Can Popular Self-Help Books Actually Promote Health Behavior Change?

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Can reading self-help books increase the frequency at which people engage in healthy behaviors? If so, the massive and growing market of self-help books represents a scalable, cost-effective tool for improving policy-relevant outcomes, such as physical health. If not, consumers should be informed that their time, energy, and money would be better spent on pursuing alternative strategies to boost their achievement - and the $10 billion self-help publishing industry may be largely a deadweight loss.

To date, the only relevant empirical research exploring the benefits of reading self-help books has been small-N investigations with clinical samples reading primarily clinical books focused on a narrow set of outcomes. So-called bibliotherapy – the use of books for the treatment of physical or emotional problems (Glasgow and Rosen 1978) – has been shown to improve depression (Gregory et al. 2004), alcohol problems (Apodaca and Miller 2003), and sexual dysfunction (van Lankveld et al. 2021).

The proposed research will be the first to test the effectiveness of reading popular self-help books for a non-clinical sample on a policy-relevant behavioral outcome: we propose evaluating whether self-help books can help those with the goal of exercising more to actually increase their physical activity levels. Inadequate physical activity is the cause of an estimated 9% of premature deaths globally (Lee et al. 2012). Further, it is objectively measurable. We will build on the large literature examining whether people who hope to build a gym going habit can be helped to do so (Acland and Levy 2015; Charness and Gneezy 2009; Milkman et al. 2014, 2021; Royer et al. 2015).

We will recruit $N = 1{,}500$ undergraduates who have a membership at their campus gym and who express an interest in increasing their gym attendance. We will randomly assign participants to one of two conditions. In the treatment condition, participants will be provided with a self-help book to read. We will stimuli sample, exploring the value of at least three different best-selling, highly rated self-help books (e.g., Atomic Habits, The Power of Habit, Tiny Habits, Switch). In the control condition, participants will be provided with one of several non-fiction books matched on reader ratings and length (e.g., Guns, Germs and Steel). In both conditions, participants will be instructed to read the book and complete incentivized quizzes to assess compliance during an 8-hour (9 am - 5 pm), in-person lab session (where lunch will be served and a comfortable atmosphere for reading will be provided).

We will track data on each participant's gym attendance in the 2 weeks before and 6 weeks after the treatment. Power analyses for a simple comparison of mean weekly visits assuming 0.9 weekly visits in the control condition and $SD = 1.4$ (based on Milkman et al., 2014) suggest that with $N = 1{,}500$ we will have 90% power to detect a 26% increase in weekly gym visits (an effect size that would be policy relevant and also plausibly achievable based on prior intervention studies testing light touch methods for increasing gym attendance, e.g., Milkman et al., 2014, 2021; Royer et al. 2015). We will follow a a preregistered analysis plan to estimate the treatment effects.

We are planning to run this experiment starting in the Fall of 2024. We are requesting $250,000 in direct costs to contribute to paying participants ($137,000), paying staff for their technical support for preparing and executing the study ($89,500), purchasing the books ($20,000), and sharing the results with the scientific community ($3,500).

Budget (Direct Costs)

Stage	Item	Amount	Rationale
Pilots	Participant Fees	$5,000	Surveys + Lab Pilots
Main Study	Participants - Standard fee	$120,000	Costs for 1,500 8h participation fees
	Participants - Incentives	$12,000	Rewards for participants who stay until the end and pass book comprehension checks
	Staff	$89,500	Staff support for preparation and execution of research
	Books	$20,000	Costs for buying 1,500 books
Sharing of Results	Conference Presentation	$1,000	Costs for registration, hotel, travel
	Publication Fee	$2,500	Costs for publishing in journal
	Total	$250,000	

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