The Effect of Self-Help Books to the Life Skills of Undergraduate and Graduate Students

(Kendi Kendine Yardım Kitaplarının Lisans ve Lisansüstü Öğrencilerinin Hayat Becerilerine Etkisinin İncelenmesi)

Hakan UŞAKLI
Sinop Üniversitesi, Turkey
husakli@gmail.com

Abstract: In the current study, the effect of self-help books on the life skills of undergraduate and graduate university students were investigated. To collect data, Emphatic Tendency Scale, open-ended interview forms and personal information forms were used. The data were analyzed through one-way variance analysis. Open-ended interview forms were categorized, and thus their percentages were given. Data analysis showed that self-help books which appealed to a large reader group in Turkey and other countries did not have any contributions to the university students' life skills. Some books such as "Educational Psychology, Development and Learning and Guidance" aimed at psycho-education" can be advised in the courses at the faculties of education. But, on the other hand, in the lessons such as "Human Relations" and "Communication", which are at the universities' category of elective courses, great attention should be given to the choosing course books and source books. There is no limitation on the on self-help books. The latest tendency of self-help books are on the best direct leading with direct alternative.

Keywords: Self-help books, Life skills, Future tendency, Personal development

Özet: Bu çalışmada kendi kendine yardım (self-help books) kitaplarının lisans ve lisansüstü öğrencilerinin hayat becerilerine olan etkisi incelenmiştir. Araştırmada, empati kurma, öfke yönetimi, benlik saygısını artırma ve aktif dinleme becerisini yerinde kullanma kişiler arası iletişimde hayat becerisi olarak ele alınmıştır. Araştırmada ölçme aracı olarak Empatik Eğilim Ölçeği, açık uçlu görüşme formu ve kişisel bilgi formu kullanılmıştır. Veri analizinde tek yönlü varyans analizi ve açık uçlu görüşme formuna verilen yanıtlar kategorilere ayrılarak yüzdelikleri verilmiştir. Veri analizleri sonunda, ülkemizde de yaygın okuyucu kitlesi olan kendi kendine yardım kitaplarının üniversite öğrencilerinin hayat becerilerine katkıda bulunmadığı bulunmuştur. Psiko-eğitim amaçlı bir kısım kitapların Eğitim Psikolojisi, Gelişim ve Öğrenme, Rehberlik gibi eğitim fakültelerince okutulan derslerde tavsiye edilebilir. Ancak İnsan İlişkileri, İletişim gibi üniversitelerde seçmeli ders kapsamında okutulacak derslerde, ders kitaplarının ve kaynak kitapların seçimine dikkat edilmelidir. Kendi kendine yardım kitapları üzerine sınırlandırıcı hiç bir yaptırım yoktur.

Anahtar sözcükler: Kendi kendine yardım kitapları, Hayat becerileri, Gelecek eğilim, Kişisel gelişim

Introduction

"Self-help" in English has the meaning of not being in need of someone and being self sufficient. Self-confidence that enables individuals and groups to develop financially, intellectually, emotionally and any kind of information which is easily accessible and also emotional support are the foundations of self-help. In accordance with this definition, self-help books are prescriptive books including real life experiences of authors who are aimed to help individuals to overcome their educational, work-life and psychological problems.

History of writing self-help books goes back to the past times. Self-help books have been very popular worldwide, particularly in the USA. It was aimed that, they would be translated into a number of different languages to reach a mass group of readers. Main characteristics of self-help books contain optimistic slogans with a clear and fluent language and advices for readers for achieving a good quality of meaningful life. People buy self-help books written on millions of different topics (e.g. losing weight, escaping from stress, looking smart, being rich and attractive) just to feel good. These kinds of books are aimed at being a guide for individuals which enables them to develop a more optimistic and realistic life perspective. While some self-books have many explanations about the ways to cope with depression and loneliness, the others describe how to strengthen family relations for parents and how to teach effectively for teachers. However, several of these books might simplify some significant and sophisticated problems, presenting unrealistic recommendations and eventually misleading the readers (Holgate, 2005).

Interesting ideas regarding self-help has attracted the attention of a number of people. The idea heralded by Poor Richard, Dale Cornegieye and Tony Robbins posing that individuals can cure themselves without taking expensive help from psychologists and psychiatrists has been found to be pleasing. Unlimited internet access to the self-help books in contrast to the limited access to psychiatrist help has recently being found out more attention-gathering. People living in the USA spent 563 million dollars for self-help books in addition to visiting more than 12000 web sites in 2000. In general, 40% of these web sites cover topics in mental health, while depression is the most frequently searched topic (Paul, 2001). Although this interest seems to be declining, there is a continuing increase in the number of self-help books, of web sites on self-help topics, and of other audio-visual materials. In search engine, Proquest Umi, there are 347 studies under the title of "self-help books", promoting them. There are only 2 studies introducing drawbacks of self-help books (Farrant, 1985; Hemsley, 2007).

One of the comprehensive studies dealing with the self-help books was conducted by Woodstock (2002). Woodstock (2002) investigated the self-help books written between 1860 and 2000 in 3 periods. The first period from 1880 to 1910 is characterized by "mental treatment"; the middle period between 1940 and 1960 is illustrated by "positive thinking". The last and the third period being the mixture of the first and the middle period from 1980 till 1990 is exemplified by "composite mental". Based on the content analysis, he concluded that sources investigated were successful in self-help in terms of psychological and religious aspects.

In recent years, self-help books have been criticized for being considerably exaggerated. For instance, Arkowitz and Lilienfeld (2006: 76), referring to Robbins's (1992) self-help book, "Awaken the Giant Within: How to Take Immediate Control of Your Mental, Emotional, Physical and Financial Destiny!" rejected that any psychological problem can be solved with ease. Moreover, they criticized the other self-help books written by individuals who have psychiatric education. They argued that studies indicating the effectiveness of self-help books suffered form inadequate sampling, misinterpretation and inappropriate experimental designs.

Paul (2001) presented several recommendations concerning his own self-help books in the area of controlling anger, escaping from sad mental mood, deciding goals, increasing self concept, listening actively in close relationships.

Self-help emerged as it was supposed that authors known for their techniques presented beneficial information, and as charlatan- psycho-talkative people promoted them. It was shown as they cure everything. There was a tendency that topics in self-help books were simplified considerably. What was wrong in those books were that truth was distorted.

Below are presented several misconceptions and distortions:

1. Distortion: Show your anger so that it will disappear. What was presented in self-help books: It was recommended that "Fist a pillow or a fist bag while screaming, shouting and swearing" (Lee and Stott, 1995). In addition, it was continued like the following: "Fist as much as severely as you can. If you are angry with a person, imagine that pillow is his face. Display your anger physically and verbally." What was put forward by researchers: Fisting pillows or acting other similar kind of violent behaviors can be helpful in the management of the anger. However, recent studies have indicated that confronting anger may result in ineffectiveness. In relation to this topic, as stated by Bushman "Confronting anger only leads it to sustain. People may think that this would be beneficial; however, when it is not effective, individuals become more angry and disappointed" (Paul, 2001).

2. Distortion: Focus on positive things and think that you are happy when you are sad. What was presented in self-help books: "Close the doors of your mind by leaving sad memories behind. Use your brain for optimistic ideas. Control your mind to focus on your choice and do not let people or events to force you to accept bad images." What was put forward by researchers: According to researchers, what you need when you are stressful or anxious is to establish a mental state activating your mind. As we are very engaged with negative images, we lose the power of our brain which will help us to over come our pessimistic ideas. If we try to direct our attention to a different target, only pessimistic ideas will surround us. As stated by Wegner, "if you are indeed under stress, it is highly probable that putting yourself in a good state of mentality will fail. In addition, you will start to look for contrasting desires" (Paul, 2001).

3. Distortion: Dream and visualize your ideals to help them be actualized.

What was presented in self-help books: Dream the images which would emerge when you are successful and visualize them actively so that you will achieve your intent. Do not forget that the state of being successful already exists in your cognition and the success is the repetition of the existing one (Peale, 1996). What was put forward by researchers: Sport psychologists maintain that imagination is effective in increasing performance. However, they also state that only imaging a successful performance will not bring success or even it will not get us close to success. As cited by Taylor, "At the

first place, imagination will lead us to move away from our objectives and our needs to fulfill those objectives." At the second place, it makes us happy with the feeling of success without actually actualizing our dreams. This weakens us and results in self sufficiency. Moreover, it causes us to study less and take less risk for the actualization of our objectives (Paul, 2001).

4. Distortion: Statements of approval of you will increase self respect. What was presented in self-help books: "Write approval statements and hang them on places where you can see. You may even record and continuously listen to approval statements about you (McWilliams, 1991)." What was put forward by researchers: Psychologists think that such kind of statements will not be helpful. Swann, considering that changing our opinions about ourselves will be more challenging, reports that "Self respect composed of two parts: First is our feelings about the worth of us as others see, and the second is our feelings with respect to our abilities." We base our feelings on both conditions based on the views of others such as parents, friends, teachers, and bosses. Even if self approval is practiced continuously, it will end in sadness and lessen our morale. Moreover, individuals who have low self respect will not be persuaded with self approval. Robert Josephs indicated that individuals with low self respect do not believe in self approval statements because they do not evaluate their own views. In the experiment of Joseph's, when people with high self respect solve a problem, they do not expect for the approval of others (Paul, 2001).

5. Distortion: Active listening will be helpful in establishing a better communication with your relatives What was presented in self-help books: "…active listening technique is not only to hear what your friend tells you but also to understand what he tells. You can do active listening as you paraphrase the statements of your friends as you listen to them." What was put forward by researchers: There is a problem with active listening, it is difficult to apply. Although many couples have been recommended to use it in their relations for many years, it is ignored in case of conflict situations. Studies indicated that even happy couples are not able to use active listening technique. In such relations, to decrease tension, those couples behave kindly to each other and show interest in what they say to each other. In short, they practice some positive behaviors but they don't practice active listening. It is true that the studies show no benefit of using active listening among the couples who are under extreme stress (Paul, 2001).

At this part, five distortions were investigated. It recommended that you be skeptical of the ideas proposed in self-help books to protect yourself. In our country, Tavuk Suyuna Çorba stories and other self-help books (Canfield et al., 2002; Canfield and Hansen, 2003) like "Dost Kazanma ve İnsanları Etkileme Sanatı" (Carnegie, 2004) are known to have a mass group of readers. Books on NLP (Gün, 2000; Knight, 1999), psychodrama and intonation can also be investigated under the heading of self-help books. Furthermore, there are books in which the stories of protagonists are focused to help the readers rather than the direct solutions for daily life problems (Koyuncu, 2005; Ersöz, 2001). There are as well books which analyze the topics with psychotherapy without directly including elements of self-help (Yalom; 1999; 2000a; 2000b; Fromm, 1996; 1998). It is considered that several of these books may have a bibliotherapy impact. According to Uşaklı's report (2001), self-help books have no influence on senior year university students.

The aim of this study was to develop a new perspective with respect to influence of self-help books. New results supporting the previous study conducted by Uşaklı

(2001), "Influences of Self-help Books", were investigated. In the recent study, the influence of self-help books on anger control, removal of pessimistic beliefs, determination of goals, increase in self respect and ability for empathy were searched.

Method

Participants of the study

Undergraduate and graduate students of Buca Faculty of Education, at Dokuz Eylül University, attending to 2004-2005 semester were participated in the recent study. 509 students filled in the research inventory, while 60 of them including both 4th grade and graduate students also provided answers for open ended questions.

Instruments

Empathy Tendency Scale, Open Ended interview form and personal information form were used to collect data. Empathy Tendency Scale including 20 items on 5 point Likert type developed by Dökmen (1988) is one of the most commonly used instruments in research studies to measure the tendency of individuals to establish empathy. The reliability value of the instrument with test-retest method is found be .82 and .81 with split half procedure.

In open ended interview form, students were asked four questions in 4 dimensions. Questions which were about the anger control, removal of unhappiness, and increase in self respect and active listening abilities were based on Paul's (2001) classification. Answers of the students were analyzed to create sub-themes by a psychologist, a Turkish language instructor and the researcher and were combined with 90% agreement in negotiated categories.

Results of the study

Results of Empathy Tendency Instrument applied to 509 students at Buca Faculty of Education are like the following:

Table – 1. ANOVA results of Empathy Tendency Instrument based on reading self-help books

EEÖ P	SS	Sd	MS	F	p
Between groups	.644	4	.161	.265	.901
	306.668	504	.608		
Within groups					
Total	307.312	508			

ANOVA results of Empathy Tendency Instrument considering reading self-help books were summarized in Table 1. Results indicated that there is not a statistically significant relation between empathy tendency and reading self-help books.

Interview results of the 60 students who already completed Empathy Tendency Instrument were selected based on the criterion that they had stated that they had read at least two self-help books. Answers of the students were grouped below:

1) What do you do to control your anger when you are angry?

Table – 2 Frequencies and percentages of anger reaction of university students

	f	%
Crying	18	30
Shouting	22	40
Taking pills	8	13,3
Sleeping	3	5
Moving away	12	20
Eating-drinking	22	36,7
Fisting	10	16,7
No answer	2	3,33

Results indicated that students most frequently shout, eat and drink or cry when they try to control their anger as shown in Table 2.

2) What do you do when you are sad to relief yourself?

Table – 3 Frequencies and percentages of relief reactions of university students when they are sad

	f	%
Crying	23	38,3
Drinking alcohol	22	36,7
Being with friends	10	16,7
Opening himself to sb	22	36,7
Sleeping	14	23,3
Moving away	12	20
Being alone	4	6,67
Eating and drinking	24	40

Results indicated that students most frequently ate and drunk, cried, drank alcohol, and open themselves to other people to relief their stresses when they were sad as shown in Table 3.

3) What do you do to increase your self respect?

Table – 4 Frequencies and percentages of the behaviors of university students to increase self respect

	f	%
Going to shopping	3	5
Doing sport	12	20
Reading	4	6,67
No answer	41	68,3

Majority of the participant students, namely 41 students out of 60, did not provide an answer for this question (see Table 4).

4) Do you benefit from active listening in your interactions with relatives?

Table – 5 Frequencies and percentages of university students' beliefs on active listening

	f	%
Yes	45	75
No	2	3,33
No answer	13	21,7

Table 5 demonstrates that of 60 students, 40 of them stated that they used active listening, while 13 students did not answer this question.

Discussion and Conclusions

Results of current study are likely to be in harmony with those of the previous studies on this topic (Arkowitz ve Lilienfeld, 2006; Holgate, 2005; Paul, 2001). In contrast to Woodstock's (2002) study, the present study indicated that self-help books make no contribution to the life skills of the university students. However, the recent study like Woodstock's (2002) study is not also based on experimental research findings.

In Uşaklı's (2001) report, it was stated that female students use assumptions viewed as wrong by the researchers less than male students do, and all students in their close relationships benefit from active listening techniques in case of conflict situations. Although active listening, is being a technique in therapeutic communication requires a certain degree of knowledge and experience to be used, undergraduate and graduate students reported their use of it.

A proportion of the participants who reported that they read self-help books cited some recommendations of the self-help books. Particularly, it is inappropriate for them to take alcohol when they are sad or angry.

17

The recent study put forward that there is not a significant relation between self-help books including elements of psychological help and solutions for psychological problems which are not severe. Nowadays, self-help books are sold in the markets considerably. In these books, terms such as active listening, conditioning, defense mechanisms of ego are included. Understanding these terminologies and finding solutions as recommended in these books may harm rather than benefit individuals. It is required that in teacher training programs of 4th grades, such courses as "Communication Skills" and "Human Relations" should be added along with "Guidance" course. To achieve biblio-therapy, there is a need for provisions of high quality resources in the libraries of the faculties selected with care and attention.

It is noticeable that the source books can create different effects in different contexts (Koyuncu, 2005; Ersöz, 2001). Same books aim to cope with stress some of them with anger. It is possible to find the books on relief of stress or anger management, conflict resolution, relief of shyness. However, recent literature studies indicate that there is no limitation for self help books (Hewett, 2004; Poussard, 2006; Lieberman, 2007; Işıksaçan, 2008). There are not only books on self help, but also thousands of internet pages, radio and TV programs and voice records for on self help. These sources are unlimited and uncontrolled. Specialists or any person can produce such resources. There should be supervision and control on self help resources. If it is imposable to limit self help resources people should seek some criteria such as American Psychology Association standards.

It is obvious that the experimental studies will be very valuable in this area. Effectiveness of self help books should be experimented. There must be researches on comparison between self help books and psycho-educational techniques for example an individual or group treatments. The future studies should be focused on the classification of self help books and on the experimentations to detect any of their biblio - therapeutic effect.

References

Altınay, D. (2003). *Psikodrama Grup Psikoterapisi El Kitabı*. İstanbul: Sistem Yayıncılık.

Arkowitz, H. & Lilienfeld, S. O. (2006). *Do Self-Help Books Help? Scientific American Mind* (17) 5 76-79.

Canfield, J., Hansen, M. V., Kirberger, K. & Aaron, R. (2002). *Tavuk Suyuna Çorba Annebabaların Yüreklerini Isıtacak Öyküler* (G. Tümer, Çev.). Ankara: Hyb Yayıncılık.

Canfield, J.& Hansen, M. V. (2003). *Tavuk Suyuna Çorba: Öğretmenlerin Yüreğini Isıtacak Öyküler*. (S. Kunt Akbaş, Çev.). Ankara: Hyb Yayıncılık.

Canfield, J., Hansen, M.V.& Hewitt, L. (2003). *Odaklanmanın Gücü Kişisel, Mesleki ve Parasal Hedeflerinizi On İkiden Vurmak İçin* (S. Kunt Akbaş, Çev.) Ankara: Hyb Yayıncılık.

Carnegie, D. (2004). *Dost Kazanma ve İnsanları Etkileme Sanatı* (N. Uzunali, Çev.) İstanbul: Epsilon Yayınları.

Dökmen, Ü. (1988). Empatinin Bir Modele Dayandırılarak Ölçülmesi ve Psikodrama ile Geliştirilmesi. *A.Ü. Eğitim Bilimleri Fakültesi Dergisi*, 6 (21):155-190.

Ersöz, C. (2001). *Şizofren Aşka Mektup*. İstanbul: Gendaş Kültür.

Farrant, A. W. (1985) Increase Your Confidence *The American Salesman. Burlington*: Feb 1985. (30) 2 p. 11-14.

Fromm, E. (1996). *Psikanaliz ve Din*. (A. Arıtan, Çev.) İstanbul: Arıtan Yayınevi.

Fromm, E. (1998). *Sevme Sanatı*. (I. Gündüz, Çev.) İstanbul: Say Yayınevi.

Gün, N. (2002). *NLP Zininzi Kullanma Kılavuzu* (16. Baskı). İstanbul: Kuraldışı.

Hemsley, S. (2007). Promotions & Incentives. *London* May (25-26).

Howett, E.C. (2004). *Genç Öğretmenler İçin Pedajoji*. (S. Göktaş, Çev.) Ankara: Yeryüzü Yayınevi.

Hogate, S. (2005). Americans Read Millions of Self-Help Books Anually http://usinfo.state.gov (Erişim 17 Şubat 2007)

Işıksaçan, T. (2008). *Etkili Motivasyon Pozitif Düşüncenin Sihirli Gücü*. İstanbul: Kumsaati Yayın Dağıtım.

Lee, J. ve Stott, B. (1995). *Facing the Fire: Expressing and Experiencing Anger Appropriately*, New York: Bantam Doubleday Dell Publishing.

Lieberman, D. J. (2007). *Herkese Her İstediğinizi Yaptırın Psikolojik Sırlar ve Yöntemler*. (Çev: Merve Duygun). İstanbul: Ajans Plaza.

Knight, S. (1999). *Uygulamalarla NLP İşinizde Fark Yaratan Farklılıklar*. (İ. Görkey Tafee, Çev.) İstanbul: Sistem Yayıncılık.

Koyuncu Soylu, S. (2005). *Gelincikler Geceye Düşer*. Şanlıurfa: Yom Yayınları.

Peale, N. V. (1996). *Psitive Imaging: The Powerful Way to Change Your Life*, New York: Fawcett Book Group.

Paul, A. M. (2001) Selp-Help: Shattering the Myths http://www.psychologytoday.com/articles (Accessed in 10 2001).

Mcwilliams, P. (1991). *Life 101: Everything We Wish We Had Learned About Life in School-But Didn't*, Los Angeles CA: Prelude Press.

Şenbay, N. (2006). *Söz ve Diksiyon Sanatı*. İstanbul: Yapı Kredi Yayınları.

Taşer, S. (2000). *Konuşma Eğitimi*. İstanbul: Papirüs Yayınevi.

Türköz, Y. (2002). *Büyü Dükkanı Psikodrama Öyküleri*. (4. Baskı). İstanbul: Sistem Yayıncılık.

Uşaklı (2001). Kendi kendine yardım kitaplarının etkileri. Uşak Eğitim Fakültesi Rehberlik Hizmetleri Çalışma Raporu.

Yalom, I. (1999) *Divan*. (Ö. Arıkan, Çev.). Ayrıntı İstanbul: Ayrıntı Yayınları.

Yalom, I. (2000a). Aşkın Celladı. (H. Saraç, Çev.). İstanbul: Remzi Kitapevi.

Yalom, I. (2000b). *Nietzsche Ağladığında*. (A. Babacan, Çev.). İstanbul: Ayrıntı Yayınları.

Woodstock, M. L. (2002) Cure without communication: Self-help books and popular notions of self and communication, 1860-2000. Univ. of Pennsylvania - Electronic Dissertations.