming response (line 4), then later, a type-conforming response, which becomes non-conforming (line 10). “Yes (.) but it wasn’t difficult”, Sophie says. While Harrold is trying to produce motherhood as remarkable and in need of

105 Drew (1992) provides an extensive analysis of a similar sequence of interaction in the context of courtroom examination.
special attention, Sophie is treating it as an ordinary, normal part of life. It was done, and
done as mothering should be done, but that is no reason to justify its use as a solution to
the “problem-as-it-is-being-produced-here”. Sophie’s display of honesty, and not her
display of resistance, is not allowing Harrold’s positive thinking prescription to
characterise her situation. Harrold needs something else, another point of entry.

Seeking depth
What do we see? Harrold is certainly working hard at her performance as a life coach.
But that does not mean self-help is being performed. Harrold needs to know how Sophie
is “seeing things” and to find out what she thinks about herself and her life. But we all
know what thinking means as a prescription for self-help. Exactly: it is of little value
without action. This is supposed to be a workshop that members attend in order to meet
an insufficiency from reading self-help books. It is supposed to exceed the activity of
reading, but we remain at the level of thinking, which we know is not much better than
reading. Thinking does not do anything; it is inactivity. And that is bad. Just read
Reinvent Yourself. Charles will need to engage the world away from the workshop and
deal with those ad hoc, situation-specific concerns in his daily life, as he has done before,
if he is to make good decisions. Sophie still needs to love herself, but it is not taking
place here. That will come later, “out there”. So we simply have the recitation of the self-
help book, with its inadequacy plainly in view.

Things get complicated when the endorsement of yes is not followed. When
affirmations are not accepted, then there are problems. That is why Sophie’s resistance to
Harrold’s questions still needs to be accounted for. Something is not right. More
questions are needed. Depth is the key; either Harrold, through her questions, or more
likely, Sophie, through her responses, has not attained the right depth. We had better let
Harrold explain:

1  Harrold: this is so deep (.) if I opened Sophie up tinside (.)
2  guess what I’d find (.) >deep (.) deep (.) deep (.)
3  deep (.) right at your t:ore (0.3) that I could see
There you go. They both agree that the problem is deep. Harrold’s questions are searching to attain a level of depth. That is why the evidence is not forthcoming – Sophie has never gone deep enough. But what is meant by depth? For Harrold, it means the endorsement of yes, agreeing with the terms of her questions. But depth is also attained through resistance; Sophie’s non-conforming responses are revealing her “unconscious”. Things are not retrieved with ease, and confusion is present, as they are painful to talk about. Perhaps they have not been considered like (or as deeply as) this before; that is why there is resistance. So Harrold is making progress, slowly. As for Sophie, well she is finding it difficult to separate all of the things outside of the workshop, away from the questions: her husband, her children, and her life. Harrold does not see this; she just sees resistance as reaching closer to the source of the problem. Harrold must achieve depth, so she asks if Sophie has done anything for someone else that only she knows about:

Sophie: °u:hh° (0.2) I have a sister who is a year younger than m:e (.) and when we were fourteen and fifteen (0.5) .hhh (0.2) we were put to (.) the choice (.) a man wanted to rape one of us (0.2) and I offered myself for my sistor° (0.2)
your <justification> (.) to love yourself (0.2) will you take that (.) on board (3.6)

Sophie: → "uhh" (0.3) I "don't understand" (0.2)
Harrold: all right (0.3) how do you <feel> (.) about yourself (.) doing that (6.9)
you did something (0.3) incr:edible (.) unbelievable (. for someone else (.)

Sophie: → >yes< (0.5) because I love my sister (]
Harrold: [y]eah=
Sophie: =my little sister (.)
Harrold: =y:eah(0.2)
Sophie: → but she’s not even nice to me now=
Harrold: =never mind h:er (0.2)
Sophie: → yeah b[ut]
Harrold: ["n]ever mind." (0.2) >no no n[0]<
Sophie: [y]eah=
Harrold: =you did something (0.2) <remarkable> (.) and incr:edible (.) and not anybody here kn:ows (.) that they could definitely do the same thing (.) in that situation (0.2)

Keep breathing indeed! This is serious, and certainly a candidate for having reached depth. But what does Harrold do with depth, given that Sophie has revealed something you might expect only a well-acquainted counsellor or therapist to be told, in confidence and after a number of successful meetings? Sophie says she sacrificed herself for her sister, and became a victim of rape. Harrold asks Sophie to treat this as the evidence she needs to see herself as a lovable person. While Harrold is trying to tell one story, one with a life coaching perspective, Sophie wants to tell another story, one that includes those complicated specifics, from "out there" (lines 16, 22, 26 and 28, arrowed). But specifics get in the way of Harrold’s neat story, and are once again rejected as relevant to
the job at hand. Harrold continues with her agenda, and is insensitive to the details of the problem. There is a pattern. As with her previous two requests for evidence that Sophie is lovable, Harrold has been supplied with *counter* evidence: Sophie provides empirical instances of her being unlovable. Sophie is telling of a legitimate occasion on which she ought to have received love, but never did. It is her sister, as Sophie tells: "she’s not even nice to me now". This does not matter to Harrold.

Evidence is flexible. It is the task of the defence and prosecution in a courtroom to make evidence say different things. It depends on perspective. And so it is here. Harrold wants Sophie to see the evidence she has provided and evaluate it differently than she is now. The substantive content of the events which the evidence is part of does not matter; that is bracketed off, left "out there", along with the story Sophie is trying to tell. Sophie has work to do:

1 Harrold: I’m telling you <now> (0.5) that you need to chalk that up and see that (0.2) as a very very good reason (0.3) a <compelling> reason (0.2) to appreciate yourself (.>) to love yourself< because you did something remarkable (.>) you did something generous (0.2) can you see that (0.7) YOU DIDN’T HAVE TO DO IT (.>) you choose to do it (0.2)
2 Sophie: —it was in my head* (0.2) "I had to" (.>)
3 Harrold: —okay< you felt that you had to do it~
4 Sophie: —>no()<
5 Harrold: [but the truth is (.>) you didn’t have to do it (0.3) the *simple* (.>) answer (.>) in truth is (.>) <you> <did> not have to do *that* (.>) there was a truth (.>) and you exercised your choice (.>) and your choice was to do it (.>) to sacrifice yourself (0.8) yeah? (0.2) "okay" (0.2) I’m gonna leave it there (0.2) thank you (.>
Harrold attributes the problem to Sophie's perspective, reproducing the hyper-individualism of the self-help book. Sophie's attempts at telling of the events of the rape (lines 8 and 10, arrowed) belong to another perspective, which supports her reported unproductive label, and are once again rejected. Something that is not currently being done, but which is required to be done, will not be done “in here”, when Harrold is present and engaging Sophie, where we can see. Harrold must move to the next item on her agenda for the workshop; there is probably someone else who wants to talk. Harrold has terminated the expertise she has applied to Sophie’s case. The prescription has been delivered: Sophie needs to see this reported case of rape as “a very very good reason (0.3) a <compelling> reason (0.2) to appreciate yourself”. But what would satisfy this request? Harrold wants Sophie to provide a confirmatory report, that she does now see this as evidence of her own self-worth. Surely that would be insufficient. Sophie will not have done anything, at a practical, action-based level. It would just be words, like the thousands read and mulled over during the activity of reading a self-help book. Harrold has told her readers, time and again, about the inadequacies of thought without action.

In any case, Sophie has more to tell. If nothing else, this will be required to more thoroughly constitute the details of the problem, to get things straight. Perhaps she will need to go even deeper, maybe speak with her sister and the rest of the family. Greater sensitivity to these features of her story would certainly tell us something. But Harrold must give way to practical matters, and move on. This is a workshop: other people have problems too. Nonetheless, Harrold has abandoned the very feature that promised to sufficiently address and engage Sophie’s problem – dialectic. All channels of communication have been severed. It is now Sophie who has to deal with things; and the problem is left floating in mid air. How will it be brought down to earth? We do not know, because what might be required is empirically unavailable. Harrold cannot tell us because she is now talking to someone else.

Meet Lilly. She has been working hard to establish and develop a successful business with her husband. She says she has been spending time developing herself too;
she gets many compliments from friends and colleagues for her positive attitude. But Lilly still has one problem, which her positive attitude has simply concealed over the years: her weight. It began in childhood, when peers teased her. She was, to use the proper Harroldian vocabulary, labelled. The problem is engrained to the extent that a positive attitude has been insufficient at dealing with this unproductive label. It just pushed it to one side. Deferred it. That is why she is present in the workshop: to deal with a lifelong issue over her appearance. Harrold’s self-help books have not worked, and neither have the various others she has likely read. Perhaps something else is needed, beyond a positive attitude? What is going wrong? When Harrold asks if she thinks that it is natural for her to be overweight, Lilly disagrees. “That’s a really good place to start”, Harrold says. But neither does Lilly think it is natural for her not to be overweight. She shows resistance to being slim. Harrold has found something; she has “got it”. She applies the prescription on which she has relied since the beginning of the workshop:

Harrold: so (.) straight away (0.2) we’ve gotta q- change the way that you think so that you truly deep down believe (0.3) that actually your natural state is to be slim because y- >at one level< (. . ) o- ( ) you say => yeah< (. . ) I’m not attached to seeing myself as naturally over weight or whatever (0.6) but <actually> (0.3) your not <completely> okay with the notion that your natural state is to be slim (. . ) there’s confusion (. . ) there’s resistance< (. . ) okay (0.2) so there’s that (0.2)

Lilly: it’s like a lack of honesty there (. . ) or something (. . ) it’s ‚like (. . )

Harrold: >well [no< no]

Lilly: [its like]e I’m not true t[o]

Harrold: [n]o no no (. . )you don’t <believe> (0.5) that your natural state is one of slimness (0.2)

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Lilly does not believe that it is natural for her to be slim: that is her problem. The world where Lilly engages her weight, and comes face to face with all its practicalities, gets totally obscured. It is left "out there". All that remains is the symptom, a belief, which needs to be modified. Work is required to be undertaken but affirmations will not do: the problem runs deeper than that. As was the case with Sophie’s label, reaching a level of depth is the key here. So Harrold applies another strategy:

1  Harrold:  a fear I have of being slim <is> (0.3)
2  Lilly:  making the effort and failing (.)
3  Harrold:  thank you
4  (0.7)
5  and the worst thing about failing is (0.4)
6  Lilly:  "having" to pick myself up and try again
7  (.)
8  Harrold:  thank you
9  (0.5)
10  and another fear I have of being slim is
11  (7.0)
12  the first thing that comes into your mind
13  (0.2)
14  Lilly:  >what< (0.2) I look like when (.) starts to
15  happen (.)
16  Harrold:  thank you
17  (0.5)
18  another fear I have of being slim is
19  (12.0)
20  Lilly:  "what's there"~
Recall those known information questions Harrold used earlier. This is similar. Mehan (1979) recognised that part of the structure of classroom discourse, where we typically see the use of known information questions, follows a three-part sequence of teacher initiation, student response and teacher evaluation (see also Carlson, 1989; Cazden, 1986; Koshik, 2002; Lee, 2007; Nassaji & Wells, 2000). Teachers do not just ask questions in the classroom for no good reason. Work is being done. Students are being evaluated on the answers they give to teachers' questions. So: Lilly is being evaluated. Harrold may not be asking questions, but she is initiating turns (lines 1, 5, 10 and 18), which receive replies (lines 2, 6, 14 and 20) to which Harrold gives evaluative comments (lines 3, 8 and 16).

Work is being performed here – not teaching like in a classroom, but life coaching. Right here, in the workshop. Harrold starts a sentence and Lilly just has to complete it. Harrold is embedding prefatory material relevant to the required answer in the sentences. Imagine the game join the dots, where following the dots "gives" the answer. Only here Harrold has also "fitted" Lilly into displaying herself as this kind of person, someone who has a specific set of relations to this kind of problem, by making her assume the "I" position formulated in the sentence she is being asked to complete. Harrold says "thank you" when Lilly finishes the sentences. What has she received that warrants this courteous reply each time? Depth. Harrold wants to get to the bottom of why Lilly displays resistance to being slim; she has to attain the depth necessary to reach it. Harrold is performing again. This is the application of expertise of life coaching. Look, when the expected ¹⁰⁶ reply is not forthcoming – when, that is, depth is not being pursued or revealed – Harrold simplifies her initiations so as to encourage it (cf. Mehan, 1979: 288-9). We see this when Harrold asks Lilly, on line 12, after a long pause, to just say "the first thing that comes into your mind". Harrold must find what she is looking for. And this work must be done.

¹⁰⁶ What exactly is expected is not specific, and it does not need to be; what is important is that an answer, any answer, is given. Work must be seen to be taking place in the name of life coaching.
Where is this expertise destined? Harrold is searching for a point of depth. Her argument, seen through her sequence of interaction with Lilly, must presumably follow an increasing acquisition of depth, stage by stage. Start at the surface, and on the basis of what you get, dig deeper. But Harrold's line of inquiry does not follow a rational argument; and neither do Lilly's replies. If anything, the sequence is irrational. It does not move in a logical manner, or according to its own logic of depth. It looks like this. The first sentence to complete (line 1) was, "a fear I have of being slim is..." Lilly said a fear of failing. Then Harrold asked what the worst thing about failing was (we assume this to be Lilly's attempts at being slim) (line 5). This required a reply that would be retrieved from a greater depth than Lilly's prior reply; it is the worst thing, ranked, logically and rationally, below all other things. But Harrold then simply re-offers the first sentence for Lilly to complete again (line 10), in effect returning to the surface and going over old ground. Then, déjà vu! The same question is once again offered (line 18), this time asking for another fear of being slim. What is being reached by the same question, just repeated? Depth is not acquired as a result of the practice of this strategy. A burden is placed on Harrold's basic sentence, as it is repackaged as if to perform different work. Let us return to the sequence:

21 Harrold: and the worst thing about feeling a fear
22 Lilly: of failing is
23 (5.0)
24 Lilly: a place that I don't want to go to
25 (3.0)
26 Harrold: what I feel about myself when I fail is
27 (.)
28 Lilly: really bad (.)
29 Harrold: pardon (.)
30 Lilly: really bad (.)
31 Harrold: okay
32 (3.6)
33 Harrold: what I feel about myself when I fail is

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Lilly: awful (0.6) and above all (. ) what I feel myself when I fail is (1.8) really frustrated (0.5)

Lilly: I hate it (0.5) because it just doesn’t fit in with the rest of me (. )

Harrold: >got it< (0.2) she just doesn’t do failure (0.2) and sometimes when we just (. ) don’t do failure (0.2) we don’t (. ) attempt things that could incur the risk of failure (. ) because we don’t ( ) it doesn’t do failure (0.3) would (. ) ar- ar- identity (. ) see you’re a very together person I can tell that (. ) <a mile away> it doesn’t matter what you would choose to do Lilly (0.2) who you are (0.2) someone who <makes things successful> (0.2) sh- se- (. ) if she asks you to go into business with ;her (. ) go into business with her=

Audience: =hehh hahh hehh hehh= Harrold: =>no< I’m serious (. ) cause I can tell (. )

Harrold starts the sentence. Lilly completes it. Harrold gives her courteous thank you. You are familiar too with the reversal of logic exhibited in the offering of the sentences. Look, there it is again. Harrold offers the sentence (line 21): “and the worst thing about
feeling a <failure> i:s...” Lilly completes it with: “a place that I don’t want to go to”. So this should be the worst thing about feeling a failure, ranked below every other feeling she might have. Has depth been reached? No. More sentences are offered. On line 26: “what I feel about myself when I fail i:s...” And this same sentence, word for word, is re-offered (line 33), which is then re-offered a third time, with an intensifier (line 36): “and above all (.) what I feel myself when I fail is...” But that is still not enough. It has to be unpacked further, and in so doing, the sentence is extended. On line 40, Harrold starts with “and...” And again, on line 43, she starts with “because...” Lilly replies: “because it just doesn’t fit in with the rest me”. Has depth been reached, finally? Yes. “Got it”, Harrold says. But what has Harrold got?

Look closer. Lilly has told us, albeit through Harrold’s sentences, that she feels “awful” and “really frustrated” by trying and failing because “it just doesn’t fit with the rest of me”. Two things. First, Harrold has recognised the attitude that Lilly has to failing. Lilly does fail, as she has told us, but that does not mean she does failure. To the contrary, it is her attitude to failing which is critical here. She picks herself back up, always sees the positive side of things; she is “someone who makes things successful”. But related to this positivity is the idea that these reported instances of failure are rare, exceptional. They stand in contrast to Lilly’s typical, character-driven successes in life. Second, notice how Harrold summarises this (line 47): “she just doesn’t do failure (0.2) and sometimes when we just (.) don’t do failure (0.2) we don’t (.) attempt things that could incur the risk of failure”. The addressee has shifted. It is no longer the first person singular form, with Lilly as the referent of all of those I constructions; and it is no longer the second person singular form, the specific addressee referred to as “you”, the person Harrold is interacting with. It becomes, firstly, “she”, a third-person singular form and then changes, secondly, to become “we”, the first-person plural form. Harrold is not addressing Lilly but the audience. Harrold has returned to her “teaching” address and Lilly has become the topic of her interaction with everyone here today. She is an example of a generality. From specific to general: the omnipresence of the audience.
While Harrold is addressing everyone else, she is not addressing Lilly's weight, as a specified, singular and particular problem. Or rather, Harrold's address is to be applied to Lilly too, as she falls within the general address. She is the reason for its being formulated now. So the message, as everyone listens attentively, is a warning. The danger of this mindset, this fear of failure that Lilly has demonstrated, is that it carries the risk of not doing anything. The prescription: the audience needs to act. They need to do rather than not do, even if that incurs (the risk of) failure. We know the hierarchy: action rather than thinking. And Lilly can take something from this warning. She needs to get busy:

Harrold: s:o (0.2) >you know something< (.) you need to get
\text{\textless} over (.) \text{\textless}f:ailure\text{\textgreater} (.) you need to get over your fear of failure (.) and you need (.) to be able to see yourself (.) as (0.3) a gung h:o (.) can do (.)
dynamic person (.) who makes things work (.) >but<
whose identity\textsuperscript{\textgreater} (.) is not so fragile (.) and tied up with (.) failure (.) success (.) that they can't take \textgreater risks (.)...

And this means...

if you give a \textless seminar\textgreater and for whatever reason (.) five people turn up and your expecting twenty \textgreater five (.) are you gonna go (.) shoot your\textsuperscript{\textgreater} (.) are you gonna make it mean (.) that your really not very good at (.) things that you th:ought you were very good at (0.2) the \textgreater smart\textless person (.) thinks (.) \textgreater okay (.)
that's interesting (.) I'm gonna do a great work\textsuperscript{\textgreater}shop (.) the fact there's only five here means I can take a few risks: (.)I can try out some different things:
\textless and also\textgreater I'm not feeling thr:own (.) because
there's not fifty people or five hundred(.) and then
I’ll go away tonight (.) and over a glass of wine
(.) and chat with a friend (.) I’m gonna figure out
why only five people turned out (.) what do I need to
do differently to ensure a bigger outcome next (.)
( .) how can I use this experience. ( .) to fuel ( .)
future success and change uh ( .) >are you with me<

This is what Lilly must take away from the workshop: advice that is heavily packaged in
the rhetoric of self-help. Harrold is approving the endorsement of yes, as we have come
to expect from the experts. Lilly is encouraged to continue to do what she has reported
she has been doing all along. Think positively: make things work for you. But there is
another requirement, perhaps even more important than positive thinking. Lilly needs to
take action. A seminar is given as an example of what she might endeavour to undertake.
Hosting a seminar is a concrete, practical activity. Thinking might be necessary, but
things need to be done. Contingencies are involved, dealing with situations as and when
they arise. Everything is geared towards action – doing things, trying. Readjusting one’s
actions as a result of outcomes to prior actions: that is the only way for Lilly to overcome
her fear of failure. Thinking gives rise to action, but the context of action is not here, in
the workshop; it is only spoken about and pointed to as work to be undertaken
somewhere else. It will only happen away from the workshop, when Lilly deals with all
of those contingencies.

Something does not add up. Reading a self-help book was found to be an
inauthentic quest for self-help. As a self-help book author, Harrold herself gestured at this
inauthenticity. Her book, Reinvent Yourself, would not satisfy the requirement of
reinvention for her readers. They will need to attend a workshop, like this one. Reading is
not a practical activity; Harrold (2004) made that perfectly clear in her book:

Once you know what you want and have aligned your perspective, you have to do
something to make things happen. The difference between thinkers and doers is
what they do at this point. Revving up your psychology will only take you so far. The next step is doing something. Demonstrate your commitment to your desires and plans. Get busy. You know what you need to do, so just do it!" (p. 69-70). “Think less and be more the person you want to be. [...] The more you behave as if you are confident, cheerful, happy and optimistic, the more you’ll feel it and become it (p. 88).

There: thinkers and doers, or readers of Harrold’s self-help book and members of Harrold’s self-help workshop, or even inactivity versus activity. Harrold’s workshop is supposed to satisfy the requirement of activity, but instead it is re-enacting the critique, widely pointed to by Harrold herself, of reading. It is producing the very same self-conscious inadequacy at providing what is necessary for members of the workshop to complete their quest for self-help. It is actually restricting members from what they absolutely need to do to, if they are to deal with their problems. Harrold realises that there is a world out there in which members of her workshop live their lives. That is where problems arise, and that is where problems are to be dealt with. While they are “in here”, answering questions and looking at how they think about things “out there”, members of the audience are not fulfilling the requirement of action. Recall the organisational narrative from the self-help book: from reading, to thinking, to action. It could not provide the last, most important undertaking - action. Here, in the workshop, there is a similar organisational narrative, but reading has been erased. We just see: from thinking to action. But presence in the workshop will not allow members to negotiate the last hurdle either – action. It remains beyond the reach of members, while they are here. It can only be discussed. Questions can be asked, and answers can be given, but it will not count. Dialectic is not bringing them any closer to action.

Post-reinvention reports
Both Sophie and Lilly may still have work to do, outside of the workshop, but their situations are instructive for the audience. “It is important to see the past in a way that works for you”, Harrold says. Lilly needs to take risks, no matter what the outcome might be. Her childhood label does not have to control her life. Sophie does not see herself as
lovable because she is still blaming her family. She must let go, and take responsibility, if she is to love herself. Harrold identifies this as a general problem. “We live in a blame culture”, she tells us. What to make of this? There has been no specification of what this blame culture might be composed of, but that is not necessary. Its focus is primarily to prioritise what is happening in the workshop. It builds barriers. It makes spaces where specific things get done. If we look “out there”, we see a blame culture; that is somewhere we do not want to be. But if we look “in here”, we see people taking responsibility for their own lives. This is better. Presence at the workshop requires members to detach themselves from the culture from whence they came, to abandon what prevents them from performing self-help. Individual responsibility is necessary, to see things in a productive way. She knows what it is like “out there”, that is why she wants to rescue these members “in here”. This is the reason for attendance: to get members to pull themselves up by their own bootstraps. This involves, as this idiomatic expression implies, activity. This is important. Harrold folds over her flip chart paper again. There is more work to do. Write down whom you blame for the things that have not worked out in your life.

We need to see things in a positive way. Harrold is again reproducing her prescription, so deeply embedded in the activity of reading a self-help book, that she claimed needed to be overcome. That is why we are here: to do more than think. When we stop blaming others, and begin to take action in bringing about our own happiness, then we can have the life we want. Things must be seen productively or, if we recall the message from the self-help book, positively. “Does that make sense to anyone”, Harrold asks. “Yes”, Vicky replies, another member of the audience who volunteers to give her story:

1 Vicky: I had difficulty trying to live with my father (0.3)
2 .hhh (.) but what I see it= ↓a::s (.) n:ow (.) is (.)

Specific occasions of people attributing blame, for whatever reason and to whomever, are one thing, but a blame culture is another. Harrold is pointing to a wide pattern of activities, a whole way of life. Something so substantial is at fault – a culture in need of rescue. This, if anything, is Harrold’s individualist critique of culture. The trouble is that people are not taking enough individual responsibility. Culture creates an absence of self-help.
Vicky provides an experiential report of the difficulty of living with her father when she was a child. She does most of the talking. Harrold does not reject what Vicky is saying, like she did with Sophie. On the contrary, she listens, only speaking to get clarification.
Harrold just wants to know how Vicky sees things now. And that is simple: she has developed courage and self-belief. Look, she has taken responsibility and does not blame her father; and she has resilience and kindness too. Vicky is not doing anything here, nor is she required to do anything, apart from recounting prior events in her life. Her report is quite sufficient. Resilience and kindness: two qualities — four if we count courage and self-belief — that point to how Vicky is making things work for herself. She is, as Harrold would say, extracting all of the juice from a situation. Harrold is simply allowing Vicky to tell things the way she wants. No need for affirmations. And no need to search for depth. It is all there, right in front of us. Harrold is satisfied. "Anyone else", she asks:

1 Cathy: hhh (.1) >uhm< my name’s Cathy I was uhm (.1) I was
2 really bullied in school (.1) from sort of the age of
3 (.1) eleven up to (.1) sor’ave (.1) sixteen seventeen
4 (.1) and I’ve always (felt that) (0.2) m:ade me very
5 kind and very <uhm> patient and tolerant (.1) *and
6 those are the sort of skills that° (.1) I see as being
7 important *and uhh° (0.2)
8 Harrold: <excellent> (.1)
9 Cathy: they sort of s:olved me (.1) I suppose in a positive
10 way (.1)
11 Harrold: beautiful (.1) that’s perfect (0.3) >I mean< you
12 obviously re:alise >got to that point< (.1) in time
13 (.1) before today (.1)
14 Cathy: yeah (.1) yeah=
15 Harrold: =I can see it (.1) cause you look clear (.1) >y’know
16 someti- (.1) sometime-< (.1) I don’t wanna cause
17 somtim- (.1) don’t wanna sort of (.1) sound spooky
18 w:ookys here (.1) but sometimes people are very
19 cluttered and caught up with the past (.1) they don’t
20 look as clear ♦tan- very (.1) what’s your name again(.1)
21 Cathy: Cathy (.1)
Harrold: they don’t t- (. ) can I just point you out to people (. )

Cathy: †>yeah< (. )

Harrold: if you look at Cathy (. )

Audience: hehh hahh hehh (. )

Harrold: if you just stand up (. )

Audience: hehh hahh hehh (. )

Harrold: †don’t you think there’s a real- (0.2) >sort of< (. )

cl:arity about her (. ) y’know the way (. ) when you
talk about someone (. ) and you sometimes <say> (. )

there very straight forward (. ) †there’s (. ) NOTHING

hidden (. ) there’s nothing sort of (. ) either ( )

them (. ) y’know (. ) <what you a:ee (. ) is what you
get> (0.2) there †black (. ) and white (. ) y’know the
way yo- get (. ) y’see people like †that (0.2) that’s
how you look to me (. ) your very cl:ear (0.2) very

very clear (0.2) <uncomplificated> y- you look very

straight forward to me (. ) †very< (0.2) you don’t do
dra:ama in your life (. ) do you (. )

Cathy: no (. ) not really=

Harrold: =>no (. ) no< (. ) y’know (. ) >y’know the way sometimes

people do drama< (0.2) o:h god (. ) you don’t look

like that (0.2)

Audience: hehh h[a:hh hehh hahh

Harrold: [does th:at make sense t- you (. )

Audience: hehh hahh hehh h[a:hh

Harrold: [you m:ay sit down (. )

congratuflations: (0.2) thank you (0.5)

Cathy used to be bullied at school. But now she has developed patience and tolerance,

important skills that anyone would like to have. Just by the fact and manner of this report,
Harrold can see that Cathy has not let her previous experience get the better of her. She is not a victim, but an individual. She is taking responsibility. Harrold has no reason to question Cathy’s report, and she does not work to attain any more depth. There is no need. Harrold can see Cathy’s soul reflecting back at her, just by talking. Cathy, like Vicky before her, is symbolic. Her account corresponds with what Harrold has been talking about. Putting the past behind you. Seeing things positively. Taking action. This is such an idealised version of reinvention, a candidate case, that it can be seen by anyone. Cathy is asked to stand up, to display her clarity. There is nothing to hide: no confusion and no unproductive labels getting in the way. It is just black and white. This is so perfect that it might be mistaken for a dramatic performance, but as Cathy does not do drama, there can be no mistake. This is not acting; this is the real thing.

Look at Vicky and Cathy once more. We have not seen a performance of life coaching; they were just talking. Harrold has not done anything, as far as attendance at the workshop is concerned, but then neither has Vicky and Cathy. The substantive content of these exchanges is located “out there”, away from the workshop, and only pointed to by it. We are unable to see it because it has already happened. What Harrold has received are post-reinvention reports: after-the-event tellings. We do not see Vicky’s relationship with her father, when things were bad, or the circumstances surrounding her development of courage and self-belief. How is this reinvention practically done: its movements, its features and their relations with other features, its site-specific character. We do not know. Similarly, we do not see how Cathy developed patience and tolerance through her bullying experience. What did she find helped her to overcome her victimisation? What does tolerance mean, as self-help? What actions were undertaken and contributed to her reinvention? We cannot say.

Sophie still needs to do work and begin to love herself; we do not see what this might look like because it will take place when she goes home. This work of self-help will exceed the workshop as a site of self-help. So it is with Lilly. And as for Vicky and Cathy, they have already pulled themselves up by their bootstraps. That also exceeded the workshop; it happened before they arrived. Once again, we are being promised so much
by the presence of expertise, but what is being delivered, to the extent that it is being delivered, are more diversions from what is required. Members of the audience might wish they could do what Vicky and Cathy have done, and reinvent themselves, but that is no substitute for doing it themselves. There is an absence of the very phenomenon that is used to qualify the occasion of the workshop. I wanted to see occasions of members reinventing themselves in a workshop entitled reinvent yourself: I am not asking for the world, just self-help. Or: just reinvention.

4.5 Concluding remarks
A group of self-help book readers has attended a self-help workshop because it promises what was unavailable by reading self-help books. Attendance closes the gap created by reading; it provides a more immediate and concentrated version of what was diluted in the reading process. These readers are in the company of an expert: Fiona Harrold. The occasion showcases the authenticity of live, face-to-face encounter, where things can be seen close up. It is all about attaining a richness of detail, at the interactional level, where members report specific details of their problems and Harrold applies specific forms of her expertise. What has this proximity to expertise accomplished for members? We see that Harrold has developed the idea of the uniqueness of every member of the audience. They are being addressed as individuals. We have met some of them: Charles, Sophie and Lilly. There are problems with making decisions. Then there is a lack of self-worth, being unlovable. Body image is there too. We are familiar with this strategy; it is reproducing the same addressing function as the self-help books. This is certainly promising.

But then something happened. There is a room full of individuals, all with different problems. Harrold conceals the differences, and treats each respective problem in a highly generic fashion. The same sets of questions are asked. Affirmations are employed as prescriptions. A common theme is identified as a collective problem: thinking. Harrold prioritises thought over action. Because actions are based on thoughts and subordinate to them, they are the level at which Harrold engages her audience. Thoughts are convenient; Harrold finds out about them by asking questions. The trouble is that everything has to become an “answer”, and only certain things count. So much
detail gets lost. The spontaneity of interaction gives way to the constraints of achieving institutional goals. This means uniqueness disappears. It also means that practical activity is precluded as a feature of attending the workshop. So, in reproducing the format of the self-help book, Harrold has returned her audience to the level of inactivity of reading from which she had previous told them they needed to escape.

Harrold's prescription is bleak. Because thinking is the problem, and because thought works to a common rhetoric of performing in a mechanical fashion, members are treated "mechanically". Members are no longer, or never have been, producing the "correct" responses to the outside world. They should be responding positively: a different form of "programming" is required. The programme is called positive thinking. Some members have deviated from it. That is all. It is possible, then, to master a given phenomenon, which is to say, solve a problem, by following some rule or, most generally, instruction. Such mastery is displayed in the form: "x" is followed by "y". If what Harrold has to offer, as expertise, is followed as described, then the desired results will obtain. Problems will disappear. This expertise applies in all situations; it is insensitive to context. Artificial intelligence follows the same image of humans; its many failings have been documented convincingly (e.g., Collins, 1990; Dreyfus, 1967; 1972; Dreyfus & Dreyfus, 1986). But we are not robots; nor are we computers. Beliefs are messy, and they are hugely sensitive to context. They are embedded in practical, situational contexts, not isolated in the skulls of the individuals. So long as problems find their expression through changes in context, propositional knowledge will not do. Things are just not like that.

A workshop called reinvent yourself has been attended, but we have not seen folks reinventing themselves. Because problems are isolated in cognition, they are hidden away from view. But they have only been concealed; they are still present. These folks do share something: they will each be performing their problems, in all their detail, when they leave today. Out in the world - this is where problems will become visible again. While we have been in the workshop, we have not seen them doing things on their own, for themselves. Recall what Smiles said about reading, "which is often but a mere passive
reception of other men's thoughts; there being little or no active effort of mind in the transaction” (1859: 218). And so it is for this self-help workshop. “You need to see yourself as lovable”, Harrold says to Sophie. “The evidence is there, you just need to believe it”. Sophie just needs to believe it. But in what might that comprise? And what about the world in which Charles is indecisive? Or the positive attitude Lilly needs to apply to her weight? So much is left unexplicated. Any specification of individual problems, or the practical circumstances of their resolution, is empirically absent. Here in the workshop there is no active effort of mind. No application. No self-help.

Harrold has done a lot of speaking. She has given her thoughts. The audience has followed her, but then they have had to answer her questions. So Harrold has been performing Harrold; and, in its own way, it has been very entertaining. Nonetheless, it has been a performance. Scripts have been followed. She has been working with her own interests, in the absence of any in-depth understanding of the lives of the members of the audience. You recall how such details, when they were introduced, were quickly negated. Harrold had an agenda to follow. But agenda or no agenda, details were being omitted. Critical details. She had her chain of questioning to pursue, and the audience had to follow. There is a significant gap between what members of the audience know about themselves, and what Harrold is treating as allowable to know through the format of her performance. Harrold cannot, through instruction, convey in words what the audience can only do in practice. She is bargaining with the “strong interactional hypothesis”; she is assuming that talking in the language of reinvention is indistinguishable from undertaking reinvention in practice. The problems of the audience have a life outside of the workshop, but because they are made available only indirectly through its format, they can only be pointed to. We have reports on them. There are gestures to them. Then there are things to do when folks return to them. However, the performative contexts of problems are left untouched, out there in the world beyond the self-help workshop (cf.

108 I am referring to the gap between discourse and action. Talking about a phenomenon is one form of expertise, but it falls short, misses a different form of expertise, which is only seen in its contexts of practice (see Collins; 1990, Collins & Evans, 2008; Dreyfus, 1972; Dreyfus & Dreyfus, 1986).

Cherry, 2008a). Harrold talks the talk\textsuperscript{110}, but does not walk the walk. So self-help is once again deferred. Attending the workshop has taken members further away from the practical activity of performing their own reinvention. It has prevented them from doing what they will need to do to satisfy self-help. Why is self-help evading us? Might Harrold’s expertise be obstructing its visibility? There is a common problem but no means of solving it. Is professional expertise creating its own problems, for those pursuing the quest for self-help?

\textsuperscript{110} Collins & Evans (2008: 28) have characterized this as “interactional expertise”. This is people who have expertise in the language of a domain in the absence of the expertise of its practice. Talking is one thing; doing is another.
5.1 Introduction
People live with problems. The experts that talk to them do not. They simply speak from a distance, from the outside. As we have seen, Harrold may have professional expertise in life coaching, but it does not get rid of the problems in her audience; the self-help workshop was not an occasion of self-help. But how so? We know that the import of Harrold’s professional expertise is propositional in form. By treating the problems of her audience in terms of “knowing-that”, that is, being uninformed about the “rules” that govern a happy life, she has concealed their “know-how”. People know a great deal more than they are able to bring to conscious attention, especially people with problems. When people are detached from this domain of knowledge production, where they “know-how”, things get missed. Important things are overlooked. Misunderstandings occur; problems are only partially seen, and certainly made to conform to formal analysis. But if expertise is required to solve a given problem, and professional expertise is inadequate, then on whom do we call? Ourselves. It has a name, we recall from the introductory chapter: experiential knowledge — personal experience of living with a problem. But we have yet to see this, and there are two reasons, at least according to Borkman, the author of the seminal article that first introduced the concept\footnote{See too Borkman (1976).}. Professionals foil its presence; that is the first. And it is unable to survive, and surely unable to develop, at the level of the individual; and there is the second. What is absolutely critical is the context in which experiential knowledge is produced, and what it is produced to do. It is not produced when we read self-help books; readers are isolated from the presence of others with whom experiential knowledge is shared. And neither is it produced in Harrold’s life coaching workshop; although members may share problems with other members who are co-present, Harrold gets in the way with her questions.

If we could just retain the co-presence of those among whom a problem is shared, and get rid of the professionals. We can. Thus I have arrived at my final ethnographic
site: self-help groups. Mutual aid is a critical dimension to understanding experiential knowledge in a self-help group. In receiving help from others, members are helped; in serving help to others, members are also helped (Reissman, 1965, Riessman & Carroll 1995; Roberts, Salem, Rappaport, Toro, Luke, & Seidman, 1999; Toffler, 1980). Self-help groups are composed of people who are experts in their own problems, but this expertise is contingent on membership in a self-help group. This is where experiential knowledge develops, gets mobilized. As Borkman makes clear, "[s]uccessful, established self-help groups create, test, use, and disseminate a body of experiential knowledge about their shared problem and a workable resolution for it" (1990: 21). And, just to be sure, she and one of her colleagues reaffirms the status of self-help groups, as "voluntary associations of persons with a common problem that are oriented to resolving the common problem utilizing their own experiential knowledge of it" (Borkman & Parisi, 1995: 403). So there are two definitional features of a self-help group: a common problem and the means of its resolution. Experiential knowledge enjoins the two; it is what enables a common problem to be resolved. We shall speak, then, of experiential knowledge, a common problem and the means of its resolution interchangeably.

Things could not be better. I have been informed by a professional literature of the phenomenon of self-help groups, and there is not a journalist in sight. We have seen that self-help groups do not attract critique, as do self-help books. The columnists stay well away too; I am yet to find a scornful article on self-help groups. That self-help groups are not spoken in the same breath as self-help books invokes something we have been unable to see hitherto – self-help. Look, it is all here: the absence of professionals, the presence of lay-constituted expertise and, something else we have not seen yet, practical activities. But let us not get hasty, and miss something important in our excitement. Many groups look like self-help groups, especially to us outsiders. Self-help group scholars – Borkman, Katz, Kurtz and Riessman are the important examples – have told us what constitutes a self-help group. And they are to be distinguished, they tell us, from other, alternative categories of group: “support groups”, “social groups”, “mutual

112 This is a candidate instance of “contributory expertise” (Collins & Evans, 2008). This “enables those who have acquired it to contribute to the domain to which the expertise pertains: contributory experts have the ability to do things within the domain of expertise” (p. 24 original italics).
aid groups" and, so as to confuse matters further, "self-help mutual groups", "self-help mutual aid groups" and "self-help support groups". So many groups, but how to distinguish them at a practical level? The self-help group literature does not help here.

The current chapter is a contribution to an underdeveloped empirical specification of self-help groups. I have already discussed accounts of self-help groups in the introductory chapter. Briefly, these accounts take as their domain of phenomena the distribution of experiential knowledge through the narratives that members of self-help groups share during meetings. Stories get told. Members tell about their experiences of living with a common problem; and they develop their experiential knowledge by receiving, and not just telling, these stories. So self-help groups can be identified by this stock of experiential knowledge, displayed through narrative. Something important: contemporary accounts treat the boundaries of self-help groups as more or less fixed. As long as there are narratives, then we have self-help groups. It is as if the category has been imposed a priori, with its expression conforming to an idealised, theoretical pattern. Anything that deviates from that pattern, causing discrepancies, is dismissed as an illegitimate phenomenon. It is inauthentic; it is not a self-help group, and perhaps not even self-help. So: it is just a question of locating the category – in essence, the phenomenon proper – which, having been predefined, can be done, and is done, by professional investigators.

This does not help me, an ethnographer venturing into the field for the first time. How do we set about identifying self-help groups, when many of their defining features are not visible to those outside of their practice? Is it all in a name, a category? Look, there is a self-help group. Yes, but where? Take the five groups documented in my fieldwork. Two things add to the confusion. Firstly, many of the groups routinely drop any prefix in reference to their category ascription, choosing to refer to themselves as the "[problem] group". Alternative categories are often used interchangeably: self-help groups at times; support groups at other times. And secondly, one of the groups changed the category under which it collects its members. With the reintroduction of its legal constitution, a "self-help group" became a "support group". Does this mean a new
phenomenon has emerged, or has an old phenomenon simply been renamed? If there is such difficulty of identification, even at this stage, am I looking in the right place? Should my selected groups properly be called “self-help groups”? Things are unclear.

5.2 The appearance of a common problem
I do not want to lose this site of authenticity, but how to secure its presence? There is one positive indicator. Initial contact with each of the groups reveals an absence of professionals. These groups are run by and for members. Expertise derives from the experience of members. That is better; this looks like self-help. But the term support group is still present. Is this merely a question of semantics? On first inspection, from newsletters and initial visits to meetings, a similar pattern of activities is taking place in each of the groups. Similar goals are set. How to get purchase on things: a self-help group or a support group? Is there any practical difference in the mobilisation of these categories? And do we need to find a self-help group before we see “self-help”? Professional classification of self-help groups needs to be suspended for a moment. Self-help group scholars have tended to overlook the activity involved in categorisation. Categories move around. They can be affirmed and rejected. In short, it is a matter that has to be routinely engaged, for those who comprise its practice to decide – to affirm or reject, and much else besides. Those scenes of practical activities and reasoning of the groups must determine the arrangements of my fieldwork. I must exercise a most valuable ethnographic skill: asking questions. Anyway, I need to check that I have the real thing – authenticity. I asked the groups about the category self-help group and how it relates to their activities in meetings. Here is the lymphoma group:

1 Scott: some groups call themselves support groups (. ) and
2 others self help groups (. ) and that ’ s : : something
3 that has and continues to. puzzle me (0.2) and
4 whether there is any difference (. ) and so > # I know
5 this is actually cast as a support group < (. ) but.
6 (. ) would it be the same as a self help group (0.2)
7 is it a self help group (0.2)
Bob: yeah (.) course it->yeah< (0.4)

Jeff: the gr- group is both really=

May: =yeah it's both

Jeff: [we] started the group as u:hh (0.2) a

group to meet other people with a: common illness

that we suffer with (.) or an association with a

common illness .hhh (.) so that we could. hopefully

learn more about it so (.) y'know and if we can (.)

help anybody we will (.).

we will (.). I think that's. (.).that's the way I look

at it y'know (.).

And the arthritis group:

Scott: I'm curious about the term self-help what does that

mean to people (.) I mean what. I don't quite (.)

understand what a self-help group means (0.2)

Reg: you could say helping each other=

Sue: =yeah (.).

Reg: that's it (.) we're

Scott: [y]eah

Sue: we bond together and we're there for one another (.).

Scott: yeah=

Linda: =we learn from one another's experiences

Scott: yea[h]

Tina: [c]ome to terms with our conditions (.). help

ourselves to manage our conditions better (.)

John: self-help comes from yourself asking the questions:

(.) as you have a group if you have a problem you

talk to somebody in the group (.). and that's where

it comes from as a group=
These groups do not object to my asking them about the category to which they belong or with which they affiliate, much less to my offering the label "self-help group" as a candidate form of category ascription. The category did not threaten the status of the groups or their normative modes of representation. Perhaps more obvious, these members formulate the prototypical image of a self-help group, so strongly insisted upon in the literature. We see mutual orientation to experiential others with a "common illness": good. And we see the exclusion of professionals: this is good, too. However, self-help and support are not so easily separated, even when professionals are not around. Boundaries converge. The neatness of classification in the literature does not conform to the messiness in the field. At any rate, I have been provided with accounts assembled out of the very basis on which these groups exist – the canon of experiential knowledge. What is the substance of this experiential knowledge? Surely it is producible – indeed, it must be produced – in these groups. Members talk. Yes: members talk further about a common illness. It is identified when you ask them about it. Look, the visual impairment group:

1 Joan: every morning you go blind when you wake up (.)
2 Doreen: yeah (0.3)
3 Joan: and start again=
4 Doreen: it is the most a::wful feeling that I have to get used to right at the beginning that uh (. ) I couldn’t cope with it first thing in the mornings (. ) not.
5 realising I’d got to go through another d:ay (. ) not seeing things properly (0.2) uhm and I don’t know if anyone else has had that (0.2)
6 Ivy: it can be very frustrating=
Doreen: when you wake up [y]eah (.)

Ivy: and say to y'uh self (. I'm goin bli:nd (0.3) and I

Doreen: think it's just depressing (0.2)

Ivy: well when I wake up in the mornings (. first thing

(.) I lo- I've got a skylight in my room (. in my

ceiling (. I look at that and can see that (. I

just say thank you for another day (.)

Doreen: [y]eah (.)

Ivy: and go for it (. make the best of it (.)

Betty: yeah (. that's what you have to do

And here, a member of the stroke group, Sam, is talking about self-help:

Sam: yeah I think the self-help actually starts in

hospital (. because the: thing there is (. they

tell you (. they don't really know (. th-

they communicate to you and they don't know what

stroke's about (0.2) and they hide behind the fact

that everyone is different (.)

Milly: [diffe]rent (0.3)

Sam: and therefore (. from that moment (. then your

carer (. <particularly> (. is asking questions

all the time (. y'know (. what do I do (. and so

on (. and so y- you learn self reliance (. the

problem wi- with stroke (. I don't know if it goes

for everybody here (0.2) but. when they decide to

let you out of hospital (. I was able to go to the

cardiac rehabilitation (. gym (. as far as the

stroke was concerned (. there was nothing (. and
therefore if you wanted physiotherapy (...) you had to
source it y’self (...) u:hm if you wanted to improve
your strength (...) then you had to pay for y’self (...)
to go to a gym (...) the hospital doesn’t want to know
(...) because they don’t have the resources and they
don’t. (...) I think a lot’ve it is (...) a lot of people
who’ve had strokes don’t really want it (...)
afterwards (...) because they didn’t know (...) I mean
u:hh one of things I: remember most (...) u:hm how
frightened I was (...) I didn’t know what a stroke was
(...) and when they told me I had one (...) they might
as well’uh said you’ve got moon dust in your blood or
something like that (...)

And here, two members of the arthritis group, Fred and Linda, talking about arthritis:

Fred: you ask Linda how long she’s been in hospital with (...) after replacements (0.2)
Linda: well the shortest record is about five days (...) and
that’s after sort of uh hip surgery (...)
Fred: simple reason being (...) the doc - the surgeon now
(...) knows that Linda is better off at home with
me (...)
Linda: “yeah” (...)
Fred: once she’s over the initial operation (...)
Linda: and because the hospitals don’t cater for you, hhh I
mean they always have a chair at the side of the bed
(...) so before I go in (...) I say I need that chair
<on blocks> to raise it up (...) because I can’t bend
down (0.2) nine times out of ten (...) nobody’s done
anything (...)

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Fred: so she's just sitting there

Linda: [you've had y'surgery (.) you can't

sit on the ch:air properly (.) cause y'legs are
dangling from the fl:oor (...) th- uhh no pillo's or
what'ave you to push you forward (0.2) and they just
make matters w::orse (...)

There is more. Dawn, also from the arthritis group, talking about life with arthritis:

Dawn: and then I real;ised (.) twenty years down the li:ne
(. .) I don't want this to happen to other peo:ple (.)
>that< (.) there should be somewhere for us to tu:rn
(. .) .hhh and I think (.) a lot of people it's really
difficult when your first diag:no:sed (.) .hhh you
think that ;you're the only person in the world
;that's (0.2) walking funny (.)

Scott: uhm (.)

Dawn: un you're the only person in the world with funny
ha:nds (.) and you're the only person in the world
that can't pick things up (.) >and they can't take
the tops off thi:ngs< (...) .hhh and ya come here (.)
and imme:diately (.) y- you find (.) y'know at least
three or four people (.)

Scott: uhm (.)

Dawn: with funny ha:nds a[nd t]heir trying to use two hands

Scott: [.hh ]

to pick a cup up or or y'know (.) >hobbling to the
ba:r< (.) an y' y'know if y- if we all go in the pub
together (.) nobody stares at us .hhh but if you walk
in a pub on your own (.) and your hobblin (.) your
aware of it=
Scott: ~yeah~

What do you see? There is certainly plenty of talking. But what we have here is a class of readily produced illness narratives (Bury, 2001; Hyden, 1997). This is experience of living with illness. Just what I am looking for: expertise from living with a common problem. Emotions often run high. Failing bodies get in the way of normal lives. Uncertainty. Limited knowledge of diseases: what is happening to this body of mine? People have to cope. Knowledge is acquired. Linda has had surgery and Fred knows better than the surgeons how to stabilize things, at home. There is history and problems persist. They emerged before the group and will be there after the group. Bodies hobble. There are arthritic hands that look funny. Then there are outsiders that look and stare. What might they see? Solidarity. This is just a group of people enjoying the company of being around similar others. What do we see? Self-categorization: people enjoined through the sharing of phenomenological understandings of illness. A common problem forms the basis of categorization and group membership. In other words, we have located a genuine version of the phenomenon documented in the literature – self-help groups. Experiential knowledge has been revealed. We can see it, clearly. But can we? Or better: how can we?

Consider the context. Insomuch as these are member-produced accounts of experiential knowledge, they are visible as particular kinds of accounting. They do not arise, normatively, as the production of a self-help group meeting. A social science researcher is present, asking questions and interfering. This setting has lost its "meetingness". As with all interview material, these accounts are co-productions of the interview format (Hammersley, 2003b; Potter & Hepburn, 2005, 2007; Rapley, 2001; Roulston, Baker & Liljestrom, 2001). My actions are significant to the production of the talk of the members of these groups; it is dependent on the local interactional contingencies of the interview as a site of knowledge production. My interactional work, as question/topic initiator and information seeker, is part of the sequencing of talk. Yes, there is experiential knowledge of illness, but it is occasioned as a response to questions, to satisfy requests for justification of prior accounts and so on. Experiential knowledge is
present because I have invoked its presence. I have asked for it. Thus far, then, I have arrived where the literature currently stands; our topic of inquiry (that is, experiential knowledge) is made visible only as a hybrid form of social science and self-help group activity. Confident that these “self-help groups”\(^{113}\) have a life beyond social science, I will use this as my point of departure. To be sure, illness must have an experiential dimension that exceeds interviewing activity\(^{114}\) (Bury, 2001; Kelly & Field, 1996; Lawton, 2003). I have new questions. I must look in other directions.

### 5.3 The disappearance of a common problem

My change in fieldwork activity is not seeking a class of “unsituated” experiential knowledge, free from context, circumstance or contingency. All things are situated; all things have their indexical expressions\(^{115}\). Rather, it is simply that, after a point, as we move away from the practical circumstances of what is done in self-help groups, we begin to lose the phenomenon. It becomes something else. We invoke a new, or another, topic. Sensitivity to context is always necessary when conducting fieldwork, and so I must follow the phenomenon, as the members of these groups are practicing it, wherever it takes me. Thus, in moving towards it, several questions obtain. What happens when a social science researcher does not ask for displays of this experiential knowledge, made available and recognizable through problems talk and illness narratives? How might it be shown as part of the interactional order of group meetings? How is this order arrived at, and what is its specification? And finally, what can be identified as contributing to its distribution?

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\(^{113}\) Although I continue to use this term to refer to the groups in my fieldwork, I do so cautiously. My quest to establish whether these groups are in fact self-help groups, and not instances belonging to another category of group, is still unresolved. Although members of these groups do not object to the category self-help group under “interview conditions”, I am yet to observe those definitional features of a self-help group in these groups, as part of their naturalistic, normative activities. Thus, I am still treating the description of these groups as problematic and in need of specification through further analysis, and hence my use of scare quotes.

\(^{114}\) It is surprising that important studies have investigated, and continue to investigate, chronic illness (the problem, if you will) using interviews (e.g., Anderson & Bury, 1988; MacRae, 2008; Nettleton, 2006; Rich, 2005). No attention is paid here, to how chronic illness is being produced as a product of the interview setting.

\(^{115}\) This term of course belongs to Garfinkel (1967); it is being applied in the intended ethnomethodological spirit.
Self-help group meetings comprise more than just telling stories. Different things are done. Other actors are involved. Here is a good example: newsletters. Members of self-help groups receive regular newsletters. These are extremely accessible artifacts for the ethnographer. They can be read before and after meetings; and they can be taken back to the office to examine in detail. I requested a corpus of backdated newsletters from the groups. I began to read. Composed by the chairperson, with occasional contributions from members, newsletters form a constant line of communication between members outside of meetings. This is especially true when members are absent from meetings, mostly due to surgery or ill health. Reading newsletters reaffirms group membership; it reminds individual members of their collective affiliation. But what is the substantive content of a self-help group newsletter? What reminds members that they identify themselves as a collective? A candidate reply is of course that the newsletter is a site for the articulation of members’ experiential knowledge of illness. Members can attend to the primary criterion of their membership in the collective: a common illness. We can anticipate some means of its resolution. Undoubtedly there will be more illness narratives; problems talk will likely be padded out too. This will give rise to other things. Bodies. Disease. Hospitals. Treatment. Medical procedures. Illness management. Let us start with the arthritis group. Here are a few entries from their newsletters:

September 2006

MEMBER’S NEWS

Group member and first time mum Jane has written to me via e-mail and has asked me to pass on her thanks to you all for the lovely presents given to her by the group on the occasion of her daughter Isabel’s birth. You will be pleased to know that Jane and baby Isabel are both keeping well and Jane is hoping to bring Isabel to a group meeting for you all to see her.

July 2007

On Tuesday 26th June, Cindy organised a meal out at the Rufford Arms. There was a good turn-out as about 30 people came along and enjoyed an excellent value carvery meal. We all agreed that it was a good place to have group meals.
out as access and parking is good and also the restaurant is large enough for us all to sit together in our very own eating area. Thanks Cindy for getting the idea and organising this at very short notice.

Hold on. What is this? Where has arthritis gone, the reason for attending an arthritis self-help group? You remember – a common problem. Instead the group learns that Jane, one of the members, has recently given birth. The group will want to see Jane’s baby, Isabel. Cindy, another member, is congratulated for organizing an enjoyable group meal. The group was able to sit together; the appearance of a group identity is important. Arthritis is “concealed” through the presence of this group identity. It is oriented to neither by members not outsiders. Arthritis disappears when members sit together. So much so that future meals are planned. Two simple things: giving birth and having a meal. These are activities you would normatively expect to find, well, anywhere. These experiences happen to all of us. We need to look at more newsletters. Here are some extracts from newsletters from the Parkinson’s group:

May 2005
Our next evening meeting, on Thursday May 19th at 7.30 in the day care centre, will be a talk by Lieut. Baker, entitled ‘My War in Burma’. In this year in which we have just marked 60 years since V.E. Day, it is fitting that we should remember that the fighting in Burma didn’t end until August 1945. Lieut. Baker went out to India and then to Burma when he was 18. He now lives in Oxbridge and is presently vice-chairman of the U3A and a regular supporter of the Carers Centre.

July 2005
A reminder that for our evening meeting on Thursday July 21st all members are invited as my guests to a summer evening party in the chairman’s garden at Hinten House, from 6.00 pm onwards. Food and drink will be provided. Croquet and table tennis weather permitting. Wheelchairs welcome on the lawn. Plenty of seats available. Please let me know if you plan to come so that I can have some
idea of numbers. There is plenty of convenient parking space. If you don’t know how to get here, or would like a lift, please phone me on 04267 456289.

There you go: an evening with Lieutenant Baker. An enlightening evening ahead, I am sure, with all of those stories about time in Burma as a young soldier. This will be a time of reminiscence for the members. Many are war veterans; the chairperson spent most of her professional career in Burma. So: the topic holds a special place in their hearts. What about Parkinson’s disease? And what about the July meeting? A summer evening party sounds very nice. I like croquet too, and I am also known for my fondness of table tennis. But I do not have Parkinson’s disease. These evenings are in the service of something specific; but Parkinson’s disease is not part of the specification. Yes, we see wheelchairs are mentioned, and that points to a common problem; but its being pointed to is not about making that common problem a feature of the evening. Wheelchairs users will need to know that they can access the lawn: that is where the main events of the evening will take place. And this is what is important. What these folks want is just a friendly party, some light refreshments and a bite to eat. If the weather permits, a few games of table tennis will be in order, perhaps some croquet too. Everyone can relax and have a pleasurable evening in the sun. Anyway, it gets them out of the day care center, their usual meeting venue.

What is wrong here? The common problem, insomuch as it is appears in any consequential way for the group on this evening, does not seem to be present. That is not the point of this occasion. And experiential knowledge does not seem to be here either; there is nothing that requires members to draw on their illness experience. Parkinson’s disease might be what essentially brings everyone to the party, but it does not make itself visible as the purpose of this meeting. Two things: a common problem and a pleasant evening. The point is that they do not co-exist, not here; or they are not both visible. One conceals the other. While Frank and Beatrice are playing table tennis, and some of the others watch while they drink red wine and enjoy the sunshine, they are not talking about Parkinson’s disease. They are not doing illness. Have I lost the phenomenon simply by
attempting to get closer to it? Surely not. I move to the Lymphoma group for clarification. Here is an opening extract from their January 2006 newsletter:

Dear Friends
We had 15 members at our December meeting and had a thoroughly enjoyable evening with a festive quiz, together with some mince pies and mulled wine. I don’t know whether it was the effects of the mulled wine or the festive season but we all had a good laugh. It was enjoyed so much that I have been asked by a couple of members to arrange another quiz night. The quizmaster has already agreed to this and it is scheduled in for our June meeting.

Look at the form of address. Those to whom these remarks are addressed are not members but “friends”. The kind of group in which these addressees have membership is not specified. It is simply a collection of friends. The address says nothing about the capacity in which they have friendship. The pronoun usage – “we”, “our” and “I” – gives us a sense that the author is personally affiliated with the group addressed. The production of his role means that he is speaking both on behalf of, and to, friends. He is like them. However, that it is a friendship arising out of a common illness, lymphoma, is certainly not identifiable on this basis. There are people drinking wine and eating mince pies while playing a festive quiz. No wonder these members had an enjoyable evening. Members are happy because of the festive season; and they had mulled wine too. The outcome of the meeting is important, for it is not just a matter of undertaking these various activities as such. Members had a good laugh. Another quiz evening is arranged. The organizer of the quiz, another member of the group, is not a member or friend (with lymphoma or of a lymphoma group). He is a “quizmaster”. He is referred to in the capacity in which he will be known for the evening. The others will be “quiz players”, or maybe “contestants”. One of the reasons for attendance, then, is to partake in these activities. They will return because there will be more wine. More enjoyment. More laughing. But, like the January meeting, no lymphoma. Experiential knowledge of illness is not mentioned. There is already enough for the evening.
Illness is important. But laughter is important too. Illness and laughter are so entwined in these self-help groups, and yet they are routinely separated. We see one but not the other. Take this entry from the May 2006 newsletter from the stroke group. This is recurrent across the stroke group newsletters, usually placed at the end. It is the last thing members read.

**THINGS YOU NEVER HEAR SAID:**

“That Dale Winton is such a hunk.”
“If you ask me, Labour is doing a great job.”
“No, it’s my turn to change baby’s nappy.”
“I think the TV license is worth every penny.”

What has happened to Sam’s experience in the hospital, with the doctors? Or the fear of uncertainty that he mentioned earlier as a feature of the lives of stroke survivors, beyond the hospital? Hearing about trips and other group events is one thing; they are practical. Even laughing is understandable. But why are we seeing this routine appearance of jokes in a self-help group? This has no contingency on heart attack experience; nor does it derive its meaning from experiential knowledge of stroke. I have not experienced stroke and still understand the humor. Yes: very funny, especially the one about the Labour government! Considering it is commonplace, within this newsletter and across the others, there is another function to humour, besides the telling of a joke. It is a reminder of the purpose of the group: to keep laughing. Laughter keeps other things at bay, like arthritis. And speaking of laughing:
THANKS FOR FLOWERS, LETTERS, AND CARDS

On behalf of the committee, Lynda and myself, I would like to thank you all for your kindness in sending letters, cards and presenting flowers in appreciation for all our work in getting the Blackpool holiday together. It was very much appreciated particularly, as you all know, we have faced many problems along the way since Lynda and I first came up with the idea of a holiday last September. However, I'm pleased to say it all worked out fine in the end and the trip was a huge success and enjoyed by all.

This is an entry from the October 2006 newsletter from the Arthritis group. Look at the photograph again. This has been selected among any number of alternative possible photographable images of the group. It is a large photograph too, occupying much of the space of October’s newsletter: it is important that members see it. The group is on holiday. We can see some crutches and walking aids; all we have to do is look. There it is, a common problem. But that it not the purpose of the holiday that everyone is enjoying. It is certainly not the purpose of this photograph. Look, everyone is smiling. These members may have arthritis but they are having a good time on holiday. Illness is incidental. To the extent that it is invoked, it is neither a defining feature of the members nor their activities together. There is a message underneath the photograph, conveying appreciation for everyone’s assistance in organising the holiday: the tickets, the bookings, the travel and the entertainment. It was a group effort. The practical accomplishment of
the holiday is being celebrated; this is a newsworthy achievement, even as a reminder for those who attended. The experience of the holiday is available for members who did not attend too. Gladys will enjoy the photograph; she is still at home recovering from surgery. This is how the group wishes to be seen: smiling, having fun, together.

It is not all laughter. Illness does have its place in self-help groups: it does become “mentionable”. But illness becomes visible for specific purposes. Here is an opening extract of a newsletter from the lymphoma group:

Feb 2006
Dear Friends
I start on a sad note as unfortunately since our last meeting, one of our members, Jack from Devon has passed away. Jack was able to come to about 3 of our meetings but I remember him as the person who spoke out at our inaugural meeting saying that he had been a member of another group in the past and he felt that their meetings were all doom and gloom and that he hoped our group would hold happy meetings. I hope we do. Jack was only 45 and leaves a wife and two young children. He was diagnosed with Lymphoma about 10 years ago and had a bone marrow transplant 7 years ago and since then he had experienced rejection problems. This in turn had caused him lung problems and it was this that eventually caused his death. His wife, Debbie telephoned me to thank our group for their support and friendship and consequently Shirley and I were able to represent the group at his funeral earlier today.

On a happier note, by the time you receive this letter, Peter and Betty will have got married and be about to embark on their honeymoon touring Australia and New Zealand. Consequently we will not see them at our next two meetings. Although I have known about the impending wedding for a little while, it was Betty’s wish that it did not become common knowledge until after the event. She has however told me I can spill the beans in this letter. I am sure you all join me in wishing Peter and Betty a very long and happy life together.
It is unfortunate that my first acquaintance with lymphoma, as naturally oriented to by the group, is under these circumstances: death. This is rare – an orientation to illness. It has taken me by surprise. A member recently died from complications around illness. Lymphoma, then bone marrow transplantation, and then a marrow rejection, and then a life lost. Death accounts for this appearance. This occasion of illness is not “about” the group; its visibility is the formal delivery of news to co-members of the absence of a member. This absence, if not accounted for, will disrupt group meetings; members will ask questions when the departed member no longer comes to meetings. An anomaly would arise. At any rate, illness, its presence through death, creates a tension. Although a formal news item, its delivery represents precisely what the group wishes to avoid. This group holds happy meetings; death changes that. It turns it into “doom and gloom”. No death: illness disappears from view once again. Thus a new topic is initiated, the recent marriage of two other members and their honeymoon. This is happy news. The group wants to know about this; indeed the chairperson has anticipated telling for some time.

We should take stock. There is no appearance of a common problem, and an empirical unavailability of anything recognizable as experiential knowledge of illness. Substituted is the presence of other things. Jane’s new born daughter, Isabel. Summer parties. Holidays. And jokes. Everything, it seems, but illness. How can we engage this tension, this loss of what is expected and, conversely, gain of what is unexpected? Perhaps discard the newsletters as a deviant case? No. However unexpected these activities might be, they feature as commonplaces; they are being attended to and embraced by the phenomenon, not deferred, like the self-help books. As such, they are productive. Specifying the details of their productivity, for these groups, becomes the topic of inquiry. We need to spell this out to arrive at an adequate understanding of what is taking place under the category “self-help group”. This will mean changing things about. As we document the character of these groups in detail, we will need to follow how authenticity is being produced, and how it functions to instantiate the phenomenon.
The problem of stigma

Illness is a problem. When we find members of self-help groups, they have undertaken, or, more likely, are in an ongoing process of undertaking, a transition. Two categories apply: health and illness. The onset of illness, especially chronic or long-term illness, introduces significant disruption to normal patterns of everyday life, particularly the ways in which identities are negotiated (e.g., Bury, 1982; Charmaz, 1983). Adjustments are necessary, from health to illness (Williams, 2000). There are life changes. However, this transition is not a natural fact of illness itself; the import of any particular illness is used to socially categorise people. The healthy represent a benchmark against which the ill are judged. Illness and social identity collide. Still better: social identity, here through illness, is socially regulated. Identity is a socially accountable matter. Illness, then, plays its part in the organisation of everyday life, not only the body. We need not venture too far to find the source. Goffman (1963: 15 original italics) put it best, as a situation whereby:

...an individual who might have been received easily in ordinary social intercourse possesses a trait that can obtrude itself upon attention and turn those of us whom he meets away from him, breaking the claim that his other attributes have on him. He possesses a stigma, an undesired differentness from what we had anticipated. We and those who do not depart negatively from the particular expectations at issue I shall call the normals.

It is a difficult word, stigma. Look at what it does; it makes the ill differ from the healthy. They stick out. Walking sticks, limps, artificial limbs and weakened bodies: these stigma symbols deviate from normative, expected patterns. Furthermore, the appearance — Goffman uses the better term “evidentness” — of the stigma becomes the central feature in social encounters, being the primary attribute used to account for the social acceptability of the person. Illness marks the person, as well as the body. Exclusion obtains if routine activities are attempted. This is produced whenever the stigmatised and the healthy interact: “Each potential source of discomfort for him when we are with him can become

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116 My attention to stigma arose, at least initially, out of the ways in which members of these self-help groups were characterizing their experiences of their illness in everyday, social encounters.
something we sense he is aware of, aware that we are aware of, and even aware of our state of awareness about his state of awareness about his awareness” (p. 30). The differentness of an illness identity departs from the normative character of that which is not different, which is to say, the aggregate of others who are neither ill nor defined by illness. The healthy are all similar: they share an unspoiled identity. Stigma reveals the comment-able nature of those who are stigmatised, those who are, as Goffman (p. 15) says, “not quite human”.

The stigmatised, then: remarkable, extraordinary, unique. So it is a term of abuse. It is not necessary to make a distinction between, on the one hand, enacted stigma, actual instances of discrimination based on the inferiority of those who are ill, and, on the other, felt stigma, a fear of potential discrimination and personal feelings of inferiority (see Scambler & Hopkins, 1986). Felt or enacted, stigma still has its effects; it is seen in those manifold contexts in which it is articulated in the shaping of lives and identities (Link & Phelan, 2001). Its presence is enough for us to understand its social import. At any rate, the individuality to emerge through stigma is routinely concealed, as Bury (1982: 176) makes clear: “Individuals begin to restrict their terrain to local and familiar territory where they are least likely to be exposed to the gaze and questions of acquaintances and strangers”. There is shame. This is evident across a range of illness experiences, for instance in relation to recently documented cases of obesity (Drury & Louis, 2002) autism (Gray, 2002) and anorexia (Rich, 2006). What “those who have suffered bodily trauma do not wish to show and what other people do not wish to see coalesce in the fact that ill people live silently with the effects of serious disease” (Radley, 2002: 4). The ill are outcast. They no longer have entitlement to community membership. Friends do not have the time to talk anymore. Families, although supportive, just do not understand. The stigmatised are left high and dry. Isolated. Not quite human. Where do they go? Who do they turn to?

117 For example, Reidpath, Chan, Gifford & Allotey (2005) argue that one of the most significant characteristics of stigma is its force at excluding the stigmatised from contributing to the social and material resources through which community is assembled and maintained.
It is not easy visiting five self-help groups. I have to drive extensively to most of
the groups. But I am able to ride my bicycle to the other two groups; they are close to
home. There is so much to take in. Different diseases. Different symptoms. All those
faces and names to remember. Walking aids are scattered about in meetings. Bodies limp
and hobble around. The arthritis group meets in the evening, at 7pm; the visual
impairment group meets in the morning. Some of the groups meet weekly; others meet
fortnightly, even monthly. Venues vary too. The Lymphoma group meets in the
postgraduate research building of the local hospital; the stroke group meets in a quiet
corner of the town’s sports and social club. The arthritis group is well established. In
contrast, the lymphoma group is still in its intimacy; it recently celebrated its second year
together. Most of the members of the groups are older; but some are young, perhaps not
much older than I. The Parkinson's group is unusual: its members wear name badges. So
there is disparity in self-help groups. Only the name is shared, self-help, at various points
at least. What else could be holding these groups together, for practical purposes?

My ongoing visits afford me one saving grace: massively regular patterns of
behavior can be found. On every occasion of a self-help group meeting, after my first
visits, what is observed is the same as what had been observed before. There is something
shared across the groups, more than just a name. I notice repeated activities within
meetings; there is a method to the presentation of a self-help group meeting. This recurs
across the groups too. The organization of the groups corresponds with a shared model,
which, although it varies in details and order, means the groups relate in different ways.
Like self-help books, these similarities share family resemblances (cf. Wittgenstein,
1953). When people arrive at meetings they exchange greetings. They talk. They arrange
themselves in a circle. Although this arrangement has its origin in Alcoholics
Anonymous, the foundational self-help group, where each member in the circle in turn
tells his or her story of abstinence from alcohol, here it does not have that function. The
circle does not give rise to stories. Other things are done. The chairperson brings the
group to order. There is interaction. The specification of this interaction, in part,
distinguishes these groups as a domain of phenomena; it gives them their character as

\footnote{Self-help group scholars refer to this as the “circle of sharing” (e.g., Borkman, 1999: 2).}
self-help groups. But what exactly is done, if not some orientation to a common problem? We are, after all, at the center of the phenomenon.

No stories or narratives. There is another shape to the interaction. This is not ordinary conversation, but a form of "institutional interaction". How to get a purchase on this? Conversation analysis, founded on the analysis of the mundane accomplishment of everyday conduct, has shown that the organization of talk in ordinary conversation displays a specific "speech exchange system". This allows interaction to take place at a practical level (Sacks, Schegloff & Jefferson, 1974). An established body of investigation into alternative, non-conversational or institutional interaction has charted the features of institutional turn-taking systems (e.g., Arminen, 2005; Bardovi-Harlig & Hartford, 2005; Boden & Zimmerman, 1991; Drew & Heritage, 1992). It shows that institutional talk departs from, or transforms, the normal arrangements of conversational turn-taking. Whereas aspects of talk's organization in ordinary conversation – e.g., turn design, turn content and turn length – is free to vary and arise out of local conversational imperatives, institutional talk is different. It displays a restriction, by allocating, differentially at any rate, opportunities for the types of participation when folks talk. When talk is produced, it fits into pre-determined or pre-allocated turns: this establishes roles of speakers. It makes specific identities relevant for the completion of some specifically institutional task. But people do not simply talk through a different sequence of turns, when they do institutional talk. No. A setting is displayed: the context in which they speak. The setting has a life. It talks too. It shapes how things are done. Talk is shaped by it, so that it reveals what that setting means for those "within" it (e.g., Arminen, 2000; Hester & Francis, 2001; Schegloff, 1987; 1991). So things happen when people talk. There is communication, but there are also other things: rules, customs. Cultures come alive. This stuff is revealed in institutional talk.

119 A range of settings has been documented by looking at the setting-constitutive features of institutional interaction. For instance, in courtroom examinations (Atkinson & Drew, 1979), news interviews (Heritage & Greatbatch, 1991) and talk radio (Hutchby, 1996; 2006), each turn-taking system reveals the institutional character of talk and how it accomplishes specific, institutional tasks embedded in that setting.
Self-help group meetings establish institutionally relevant identities. Two are relevant: “announcer” and “announcement recipient”. This pattern of interaction has a distinctive sequence. Announcers have certain rights to speak and their talk is composed over a longer duration. Other members of the group, being recipients of the announcement, typically only contribute shorter turns. An announcement is typically given priority when it is delivered to recipients. The initiation of unprompted or otherwise unsolicited talk by the group, between announcements or during them, is actively precluded by the turn taking sequence (but see later). Take extract 1. This is an opening sequence from the arthritis group meeting:

Extract 1.

1  Dawn:    uhh *apologies* from Cindy (0.2) for tonight (.)
2       u:hh I got the Christmas dinner list (. if anybody
3       wants to either change the *food* order (. o:r (0.2)
4       uhh *add* anymore to it (0.2) it’s the last night
5       because I’m going in with the. o:ders to the pub (.)
6       tomorrow (. o:r >over the weekend< (. o:r Monday (.)
7       "in the next day or two" (0.2) .hhh u:hh *Christmas
8       *raffle prizes* (0.2) thank you to *Heth* (0.2) I don’t
9       know if you saw at the last meeting (. all those
10      br:illiant prizes (.)
11     Tina:  am:azing collection "hehh hahh"(0.2)
12    Dawn:  such a <great> collection an. we were saying to Heth
13       (. we really. there’s so much stuff there that
14       there’s too much fo- for Christmas (. and we r:ally
15       need to think about how we’re going to *maximise* (.)
16     Tina:  the pr:izes to (. for fundraising for the group (.)
17      yeah (0.2)
Dawn: how we're going to do that(.) whether we're going to
have an auction next year(.) I mean obviously a lot
of the stuff's seasonal .hhh or perishable but
we'll. we'll have u:hh u:hh at the raffle(.) but it
something that we're going to think about(.) we'll
probably hold. a lot of the. big things back(.) and
have a think about what to do(.) so we'll and
perhaps have a chat about that(.) if anybody's got
any ideas of how we can maximise .hhh(.) it whether
we have one prize(.) big prize(.) a month(.)

Heth: uhm

Look at the identities. Dawn produces several stretches of lengthy turns (lines 1-10, 12-16 and 18-27), which are separated by various short turns by other members (lines 11, 17 and 28). These turns, through their sequence, accomplish the task of doing announcements. Compare this with ordinary conversation, where talk is messier; folks share the burden of turns far more frequently across their talk (e.g., Sacks, Schegloff & Jefferson, 1974). In effect, these “first turns” constitute agenda setting; they are producing the topics with which to occupy the business of the meeting. Dawn could be interrupted. Other members of the group might want to say something. But they do not. They know that something is happening: announcements are being done. When other members do talk, the turn taking is designed that way; they are not interrupting. For instance, when Dawn asks, on lines 8, “I don’t know if you saw at the last meeting(.) all those brilliant prizes”, although not addressed to any specific member, it is nevertheless looking for a response. The members of the groups are relevant now; they are being treated as recipients. A candidate response is sought. Look, Tina replies with an acknowledgment: “am::azing collection ”hehh hahh“.

Dawn has made the presence of Tina’s acknowledgment an expectable feature for the interaction to proceed. The minimal length of Tina’s turn is economical; it satisfies the role of providing acknowledgement. And it displays attentiveness to the
announcement. That is it. See how there is a smooth transfer back to Dawn; they both know that Dawn has to continue with announcements. Her identity as announcer takes priority. Here, then, the design and transfer of turns demonstrate the goal orientation of the interaction, and the institutional identities required to render it possible. And this is demonstrated in other ways too. Although turns by different speakers have been produced, Dawn has been the main speaker. She has institutional work to complete. And the others know this; that is why we do not see them speaking at length. The floor is given to Dawn. Like news interviews (e.g., Greatbatch, 1988; Heritage & Greatbatch, 1991), when we see that recipients of announcements withhold from producing a turn, particularly when it is possible and available to do so, it is evidence of the institutional character of this talk. Take extract 2. A member of the Parkinson’s Society group, Anne, is formulating details of a previous fund raising day attended by some of the members:

Extract 2.

1 Anne: and the star collector was Sandra’s husband (.).
2 who sat for three hours in his chair (.) and in his
3 box he had a hundred and sixty nine p(h)un(ds hehh
4 Betty: [a::hh
5 (0.2)
6 Anne: I think he gives everybody such a lovely sm(h)ile
7 when they w(h)alk past (0.2) so (.) that’s (.)
8 that’s good news
9 → (1.0)
10 well that’s enough notices for the moment (.) ↑I’m
11 (.) sure some of you may remember su- surin

Look at line 9, the pause of one second. That is quite a long time, when people should be talking. Other members of the group could take over, and have a turn at talk. But that pause is doing something. It is an intentional action; on the part of the audience, it is “doing” listening (Greatbatch, 1985; Moerman, 1988). It is withholding from producing a
turn and showing an expectation that Anne, the speaker, will continue with her talk. Conversation analysts have shown that, like other interactional phenomena, such as “continuers” (e.g., “mm hm” and “uh huh”), this silence marks a “passing” on an opportunity to talk. The group is responsive to Anne’s task of doing announcements (Jefferson, 1984). Consider extract 3:

Extract 3.

1. Dave: well (.) I think we must accept that (0.2) this is
2. our little lot
3. \(\rightarrow\) (0.9)
4. I don’t know why there’s such a small lot
5. \(\rightarrow\) (0.7)
6. uhm (.) if I could introduce Geoff Barns (.) from Bronnley’s (.) he’s the chemist he’s come to talk to us about (.) uhm (.) Bronnley’s and s:soap and things like that (.) take it away please (0.3)
7. Geoff: hello (.) as you may know I work with Barbara (.)
8. and u::hm (.) not quite as long as Barb[a]
9. Barbara: [h]ehh

Here we see Dave, a member of the lymphoma group, first gesturing at the absence of many of the members from the group meeting, and then inquiring about the absence. There are two noticeably long pauses (lines 3 and 5). Like extract 2, these pauses are not “filled” by talk from other members of the group. They are assumed not to require a response, and they do not get one. The other members know that announcements are in progress and must be completed. Dave is entitled to continue; he is the announcer. This shared expectation, that Dave can produce these pauses without fear of speaker transfer, where other members willingly leave those pauses “open”, shows the co-production of situated, institutional identities with specific roles to play, which is to say, the delivery and receipt of announcements.
This sequence of interaction serves as a normative feature of "doing" self-help group meetings, which can be made even clearer when that sequence of turn taking is breached. This is typically seen by the way in which members of these groups depart from their pre-allocated and allowable turns at talk, such as unsolicited responses and acknowledgements to announcements. Such departures become accountable. Look at extract 4. This is taken from later in the arthritis group announcements:

Extract 4.

1 Dawn: ①uhhm (.) the other uhm (.) one of two items (0.2)
2    ①Christmas cards (. ) I mentioned in the newsletter
3    (. ) what do you th:ink about this money for charity
4    (. ) "or do we send each other Ch[ristmas cards"
5 Sue:                [money for charity=
6 Tina: ①⑦charity (0.2)
7 Dawn: shall we have a v:ote (0.2) who thinks that we should
8    s- ( . ) s- ( . ) y'know ( . ) all contribute a pound to
9    charity ( . )
10 John:  "y::eh> ( . ) I think that's: (0.2)
11 Dawn: who thinks we should stick to Christmas cards (. )
12 Marge: ①exc:use me ( . ) ①what charity ( . )
13 Dawn: arthritis r:e+search=
14 Marge:  =oh
15 (0.9)
16 Dawn: so are w- (. ) we having it for charity (. ) then (. )
17 Cindy:  "uhm" (0.3)
18 Dawn: okay (0.3) no Christmas cards to each other

In initiating a topic for announcement, the chairperson of the arthritis group, Dawn, is asking the group to decide whether they wish to exchange Christmas cards or,
alternatively, submit money to charity. However, part of the way through the announcement, one of the members, Marge, inquires about the nature of the charity by asking a question (line 12). Marge’s question, but specifically its preface “exc:use me”, is an acknowledgment that her current turn is a departure from the announcement sequence, indicating its nature as a detour in the delivery of the announcement. This announcement normatively requires only that members, in their next, adjacent turns, provide a candidate response: to give each other Christmas cards or to give money to charity. Other members, Sue (line 5), Tina (line 6) and John (line 10), have in fact oriented to this pattern of turn taking. As a response to the question, Dawn specifies the name of the charity (line 13), which is receipted by Marge. A gap of almost one second follows, between the offer of this receipt and Dawn’s next turn. Stuff is happening here; but it is not anticipating further engagement with Marge. Rather, it is providing a “space” for other members to cast their votes on the substance of the announcement: Christmas cards or money to charity.

Dawn re-offers her initial question (line 16), giving the members a final chance to arrive at a decision. Dawn prefaces her question with the conjunction “so”. Like all conjunctions, this is doing reconnecting work; Dawn is returning her question to the business at hand, before Marge’s question. So Marge’s question was an interruption to announcement work. But the completion of the announcement is still required: Dawn needs a decision. In her closing turn (line 18), she treats those earlier tokens and receipts, the last of which is given by Cindy (line 17), as the co-production of a decision. A task has been accomplished: the money will go to charity. Announcements are done using pre-allocated turns at talk, and breaching this sequence of interaction becomes visible. It is, as we have seen, preventing the group from doing business. Here is the visual impairment group. As with the extract from the arthritis group, we see an announcement being made. The group is in for a treat, as there is the possibility of a visit from of a chocolate company who provides tours and demonstrations of their business to interested parties:

Extract 5.
Tom: professionally yours handmade chocolates (.) ridge way craft centre main road Doncaster and there is directions (0.2) all (.) p:ersonally yours we specialise in visiting any interested group of people in the comfort of your own premises or meeting place to provide an entertaining informative insight

Floe: [o:hh almost mouth waterin[g

Doris: [just a minute floe (0.2)

Tom: we provide an entertaining and informative insight into art of handmade chocolates well we’re all for that a:ren’t we=

Simone: =yes (.)

Ivy: o:h yes (.)

Tom: learn about the ↑history of the origin of chocolate (. ) witness the products being made then tantalise your taste bus

Look at where the action is, on lines 7-10. Tom is reading a letter the group received from the chocolate company and is given normative rights to speak. He is doing an announcement, as we recognize. When Floe interjects, at the end of line 7, expressing her excitement, it stops Tom from completing the letter. In selecting herself to speak, she has stopped a task from being done. If the group does not hear it, they will not find out about the visit, and they will not get any chocolate. The successful completion of the announcement means a lot, as it is maintaining the relevance of a set of situated identities for the purposes of conducting specific institutional work (Boden & Zimmerman, 1991). Look at line 9, where Doris steps in; she knows something is wrong. She wants the group to hear about the chocolate company. Doris is treating Floe’s response as an interruption of the announcement, and in effect, terminating the possibility of her continuing, or producing another turn. Tom then re-offers his announcement, repeating the part already mentioned during speaker overlap. He is treating his turn as having been interrupted, it
not being successfully delivered the first time round. Whereas Floe’s turn was terminated, two subsequent turns, by Simone and Ivy (lines 13 and 14), in responding to the announcement, are not. These turns are not interrupting the institutional work performed through this interaction; to the contrary, they represent an institutional relevance as they are responding as legitimate “receivers” of the announcement. Tom (line 12) is requesting agreement from those at whom his announcement is directed. Things get done when interruptions do not occur. Although not seen here, Tom goes on to receive acceptance from the group of the invitation from the chocolate company. Through this organization of talk we see the management of the life of these groups. This is not the same as the talking you might hear in the street or on the telephone between friends.

Things happen when this turn-taking is performed, consequential things that define the groups in which this talking takes place. Tasks are undertaken. Guest speakers deliver their talks. Charities receive donations. Visitors arrive to give demonstrations at group meetings. Self-help groups go on trips. This is interesting enough, but there is no sight of illness, not even a glimpse. No common problem. And there are no signs that they will be produced for me on my visits.

The reduction of stigma
We know that illness features heavily in the lives of people. They talk about it, again and again, through illness narratives. It contributes to understandings of their experience of illness and identity (Bury, 2001; Hyden, 1997; Nettleton, O’Malley, Watt & Duffey, 2004; Twohig & Kalitkus, 2004). And it provides resources with which lives are reassembled, rewritten and retold. More particularly, and to the point, self-help groups, according to the literature, are defined by the presence of a common problem; they provide the context within which the narrativisation of personal experience of illness gets done. A common problem should be present, organizing the production of meetings: arthritis, lymphoma, visual impairment, stroke, Parkinson’s disease. And yet, as we are forced to consider, from our journey through these self-help group meetings thus far, it is not. I am aware that it will be inadequate to suggest the absence of a common problem without also having knowledge that that absence is non-trivial (McHoul, 1980). In other
words, this *particular* absence needs to be considered to have significance for what we would otherwise expect to be present\(^\text{120}\). If not a common problem, then what accounts for the existence of these self-help groups? Now, before we answer that, we can consider the logical possibilities of the empirical unavailability of a common problem, just as others have suggested\(^\text{121}\). Perhaps a common problem is simply not there, which is to say, these are not self-help groups. In which case, I have been looking in the wrong place\(^\text{122}\). Or maybe it is because I am an incompetent observer; I do not “have” the illness I am seeking to illuminate, and therefore do not see it. I am an outsider. I do not *live* with the common problem\(^\text{123}\). There is another possibility: the common problem is present, but it is disguised.

\(^{\text{120}}\) Sacks (n. d.; 26-27) makes the point thus: “If one is going to make the statement which proposes that something is absent, then you cannot in any serious way propose that *X* is absent unless you have some way of discriminating the absence of *X* from the assertable absence of a range of other things that are also not present”.

\(^{\text{121}}\) Personal correspondence with the author of the paper that introduced the concept “experiential knowledge” (and therefore the common problem and the means of its resolution), Thomasina Borkman, who read an early draft of this chapter, has provided a number of arguments that elucidate these possibilities, to follow.

\(^{\text{122}}\) “[A reason why experiential knowledge is absent] is that you studied social groups, not problem solving self-help groups---if all they did was think about raffles, prizes, social activities, they don’t sound like any self-help groups I know” (Borkman, 2008a).

\(^{\text{123}}\) “Experiential knowledge of arthritis, for example, is by definition partly/largely unknown to someone without arthritis unless that someone has extensive experience being around and caring for someone with arthritis” (Borkman, 2008b). And more: “[S]ince you (presumably) are a lay person about arthritis, lymphoma, stroke/heart attack and visual impairments, how do you know the self-helpers weren’t communicating experiential knowledge during the meetings but since you don’t know it you can’t see it when it is in front of you” (Borkman, 2008c). I do not accept Borkman’s argument, and for a very specific reason. It strongly reflects “standpoint epistemology”, most famously articulated in feminist scholarship: it takes the idea that knowledge is situated, to an extreme level. The world, or a part of the world, can only be known if it is seen or experienced from a specific perspective, or standpoint. It draws heavily on the notion of knowing and experiencing from within an embodied, subject position. In feminist writing, then, we can only understand “women” if we are ourselves women; “men”, for instance, just do not understand. But that is not enough; it gets even more specific, perspectivalized. We can only understand “black”, “disabled” women from the standpoint of a black, disabled woman’s embodied position. If we do not meet those criteria, and see the world from (as) that standpoint, then we have no way of knowing what it is like to see things that way. This is singularity: there is only a single way of seeing a single phenomenon. Latour says it nicely when, speaking about the project of science studies and “non-scientists” investigating scientific practices, he comments: “Just imagine if that slogan [that only scientists should speak about science] were generalized: only politicians should speak about politics, businessmen about business; or even worse: only rats will speak about rats, frogs about frogs, electrons about electrons!” (1999b: 17). Latour’s remarks are not so absurd when we replace singularity with multiplicity; there is not a single reality, but many, and there is not a single perspective from which to see it, but many. But perspectivalism is the wrong word; it retains singularity, of only knowing the world in relation to somebody’s position within it. My earlier discussion in the methods chapter, about method and practice, should suffice to flesh out this alternative argument. And it is in those terms that I investigate my topic here, self-help groups. So: the common problem in these groups is not absent because I do not share it, whatever sharing might entail. Something else is in play.
We can see that the unavailability of the common problem cannot be attributed to an experiential absence in the lives of the members in these groups. Despite the appearance of social activities, these are not "social groups" or "social clubs". A common problem, that feature by which a self-help group is identified, is traceable. Look: wheelchairs, hobbling bodies, guide dogs, even death. The signs are there, but they perform a common problem out of "necessity". It is difficult for Betty to walk to a visual impairment group meeting without her walking aid or guide dog. Likewise, it is difficult for Daisy to arrive at the arthritis group meeting without her wheelchair. These things must be done; they must be present. Members arrive at group meetings with a common problem, as they limp, hobble and get assistance walking. They greet one another, set up the venue for the meeting, organize refreshments, and the rest: here we can see the hobbling, the wheelchairs. Similarly, members leave at the end with the same common problem, still limping and hobbling. But to treat this presence as the extent of a common problem, as the way in which members deal with it and make it relevant as an alternative to illness narratives, is to miss everything my ethnographic journey through these meetings is describing. This ethnographic description is not, or rather not only or simply, in the Garfinkelian ethnomethodological sense, drawing attention to a common problem as the "seen but unnoticed" background against which it is articulated, but in some way is unsuccessful at doing so. In other words, it is not missing, or overlooking, what has been present all along. What it is showing, by attending to situated features, is that the relevance of a common problem is getting suspended in some way by the activities in which members are mutually engaging themselves. The wheelchairs, the hobbling and the guide dogs, although evidencing a common problem, are being situated at the margins of group meetings.\(^{124}\)

Our earlier question: what accounts for the existence of these groups, if it is not the common problem? We can begin with a common problem as tacit knowledge. When

\(^{124}\) I draw on the term margin from the mundane context of writing. Margins of course surround the content of a page of text, and help to define where a line of text starts and ends. They set up the whole presentation of writing. But although important, I am much more interested in what is happening on the page, in the substantive text as I am reading it. Like margins, then, a common problem in these self-help group meetings makes way for, and yet is of little relevance in comparison to, what happens in the meetings themselves. We want to see the body of the work; representing the bulk of the activity, that is what will define its boundaries.
members of these groups were newly diagnosed, their knowledge was limited. They asked questions, but did not know the answers. Illness would have been highly visible: pointed to, gestured at, questioned, argued. But members live with a common problem; they get close to it. They develop knowledge, and learn how to deal with it. Recall Gladys, from the arthritis group. She knows more than the surgeons do about the experience of her juvenile arthritis. She is better off at home after surgery, rather than in the hospital, where she can better tend to the experience of hip replacement. She knows her body. And so it is for Bill, from the stroke group, whom we will meet shortly. He knows so much about his experience of stroke that he does not need to talk about a common problem when he goes to group meetings. Members of these groups, then, have expansive knowledge of their illness, and have developed such intimate awareness of it, that, unlike those non-members (outsiders), they no longer need to point to it. It is the same elsewhere, wherever knowledge is developed. Take science, for instance. Latour has traced the development of a fact in the context of statements produced in the writing of science. He looks at how one phenomenon, a growth hormone, becomes a fact through a sequence of citation practices:

There is a mass of literature on the growth hormone, and Guillemin’s article which I referred to is five pages long. Later papers, taking this article as a fact, turn it into one sentence: Guillemin et al. (ref.) have determined the sequence of GRF: H Tyr Ala Asp Ala Ile Phe Thr San Ser Tyr Arg Lys Val Leu Gly Gln Leu Ser Ala Arg Lys Leu Ser Ala Arg Lys Leu Leu Gln Asp Ile Met Ser Arg Gln Gly Ser Asn Gln Glu Arg Gly Ala Arg Ala Arg Leu NH2. Later on, this sentence itself is turned into a one-line long statement with only one simplified positive modality: ‘X (the author) has shown that Y’ (1987: 42).

Latour argues that, if this is to be believed as a fact, each subsequent statement will continue to stylise any prior statement. Something significant happens:

The activity of all the later papers will result in the name of the author being dropped, and only the reference to Guillemin’s paper will mark the origin of the
sequence. This sequence in turn is still too long to write. If it becomes a fact, it will be included in so many other papers that soon it would not be necessary to write it at all or even to cite such an incontrovertible fact, it will be transformed into something like: ‘We injected sixty 20-day-old Swiss albino male mice with synthetic GRF... etc’ (Ibid).

And so it is for self-help groups. A common problem has traveled through the same sequence. To point to it, and to make it reportable, is to display a lack of familiarity with it; in short, it demonstrates a lack of experiential knowledge. Members of these groups, then, are speaking to co-experientialists. Illness is uncontroversial. There is no need to mention what is already known. Illness, a common problem, a fact, is “slowly eroded, losing its original shape, encapsulated into more and more foreign statements [and practices], becoming so familiar and routinised that it becomes part of tacit practice and disappears from view!” (p.43).

But the tacit status of a common problem does not tell us everything. It is not the case that the activities I observe in these group meetings merely imply or display a ghostly presence of a common problem. Something far more active, and explicit, is in play, that means a common problem, the illness, is being intentionally deferred and made to disappear. And this means traveling back to the beginning, before tacit knowledge had been developed and from whence a common problem emerged. Recall what the presence of a common problem entails. Stigma: all of those features of a spoiled identity. Exclusion. Isolation. Confinement. Unpacking this reveals more. Stiff joints on waking in the morning. Night sweats when pain interferes with sleep. Daily exhaustion from a dysfunctional body. Painful courses of chemotherapy that induce sickness. Ongoing visits to the hospital for treatment and surgery. This is all too familiar to self-help group members; it is part of everyday life, outside of the group. Gladys, from the arthritis self-help group, has just returned to the group after a hip replacement; there was great discomfort in hospital. Ilene, one of the youngest members from the stroke group, walks through her local town to get out of the house. She gets tired very quickly and takes only a few steps at a time. People pass her by with their fast walking. They stare. She does not
look old enough to be hobbling around. These are all things that invoke illness, a common problem. To reproduce a common problem in a self-help group is to reassert stigma. It is to retain differentness. While there is illness, there is stigma, the loss of a legitimate identity. So: meetings do not attend to the relevance of illness. Other things appear, and become the relevant things to do.

Let us look at it like this. There is a recursive relationship between what is made reportable, and what is not made reportable in practice. Things are made visible when things are said, done or performed. But what is made visible also does work to make other things invisible. How to explicate this? Billig (2005) provides a compelling discussion of the rhetorical functions of laughter, suggesting that, like any form of communication, rhetorical meaning can always be contested. It can always be countered with an opposite meaning. In other words, “what ever can be asserted rhetorically can be negated rhetorically” (p.192). What one person considers funny another might consider serious; what can be communicated as amusing can also be communicated as unamusing. The rhetorical meaning of laughter, then, is only possible because of a corresponding rhetorical meaning of unlaughter. Importantly, if someone shows unlaughter, it does not simply imply that s/he is not laughing. We do not always laugh when we conduct many of our everyday activities, but this is not, rhetorically speaking, intentional unlaughing. Billig offers a parallel in terms of “unsmiling”: “A person is typically described as ‘unsmiling’ when they are conveying seriousness in moments when they might be expected to smile. The word communicates more than an absence of a smile – it is a significant absence” (Ibid. my italics).

That is it. The relevance of a common problem is significantly absent from these group meetings. But the unavailability of it is indicating far more than an absence as such; it is itself a rhetorical presence. It is alluded to, but mostly by default; it is difficult not to hobble when you have a replacement hip. And this makes its presence felt. However, it does not develop into, or become part of, the routine activities that members participate in, as the defining feature by which these groups produce what it means to do self-help group meetings. Something important: its absence is being made to be absent.
Work is being done to produce this absence, to put something in its place, particularly when its presence is expected. This is what I am observing, and documenting ethnographically, as I journey through the meetings on my visits. What I am seeing, as part of the production of routine activities, is the absencing work that is performed temporally, where it is seen across the duration of meetings, and consensually, where all members mutually co-produce it. We had better return to the meeting, where we can see what is going on.

The groups disperse for the rest of the meeting; the sharing circle breaks. Announcements are now over. It is a busy evening for the arthritis group. Some of the members are preoccupied, looking at each other in anticipation. I noticed it earlier, when Dawn, the chairperson, was doing announcements. I should have known: there is a competition tonight. Teams will be competing. That was some of them earlier, gesturing across the circle, teasing one another. Things get going. Brian, enthusiastically hobbling out of his seat, asks for assistance from some of the others in setting up the main activity of the evening: Boccia. Chairs are positioned. Teams are called out. Balls are issued. Members of the group arrange themselves into pairs, each pair representing a team. The teams are seated at one end of the community center. The game begins. Look: three teams competing. Other teams waiting to compete, along with non-competing members of the group, observe from the sides of the room. Each member in turn throws a ball — one team has blue balls, the other red — as close as possible to a white target ball, the jack. Some members are extremely proficient at throwing; others, such as Daisy, who is sat in the centre, wear soft padded splints to support weak, arthritic wrists. Her throwing is distinguishable from the others in that she uses both hands and throws the ball very slowly. It does not interfere with play. The others do not notice it. Anyway, Daisy is joining in and being part of the evening.
The other members are having a good time too, just watching: cheers, boos, claps and hisses abound. A referee – there he is, to the left, with a walking stick and his blue bat, which is used to communicate to the players during play – oversees play and measures how close the thrown balls are to the jack at the end of a game. Care is taken to do things precisely. Boccia is played across several meetings; sometimes games are deliberately only partially played, and then reconvened later in a meeting, depending on scheduling. When games are finished, scores get calculated. Finalists get named and winners get congratulated when Dawn does the announcements. There is usually a presentation, where a trophy is given to a member of the winning team of a tournament, just like Brian, smiling, up there, on the right. He has won the trophy twice now.

It is different in the Parkinson’s group. The chairperson, after announcements, introduces the speaker for the evening. It is a local traffic warden. She speaks about her
recent trip to the Masai Mara, a large park reserve in southwestern Kenya. The lights are dimmed, as slides will be shown. The first slide is of the camp where she stayed with a group of others. “There’s no electricity, you have the old fashioned lamps with paraffin”, the traffic warden says. The next slide. Look, a zebra! And the next slide comes. This is quite a contrast to a recent speaker in the lymphoma group: a chemist from a local toiletries manufacturer. He talks about soap, their main product. Members are given samples of the ingredients used in the manufacture of soap. Noodles are shown – small granules of unflavoured, unprocessed soap. The noodles get mixed in a huge mill, where colouring and perfume are added: lavender, mint and lemon. The soap is extruded from the mill, and then cut into sections. Samples are passed around. “When it comes out like that, whatever perfume is in there is in the soap”, someone asks. Derek, another member, asks if the mill is warmed during the mixing. The group – tonight only ten members are present – is friendly and attentive. More questions are asked and more samples are shown.

We would have difficulty – and most likely be incorrect, anyway – identifying the nature of the groups to which these speakers are addressing their remarks. It is just holiday photographs and soap. The first speaker could be entertaining a group of close friends after a dinner party; they would like to hear about her holiday. The second speaker might even be talking with a group of new employees in the company, giving them the speech at the start of the tour. And so it is with the other groups. The arthritis group sits back and enjoys a lively talk by the local fire chief. He puts on his safety gear, describing its function. Members begin to whistle with good nature: look, a man is in uniform! He gives advice on fire precautions in the home. Members are encouraged to check their fire alarms. Be safe – that is the message. Two tour guides from a chocolate factory visit the visual impairment group. They speak about the process of making chocolate. Pretty samples of chocolate, shaped like rabbits, are passed around the table. There is plenty for everyone. Mouths begin to water. Chocolate rabbits disappear quickly. Members are excited; they are talking about chocolate. The last chocolate rabbit: gone. Recently the Parkinson’s group invited the chairman of the Cotswold Canal Trust to one of their meetings. He spoke about canal restoration. He was inundated with questions
from the group, and things ran over at the end; many of the later activities were postponed until their next meeting. Canals are important things. They can be travelled on by boat; but they can be spoken about in self-help group meetings.

Seeking the ordinary

Members of self-help groups are seeking to remove their stigma by appropriating a collective identity. This identity is not defined by stigma. I have already invoked Goffman, whose discussion on stigma has provided us with such valuable insight, and I shall do so again. He remarks on this paradox surrounding the management of stigma, and more particularly, for our purposes, the paradox of a self-help group. “The individual’s real group, then, is the aggregate of persons who are likely to have to suffer the same deprivations as he suffers because of having the same stigma; his real ‘group’, in fact, is the category which can serve as his discrediting” (Goffman, 1963:137). The very phenomenon that brings members of a self-help group together, that serves as their discrediting, which is to say, a common problem, is what is transgressed by membership. Importantly, such transgression can only take place when what is transgressed is collectively shared, when it is present. It needs to have a presence in the lives of members before it can become absent. How remarkable: the erasure of a phenomenon from the very site that is founded on its existence.

Just look at what happens in other illness settings. What about spending time in hospital, for instance? Patients are sick and wish to get better. That is what the doctors are for. But there is something about the hospital: it is a site where illness is enacted. Thus, patients often take personal items with them when they stay in hospital; this lets them forget about the reason for attendance. Here we see the active concealment of the illness, or, perhaps better, the problem (Radley & Taylor, 2003). It is not only in the hospital either. Gregory (2005) has shown the ways in which diet-related illness is managed through the routine import of mundane family eating practices. Specific illnesses carry specific dietary requirements. This points to differentness. Illness interferes with normal eating and cooking procedures. It disrupts traditional role activities in the home, especially around meal times as a site of “doing” family. However, as Gregory points out,
food and meal tasks, such as roles and responsibilities for, and over, cooking and eating, are strongly preserved when people are ill. Those diagnosed, sometimes with disabling conditions, will continue to cook for their families. Similarly, special food requirements will be neatly concealed as part of the normal mealtime preparations. Those with special diets do not stick out at the dinner table, with the rest of the family. They all eat together and illness is made to disappear. These preserved roles contribute to the identities of the ill; if they are abandoned, then so are identities. “They [mealtimes] may be a convenient way to achieve regular nourishment, but they provide also a vehicle through which family and individual identities are produced and reproduced day to day” (p. 375). These routine practices – food preparation, cooking and eating undertaken daily as a family activity – which went largely unnoticed before, are now, with the intrusion of illness, part of getting on with life. Family members want “the same as what went before” (p. 388). Before illness, things were normal. So maintaining routine mealtime activities are about keeping an identity. It means not being relevantly ill.

There is something to be said for routine, the ordinary. Raymond Williams has discussed the importance of this:

Culture is ordinary: that is the first fact. Every human society has its own shape, its own purposes, its own meanings. Every human society expresses these, in institutions, and in arts and learning. The making of a society is the finding of common meanings and directions, and its growth is an active debate and amendment under the pressures of experience, contact, and discovery, writing themselves into the land (Williams, 1989: 4).

That is it: “culture is ordinary”. Williams is pointing to the idea that culture is produced readily and routinely through all of those efforts at “finding” “common meanings and directions”. The specification of this “finding” does not discriminate status, intelligence, name or creed, that is to say, all of those things traditionally considered to define Culture. “We use culture”, Williams continues, “in these two senses: to mean a whole way of life – the common meanings; to mean the arts and learning – the special processes of
discovery and creative effort" (Ibid.). Yes: "a whole way of life". All of those routinely produced sites of everyday life are cultural practices; to reverse this, the ordinary is culture. And this is culture with a small-c; we are not talking about generalities but particularities of activities (McHoul, 2004). Ordinary experiences are creative. They produce meaning. They have value. It is out of this domain of mundane practice that common meanings are developed; it is from within this domain that they are preserved. What is important is found in the routine, the ordinary.

Come on, we are just in time for tea break. Self-help group meetings follow a methodical order. Meeting time is essentially split into two sections by a tea break, at which point members prepare refreshments. The tea trolley is wheeled out. Hands delve into the biscuit tin. When members drink tea, they talk a lot. Look at the chairperson of the visual impairment group, seen here preparing refreshments. She enjoys baking cakes for the group, a different one for each meeting. Everyone likes cake. This morning it is a group favourite – rich coffee sponge with butter icing.

The cake organises tea break time. Members ensure that it is unwrapped carefully; they do not want to destroy the beautiful cake. The unwrapping is met with anticipation: what type of cake will the members have with their tea this morning? Pieces of cake are passed around the table and there is no shortage of appreciative comments. "Eee, ain’t that nice", Trevor says. Now the members have to deal with the cups of tea, the saucers and the delicious cake. Then there is Sally, one of the guide dogs. Sally rests patiently under the table, next to her owner. She gently nudges the laps of some of the members with her
face: if she is lucky she will get a piece of cake. I happily accept the leftovers for my journey back home. I show my appreciation by washing the teacups afterwards.

Of course tea breaks in these groups might be straightforwardly understood as a sort of intermission – like you typically encounter in most social events. And they are. Boccia has had its run. There are no more quiz questions. But we need not dwell on drinking tea, eating cakes and petting affectionate dogs. There is a reorientation – literally a break from those earlier activities – to what is recognisable as “small talk”. Members chat amongst themselves, some in pairs, others in small groups. This was not a priority earlier, when everyone was cheering as Beatrice hit the jack. But that was then, and this is now. What is all the chatting about, anyway? Maybe problems with an arthritic knee joint? Coming to terms with increasingly impaired vision? Perhaps sharing treatment or diagnosis narratives? Yes, and no. One member of the lymphoma group, Catharine, does mention that, since her last course of chemotherapy, she still spends most days feeling exhausted. She gets fever and night sweats. She asks if there is something she can do. Someone suggests something. And Peter, a member of the Parkinson’s disease group, complains that his wife’s consultant has failed to reconcile her symptom management. Her uncontrollable tremoring, the most visible symptom of Parkinson’s disease, has been getting worse lately.

And there is more talking. But often, more often than not, stroke is put to one side. So is arthritis, and Parkinson’s disease. Illness just does not want to make itself the relevant thing about which members want to talk. Bill and Sarah, two members of the stroke group, are good friends. They talk all the time in meetings; sometimes I join them, and talk too. The range of topics covered is amazingly broad: there is always something to talk about. I try to listen. Take this:

1 Bill: it was on late (. ) she recorded it for me and they
2 was on about (. ) there’s a bloke in America who’s
3 autistic (. )
4 Betty: yeah (. )
Bill: he's the one the rain man's based on=
Sarah: =ohh (. ) I read that in the paper (. )
Bill: you should've seen it (. )
Sarah: no I didn't see it but I read about it=
Bill: =how he manages to do this because
Sarah: [well he's got so much stuff in is brain=
Bill: =they scanned him (. )
Sarah: =oh did they (. )
Bill: they scanned his brain. (. ) there was a piece missing
Betty: hehh hahh (0.2)
Bill: it was what they call the (. ) well (. ) I forget what
they call it (. )
Cyril: the hypo something=
Bill: =but it joins the bits of the brain and you could see
on him on the scan (. ) they showed it on the scan
that's the piece that links it all together (. )
Sarah: yeah (0.2)
Bill: and they showed the brain scan of his and he said
it's all wrong=
Sarah: =ehh hahh
Betty: [hehh hahh (0.2)
Bill: I mean it was an illustration but I mean all the
information it comes flying around in his head (. )
and somebody mentions something and he'll link it all
togeth'ur like Beethoven's fifth (. ) dot dot dash (. )
Irene: [ch (0.2) church. (0.3) ill=
Bill: =Winston Ch:urchill (. ) he brought it all together
What to make of this? Here, as with all those other opportunities during tea break, members, not occupied by the obligations of Boccia or guest speakers, can discuss their illness as much as they wish. They can talk about the restricted movement in their joints. They can share their knowledge of strokes, how to manage symptoms. One of the members of the Parkinson’s group, Susan, has a speech disturbance – another symptom of Parkinson’s – and talks through a laryngophone. This is a small device held to the throat that picks up voice vibrations directly. If she did not use this, people would not hear her speak. The resonance from the device, when Susan speaks, can be heard across the room, but it is not noticed. It is not mentioned. Look at Barry, a member of the arthritis group. He recently had surgery. He now has an artificial hipbone. There is still pain, and plenty of scars and bruising. This is not mentioned either. What is mentioned is a topical news item: a recently viewed television programme, which has received coverage in the press. Look at the way Bill and the others are making this television programme demonstrably relevant to one another as the business at hand. We see storytellers, and story recipients, but no illness: just a television programme. What about Irene, Bill’s wife, whose speech is disjointed? The impact of her heart attack means that her words come out much slower now. Does that not need to be mentioned? Yes, of course, but not at the moment.

And look. What is this? A conversation between two members from the visual impairment group:

1 Matthew: really (.) there isn’t a solution to it (.)
2 Alex: ↑no (.) no there isn’t (0.2) e::rr (.) the only time
3 (. ) I’m unable to get out is when it’s bad weather
4 (. ) particularly when th. (. ) if there’s snow on the
5 ground (. ) ↑that. (. ) is a nightmare(0.3)
6 Matthew: the wind really a[nd
7 Alex: [yes (.) u::h (.)
8 Betty: treading on the (. )
9 Mathew: we’ll get some (.) there’s more bad weather soon (.)
The weather is certainly an important matter, as any meteorologist will tell you. But this is a self-initiated topic of conversation in a self-help group. And at tea break. What happened to the crippling effects of visual impairment? At any rate, there are other topics. Members talk about holidays. Weddings. Visits. Friends are mentioned. A member of the arthritis group, Reg, sings songs with his guitar. He even does impressions. The group laughs. But that topic is not mentioned: a common problem that can be identified as a principle criterion of membership of the visual impairment group. That topic, disease and illness, in each respective group, is just not spoken about. That is not how these self-help groups are done.

The ongoing inclusion of raffles during meetings is an opportunity for self-help groups to generate revenue. As a fund raising mechanism – receiving donations from local charities is another – it satisfies the various inevitable expenses of running self-help groups. I helped out where I could, always purchasing a raffle ticket on my visits. I won various prizes; a travel drinks container and some scented bath oils, as I recall. At the beginning of meetings, usually before announcements, members purchase raffle tickets,
retaining them until a member "calls the numbers" later. Sometimes raffle prizes are bought commercially before the meeting, a notable example being toiletries. Many members prefer to make prizes. Artistic and creative skills are readily deployed as many spend considerable time donating prizes brought in from home: pictures, knitwear, cakes, wine. The presentation of the raffle prizes is neither arbitrary nor unimportant. Prizes are routinely displayed for everyone to see. Members crowd around to get a look. People comment on the pretty colours; wrapped prizes evoke surprise. More comments are made.

No matter how elaborate or, as is sometimes the case, sparse the display of raffle prizes, the raffle goes ahead; the display is still present. A tin of beans, some home grown vegetables and a packet of budget biscuits is quite sufficient. The display of prizes, which have been mutually collected and organised by the members, enables the raffle to take place. There is something to win. A member of the group, who selects tickets from an empty jar, calls out the raffle numbers: slowly, and one at a time. Each number is announced with a sharp, confident tone. Members have a tendency to talk loudly when tea and biscuits are involved, so the numbers are delivered so everyone can hear; many are hoping to win a bottle of sparkling wine. Or maybe those luscious, home grown aubergines. The raffle is sometimes undertaken during tea break, when members are less occupied, or more usually before the end of the meeting when members are talking again. They will not have a chance to talk again until the next meeting in a fortnight, or longer. "Six eight one", Tina calls out loudly, nearly dropping the ticket jar. "It's me", David screams, the lucky winner. Everyone cheers. A prize is won. The aubergines are chosen;
David says he likes aubergines. No wonder: fresh vegetables means staying healthy. A few moments later, another winner is called out. Any remaining prizes are stored until the next meeting. There: we have reached the end of a self-help group meeting. But, there is no illness, and no common problem. There is no stigma, either.

Look at the course of a self-help group meeting again. Consider the activities, the things members are doing together. Arranging trips. Going on holidays. Competing in tournaments: Boccia, you remember. Talking to friends. Being entertained. Learning: canal restoration, the manufacture of soap, fire safety. Conversing over refreshments in good company. Members have fun when they tell jokes. They clap their hands and join in when Reg sings. Membership takes members to different places; the boundaries of a self-help group extend into other locations. They meet new people when they go on holiday. They travel on coaches, eat in restaurants and drink in pubs. Yes: members get about. But then there are all of those objects too. Lots of things. Boccia balls. Cups of tea. Biscuits and cakes. Raffle tickets. Aubergines. There are plenty more.

So: what do you see? Throwing a red rubber ball at another, smaller white ball at the other end of a hall? A couple of inanimate vegetables, just a few aubergines, that is all? Drinking tea? No, or not simply. These things can no longer be separated so easily. Activities, objects, and illness – they coalesce. The assemblage is seen as a whole; it is symbolic. The meeting speaks from all of these places. It exceeds illness as it priorities health; it means doing identity work (Radley & Taylor, 2003). We see ordinary experiences. This exemplifies affective settings, doing normal things. The body, constituted and identified through illness, is now enacted through activity. Self-help groups are about recovery. However, “[t]he recovery in question is [...] not a physical one (in the sense of overcoming disease) but an existential one – the recovery of personhood” (Radley, 2002: 20). Recovering or restoring a spoiled identity is performed through participation, with other people and with other things. Throwing a rubber ball once every few minutes, or eating cake and talking about the weather: these are legitimate occasions of the expression of these groups. They signify the reduction of stigma. They mean joining in, doing things, ordinary things (e.g., Duyvendak &
Nederland, 2007). Body, illness, self and world enjoin. Barriers have been crossed, as members no longer feel confined by a common problem. No illness. No common problem. So business as usual: members will see each other at the next meeting.

5.4 Concluding Remarks
The pivotal topic of any discussion of, and membership in, self-help groups is "a common problem”. It provides the resource around which the whole phenomenon unfolds. And yet, it is unavailable for empirical investigation. This concerns its temporality. It is present before joining a self-help group; it will be present after leaving a self-help group. It is present before meetings; it will be present after meetings. It does not disappear. This is not the purpose of these self-help groups, to solve the common problem. This reveals a noticeable paradox: membership requires its members to have the common problem around which the group is formed, but membership consists in its “erasure”. To share the common problem is a device to forget it. One cannot forget what sticks out as individual, as remarkable. Because the problem has been specified so clearly and at length in the daily lives of members, engaged to the point that attention to it represents a constant reminder of their “inauthenticity”, it is intentionally subverted. It gets forgotten, where forgetting is a mechanism for attaining normality. In meetings, members “know” they are around similar others; part of this knowing is composed of the collectively produced absencing of the common problem. So: the problem is presupposed. Whatever is being done, it is being done unselfconsciously (Dreyfus & Dreyfus, 1986). There is expertise here, as members do not need to ask, so to speak, how to go on. They are experts on the common problem; that expertise does not need to be shown. And it is not; it goes unnoticed. Besides, the purpose of meetings is to transcend the common problem. Joining one of these self-help groups is about a reduction of stigma derived from the presence of illness: the assertion of a creditable social identity. The production of illness is the production of stigma. Normatively, then, these self-help groups do not contribute to or produce the common problem.

Self-help groups represent a deeply authentic site of self-help. This much is certain. We see the polar opposite of self-help books. It is true that illness, and stigma

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along with it, is negotiated. People do get on with their lives, consolidating illness and restoring part of a normal identity, just as the sociology of health literature has identified. But it still leaves the existence of self-help groups in question. Why are they there? They are satisfying an insufficiency, variably located. Self-help groups provide the one thing that is unattainable, or has been unable to be sufficiently attained, beyond membership: the disappearance of illness and its concomitant concerns. But hold on. Something else just caught my attention. I mention it only in passing as it displays this demarcation around membership of a self-help group. It is a piece of writing on the “promotional” pamphlet given out by the stroke group.

By their very nature leaflets and posters concerning stroke are severe and ‘heavy’ but we feel the message can be conveyed in a less stressful way without losing the seriousness of the situation; after all we have all been there and are now enjoying life again. You can too. Stroke does not mean all doom and gloom. As a self-help group we know what it’s like since we have been there (original underlining).

A division: membership and non-membership in a self-help group. A temporal shift takes place, from past tense to present tense, as a result of membership. Current members have been there. They are now somewhere else. They were deprived of what they now have. Membership makes this “there”, as a temporal location and identity, disappear. It makes it historical. Membership is a requirement to transform the status of the illness; doom and gloom gives way to enjoying life. Fulfilment and satisfaction, these are important too. They are replacements for illness. What distinguishes self-help groups, which is to say, membership from non-membership, is their contribution to identity reconstruction. The specification of this agency is the collectivity of a group. Members have admitted that “self-help” is not something that is pursued, or satisfied, individually. While they are away from the group, illness becomes (more) visible; a common problem makes its presence felt more strongly. People stare when you walk in the street; they stare when you struggle to carry your shopping in the supermarket. Parents or children may invite you to join in with family activities, but they still walk too fast when you go to feed the ducks in the park. You trail behind, slowly, with your illness. There is guilt: you are just
holding your family back, not letting them do what they want to do. They make allowances for you, for your illness. You just cannot share your illness with them; they do not know what it is like. Illness "marks" you as different. But things change in a self-help group. The quest for self-help is accomplished through the co-production of a collective, shared identity. This is work, as we have seen, which surpasses illness. And when actions are not defined by illness, but by participating in the activities with friends, life can be enjoyed again. Life can return to, or acquire, normality: doing ordinary things, not sticking out, not having illness, and not being relevantly ill.
Chapter 6
Discussing the promise of the hyphen in self-help

6.1 Tackling the original problematic
I have travelled across three sites of self-help practice. In chapter 3 I undertook the activity of reading self-help books, in chapter 4 I attended a self-help workshop, and finally in chapter 5 I visited many self-help groups. I wanted to find out about self-help. The term displayed a paradox, encompassing two opposing ideological positions, individualism and collectivism. As I read about it, and tracked it through the literature, I found that this tension was being reproduced. The term was unproblematically separated, and handled as two separate phenomena. Within a contemporary context, we saw self-help through two lenses: the first criticizes self-help books, but ignores self-help groups, while the second endorses self-help groups, but ignores self-help books. This tension around the term is effectively made to disappear, as each pole of self-help is repelled further away from the other. But this entirely disregards the omnipresence of the term itself, which is to say, the fact that it does overlap, and is used interchangeably to describe two sets of practices. The literature tells us that self-help books and self-help groups have absolutely nothing in common, and yet they share the same term. This has been my task: to explore this paradoxical split at the centre of the phenomenon. This took me to the hyphen that enjoins self and help. It materialized in the form of a self-help workshop; this stemmed from the activity of reading self-help books, but which also displayed features of self-help groups. Could I reconcile self and help, by unpacking the hyphen?

My topic moved around when I undertook substantive empirical work to investigate it. It changed. These purportedly activated sites of self-help, each in turn, made my empirical aim to see self-help most puzzling. A self-help book was not an occasion of self-help; it increasingly pushed the reader away, first with non-reading, extratextual activities, and then by recommending the abandonment of reading altogether. The practice of reading, then, was clearly insufficient for the quest for self-help. However, the reader was oriented to one relevant place: a self-help workshop. Here, the
reader is mobilized, from the individual activity of reading, to the collective activity and mutual production of the quest for self-help. But here, the self-help book was simply being reproduced; only now it was spoken instead of written. As such, it suffered the same insufficiency – it was incapable of allowing the audience to perform self-help for themselves. There was a professional, Fiona Harrold, asking questions, busy performing the starring role of the show; she was not a legitimate, that is to say experientially equal, member in the workshop. What was left, when the workshop was over, was a group attempting to undertake self-help. Thus we arrived at a self-help group – a collectivity defined by the mutual production of experiential knowledge, that is, where people help themselves, together, using their own expertise. But having arrived at the site where we have been progressively led, to complete the quest for self-help, the very reason for self-help disappears. Members of self-help groups revel in the absence of the common problem, the thing that unites them.

I shall return to my original problematic. Here it is: “self”, “-” and “help”. I am unable to remove the scare quotes, and leave my topic as I found it: self-help. There is something about the promise of the hyphen that has not been fulfilled. Self and help just do not fit happily together. There is clear divergence between self-help books and self-help groups, and a self-help workshop will not unite them. This is something that is displayed by the topic, as it gets instantiated in practice.

With the self-help book, we saw the performance of the self: the unique individual, the single human, the distinct entity, individuality, the person considered apart from society. But we did not see help – nothing to which the self was connected. In the self-help workshop, things changed. We saw the self and help: some emergent linkage of self and help, self and a collectivity of others. But this copresence of self and help was only transient; it kept falling apart each time Fiona Harrold intervened, and then broke entirely when everyone went home. And in the self-help group, we saw the disappearance of the self, the importance of thinking and individual action, but also, strangely, a disappearance of help, the common problem which unites people. There was just a collectivity. So: Fiona Harrold’s workshop has exhibited a noticeably strange form of
connection between self-help books and self-help groups. We see a single direction of travel, beginning at self-help books and ending at self-help groups. Maybe one of my diagrams can do something here:

![Diagram]

Self-help books ———> Self-help groups

This is familiar enough. It is the classic polarization we have been talking about, and the conventional way in which the topic of self-help gets engaged. We see no contact between the two poles; they are as far apart as can be. But: is does not display how the topic moves about – how it actually performs when we look from the middle, the part that everybody ignores. Adjustments are necessary, and more arrows need to be added. This means another diagram:

![Diagram]

Self-help books ———> Self-help workshop ———> Self-help groups

This is better. The self-help book pushes us to the self-help workshop. Here, the audience is composed of Fiona Harrold’s readership; this is where she discusses her books, drawing on their discourse as her primary resource. That explains the first arrows, connecting self-help books with the self-help workshop. Now we get from the self-help workshop to self-help groups, after Fiona Harrold has left the scene. But there are no available signposts indicating a return journey, not to the self-help workshop and certainly not to the self-help book: there is no two-way traffic. The hyphen (Fiona Harrold’s workshop) forms only a temporary bridge, between self and help; once it has been crossed, allowing us to travel from the self-help book to the self-help group, it falls away, breaking any visible connection. It looks like self and help have not been united, and the promise of the hyphen in self-help, which implies a point of union, has been unfulfilled.

The term self-help carries a lot of freight. It is so dense, concealing “dark matter” that seems to have been forced deep from view, and forgotten, or assumed, or simply
never dealt with. It needs to be further unpacked, as it is still painfully unclear. Let us think about this one-way journey, from the self-help book to the self-help group. Neither the literature that dealt with self-help books, nor the literature that dealt with self-help groups, told us about this. Yes, there is a peculiar splitting of the two, where we see the gap between them; but there is a relationship too. Now, I want to argue that the separation is produced by, travels through, and is managed as part of, this relationship. And it is here that we have a chance—surely a unique occasion—of engaging the term as something more substantive, more significant and more logical, without it crumbling when we pick it up. Maybe we can get some lasting purchase, and uncover some of this dark matter. This is what we have in front of us: one pole moving towards the other. We should not think of self-help books and self-help groups as one repelling the other, like magnets, but rather as one gesturing to the other, pointing to the same destination. Now, in so doing, the polarization no longer holds. But this does not settle things. There is still divergence.

Let us tackle this in terms of the significance of the difference between self-help books and self-help groups. The self-help book points away from itself, as a strategy to complete the quest for self-help; it admits of its own insufficiency. In contrast, the self-help group points towards itself, and the richness we find here is firmly preserved. It is sufficient enough. This accounts for the one-way arrows in my crude diagram. With the self-help book, something is promised but not delivered, and with the self-help group, that promise is firmly satisfied. But what is being delivered, seen in one site but not the other? What is it that is sought? The critics of self-help books were on the right track. And so were the promoters of self-help groups, the sociologists who fleshed out the basic argument. We recall Borkman, the leading self-help group scholar, and the dissociation of self-help books from her discussion of self-help groups, which she formulates around the notion of experiential knowledge.

It unfolds like this. Self-help book authors do not know what is going on, not with each and every one of their readers. There is nothing that binds readers together, prior to reading—no common problem. It is just a collection of widely distributed and unrelated individuals. Readers are banded together because they are given the same generic
solution to all manner of particular, individual circumstances. Nevertheless, readers keep returning to the self-help book, no matter how vague its prescription; reading is at least some effort at addressing whatever they see as not right in their lives. Such is the popularity of the self-help book. Impersonal. Disembodied. False. Self-help groups are different. They form around the deeply embodied experiences of living with a real problem – members share a common problem, which emerged prior to membership in a self-help group. They can *legitimately* engage their problem because they are experientially linked. People understand what it is like; they have all been there, literally and practically. Specifics can be dealt with, real instances: managing pain on walking with arthritic joints, or techniques to minimize the involuntary Parkinson’s tremor when *drinking coffee*. People share *this* knowledge. *The whole process is different. This is genuine* self-help.

The self-help group is a site of self-help that is presenting itself as highly authentic. It all rests on the presence of a common problem. With the self-help book, and even with the life-coaching workshop, we did not see a common problem. There was nothing to unite people, bring them together at a practical and embodied level. These first two sites of self-help were operating in the absence of the “help” side of self-help – failing to live up to the promise of the term. In a self-help group, we move from self to help, from the individual to the collective. However, we may have met with a genuine site of the topic, but something is still unresolved. I have unfolded my original paradox, and am finding some purchase, only to begin slipping again. The ground is giving way; one paradox is revealing another. Look. We have attained proximity with what the term self-help might signify and embody, but now the help side has disappeared. The common problem in a self-help group – the *reason* for being in a room with a group of other people – has vanished. *But: people still come along to these groups. They do not miss a single meeting. It has not lost its authenticity, even in the absence of the common problem. Why? Because members are engaging in the mutual production of another kind of collective activity: they are busy doing ordinary things, together, as if the common problem had never existed. And no one has batted an eyelid. The help side of self-help has been reconfigured.*
6.2 Mapping self-help

I have not lost the phenomenon of self-help. In fact, a new kind of stability has been established around the term. But it does require us to modify our approach to it, and not get disoriented by this point in its metamorphosis. This is what we see, as a massively stable feature in self-help groups: people doing ordinary things. They want to do the same things together. Members turn to, and embrace, the common things that are shared between them. These things are heavily unremarkable, mundane – quite definitely banal. They are so common. And now what we see is not confined to the context of a self-help group, but spills out. It travels to other places. It looks like all kinds of possible things; it could be practically anything, anywhere. If so, then, what is self-help a phenomenon of? Could it be something so substantive, so massively entrenched and of such general significance, that we simply do not see it for what it is? Is self-help even more prevalent than the self-helps books we so readily discount for their popularity?

I want to take you to another place. I want to show you what goes on in a different site of cultural practice. Look at the photograph:

![Photograph](image)

Do you see them? They are sat there, busy talking. And they are of little significance, to us anyway; it is just a picture. Still, we know what is going on. They are there for a refreshing drink – perhaps it is a hot outside. Perhaps; but that is not why I am looking at the photograph. Look again. Not much is happening; just a quiet drink. Not much at all.
Pubs are funny places, and what happens in them, where people drink together, is just as funny. We have a setting, a context. There is the bar where people go when they arrive, to order drinks. And maybe there is a roaring fire, which glows and keeps you warm in the winter. Signed photographs of personalities from yesteryear, nestled among the quaint crockery, decorating the walls – they are there too. Then there is the friendly old dog, which suddenly appears, right under your feet. This is one context, the material space. It is where things happen. But it does not say what happens. We see lots of people drinking, a room full of “strangers”. Who are they? What brings them together, sharing this company? They are all different. Some have come from a business meeting, or have stopped by only briefly, while out walking their dog; when they leave, some will return to work, or go home, or go shopping, or go to the betting shop. Some are builders, or ramblers, or tourists, or retired, or just locals. Thus: there is no prior existence of any particular or obvious connection that brings everyone together, here in a pub. We cannot say, not just by looking, and not even by asking. But: folks are not here just to drink; that could easily be done elsewhere, at home.

A pub is a special place for doing site-specific activities. Let us go to the bar, where most things happen. The anthropologist Kate Fox\(^\text{125}\) (2004: 89) argues that here we see a “cultural remission”, an active deferral of normative social controls. We do things differently, at the bar. There is a new kind of appropriateness of behaviour; we see it when folks start gossiping. It is called pub-talk. We routinely initiate conversations with absolute strangers, at the bar. We just talk, and keep talking. Someone mentions the weather; that is enough to get everyone started. But they do not really want to know if the sun is out today; they are engaging in “grooming talk” (p. 26). It is social bonding: there is no need for it, but it serves as a social facilitator. Reciprocity, and not the content of the talk, is what matters. There are plenty of barstools at the bar, where people tell stories. We have heard it all before, but enjoy listening, and taking part. People just keep talking, but it is a particular kind of talk – not too serious. So many topics get mentioned, one thing moving onto another, just as quickly as the landlord is pulling the pints. To remain on one topic, especially topics on which people hold strongly held convictions – science

\(^{125}\) I draw on Fox’s anthropologically informed insights into pub life for much of my discussion here.
and religion are good ones – for more than a few minutes, means normative activities get disrupted. It breaks up what is wanted, and what is shared. So topics come, and topics go. One thing, say the ups and downs of the week, leads onto another, say the difficulty of separating recyclable from non-recyclable household rubbish. But that spills into problems with trying to watch our cholesterol whilst still having the “enjoyable” foods, and then to the new housemate in the Big Brother house, the Slovakian cross-dresser who can play the banjo with his testicles, while not forgetting that obscure lump on our neck, the one the doctor looked at this morning. So many topics: all of them interesting, and all of them relevant.

Sociability is omnipresent. It is the same when we order more drinks. The landlord does not just serve drinks, but is invited to drink with the people at the bar, the regulars: “Two pints of bitter, and one for yourself, landlord”. Not merely a tip, or recognition of the service, it is a welcoming into the group, the clan. The landlord will raise a glass, showing appreciation. Things are friendly. This bond is also performed by the regular use of personal names, nicknames, sometimes specific to the pub and its web of relations. People bundle together, as particular kinds of people, for this setting, on the basis of these names. We may know very little about the person sitting next to us, apart from their name – “thrifty”, or “spanner”, or whatever people keep calling him. We do not know who they are, outside of the pub. But then, that is not required, and that is not how relations are organized. In here, inside the pub, that person is known for their membership in pub-talk. This setting is where that person gets their relevance. All the other things, outside, along with the usual social conventions, get deferred.

This is not really about pubs. Or drinking. That is just a device to display the kinds of things that take place in a setting when people come together. It is a way of mapping the topic of this thesis. A pub is a place where we routinely undertake what appears to be self-help. It displays just those kinds of communal practices we saw in the self-help groups, earlier. Look closer. We are mutually engaged in a process whereby particularities disappear. The individual, the unique and the singular I, gives way to the collective, the common and the plural we. Various social distinctions can easily be
identified, among the folk at the bar: social class, occupation, marital status, and wealth. But these things get buried. They are actively made to disappear. What is put in their place is pub-talk. It takes on a most primordial quality. And it seems to be serving profoundly important functions – meeting basic needs, wants and desires. So: we may consider what takes place in a pub to be a ritualistic display of strongly egalitarian values. Of folk in pubs, then:

It also emphasizes and reinforces the sense of equality among them. In a pub, your position in the ‘mainstream’ social hierarchy is irrelevant: acceptance and popularity in this liminal world are based on quite different criteria, to do with personal qualities, quirks and habits. ‘Meat-and-two-veg’ could be a bank manager or an unemployed bricklayer. His affectionately teased nickname is a reference to his middle-of-the-road tastes, his rather conservative outlook on life. In the pub, he is liked, and mocked, for these idiosyncratic foibles; his social class and occupational status are immaterial. ‘Harry’ might be an absent-minded professor, or an absent-minded plumber. If he were a professor, he might be nicknamed ‘Doc’, and I heard a plumber whose unfortunate pub-nickname was ‘Leaky’, but Harry’s absent-mindedness, not his professional rank, is the quality for which he is known, liked and teased at the Rose and Crown (Fox, 2004: 101 original italics).

Fox has hit the nail right on the head. The evident social differences in a pub are explicitly ignored. They get left behind – transcended. So: up at the bar, differences are temporarily irrelevant. Besides, they do not form the basis of the kind of sociality in a pub; or better, such sociality is properly performed within an egalitarian space. We go to pubs because we want to be like everyone else. Particularities mark our distinctiveness, our separation from others. Thus there is a concerted production of sameness. We just want to fit in with a collectivity, our clan. Something important: it is not that the jokes, the nicknames, the rapid topic shifts, the banality, the unremarkableness, in short, the pub-talk, is avoiding the serious issues in our lives. To the contrary, it is where we feel most comfortable. Sometimes we agree; other times we disagree. But we participate. We
have a position, and we find and locate ourselves here, in the vast extent of familiarity with our fellow pub-goers. "It occurs to me that perhaps our official, snooty, well-bred contempt for such familiarity masks a secret need for it, expressed only in liminal spaces" (p. 107). So: pubs serve a deeply felt social need, but one which no longer gets served after closing time, when we are thrown back into the world of mainstream social conventions. This is why Fox is describing pubs as liminal spaces. They are places where we see embodied social connection, based not on duty (or convention, or requirement, or control), but desire. Here is a very primordial communality. Authenticity is certainly implied, or can be inferred: going back to our roots, back to basics, like they did in the olden days, during the emergence of the earliest forms of civilization.

6.3 A newfound significance of the hyphen

It looks like there is something to this romanticized version of self-help that the self-help group scholars were so carefully endorsing. Doing things together, comradeship, living alongside our fellows, identification in our clan: all of these things seem to be a part of a cultural phenomenon I am mapping, beyond self-help groups. But hold on. While we have acquired an unprecedented proximity to the topic, we have also seen the total disappearance of the two poles that make up its contents. Both self and help have vanished into thin air. We see no individual self, and no common problem, which is to say, the prior reason for the copresence of multiple selves. There is just a bunch of folk, intimately connected by what they share as fellow human beings. How to deal with this? Recall the OED definition of self-help – "the action or faculty of providing for oneself without assistance from others". This does not add up. We have seen the term self-help under more or less constant tension. It has been like opening Pandora's box; I have peeked under the lid, out of curiosity, hoping to find something solid, only to reveal the source of so many unforeseen troubles. Could this be another paradox, again appearing at the centre of the phenomenon? Look. We provide for ourselves through membership in a collectivity, and at the same time losing what we had set out to preserve, that is, our individuality. Is this the loss of self? Has self-help become an archetype of all that sociology stands for? Could the term, and its official definition with its heavily individualistic pretensions, simply be incorrect? Maybe I have been chasing a silly little

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hyphen which was entirely redundant, and which was never supposed to hold anything together, after all? Should we dust ourselves off, and go home, admitting that the topic has defeated us? It is not all bad: at least you have been entertained, if you have been, and I have managed to stay out of mischief for a while.

Nobody likes a defeatist. And besides, there is too much riding on this to discard it now, at this late stage. Thankfully, there is another version of self-help. I have simply been thrown off the scent of the topic somehow, chasing a red herring. Self-help is a far more complex beast. It *does* hold together. The hyphen in self-help is certainly needed here; it now forms the most important part of the whole phenomenon. But what the hyphen is *doing* needs to be specified with greater precision. We must restrain our earlier tendency, to see the hyphen as bringing together two separate phenomena, self and help. Not to do so would mean dealing with tensions indefinitely, and trying, without success, to satisfy the imbalance. Sometimes self would be adequately engaged, but help would get concealed; other times, help would become significant at the expense of self. That would be unwise, "the result of trying to picture a trajectory, a movement, by using oppositions between two notions, micro and macro, individual and structure, which have nothing to do with it" (Latour, 1999a: 17). We need to formulate something critical: the phenomenon of self-help is neither self nor help. And *this* is the purpose of the hyphen – not to act as a bridging device, but to indicate an assemblage, something in the middle that does not turn the topic into a dualism as its mode of engagement. But this does not mean the definition of self-help, which embodies individuality but whose loyalties belong to collectivism, requires consolidation. We must reject any discussion of self-help that separates the individual and the social.

The philosopher John Dewey can help us engage this cleavage more satisfactorily. I shall not forage deeply into his philosophy, but draw briefly on its most important and relevant parts. In many ways, it is as if he were writing, not in the 1920s, but in current times – today. Dewey, like me now, was concerned with splitting effects, with tensions and things that do not fit together. "Anthropologically speaking, we are living in a money culture", writes Dewey (1999: 5), on the opening page of *Individualism Old and New.*
This culture supports only the economically fittest. Things depend on whether one gets ahead of the crowd. Culture loses its value as an association of citizens, and becomes an unconnected collection of economic competitors. Any interaction is purely economically motivated, initiated for the purposes of achieving private gain. The selfish gene has spawned a whole generation of hyper-individualists. And this all turns the cogs of the huge industrialized, socioeconomic machine that enables life to move forward, without grinding to a halt. And yet:

Our whole theory is that man plans and uses machines for his own humane and more purposes, instead of being borne wherever the machine carries him. We praise even our most successful men, not for their ruthless and self-centered energy in getting ahead, but because of their love of flowers, children, and dogs, of their kindness to aged relatives. Anyone who frankly urges a selfish creed of life is everywhere to be frowned upon (p. 7).

This is the contradiction, that thing that just does not add up. We are part of a society driven by private pecuniary gain, and yet we display a clear desire for sociality. History has shown a profound transformation from an earlier individualism to what Dewey calls the current “corporization” across all phases of life. Here, everything has been combined, brought into association. There is a common market. We work together in factories and offices, rather than cultivating land, on our own. We live in neighborhoods and cities, and go to supermarkets to buy groceries; most of us are no longer isolated out in the countryside, milking cows and living off the land. Then there is entertainment and leisure: we drive cars, enjoy movies at the cinema and go to the gym as often as we can. Others things too, like the theater, the arts and live music; we all partake of these. So: individuals have become thoroughly collectivized; it is membership in these pockets of social practice that now defines our opportunities, choices and actions. However, the earlier ideology of individualism has been inherited as a way of moving us all along. An impersonal, individualist language circulates: buying and selling. Everything has an economic value. Social conditions are merely opportunities for private gain. Money
enables people to exist together in the best way possible, that is to say economically, by separating them into private individuals.

This old individualism is supposed to satisfy our need for individuality. We become liberated, and achieve our quest for individual freedom, by adopting this antiquated ideology. Dewey was baffled. Rather than allowing individual freedom, the corporateness of our culture actually limits it, restricts it and submerges it. Individuality has been sacrificed by the powers of industrialization and technology. This is Fordism: mass production can only offer things that have been made from a predefined mould, something that is known to travel efficiently and smoothly in the market, without getting stuck, or stopping. Everything is standardized, made to be uniform. Differences are ignored, while agreement is the regulative norm. The world becomes internalized. We have to understand ourselves, as an economic value, in terms of market principles. We are given the same things to aspire to, and forced to relate ourselves to the world according to a normative pattern. There is only, as Dewey calls it, “homogeneity of thought” (p. 12). But it just does not align with the world in which we live; there is widespread bewilderment. We are atomized, detached from acknowledged social values; there is nothing to which we can secure our individuality. There is a prevalent solution: with the advent of post-Fordism, and the rise of niche marketing, goods are now tailored to individual tastes; we see individuality articulated through the pursuit of more of the activities that increase private gain, satisfy individual need. But we are still lost – we do not know who we are. Each individual is conflicted, between the material culture of sociality, and the moral culture of individualism. “It is divided within itself and must remain so as long as the results of industry as the determining force in life are corporate and collective while its animating motives and compensations are so unmitigatedly private” (p. 29).

Dewey argued for a different philosophy of life – a new individualism\(^\text{126}\). The carrying over of the old individualism into a corporate age has treated the individual independently of the social, as a kind of “problem” to reconcile, or “gap” to bridge

\(^{126}\) Some have called this a non-individualistic individualism (e.g., Zeman 1998).
Dewey, 1989). The damage is plain to see; the individual is opposed to the social. The material world does not cohere and reflect with the thoughts and theories of the people in it; social conditions are not part of their morality. Dewey wanted to see the individual embedded within a social whole, but not uniting the two by recommending even greater levels of conformity. That is simply a way to describe the artificially induced uniformity of thought, by adherence to old patterns of thinking. We know the sort of thing: “preserving” our individuality through the resources available to us under the auspices of an individualistic ideology. Dewey insisted that we abandon the idea of there being two entities: the individual and the social. Character, judgment, desire and feeling; our personal intimacies are not produced outside of the social context. Individuals, at a fundamental, ontological level, change in tandem with the changes that occur in society. But then, society is not a piece of matter, or an object – a thing. For “an institution that is other than the structure of human contact and intercourse is a fossil of some past society; organisation, as in any living organism, is the cooperative consensus of multitudes of cells, each living in exchange with others” (Dewey, 1999: 43). This has happened: the distinction between man [sic] and nature, the individual and the social, has vanished. The two, now one, are found in the “spontaneous and largely unconscious manifestation of the agreements that spring from genuine communal life” (Ibid.).

Dewey has given us what we needed. Maybe he has offered a simple point of clarification, or perhaps some major philosophical reshuffling; whichever, it has cleared the way for us to complete our journey. Now we can return to self-help, as we confront it in practices, without dealing with contradiction – a bundle of loose parts. Let us go back to the pub again. Or even perhaps to one of the self-help groups, any one of them. What we saw there was not a disappearance of self, a sacrifice of individuality as everyone conformed to a single version of reality – a heterogeneity of thought. Instead, we saw the thriving of self. Individuality was everywhere to be seen. We saw it at the bar, when folks were chatting about the weather, and telling good-natured jokes. But we also saw it when they were drinking, playing darts, sitting on the barstools, reading the newspaper, and using the toilets. It was not just a social setting, a structure or an institution; it was a site instantiated out of the performance of self.
Whether in a self-help group or in a pub, folks share one thing; they want to be individuals. They share a desire for individuality. Two things: the first is important, and the second is absolutely critical. It is because they share this desire that individuality is even possible; this is important. And it is because all of this is pursued out of the shared resources of the collectivity in which it gets pursued, that individuality gets off the ground; and this is critical. But we need to go further. It is not only that the resources out of which we make ourselves are shared, but also that our selves are shared. Look. Meat-and-two-veg, one of the pub regulars Kate Fox told us about, wants to know about Harry’s recent holiday, the other regular. They get talking. Then the landlord tells about his sister’s birthday; others join in. There: now there is more talk. Folks do not just tell their individual stories; they contribute to the authoring of each other’s tellings. Bits in one story become bits in another. The singular “I” loses its force in structuring lives, and the plural “we” is more important – not what I do alone, but what we do together. Each person can float around, and be in different places from other persons, and tell stories from different experiences, but that person becomes an instance of a collective we. Now everyone can share the stories, their lives, as they all take part in them. The “I” is communally embedded, in here in the pub, telling stories, and out there in the world, living the stories told. It always connects to the community in which it is told, and out of which it is made. So: the individual and the social become harmonized. This is self-help – the manifestation of social values in communal life.

Recall the terrain on which we have travelled, for many miles now: the failure of the project of self-help through reading self-help books, and the burial of the common problem in self-help groups. Here is a particular connection between these sites of self-help. The self-help book has its life in money culture. Readers seek refuge from the loss of self and bewilderment from living in a culture where individuality is submerged, but reading simply throws them back into the sinking wreckage. They are told to remove themselves from the very source of individual freedom: embodied connection with other people. Reading is an answer; but it is superficial, merely a diversion, not a solution. Readers buy self-help books because they are desperate to regain a sense of self, not
because they embrace what the books seem to offer.\textsuperscript{127} The self-help group, in contrast, is a genuine response to a culture driven by private gain. It brings people together. The common problem has to be buried, so that members can be closer to each other. So long as arthritis is present, members cannot be themselves. They cannot unite, because illness marks their differences. A greater commonality is being subverted: being like everybody else. Members want to tell stories and undertake activities in which they all participate, and in which they all live their lives. We just see bonding, the sharing and mutual production of lives-in-common. There is coherence. The individual and the social interfere, until they can no longer be separated. One speaks of the other.

This links with our definition: “the action or faculty of providing for oneself \textit{without assistance from others}”. This needs to be taken figuratively. It means: without assistance from \textit{particular} others. Self-help book authors are excluded; they are as bad as professionals, who work with official regulations and protocols. They do not reach where self is enacted, where it has its life, and where it acquires its anchorage. We see self in liminal spaces, as Fox explained; self-help groups and pubs are good places to look. But I still have a problem with \textit{only} seeing self-help in liminal spaces — and liminality more generally. A liminal space: that is where normal conventions are suspended, rules. However, despite this, there are still formalities, in pubs and in self-help groups. We would have problems getting served in a pub, if we did not observe the absurd rules that operate at the bar. So, we might see this differently, as what is \textit{desired} or \textit{sought} in these sites: informality, where formalities get pushed to one side. Here, informality is preserved, or the mundane, as I have been calling it. Of course, things get reversed in formal, or formally driven spaces, where what is sought is formality. There, we see protocols, guidelines, instructions and official plans of action. Nevertheless we still see

\textsuperscript{127}The popularity of self-help books is testament to this desperation. And this is how deeply embedded the need for self is; a continued cycle of reading, despite every additional self-help book bought pointing to the failure of every prior purchase. And yet, readers convince themselves that, when success is not forthcoming, and the world does not change after reading, more adjustment is required, and any “failure” becomes a failure of self. The cycle of reading is once again repeated. Some have labelled this compulsive behaviour as the “false hope syndrome” (Pofivy & Herman, 1999).
informality, even in the most formal spaces\(^{128}\); formality may be sought, but it is only done through informality.

Maybe to talk of self-help is not to lament the world we once had, but which is now lost and gone forever. Perhaps it is still alive, everywhere. And perhaps it is impossible to confine to place, space or context. There are minimal criteria for membership in the places where the mundane gets done, where we see sociality and where we might see self-help. It could be operating all the time. Of course now we are no longer looking at small things, the local sites, or the big things, the forces and the institutions. Instead: it is how the micro and the macro, the individual and the social, form a trajectory, a movement, where both (are there only two?) travel as a “circulating entity” (Latour, 1999a: 17 original italics). We follow this in practices. Perhaps we had better forget about self-help books, and even self-help groups. They were just places where we had to go; they taught us a few empirical lessons. But extending our reach, to see the world-building activities in the domain of the informal, might be difficult for a social science that privileges formalism, or what Brekhus (1998) calls the “marked” \(^{129}\). The problem for social science is its complete lack of interest in mess, things that do not unfold rationally. This is matched to the lack of self-consciousness or self-interest displayed by the actors in the informal and the mundane as a topic. This strange character of the topic itself, then, and the study of it, passes under the radar.

So the mundane remains invisible to social science, except, that is, through the programme of ethnomethoodology. It sees the world as a mundane accomplishment; there

\(^{128}\) Timmermans & Berg (2003) provide an exemplary case in point. In medical settings, the introduction of clinical practice guidelines and medical protocols is supposed to bring clarity and disambiguate things – get rid of mess and uncertainty. But it often, too often, does not; to the contrary, this actually increases the ambiguity of practice. Things only move through informal practices, situated activities that do not reflect the rules that are supposed to determine them.

\(^{129}\) Brekhus is outlining a relationship between the formal and the informal, the marked and the unmarked: “1) the marked is heavily articulated while the unmarked remains unarticulated; 2) as a consequence, the marking process exaggerates the importance and distinctiveness of the marked; 3) the marked receives disproportionate attention relative to its size or frequency, while the unmarked is rarely attended to even though it is usually greater; 4) distinctions within the marked tend to be ignored, making it appear more homogeneous than the unmarked; and 5) characteristics of a marked member are generalized to all members of the marked category but never beyond the category, while attributes of an unmarked member are either perceived as idiosyncratic to the individual or universal to the human condition” (1998: 36).
is nothing but mundanity. But this raises another set of problems. We are unable to do adequate ethnomethodology of particular practical scenes with which we are not already embedded. This is the well known “unique adequacy requirement” – the analyst’s competence in the use of the methods by which a phenomenon is produced. So ethnomethodology is about doing activities that are indistinguishable from the topic it claims to be studying. It faithfully reproduces its topic, so that “analysis” and “study” become inappropriate terms. Let us turn this around: ethnomethodology is not a form of study if that study is outside of the practice it wishes to explicate. And if it is not specifically a study, then it is nothing; it loses its social science credentials. More: it becomes merely one of the myriad practices of the mundane. However, this does not happen; it is only ethnomethodologists that do ethnomethodology. The scenic contexts that ethnomethodology claims to study – the practices of everyday actors – have not heard of, and do not engage in, “ethnomethodological” talk. On the contrary, ethnomethodology, when it performs ethnomethodology, departs from members’ lived sense of their activities, where analysis is disruptive of mundanity, as “it loses its phenomenon through the very technical skills it uses for this task” (Arminen, 2008: 170; see also Dennis, 2003). Ethnomethodology appears to be an impossible task: in order to do it, one must abandon what defines it, at least as social science investigation. And yet, it is itself a piece of mundane reasoning, relying on the resources that it claims as its topic. It is only that, at some point, something gets lost – that piece of the world we want to find out about. We just have ethnomethodologists doing ethnomethodology, and not members doing some world-building activity, out-there, beyond social science.

Maybe I can invite you to my local pub, The Punch Bowl. It is not far from here. While we are there, what is it that we will be engaging in? Will we be doing social science, while we interact with the other regulars, or merely chatting? Will it be self-help, or will we still be at work, engaging in shoptalk? Is this the future of social science, here in the pub, doing self-help? Anyway, be that as it may, I am thirsty. How about a drink?

130 Ethnomethodology speaks about its topic by adopting a metadiscourse. This strategy, of moving to “higher” levels of discourse (inquiry) in order to say something, is what, paradoxically, is moving ethnomethodology further away from its topic (see esp. Ashmore, 1989).
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Appendix 1.
Selection of self-help books for analysis

Selected from Butler-Bowdon's 50 Self-help Classics:

Carlson, R. (1997). Don't sweat the small stuff... and it's all small stuff. London: Hodder & Stoughton


Selected from The Cardiff Book Prescription Scheme list:


Appendix 2.
Consent form for life coaching workshop

PhD Candidate Project

Working title:
An Ethnographic Study into Self-Help Practices

Researcher: Scott Cherry (s.cherry@lboro.ac.uk)

To: Fiona Harrold

Research Outline:
The aim of my research is to spell out in detail the relationships between self-help groups and self-help groups. Your workshop might be characterized as a hybrid of self-help books and self-help groups. This needs to be documented to give a richer picture of self-help.

I would be grateful if you would give me permission to record the interaction in the workshop and for this material to be used in my research project, any subsequent publications and presentations.

Any personal information conveyed during these meetings will remain anonymous and pseudonyms will be used as to protect everybody’s confidences.

PERMISSION FORM: RECORDING

I give my permission for you to record my workshop, and for this material to be used in your research project, any subsequent publications and presentations.

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<tr>
<th>Name</th>
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<tr>
<td>Fiona Harrold</td>
<td></td>
<td>Saturday 10th December 2005</td>
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Appendix 3.
Glossary of basic Jeffersonian transcription notation

** Degree signs enclose speech delivered at a noticeably softer pitch than surrounding talk

[ ] A left bracket indicates the point of overlapping talk

] A right bracket indicates the point at which the overlap stops

= Indicates no break or gap between one speaker’s turn and another

(·) Indicates a micropause of less than a tenth of a second within or between utterances; longer pauses shown to the nearest tenth of a second e.g., (0.3)

Look

Underscoring indicates some form of stress, via pitch and or amplitude

: Indicates prolongation of the immediately prior sound. Multiple colons indicate a more prolonged sound

↑↓ Indicates rising and falling intonation respectively

.hhh Indicates an out-breath

.hh Indicates an in-breath

( ) Empty brackets indicate that the transcriber was unable to identify what was said; the length of the space indicates the length of the untranscribed talk

LOOK Upper case indicates especially loud sounds relative to the surrounding talk

<> Right/left carets bracketing an utterance or utterance-part indicate speeding up talk from surrounding speech; reversed caret s indicate slowed down talk

l(h)ook A single h within a word indicates breathiness e.g., laughter

hehh hahh Indicates laughter

These notation symbols preserve the details of talk as they are spoken, and reflect a requirement for considering such details, and talk more generally, as situated activity and performative of the contexts in which these phenomena are found.
Appendix 4.
Consent form for self-help groups

PhD Candidate Project

Working title:
An Ethnographic Study of Self-Help Practices

Researcher: Scott Cherry (s.cherry@lboro.ac.uk)

To:

Research Outline:
The aim of my research is to spell out in detail the ways in which self-help groups form a set of practices that give meaning to those within them. I also want to look at how self-help groups provide some sense to their members of the various issues directly related to these practices.

I would be grateful if you would give me permission to attend some of the meetings, take some photographs, and interview the group as a whole. I would like your permission to be able to use this material in my research project, as well as in any subsequent publications and presentations.

Any personal information conveyed during these meetings will remain anonymous and pseudonyms will be used as to protect everybody’s confidences.

I understand what is being outlined here and agree for you to take part in the terms.

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Appendix 5.
Interview schedule for self-help groups

Self-help or support group:

Different categorisations
Differences and similarities between them
What is support/self-help?
Attendance/Membership in this group:
Why are you here?
What it is doing?
Are you able to do this support/self-help on your own?

Self-help relates to other things:

Similarities between self-help books and self-help groups
Do members read self-help books?
What is that experience like?
Does reading help?
Are these things different from being in the group?

Drivers of group:

What keeps the group alive?
What keeps people returning to meetings?
How does it cause you to see your caring role?
How do you see your self as a member of this group?
Do you only have contact with each other within the group?
Requirements for membership
How does group appeal to new members?
How does membership fit into your life?
Is life inside the group the same as life outside of the group?

Membership to the group:

Expectations of membership
What were you looking to address?
How has the group figured in terms of your initial expectations?
What are you expressing in the group?
Are these messages and feelings able to be conveyed anywhere else?
How do other people respond to your being in a group?

Experience:

Personal experience seems to bind the group.
Exactly what is this experience? Direct? Actual?
What counts as experience?
Can others have it (professionals? Doctors?)?
How is that conveyed to other people? Listening? Looking?

Psychological:

How has being involved in the group affected you emotionally?
Has the group enabled any of you to see yourselves differently from life outside of the group? How? In what ways?
Are you a different person now?
How?
How has the group impacted upon your belief in your self?
How have others in the group enabled this to happen?