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View from the Top

Self-Help as an Activist-Academic Research Project

Meg-John Barker

Back in the 1990s I embarked on a psychology degree for the classic reason that many students do, despite attempts by academics to dissuade them: to learn about what makes people tick in the hope that it'd help me in my own life. Like so many others I discovered a confusing gap between the psychology curriculum and the 'psychology' that I was familiar with from the 'self-help' section of the bookshop. Where were my seven rules for successful relationships? Where was my guidance for how to deal with difficult feelings? Nowhere in my cog psych 101 module I can tell you!

I knuckled down and got my psychology degree and PhD, but I still bought self-help books on the sly, despite knowing now that there was a great deal to question - from a psychological perspective - about the kind of 'common-sense' psychology I often found there. I noticed a bewildering gulf between the most useful parts of psychology that I was learning about - for me mostly in critical social psychology - and the material in these books. That sense continued as I went on to study more sociological theories of love, sex and gender, and then more psychotherapeutic and philosophical understandings of human relationships and emotions. None of the most helpful stuff seemed to be reflected in the self-help literature. There was, for example, a huge distance between the best-selling Mars and Venus series and what I knew about gender and relationships from reading the likes of Margie Wetherell, Viv Burr and Ros Gill.

It took a while to gain the confidence to do something about this myself. The problem niggled away at me while I attempted to prove myself as a 'proper academic' (whatever that means!) and I daydreamed a project where I took the useful stuff I'd learnt from academia, psychotherapy, and my work with activists, and turned it into a self-help book. I managed to finally do it in 2010 when I sat down pretty much every day for 6 months and wrote *Rewriting the Rules* (Barker, 2013a). Since then I've developed my self-help pipe dream into an ongoing (proper?) academic project in its own right. Here I'd like to reflect a bit on the methods involved, in the hope that it might inspire others to think along these lines. I still think it is a desperate shame that so many of our best ideas and research projects only reach a handful of people, and rarely get turned into forms that people can apply to their everyday lives. It means that folk often turn to poor advice, and also that they're not getting access to the tools that'd help them to critically evaluate the self-help they are engaging with.

So what does self-help look like from a critical social psychological perspective? First it draws on theories and research from across disciplines psychology, sociology, philosophy, cultural studies, and psychotherapy and tries to make that accessible and engaging. Second, its starting point is a critical approach to mainstream self-help. Most self-help takes an individualistic approach to people: 'this is what is wrong with you and this is how to fix it'; mine takes a more

psychosocial perspective: 'this is what's wrong with wider cultural assumptions, systems and structures, and here are some ways in which you might navigate them differently'. A lot of self-help promises a one-size-fits-all solution; mine emphasises diversity and the fact that different things work for different people and at different times. I've sometimes described it as 'anti-self-help' because it doesn't locate our problems in people as individuals.

But how is the project of producing self-help a *research* project, and what methods does it use? Actually my project weaves together various kinds of research and methods in order to further the main goal of creating useful self-help materials. You can see this illustrated below.



Starting in the top right, my project engages with academic theory and research on self-help itself. For example, academics have written critically about the assumptions and norms that are perpetuated by mainstream self-help (e.g. Potts, 1998; Illouz, 2008) and have studied how people engage with self-help (e.g. Cherry, 2012; Woodiwiss, 2015). I'm particularly working with a group of academics and practitioners who are critically examining the popularity of the mindfulness movement in self-help, and exploring more socially engaged ways of employing Buddhist mindfulness theories and practices (Barker, 2013b; Stanley, Barker, Edwards & McEwen, 2014). Some of my projects are also attempts to develop methods to get the findings of a particular study – or the ideas in a particular theory – out to the general public in an accessible way. For example, *The Secrets of Enduring Love* presents the findings of Jacqui Gabb's 'Enduring Love?' project on people in long-term relationships (Barker & Gabb, 2016). *Queer: A Graphic History* (Barker & Scheele, 2016) is a comic about what queer theory is and how it might be useful in people's lives.

Moving anticlockwise to the top left, I've also conducted my own research into self-help, which informs my wider project. For example, Ros Gill, Laura Harvey and I are writing an academic book based on our research on sex advice (Barker, Gill & Harvey, forthcoming 2017). The method for my part of that was to study 62 sex manuals (I don't recommend it!) to discover the messages they tend to give people about how to have enjoyable sex. My critical analysis of

these books, and other media, then went on to inform the sex advice book - and website - that I've recently written with sex educator, Justin Hancock: *Enjoy Sex (How, When and If You Want To)* (Barker & Hancock, 2017).

Down into the bottom left corner, much of my self-help is informed by the research I've conducted over the years with members of gender, sexual, and relationship diverse (GSRD) communities (e.g. Barker et al., 2012; Barker, 2013c). I've always felt that the common psychology question of how GSRD can be *explained* is a problematic one, and that it's more valuable to ask instead what can be *learnt* from people who are doing gender, sexuality, or relationships in different ways to the currently perceived 'norm'. In *Rewriting the Rules* (Barker, 2013a) I drew on this kind of research to give people a sense of all of the diverse ways in which they could manage their relationships (see Barker & Langdrige, 2010). There's a feedback loop here too, because I want to keep learning from my GSRD readers. I'm currently starting work on a second edition of *Rewriting the Rules* and I'll be conducting survey and focus group discussion research to find out what readers found useful – and less so – to inform how I edit the book.

Finally, moving around to the bottom right, my self-help is also grounded in methods of personal reflection and therapeutic work. My own experience – and that of my clients – is a constant testing ground for what is actually useful in people's lives. For example, I publish a lot of zines to take people through activities that I, and clients, have found helpful. I'm currently doing some autoethnographic work based on the queer autoethnography of Adams & Jones, 2011) and the auto(erotic)ethnography of Blinne (2012) about what people can learn from tuning into their sexual fantasies. The first glimpse of this work can be found in *The Psychology of Sex* (Barker, 2017). My books on gender with Alex Iantaffi also draw on our own lives and reflections, as well as years of therapeutic work (e.g. Iantaffi & Barker, forthcoming 2017).

Finally, moving back to the centre of the diagram, there's a kind of research method involved in the creation of the self-help materials themselves: perhaps more akin to creative methods or visual methods (Barker, Richards & Bowes-Catton, 2012; Reavey, 2012). I'm constantly engaged in a dialogue with people about what they'd find most useful, and what formats would be most accessible to diverse audiences, hence my experimentations with different kinds of books, blogs, podcasts, videos, comics, and various other media.

There's a lot of joy, for me, in the dance between the five related sub-projects that I've written about here. I enjoy moving between methods, topics and formats – from talking with clients, to collaborating on a zine, to attending a community event, to recording a podcast, to reading a colleague's latest paper, to writing my personal journal, to analysing some blog posts about a particular issue, to speaking on a panel. There's a deep pleasure in the way that all of these parts of the project weave together and inform each other in a kind of ongoing conversation, and I love that this way of doing things may help to rewrite the rules of what academic research looks like as well.

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Biography

Dr. Meg-John Barker is a writer, therapist, and activist-academic specialising in sex, gender and relationships. They are the author of *Rewriting the Rules*, *The Secrets of Enduring Love*, and *Queer: A Graphic History*. Meg-John is also a senior lecturer in psychology at the Open University and has published many academic books and papers on topics including non-monogamous relationships, sadomasochism, counselling, and mindfulness, as well as co-founding the journal *Psychology & Sexuality*. They were the lead author of *The Bisexuality Report* – which has informed UK policy and practice – and are currently co-editing a book on non-binary gender with similar aims. They are involved in running many public events on sexuality and relationships, including *Sense about Sex* and *Critical Sexology*. Meg-John is a UKCP accredited psychotherapist working with gender, sexually, and relationship diverse (GSRD) clients, and they blog about all these matters on www.rewriting-the-rules.com. Twitter: @megjohnbarker.