Exploring engagement with non-fiction collections: sociological perspectives

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to build on limited understandings of how readers engage with non-fiction. Drawing from prior research and three recent case studies involving non-fiction reading, this paper considers heterogeneity in modes of reading and the central role of libraries in fostering non-fiction reading cultures.

Design/methodology/approach – Findings from three recent case studies of non-fiction reading about relationship advice; developmental disorders; and financial planning, based on qualitative interviews, participant observation and survey data, are used to assess and expand understandings of non-fiction reading and collections.

Findings – There is considerable heterogeneity in modes of non-fiction reading, and readers often appropriate non-fiction texts for purposes unintended by the authors. Both physical and online libraries function as sites where non-fiction reading can be used by a broad range of demographic groups to participate in individual or group-based resistance to structural and cultural sources of power and inequality.

Practical implications – This paper provides insight into the role and value of non-fiction collections.

Social implications – Findings speak to the value of robust funding for print and online non-fiction collections in communities and schools.

Originality/value – This paper offers new empirical and theoretical insight into how non-fiction collections are used by a range of demographic groups in community and school contexts. Sociological theories are introduced to highlight the role of non-fiction collections in facilitating social change at individual and group levels.

Keywords School libraries, Public libraries, Advice literature, Non-fiction reading, Reading cultures, Reading modalities

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

Sociological studies of culture have a long-standing interest in texts and their readers. Initially, research in this vein centred on “highbrow” books or other written products that were considered “legitimate” by virtue of their inclusion in literary canons (such as subject curricula and university collections) and their receipt of prestigious awards (Alexander, 2003; Corse, 1995; Mukerji and Schudson, 1991). These inquiries, however, focussed on academic or so-called expert interpretations, uses and evaluations (Bourdieu, 1984; Beljean et al., 2015; Lizardo and Skiles, 2008). Over the past 30 years, the “everyday” readers, texts and collections that had been overlooked have become central research foci (Lichterman, 1992; Radway, 1984; Simonds, 1992; Staiger, 2005). Non-fiction texts, collections and their readers – the focus of this paper – make up an important though still understudied part of this area of inquiry.

Along with the shift towards studying “everyday” readers and texts, critical approaches that consider the broader implications of texts and reading have gained popularity. These critical approaches are rooted largely in Marxist theories that see like books as processes that arise out of – and reinforce – social relations of power and social inequalities (Fuchs, 2014). By using critical frameworks alongside a sociological lens that connects micro- and macro-level practices to reveal the political dimensions of personal experiences (Mills, 1959), many studies of texts and readers now emphasize how reading – while often seen as a private and highly individualized experience – is in fact patterned and bound up in processes that contribute to social inequality and change. For example, research shows how communities of readers reading a common genre or topic may, in loosely or highly organized ways, use their reading experiences as a springboard for political activism (Lamb, 2005; Steinem, 1992; Taylor, 1996; Wu, 2014). Together, these research contributions encourage awareness of how texts and reading can foster resistance to cultural and structural power, and how interpretations of and reactions to texts are shaped by readers’ cultural contexts.

Despite the critical and “everyday” turn in the field, sociological studies of readers still concentrate on fiction (Griswold, 1993, 2000; Puri, 1997) and on primarily white, educated and middle-class women as readers (Staiger, 2005). Beyond the study of literary canons, there has been minimal sociological interest in text collections (whether physical or virtual), and on how collections factor into how books are read or otherwise used. To date, most collections-related research has focussed on what does not get to become a part of text collections as a result of institutions’ gatekeeping practices.
(Becker, 1982; Hirsch, 1972, 2000; Smits, 2016). Research in educational studies fills some of these knowledge gaps by paying greater attention to non-fiction and diversity in readers, but studies are limited by their heavy focus on youth, literacy and curriculum design (Gallil, 1999; Golden, 2006; Kittle, 2013; Wijekumar et al., 2012).

The “talking life” of non-fiction: developing critical perspectives from the social sciences
Existing sociological work leaves us poised to learn more about non-fiction texts and readers from a critical standpoint. We have minimal understanding of the “talking life” of non-fiction (Lamb, 2005), meaning the extent and nature of how interactions with non-fiction may translate into broader social processes. Consequently, the aim of this paper is to raise critical awareness about how non-fiction is read and used. Although it is expected that improving knowledge of the sociological dimensions of non-fiction would benefit a variety of disciplines, it is anticipated that the knowledge would be especially relevant and helpful for those who build, maintain or otherwise make key decisions about non-fiction collections. Particularly in publicly funded situations where financial support of these resources may be highly scrutinized and at risk of cutbacks, it is likely that new knowledge of non-fiction’s “talking life” would help to build a case for its relevance to community needs and thereby justify robust support for non-fiction collections – both monetarily and in terms of other resources and programming.

Despite the availability of general survey data on the composition of library collections (Federation of Ontario Public Libraries, 2017; Institute of Museum and Library Services, 2017) and on who accesses them (National Endowment for the Arts, 2015; Timperley and Spiller, 1999), richer qualitative data are also needed to round out understandings of how non-fiction is accessed and used. As such, this paper draws from three of the author’s case studies to provide interpretive accounts of encounters with non-fiction from research participants’ perspectives (Alexander, 2004; Geertz, 1973). In keeping with sociology’s aim of linking micro and macro perspectives (Mills, 1959), it considers individual experiences within broader contexts. Ultimately, it is hoped that the case study findings will help to develop fuller understandings of engagement with non-fiction alongside existing survey data about collections and readers. Although the primary focus here – as in most prior research – is on printed books, there is also consideration of other non-fiction print and electronic resources as they apply to the context of each case study.

Towards a critical, interpretive research programme
To understand the “talking life” of non-fiction from the perspectives of its readers, it is necessary to ask: who reads what? Why? How? An attempt should be made to understand the place of non-fiction within the reader’s lifestyle and life story. In doing so, it is vital to think intersectionally (Jones et al., 2017), meaning with an awareness of how reading experiences and motivations might vary along socio-demographic lines such as gender or ethnic background, and across geographic locations (Griswold, 1993, 2000; Puri, 1997; Radway, 1984). In short, a critical, interpretive approach seeks to uncover the motivations and experiences of non-fiction readers, and the consequences of their reading. It also seeks to demonstrate impacts or outgrowths of non-fiction reading embedded in broader communities. Because power is central to any critical sociological approach, here it encourages questions like: to what extent does reading seem to (dis)empower readers? What are the limits of the power that reading gives them? Do the readers seem to be aware of these limits?

In terms of understanding those who build and maintain collections, similar questions can guide inquiries: who includes what in a given collection? Why? The researcher should try to map out whether non-fiction collections and those who work with them are connected to broader reading cultures through events, programmes or designated spaces. In other words: what does a non-fiction collection foster – socially – that is outside of itself geographically or even subject-wise? When budgets are restricted, what is excised from non-fiction collections, and why? Who gets to make those decisions, and what are the consequences? What might inputs of resources (namely, time and money) into building non-fiction collections be giving back to communities and groups?

Findings can then be used to build a conceptual and theoretical vocabulary for talking critically about non-fiction collections and their readers, or existing concepts and theories may be brought in to make sense of the data. These abstract ideas are helpful because they are transferable from smaller case studies to broader looks at collections, readers and reading, notably large surveys which often present findings without theoretical explanations.

Three case studies

Empirical and theoretical starting points
All case studies were exploratory, so they began with an awareness of the existing theories and research findings outlined below but also sought to move the field forward by developing new understandings of non-fiction. As an empirical starting point, they all acknowledged the immense popularity of non-fiction books as evidenced by their high rates of borrowing from public collections and high publication and sales volumes. Canadian data suggest that recent non-fiction sales comprised 31-32 per cent of the national book market (Bourdeau, 2015; Sparkes, 2017), and the country’s largest public library network – The Toronto Public Library – reported 18 million visits and 1.2 million card holders in 2015, with an unspecified though significant number of visits and borrowing focussed on non-fiction (Toronto Public Library, 2017). In the nationally representative Survey of Public Participation in the Arts, 78 per cent of adult Americans said that they had read non-fiction books in the past year (National Endowment for the Arts, 2015).

Research also points to diversity in the socio-demographic profiles of non-fiction readers and borrowers (Harrison, 2000; National Endowment for the Arts, 2015; Timperley and Spiller, 1999), and shows strong positive correlations between household income, educational attainment and reading frequency. Studies of non-fiction borrowing and reading patterns, however, are based on survey data that cannot provide in-depth information about readers’ motivations or reading modalities. That said, findings suggest that reading non-fiction for practical purposes predominates (Harrison, 2000), that
readers in the 35–54 age demographic tend to be the most frequent readers of non-fiction (Timperley and Spiller, 1999), and that men and women seem to read non-fiction genres about equally (Merga, 2017) despite women's tendency to be more varied and frequent in their overall reading habits (National Endowment for the Arts, 2015; Tepper, 1998). Studies in this vein also underscore the central role that publicly funded libraries, including school-based libraries, play in supporting broader communities through programming and initiatives such as literacy (Eyre, 2004), immigrant settlement (Toronto Public Library, 2017) and Indigenous reconciliation (Saskatoon Public Library, 2016).

Theoretically, the case studies build on five major insights developed from studies of reading in the sociology of culture:

1. There is heterogeneity in modes of and motives for reading, but there are nonetheless patterns in the reading practices of people with certain backgrounds or in certain contexts (Griswold, 2000). Connected to this fundamental insight are the assertions that:

2. Reading is shaped by readers’ own socio-demographic profiles and biographies (McLean and Kapell, 2015; Wu, 2014); and

3. Reading is shaped by one’s context, both in an immediate or micro sense and in a more macro way (Puri, 1997; Radway, 1984).

4. Further, (Non-)fiction collections, their creators and curators, and their readers are often implicated in processes of resistance to power and social change (Simonds, 1992; Taylor, 1996). Similarly, they can also play roles in processes of domination or disempowerment, such as through censorship or gatekeeping by institutions (Corse, 1995; Hirsch, 2000), or through a profound clash between a reader’s values or life experiences and the book’s messages (Puri, 1997).

5. Finally, Sociological theorizing about readers and reading underscores the idea that even though we may think of reading as a solitary act, it can in fact be very social – particularly in its consequences.

Relationship advice books and readers in a context of cultural diversity

The first case study involved a departure from the typical research focus on fiction reading and its white, middle-class readers to look at readers and reading modalities of a highly successful non-fiction genre with a heterogeneous audience. Self-help – also known as self-improvement or advice literature – is a non-fiction genre that originated in Protestant New England in the 1600s (Starker, 1989) and continues to enjoy high sales volume; in the USA, it recently tied with graphic novels for the fastest-growing print sales of all adult book segments despite e-books' contribution to a general decline in print book sales (Publishers Weekly, 2015). The genre’s readers also span socio-demographic groups (Giddens, 1992; Illouz, 2012), which further expands its cultural reach.

Given the genre’s popularity but lack of studies about how it is read (McLean and Kapell, 2015), this case study asked readers of a popular sub-genre – self-help books about intimate relationships – to talk about how and why they read them. The study was guided by the central question: what contributes to different modes of reading? Unlike fiction genres, which are predominantly read with a pleasure motive (Staiger, 2005), non-fiction readers of this and other genres may seek out and work with the books in different ways. A secondary question was motivated by the study’s critical focus: how does self-help reading contribute to the creation or maintenance of social inequalities and boundaries?

The sample consisted of 36 adults who self-identified as readers of relationship self-help. All participants resided in a large, highly diverse Canadian city with a population over 1 million. Aside from age and sexual orientation (heterosexual), no restrictions were placed on readers’ socio-demographic characteristics in an effort to gain a window into the readership’s diversity. The research focussed on participants’ reading of the genre in books, though several participants were consumers of relationship self-help in other media such as blogs and podcasts. Semi-structured interviews were carried out, and focussed on participants’ reading practices and the reading’s place within their life histories. Interview transcripts were analysed thematically, using qualitative coding and content analysis techniques (Altheide, 1996).

Reading and resource libraries in a special education programme

This project explored life transition planning of secondary students who were part of a school-based resource programme for youth with developmental disabilities. While the case study was not initially focussed on books or reading, non-fiction reading and resource collections became central to the research. Initially, the project intended to look solely at how the programme works with students nearing the end of high school to set and articulate life goals, as well as identify and implement appropriate post-school supports, in the areas of employment and employment training, social supports and independent living supports. It sought to assess how and whether students perceived the transition planning to be helpful, and understand teachers’ and administrators’ impressions of the transition planning’s role in students’ transition process.

Data collection included structured interviews with ten students enrolled in the programme (representing 63 per cent of its total enrolment), all of the programme’s special education teachers (i.e. 4), and the programme’s coordinator at the school board level. It also encompassed observational visits to the student resource rooms at the two schools where the programme was housed over the 10-month period of a school year, and qualitative analysis of curriculum materials and informational materials for parents housed in a reading resource collection. The project was carried out within the publicly funded high school system of a mid-sized Canadian city (i.e. with a population between 250,000 and 500,000).

Finance reading and goal-setting during the transition to adulthood

The central goal of the third case study was to map out young adults’ supports and obstacles in the transition to adulthood as they relate to financial goals, realities and priorities. It comprised part of a broader research programme guided by the question: what do youth aged 18–32 from varying socio-economic positions recognize as major sources of support and constraint in their transition to adulthood? The overarching question sought to illuminate the roles that families, community resources and social policies play in easing or complicating young adults’ transition experiences. It also
aimed to assess connections between socio-demographic locations and finance-related behaviours.

Data were collected from 36 in-depth interviews and 150 questionnaires composed of closed- and open-ended questions. Findings from interview and open-ended survey questions were used to construct participants’ financial pathways and qualitatively assess patterns within them; survey data from closed-ended questions were analysed using statistical software. All participants were living in a mid-sized Canadian city (i.e. population 250,000-500,000).

Case study findings and implications for understandings of non-fiction

Heterogeneity in reading modes and motives

Across and within the three case studies, findings speak to heterogeneity both in what draws readers to a particular non-fiction genre or collection and in how they read and make use of the texts. Reading modalities are at once shaped by readers’ socio-demographic characteristics, motivations for reading and cultural context. Despite non-fiction’s intent to provide factual content, and the general expectation that it will be read for informational purposes, findings reveal that its role extends to providing entertainment, reassurance, catharsis and life structure.

In the case of relationship self-help readers, findings demonstrated that they use one of two overarching modes. Some read in a targeted manner, consulting books infrequently though intensively, using them for informational purposes, and reading them pragmatically without the expectation that the books will be entertaining. Those most likely to read in this mode were members of dominant social groups who were experiencing acute relationship challenges. By contrast, those who read in a habitual mode found reading self-help pleasurable and at times entertaining. They enjoyed reading the genre frequently – not just at times of acute relational crises – and did not read with the primary aim of being able to implement the books’ advice. Their reading of the genre formed part of a broader lifestyle centred around self-awareness and introspection, and they used the genre to lend structure to their understandings of their lives. Readers also acknowledged the books as sources of reassurance and even catharsis that facilitated healing after traumatic events. Unlike targeted readers, habitual readers tended to be members of minority socio-demographic groups (e.g. new immigrants or visible minorities by virtue of their ethnicity) and to report extended periods of life struggle connected to finances or employment. Thus, instead of reading the genre in times of acute crisis, these readers read within a life of prolonged challenges.

In a somewhat similar vein, teachers within the special education programme spoke of two dominant ways in which students’ parents read non-fiction materials from their programme’s central resource collection. Some, they explained, tended to read chiefly for information and advice that will help them support their children through the transition to adulthood; others – while appreciative of the books’ information – seem to seek them out primarily for reassurance that their children’s challenges are surmountable and that they are not alone in experiencing them. While this case study did not focus on establishing connections between readers’ demographics and their reading modes, it did underscore the existence of diverse non-fiction reading modalities. Both cases also emphasize the possibilities of non-fiction reading as bibliotherapy (Tukhareli, 2011) for working through challenging and stigmatizing experiences.

Non-fiction reading and collection building as forms of (limited) political protest

All case studies demonstrate that, as with fiction reading, non-fiction reading offers opportunities for readers to link up in active ways with interpretive communities (DeVault, 1990; Fish, 1980) that not only interpret texts to generate meanings, but do so critically. Particularly when a reader’s encounter with a non-fiction text involves considerable dissonance between the text and the reader’s feelings about it, he or she may respond by challenging its messages. Thus, heterogeneity of non-fiction reading modes and instances of readers challenging textual content suggest that non-fiction is often read and used in ways not intended by authors.

For relationship self-help readers, challenging the texts happened through two strategies, namely, talking back and transcoding. In talking back to a text, readers resisted its content and underlying ideologies, questioning their relevance and validity. A less common and more involved resistance to texts came through transcoding, whereby readers would engage in a more politicized “pushing back”. For instance, whereas a reader talking back to dissonant advice might critique it privately or to others, a transcoding reader would go a step further to try and reinterpret the advice from other cultural or socio-demographic vantage points and initiate public dialogues with others about its failure to mesh with their own views.

Within the context of the special education programme, the reading resource collection’s very existence functioned – for parents of the programme’s students, and for the programme’s teachers – as a first step in advocating for curricular and broader social change towards the acceptance and integration of those with developmental disabilities in the public-school system. Although the case study did not involve interviewing parents about their use of the collection, teachers spoke to its importance for parents not only as a source of information, but as a symbol of the school district’s commitment to supporting the students. Whereas teachers acknowledged that it has become increasingly possible for parents to connect with support and advocacy groups for their children through online fora and community organizations, they emphasized that the physical resource collection also functioned as an important starting point for advocacy.

For young adults, thinking about their futures and becoming educated about finances through non-fiction reading constituted a form of talking back to widespread cultural stereotypes of their generation as financially lazy, incompetent and clueless (Furstenberg, 2010; Furstenberg and Kennedy, 2016). Although not all of them read physical or e-books on the subject – instead preferring blogs or magazines as information sources – they saw reading about finances as empowering and as a means of asserting their competence as young adults.

Despite the finding across case studies that non-fiction reading and collections can contribute to social change through advocacy and empowerment of particular social groups, a critical sociological lens reminds us that such protest is – at least
at the outset – limited. As with the limited evidence available from other case studies of non-fiction reading (Taylor, 1996; Wu, 2014) and fiction reading (e.g. Radway, 1984), non-fiction reading and collections can plant powerful seeds for change and activism, but broader institutional and cultural support must be present to keep the momentum going. When resources are scarce or the social milieu is not receptive to a given group or issue, the grassroots momentum offered by non-fiction encounters is stunted.

Non-fiction reading as a supplement to – or problematic replacement for – social support

Critical sociological perspectives caution that, in an international climate of dwindling support for social programmes, various levels of government now call on individuals, families and communities to help themselves through challenges (Rose, 1990; McGee, 2005). In this current context of neoliberalism, non-fiction reading has gained popularity as a means of substituting for publicly funded services, and for acting as a stand-in or supplement to private services and social support networks (McGee, 2005). Sociologists lament the neoliberal turn, however, because it unfairly assumes that all citizens can find private substitutions for sources of support that used to be public (Pugh, 2015; Silva, 2013).

Sociologists working from a critical framework argue that non-fiction resources – while valuable and typically accessible to individuals across socio-economic strata – should not have to substitute for publicly funded services. Instead, they ought to be supplements. This leaves non-fiction, especially of the prescriptive or self-help variety, in a tricky place: on the one hand, it can be a helpful and empowering resource for people from many walks of life, but on the other hand it can be leveraged to do the work of shrinking welfare states (Lee, 2017).

For readers of relationship self-help, it can function as a cheaper (if not free) and more private alternative or complement to therapy or support groups – not much of which is provided by the state in even the most generous of welfare systems. It can also stand in for the reassurance or guidance of friends and family. Thus, within this case study, we do not see much evidence of what sociologists might term the sinister agenda of neoliberalism. That said, non-fiction reading to cope with relationship challenges could be problematic in promoting social isolation more so than solidarity.

In the case of the special education resource collection, there is greater concern as to whether a publicly funded non-fiction collection might be justified as a replacement for more robust support services. Within the context of the study, it did not appear that the collection’s existence and availability to parents and teachers was used to rationalize fewer auxiliary services for special education students. That said, a critical sociological standpoint calls on those who build and maintain publicly funded non-fiction collections to be aware of how their resources may be justified as a substitute for others, albeit an insufficient one.

Turning to the case of financial reading, some participants noted – as with relationship self-help readers – that they used non-fiction advice as a supplement to or replacement for the advice of people, including financial advisors, which many young adults said they did not want to pay for or could not afford. Although such services are not often covered through public funding, in some countries with robust welfare states – notably Scandinavian nations – financial counselling services are provided to citizens (Larsson et al., 2016). In these contexts, non-fiction resources are helpful additions to – and not insufficient replacements for – state support.

Limitations and avenues for further research and collection development

Given the paucity of existing research on engagement with non-fiction, it is hoped that this overview of recent case studies, situated within existing sociological insights, offers new perspectives on non-fiction’s “talking life”. The findings from case studies presented here are by no means exhaustive, but are instead meant as a conversation starter for those who work with non-fiction collections and who may not have been exposed to sociological perspectives on collections and reading.

As with all starting points, this paper has limitations: small, qualitative case studies do not necessarily represent realities within broader populations and across cultures or milieux. Thus, the findings will need to be interpreted alongside other studies and triangulated with bigger data sets through research instruments like surveys, as was done in the finances and transition to adulthood study. Further, all case studies considered aspects of non-fiction collections and reading in public and school libraries, but did not consider books and reading in academic and corporate libraries. Inquiries in those settings will round out understandings of encounters with non-fiction.

Conclusion

The annual report of a Canadian public library system describes public libraries as “community living rooms” (Saskatoon Public Library, 2016). Indeed, to see publicly funded libraries as “living rooms” and non-fiction books as having “talking lives” is to think sociologically. Adopting a sociological perspective also invites us to see the allegedly individual act of reading non-fiction as deeply social and bound up with power relations on micro and macro levels. From a critical sociological standpoint, non-fiction collections and readers can play a part in resisting power and social inequality, albeit an often limited one. Considering the potential for non-fiction collections and books to promote positive social change, there is a strong case for the importance of robust funding for non-fiction collections in communities and schools. Although those who create and manage non-fiction collections likely do not think of themselves as facilitators of social resistance and change, there is growing evidence that they do so in their everyday work.

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