

My Mother Told Me Not to Talk to Strangers: When is it Acceptable to Take Advice From a Women's Magazine?

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ABSTRACT

The content of most women's magazines tends to be centred around the giving of advice to their readers. This advice appears not only in problem pages, but also in many of the features and articles.

This paper is based on data from interviews with twenty women and examines the ways in which readers make judgements as to when it is or is not appropriate to take advice from a women's magazine. My data suggests that readers are willing to accept the authority of the magazines to give 'practical' advice, such as fashion and beauty tips. They are reluctant, however, to take advice on what they see as 'personal' matters, such as relationships. I illustrate that despite the writers positioning themselves in the role of a sister or knowledgeable friend, readers do not always accept the authenticity of this position, instead constructing the writers as 'strangers', who do not have the authority to give advice on 'personal' issues.

This paper examines how readers draw these distinctions between the 'practical' and the 'personal', and as a result, how they define the relationship between magazine reader and writer. It concludes with a discussion of what this tells us about the construction of 'self', and in particular beliefs about an 'exterior' and 'interior' self which seem to underlie the distinction between the 'practical' and the 'personal'.

1 INTRODUCTION

The content of women magazines tends to be centred around the giving of advice to their readers. This advice appears in different forms and on different subjects. For example, individual readers can seek advice on specific problems by writing to a magazine's problem page. Advice is not limited to the problem pages, however, as many features and articles are also based on the giving of more general advice to readers, often in the form of step-by-step guides or lists of dos and don'ts, such as '3 simple steps to fantastic skin' (Cosmopolitan, Sept. 2001) or 'sex, your body and him – what men need you to know by tonight' (Glamour, July 2001).

This paper is based on data from interviews with twenty female readers of a variety of magazines and examines the ways in which they make judgements as to when it is or is not appropriate to take advice from a women's magazine. My informants are aged between 18 and 64 and come from a variety of backgrounds, although the majority are white, middle class and heterosexual. My main interest is in how women discursively construct their own identities in relation to the subject positions constructed for them by the magazines. A focus

on advice offers one way of addressing this question, as I have found that my informants' talk on the subject tells us a lot about how they construct the relationship between writer and reader, and also about how they position themselves in relation to other readers.

Various studies of women's magazines have examined the linguistic strategies utilised by writers in order to create the impression of an intimate and friendly relationship with the reader. These strategies are designed to make the reader feel she is being addressed as an individual, but also positioning both reader and writer as members of a larger community of women, or a 'synthetic sisterhood' as Talbot calls it, with shared experiences and interests.

Talbot (1992), for example, provides a detailed analysis of a beauty feature from the teenage magazine *Jackie*. Drawing on Fairclough's (1989) concept of 'synthetic personalisation', she examines the creation of the 'text population', which she describes as 'a mesh of intersecting voices of characters inhabiting a text' (Talbot 1992: 176). She looks at how the writer constructs herself in the role of older sister or friend, as someone who has a close relationship with the reader but who is also more knowledgeable, and therefore in a position to give the reader advice on how to be a woman. The impression of a close relationship is achieved by presupposing shared knowledge and experiences with the reader. Scare quotes, for example, are used to represent the thoughts and words of the implied reader, giving the impression that the writer knows what the reader thinks. The inclusive 'we' is used to suggest knowledge and beliefs shared by writer and reader, whereas the exclusive editorial 'we' is used to construct the writer as being in a position of authority, passing down her knowledge and advice to the reader. The writer also uses lexical items like 'lippy' and 'cutesy' to approximate the readers' supposed way of speaking, making the writer seem closer in age to the reader.

Studies by McCracken (1993) and Eggins and Iedema (1997) have found similar techniques employed by magazines aimed at young women rather than teenagers, although the identity the writers try to create is more that of close friend than sister. In this paper I intend to explore how the readers themselves construct their relationship with the writer, and how they position themselves in relation to the 'synthetic sisterhood' created in the magazines.

2 PERSONAL VS. PRACTICAL ADVICE

In order to answer this question we need to look at how readers evaluate women's magazines as a source of advice. To do this, I will begin by examining how my informants construct the whole notion of advice in the first place. One thing which features very strongly in my data is the way in which my informants construct two qualitatively different categories of advice, which can broadly be defined as a distinction between the 'personal' and the 'practical'. Whether or not readers think it is appropriate to take advice on a particular subject seems to depend on which category of advice the subject falls into. The general consensus seems to be that, in theory at least, it would be acceptable to take advice from a magazine on 'practical' matters, but that 'personal' advice should be sought elsewhere. Readers' construction of the 'personal' tends to centre on the subject of (heterosexual) relationships, whereas issues to do with appearance, such as fashion and beauty advice, as well as advice on cooking and other areas of domestic labour, and also problems to do with health, including sexual health, are deemed to be areas of practical knowledge which can appropriately be sought and gained from a magazine.

Extract 1: Maggie

- 1 M: | I don't think I do
 2 actually – I mean I think [...] erm [...] I s'pose there's *certain* articles
 3 that you might take seriously – sort of beauty tips – you might think
 4 oh that's a good idea if you're in the sun – or oh – better take an –
 5 you know that cream sounds really good and *that's* sort of – more =
- 6 D: | mmh
- 7 M: = serious in a way because you are kind of taking note – but I think
 8 this kind of – how to find a man and how to keep a man – it's – it's [...]
 9 it's *fun* to *read* but I don't – I'm I'm not *aware* – that I sort of I
 10 would live my life by it (laughing) I hope not! [...]
- 11 D: | (laughing)
- 12 M: (still laughing) I'd be quite depressed if I did actually! [...]
 13 suicidal! [...] can't go out till I've read this!
- 14 D: so what about the – this – the sort of fashion and beauty and stuff –
 15 do you think – do you often go out and buy things that (inaudible)?
- 16 M: | *I do* II
 17 mean I do sort of erm cosmetics-wise yes – I *do* – em – I'll kind of
 18 read about – em some new cream that's out – *not* that it's going to
 19 make you look a hundred years younger but I've got very dry skin
 20 and I'm always looking out for something that's really *good* – so I
 21 *will* try things from that o:r [...] maybe make-up [...] but [...] yeah! – I
 22 mean sort of – cosmetics – yes I would – I would

In extract 1 on the handout we see Maggie distinguish between beauty tips and articles on how to find or keep a man. In line 5 Maggie says that for her, advice on cosmetics is 'more serious in a way because you are kind of taking note'. In line 19 she goes on to give an example of a specific problem she has, very dry skin, and says that she is 'always looking out for something that's really good'. This suggests that she actively looks to magazines for tips on how to deal with her skin, as opposed to just taking note of any tips that she happens to come across.

In line 9 she characterises the 'how to find a man' type articles as being 'fun to read', implying that that is as far as it goes, and that although she reads them she certainly would not take their advice on the subject. As she continues, however, we can see from her self-repair that although she starts to say that she does not live her life by this advice, she then shifts to a less definitive answer, that she is not 'aware' of following the magazine's advice. This raises some potentially difficult questions about the possible subconscious effects that these articles could be having on her, and so she uses laughter to deal with this uncertainty. Although her use of hyperbole in lines 11 to 13 is clearly intended for dramatic effect, her comments show that Maggie clearly has very negative feelings about the idea of taking such advice from a magazine, although she does not offer any explanation as to why she feels this way.

Extract 2 : Louise

1 L: if they're the how to get yourself a boyfriends o:r ten ways to make
2 him marry you – then no – I don't – cos I just think they're *really* =

3 D: | (laughs)

4 L: = *stupid* – and if a boy doesn't wanna marry you then advice from a
5 magazine is *not* going to be the right way to go – but em – like the
6 ones like how to have the best orgasms – and how to – yeah =

7 D: | (laughs)

8 L: = then I read those ones – they're hil- they're much more interesting
9 (laughs)

10 D: so – *why* do you think that they're more – more interesting?

11 L: er it's more practical advice the other ones – the self-help like
12 the ones like how to – snag your man and stuff – I just think it's all
13 hearsay and it's all – not going to get you anywhere

14 D: mmh

15 L: but the sex stuff that's like – can give you little tips for what you might
16 like to use yourself – so they're a bit more useful

17 D: | (laughs)
18 so do you think you – you know – do you actually – would you
19 actually think about – you know oh I might try that?

20 L: | *yes* [.] I did – I
21 would – and I have – yes (laughs)

22 D: | (laughs)

23 L: so yeah definitely – they're *really* - there's a *whole education* in
24 those magazines if you want them – yeah – I would use them

25 D: but so you wouldn't describe the sort of – how to get your man kind
26 of advice – you wouldn't think of that as practical advice then

| | | |
|----|----|--|
| 27 | L: | no – not at |
| 28 | | all – I don't think – I don't see much [.] point in – that kind of thing – |
| 29 | | like I've got – at home my mum recently has started buying she's |
| 30 | | quite a religious person – so she'll buy the kind of <i>God</i> self-help |
| 31 | | books but she's also got that Men Are From Mars, Women Are |
| 32 | | From Venus |
| 33 | D: | mm |

| | | |
|----|----|---|
| 34 | L: | and I think I've tried to pick it up – two or three times – and I just can't |
| 35 | | - get into it – I'm just not interested in all the psycho American babble |
| 36 | | - I just – no – don't like it at all – so I'd say I probably view those in |
| 37 | | the same way |
| 38 | D: | right |
| 39 | L: | they're not gonna – anyone who believes in those [.] who thinks |
| 40 | | they're gonna work – I just don't – they're <i>not</i> [.] either a man likes |
| 41 | | you or he doesn't – or he's gonna marry you and he isn't – or – you |
| 42 | | know – I just don't think that they're really gonna work |

If we look at extract 2, we see that Louise demonstrates a similarly negative view of relationship advice. What is particularly interesting is the distinction she makes between the 'how to get yourself a boyfriend' type advice and sex advice. In line 11 she describes sex advice as 'more practical advice' and therefore 'more useful'. In lines 20 to 24 Louise is more than happy to admit that she has taken sex tips from a magazine in the past and would certainly do so in the future, as can be seen by the way she gives an affirmative response to my question not once, but four times, and by the lack of hedging or false starts. The directness of her reply is evident when we compare it with the indirectness of her speech in lines 27 to 42, when she is explaining why she does not like the magazines' personal advice.

Like Maggie, Louise completely rejects the idea of getting relationship advice from a magazine. In line 2 she describes this type of advice as '*really stupid*', which suggests that the problem is with the quality of advice given by magazines. She then adds in line 12 that 'I just think it's all hearsay and it's not going to get you anywhere'. Here again she seems to be criticising the quality of advice. Her description of the advice as 'hearsay' suggests that she sees it as based on some kind of myth, whereas perhaps she regards the more 'practical' sex tips as being tried and tested, or somehow scientifically proven.

In line 28 Louise adds that not only does she not see relationship advice as practical advice, but that she 'doesn't see much point in that kind of thing', so it seems that she thinks relationship advice is never useful, regardless of where it comes from. In lines 30 to 37 she compares this type of advice to self-help books like *Men are from Mars, Women are from Venus*, which she dismisses as 'psycho American babble' (although I assume she meant to say 'American psychobabble'). Louise's dismissive attitude towards relationship advice suggests that she wants to distance herself from this discourse of emotional self-improvement which is used in both self-help literature and women's magazines. In lines 39 to 42 Louise makes it clear that whereas sex and orgasms are things which can be worked at and improved through taking the advice of magazines, relationships are somehow beyond the scope of advice because 'either a man likes you or he doesn't'. There also seems to be an implied criticism of women who do believe in the efficacy of this kind of advice, although she does not make this explicit.

This negative evaluation of readers who take personal advice from magazines is particularly evident in my informants' attitudes towards problem pages and the readers who write in to them. Problem pages are different to the advice given in features and articles in various ways. First of all, assuming that the letters are written by actual readers, they are one of the few sections of the magazine which are dialogic in character, containing genuine interaction between reader and writer. Problem pages allow individual readers to actively seek advice to

a specific problem, typically regarding relationships or health-related issues. I presume, however, that the selected letters are published not only for the benefit of those particular readers, but also because the agony aunt or editor feels that they address the concerns of the readership in general. Secondly, because the advice is given by an agony aunt or some other designated ‘expert’, the role constructed for the writer tends to be one of ‘authoritative expert’ rather than ‘friend’.

3 PROBLEM PAGES

Many of my informants read problem pages, but they were all adamant that they would not take advice from a problem page, let alone consider writing in to one, unless the problems dealt with were ‘practical’ and not ‘personal’, as can be seen from extract 3.

Extract 3: Venus

- 1 D: erm – do you read – does it have an advice page or letters page or
2 anything like that?
- 3 V: erm – yes they have advice on all sorts of things – in that they have I
4 think they’ve got two advice pages they’ve got a personal one – and
5 also you know a how to get that mark out of your carpet type advice
6 which is quite interesting
- 7 D: aha
- 8 V: so – yes I do look at those – yes
[10 lines omitted]
- 19 V: but I can’t say that I would take personal advice from the er agony –
20 the agony aunt
- 21 D: why not?
- 22 V: I don’t know [.] cos usually the questions that are asked are very
23 broad
- 24 D: | mmh
- 25 V: and often not specific enough to an individual – unless it’s that
26 particular individual but they choose the questions according I think
27 for a broad interest rather than a particular thing
- 28 D: but do you think the advice itself is
29 V: | generally quite sound I think

In this extract Venus is talking about *Good Housekeeping*, which has two problem pages, both of which she reads. In line 4 she describes them as ‘a personal one’ and a ‘how to get that mark out of your carpet type’ one. What is interesting here is that although in line 28 she describes the personal advice as ‘generally quite sound’, she has only taken advice on practical problems, and in line 19 she says ‘I can’t say that I would take personal advice from

the agony aunt', implying that she would never consider taking personal advice from the magazine. When asked why, she responds in line 22 that 'usually the questions that are asked are very broad and often not specific enough to an individual'. Her initial response, however, is that she does not know, followed by a pause, which indicates that she is having difficulty explaining her resistance to the personal advice, just as Maggie does in extract 1.

Extract 4: Gayathri

1 D: ok [...] and you said you read problem pages – or you would read one
2 if there's one in a magazine – em – would you ever write in to a
3 problem page? =

4 G: = no

5 D: no? [...] em – can you tell me why?

6 G: em – well – A I couldn't be bothered [...] B – I would rather ask – I'd
7 rather ask a friend for advice o:r [...] you know family – than [...] than
8 writing in to someone who doesn't even know me

9 D: and why

| | | |
|----|----|--|
| 10 | S: | cos I don't think I don't think [...] I think people who expect their |
| 11 | | pro- you know – I – I just don't think someone who – someone can |
| 12 | | tell what exactly what your problem is – from one letter [...] unless it's |
| 13 | | something – like [...] I don't know – something like – a physical |
| 14 | | problem – a medical problem or something [...] then – you know like |
| 15 | | if it's a psychological problem then I don't think – it's like you |
| 16 | | know – I don't think taking the advice of – someone – when they've |
| 17 | | just read one letter of yours – is – necessarily a good idea |

If we look at extract 4, we see that Gayathri seems to share Venus' attitude towards problem pages. When asked if she would ever write to a problem page for advice, Gayathri's answer, on line 4, is a definitive 'no'. There is no pause between my question and her response, and no use of hedging or epistemic modals. She does not preface her answer in any way, nor does she offer any elaboration or explanation for her answer. This is particularly striking, as in the rest of her interview her responses tend to begin with some form of hedge, as for example in line 10, and the directness of her reply indicates that she is extremely keen to distance herself from the type of reader that would write to a problem page. Furthermore, I have received the same response from all the informants who were asked this question, which suggests that there is a perceived stigma attached to the act of soliciting personal advice from a women's magazine.

When asked to explain her response, Gayathri's talk becomes noticeably more uncertain. The first reason she gives, in line 6, is that she 'couldn't be bothered', which implies that she does not object in principle to seeking advice from an agony aunt, but that she is simply too lazy to do so. However, she then goes on to say that she would prefer to ask a friend or family member for advice, rather than 'someone who doesn't even know me'. Here Gayathri sets up a distinction between the agony aunt, who is constructed as a stranger, and her friends

and family. As becomes clear in lines 10 to 17, Gayathri rejects the authority of the agony aunt or ‘expert’ to give personal advice, because they are strangers and personal advice can only be given, and should only be sought from, people who ‘know’ you. Medical and psychological problems, however, are constructed differently, as problems which can be addressed by a stranger. Gayathri seems to be struggling here, as we can see from the number of pauses and false starts in her speech. She also mitigates her assertions with ‘I think’ or ‘I don’t think’, and by using hedges such as ‘like’ and ‘you know’. I would argue that this is evidence of Gayathri’s awareness that she is entering sensitive territory here, and she is trying to avoid making explicit criticism of those readers who would write to a problem page, while also distancing herself from that group.

It should also be noted that initially, Gayathri focuses on her own situation, saying in line 6 ‘I’d rather ask a friend [...] than someone who doesn’t even know *me*’, but then she shifts to speaking more generally about ‘*your* problem’ and ‘one letter of *yours*’, making it clear that she does not feel it is appropriate for anyone to seek personal advice from a magazine. This could also be a way of strengthening her personal opinion by positioning herself as part of a group of women that feel the same way. In line 10 she begins to say ‘I think people who expect their problems’, as if about to criticise the readers, but then decides this is too problematic and shifts her focus to the advice-giver instead. In line 16, however, she shifts her focus back again, saying ‘I don’t think taking the advice of someone when they’ve just read one letter of yours is necessarily a good idea’. What she seems to be implying here is that those women who do seek personal advice from a magazine are somehow misguided or lacking in judgement, although she does attempt to mitigate the force of this criticism by saying ‘I don’t think’ and it’s not ‘*necessarily* a good idea’.

Extract 5: Maggie

- 1 D: what do you think of the advice that they give?
- 2 M: em [...] I mean generally it’s – it’s reasonable – there’s nothing sort of
3 particularly unreasonable there – it can come across I think as a
4 wee bit patronising – but then again if you’ve – I suppose if you’ve
5 actually got to the stage that – you’re having to write to a magazine
6 rather than chat to somebody [...] it’s really quite sad
- 7 D: so – if you ever *had* [...] one of these sort of problems would you ever
8 *consider*?
- 9 M: | no
- 10 D: no?
- 11 M: no I wouldn’t because I think [...] I think just the nature of the person I
12 am I’ll either sort of like – try and sort it out myself – or talk to a friend
13 about it – I wouldn’t – I wouldn’t really feel I’d want to get advice
14 from a stranger who doesn’t really know me from Adam
- 15 D: so what is it – do you think – that makes *other* people decide to
16 write into a magazine rather than doing what you would do and - ?

17 M: I don't know – I mean perhaps it's – it's just [...] an inability to sort
18 something out for yourself – and that you've reached the end of your
19 tether you can't see where else you can go with it [...] and maybe
20 just feeling that there's nobody that – you feel close enough to
21 actually talk to about it – o:r – there's nobody that you want to admit
22 to – that you've actually got this problem o:r [...] that – it's just not
23 something you feel – you want to make public in any way amongst
24 friends and family

In extract 5, Maggie, like Gayathri, questions the authority of the magazine as a source of personal advice rather than the quality of the advice itself, which she evaluates in lines 2 to 4 as being generally reasonable, if a 'wee bit patronising'. Also echoing Gayathri's comments, Maggie constructs personal advice as something which should ideally be sought from friends and family rather than a magazine's advice-giver, positioning the former as people who know you and the latter as strangers. In lines 4 to 6 Maggie changes topic from the quality of the advice given to an evaluation of the type of reader who would seek a magazine's advice. She presents the act of writing to a problem page as a last resort and sees women in this situation as pitiable, saying 'if you've actually got to the stage that – you're having to write to a magazine rather than chat to somebody [...] it's really quite sad'. Although Maggie generally positions herself as being sympathetic towards these women, there is an element of judgement and fault-finding in her talk, as is evident in line 17 when she describes them as having 'an inability to sort something out for yourself', which implies that she herself is capable of solving her problems herself.

Like Gayathri, Maggie is adamant that she would never even consider writing to a problem page, as we can see from the way she responds before I have finished asking the question. The nature of her response demonstrates her desire to distance herself from this type of reader and to seek positive distinctiveness from them, which suggests that she does indeed find fault with this group. As such, we can see that she chooses not to participate in the community of women set up for her by the magazine.

4 CONCLUSION

Social identity theory (Tajfel 1978,1981) posits that the construction of a positive self-image for the in-group is achieved in part through the construction of an out-group which is negatively evaluated. My data suggests that this is what my informants are doing, constructing a positive identity for themselves by comparing themselves with, and distancing themselves from another group of women. In this case the out-group consists of women who seek personal advice from women's magazines, an act which is negatively evaluated in comparison with seeking advice from friends, which is what women in the in-group do. What this amounts to is a rejection of the in-group constructed through the discourse of the magazine, an 'us' which includes the entire readership of the magazine, as well as those who write for it. Problem pages and other advice sections are constructed to invoke shared experiences and feelings of identification with the women who write in with their problems, and with the writers who give advice, but clearly this relationship is not necessarily accepted by readers. My informants distance themselves from other readers by comparing those readers' lives unfavourably with their own, and from the magazines' writers by positioning them as strangers. This rejection of intimacy between reader and writer is made most explicit by one informant who says 'I suppose also if you read magazines over a long period of time – you just assume that there's a bond between – the reader and the writer and er – I don't think that's true'.

My data demonstrate that readers are not cultural dopes who will unquestioningly accept the identities constructed for them in the texts, and that the relationship between reader and writer is much more complex than that which can be predicted from analyses of the magazines alone. Readers are actively agentive in the ways they interpret and take up the ideologies of femininity found in the magazines, although they are not completely free in their interpretations. Although many readers are actively and consciously resistant to being positioned as members of the 'women's world' produced by the magazines, in other respects it seems that they are positioned or constrained, both actively and passively, by the discourses of femininity made available in the magazines. Women's magazines provide their readers with a whole range of ways in which to describe and define femininity and what it means to be a woman. My data show that readers are able to exercise discrimination in the ways they take up and reconstruct these discursive resources, but that this agency is constrained by the fact that some discourses are more accessible, or more dominant, than others. Women's magazines deal largely with culturally dominant ways of constructing femininity, and these dominant discourses shape the issues which are presented as 'problems' for women as well as the advice which is given in response to these problems. By privileging the perspective of the readers we can see the complex and variable ways in which readers understand and position themselves in relation to the imagined communities of the texts, and thereby how this affects the ways in which they take up the magazines' codes of femininity.

TRANSCRIPTION CONVENTIONS

| | |
|----------------|---|
| : | lengthened sound/syllable |
| ? | rising intonation |
| ! | exclamatory intonation |
| = | continuous utterances |
| | overlap |
| - | short pause |
| [.] | long pause |
| <i></i> | emphatic stress |
| () | material that is not part of the talk being transcribed e.g. laughter |

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