SELF-HELP BOOKS EMPHASIZING TRANSPERSONAL PSYCHOLOGY: ARE THEY ETHICAL?

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As a professional counselor I have become interested in self-help or "how-to" books in psychology, a literature which has experienced a minor explosion in popularity in recent years. My reading has raised a question: to what degree are these books ethical? Many of them are not identified as being restricted to counselors or clinicians but seem to be written for the average layperson, and are available to the general public in most bookstores, or even on newsstands. The authors of these books vary from highly qualified professionals to writers with good intentions but perhaps fewer qualifications. An increasing number of these books identify themselves with transpersonal concerns, and are thereby associated with those of us actively working in the field of transpersonal psychology. Since the area of personal responsibility is one of the cornerstones of our discipline, I believe it follows that we have an obligation to consider these books in the light of high ethical standards.

The American Psychological Association code of ethics (Ethical Principles of Psychologists, 1981) is a carefully defined and generally accepted standard in the field of psychology, and can be used as a convenient yardstick to measure self-help books. In its Public Statements section, this code asks authors to be conservative in expounding methods of self-improvement and to disclose any possible limitations of such methods.

In terms of limitations, even the most naive practitioner in transpersonal psychology is likely to agree that mental responsibility and ethical standards

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health, happiness, enlightenment, etc., are not (with very rare exceptions) achievable by reading a single book. This point is recognized, for example, in one of the self-help books written by F. E. Vaughan, *Awakening Intuition* (Vaughan, 1979), which is very open and honest in stating that the insights and exercises included are not likely by themselves to cause a major transformation in the reader's life.

In terms of conservative exposition of methods, the general public has only recently been exposed to the terminology used in transpersonal psychology. Those of us who write books for popular consumption must be especially careful to define unusual terms in a way that laypeople can easily understand. Similarly, it is imperative to avoid the advocacy of potentially harmful practices to audiences which may have no access to professional help if a serious psychological incident should occur.

This is especially relevant given the current interest in group hypnosis and/or induced trance states, which may appear as "games" or "exercises" in self-help books. Induction of deep trance, for example, is not something to be attempted by untrained individuals with only basic skills, especially in a group situation. It requires specialized training to ensure that all participants are reasonably safe from accident or premeditated trauma (Phillips, 1981).

Some self-help books do not identify their intended audiences and some of these, sold in the popular markets, may mislead naive readers into thinking they possess skills which are developed over years of training. Lay readers, who are looking to solve basic personal problems may not be ready for more advanced responsibilities. As Welwood (1982) has pointed out, people with inadequate ego defenses must be taught these before any transpersonal therapy can take place. An even more advanced step to assisting others is still another matter. As Vaughan observes (1982), "... the process of learning mysticism and psychotherapy is a bootstrap operation of conscious evolution. It is not dependent on a religious or spiritual context, but requires the skillful development of intuitive perception."

A criticism of self-help books is that some of them may promote self-centeredness. Aitken (1982) offers the following guidelines on therapy which could also apply to popular therapy oriented books: "... I would view good therapy as that directed toward enabling the individual to release himself or herself from preoccupation with personal condition. If therapy reinforces such pre-occupation in the long run,
then it is inducing a permanent division of the self between observed and observer, and surely this is no good!” In view of the emphasis in transpersonal psychology on a universal point of view, authors who emphasize "centering" or "inner space" without also stressing responsibility to the community and the world may want to re-think their positions.

CONCLUSION

These comments point to the need for more attention to be directed to the ethics of self-help books written within the loosely defined limits of transpersonal psychology, particularly those by identified transpersonal psychologists. This paper has not even attempted to look at the plethora of works authored by physicians, spiritual leaders, or laypeople. Finding a common ethical standard and applying it to these disparate groups is an even larger and more complex task.

Personal and transpersonal responsibility are at the heart of our honest inquiries into the nature of living beyond mere physical and emotional survival. Perhaps those of us who write, suggest readings, and otherwise use the popular literature connected with the field could promote the development of transpersonal ideals by subscribing to the APA Code of Ethics. We can do this by paying more attention to 1) What we expect to accomplish; 2.) The support for claims or promises we make or imply to the public; 3.) Who we are addressing when we communicate. We might also consider more completely the issues raised here and invite internal examination of our professional ethics and practices.

REFERENCES


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