Ways of Learning in Spiritual Self-Help

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Ways of Learning in Spiritual Self-help: Singing Bowl Manuals and Handbooks

Abstract:

Multiple forms of learning that seek inspiration from religion and spirituality are found alongside with more formal learning institutions and methods in contemporary Western societies. The familiarization with practices of spiritual well-being often takes place in introductory courses and workshops. Such courses usually incorporate different kinds of study material – for example, course manuals, through which the participants gain deeper knowledge about the practice. This article examines the role and uses of learning materials within well-being spirituality by studying course materials for the Eastern influenced well-being practice of singing bowl sound relaxation. We also make use of ethnographic data from participant observations and interviews. The course materials for sound relaxation are investigated through a thematic analysis that draws on studies of self-help literature and the notions of formal, non-formal, and informal learning. The article illustrates how an analysis of course materials for spiritual practices can further our understanding of self-help literature as a potentially important if largely unacknowledged source for adult learning. Our main argument is that singing bowl course materials in multiple ways express entanglements of formal and non-formal, as well as secular and spiritual pedagogics.

Keywords: learning, self-help, therapeutics, course materials, textbooks, singing bowls, science

The ideal of self-development and independent adult learning

> I entered the bright space of an office building in Helsinki and was welcomed by a smiling woman. She directed me to a large room with white walls, where the introductory course for singing bowl sound relaxation would shortly begin. At the front of the room metallic singing bowls of various sizes were placed side by side, and beside them was a large gong. […] The centre of the room was filled with yoga mats, each equipped with pillows decorated with a picture of Buddha and a neatly folded blanket. Everything was beautifully and orderly arranged. […] On top of each pillow there was also a booklet entitled "Peter Hess sound method: Peter Hess singing bowl massage level I". This booklet appeared to me quite a concrete way of materialising and make tangible the learning process on which we would soon embark. I was intrigued,

> and began to through the pages of the booklet and its instructions concerning the ontology and rituals of the art of sound relaxation (Fieldnotes 14.3.2020).

While the roots of self-development have often been located in antiquity, one of the most prominent examples of texts written specifically for the purpose of improving one's life appeared in the eighteenth century, when Benjamin Franklin authored texts that provided guidance on how to achieve a wealthy, virtuous, and happy life (Madsen 2015:5; Salmenniemi et al. 2020:3). Later, in 1859, the author Samuel Smiles published a book entitled *Self-Help*, which is widely considered a starting point for the modern self-help literature. Louise Woodstock (2005:157) suggests that self-help books can be traced back to early religious manuals, which encouraged readers to direct their thoughts to mirror the intentions of a Christian God. The self-help books of the 1950s portrayed God as generous, giving, and gentle. In the 1960s they instead started to portray institutional religion as failing to meet the individual's needs (Woodstock 2005:165–168). By the 1990s psychology and religion had, according to Woodstock (2005:173), "merged into a hybrid concept of spirituality in self-help, increasingly positing transformative power and transcendental wisdom within the inner self". In this sense the roots and development of much self-help literature can be regarded as having a strongly religious connection, even if this connection is more or less explicit.

In this article, we write about "spiritual" and "New Age spirituality" in referring to a contemporary cultural category that, in its users' self-understanding, challenges the binary categories of religion and secularity and aims at less exclusivity and more openness to diverse influences. The kind of spirituality present in our case of singing bowls shares traits from the tradition of New Age such as the notions of energy, inner awareness and personal growth as well as multiple compositions of various religious and cultural ideas and practice. We find it also possible to understand (New Age) spirituality as a form of contemporary lived or vernacular religion – and even as exposing some elementary forms of religion (Sutcliffe 2013) – that frequently disconnects itself from or exists in tension with traditional, organised religion (e.g. Ammerman 2013; Sutcliffe & Gilhus 2013, 10-14). However, in this article, we do not take a definite or final analytical stance in the dispute concerning the understanding of spirituality either as an illuminative subtype of religion (Sutcliffe & Gilhus 2013; see also Gauthier 2020) or, alternatively, as something distinct from religion (Huss 2014). To what extent the manifold phenomenon of contemporary spirituality will possibly evolve into a more generally recognised cultural category between religion and secularity, or eventually even undermine religion-secularity dichotomy, lies outside our present concern.

Self-help literature is today an oft-used and variously defined literary genre and a rapidly growing global industry. In Finland books providing instructions for improving one's life are extensively translated and published by publishers such as *Basam Books* and *Viisas Elämä,* but also by other publishing houses. A list gathering the top 100 well-being books in Finland in 2020, compiled by the online bookstore Adlibris, also displays a wide range of topics. Many of these books are either translations of international bestsellers or authored by famous Finnish media figures for a Finnish audience, addressing topics such as hope (Kallio 2020), consciousness (Nordin 2020), and gratitude (Pimiä & Huhtamäki 2019). As this implies, many of the self-help books, influenced by spiritual notions and ideas, do not represent a marginal phenomenon in today's Finland. Like many other Western societies, they instead appear an integral part of our culture in which self-development is increasingly valued and encouraged. Besides bestselling books in bookshops, we have noticed that similar guidebooks and manuals also constitute an essential part of courses and workshops for contemporary spirituality.

In this article we examine course materials for singing bowl sound relaxation in the heuristic frame of self-help and research on learning. With course materials in this article, we refer to textual sources that complement courses and workshops: one course manual and one practical handbook.[1] The manual, which is part of an introductory course in sound relaxation, has been translated from German to Finnish. The practical companion is written in English and targets a broader international audience. The analysis also includes ethnographic research data in the form of field notes from participant observations by one of us, as well as individual and focus group interviews addressing the practitioners use and interpretation of the studied course materials. Both books chosen as our material address the practice of Peter Hess sound relaxation (hereafter referred to as PHSR), a deep-relaxation technique with Eastern influences, developed by the German engineer Peter Hess. The method involves playing different sized metallic bowls in a specific way on top of or near the body. The practice aims to create a state of deep relaxation, which is regarded as a way to promote and support overall well-being and health. The method is taught in the Peter Hess institute, which functions as an umbrella organization with more than 22 local PH academies in different countries. The PH Institute was established in 1984, and the first PH instructors graduated in 1991 (https://www.peter-hess-

[1] However, we recognize that the definition of course materials has some limitations for describing the studied books. Primarily, as the courses also include a multitude of other materials, such as the bowls, mallets and other instruments, pillows, massage tables etc., used to aid the learning process. Nevertheless, the concept reveals the books as an important part of singing bowl courses. One alternative option would have been to use the term textbooks or handbooks. This in turn might have ignored the practical side of the studied books, which also include for example practical tasks and visual maps of where to place the bowls on the body. The label of workbooks on the other hand would have diminished the fact that these sources primarily are written and textual accounts, providing a clear connection to the literary category of self-help literature.

institut.de/kontakt-international/). At the time of writing the technique is taught in Finland in one national PH academy, *Medi-Sound KG,* established in 2010.

Course materials for well-being spirituality as self-help literature

An oft-emphasised feature of self-help books is that they tend to place the individual at the centre of personal development, providing readers with the agency and authority to affect the trajectories of their own lives. According to Ole Madsen (2015:4) self-help has come to refer especially to the self's psychological disposition. Consequently, self-help books are frequently described as expressing and promoting a larger therapeutic turn in Western societies (e.g. Madsen 2014), or a psychologization process (McGee 2005), incorporating ideas of "psychic interiority, autonomy, authenticity, self-responsibility and continuous self-invention" (Salmenniemi et al. 2020:1). Overall, therapeutic discourses enjoy great authority in Western societies, affecting how people perceive of themselves at a fundamental level (e.g. Illouz 2008; Madsen 2015:11; Utriainen 2019). While self-help literature has extensively been studied as a therapeutic practice and as popular psychology (e.g. Nehring 2017), our analysis focuses on self-help literature primarily as learning materials, a perspective less studied (see, however, McLean 2013, 2015).

Moreover, we study self-help literature in the particular context of well-being spiritualities (e.g. Heelas 2009). As noted by Ruth Bradby (2015:354) spiritual self-help can provide a bridge from esotericism to the wider mainstream culture, as many of these books such as M. Scott Peck's *The Road Less Travelled* (1978) or Eckhart Tolle's *The Power of Now* (2004) have become international best sellers. Self-help books have also been described against the background of New Age spiritualities as self-help books characterized by a metaphysical and mystical emphasis, as well as a countercultural nature (Redden 2002, 36).

Eastern images and ideas, especially derived from Tibet and Buddhism, usually acquire a noteworthy position in singing bowl practices. Eastern influences are in general a common trait in New Age practices, where oriental religions have extensively been adapted to Western conditions (Campbell 2007, Hanergraaff 1996). Traditionally Westerners have turned to the East in search of enlightenment, Helena Blavatsky being perhaps one of the most influential in this regard (see e.g. Partridge 2013). A Western idealization of Tibet as a thoroughly spiritual place is consequently wide spread both within and outside the context of New Age (e.g. Congdon 2007). As Dodin et al. (2001:181) suggest Tibet's role in New Age must be understood as "part of a larger complex of ideas that freely and often loosely circulate within communities looking for alternative epistemologies". Moreover, the actual Eastern

origins of singing bowls, which are frequently referred to as "Tibetan", is a debated issue (e.g. Brown 2020, Congdon 2007). For example Congdon (2007) notes that singing bowls constitute a Western invention that as a result of marketing and US representations, particularly in the form of New Age electronic music and Tibetan bowls, contributed to the development of new Tibetan musics, which gained popularity from the 1960's together with the rise of New Age spiritualities. The representation of a Tibetan past in the studied course materials may from this perspective be described as a way of transmitting an invented tradition (Hobsawm & Ranger 1983), that provides the reader with tools for placing, conceptualizing and authenticating the practice. It furthermore positions the studied course materials within the context of New Age/spiritual self-help literature. When addressing issues of an Asian origin, the course materials, however, demonstrate quite a problematizing and reflective attitude towards the issue. We will return to this topic later.

Similar to many self-help books the PHSR course materials portray emotions and the reader's inner world as essential for improving the personal and collective aspects of life, such as social relationships or personal emotions (Furedi 2004, Rimke 2000). They also tend to present the reader as the foremost initiator of and contributor to personal or sometimes more general well-being, while including an "enchanting other" in the form of sound. Furthermore, the therapeutic benefits of playing singing bowls are frequently emphasised and facilitated within the texts, for example, when the author encourages the readers to practise introspection, or instructs them in how to observe personal emotional and physical changes during the practice. PHSR course materials thus provide an interesting new and concrete case for studying how well-being can be taught and learned within the frame of the self-help genre.

Another central theme that runs through our analysis is the dynamics between formal and non-formal learning within spiritual learning materials. PHSR course materials provide an illustrative example of how various forms of learning are negotiated and combined in the context of spiritual self-help literature. The analysis also aims to further our understanding of self-help literature as non-formal adult learning sources and their pedagogical strategies. Our understanding of formal and non-formal learning is guided by Alan Rogers' description of the notions, which is based on UNESCO's (2009) definition of lifelong learning. Rogers (2014:15) defines formal learning as a process in which learning occurs within education or training institutions, has structured objectives, times, and support, and leads to certification. Formal learning is also primarily intentional. Meanwhile, non-formal learning occurs outside education and training institutions, and typically does not lead to certification acknowledged in the larger society. However, it may include structures such as learning objectives, time, and/or support. Like formal learning, it is primarily

intentional, at least from the learner's perspective. Rogers furthermore identifies the category of informal learning, which refers to unstructured and unintentional learning that happens for example in daily activities. It does not lead to certification and is in most cases unintentional. We will pay attention especially to the interesting dynamics between formal and non-formal learning within the studied PHSR manuals.

Self-help literature as learning materials: three analytical perspectives

Narrative and textual techniques

Our first analytical theme focuses on the narrative and textual formulations and techniques operating within self-help literature, playing a notable role in producing an environment for introspection within self-help books. Auto-/biographical life stories possess an essential role in religious and spiritual traditions, from hagiographies (see e.g. Marcos 2015), to narrations depicting the life of New Age leaders (e.g. Sutcliffe 2003). Also outside of religious settings, biographies have gained in popularity and can be regarded as a growing source for learning (Hallqvist et al 2013:498).

A common feature in self-help literature is the writers' tendency to address readers with a specific use of pronouns like "we" and "you" (Cherry 2008, Lee 2007:98). For example, when talking to the readers with the collective pronoun "we", self-help authors invite readers to participate in the text, creating an atmosphere in which "a dialectics is being assembled between the self-help books and the extratextual 'life' of the reader" (Cherry 2008:342). This creates a sense of unity between the reader, author, and other readers (Lee 2007:98). Similarly, the singular "you" generates an engagement with the individual reader (Cherry 2008:342) and presents the message in a personal way. Such personalised language is a widely applied textual technique in self-help literature. Speaking to the reader in such personal and direct ways is also a prominent feature of PHSR manuals – for example: "within this book *I* would like to invite *you*" (Hess 2019:6), or "singing bowls allow *us* to take small 'breaks' which can help *us* find *our* balance" (Hess 2019:54, our emphasis).

The inclusion of narratives depicting the authors' personal transformations can be considered a way to generate what Woodstock (2006) calls narrative and communicative authority. This is another prominent technique in self-help literature that is apparent in the studied books. Woodstock (2006:322) sees autobiographical life stories as a narrative strategy for presenting the author as an authority "filled with lay knowledge drawn from personal experience". Such lay expertise is often constructed in contrast with formal expertise. We will later return to this discussion

by investigating the biography of the founder Peter Hess included in the PHSR course manual. While the depiction of Hess's background indeed seems to function as a way to ascribe him an authority based on his personal transformation and experiences, the narration nevertheless has an additional purpose. This becomes apparent when reading the manual as a pedagogical source. Hence, we will direct our analytical attention to the ways in which the narration of Hess's biography negotiates the relationship of the author's formal and non-formal education backgrounds. By paying attention to the autobiographical story of Hess, we will also analyse how narrative learning takes place as individuals learn through autobiographical storytelling (Clark & Rossiter 2008, Hallqvist 2014, Dominicé 2000).

Religious, spiritual, or secular self-help?

Our second analytical theme is the distinction between secular and religious self-help. How self-help literature is defined depends on the perspective from which the phenomenon is regarded. For example, Madsen (2016) argues that self-help can be interpreted as a natural result of the New Age movement of the 1970s or as an extension of the Do-It-Yourself movement of the 1950s. Kelly George also points to the fluidity of self-help as a literary genre. According to her "terms like self-help, New Age, spiritual self-help, psychoreligious, popular psychology, positive thinking and spiritual New Age are often used interchangeably in academic writing, journalism and the publishing industry" (George 2012:25). The researcher's perspective and choices therefore set the rules for which books are regarded as self-help literature. Consequently, if self-help is seen as an extension of the New Age spirituality, Princess Märtha Louise's and Elisabeth Nordeng's (2009, 2012) angel books, for example, occupy an important place, Madsen concludes (Madsen 2016:12). However, had the topic been addressed from another angle, they might not have been defined as self-help literature at all. The categorization of self-help into religious/spiritual/secular sometimes also comes from within the field. One example of this is Sue Johnson's relationship manual, *Hold Me Tight* (2008), which also has a Christian counterpart, *Created for Connection* (2016) (for a detailed analysis see Laakso 2018).

As Helen Lee (2007:98) points out, dualistic assumptions such as science–religion, male–female, or free will–determinism are an intrinsic part of Western logics (see also Ingman et al. 2016). Such dualistic assumptions also often operate in self-help books. An example of this is the way in which self-help texts often draw on dualistic assumptions such as light-dark, awake-asleep, or truth-lies, Lee continues. Our analysis will focus on one such dualism, often portrayed as an oppositional pair, that between science-religion, illustrating how the studied manuals both utilise and

problematize this division. Scholars have recently started to acknowledge the intersecting nature of science and religion in different contexts (see, for example, Hiiemäe & Utriainen 2021, Tiaynen-Qadir et al. 2021, Lightman & Elsdon-Baker 2020). Our analysis studies how the fluidities, overlappings, and entanglements of scientific and spiritual discourses are expressed and negotiated in the studied course materials.

Woodstock maintains that early self-help books portrayed religion and science as "two seemingly conflicting belief systems" explaining reality and the individual's place within it (Woodstock 2005:162). The middle period from 1940 to 1960 was defined by the adoption of psychological rhetoric. Modern (1980–2005) self-help books instead appeared to include biomedical beliefs about the body and mind, while remaining overwhelmingly influenced by psychology (Woodstock 2005:172). As we will see, later in the case of PHSR course materials, the role of psychology appears less prominent than theories from the different spheres of the natural sciences, such as theoretical physics and neurosciences.

Contextual and local assemblages

The third theme for our analysis considers how self-help practices are affected by local surroundings. It is common to talk about a global therapeutic culture (at least in Western societies) in which psychology is the transnational language of selfhood. Illouz (2008:8) even suggests that "therapeutic discourse offers an entirely new cultural matrix" shaping our understanding of the self and others. A therapeutic understanding of the individual has therefore functioned as an underlying idea that affects self-help practices, as well as other spheres of contemporary societies. During the twentieth century technological self-tracking devices and practices have further altered the domain of the therapeutic (Bergroth & Helén 2020:107; see also Madsen 2014, 2015, Moskowitz 2001). Instead of a holistic self-inspection, self-tracking practices appear to express a fragmentation of daily lives into graphs and charts portraying the self as a constant work in progress (Bergroth & Helén 2020:120). Even if different kinds of activity promoting personal well-being through therapeutics often possess many similarities, scholars have also warned of the risk of including a large variety of practices in one explanatory category. Self-help should therefore always be addressed in relation to how it blends with local cultures and are adapted in different environments.

This brings us to the third analytical theme, namely, a way of considering self-help practices as transforming activities that always reflect their surroundings and adjust themselves locally. To address this issue, we will illustrate how local conditions

affect PHSR course materials, and how they highlight the contextual and situational nature of the practice. As our starting point, we take a perspective in which the studied course materials are products of the particular historical, cultural, pedagogical and geographical contexts in which they operate. Such a way of understanding the situational character of self-help and other therapeutic practices is thoroughly presented in the work of Suvi Salmenniemi et al. (2020), where the processual rather than stable character of therapeutic practices is analysed through the concept of assemblages. According to Salmenniemi et. al. (2020:2) therapeutic practices are affected by their surroundings when they become "invested with different meanings and constitutions as they travel to and are adopted and practised within different historical, cultural and geographical contexts".

We will address how this interpretation of self-help, as constantly changing and highly contextual, is expressed in PHSR course materials. Our focus is on a local community of practice including the group of people (in our case especially teachers and students) who engage in a process of collective learning and interpretation of what is learned (Wenger 2000; George 2012). As self-help practices (as well as texts produced within them) become invested with different meanings, structures, and purposes to accommodate themselves to the surrounding local settings, self-help always challenges "the notion of a singular therapeutic culture and [testifies] that therapeutic engagements cannot be tamed under any one narrative" (Salmenniemi et al. 2020:15). We therefore also aim to explore the outcomes that local conditions have for PHSR by investigating how this seemingly globally uniform practice and its spiritual aspects, are modified and contextualised for the Finnish setting, and how this modification can be understood as quite a strategic action from the practitioner's perspective. These issues are addressed by regarding the cultural translation of an Eastern origin and by examining some details in the translation from German to Finnish, to illustrate how the course materials are used and interpreted when they enter new settings.

PHSR course materials through the lens of learning

Both books analysed in this article are produced for the explicit purpose of learning PHSR. The course manual (Medisound 2014) is a booklet consisting of 82 pages and the practical companion (Hess 2019), a book of 145 pages. All PHSR training includes a course manual that gathers theoretical and practical information about the course topics. The course manual we analyse in this article is part of the Finnish PHSR level 1 introductory course, while the practical companion can be purchased and used independently without participating in a specific course. Besides an introduction, the manual has five sections: theory; material instructions; information about Peter Hess

sound massage; a section for practical exercises; and additional information. The companion focuses on practical instructions and begins with the sections "your first encounter and experimenting" and "playing the singing bowl with intent". The next section offers exercises "to use in everyday life", followed by two sections covering information on origins, styles, and how to care for the singing bowls, as well as some information on the method and further reading.

Autobiography of the founder and narrative learning

The biography of the founder, Peter Hess, appears at the beginning of the course manual. As already mentioned, the inclusion of transformative life stories is a typical element of self-help literature. Narratives about self-help authors' lives may also be compared to hagiographies, and other biographies of religious founders and leaders, which are often narrated in the form of autobiographical books, for example. The course manual narrates Hess's life from his birth to the present. The story is told in the first person, and was originally written by Hess himself. We consider the biography an essential part of PHSR training, because Hess is the founder of the practice and therefore also a respected and highly valued authority and key figure within the movement.

In a similar vein, as outlined by Woodstock in terms of narrative/communicative authority, Hess's biography is told in a way familiar from self-help literature. The story depicts Hess as an expert, authority, and teacher, emphasising his personal experiences and history. For example, his travels to India and Nepal are described as transformational journeys where he personally experiences and learns about singing bowls through practice. In this sense, personal experiences are depicted in the biography as fundamental for the construction of a narrative authority. This is a phenomenon that can also be found in more traditional religions, where hagiographies have for example "provided role models and acted as a guide for the construction of Christian identity" (Marcos 2015:190). The PHSR course materials illustrate a similar process in course books for well-being spirituality.

A sub-chapter entitled "Not so great schooling" portrays Hess's first years of school as troublesome. He got into trouble with teachers, encountered injustice, and generally experienced the learning environment as impossible (Medi-Sound 2014:11). It is concluded that this difficult first encounter with the formal learning environment resulted in the initial spark of his desire to become a teacher who would "do things differently and more justly" (Medi-Sound 2014:11). The narration of Hess's first school years describes a gap between the author's formal and non-formal learning environments, as well as pointing to this division as a transformative

moment when he began to consider alternative ways of teaching. Hess's frustration with the formal education system later led him to attend a boarding school at the Franciscan monastery of Frauenberg in Fulda, after which he continued elsewhere to graduate as an engineer of physics. Interestingly, the monastery is not depicted as the primary place for Hess's spiritual awakening and growth. Instead, it proves to have been his engineering studies and later his occupation as a teacher that initiated his spiritual awakening and his life transforming trips to India and Nepal.

Hess's time studying to become a vocational school teacher further exemplifies how the narration of his personal history blurs the lines between the formal and non-formal, as well as secular and spiritual education. Hess points out that the education took place at the time of the student revolutions in the late 60s, which he also describes as a period when teachers themselves had the opportunity to decide what and how they wanted to teach. "It was learning that comes out of practical needs and changes practices. I had found my 'wheel of life', which in Buddhism illustrates the development of life," Hess concludes (Medi-Sound 2014:12). The story moves on to recount how he began to combine this revelation within the formal education environment of his vocational school. Hess's questioning of the prevailing teaching methods (especially through his engagement in the student revolution) and his ability to gain agency and authority (through his studies to become a teacher) take the biography in a new direction, in which his formal, non-formal and informal learning become mutually complementing systems, both providing him with knowledge and authority.

The dynamics between Hess' formal and non-formal (as well as secular and spiritual) learning environments are also described in the narration of his mentors and teachers. One of these mentors is described as introducing Hess to the spiritual side of sound:

> My work took me to a music scholar, who got interested in my work. Together with him we did a lot of research. He introduced me to ritual festivities, such as Gai Jatra, an annual goodbye party for dead souls. This way I found out that sound is an important method for letting go. I learned a lot from him, for example that in Nepal you can only study music, if the Gods are favourable (Medi-Sound 2014:13).

In Hess's story Nepal becomes an extraordinary place where he encounters non-formal teachers, who help him to understand sound in a new and life-changing way: "In Nepal's special circumstances it became possible to re-connect with those authentic experiences that every human being has experienced in their mother's womb" (Medi-Sound 2014:15). It is during his trips to Nepal that the narration introduces two characters, Professor Gutschow and an unnamed music scholar (in

the above quotation), who both teach Hess about alternative and enchanted ways to use and relate to sound. While these characters function as non-formal mentors in Hess's story, their formal education is, however, clearly important, as it is emphasised and mentioned in providing authority and expertise for alternative understandings of sound.

Finally, the pedagogical function of the narration appears twofold. It is apparent that the narration of Hess's formal and non-formal educations functions as a way to transmit the world and rhetoric of singing bowls through his personal insights and developments. The biography thus becomes a way to facilitate an informal narrative learning, as the readers learn *through* Hess' life story (Clark & Rossiter 2008; Rossiter & Clark 2007). Non-formal learning in Hess's story also appears largely connected with his spiritual and enchanted insights into sound. The biography thus also transmits and narrates an intertwinement of secular and spiritual learning. Presenting this combination of different sources and trajectories of learning possibly also gives Hess a more comprehensive authority.

Multifaceted legitimization through scientific and spiritual discourses

In this section we examine the position of scientific discourses in PHSR course maerials. Any book on sound healing/massage/meditation will certainly include a part dedicated to scientific explanations addressing the benefits and effects of the practice. These chapters usually deal with theories from neuroscience, psychology, biomedicine, and theoretical physics on topics such as hearing, soundwaves, and frequencies. However, such theories and a scientific rhetoric are presented in the books alongside narratives from mythology and descriptions of the singing bowls' ability to produce extraordinary experiences. In this sense, the course materials illustrate multifaceted and adjustable interpretations of the world.

The course manual includes two chapters and eleven sub-chapters explicitly devoted to scientific discussions of sound. These chapters are gathered under the heading "Theory section". The first sub-chapter poses the question: "Sound – what is it?", and introduces the reader to the categories of sound, music, and noise, based on differences in their soundwaves. The section also explains how soundwaves act in different natural elements (for example, how they move in gas, water, and solid substances). This process is complemented by pictures depicting soundwave frequencies, as well as textual descriptions – for example, by describing how sound moves in water and consequently affects the human body:

> Sound moves in water better, or faster, further approx. 1.500m/s, than air. When we consider the fact that 80% of the human body is made out

> of fluids, we can well imagine, how the sounds of the singing bowls spread within the human (Medi-Sound 2014:19).

How soundwaves act in water becomes a way to legitimize and explain how the singing bowls affect the human body, thus connecting outer and inner realms. Scientific theories describing how sound moves in water, consequently, results in knowledge of the healing benefits of sound as well. Through such discussions, the manual begins to introduce various scientific arguments, all of which support the idea of sound as a medium that positively affects well-being in various ways.

Another prominent element in the theory section is the idea of overtones as special and especially beneficial sounds. This illustrates how scientific vocabularies and discourses can be included in a process of creating enchanted relational ontologies to be learned:

> Overtones are "a natural vibrational phenomenon that include the entire cosmos. […] This is the universal vibrational behaviour of the nature, not dependent on whether it deals with sound or vibration on an atomic level, electric level or in cosmic areas" states the internationally acknowledged overtone singer and special expert Wolfgang Saus (Medi-Sound 2014:19).

The nature and manifestation of overtones is furthermore visualised with a picture of soundwaves in a spectrogram, visually providing further scientific legitimization. What is particularly interesting for us is not if sounds created with singing bowls actually can be scientifically proven to enhance well-being; instead, we are interested in how these theories become such a prominent feature of the manuals, and how readers relate to and use them when practising PHSR. The entanglements of scientific discourses and enchanted understandings illustrate how knowledge from formal education environments, such as universities, can be used to legitimize and support knowledge produced within the less formal education environment of spiritual well-being courses and workshops.

The third and most striking example of how scientific discourses are intertwined with enchanted understandings of sound as a therapeutic promoter is the photographs of singing bowls filled with water producing beautiful patterns when played. The photographs by Alexander Lauterwasser are called "moving sound images". They are included in the practical companion, but are absent from the Finnish manual. However, the photographs can also be understood as an indirect yet important part of the Finnish training, because during participant observations for the PHSR-introductory course the teacher referred to the same pictures, which were also hung on the wall of the course venue. The photographs were discussed and

admired during coffee breaks and other informal discussions, thus providing an example of informal learning and teaching during the course event. In the practical companion the photographs appear under the heading "Singing bowls and water", and the section begins by stating that many creation myths associate water and sound with the beginning of the world. The photographs are complemented by chakra drawings by "the *religious* painter Madhu Chitrakar from Nepal" (Hess 2019:24 our emphasis), bringing a mythological and spiritual dimension to the relationship between water, sound, and the chakra system.

Two issues are noteworthy here. First, the same process of sound moving through water and affecting the human body is addressed somewhat differently in the practical companion and the Finnish course manual. While the latter clearly emphasises a more natural scientific way of explaining and legitimising the phenomenon, the practical companion instead approaches the subject by referring to myth and visually complementing the photographs with chakra drawings. This hybridity in explanatory rhetoric appears a distinct example of how secular understandings of the practice in the form of scientific discourses occasionally become intertwined with more spiritually influenced interpretations. How the studied books use both scientific and enchanted explanatory models in a non-contradictory way leaves no room for sharp divisions between scientific or religious ways of legitimizing the practice. The books thus also illustrate how knowledge produced within formal educational settings in the form of scientific theories can be incorporated into non-formal knowledge production and transmission. Course materials for PHSR therefore clearly express a complex and nuanced way of knowledge legitimization that draws on both formal and non-formal, as well as secular and spiritual education techniques and spheres.

Recent sociological research has highlighted such complex, dynamic, and multi-layered ways of negotiating the interplay between scientific and religious discourses – for example, within institutional settings and workplaces (e.g. Tiaynen–Qadir et al. 2021; Catto 2020; Kaden et al. 2017). Our analysis suggests that a similar diversity can also be found within sound relaxation practices, where science and spirituality do not constitute oppositional counterparts, but instead operate in mutually constitutive ways. However, it is noteworthy that this may to some extent be a result of differences in the cultural contexts of the books (Finland–Germany), a theme to which we will return later. Nevertheless, it is still apparent that scientific and spiritual rhetorics do indeed occur as a combination, or at the very least are made available simultaneously, within PHSR course materials in Finland. This argument is further supported by the fact that the practical companion was handed to the ethnographer by the Finnish course teacher, and the photographs were informally discussed during the introductory course. Moreover, during the course mythological

explanations (often derived from Greek, instead of Tibetan, mythology) were to some extent included as explanatory models, pointing to the long history of sound healing. However, mythologies were not adopted as explanatory models to the same extent as scientific discourses.

Scientific explanations also appear to be considered particularly valuable by the practitioners. When participants in a focus group interview were asked how they used the manuals, they all stated that they turned to them especially to learn about scientific theories of sound. They all refused to speak of PHSR as a healing practice, even if some of them had strong personal therapeutic experiences of singing bowls. This was mostly because they felt uncomfortable about giving unrealisable promises to customers. The interviewees expressed that they felt more secure, because they knew that they could consult the manuals for scientific explanations, especially when confronting potentially sceptical customers. They mentioned that scientific explanations gave them "something concrete to rely on" (TKU/A/21/311). Thus, the scientific discourses presented within the manuals became a way for the practitioners to discuss PHSR and its benefits in a specific way that was accepted and comprehended by the broader (secular) society. We therefore understand the adoption of scientific discourses primarily as a way for the practitioners to accommodate the practice to the surrounding society. They also appear as a way to communicate about PHSR to "outsiders", who often lack the same sensibility and understanding of the implications and connotations that words such as healing and care gain in these kinds of practices. The emphasis on scientific explanations can therefore also be understood partly as a way to protect oneself and the group, as well as to legitimise the practice, in the event of judgemental reactions from the surrounding society.

Contextualization through translation

The third and final theme of our analysis considers how PHSR course materials can be understood as contextualised and local products. We begin by discussing translations of the practice from an Eastern to a Western context as it appears in the course materials. Moreover, we demonstrate how the practitioners negotiate the studied texts with the aim of adapting them to the Finnish cultural and societal environment, the problems they encounter during this process, and some solutions to which they turn to resolve these issues. This discussion primarily consists of reflections on the translation of course manuals from German to Finnish. As becomes apparent, the translation of the manuals, as is of course the case in any translation

process, involves more than simply considering language issues.[2] What becomes especially interesting is that in the case of PHSR some issues in the translation process prompt reflections concerning spirituality, as the practice moves to a new cultural context.

As previously mentioned the studied course materials can be regarded to consider ideas of an Asian origin. The practical companion includes a chapter titled "The origins of singing bowls". Both the course manual and the practical companion, however, express a reflexive and problematizing attitude towards discourses of an Eastern origin, frequently emphasized and romanticized in New Age spiritualities. For example, Asian or Tibetan roots are in the course manual mentioned only seldom. At one point it is explicitly stated that "even if Tibetan bowls are often celebrated as mystic or sacred instruments, they were originally used primarily as storage vessels for groceries or sacrifice gifts." (Medisound 2014:32). The manual identifies Hess as the primary inventor of the PHSR-technique, bringing together his experiences from Nepal, India and Tibet with his "previous knowledge on sound (for example from Ayurveda)" (Medisound 2014:33). Also within the practical companion, ideas of Eastern origins are addressed in a similar way. This becomes obvious for example in statements such as "Unfortunately, singing bowl vendors are inventing mystical stories in order to sell goods" (Hess 2019, 98). Similarly to the Finnish course manual, PHSR is in the practical companion addressed as a Western innovation, introduced to Westerners in 1960s by the hippies, who "rejected a world that was too shallow and materialistic for them" (Hess 2019, 98). From this perspective, it becomes more interesting to pay attention to, what is *not* translated when constructing an imaginary tradition in PHSR.

While Asian origins of the bowls as objects are not directly romanticised or described as mystical, the East is however given an important role as the place where Hess has gained his spiritual expertise and experiences, as well as mentioning the practice of Ayurveda as a source for his knowledge on sound. The reference to the hippies and their role in the translation of the practice to a Western audience, might also express Hess's personal history, as well as potentially indicating a growing awareness for questions of cultural appropriation increasingly brought into public discussions. While our data does not allow us to conclude how much discourses of an Eastern origin affect individual's practice of PHSR, it is however interesting to notice that an Asian background was not regarded as particularly important by all interviewees. Most of the research participants, however, expressed an interest in particular

[2] The translation of self-help books to several languages is quite a typical feature. For example, Eckhart Tolle's *The Power of Now*, one of the most popular spiritual self-help books, has been translated to more than thirty languages (Tolle 2010, xiv). Translation of religious texts is also in general a common practice.

Eastern ideas or practices, such as the Chakra system and energies in relation to their singing bowl practice.

Overall, the course materials can be regarded to add a Western gaze on the discourse of an Eastern background in PHSR, thus potentially expressing what Steve Bruce (2017) has described as a "westernization of the easternization of the West". Furthermore, providing an example of a context where Asian origins (both imagined and real) are problematized and translated into Western contexts when constructing imagined traditions. These kinds of reflective problematizations in cultural translations might also reflect how singing bowl practices could in fact be in the process of a similar cultural transitions as for example mindfulness, which has increasingly been incorporated into secular environments such as more conventional health care, workplaces or beauty and wellness services (e.g. Husgafvel 2016; Wilson 2014).

Problems that may occur when translating the course manuals arose during a focus group interview. "Niina", who had been involved in the manuals' translation process, said that while she enjoyed the process of translating them, she had encountered some "issues related to culture" during the process. She explained that she had felt that the German manual emphasised the "excellence of the practice" too much. "Niina" regarded this as unsuitable for Finnish readers. With the other translator "Niina" therefore decided to downplay the laudatory German tone and rhetoric in the Finnish manual. She further elaborated on the topic by saying that in Finland people would better see the value of the practice through personal experience (TKU/A/21/311). The learning materials were thus to some extent modified in translation to better suit the particular surroundings where it would be disseminated and used for teaching. As we will illustrate here, this process also affects and shapes the local community of PHSR practice in Finland.

Hence, the seemingly uniform practice of PHSR is to some extent modified and reinterpreted according to local contexts. In the case of the manuals this modification becomes highly dependent on how the language around the practice is constructed in different settings. By interpreting and selecting relevant notions, the local course organisers, teachers, and translators gain an important role. This theme was thoroughly elaborated during an interview with "Erja", who is a prominent figure within the Finnish Peter Hess community. During her interview "Erja" pointed out that she had noticed a difference in the extent to which what she referred to as "esoteric" aspects were included or excluded in the practice in different countries. For her this difference was closely related to how different terms were used to describe the same practice. When she noticed this difference, "Erja" decided to remove "esoteric language" from the manuals' descriptions so they would better suit

a Finnish readership. “We don’t need to speak of the solar plexus, because we have the upper stomach, for example,” says “Erja”. She makes this statement in relation to the situation in Germany, where she describes alternative health practices such as homeopathy and acupuncture as more established and accepted.

> You could say that I translate to an everyday language. It’s easy for me, because I’ve enrolled in these esoteric training courses, and I know about the chakra system and so on. […] They [esoteric and non-esoteric languages] don’t exclude each other. And there are so many similarities – we talk about the same things, but we use different terminology. […] So every culture uses different languages, but we speak about exactly the same things (TKU/A/21/310).

“Erja’s” previous training in esoteric practices also provided her with the ability to translate the manuals, not only from German to Finnish, but from “esoteric language” to “non-esoteric language”, to make the books more suitable for a Finnish context and as she explained, without changing the practice in any significant way.

As described above, the course manuals seem to bring layers of culture-specific authorities of self-help literature to the surface. “Erja’s” interview makes a case for arguing that besides the author the manuals’ local translators, teachers, and communicators may affect the form of the practice by formulating and selecting which notions and features are transferred to the manuals – thus resulting in a process that is highly reflective of local circumstances.

Concluding remarks

Manuals and workbooks are an important part of learning spiritual practices. By analysing course materials for the practice of Peter Hess singing bowl sound relaxation, we have demonstrated how spiritual self-help literature operates as a pedagogical source. Our analysis of PHSR-course materials illustrates how the practice is learned and transmitted through narratives, scientific validation and cultural translation on different levels. By engaging in these modes of non-formal learning readers of PHSR course materials learn how to interpret, use and experience sound in enchanting and healing ways.

The case of PHSR provides a new example of the many ways in which individuals engage with, learn and transmit alternative well-being in present day Finland. As we have described in this article, the intertwinement of formal and non-formal learning, as well as the entanglement of scientific and spiritual pedagogies, occupies a central position in the narration of the founder Peter Hess’s biography. It is possible

therefore that the PHSR courses represent also to some of the Finnish participants a welcome form of non-formal learning that complements and combines with different more formal learning ways in their lives.

Rather than emphasizing a countercultural or metaphysical side of New Age/spiritual self-help, the intertwinement of formal and non-formal pedagogies in PHSR course materials instead appear to demonstrate an attempt to conform to the surrounding society. For example, scientific explanations together with more "esoteric" interpretations elucidates a non-dualistic view of science and religion applied in order to legitimize and explain the practice. Translation of the practice, in turn, raises issues that address the origins, locality and processual nature of spiritual well-being practices. The idea of an Eastern origin is addressed in a reflective and de-mystifying way, while translations of course manuals from German to Finnish raise issues addressing the contextualization of PHSR as a spiritual well-being practice to present day Finland, especially in relation to questions of esoteric vocabularies and ideas.

Overall, the division between formal and non-formal pedagogics is actively negotiated and redefined in PHSR course materials. One essential point that the PHSR as a case study brings forth, is that formal and non-formal educations in these kinds of situations tend to be hard to define or differentiate properly. From the perspective of the broader society, PHSR-courses may primarily appear as non-formal learning. As we have described, the courses, however, build on a clear (globally uniform) pedagogical structure and formal certificates. Therefore, when regarded from the practitioner's perspectives, they might instead come across as a formal kind of learning, in relation to learning that happens by oneself through YouTube videos, for example. Another important aspect is that the competences acquired through PHSR-courses might be combined with more traditional formal educations. Thus from the perspective of self-help literature as a pedagogical source, the course materials provide an example of a learning source that are frequently negotiated in relation to the division of formal and non-formal educations. In conclusion, the material with which we have engaged in this article serves as an example of an intriguing area and dynamics of adult learning in contemporary culture, a topic that deserves further research.

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