

Dear Reader: What's changed?

Psychological Language and Persistent Gender Expectations

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INTRODUCTION

Advice columns:

- Advice columns provide a centuries-long record of often unspoken social norms, private concerns, and relationship expectations (Golia, 2021)

Psychologization:

- Psychological terms do not just serve as definitions; instead, they become a part of how people understand themselves and others. (De Vos, 2012; Rose, 1998).

Gendered Discourse

- Advice columns emerged in 18th century women's magazines. (Neville, 2012)
- Women's role as the advice seeker and advice giver is argued to reinforce norms of femininity by positioning women as responsible for emotional expertise and relationship maintenance (Jimenez & Rice, 1990; Neville, 2012)

Research question

- How has the use of psychological language in Dear Abby advice columns changed from 1962 to 2026?
- How has the assignment of responsibility for resolving interpersonal problems in Dear Abby advice columns changed across time?

METHODS

The dataset

- 24,064 Dear Abby columns from 1964-2026, gathered using OCR text mining

She May Not Be The Lady He Thinks

By Abigail Van Buren
Social to The Journal-Constitution

DEAR ABBY: My wife died 18 months ago, and this lady I'm interested in has been a widow for three years. We knew each other "way back when." I'm 66, and this lady is 63.

If indeed you could. But if you deaf ears. And your vision



together it means they are "in tune" and "meant for each other?"

DEAR LILA: When two people dance well together, it means only one thing. They dance well together. Believe me, it means nothing else. If

Analysis 1

- Articles containing at least one psychological term were identified
- "Psychological term" was defined by a list generated by the Morawski lab during a qualitative study of social media
- IV: Decade of publication;
- DV: Articles containing psychological terminology

Analysis 2

- Sampled 100 advice columns per decade
- Used the GPT-4.1-mini LLM to classify each advice response according to who was primarily responsible for resolving the problem. (Woman, Man, Partner, Relationship, Outside Support, Society, or None of the Above). A standardized prompt with definitions for each category was used.
- Calculated frequency of each responsibility category by decade to examine assigned responsibility over time.

RESULTS

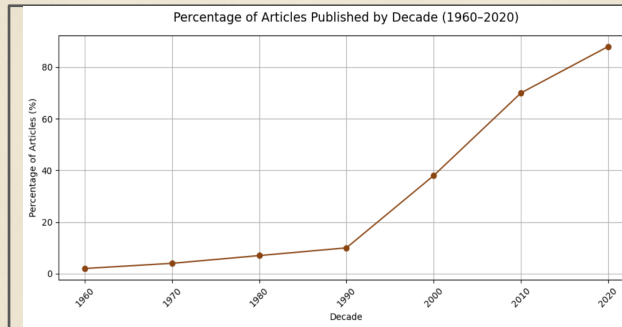


Figure 1: Percentage of articles using psychological words over decades

- The Ordinary Least Squares regression showed a significant positive relationship between decade and psychological language use ($\beta = 1.43$, $p < .003$)
- This suggests that psychological concepts are increasingly being used in advice column discourse.

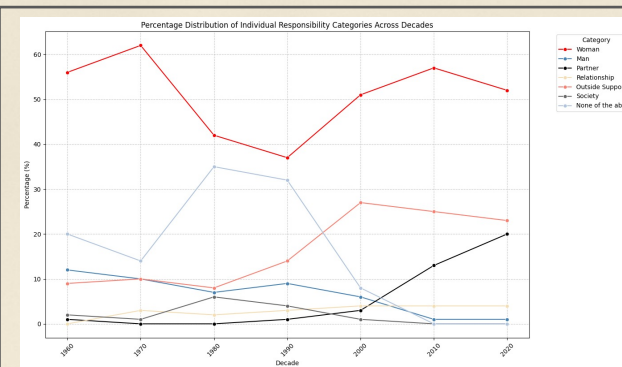


Figure 2: Representation of who is held responsible for change across time

- The group that was responsible for change varied significantly across decades. ($\chi^2(6) = 55.77$, $p = .001***$).
- However, a direct comparison between the 1960s and 2020s found no significant difference in whether responsibility was assigned to women versus others ($\chi^2(1) = 0.67$, $p = .481$).
- These findings suggest that although responsibility has shifted across decade, the 2020s have similar levels as the 1960s in framing interpersonal problems as individual women's responsibility to solve over all other categories.

DISCUSSION

- Through the last 6 decades advice columns have increasingly adopted psychological language
 - This supports Haslam's idea of "concept creep": over time psychology terms have expanded past their original meanings to describe a broader range situations (Haslam 2021).
- The increase in psychological language reflects broader cultural shifts in how people understand and interpret themselves, their relationships and problems (Illouz, 2008; Pettit, 2020; Rimke, 2000).
- Despite the changing definitions and interpretations of "problems" addressed in advice columns, based on this analysis a preliminary conclusion is that responsibility is frequently placed on women, with the 2020s reflecting levels comparable to the 1960s.
- This is a trend similar to that in self-help literature in which women's continual self-improvement is emphasized as a solution broader social and structural factors (Topper-Kroog, A.B, 2026, Gill & Orgad, 2022; Riley et al, 2019)

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

- Although Dear Abby has been written by various authors they have all been women. This may influence how responsibility and emotional labor are framed in advice
- Future research should examine male authored and male targeted or neutral advice columns or advice columns to explore gender differences in responsibility and psychological language.
- Similar analyses could be run on other platforms such as social media
- Another limitation was that sampling for the second analyses was limited to 100 columns per decade due to runtime constraints on Colab and Open AI
- Research could also further investigate the dip in women being resocialized that happens between 1980 and 2010

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References:

