

Self-Help Literature in Hebrew Published in Israel During 1967-1997: a bibliometric study / Tal Kvity

Abstract

Self-Help Literature includes books dealing with the subjects of **psychology**, **physical health** and **spirituality**, which are basic human needs, aiming to assist people in fulfilling these needs.

Human beings are constituted of three entities: body, soul and spirit and accordingly their main needs are physiological and spiritual needs. These needs are similar in all human beings, but the manner in which they seek to fulfill them, are different. Sometimes, finding the personal way to self-fulfillment is a search process, especially in our times, in which there are several routes and an abundance of varied possibilities. The search routes may be psychological, spiritual, religious, philosophical or natural – and they are expressed in society in psychological and spiritual workshops, a return to nature and simplicity (in life style, nutrition, alternative treatment methods), in getting closer to religion and mysticism, in a search for answers to philosophical questions, and sometimes in jointly in mixing a number of expressions and search methods. **Self-Help Literature** in its various subjects, reflects these social manifestations, and expresses the necessity to search for a personal route and the attempt to fulfill the basic personal needs of each person.

The **Self-Help Literature** is a young literary genre which is fastly developing in the Western world and in Israel – quantitatively and qualitatively. The main **aim** of this work was to examine these development characteristics, growth patterns across years, and to measure of information delivered by the titles, in relation to the subjects and contents of the books.

The study is based on an analysis of 3,318 books titles published between the years 1967-1997, on the subjects of **psychology**, **physical health** and

spirituality. The books were gathered from various sources: “Kiryat Sefer”, the publication of the National Library; periodicals on specific subjects pertaining to the study subject; publishers’ catalogues; university and public libraries; bookstores; and private collections. This list of books is composed of non-professional titles addressing the general public, rather than text books and research publications. The books contained fit the subjects and years mentioned, but no rules were set for judging their quality and standard, or the level of reliability they provide.

The basic assumption of this study was derived from the school of “book and society”, which claims that literature published in a certain society reflects its countenance, its needs and its state-of-mind and the changes it is undergoing. Therefore, the **Self-Help Literature**, especially as it applies to the general public and not to the professionals, also reflects the countenance of its readers and adapts itself to their needs.

Our Main Hypotheses were that **psychology** is the largest subject, followed by **physical health**, and **spirituality** is the smallest subject. Concerning the literary growth – it was assumed that the main quantitative growth took place in recent years.

It was also assumed that the level of informativeness has risen with time, and that **physical health** is the most informative subject, followed by **psychology** and finally **spirituality**.

The Methodology in this study was based on bibliometric techniques measuring different aspects of literature by quantitative means, through which it reaches conclusions in relation to its contents. Three aspects were examined: **subjects distribution, literature growth and informative of the titles** (informativeness of titles was examined by three methods: length of title according to the total number of words contained, number of substantive words only, and subjective impression through perusal of the title).

To process the raw data (list of titles), it was necessary to build a special **subject index**. It was built on the basis of professional thesaur, title of articles and

indexes of various journals dealing with these research fields, and books included in the list. The subject index is based on the decimal classification system method, while each subject is broken down into sub-subjects (up to 9 subjects), and the sub-subjects are also assorted down into additional sub-subjects, up to 4 levels of itemization. Processing of the data was carried out in accordance to the subjects and sub0subjects, as they appear in the index

Study of the **Self-Help Literature** characteristics (subject distribution and literature growth) was made on the basis of the **whole sample**, i.e. all the 3,318 books.

Study of the informativeness of titles was made on the basis of **representative sample**: 1975, 1985, 1995 – 50 titles for each of the years.

Main Findings:

From the **quantitative aspect** – a growth occurred in the **Self-Help Literature**, in all its sub-subjects – while slow growth at the beginning of the period makes a faster one later.

From the **content aspect** – the **psychology** subject is the largest (50%), followed by **physical health** (30%), and **spirituality** (20%). These ranges are maintained across all years, but the rate of growth of the subjects varies; whereas **psychology** maintains a steady growth rate during the whole period, **physical health** increased its growth in the fifth half-decenny, while **spirituality** increased its growth in the last half decenny, and it is the subject developing most in recent years.

In the ancillary subjects as well many are those increasing their range significantly in recent years: identity and self-awareness, guided imagination, art therapy (in **psychology**); alternative medicine, in all its treatments methods (in **physical health**); and, as well, all **spirituality** subjects – philosophy and mysticism with their ancillary subjects.

The number of the subjects constituting the broader subject (including all sub-topics) has grown along the years, and many subjects branched out to ancillary subjects together with their quantitative growth.

New subjects were added in the last decenny in all fields of the study: eating disorders, one-parent family, alternative treatment methods, Thai-chi, doctor-patient relations, outsiders, etc. on the other hand, only few subjects have diminished or disappeared during the years.

The common types of **Self-Help Literature** books are:

1. Information Books – such as encyclopedias and information books in various fields.

2. Guides – teaching ways of behaviour, giving advice in various fields of life (astrology, physical training, child care, etc.).

3. “Case” Books and Personal Stories – providing information, presenting ways of dealing with a problem and bringing affinity and empathy towards the person who is the subject of the story (in diseases, anomaly, psycho-therapy).

Many books deal with more than one subject and thus were classified under a number of subjects- especially psychology books dealing with personal awareness and self actualization and spiritual development, or books dealing with alternative treatment methods connected to the soul and spiritual aspects. Thus, it appears that the subjects of the study relate to one another and complement each other, as do the three companies in Man: body, soul and spirit.

Concerning **informativeness of titles**, the representative sample showed that in general, informativeness rises with the years: titles became longer, the number of substantive words rose, and even the subjective study of the titles shows that they are clearer in recent years compared to former years.

Examining each subject separately, it appeared that in **psychology** and **physical health** titles became more informative with years according to all testing methods, while in **spirituality** – the subjective test showed a rise in

informativeness, whereas the objective test (counting the words in the title and counting the substantive words therein) showed a decline.

In comparing subjects – it appears that according to the objective testing method, **spirituality** has the most informative titles, whereas the subjective testing method shows **spirituality** to have less informative ones, while **physical health** has the most informative titles. The fact of the **spiritual** subject being less clearly defined goes together with its low level of subjective informativeness – especially in face of the high subjective level of **physical health** – which is far more defined and clear subject.

It may be said that most of the main **hypotheses of the study** were confirmed:

Characteristics of the Self- Help Literature:

The order of the subjects in relation to their size is: **psychology, physical health, spirituality**. The **Self-Help Literature** grew quantitatively during the study period and especially during recent years, and so also each subject separately (and also nearly all ancillary subjects).

In this part of the study all the hypotheses were confirmed.

Informativeness of titles:

Generally speaking – there has been a rise in informativeness with time.

Separately, in each subject – there was a rise in **psychology** and in **physical health**, but in **spirituality** the rise is only in the subjective testing.

In comparing between the subjects – the subjective testing showed that **physical health** has the most informative titles, followed by **psychology** and **spirituality** – as assumed.

As against this, the objective tests - contrary to hypotheses, showed that spirituality has the most informative titles.

In this part of the study the hypotheses were confirmed only partially.

As a by-product of this study, a bibliographic list was composed of Hebrew self-help reference books published in Israel during the years 1967-1997, and it is presented here in a printed appendix – “List of Titles” and in computerized form on a disk.

