

A FEMINIST ANALYSIS OF SELF-HELP BESTSELLERS FOR IMPROVING RELATIONSHIPS: A DECADE REVIEW

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Self-help literature is pervasive and influential in the United States. A critical analysis of self-help books would help therapists to determine their utility for the therapeutic process and assist them in making reading recommendations to clients. In this study, a content analysis was conducted of the top 11 relationship self-help books on the New York Times Bestseller List over a period of 10 years (1988–1998) to determine the degree to which these books support a feminist approach to therapy. This study yielded three major findings. First, the number of feminist books, the number of nonfeminist books, and those falling in the middle across four components of feminist family therapy are about equal. However, the second major finding was that the top-selling books are more likely to be nonfeminist than feminist. The third finding is that most best-selling self-help books appear to have become less compatible with a feminist approach to relationships over time. This analysis encourages therapists to think critically about these best-selling books; it will also allow therapists to consider this methodology as a model for critically analyzing other books that they recommend to clients or use in their own professional development.

The self-help industry is important to therapists and can have a profoundly beneficial or detrimental influence on the therapeutic process. Therapists can use self-help books to educate clients on specific issues. However, if books are inaccurate, fail to separate an author's opinion from research findings, and/or contain suggestions or interventions that fail to recognize gender and diversity issues, self-help books can be detrimental to clients' change process.

Many therapists frequently assign self-help books as part of their therapeutic plan. In a study of 105 psychologists, 89% reported that they regularly assigned self-help books as a part of therapy (Starker, 1989). Further, individuals and couples in therapy may read self-help books before entering therapy and may discuss their reading with their therapists. Thus, even therapists who do not plan to use these books as a part of therapy should be familiar with and be able to evaluate the self-help literature.

In many cases, the popularity of self-help books makes the authors' messages or guidance seem important, right, or truthful, regardless of its accuracy. To use self-help books most effectively, therapists must critically analyze them to determine their appropriateness for inclusion in the therapeutic process. This

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analysis must be based on current research and theory in marriage and family therapy, including the feminist perspective. For this analysis, Haddock, Zimmerman, and MacPhee's (2000) definition of feminist family therapy was used. These authors delineate four components of a feminist approach to therapy: (1) Addressing the influences of the social construction of gender on individuals and their relationships, (2) encouraging egalitarian relationships between couples, (3) empowering clients to explore nontraditional behaviors and choices, and (4) managing the power differential between therapist and client. In this study, the contents of self-help books were analyzed to determine the degree to which they supported this definition.

When couples understand the influence of the social construction of gender on them as individuals and on their relationship, they can better resist pressures and constraints. When they do so individually (as in her assertiveness, his expressing feelings and vulnerability), they are better able to resist the influence in their relationships and instead share equal power (as in coparenting, division of labor). Consciousness raising with couples about the influence of the social construction of gender, therefore, may be an important component to help them recognize and resist stereotypical ways of behaving and encourage them to explore a wider range of behaviors and choices in all aspects of their lives (Haddock et al., 2000).

Research findings consistently show that equality in romantic relationships is imperative. For instance, research conducted by Gottman and Silver (1999) indicated that sharing power is one of the seven principles essential for a successful marriage. In a qualitative research study, Schwartz (1994) found that equal relationships (characterized by deep friendship, role sharing, and equity) are among the most intimate and satisfying of marital relationships. Rabin (1996) and Steil (1997) both argued that sustained intimacy is virtually unattainable in a relationship that is based on power differentials. Steil (1997) found that husbands and wives who reported an equal balance of power gave and received higher levels of nurturance, positive regard, affirmation, and empathy to one another. In addition, long-term cohabiting couples enjoy greater stability when their employment and earnings are very similar (Brines & Joyner, 1999).

These research findings inform the content of some self-help literature. Books such as *Love Between Equals: How Peer Marriage Really Works* (Schwartz, 1994) and *The Seven Principles for Making Marriage Work* (Gottman & Silver, 1999) are consistent with the above research findings and can help couples achieve more balanced power. In contrast, some self-help books, such as *Men are From Mars, Women are From Venus* (Gray, 1992) are based largely on opinion. Gray's recommendations for improving relationships are not research based and they serve to endorse and encourage power differentials between and traditional roles for men and women. Regardless of the degree to which books are based on research or promote equality, women are more likely than men to purchase and read self-help books (Simonds, 1992). In addition, women are traditionally the less powerful partners in relationships; therefore, it is ironic that they may be more likely to try to act on advice from self-help books, even though they may be less likely than their male partners to be able to effect change in the relationship.

In addition, managing the power differentials between therapist and client is an important component of feminist family therapy (Ault-Riche, 1986; Haddock et al., 2000). Although in this study we are evaluating author/therapist and client/reader, it seems imperative to evaluate how the power is managed. For instance, is the author making guarantees and promises for change to the reader in a hierarchical way or inviting the reader to consider the information and suggestions given their individual circumstances as they set goals for change?

The purpose of this study is to analyze the 11 best-selling self-help books between 1988 and 1998 according to the degree to which they are congruent with feminist family therapy principles and practices. This analysis is guided by our stance that feminist principles (such as shared power and equality in relationships) are important components of successful long-term relationships. The analysis presented will not only allow therapists to think critically about the books included in this study, but it will also allow therapists to consider this methodology as a model for critically analyzing other books that they recommend to clients or use in their own professional development.

METHODS

Sample

We performed a content analysis on 11 books that claim to help people either attract a partner, maintain a romantic relationship, or experience a satisfying sexual relationship. These books were chosen based on their popularity as measured by the number of weeks that each book appeared on the *New York Times* bestseller list. Advice books were selected that appeared most frequently on the bestseller list in the "Advice, How-To, and Miscellaneous" category (which encompasses all of the books on relationship enhancement). The time period covered was January 1988 to November 1998. The book that appeared most frequently on the list was *Men are From Mars, Women are From Venus*, which was on the bestseller list for 243 weeks. The remainder of the books were on the list for between 6 and 50 weeks.

Although the intended sample was 10 books, the actual sample comprises 11 books because there was a tie for tenth place (two books were on the list for six weeks). Among the eleven books, there was significant duplication of authorship. Four of the books were written by John Gray, and two were written by Barbara De Angelis. As for the intended audience of the books, four books were written for women (*Secrets About Men Every Woman Should Know*; *The Rules*; *The Dance of Anger*; and *Women Who Love Too Much*), one was written for men (*How to Satisfy a Woman Every Time . . . and Have Her Beg for More!*), and the remaining six were written for both genders. The gender composition of the intended audience was determined by analyzing statements made by the authors in the introductory chapters of the books.

Instrument

All of the books were read and analyzed in their entirety according to an assessment guide developed by Haddock et al. (2000) entitled "The Power Equity Guide" (hereinafter referred to as "the guide"), which was developed to highlight and assess the ways in which the practice of family therapy is consistent with feminist principles. The components highlighted in the guide were drawn from the feminist family therapy literature (e.g., Ault-Riche, 1986; Avis, 1988; Bograd, 1986; Chaney & Piercy, 1988; Goldner, 1985, 1987, 1988; Goodrich, 1991; Goodrich, Rampage, Ellman, & Halstead, 1988; Hare-Mustin, 1978; Libow, Raskin, & Caust, 1982; McCollum & Russell, 1992; Stone Fish, 1989; Wheeler, Avis, Miller, & Chaney, 1989). The version of the guide that was used in the current study is organized into four major sections that focus on how authors address the four components of a feminist approach to therapy.

In an earlier study, the guide's internal consistency (Cronbach's α) with regard to an analysis of family therapy (as distinguished from an analysis of books) was .88, and interrater reliabilities exceeded .90 (Haddock, 1995). In terms of convergent validity, ratings on the guide correlated with events sampling counts of specific feminist and nonfeminist behaviors on the American Association for Marriage and Family Therapy (AAMFT) Master's series tapes (Haddock, 1995). Chaney and Piercy (1988) developed a similar instrument, the Feminist Family Therapy Behavior Checklist (FFTBC), for identifying specific feminist behaviors in therapeutic practice. In an analysis of the AAMFT Master's series tapes (Haddock, 1995), the FFTBC was used in addition to the guide. The convergent validity between these two coding systems was .80. Guide scores significantly discriminated between tapes that incorporate feminist principles and those that do not using molar rating and scores on the FFTBC. Thus, the guide can be used with confidence by raters who have a background in feminist theory, and it effectively identifies therapeutic practice (and, in this study, self-help advice) that is attentive to gender issues.

Although many of the themes in the FFTBC and the guide are similar, there are differences between the two instruments that cause the guide to be a more appropriate instrument for this study. The guide includes more items that are relevant to the empowerment of men, such as encouraging them to be more emotionally expressive, supporting them in exploring nontraditional life choices, and helping them to become aware of their privileged social position. In addition, the guide includes themes that are relevant to children, parenting, to forms of oppression such as racism, classism, and homophobia, and to the general management of the hierarchy between the therapist and the client.

Procedure

The first two authors separately analyzed three books according to the categories of the guide. A comparison of the individual results of this analysis reflected high agreement in identification of relevant material. This process resulted in a completed "Power Equity Guide" assessment for each of the first three books. Once interrater consistency in the selection of examples from each of the books was established, one author completed guides for each of the remaining eight books.

Next, the guide findings for each book were analyzed according to the degree to which they illustrated the four components of a feminist approach to therapy. The four components are as follows: (1) Addressing gender as socially constructed, (2) encouraging egalitarian relationships, (3) empowering readers to explore being nontraditional, and (4) taking a nonhierarchical stance with readers. After reading thoroughly the verbatim quotations selected from each book for each of the guide categories, the two coders independently rated each book on the degree to which it supported each of the four components. For each component, a 3-point scale was created that measures the degree to which each book supports that component (1 = low support, 3 = high support). For example, within the fourth component (nonhierarchical stance with readers), books received a score ranging from 1 (very hierarchical) to 3 (nonhierarchical). We achieved 100% reliability with this scoring process. Initially, we disagreed on approximately 10% of the scores, but we reviewed the verbatim quotations and discussed these ratings until agreement was reached. This system resulted in four scores for each book.

RESULTS

Component 1: Gender as Socially Constructed

This component pertains to the way in which gender is conceptualized by the author—as an innate characteristic or as socially constructed. A score of 1 refers to gender being conceptualized as an inherent and immutable fact. Books that reflect this notion implicitly encourage readers to accept traditional (i.e., nature vs. nurture) gender roles. A score of 2 indicates that gender was barely addressed, which reflects a missed opportunity to focus on how gender socialization and gender stereotypes affect relationships. Books that address gender as socially constructed through processes such as socialization were assigned a score of 3. These books have the potential to empower readers, because they suggest that change is possible. Although they acknowledge the power of social conditioning, they also note that couples can make relationship choices that go beyond social norms. Within the 11 books that were analyzed, four discuss gender as innate, four do not take a stance, and three examine gender as a socially constructed phenomenon. Thus, the majority of the books either discuss gender as being innate or barely address gender; only 27% of the books focus on gender socialization. Some examples of text in which gender is regarded as innate are the following:

In a relationship, the man must take charge. He must propose. We are not making this up—biologically, he's the aggressor. (Fein & Schneider, 1995, p. 9)

For a man, sex instinctively is a testosterone drive toward the ultimate release of climax. When he becomes aroused, he automatically seeks release. (Gray, 1995, p. 27)

Just as we do not *decide* to be hungry, a man does not decide to pull away [emotionally]. [Pulling away] is an instinctual urge (Gray, 1992, p. 96, emphasis in original). The above quotations justify longstanding norms of engagement, sex, and emotional intimacy by stating that such behaviors are biologically and instinctually rooted. Throughout the books, language such as "instinctively," "automatically," "inherent," "natural order," and "animal drive" indicate when authors view gendered behavior as inherent and immutable. This view of gender does not empower readers to change or to make different choices for themselves due to the belief that these are unchangeable aspects of biology.

Three books recognize the influence of societal forces on the creation and expression of gendered traits. Three examples of quotations that reflect a view of gender as being socially constructed are the following:

Our society undervalues the importance of close relationships for men and fosters their emotional isolation and disconnectedness. Women, on the other hand, receive an opposite message that encourages us to be excessively focused on, and fused with, the problems of others, rather than putting our primary 'worry energy' into our own problems. (Lerner, 1997, p. 139)

'It's a boy!' the doctor announces, and from that moment on, this tiny male person is treated differently from the baby girl in the next delivery room. (De Angelis, 1990, p. 13)

Reflected again and again in our daily speech and behavior is the tacit cultural assumption that we can change someone for the better through the force of our love, and that, if we are female, it is our duty to do so. (Norwood, 1985, p. 138)

These quotations highlight the role of culture and society in shaping the behavior of both men and women. Words and phrases that appear throughout the books that suggest the social construction of gender include "taught," "are trained," "culturally prescribed," "cultural teachings," and "social conditioning." All of this language highlights the social learning process that is involved with gendered behavior.

Component 2: Egalitarian Couples

Egalitarian couples are characterized as having a balance of decision-making and financial power, shared responsibility for major areas of life (e.g., parenting, relationship quality, housework), and equal opportunities to pursue work and life goals. In this study, books were coded 1 if they promote traditional gender roles (and the power imbalance that often accompanies these roles) so that partners can get along with each other. Books were scored 2 if they emphasize neither egalitarian nor traditional relationships. This subset of books misses the opportunity to address the issue of shared power between couples. Books were coded 3 if they affirm egalitarian relationships and if they directly address aspects of nontraditional relationships.

Four books promote traditional gender roles. These books describe men as active and in control. In contrast, they describe women as passive. Representative examples include:

Don't overwhelm him with your career triumphs. Try to let him shine. (Fein & Schneider, 1995, p. 65, emphasis in original)

Dating is like slow dancing. The man must take the lead or you fall over your feet. Remember, let him take the lead. He declares love first, just as he picks most of the movies, the restaurants, and the concerts the two of you go to. He might sometimes ask you for your preference, in which case you can tell him. (Fein & Schneider, 1995, p. 88)

The wisdom of dating rituals is to define the roles of man as giver and woman as receiver. Dating rituals are designed to assist a woman in relaxing and letting a man take care of her needs. They reinforce this most important pattern: the man doing things to fulfill the woman's needs and the woman graciously receiving. (Gray, 1997, pp. 310–311)

The one-down and passive position for women that is promoted in these passages is linked to power imbalances and relationships that are not egalitarian. Fein and Schneider (1995) recommend that women should categorically be (or appear to be) less successful in the job realm than men. These authors, along with Gray (1997), also recommend that women do not participate as equal partners in planning how to spend time together as a couple. Throughout the books, language such as "the man must take the lead," "follow his lead," "build up his ego," and "let him shine" is suggestive of the promotion of nonegalitarian relationships.

Four books clearly support relationships in which power is balanced and in which women are active partners who are encouraged to assert their viewpoint and pursue success. Key illustrations of text reflecting egalitarian ideology are:

Look for a man who wants to let you shine. We all know there are men out there who, for a variety of reasons, don't want to be with a woman who appears powerful or confident. It is hard to celebrate yourself around someone who isn't interested in seeing you shine. Make sure your partner supports you in becoming the magnificent woman you're meant to be. (De Angelis, 1990, p. 57, emphasis in original)

The kind of man you want to be with is going to want to be with a woman he feels is his equal, not his inferior. (De Angelis, 1990, p. 201)

The dilemma is that we may unconsciously be convinced that our important relationships can survive only if we continue to remain one down. To do better—to become clearer, to act stronger,

to be more separate, to take action on our own behalf—may be unconsciously equated with a destructive act that will diminish and threaten our partner, who might then retaliate or leave. (Lerner, 1997, p. 33)

The first of the three quotations above conflicts directly with the quote from Fein and Schneider (1995) in which women are advised to let men shine by downplaying their own career success. The second quotation supports equality, and the third quotation encourages women to be assertive on their own behalf. The books that promote egalitarian relationships explicitly address the issue of power and discuss relationships as being based on teamwork.

Component 3: Empowerment to Explore Nontraditional Behaviors and Life Choices

The third element of feminist family therapy is the empowerment of clients to explore many options for their lives (especially nontraditional options) and to make choices based on a full range of options rather than simply following the most socially accepted behavioral prescriptions. Books that encourage stereotypic behaviors and beliefs were assigned a score of 1. Books in which nontraditional options are not a focus were assigned a score of 2, and books that encourage nonstereotypic gender roles were assigned a score of 3. Four books espouse stereotypic behaviors, five books promote nonstereotypic behaviors, and two books do not focus on this subject.

In the books that were analyzed, stereotypic behaviors that are espoused for women include a focus on looking attractive and being passive and selfless. Illustrative examples of text are:

Don't leave the house without wearing makeup. Put lipstick on even when you go jogging. Do everything you possibly can to put your best face forward. If you have a bad nose, get a nose job; color gray hair; grow your hair long. Men prefer long hair, something to play with and caress. It doesn't matter what your hairdresser and friends think. You're certainly not trying to attract them! (Fein & Schneider, 1995, p. 19)

A woman needs to remember that she is the jewel and he is providing the setting for her to shine. As long as he gets credit for making her shine, he is happy to be the provider of support in the relationship. (Gray, 1997, p. 279)

Don't bring up marriage, kids, or your future together, not in bed (or out). Remember, these are *your* needs you are concerned about filling, and *The Rules* are a selfless way of living and handling a relationship. (Fein & Schneider, 1995, p. 83, emphasis in original)

In the first quotation, women are encouraged to value physical attractiveness to the point that they are advised to have surgery if they "have a bad nose." In the second, women are told that they are "jewels," which emphasizes their looks. The passivity of women is underscored by the statement that men actually get the credit for making women "shine." The third quotation instructs women to ignore their own needs and reminds them that they should be selfless.

Men are warned not to become too emotionally intimate, as illustrated by the following quotations: When a man gets too close and doesn't pull away, common symptoms are increased moodiness, irritability, passiveness, and defensiveness. (Gray, 1992, p. 105)

Some men are already in touch with their feelings. They are very open and ready to talk. These men can unknowingly sabotage a relationship. (Gray, 1997, p. 107)

To expect a man who is in his cave instantly to become open, responsive, and loving is as unrealistic as expecting a woman who is upset immediately to calm down and make complete sense. It is a mistake to expect a man to always be in touch with his loving feelings just as it is a mistake to expect a woman's feelings to always be rational and logical. (Gray, 1992, p. 33)

In these quotations, intimacy for men is likened to an illness with "symptoms," and the ability to identify and express feelings is defined as an unwitting hazard to relationships. The final quotation is not empowering of women or men. It depicts men as emotionally closed and women as irrational and overly emotional.

In contrast, the five books that espouse nonstereotypic gender roles promote relationships in which

women are valued for their personal qualities rather than their physical appearance and in which women set limits on the degree to which they caretake. Men are recognized as being valuable individuals and not just breadwinners. Representative quotations of text that empowers readers to explore being nontraditional include the following:

Practice being beautiful from the inside out. No matter how hard you work to look good on the outside, your real beauty always radiates from within. When you feel good about yourself, when you are taking good care of yourself, when you are maintaining your dignity as a woman, you will feel beautiful on the inside, and that beauty will show. (De Angelis, 1990, p. 189, emphasis in original)

The more autonomous you are as a woman, the less you will look to your relationship to fill you up. Follow your own dreams, take good care of yourself, and make sure you are giving to yourself as much as to your partner. (De Angelis, 1990, p. 89)

It makes me sad that, as women, we have been so disempowered throughout history that we look for sex with famous or rich men, or for a husband with an important job and standing in the community, or a boyfriend with a nice car and a condo to make us feel worthwhile *rather than finding our own worth within ourselves*. Although times are changing and millions of women are helping support their families while others are the sole breadwinners, *we still place exaggerated value on the money and prestige a man can offer us and, in the process, neglect to discover what kind of heart and soul our prospective partner possesses . . .* how many of us have heard our parents or grandparents discussing a woman who “*married well*,” not meaning that she found a caring, loving man but that she’d married a man with a good career, a prestigious job, or lots of money. (De Angelis, 1992, p. 120, emphasis in original)

Note that the first quote above contrasts directly with the quote from Fein and Schneider (1995) in which women are encouraged to place so much importance on their looks that they are advised to wear lipstick when jogging. In all of the above quotations, De Angelis advocates for men and women to be valued for their personalities rather than their looks and/or earning power. Further, she encourages women to invest in themselves and to be independent.

Component 4: Nonhierarchical Relationship between Author and Reader

Feminist family therapy is characterized by nonhierarchical relationships between therapists and clients. In this study, a hierarchical orientation on the part of an author was operationalized as the author making guarantees as opposed to acknowledging that advice given maybe helpful rather than foolproof. Nonhierarchical authors honor readers’ own standards, goals, and individual differences. Books were assigned a score of 1 if they are very hierarchical, a score of 2 if authors miss the opportunity to take a stance in this area, and a score of 3 if the book is specifically nonhierarchical. Overall, three books display a high level of hierarchy, four books display a low level of hierarchy, and four books do not take a stance in this area.

Following are quotations from *Women Who Love Too Much* and *How to Satisfy a Woman Every Time* that indicate a hierarchical relationship between the author and the reader:

In my personal and professional experience, I have never seen a woman who took these steps fail to recover, and I have never seen a woman recover who failed to take these steps. If that sounds like a guarantee, it is. Women who follow these steps will get well. (Norwood, 1985, p. 221)

I *guarantee* that if you read them carefully and go about making love as I suggest, you will absolutely, positively be successful in pleasuring your woman *every time*. (Hayden, 1982, p. 30, emphasis in original)

Both quotations contain explicit guarantees of positive outcomes that will occur if readers follow the authors’ advice. Throughout the books, language that indicates a hierarchical therapeutic stance includes words such as “guarantee” and “automatically,” which reflect authors’ promises of certain outcomes. In addition, phrases such as “ultimate relationship aid” and “essential guide” promote certain books as being the best sources of information for readers.

The authors of four books have written text that explicitly establishes a nonhierarchical stance. Below are two examples of nonhierarchical text from the books that were analyzed. In the first example, Lerner (1997) warns readers that her book does not identify a finite number of simple steps to solve their problems. In the second example, De Angelis (1992) states that she hopes that her ideas will be helpful, but she does not guarantee that they will be helpful. De Angelis also adopts a nonhierarchical stance by stressing that the reader's standards are more important than her own standards.

The reader should be forewarned that this book does not lay out rules on 'how to do it' in ten easy steps. This is because the ability to use anger as a tool for change requires that we gain a deeper understanding and knowledge of how relationships operate. (Lerner, 1997, p. 11)

I spent a lot of time thinking about how I could support you in evaluating your relationship *based on your own standards and needs, not mine*. Out of this concern came my idea for the Compatibility List and formula. I'm happy with the results, and I hope these tools have helped you become clearer about your love choices. *Ultimately, all that matters is your own happiness and what you think of your relationship, not what I think*. (De Angelis, 1992, p. 320, emphasis in original)

TABLE 1
Summary of Results

	Gender as socially constructed ^a	Egalitarian couples ^b	Empowerment to explore being nontraditional ^c	Nonhierarchical relationship ^d	Totals
The Dance of Anger	3	3	3	3	12
Secrets About Men Every Woman Should Know	3	3	3	3	12
Are You the One For Me?	2	3	3	3	11
Women Who Love Too Much	3	3	3	1	10
Mars and Venus Starting Over	2	2	3	2	9
Getting the Love You Want	2	2	2	2	8
How to Satisfy a Woman	2	2	2	1	7
Mars and Venus on a Date	1	1	1	3	6
Mars and Venus in the Bedroom	1	1	1	2	5
Men are From Mars, Women are From Venus	1	1	1	2	5
The Rules	1	1	1	1	4
Totals	4 scores of 1 3 scores of 2 5 scores of 3	4 scores of 2 4 scores of 3 3 scores of 1	3 scores of 3 4 scores of 1 4 scores of 2	4 scores of 1 2 scores of 2 4 scores of 3	

Note. Scoring codes indicate support: 1 = low; 2 = medium; 3 = high
^a1 = gender is discussed as being innate; 2 = missed opportunity; 3 = gender is discussed in terms of socialization
^b1 = status quo is a goal in order to get along; 2 = not a focus; 3 = egalitarianism is a goal
^c1 = encourages stereotypic behaviors; 2 = not a focus; 3 = encourages nonstereotypic behaviors
^d1 = very hierarchical; 2 = missed opportunity; 3 = nonhierarchical

Throughout the books, a nonhierarchical stance is indicated by phrases such as “point you in the right direction” and “gain the ability to.”

Summary of Findings

Table 1 summarizes the results of the content analysis. It is organized according to the four components of feminist family therapy. We provide the scores of all 11 books on each of the four components, along with a total score for each book. A comparison of feminist orientation across the four components reveals that three are feminist with regard to the social construction of gender, four are feminist in terms of promoting egalitarian relationships between couples, five are feminist with respect to empowerment, and four are feminist in terms of hierarchy. Implications of the findings are discussed below.

DISCUSSION

Major Findings and Directions for Future Research

The books that were analyzed contain a wide variety of messages for men, women, and couples regarding behaviors and attitudes that are relevant to attracting a partner or maintaining a romantic relationship. Although some books promote egalitarian relationships that are consistent with feminist principles, other books validate relationships based on traditional gender roles. Overall, the number of feminist books is similar to the number of nonfeminist books. Those falling in the middle are distributed fairly equally across the four components of a feminist approach to therapy. Both extremes of high support and low support are represented by the books that were analyzed. Two books, *The Dance of Anger* (Lerner, 1997) and *Secrets About Men Every Woman Should Know* (De Angelis, 1990), received the highest score possible while another book, *The Rules* (Fein & Schneider, 1995), received the lowest score possible. The three books with the most egalitarian content were written by women, as are *The Dance of Anger*, *Secrets About Men Every Woman Should Know*, and *Are You the One for Me?* (De Angelis, 1992). Both *Dance* and *Secrets* were written exclusively for women. *Dance* was written to help women find more straightforward and effective ways to express anger in intimate relationships, and *Secrets* was written to help women understand their relationships with men. The third book, *Are You the One for Me?* was written for both men and women who are seeking healthy romantic relationships. Although Harriet Lerner (author of *Dance*) specifically mentions feminism in her book, Barbara De Angelis (author of *Secrets* and *Are you the One for Me?*) does not mention feminism. However, both authors explicitly focus on the social construction of gender and empower women to explore nonstereotypical behaviors.

The most popular books are the least feminist of the books that we analyzed. That is, the five top-selling books received the lowest scores on incorporating components of feminist family therapy. It is possible that these books are popular because they confirm and support the dominant discourse of a status quo in which men and women are viewed as being inherently different and in which men ultimately hold more power than women. However, the popularity of these books may be based on how readable they are or how well they are promoted rather than the actual messages contained in the books.

It is interesting to note that *Mars and Venus Starting Over* (Gray, 1998) consistently received higher scores than the other three books by John Gray. This is part of a trend within Gray's books in which more recent books are slowly becoming more consistent with feminist principles. His bestsellers published in 1992 and 1995 each received a total score of five, his 1997 bestseller received a total score of six, and *Mars and Venus Starting Over* (1998) received a total score of nine. However, the trend within Gray's books runs counter to the more general trend in which more recently published books analyzed do not appear to be more feminist than older books. Indeed, the opposite may be the case. The average length of time since original publication of the five highest-ranked books is 10 years. The average length of time since original publication of the five lowest-ranked books is about 8 years.

In summary, this study yielded three major findings. First, the number of feminist books, the number of nonfeminist books, and those falling in the middle are about equal across the four components. However, the second major finding was that the top-selling books are more likely to be nonfeminist than feminist. The third finding is that best-selling self-help books appear to have become less feminist over time. This finding

runs counter to the growing body of research that indicates that equality is conducive to successful and stable intimate relationships (Brines & Joyner, 1999; Gottman & Silver, 1999; Rabin, 1996; Schwartz, 1994; Steil, 1997).

Future research would profit from interviews of readers regarding their reactions to these bestsellers. In particular, it would be useful to gauge to what extent the authors' recommendations were acted on and to what degree this action yielded the anticipated results in terms of individual and relationship satisfaction. Such research would examine the commonly held belief that the best-selling books are those that most influence our society in terms of personal and social change.

Clinical Implications and Further Use of the "Power Equity Guide"

Therapists can use the guide to evaluate other self-help books that they use with clients or that clients have read outside therapy. The guide is a tool that offers a critical lens for therapists to evaluate other books before recommending them to clients. Books do not necessarily need to embody the feminist principles used in the guide to be useful in therapy. Therapists and clients can benefit from discussing the strengths and liabilities of the different viewpoints expressed in self-help books. This discussion can be rich, and the process of analyzing and discussing these books can stimulate clients as they decide what changes to make in their relationships. Clients who use the guide will gain knowledge about marriage and family therapy that supports equality in relationships. Their consumer knowledge of self-help literature will increase as they gain insight into practices, research findings, and perspectives that are informed by principles of feminism. In addition to the uses mentioned above, the guide can also be useful in training students in family therapy to become more gender aware in their practice.

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*Note: Numbers in parentheses represent the period during which the book was on the *New York Times* best-seller list from January 1988 to November 1998.