

## **The selves of self-help books: Framing, argument, and audience construction for social and autonomous selves**

Martha Cheng, Rollins College

### **Introduction**

*T*he traditional American values of individualism, self-improvement, and hard work have supported the publication and popularity of self-help books since our country's inception. As early as the 1700's Puritans were reading guides on how to live piously and do good. (Starker, 1989) Over the years self-help has expanded to secular topics and now applies to almost every aspect of life: marriage, wealth, health, career, child-rearing, addiction, happiness, etc. Despite its long history the genre of self-help received little scholarly attention until the last 25 years when the number of publications doubled and publishers and entrepreneurs seized the opportunity to expand self-help to other media—television, DVD's, lecture series, workshops, websites, etc. Now an entire self-help industry thrives. (McGee, 2005)

This increased popularity of self-help, indeed its pervasiveness in our culture, has led scholars to question what social and cultural forces drives it and what effects it has on people, society, and culture. To address these questions scholars have employed a macro-level approach, studying large corpora of texts that allows for identifying common characteristics and tracing patterns over time in relation to social/historical contexts. Sandra K. Dolby (2005), for example, looked at no fewer than 300 books. Her definition of the self-help book allows for a wide range of texts: “books of popular nonfiction written with the aim of enlightening readers about some negative effects of our culture and worldview and suggesting new attitudes and practices that might lead them to more satisfying and more effective lives” (38). Most scholars use similarly broad definitions of self-help in forming their corpus for analysis. But their evaluations of the self-help phenomenon differ—some view the books as a negative force, encouraging or reinforcing certain ideologies<sup>1</sup>, while others see positive effects<sup>2</sup>.

Despite these conflicting perspectives on self-help books, agreement exists on some characteristics. First, they respond to the social problems of a given time period and do so by reasserting traditional American values. For example, McGee (2005) points to the correlation between the success of M. Scott Peck’s *The Road Less Traveled* and high unemployment rates, suggesting that Peck’s message that “life is difficult” and his solution of hard work and discipline resonated with Americans whose lives were difficult and who needed encouragement. The second common idea in self-help research holds that the recent surge in self-help books has been fueled by those focused on the internal psychological self. And the “self” of these books takes on different forms, with the most general distinction being between the autonomous self as individual, unattached, and unaffected by others and the social self as informing and informed by others as well as

---

<sup>1</sup> Rimke (2000) and McGee (2005) criticize self-help books for glorifying the autonomous self to the detriment of collective and social relations. Ebben (1995) takes a feminist perspective to point out the tendency of self-help books directed at women to implicitly blame the individual woman for her own problems, while ignoring social forces.

<sup>2</sup> Dolby (2005) approaches self-help books as functioning as folklore that passes on cultural values and as following the traditional of American self-education.

obligated to others. (McGee, 2005) Third, several common rhetorical features exist among self-help books. The genre, as non-academic and non-scientific, eschews using data or studies to support its message. Instead, following in the tradition of other popular nonfiction, it relies on rhetorical devices such as personal narratives, metaphor, parables, analogy, and metacommentary. Also, these books use a general problem-solution structure, though, of course the nature of the problem and appropriate solutions vary. (Dolby, 2005)

Thus, current research provides substantial insight into the how and why of self-help books. But the majority of research in this area follows the general methodology of broad corpus analysis. To add another dimension to our understanding of self-help, this paper offers a micro-level analysis of the linguistic patterns of two texts, focusing on how the overall rhetorical framing relates to other features such as argument patterns and audience construction. The texts, M. Scott Peck's *The Road Less Traveled* (1978) (RLT) and Philip McGraw's *Self Matters* (2001) (SM), were chosen because they are of the same sub-genre, psychological self-help. Also, both texts have been recognized as significant forces in the self-help movement (Dolby, 2005; McGee, 2005), have been best-sellers over multiple years, and have spawned significant media attention. Finally, the texts highlight the two predominant kinds of selves represented and addressed in self-help books: the social self and the autonomous self. Peck addresses a self tied to and accountable to others, the social self, while McGraw only recognizes a radically independent self. The comparative analysis of these texts highlights how the kind of self being addressed and reinforced influences discourse and rhetorical features. We find that in dealing with a social self, Peck relies on a mental health and religious frame in which he acts as clinical expert bestowing knowledge upon a passive, ignorant, and ill reader who ultimately needs grace to be healed. In contrast, McGraw's work depends upon a frame of the "authentic self" in which he is a coach, guiding and encouraging the active and informed reader to reclaim her true self. Through a micro-analysis of discourse features, the following analysis investigates how the kind of self being addressed, either social or auto-

mous, relates to the framing, argument strategies and audience construction developed by the authors.

### **Best-Selling Self-Help Authors**

Peck is considered one of the “founding fathers of the self-help genre of books” (Wyatt, 2005). He received his BA from Harvard and his MD from Case Western University. Before becoming a full time author and lecturer in 1983, he practiced as a psychiatrist for 10 years in the Army and another 10 in private practice. Although RLT was published in 1978, it did not become a bestseller until 1983, after much promotion by Peck himself. Since then it has been on the *New York Times*’ best seller list for 694 weeks, sold over six million copies in North America and been translated into 20 languages (M. Scott Peck, 2001). Peck did not initially consider it a self-help book, but rather an inspirational book in which he combines psychology and spirituality. He wrote many other books, several of which grew out of the RLT’s success: *Meditations from the Road* (1993), *Further along the Road less Traveled* (1993), and *The Road Less Traveled and Beyond* (1997). Since RLT is considered “popular psychology,” written for the general public, scholars and mental health practitioners have not taken it seriously enough to review it, nor have there been many reviews by book critics. Most of the press on Peck, rather than reviewing the content, usually gives a brief summary and speculates about his success, which surprised himself and the publishing industry. The most detailed and well-known review comes from Phyllis Theroux of *The Washington Post*. In her glowing review she states,

But “The Road Less Traveled” is a clipper ship among Chris Crafts, a magnificent boat of a book, and it so obviously written by a human being who, both in style and subsance, (sic) leans toward the reader for the purposes of sharing something larger than himself, that one reads with the feeling that this is not just a book but a spontaneous act of generosity. (Theroux, 1978)

Any criticisms surrounding Peck seem to have only come in light of his personal behavior (problems with alcohol, his marriage and his children), not the book itself (Billen, 2005). Since RLT appeared, the self-help industry has steadily grown to include many authors, one of the more popular being Philip McGraw. After receiving his doctorate in clinical psychology from the University of North Texas, he had a private practice for 10 years. In 1989 he left private practice to begin a trial consulting firm. He impressed one of his clients, Oprah Winfrey, so much that she invited him onto her show which began his path to celebrity. From his popularity on her show, he was able to get his own show in 2002, *The Dr. Phil Show*. He has written several books dealing with different issues such as weight loss, relationships, and family. But his most popular to date has been *Self Matters* (2001) which also has an accompanying workbook, *Self Matters Companion* (2002).

Like Peck, there are few reviews of McGraw's work; rather, journalistic attention focuses on his celebrity. One review, from Montreal's *The Gazette* does critique SM for its lack of originality, ("His message is hardly new—the power of positive thinking—but he finds lots of new ways to gussy it up."), his Texas colloquialisms, audit-like methods of self-examination, and lack of supporting research (Yanofsky, 2002).

## Framing

Although Peck and McGraw's self-help books share rhetorical goals and are popular with a mainstream audience, they frame their projects quite differently. Framing refers to the way an author or speaker highlights certain aspects of a rhetorical situation in order to define that situation for the audience. It helps readers interpret and make sense of an event or situation. Entman claims that framing

essentially involves selection and salience. To frame is to *select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation* for the item described. (1993: 52) (emphasis original)

This concept has been especially useful in studies of news reporting and political rhetoric.<sup>3</sup> Frames develop from lexical choices connected with certain images, stock characters, schemata, stereotypes, and coherence systems. For example, Speilvogel (2005) analyzes the discourse surrounding the war on terrorism and the war in Iraq during the 2004 Presidential campaign. He reveals how Bush successfully framed the war in Iraq in terms of the global “war on terrorism” and “good and evil.” Bush was able to win support for his Iraq policy by leading the American public to think of that war as an extension of the war on terror and the age-old battle between good and evil. An alternative way to understand the situation, as Bush’s opponents did, framed the policy as imperialism or pre-emptive war, which has associations with former enemies of the U.S (Britain and Japan). For Lakoff the power of framing comes from the fundamental relationship between language and thought: “Framing is about getting language that fits your worldview. It is not just language. The ideas are primary—and the language carries those ideas, evokes those ideas” (2004: 4).

The following sections provide description and analysis of how Peck and McGraw frame their arguments. For each author, we first look at their overall problem definitions and solutions, followed by a closer analysis of their lexical choices.

### **Framing *The Road Less Traveled***

On the first page, Peck defines the overall problem he is addressing: “Most do not fully see this truth that life is difficult” (p. 15). Note that the problem is not simply that life is difficult, but that people *do not see* that that is the way it is supposed to be. In fact, he chides the general public for expecting life to be easy and pain-free.

His solution is “discipline,” which he defines a set of tools required to *accept* the suffering problems bring and thereby solve the problem as he defined it. Discipline consists of four techniques accept suffering: delaying

---

<sup>3</sup> For an overview of theories of framing see Scheufele, D.A. 1999 “Framing as a theory of media effects” *Journal of Communication*. 49 (1): 103-122.

gratification, acceptance of responsibility, dedication to truth, and balancing. Peck discusses each of these tools in detail, describing what they are and the consequences of not possessing them. After a lengthy treatment of discipline, he delves into the topic of love, which he claims provides the motivation to be disciplined. According to Peck, being disciplined is difficult, but if one has enough love for oneself, for others, and for the world, one will be motivated to be disciplined. But this part of his work is not a mere exhortation to love. He takes great pains to undo popular notions of love, which he thinks are harmful, and redefine love as desiring the spiritual growth of another.

Peck admits that love is difficult to define and understand so he turns to religion and the idea of grace. Some people, despite great hardships, live lives full of love and discipline. Others, who are surrounded by support and comfort, are void of love. For Peck, the only way to explain this contradiction is grace, mysterious gifts, or guidance from God that help us on our spiritual journey. Thus, in his book, Peck progresses from the problem of not accepting suffering, to the solution of discipline and love, and finally, to the ultimate solution, grace.

Peck's lexical choices describe the problem and solution in terms of mental health and illness. When defining the problem in his introduction, he claims, "This tendency to avoid problems and the emotional suffering inherent in them is the primary basis of all human mental illness....We are all mentally ill to a greater or lesser degree" (p. 17). Later, when describing the tools of discipline, he explicitly portrays the lack of tools in terms of mental illness and offers psychotherapy as the cure. Table 1 presents some of Peck's comments on the individual tools of discipline. The words demonstrating mental health discourse are italicized.

Table 1. *Mental health language used to discuss tools of discipline*

Discipline Tool	Comments on Tool
Delaying Gratification	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The feeling of being valuable—"I am a valuable person"—is essential to <i>mental health</i> and is a corner stone of self-discipline. (p. 24)</li> </ul>
Acceptance of Responsibility	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• [<i>Neuroses and character disorders</i>] are disorders of responsibility, and as such they are opposite styles of relating to the world and its problems (p. 35)</li> <li>• Few of us can escape <i>being neurotic or character disordered</i> at least to some degree. (p. 36)</li> </ul>
Dedication to Truth	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• This process [transference] of active clinging to an outmoded view of reality is the basis for much <i>mental illness</i>. (p. 46)</li> <li>• <i>Psychotherapy</i> is, among other things, map revising. (p. 49)</li> <li>• <i>Mental health</i> is an ongoing process of dedication to reality at all costs. (p. 51)</li> <li>• <i>Psychotherapy</i> is an act of greatest courage. (p. 54)</li> </ul>
Balancing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Much of work of <i>psychotherapy</i> consists of attempting to help our <i>patient</i> allow or make their response system more flexible. (p. 65)</li> <li>• Since <i>mentally healthy</i> human beings must grow, and since giving up or loss of the old self is an integral part of the process of mental and spiritual growth, <i>depression</i> is a normal and basically healthy phenomenon. (p. 69-70)</li> </ul>

Although the language of mental health predominates in Peck's frame, he also uses the language of religion and spirituality. In summing up the section on discipline, his conclusion is that we need to accept suffering and that the more we do, the happier we will be, like Buddha and Christ.

(1) It is in giving up of self that human beings can find the most ecstatic and lasting solid, durable joy of life. And it is death that provides life with all its meaning. This “secret” is the central wisdom of religion. (p. 72)

When he begins discussing love he draws on religious/spiritual language even more. Truly loving, as he defines it, takes great effort and energy. As limited human beings he points out that we must choose whom we can love—we aren’t capable of truly loving everyone who might ask for our love.

(2) The choice is not easy; it may be excruciatingly painful, as the assumption of *godlike* power so often is... To attempt to love someone who cannot benefit from your love with spiritual growth is to waste your energy, *to cast your seed upon arid ground*. (p. 158) (my emphasis)

But even as he uses religious terms, he continues to draw on the language of mental health. When discussing the various misunderstandings of love he uses terms such as “cathexis” and “dependency,” and he describes psychotherapy as helping people gain the proper understanding of love. He even claims, “Any genuinely loving relationship is one of mutual psychotherapy” (p. 178).

The frame of mental illness suggests that the reader needs to be healed. Although the reader is blamed for her illness (because she doesn’t have discipline) and the book provides the tools to overcome it, Peck implies that part of the process is out of the individual’s control. The mentally ill patient can only get so far on her own. Ultimately, she needs to be healed by some other power. Thus, the frame allows for Peck’s spirituality, his belief in a higher power, to be part of the solution.

### **Framing *Self Matters***

McGraw frames SM in very different terms than RLT, staying away from mental health and religious language, using instead a frame of “authenticity to self” and the language of self-determination. McGraw defines

---

the problem he is addressing as a mis-match, an “incongruence” between the reader’s “authentic self” and current “self-concept.” The authentic self refers to a person’s self when living fully, happily, and with passion. McGraw tells his reader:

(3) The authentic self is the you that can be found at your absolute core. It is the part of you that is not defined by your job, or your function, or your role. It is the composite of all your unique gifts skills, abilities, interests, talents, insights, and wisdom. It is all of your strengths and values that are uniquely yours...(p. 30)

One’s self-concept is the “bundle of beliefs, facts, opinions, and perceptions about yourself that you travel through life with, every moment of every day” (p. 69). Unfortunately, our self-concept often conflicts with our authentic self. Through life’s challenges our authentic self has gotten buried or side-lined. The goal of McGraw’s book is to help the reader achieve congruence by finding her authentic self and revising her self-concept to match it.

The solution consists of an “audit” of the reader’s life that contributes to her current self-concept. The audit has two parts: identifying external factors and internal factors. The three external factors are your ten defining moments, your seven critical choices and, your five pivotal people. The four internal factors are your locus of control, your internal dialogue, labels and, life scripts.

McGraw asks the reader to keep a journal during the audit, tracking each step of her self-examination. She is to identify specific factors and convey how they influenced her self-concept. For example, the reader may find that she has a life script that says “Men always use me, so I must deserve it” (p. 227), which has contributed to a negative self-concept. At the end of the audit, the reader has a written record of the events that have made up her self-concept. And the point of the audit? “If you know the events that have driven your self-concept, and you can identify the reactions that you’ve had to those events, then you know what the levers are that you can pull to change it” (p. 256).

After the audit, McGraw offers a “Five-step Action Plan” to help the reader maintain her authentic self as she moves forward in life and is faced with experiences that may challenge that self:

Step 1: Isolate a Target Event

Step 2: Audit Your Internal Response to that Triggering Event

Step 3: Test Your Internal Response for Authenticity

Step 4: Come up with an “Authentically Accurate Alternative” Response

Step 5: Identify and Execute Your Minimal Effective Response (p. 258-261)

By following these steps the reader can control her self-concept. Instead of letting external factors define her self-concept, the reader can choose how to interpret and relate an experience to her authentic self.

In this solution of the audit, the reader needs only to rely on herself, no higher power or therapist is needed. McGraw further emphasizes the power and value of the individual reader by placing the responsibility for the incongruence between authentic self and self concept on others, not the reader. And throughout SM McGraw uses the language of self-determination. He begins his book with a dramatic and personal story of an unhappy man:

(4) Like an enemy I knew as intimately as any friend, I came to know the nagging, constant emptiness of the incongruent life. I ignored my self and lived for people, purposes, and goals that weren't my own. I betrayed who I was and instead accepted a fictional substitute that was defined from the outside in. I betrayed myself, and mine was a life and experience that was a fraud and a fiction. (p. 7)

Although McGraw has agency in this unhappy situation (“I ignored,” “I betrayed”), notice that he betrays himself for *other peoples’* goals or expectations (“a fictional substitute ...defined from the outside in”). Throughout SM he places most of the blame for unhappiness on external forces.

(5) Life can be cruel and when it is, your authentic self—which might have otherwise been doing fine—is altered and that’s not good. (p. 89)

(6) I think a lot of this losing ourselves has happened because our world has sped up to the point of being absolutely, out-of-control insane. (p. 16)

In addition to our fast-paced culture, McGraw points to other people as having negative influences on us, leading us away from our true selves. In fact, McGraw dedicates the last chapter, “Sabotage,” to warning the reader against others. At the end of the book, when the reader has found her authentic self, he warns against the sabotage of others. Others may not like the changes the reader makes to her life and might undermine her efforts to be happy. The danger is not simply that the reader could fall back into her poor habits, but rather that she could be sabotaged by others who prefer her old ways. Thus, the culprit is the other, not the reader.

Since negative external forces are to blame for the problem (an incongruent self-concept), McGraw’s solution is asserting oneself against those negative forces. There is no need for therapy or grace. McGraw tells the reader that she-completely on her own- can find her authentic self and live according to it. Throughout his book he reiterates this self-determining, independent, can-do attitude, as seen in the excerpts below (emphasis added):

(7) Connecting with this authentic self again means finding your way back to the no-kidding, real you that existed before the world started crowding you out. This is *a control that comes from the inside out*. (p. 10)

(8) If you want to be totally, consciously *in charge of you* and everything you think, do, and feel, and use *that control to create value* for you, and therefore everyone around you, you’ve come to the right place, but there is work to be done. (p. 11)

(9) The good news is that *the only person we need* to fix all of this *is you*. (p. 21)

(10) You need the tools, you need guidance on where to start and what to do, but with a little help, *you can do it*. You are worth it, and *you can do it!* (p. 95)

(11) Yes, you have had defining moments. Yes, their consequences have flowed through innumerable moments in your life since then. But remember, as well, that *you are in control*. *You are the manager of your own life*. (p. 123)

(12) You can't change history. But *you can change* your responses to those external factors. *You can change* what you do in response to that history" (p. 157).

There is no room for mystery in McGraw's frame. Everyone has an authentic self that can be reclaimed. Various events and people affect one's self-concept so that it may or may not correspond with the authentic self. When the self-concept and authentic self do not correspond, one lives an incongruent, unhappy life. To reconnect with one's authentic self, the reader needs to undo the damage done by external forces (through the audit) and continually assert her true self. Note that in this frame, the incongruence or loss of one's authentic self is never referred to as an illness, nor is the solution psychotherapy or grace. Instead, by using the language of self-determination, McGraw sets up a dichotomy between self and other, blaming the other for drowning out the reader's true self and the solution is the reader's audit of her life and her continued reflective diligence.

Thus, we see these authors using very different framing strategies even though their rhetorical goals are similar. For Peck the source of the problem, not accepting suffering, stems from individual weaknesses, described as illnesses, and a misunderstanding of love. The solution requires being supernaturally and therapeutically healed so as to love enough to embrace suffering. And the heart of his solution, love, entails loving and suffering for others, as well as oneself. McGraw's frame contrasts the mental health frame by focusing on the authentic self and what the reader can do, on her own, to find and strengthen that authentic self. We shall see how these frames influence the other rhetorical features of argument functions and audience construction.

## Argument Functions: Undermining Doxa

Although Peck and McGraw employ contrasting frames, they do share some argumentative strategies. They both identify the cause of the reader's unhappiness as rooted in misguided socially drawn beliefs about the world and/or about herself. Undoing these false beliefs is crucial to both authors' rhetorical strategies. Peck must undermine the popular notions of love, and McGraw must undo the self-concept at odds with one's authentic self.

These beliefs can be understood as *doxa*. *Doxa*, the Greek term for common opinion or belief, was central to classical rhetoric in that a rhetor must build common ground with the audience by drawing on shared beliefs and values. *Doxa* is also pivotal in other humanistic disciplines, though treated under different names such as cliché, stereotype, commonplace or public opinion (Amossy, 2002). In these other disciplines *doxa* is often negatively construed as that which needs to be revealed or overturned.

But to uproot *doxa*, to make an argument and lead an audience to a new belief, one must always rely on common ground or *doxa* from which to build a case. Some scholars have referred to this contradiction, that we must use *doxa* to change it, as "the scandal of *doxa*" (Jasinski 2001: 186). In a similar vein, one critic characterizes self-help writing as simply replacing one set of beliefs with another:

By proclaiming what types of self-change are deemed healthy and best, the self-help experts themselves are providing social, not psychological rules of conduct...the self becomes reinvented by its dependence on a novel system of popular expert truth. (Rimke, 2000: 70-71)

Although one could characterize Peck and McGraw as simply providing new rules of conduct, they do not simply proclaim which beliefs are false with no justification. They both undermine *doxa* through a careful tracing of *how* the false beliefs have come to be, by revealing them as constructed rather than natural or true. For example, as noted earlier, Peck attacks the notion that the feeling of falling in love is equivalent to love itself by carefully explaining where the feeling of falling in love comes from, how it develops, and how it can fade. McGraw's audit likewise shows the reader where certain beliefs originate. According to Fairclough (2003) such causal

tracing reveals an “explanatory logic” which is used in some genres to highlight contingency and variability. In contrast, the “logic of appearances” marks other genres with generalizations and descriptions to emphasize stability.

But the authors present their explanatory logic in different ways, creating different kinds of exchanges between author and audience that correlate with their respective frames. Peck’s exposition of what beliefs are wrong and why indicates his arguments function as “knowledge exchange” (Fairclough, 2003). In the mental health frame Peck is the expert and passing on knowledge. But McGraw’s guiding the reader through an audit so that the reader identifies false beliefs for herself show his arguments as an “activity exchange” (Fairclough, 2001). As coach, McGraw guides and encourages the reader to act.

Although the authors share the overall strategy of changing beliefs through explanatory logic, they do so with different types of interaction with the audience that reflect their respective roles appropriate to their argument frames. The following section elaborates on how the authors’ reasoning and other linguistic moves imply certain kinds of author-reader relations.

### **Audience Construction and Orientation to Difference**

The effectiveness of persuasive strategies, such as the frames and argument functions seen here, depends upon how they appeal to their target audience. Leff (2002) claims that even classical rhetoric, which has been characterized as focused on the agency of the speaker, had an implicit dependence on audience. The “power of the orator ironically implied humility before the audience, because the power to move and persuade an audience requires accommodation and adaptation to its sentiments” (2002: 6). Early rhetoricians advised speakers to know their audience—what qualities, knowledge, and values they bring to the speech situation. The speaker had to anticipate and often to acknowledge explicitly these audience characteristics in order to be persuasive.

Such preparation requires the construction of the audience by the speaker or author (Perelman & Olbrechts-Tyteca, 1969). The speaker uses an implied audience or an imagined audience that has certain characteristics, motivations, and values, which may or may not correspond with the actual audience. The analysis of an argument can reveal the speaker's imagined audience.

A striking difference in the self-help texts is the degree to which Peck and McGraw are "oriented to difference" with respect to their audiences. Fairclough has built upon Bakhtin's notion of dialogism to describe "orientation to difference" as the degree to which a text accentuates or acknowledges the dialogue between the voice of the author and other voices (2003: 41). The following analysis focuses on how the authors acknowledge the voice of the audience and how much they imagine their audience to be similar to or different from themselves in knowledge, values, and experience. Not surprisingly, their imagined audiences correspond with their overall frames.

In RLT, Peck uses a distant and didactic tone of a the mental health expert bestowing knowledge on the ignorant (and troubled) layman. One characteristic that contributes to his tone is his frequent generalized claims about people and life:

- (13) This tendency to avoid problem and the emotional suffering inherent in them is the primary basis of all human mental illness. (p. 17)
- (14) The process of making revisions is painful..and herein lies the major source of many of the ills of mankind. (p. 45)
- (15) Tendency to avoid challenge is so omnipresent in human beings that it can properly be considered a characteristic of human nature. (p. 53)
- (16) It is in the giving up of self that human beings can find the most ecstatic and lasting solid, durable joy of life. (p. 72)

Even though he uses some modalized language ("primary," "major," "many"), these are still strong, sweeping claims ("all human mental illness," "ills of mankind," "human nature," "human beings"). His failure to

qualify or support these claims signals an assumption about his own authority and the audience's acceptance of that authority.

His didactic tone also comes across in his manner of reasoning. When explaining concepts or processes dealing with mental health, Peck tends to use syllogistic reasoning and states the warrant/minor premise even when it seems unnecessary. For example:

(17) Problems, depending on their nature, evoke in us frustration or grief or sadness or loneliness or guilt or regret or anger or fear or anxiety or anguish or despair. These are uncomfortable feelings, often very uncomfortable...it is because of the pain that events or conflicts engender in use that we call them problems. (p. 16)

One can diagram this reasoning as a syllogism:

Major premise:	Problems evoke negative emotions.	(A→B)
Minor premise:	Negative emotions are painful.	(B→C)
Conclusion:	Problems are painful.	(A→C)

Similar chains of reasoning run throughout RLT:

(18) When we love something it is of value to us, and when something is of value to us we spend time with it, time enjoying it and time taking care of it...So it is when we love children; we spend time admiring them and caring for them. We give them our time. (p. 22)

(19) The feeling associated with giving up something loved...depression...Since mentally healthy human beings must grow, and since giving up or loss of the old self is an integral part of the process of mental and spiritual growth, depression is a normal and basically healthy phenomenon. (p. 69)

(20) ..the definition of love implied effort. When we extend ourselves...we do so in opposition to the inertia of laziness or the resistance of fear. Extension of ourselves or moving out against the iner-

---

tia of laziness we call work. Moving out in the face of fear we call courage. Love, then, is a form of work or a form of courage. (p. 120)

In these instances he takes care to lay out the steps of reasoning and assumes no knowledge on the reader's part. Or at least he does not ask the reader to rely on that knowledge to draw reasonable conclusions. Unlike using the rhetorical enthymeme in which the audience participates in the reasoning, Peck does the work for the reader. Fairclough states that making assumptions indicates sharing common ground and lessening the orientation to difference. By not making assumptions in these cases, Peck highlights difference—specifically a difference in knowledge and maybe even reasoning ability.

However, when he moves from explaining the abstract theories of mental health to relating stories, anecdotes, or analogies to illustrate the theories, he assumes much common ground with the audience. He uses both general and specific anecdotes. The general do not cite specific persons or events, but they do invoke characters, stereotypes, and "typical" scenarios:

(21) To our children we say, 'Don't talk back to me, I'm your parent.' To our spouse we give the message, 'Let's live and let live. If you criticize me, I'll be a bitch to live with and you'll regret it.' To their families and the world the elderly give the message, 'I am old and fragile. I you challenge me I may die or at least you will bear upon your head the responsibility for making my last days on earth miserable.' (p. 52)

(22) In marriage there is normally a differentiation of the roles of the two spouses, a normally efficient division of labor between them. The woman usually does the cooking, housecleaning...the man usually maintains employment...Healthy couples instinctively will switch roles from time to time. (p. 102)

In these brief, general anecdotes Peck assumes common ground and is not oriented toward difference. He assumes shared social and cultural experiences and values with the reader. However, it is not difficult to imagine

readers who would not identify with these scenarios. Peck's assumption of similarity can also be seen in his use of analogies. During his discussion of love, for example, he uses this shocking analogy:

(23) I frequently tell my patients that their feelings are their slaves and that the art of self-discipline is like the art of slave-owning. First of all, one's feelings are the source of one's energy; they provide the horsepower, or slave power, that makes it possible for us to accomplish the tasks of living. Since they work for us, we should treat them with respect. There are two common errors that slave owners can make which represent opposite and extreme forms of executive leadership. One type of slave-owner does not discipline his slaves, gives them no structure, sets them no limits, provides them with no direction and does not make it clear who is the boss. What happens, of course, is that in due time his slaves stop working and begin moving into the mansion, raiding the liquor cabinet and breaking the furniture, and soon the slave-owner finds that he is the slave of his slaves...Yet the opposite style of leadership...is equally self-destructive. In this style the slave owner is so obsessed with the fear that his slaves (feelings) might get out of control and so determined that they should cause him no trouble that he routinely beats them into submission and punishes them severely at the first sign of any potency. The result of this style is that in relatively short order the slaves become less and less productive as their will is sapped by the harsh treatment they receive. Or else their will turns more and more toward covert rebellion. If the process is carried out long enough, one might the owner's prediction finally comes true and the slaves rise up and burn down the mansion, frequently with the owner inside. Such is the genesis of certain psychoses and overwhelming neuroses. (p. 156-157)

Analogies work by creating an "evidence case" with which the audience is familiar to make a claim about the "conclusion case" (Herrick, 2004). They depend upon the assumption that similarities between the cases in some respects suggest similarities in other respects. In Peck's analogy, the evi-

dence case is the “art of slave owning” and the conclusion case is the “art of controlling one’s feelings.” By using this analogy Peck is assuming first, that there is such a thing as “the art of slave owning,” second, that the reader is familiar with this art and can relate to it and, third, that slave owning is a positive practice. Relying on such assumptions that do not acknowledge the divisive history of slavery in the U.S. indicates little orientation to difference and implies little diversity in his imagined audience.

Peck often relies on such analogies and generalized anecdotes, presented with no qualifications, implying an audience with cultural and social experiences and expectations similar to his own. In fact, with but two exceptions, Peck rarely acknowledges disagreement from the reader:

(24) The reader may naively suppose that I will recommend to parents...(p. 120)

(25) By this time some readers may feel saturated by the concept of discipline... (p. 160)

Note that in these examples he uses the term “reader” instead of directly addressing his audience as “you.” Peck rarely addresses the audience directly, but prefers to use the third person or the generalized “we.”

Peck’s discourse addresses an audience who knows little about mental health and passively receives knowledge from him, yet his readers come from a homogenous population with shared cultural and social experiences and values.

In contrast, McGraw’s imagined reader of SM is highly involved and active in the communication process and represents a diverse population. These qualities are demonstrated by McGraw’s conversational style and general orientation to difference. His reader participates in an “activity exchange.” She does not simply receive knowledge from him. Rather, McGraw guides her through activities to find her own, personal knowledge. The involvement of the reader is demonstrated not only through the audits, but also in how McGraw engages her. Unlike Peck, McGraw consistently directly addresses the reader as “you.” Moreover, he frequently anticipates the reader’s reactions and responds to them:

- (26) Now you may be convinced that your life never had any color or passion to begin with. But if it did...(p. 13)
- (27) Now you may be thinking, Dang, you're being hard on me and you don't even know me...(p. 15)
- (28) Just hear me out. (p.15)
- (29) Are you in total shock right now? (p. 19)
- (30) Maybe it sounds melodramatic to be describing your life with words like power, vision, and passion, because, after all, we're just talking about you, right? There may be a little voice inside that says, "Those things are for other people. That's just lofty talk you put in books. He can't be talking about me." But if you're really honest with yourself, don't you admit that...(p.75)

Through the direct address and anticipation of audience reaction, McGraw demonstrates an awareness that his discourse is in dialogue with another voice, specifically that of his audience. In excerpt 27, for example, he even puts words in his audience's mouth and imagines her retort--a form of what classical rhetoricians called *prosopopoei*.

McGraw's differences with Peck also extend to style of reasoning. While Peck tends to make generalized claims about social life and people, McGraw presents his ideas in highly qualified terms. For example, rather than beginning his book with a claim like "life is difficult" McGraw asks his reader a question:

- (31) Is it possible that, just like me, you have a great chance for a tremendously more satisfying and exciting life, but you are selling yourself short and missing out because you don't know it, or, if you do know it, you are just stuck in your life and aren't doing anything about it? (p. 9)

The tentative yet suggestive tone of this introduction continues throughout McGraw's book. Instead of using syllogistic reasoning that results in unqualified claims, he employs anecdotes to illustrate his central concepts and

then asks the reader to apply the concepts to her own life. For example, when explaining “defining moments,” McGraw first presents two stories from his own life that are examples of defining moments and how they impacted him. Only then does he try to explain explicitly the concept of defining moment:

(32) Nevertheless, just as with me, there have been events, moments, in your life that have defined and redefined who you are. The event enters your consciousness with such power that it confronts the very core of who and what you conceived you were. (p. 104)

If McGraw’s style of reasoning were like Peck’s, he might have explained his idea this way:

A defining moment enters your consciousness.  
Your consciousness influences your self-concept.  
A defining moment influences your self-concept.

Clearly, McGraw is more conversational and uses more enthymematic reasoning, engaging the reader in the reasoning as well as explaining the idea with reference to the reader herself. Thus, the central concepts of the audit, such as defining moments and life scripts, are to be understood *in terms of the reader’s own life*, rather than in an abstract, objective way. Each concept is personalized, and the reader has to find her own meaning:

(33) In order to understand what I mean by your authentic self, you need only think back to the times in your life when you have been your best. (p. 9)

Thus, McGraw’s text is much more dialogical than Peck’s, with a high awareness of readers with diverse backgrounds who must work actively for their own improvement.

With regard to social and cultural values and experiences, McGraw never uses generalized anecdotes that depend upon stereotypes and typical

situations. Instead, he always uses specific anecdotes or analogies from which to draw conclusions. In this way he assumes fewer shared cultural or social values. Of course, to be rhetorically effective, even specific examples require common ground and warrants, but less so than generalized, stereotypical scenarios.

Peck's and McGraw's imagined audiences differ from each other in knowledge, agency, and social/cultural experiences and values. One might speculate that the differences result from the different time periods in which the books were written. Surely there are correlations between time of publication and audience construction, but given both texts' continued popularity today, the analysis suggests that it would be difficult to define one kind of audience for self-help.

## Discussion

Peck's RLT and McGraw's SM clearly fulfill Dolby's definition of self-help books as books "of popular nonfiction written with the aim of enlightening readers about some negative effects of our culture and worldview and suggesting new attitudes and practices that might lead them to more satisfying and effective lives" (38). They share some typical genre features such as a problem-solution structure and the use of personal narratives, analogies, metaphors, and anecdotes as persuasive devices. Yet they represent two contrasting ways of portraying the self: the social self or the autonomous self. Through a micro-analysis of the discourse features of each text, we have seen how the authors represent and address the different kinds of selves. They do so explicitly in how they frame the problem and solution, but also implicitly in how they construct and address their readers and the degree to which they give their readers agency in helping themselves.

The social self found in self-help books has been described as accountable to society and reciprocally influenced by others. (Dolby, 2005; McGee, 2005) Peck advocates a social self when prescribing loving others as his solution and pointing to the need of higher power, an Other, for ultimate healing. He chooses the frame of mental illness and religion to situate

his social self, thereby creating a sick and powerless social self, who is at fault for her own illness. These characteristics are reaffirmed by Peck's method of undermining "wrong" cultural beliefs and replacing them with "truth" through knowledge exchange in which the reader passively receives the knowledge he bestows upon her. Peck's social self is not only sick and powerless, but also ignorant in psychological matters. And she is assumed to be like Peck in cultural values, background, and experiences; in this way he does not acknowledge individual, diverse experiences. Peck's version of the social self heavily values the social over the individual with strong negative connotations.

McGraw's SM presents a self of radical individualism and autonomy. In this case the social (family, institutions, and others) is to blame for the self's unhappy state and the solution is a return to one's authentic, internally defined self. Thus, any Other is positioned as a negative force or potential danger. McGraw empowers the autonomous self by giving her agency in helping herself; through a process of activity exchange the reader uproots negative beliefs and replaces them with beliefs aligned with her authentic self. And by being highly oriented to possible differences with the reader, McGraw acknowledges her individuality and diverse experiences and values.

The analysis offers a benchmark for subsequent studies of the selves of self-help. The two texts present extreme examples of the social and autonomous selves with little compromise or balance—either the self is completely at the mercy of others or she is independent to the point of having no use for others at all. Do other self-help texts maintain these extreme types of selves or do some offer more nuanced selves that acknowledge both individuality and social influences? Or might the success of these books be tied to their extreme positions? And to what extent do the selves of either kind correlate with the discourse and rhetorical strategies found in RLT and SM? Could a self-help text use a medical frame to address a autonomous self? Or could an author be highly oriented to difference with a social self? What we do know is that the self-help industry shows no signs of slowing down. And American readers seem to be accepting at least two conceptions of what kind of self they are. In Booth's (1961) terms, they are

agreeing to be the audience as implied by the authors—either sick and powerless or self-sufficient and fully capable.

## REFERENCES

- Amossy, R. (2002) 'Introduction to the Study of Doxa', *Poetics Today*, 23(3): 369-394.
- Billen, A. (2005) 'Gin, cigarettes, women: I'm a prophet, not a saint', *Times Online*.  
[http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/life\\_and\\_style/health/features/article520838.ece](http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/life_and_style/health/features/article520838.ece).
- Booth, W. C. (1961). *The rhetoric of fiction* (Second ed.). Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Cheng, M. (2007, June 6-9). 'Undoing Common Ground: Argumentation in Self-Help Books', Paper presented at the Ontario Society for the Study of Argumentation, Windsor, Ontario.
- Cowlshaw, B. R. (2001). Subjects are from Mars, objects are from Venus: constructions of the self in self-help. *Journal of Popular Culture*, 35(1).
- Dolby, S. K. (2005). *Self-Help Books: Why Americans Keep Reading Them*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press.
- Ebben, M. (1995). Off the shelf salvation: A feminist critique of self-help. *Women's Studies in Communication*, 18(7), 111-122.
- Fairclough, N. (2003) *Analysing Discourse: Textual Analysis for Social Research*. New York: Routledge.
- Herrick, J. A. (2004) *Argumentation: Understanding and Shaping Arguments*. State College: Strata Publishing.
- Jasinski, J. (2001) *Sourcebook on rhetoric: Key concepts in contemporary rhetorical studies*. Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications.
- Lakoff, G. (2004) *Don't Think Like an Elephant! Know Your Values and Frame the*

- 
- Debate*. White River Junction, VT: Chelsea Green Publishing.
- Leff, M. (2002) *Tradition and agency in humanistic rhetoric*. Paper presented at the Rhetoric Society of America, Las Vegas, Nevada.
- M. Scott Peck, M.D.: *Author of the Road Less Traveled*. (2001)  
<http://www.mscottpeck.com/html/biography.html>
- McGee, M. (2005). *Self-Help, Inc. Makeover Culture in American Life*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- McGraw, P. C. (2001) *Self Matters: Creating Your Life from the Inside Out*. New York: Free Press.
- McGraw, P. C. (2002) *Self Matters Companion: Helping You Create Your life from the Inside Out*. New York: Free Press.
- Peck, M. D., M. Scott. (1978) *The road less traveled: A new psychology of love, traditional values, and spiritual growth*. New York: Touchstone.
- Peck, M. D., M. Scott. (1993) *Meditations from the Road*. New York: Touchstone.
- Peck, M. D., M. Scott. (1993) *Further Along the Road Less Traveled: The Unending Journey Towards Spiritual Growth*. New York: Touchstone.
- Peck, M. D., M. Scott. (1997) *The Road Less Traveled and Beyond: Spiritual Growth in an Age of Anxiety*. New York: Touchstone.
- Perelman, C., & Olbrechts-Tyteca, L. (1969) *The New Rhetoric*. Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press.
- Rimke, H. M. (2000) 'Governing citizens through self-help literature', *Cultural Studies*, 14(1): 61-78.
- Scheufele, D. A. (1999) 'Framing as a Theory of Media Effects', *Journal of Communication*, 49(1), 103-122.
- Spielvogel, C. (2005) "'You Know Where I Stand": Moral Framing of the War on Terrorism and the Iraq War in the 2004 Presidential Campaign', *Rhetoric & Public Affairs*, 8(4): 549-570.
- Starker, S. (1989). *Oracle at the Supermarket: The American Preoccupation with Self-Help Books*. New Brunswick: Transaction.
- Theroux, P. (1978) A Psychotherapist's Guide for Living. *Washington Post*, p.

D9.

Wyatt, E. (2005, September 28) M. Scott Peck, Self-Help Author, Dies at 69.  
*New York Times*.

Yanofsky, J. (2002, February 9) 'Self Esteem Run Amok: With Oprah  
backing him, Dr. Phil plans to turn us all into winners', *The Gazette*  
K3.