

How to Perpetuate Problems of the Self

Applying Foucault's Concept of Problematization to Popular Self-help Books on Work and Career

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How to perpetuate problems of the self:

Applying Foucault's concept of problematization to popular self-help books on work and career.

Abstract:

This article investigates how popular self-help books on work and career construct problems and solutions related to the subject and its working life. The investigation draws on Michel Foucault's concept of 'problematization' along with concepts of governmentality and ethical self-government. The first part of the analysis shows how problems in self-help are generally articulated as different types of inadequacies, which must accordingly be amended through constant development towards a goal of self-realization, which can never be fully achieved. Accordingly, the subject is offered a subjectivation as an incomplete project, which is never quite good enough and always in need of improvement. The second part of the analysis shows how this general form of problematization plays out in relation to the paradoxical cultivation of autonomy in self-help books, in which the subject must follow instructions of an external authority, in the form of a self-help book, in order to achieve independence.

Key words: Foucault; problematization; self-help books; self-government

Introduction

Contemporary work and career-oriented self-help books, and their many recommendations on everything from time management to breathing exercises, are a rapidly growing industry and an increasingly influential cultural force (McGee 2005; Kiel 2010; Rimke 2000; xxx 2019). In the US, the share of self-help books of the total number of books printed doubled during the period 1972 to 2000, and every other American is now assumed to own a self-help book (McGee 2005, 11). Hence, at the time of writing, seven of the books on Amazon's top 20 best-seller list are self-help books. Arguably, this immense proliferation alone makes these books a phenomenon worthy of social analysis.

According to popular self-help literature, the road to happiness and success is largely a matter of independence, autonomy and 'being yourself'. The subject of self-help should not be limited by other people's expectations and social norms, but rather live its life 'authentically'. Often-cited analyses of this agenda (eg. Rose 1992; Dean 2010) have linked it to concepts of neoliberal governmentality and the entrepreneurial self (Grey 1994). This paper however investigates the issue from a somewhat different angle. Emphasis is instead put on the *problematization* of the self that is facilitated in self-help books, and the question of what the problem(s) might be, if the solution is to 'be yourself'. As such, the aim of the paper is to investigate what kind of problems self-help literature suggests its readers might have, and what the common structural characteristics of these problems and the suggested responses to them are. As will be shown in the analysis, this approach allows for an elucidation of the fundamental paradoxes upon which self-help literature is constituted, and gives insight into the conditions of (im)possibility behind the cultivation of personal characteristics such as autonomy, efficiency and happiness.

Theoretically, the analysis is based on Michel Foucault's concept of *problematization*, which is utilized in order to identify the structural form of the problems, responses and *telo*i (which is the plural form of *telos*) applied in self-help literature; what is referred to as *the general form of problematization* (Foucault 1984, 118). The second part of the analysis then zooms in on a specific problem that is articulated in most popular self-help books, namely the subject's lack of autonomy, independence and ability to 'be itself'. Here, the analysis shows how the paradox of seeking to become autonomous by following the instructions of a self-help book interacts with the general form of problematization. Empirically, the analysis is based on an archive of 32 popular self-help books on work and career published in Danish between 2000 and 2010.

The following section proceeds by reflecting on self-help books as a phenomenon and area of study, after which existing research on the topic is reviewed. Then, the theoretical framework of

problematization and ethical self-government is outlined, before the methodological section explains how the archive of self-help books has been constructed and analysed. This leads to the analysis and the concluding discussion.

Self-help books

Many of the problems addressed in contemporary self-help books can be explained through recent changes in capitalism which, in the words of Hardt and Negri (2000), has become a form of ‘social factory’, in which the division between public and private realms is dissolving, and ‘the personal and existential sides of human beings are now ever available as a source of productivity’ (Ekman 2013, 1160). Work and careers in particular seem to have taken on new meanings and manifestations as a result of these new structural conditions. An example of this is the concept of *the boundaryless career* (Arthur and Rousseau 1996), which points to how a career can no longer be described as a stable, predetermined ascent in the hierarchical system of single organization, but instead has become an uncertain, complex and cross-organizational issue. This implies that the subject must now manage its own career, a task which was previously handled by the employer. This is achieved through managing one’s *employability* (McGee 2005, 133) and constantly staying attractive to the labour market (xxx 2017). Moreover, the criteria by which to measure a successful career have changed from being primarily external parameters (pay, power, position, etc.) to also include internal parameters such as satisfaction and self-actualization (Grey 1994, 482). Under such circumstances the individual needs help, and self-help literature accordingly offers itself as an ‘answer factory’ (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2002, 7), providing the individual with answers on how to acquire security, well-being and success under the new structural conditions (see also Garsten and Grey 1997, 226; McGee 2005, 12).

While recognizing self-help as a genre in a pragmatic everyday sense is generally easy, defining it for the purpose of academic research has proved to be somewhat problematic (see e.g. McGee 2005, 193; Garsten and Grey 1997, 212; Bröckling 2005, 16). Hence, if one defines the literature with obvious formulations such as ‘literature that helps the reader help him- or herself’ this tends to encompass a much broader array of literature than would be recognized intuitively as self-help, including the Bible, novels, poems and even academic papers. In spite of these difficulties, we might however begin by noting that the literature applies a particular form of suggestive jargon (e.g. ‘*Self Matters: Creating Your Life from the Inside Out*’ (McGraw 2001)) that is directed personally at the reader with the explicit aim of helping her optimize and improve her life and self. Hence, the self-help book offers ‘prescriptive expertise on problematic broadly-defined and anxiety-provoking matters’ (Garsten and Grey 1997, 217). Furthermore it tends to do so with a certain claim to proficiency - psychological, managerial, spiritual/religious or otherwise - albeit without being explicitly scientific in nature. *Self-help* by Samuel Smiles, published in 1859, fits this description, and might then be considered the first self-help book, if self-help is defined as a particular genre, as opposed to a way of reading (see eg. Garsten and Grey 1997; Cherry 2008). In its calls for individual thrift, self-discipline and self-control as a basis for becoming morally worthy and materially prosperous, Smiles’ book also embodies a paradox that defines the genre. While claiming that ‘help from without is often enfeebling in its effects, but help from within invariably invigorates’ (Smiles 1859, 1), a counter-observation would suggest that:

(..) the term ‘self-help’ attaches itself to phenomena recognizably ‘external’ to the individual, most notably the publishing phenomenon of ‘self-help books’. If the individual interacts with a reading object, where *it* bears the name ‘self-help’ then following Smiles, this implies ‘help from without’. But self-help, ‘help from within’,

has to preclude the self-help book; however without the latter, self-help disappears.
(Cherry 2008, 337)

Constituted by this fundamental paradox, self-help literature is understood in the following as a specific type of popular psychological literature which addresses the reader directly with the explicit aim of helping her improve herself and her future prospects - often by means of practical exercises and techniques.

In her seminal work on self-help culture, McGee (2005, 50) argues that ‘for the most part, an overview of advice literature of the past 30 years presents a story of more continuity than divergence. Indeed, a close analysis of the literature will demonstrate that most advice books (...) draw on figures from previous literatures’. Nonetheless, she also observes an ‘inward turn’ (ibid) in self-help literature, beginning in the early 1980s. Hence, in the 1970s, self-help literature was dominated by a stark social Darwinist survivalism, where themes such as ‘looking out for number one’ or ‘winning through intimidation’ were dominant, and victimhood was cast as the ultimate category to be avoided (McGee 2005, 54).

By the early 1980s, a reaction to this fierce jungle law emerged, with a new emphasis on negotiation. Titles such as ‘Getting to yes: Negotiating agreement without giving in’ (Fisher and Ury 1983) or ‘The art of the deal’ (Trump 1984) which has recently re-emerged into prominence all point to the idea that one can prevail in any situation through honest negotiation, ‘principled reasoning’ and ‘win-win situations’, rather than overt manipulation or intimidation which were the preferred techniques of the 1970s survivalism. (McGee 2005, 55) The late 1980s and early 1990s saw a continuation of the inward turn. Gurus such as Anthony Robbins began advocating that individuals can control their inner experience – or ‘state’ – through techniques such as positive affirmations and neuro-linguistic programming (NLP) as a means of mastering their external

environment (McGee 2005, 76). In parallel to this, New Age writers such as Deepak Chopra promoted ideas of a world in which there is ultimately no distinction between self and other, matter and energy, reality and imagination (ibid.70), and proposed a purportedly ‘effortless’ path to self-discovery through spiritual exercises such as meditations and visualization. The 2000s saw a continuation of this form of secular spirituality with the proliferation of ‘mindfulness’ as a means to achieve anything from happiness to productivity at work. Along with this came an abundance of books on ‘positive thinking’, the most striking example being Rhonda Byrnes’ best-seller *The Secret*, which literally posits that the individual attracts things into her life – such as money, illness and love - through her thinking (Byrne 2007).

During the 2010s, the massive digitalization of self-help on YouTube, podcasts and various apps has ushered in an increasing diversification in both style and content, as well as an environment in which internet-savvy authors, such as Tim Ferriss and Jordan Peterson, can proliferate content across various platforms. While it remains difficult to judge if there is any discernible pattern in the vast array of digitalized self-help of the 2010s, a cautious proposition would be that a reaction to the ‘inward turn’ of the previous decades in the form of a return to the somewhat (and sometimes explicitly) masculine themes of ‘mastery’, ‘tradition’, ‘order’ and ‘responsibility’ seems to be materializing – albeit not always without controversy (eg. Peterson 2018). Possible links between this reaction and the wider political context seem plausible, and would be a worthy object of analysis for future studies, along with the digitalization of self-help.

Existing research: Self-help as discipline and control

The existing research on self-help books is quite limited and scattered throughout different fields. It has touched on topics such as the historical origin of self-help books (Starker 1989), their human

ontology (Aspelin 2008), gendered logics (Bröckling 2005), typical conclusions (Kjær 2013) and how they are interpreted in practice (Carlone 2001). Despite a growing interest in self-development in connection to organization and management in general (see e.g. Cederström & Spicer 2015; Rose 1989; Tucker 1999), work in management and organization studies dealing explicitly with self-help books is also rare. Cullen's critical discourse analysis of Stephen Covey's '7 Habits of Highly effective People', however, shows how the book represents a 'disciplinary gaze' emerging from 'the expectations of a conservative capitalist order' (2009, 1248) which is internalized by the individual. Similarly, Garsten and Grey (1997) explore discourses of subjecthood in an archive of 'How to books' directed towards managers. Deploying concepts derived from, among others, Giddens' work on reflexivity, they find self-help books to be 'profoundly disciplinary' and a 'post-bureaucratic mode of control', offering an 'illusory' promise to their readers (Garsten and Grey 1997, 226). While this line of analysis is also quite common outside of management and organization studies (eg. Bröckling 2005; Rimke 2000). Giddens himself was however more forgiving towards self-help, and described it as part of the democratization of daily life (Giddens 1992, 64, 156, see also Hazleden 2003). Furthermore, the implicit trust placed in the efficacy of disciplinary control mechanisms (eg. Townley 2005) underlying many of the critical analyses of self-help books, is not necessarily supported by the scant empirical studies on how they are read. For example, Lichterman (1992) has shown how self-help literature is often read with a certain critical distance on the part of the reader, who typically treats the book as a catalogue for inspiration, and will only use the parts she finds make sense, while ignoring the rest. Furthermore, misunderstandings abound: McCabe (2011) has shown how the organisational application of the teachings of Stephen Covey, through various selections and reinterpretations, can make them almost unrecognizable.

Accordingly, within management and organization studies, Garsten and Grey (1997) is the only other study that analyses a large archive of self-help books. The books in this study are however directed towards managers, and contain dominant themes such as ‘control’, ‘modernist-masculinist mastery’, ‘self-presentation’ and ‘winning’. This not only suggests that the books cater to a specific target population of managers (the majority of which are likely men (see eg. Jericho 2017)) – while most readers of self-help books are traditionally women (Starker 1989; Wilson and Cash 2000) - but also that they belong to a specific 1980s and 1990s era of self-help books (see above), in which the inward turn of subsequent decades has yet to materialize. Accordingly, this paper seeks to update and refine the analysis by Garsten and Grey (1997) by applying a more current and diverse selection of self-help book, as well as theoretical concepts that are less prone to understanding self-help literature as unilateral discipline and control. These are presented in the following section.

Theoretical framework

This section begins by presenting the main theoretical concept of this paper, namely *problematization*, and how it may be operationalized into a framework for the analysis of problems, responses and teloi in self-help literature. Subsequently, a supplement in the form of Dean’s (2010) governmentality framework for the analysis of ethical self-government approach is introduced. This approach is utilized in the second part of the analysis, which explores the cultivation of autonomy through various technologies of the self.

Problematization analysis

The concept of *problematization*, or problematization analysis, which Foucault developed towards the end of his life, can be seen as an attempt to capture the analytical intention and common

methodological thread running through much of his previous work (Gudmand-Hoyer 2009, 4; Foucault 1991a, 343; Foucault 1984, 117; Osborne 2003):

What I tried to do from the beginning was to analyze the process of “problematization” — which means: how and why certain things (behavior, phenomena, processes) became a problem. (Foucault 1983, 2)

By investigating how certain aspects of the self and its career are made into problems in self-help books, and how this problematization shapes the possible responses to these problems, the interest shifts from looking at self-help books as a form of ‘control’ or ‘discipline’ to an emphasis on self-help books as a medium in which the subject and its working life are made into objects of reflection. Consequently, a problematization analysis does not - as the name might suggest – imply that something is ‘challenged’ or ‘criticized’, but rather that the problematization itself becomes the object of analysis. Hence, the aim of the following analysis is not to ‘problematize’ self-help literature, but rather to investigate more closely how it construes certain issues as problems, as well as what responses this problematization implies. The problematization of the subject in self-help books thus undoubtedly entails elements of discipline and normalization (Foucault 2003) in the sense of encouraging subjects to become highly efficient at performing a narrowly defined range of practices. This is however not the primary focus in a problematization analysis, which gives primacy to problems over theory, and is more akin to an analytical strategy than a set of theoretical principles (Dean 2010, 69; Osborne 2003,16).

Problematization analysis is accordingly interested in how various difficulties (such as the aforementioned shifts in working life and careers, and the concomitant demands on the subject) are construed as a problem, and how this problematization contributes to shaping the conditions for the responses that may be provided:

It is problematization that responds to these difficulties, but by doing something quite other than expressing them or manifesting them: in connection with them, it develops the conditions in which possible responses can be given; it defines the elements that will constitute what the different solutions attempt to respond to. (Foucault 1991, 389)

Problems and responses, then, can be understood as linked in a dialectical relationship where they become ‘response-instigating problems’ and ‘problem-construing responses’ (Gudmand-Høyer 2009, 6). In continuation hereof, a problematization analysis seeks to identify the *general form of problematization* which makes these responses and solutions possible and establishes the conditions for their emergence:

To one single set of difficulties, several responses can be made. And most of the time, different responses actually are proposed. But what must be understood is what makes them simultaneously possible: it is the point in which their simultaneity is rooted; it is the soil that can nourish them in all their diversity and sometimes in spite of their contradictions. (...) the work of the history of thought would be to rediscover at the root of these diverse solutions *the general form of problematization* that has made them possible – even in their opposition (...) (Foucault 1991, 389, emphasis added)

The general form of problematization, then, is seen as an abstract scheme, decoupled from any specific content, which structures the various specific problems and responses. To make it more analytically operationalizable, the general form of problematization is however expanded to also include a general form of *telos* and *response*. For every problem, there is thus an embedded normativity in the form of an implicit imperative, which is necessarily pursued (Gudmand-Hoyer 2009, 7). In the analysis, this imperative is referred to as *telos*, and understood as the ideal condition

which the problematized 'stands in the way of', and which the responses are aimed towards achieving – e.g. purity, happiness, freedom, autonomy, etc. (Foucault 1991a, 355). The problematization also involves a number of *responses*, which can be understood as means of achieving its telos. In self-help literature, the concrete responses, or solutions, are often given in the form of various technologies of the self (see following section), such as visualizations, affirmations or diary exercises. Finally, a problematization involves a *problem* that must be overcome. Again, a distinction is made between concrete, specifically articulated problems and the abstract form which structures them. In self-help literature, a myriad of different and often conflicting problems are articulated, such as inefficiency, unhappiness or inauthenticity. These are however shaped, and made possible in all their diversity, by the general form of problematization.

Figure 1 near here

In sum, Foucault's concept of a general form of problematization is expanded in this paper, so as to not merely imply the condition of possibility for different *responses* – which seems to be the case in Foucault's scant writings on the concept - but also for various specific *problems* and *teloi* (see figure 1). This enables the observation of structural homogeneity in the multiple and sometimes conflicting articulations of problems, responses and teloi in the self-help literature, by way of identifying an abstract figure of the problematization – devoid of specific content – which cuts across these.

Governmentality and ethical self-government

As a supplement to the problematization approach described above, self-help books are subsequently investigated from a perspective of power. The Foucauldian concepts of ethical self-government and governmentality are drawn on here, in order to avoid relying on notions of

‘control’ and ‘illusion’. Hence, according to Raffnsøe et.al (2017, 13) a point that has ‘often been misunderstood’ about the exercise of power understood as governmentality, is that it presupposes that ‘action on the actions of others only works where there is some freedom’ (ibid.). In investigating how self-help books cultivate autonomy, the second part of analysis draws on this idea, and argues that Foucault’s interest in the ‘different modes by which, in our culture, human beings are made subjects’ (2000, 208) can yield productive insights – particularly when informed by a problematization analysis.

According to Foucault, modern power operates through ‘a tricky combination (...) of individualization techniques and totalization structures’ (2000, 213). In the context of self-help books, it is however the individualizing dimension of governmentality that is emphasized:

And in this way one could take up the question of governmentality from a different angle. The government of the self by oneself in its articulations with others (such as one finds in (...) the prescription of models for living and so on) (Foucault 1997b, 88)

The efforts in self-help books at cultivating certain characteristics of the subject may by extension be seen as attempts at ‘governing at a distance’, in which the book provides the reader with specific *subjectivations* (Foucault 1997, 225; Foucault 2000, 212), which she may choose to subject herself to in the attempt to shape her subjectivity in a particular direction. In self-help books, this often takes place by means of various exercises, which, from a Foucauldian perspective, may be understood as *technologies of the self*. These technologies are procedures that prescribe to the subject how to determine its identity and how to develop and maintain it in order to achieve certain objectives. (Foucault 1997b)

In the second part of the analysis, such technologies of the self, which aim at cultivating the autonomy of the subject, are analysed through Dean’s Foucault-inspired framework for the analysis

of ‘ethical government of the self’. This framework is comprised of four aspects (Dean 2010, 53): first, an ontology that covers *what* is acted upon, i.e. the object of government or what Dean calls ‘the ethical substance’ (ibid.). In self-help literature, the object of the subject's government of self will often be its thoughts or feelings, which in one way or another need correction. The ethical substance may furthermore entail certain *a priori* properties of the subject, which are presupposed in the particular mode of self-government. Secondly, the analysis includes the manner in which self-government takes place, i.e. the ‘ethical work’ (ibid.). This emphasizes *how* the ethical substance is handled in self-government. For example, if the ethical substance is 'impure thoughts', the ethical work might entail a 'cleansing' or a 'purification'. Thirdly, the analysis comprises the mode of subjectivation or – in Dean’s words – ‘who we are when we are governed in such a manner’ (ibid.). Examples of subjectivations in self-help literature might be the inauthentic or unbalanced subject. Finally, the analysis includes the ‘telos of ethical practices’ - i.e. the ends or goals sought. (Dean 2010, 53)

As mentioned, the governmentality approach described above is utilized as a supplement to the main theoretical concept of *problematization*. By foregrounding problematization analysis in this way, the paper attempts to show how the ‘governing at a distance’ in self-help literature can only emerge as a result of specific ways of framing problems and responses. Hence, a problematization approach amounts to inquiring into the *conditions of possibility* behind the cultivation of particular personality characteristics (such as autonomy) in self-help books, and can accordingly inform and enrich the analysis of particular instances of governing at a distance.

Methodology

The article is empirically based on a previous study of self-help literature related to work and career (xxx 2010) in which a large archive of self-help books written in Danish between 2000 and 2010 was constructed through a series of broad search methods such as browsing the public library, best-seller lists and various references and recommendations. For the purpose of this article, the selection criteria have however been narrowed down, with the aim of limiting the amount of marginal and idiosyncratic books in favour of books with broader appeal, circulation and cultural resonance. This in turn helps ensure the relevance of the books as objects of social research. The books selected for analysis in this article accordingly fit with a minimum of one of the three criteria outlined below:

1. **Best-seller.** The book has featured on the yearly best-seller list of either Amazon.com or a Danish book-retailer in the period 2000-2010. These lists can be found online. Books like Stephen Coveys (2008) '7 habits' or Rhonda Byrnes 'The Secret' (2007) fit into this category.
2. **Translation.** The book has been translated into Danish from another language. Books such as Sanna Ehdin's (2008) 'Find your Inner Strength' (originally published in Swedish) or Anthony Robbins' (2005) 'Unlimited Power' (originally published in English) match this criterion.
3. **Media coverage.** The book has been reviewed or in other ways covered (eg. interview with the author, feature on the book as a phenomenon, etc.) in Danish news media. To determine which books fit this criterion, the book-titles were used as search words in the media database *Infomedia*, which captures all written content in Danish news media. Charlotte Mandrup's (2008) 'Everyday mindfulness' and Stendevad and Eilvig's 'The Millionaire Method' (2008) are examples of books which have been covered and/or reviewed (see Dilling 2010; Sørensen 2009).

Of the books from the original archive, 32 lived up to one or more of the above criteria. The sample used for the current analysis accordingly consists of 32 self-help books, which have achieved a level of circulation which can arguably justify labeling them as ‘popular’, and as such we can assume that they to some extent are indicative of wider cultural dynamics (xxx 2019)

Despite not living up to Foucault's admonition to 'read everything' (1998, 262-3), the archive can however still be argued as allowing for at least some level of generalizability. Self-help is not the most innovative of genres, and many self-help researchers note how even a quick, fragmented reading of various self-help texts will reveal a significant redundancy in terms of themes and tropes (McGee 2005, 51; Starker 1989, 14; Bröckling 2005, 16). The books studied were all published in Danish, and the quotes from self-help books that appear in this paper have accordingly been translated from Danish into English by the author. The Danish books do not differ markedly from the Anglophone books, neither in tone nor content – with many of them being ill-disguised rehashes of international best-sellers. It should however be noted that the archive represents a predominantly ‘western’ outlook in terms of themes raised and concepts used.

Initially, the books were read in a first order reading, in which a ‘witting ignorance’ (Gioia et.al. 2012, 21) with regards to previous theorizing was applied. Instead, I sought to put myself in the position of the typical reader. This implies actually taking the suggestions and claims made in the books seriously, and genuinely applying them to my own life and subjectivity. In my experience, this gives the researcher a more direct and intuitive feeling of the messages conveyed, which can be fruitful in guiding the subsequent analysis. Relatedly, it is helpful if the researcher is able to foster a degree of fascination and even sympathy for the genre, thus avoiding the temptation of reading the books as drivel that should not be taken seriously by ‘competent academics’ – despite admittedly wanting to be associated with this label (see Cunliffe 2003; Fotaki and Harding 2013).

Following on from this reading, a ‘first order analysis’ (Gioia et al. 2013) was conducted, in which the self-help books were coded using ‘data-centric’ words from the books themselves. This coding was guided by my original research interest, which revolved around what kind of subject(s) these books are promoting and how they encourage their readers to become this subject. Here, a myriad of terms, codes and concepts emerged, as I sought to adhere only to terms used in the self-help literature and made little attempt to distill categories (Gioia et al. 2013, 20). This resulted in a large and diverse compilation of first order categories ranging from ‘what do you want people to say at your funeral?’ through ‘presence in the moment’ to ‘count your blessings’. At a certain point these had to be reduced into a more manageable number, which was done by seeking similarities and differences among the many categories and grouping them together under broader, aggregate (but still data-centric) terms such as ‘authenticity’, ‘unrealized potential’ and ‘improvement’ (Gioia et al. 2013, p. 20). During this process, it became clear that many of the categories were not so much about describing the ideal subject, as they were about diagnosing lack and inadequacies in the actual, less-than-ideal, subject.

At this point, theories and research literature were consulted, and the analytic process transitioned from being primarily inductive towards a more abductive approach (Alvesson and Kärreman 2007; Brinkmann 2014). During this process, Foucault’s notion of problematization was introduced, and utilized to distill the first order data-centric categories into second order theoretical, ‘researcher-centric’ (Gioia et al. 2013, 18), concepts. These were then employed in the second round of coding, or ‘second order analysis’ (Gioia et al. 2013), and eventually saturated into the three themes of problem, response and telos. The application of Foucault’s concept of ‘the general form of problematization’ described in the section above was accordingly also a result of this abductive process (Charmaz 2006).

(Re)visiting research literature as well as theories on governmentality and ethical self-government also made it clear how the themes of ‘freedom’, ‘independence’ and ‘authenticity’ (and the lack thereof), which were arrived at in the first order analysis, relate to the paradox of self-help described in the introduction (i.e. help from without vs. help from within). Furthermore, it became apparent that the analysis of this paradox could be supplemented by the findings from the problematization analysis. After a series of back-and-forth readings between theory and empirical material (Alvesson and Kärreman 2007; Charmaz 2006) this eventually saturated into the second part of the analysis on the cultivation of autonomy.

In writing up the final analysis, emphasis was put on suffusing the text with quotes in order to illustrate how the results were arrived at, and how the data-to-theory connections were made between first and second order categories (Gioia et.al. 2013, 23). Furthermore, the quotes used have been selected on the basis of being particularly illustrative of the core discursive rules, breaks, etc. dealt with in the analysis.

Analysis

The analysis begins by identifying the *general form of problematization, response* and *telos* in self-help literature. The second part of the analysis looks more closely at a specific problem, namely the subject’s lack of *autonomy*, and how it interacts with the general form of problematization identified in the first part of the analysis.

Form of problematization: Incompleteness

'But what if this book is exactly what you need, what is missing in your life?' (McGraw 2003, 31).

So goes a typical question posed in popular self-help books. As we shall see, this question is emblematic of their general form of problematization, namely *incompleteness*. Something about the subject, its career or its general life situation is somehow incomplete. Typically, the most exemplary

texts to illustrate this tendency are on the initial pages of the self-help book, where the articulations are generally more wide-ranging and revolve around general deficiencies in the subject's life. The books soberly note things like 'Many of us don't quite become what we once dreamt of' (Horn 2005, 8), and present their readers with the hard truth: 'Admit it. There is something in your life that you have been trying to attract, solve or achieve, and you simply have not managed yet.' (Vitale 2008, 5) Further along in the book, the formulation of problems often becomes more specific. Here for example in the form of a lack of passion:

Most people have heard of Sisyphus and his troubles. The story invites us to hold up a mirror to our own lives and ask ourselves which Sisyphean activities are in our lives and which activities stem from passion. The first reaction will usually be that there is a lot in between. But think about it: If an activity is not based on passion, what is it then? Maybe something that is more 'need to do' than 'nice to do' or a maintenance activity. Well, is that not exactly what a Sisyphean task is when all is said and done? The next thought is whether it is realistic to cut out all these activities. It is! It may just take some time and require some sacrifices along the way. (Stadil and Hahn 2008, 20)

The subject is invited to look in the mirror (a frequently used metaphor in self-help literature) where it can see itself as incomplete in terms of lack of passion. If something is not an 'activity of passion', it is problematized as a 'Sisyphean task' that must be 'cut out' before the incompleteness can be eliminated and the fully passionate life achieved. In this way, the general form of problematization installs a difference between 'the present', which in some way is unfinished, and 'the ideal', which is the telos one must work towards. By extension, the subjectivations offered in self-help literature are linked to this incompleteness, which the subject must strive to eliminate. This elimination is, however, a difficult process because - as in the above-mentioned passion example - the specific

teloï are often close to utopian. Even if the subject succeeds at eliminating all 'need to do' activities and manages to fill its life with 'nice to do' (incidentally, whether the 'sacrifices' which must be brought in this process are 'need to do' or 'nice to do' remains an open question), it is still incomplete on a number of other parameters. Hence, the articulated problems in self-help literature revolve around many different aspects of the individual's career and subjectivity such as inauthenticity (McGraw 2001), negative thought patterns (Robbins 2000, 43), wrong priorities (Covey et al. 2005, 16), inefficiency (Cohen 2003, 15), lack of presence in the moment (Brantley and Millstine 2008, 17) and lack of willpower (Horn 2005, 41). In sum, the general form of problematization in self-help literature invites the subject to observe itself and its life as incomplete with respect to a given parameter (e.g. passion) and by extension urges it to eliminate this lack. The following section looks into how this elimination is suggested to take place by way of *development* as the general form of response.

Form of response: Development

The response to the problematized incompleteness, then, is for the subject to *develop* itself: 'The truth is, that the more we develop ourselves, the better we are able at dealing with problems confidently and efficiently, thereby reducing the risk that the same problem occurs again' (Jones 2005, 60). Constant development is a recurring dogma in self-help literature, and is offered to the subject as a general form of response to its various inadequacies. For example, American guru Anthony Robbins defines success as follows:

For me, success is the continual quest of striving to be better than I am. It is the ability to continue growing emotionally, socially, spiritually, physiologically, intellectually and economically (...). The road to success is always under construction. It is an ongoing process, not a goal that can be reached. (Robbins 2005, 20)

Robbins accordingly considers personal development so essential that it almost represents its own telos as 'the road to success is always under construction'. At the same time however, success - somewhat paradoxically - is still achievable in the form of 'the continual quest of striving to be better than I am'. Apparently without acknowledging this paradox, Robbins has taken out a trademark for the abbreviation 'CANI!™' which stands for 'Constant and Never Ending Improvement' (Robbins 2000, 82). Furthermore, this constant and never ending improvement must take place on a variety of different parameters - 'socially, spiritually, physiologically, intellectually and economically' - which transcend traditional boundaries between work and life. The same tendency can be seen in Stephen Covey's '*7 Habits of Highly Effective People*', where the seventh habit calls for the individual to continually 'sharpen the saw', understood as constantly renewing the four dimensions of its nature: the physical, spiritual, mental and emotional (Covey 2008, 317-18).

An example of the way in which never-ending development as a general form of response is reflected in the concrete solutions, or technologies of the self, in self-help literature can be seen in 'The ten-day mental challenge' from Robbins' *Notes from a Friend* (2000, 90-91). The exercise takes place over ten days where the subject must 'refuse to hang on to any crummy thoughts, feelings, questions, words or metaphors at all' (ibid.). When the subject catches itself focusing on the negative, it must ask itself a so-called 'Problem-Solving Question' such as 'What is great about this problem?' etc. (ibid.). Every morning, it must ask itself 'Morning Questions' such as 'What do I look forward to today?' (ibid.) etc., and every night before going to bed it is time for an 'evening question' such as 'How did I contribute to my own quality of life today?' etc. (ibid.). For the following ten days, the subject must accordingly 'focus entirely on solutions and not on problems' (ibid.). The subject is instructed not to punish itself when it has a negative thought, but rather to change it immediately. An important caveat in this exercise is, however, that the ten-day challenge

must start over if the subject dwells on negative thoughts or feelings for more than five minutes. In that case, the instruction is to wait until the next morning and start the exercise all over again:

(..), the goal is *ten consecutive days* without dwelling on a negative thought. Each time you dwell for too long on the negative, you must start over, no matter how many days you have already met the challenge. (Robbins 2000, 90-91)

Despite the fact that this technology of the self is called 'the ten-day mental challenge', it is obvious that it requires more time than this to be completed. Furthermore, the 'never-ending' nature of the development is enhanced by the way in which there is no point, during the course of the exercise, where the subject is not under development. It must monitor its thoughts around the clock and ask itself questions every morning and every evening. Though the practice has a defined end date - after however many days that may be - this exercise is just one of many in 'Notes from a Friend', and consequently there is always potential for continued development when/if the subject masters the above exercise.

As such, constant development as a general form of response leads to a general subjectivation, in which the subject is cast as incomplete, and in the quest to overcome this incompleteness must constantly work on itself. This development towards elimination of incompleteness is furthermore required with respect to many and often conflicting parameters. In addition to working on 'getting to the top' (Frankel 2007; Horn 2005, 11), being 'rich and powerful' (Arden 2006, 2), 'being successful' (Robbins 1999, 20; Horn and Fagerland 2007) and 'performing brilliantly' (Robbins 1999, 66), the subject must also seek to obtain 'happiness' and 'peace' (Mandrup 2008, 31) and 'experience joy, peace, intimacy and love' (Noyes 2007, 16).

The same is true at the level of subjectivity. Here, the subject must for example develop itself towards becoming more driven by values and principles (Covey 2008, 131), while at the same time

optimizing its external appearance in the form of body language, facial expressions, voice and clothing (Jones 2005, 84). Likewise, the subject must learn to master 'time management' and the art of making a 'weekly schedule' (Covey 2008, 151, 180) while also living in the moment and not becoming a slave to 'external demands in the form of calendars and other people's wishes' (Mandrup 2008, 40). With so many different and conflicting teloi to develop itself towards, total completeness becomes close to unattainable, because an optimization on one parameter will often logically result in a problematic lack with respect to another. As an example, some self-help books link problems like 'anxiety' and 'lack of love' to the achievement of - and in some cases excessive focus on - other teloi such as 'success' and 'getting to the top':

Now I have reached the utmost one can achieve in my field. I have replaced my wife with a younger and 'better' model. I have more money than I will ever have time to spend. But I am still not happy! What do I do? (Kjær and Stendevad 2005, 83)

As we have seen, development as a general form of response takes place on various parameters and aims at multiple teloi. These teloi are, however, also shaped by an abstract form, which we will look at in the next section.

Form of telos: Self-actualization

The general form of telos that the subject must develop itself toward in order to eliminate the problematized incompleteness is *self-actualization*. Self-actualization as a concept is associated with Abraham Maslow's (1943) theory of the hierarchy of needs and implies that the individual subject creates itself and actualizes its inner potential. While self-actualization is the general form of telos, it is not always mentioned explicitly in the literature, whereas related themes such as 'being the best version of yourself' (Jones 2005, 6), or 'becoming who you already are' (Noyes 2006, 21) are more common. Nonetheless, the articulated teloi in self-help literature tend to assume the *form*

of self-actualization in the sense of a continuous process without end. Hence, self-actualization is an abstract and immeasurable objective, which is by definition unachievable, but which may be approximated through constant development of the self (see e.g. McGregor 1966, 10).

This openness and plasticity of the general form of telos is reflected in the various specific teloi suggested in self-help literature. Hence, 'success', 'peace', 'passion', 'authenticity', 'happiness', 'freedom' etc. do not take the form of clearly defined and quantifiable ultimate objectives, such as earning a billion dollars or being promoted. Rather, they are open and elastic teloi, of which there may always be more. The effect is that the problematized incompleteness never gets fully resolved, as one can never have enough peace, authenticity or success. By extension, most people would probably find it difficult to categorically reject the following proposition:

Is it possible that you - like me - have the opportunity to obtain a much more fulfilling and exciting life, but you cheat yourself and miss out on it all because you are not aware of it, or if you are, you are simply stuck in your life and not doing anything about it? Is it possible that you are indeed a fascinating, unique individual with a need to realize your *full* potential, yet you deny yourself this powerful individuality and remain submerged and caught up in a world of (...) conformity? (McGraw 2003, 23)

As in the quote above, the general subjectivation offered in self-help literature, in the form of an incomplete subject that develops itself towards actualizing its full potential, becomes – to paraphrase *The Godfather* - a subjectivation you can't refuse. Because telos is open, plastic and infinitely stretchable, it is difficult not to identify with the associated problematization of incompleteness.

The general form of problematization in self-help literature, or 'the root of these diverse solutions (...) that has made them possible – even in their opposition' (Foucault 1991, 389), can consequently

be identified as the problem of incompleteness, the response of constant development and the telos of self-actualization. Furthermore, this form can be seen as a self-perpetuating process, in which the telos of self-actualization and the response of constant development constantly require more incompleteness to be problematized. As such, self-actualization and incompleteness are mutually dependent. Hence, the general form of problematization makes it a condition of possibility for the cultivation of qualities such as autonomy, balance, efficiency, etc. that their absence is recognized as an incompleteness, which can never quite be eliminated, but still requires a continuous striving as though it could.

That the subject is never 'good enough' in its present state also implies that self-help literature attains universal relevance. Hence, the general form of problematization makes it a condition of possibility for the subject's work upon itself, that there is no time or state in which the subject and its career are unproblematic and do not need optimization. Therefore, the general form of problematization implies an ongoing need for more self-government. Accordingly, the demand for self-help books is infinite; no matter how many self-help books we buy, more self-help is always required. That the incompleteness is irreversible, the development infinite and the self-actualization unattainable may to some degree also be said to implicate the subject's *self-rejection*, as the subject of self-help is always on its way to completeness and actualization, but never quite achieves it. The present self is always incomplete and problematic, a temporary deviation from a future and more desirable state. The temporary deviation is, however, permanent since in the self-government ascribed by self-help literature, the subject never reaches the ideal state.

The problem of autonomy

In this second part of the analysis, we turn from the abstract form of problematization to an example of its concrete manifestation— namely, the cultivation of the subject's autonomy. Hence, we will now explore how the general form of problematization unfolds in relation to autonomy, one of the

most prevalent themes in self-help literature. Accordingly, the theoretical perspective shifts to one of *ethical self-government* and the subject's modulation of itself by means of specific techniques (Dean 2010; Foucault 1991a; 1997b).

In self-help literature, autonomy is generally understood as the subject's independence from external influences on its subjectivity – including its ideas, values and actions (Ehdin 2008, 158; Covey 2008, 107,135; Arden 2006, 117). The concept is however given slightly different labels, which cover roughly the same phenomenon. For example, authors speak of being 'authentic' (McGraw 2001), 'independent' (Manning 2009, 83), 'in touch with your inner voice' (Noyes 2006, 18) and living 'according to your true self' (Ehdin 2008, 158). This can happen by the subject trusting itself more (Frankel 2007, 36) or getting to know itself under the layers of socialization to which it has been exposed throughout life (Mandrup 2008, 76). Hence, autonomy is seen as the call for the subject to become independent from external expectations and instead identify its inner, true essence, which it must live in accordance with.

Autonomy is interesting in this context because it - in continuation of the above definition - seems to be at the heart of the constitutive paradox of self-help mentioned in the introduction, in which the subject should be responsible for its own life and act upon its own convictions, but at the same time derives this ability to act autonomously from the very same authorities from which it must become autonomous (Bröckling 2005, 9). By extension, it can also be seen as an example of what Dean (2010, 262) has called '*the neoliberal governmentality paradox*', in which the subject's freedom and subjection superimpose and presuppose each other, as autonomy moves from being the antithesis of power to being its telos.

An illustrative example of this paradoxical cultivation of autonomy can be found in Sanna Ehdin's (2008) 'Find your inner strength'. Hence, the main message of this book is the promotion of

autonomy from external standards – the so-called ‘clan codes’. The clan codes are described as the standards, thought patterns, expectations and limitations that exist in the subject’s social environment, and according to Ehdin (2008, 184-184), it is important not to be cowed by these, but to 'liberate yourself' and 'let loose your inner power'. Hence, the subject is offered an exercise that will help identify these clan codes, which are seen as barriers to autonomy:

Stand up and think about the clan codes that exist in your family and your tribe. What is it you are supposed to do and definitely cannot do? What is expected of you? What is the worst thing you could do? Are you carrying a hidden shame that limits your individual expression and/or personal growth? Perhaps a sense of being useless, or not good enough deep inside. Do you feel that you are acting as an independent individual or as an extension of something else, perhaps something indefinable? (Ehdin 2008, 182)

Drawing on Dean’s (2010) framework for analyzing the ‘ethical government of the self’, which was presented in the theoretical section, we can now identify the *ethical substance* (Dean, 2010, 53) addressed in this technology of the self (Foucault 1997b). Hence, what is made into an object of self-government here is the 'invisible' limitations and barriers to 'individual expression' which the subject has imposed upon itself due to the influence from various clan codes. By encouraging the subject to reflect on the above questions, this technology seeks to visualize externally imposed standards in order to bring the subject closer to its ‘true self’. The *ethical work* may accordingly be described as a kind of emancipatory revelation of the invisible and oppressive structures that restrict the full autonomy of the subject. The mode of *subjectivation* which the subject accepts when performing the exercise on itself is that of an oppressed subject that lets itself be governed by external standards, but wants to liberate itself and move closer to the autonomous telos.

The aforementioned paradox of self-help is quite evident here, as the suggested self-governing in itself can largely be viewed as a set of clan codes, setting up expectations about the subject's way of life. On the one hand, the subject must accordingly liberate itself from external standards about who it is and how it should live its life. On the other hand, in the exercise the subject must accept exactly such standards regarding 'individual expression' and 'personal growth'. This paradox is, however, handled through the unspoken premise that the clan codes promoted in self-help literature should not be considered as clan codes because they aim at emancipation from clan codes. Without acknowledging this paradox, the implicit message to the subject accordingly seems to be: 'Liberate yourself from clan codes - except mine'. The *ethical work* undertaken in this exercise, then, seems to take the shape of a hypocritical emancipatory bondage. Only a particular type of autonomy and freedom are encouraged, and the statement 'When you allow others to define what is important to you, it is the same as giving away your power' (Ehdin 2008, 183-4) presumably does not apply to self-help literature itself. Hence, while the telos sought out in Ehdin's self-government regime ostensibly is full autonomy, in practice it is merely autonomy from everything but itself. Garsten and Grey (1997, 222) note a similar paradox in their study of How to books directed towards managers, in which the purpose of self-discovery always seems to be efficiency (Garsten and Grey, 1997, 222). The autonomous inner self, which is 'discovered' through the techniques supplied by self-help literature, is then simultaneously aligned with 'a particular version of the self which is congruent with certain demands of organizational life' (ibid. p. 223), whether this be demands for 'efficiency', or 'personal growth'.

Another example of the 'clan codes' of self-help is 'the building a good self-image' (Ehdin 2008, 160). Without a good self-image, the subject is purportedly not able to live in accordance with its 'true self' and consequently lives as 'a billiard ball, rolling around in different directions, dependent on the balls that happen to nudge it' (ibid. 159). Furthermore, self-image can change as a result of

the subject's efforts, but is presented as a 'perishable commodity' and must accordingly be cultivated and optimized through 'daily exercises' (ibid. 159). For this optimization, the visualization exercise 'Strengthen your self-image' is suggested:

- Think of yourself as a small mini-version of yourself and imagine that you are sitting on the lap of a comforting mother or father figure. How does he or she look? It need not be a real person, but can be your own fantasy person.
- Let the mother or father figure say kind, warm and appreciative words to your mini-me. Let him or her describe how nice, pretty, clever and lovely you are.
- Accept the kind words without feeling that the mini-version needs to do anything in return. Remain seated or lying in a relaxed state for as long as you like. (Ehdin 2008, 160)

Despite the fact that a poor self-image is characterized by a 'great need for external affirmation' (Ehdin 2008, 158), the subject of this somewhat infantilizing technology of the self (Foucault 1997b) must still imagine itself as receiving just that. The subject must accordingly visualize itself in a childhood-like state, where it is not autonomous, but dependent on other (adult) human beings. In attempting to cultivate an autonomous subject with a strong 'self-image', the subject is accordingly encouraged to imagine a situation on a daily basis in which it receives 'external' affirmation from an imaginary father or mother figure. By extension, the *ethical work* (Dean 2010, 53) undertaken here can be described as a kind of affirmative refuelling of the subject, in which it can fill itself up when doubling itself and acting as 'father' or 'mother'. Through this refuelling, the subject may strengthen its self-image in order to become more autonomous and independent of external affirmation 'in real life'. The *mode of subjectivation* in this technique is consequently that of a subject which is dependent on external affirmation, but can control this desire through the

imagination, so the need for affirmation does not manifest itself in daily life. If masturbation is observed through a self-technological perspective, it accordingly seems to have certain structural similarities with the visualization exercise. However, in the same way as masturbation does not eliminate the basic desires of the subject, but merely satisfies them temporarily, the visualization exercise does not permanently eliminate the basic need of the subject for external affirmation, since self-image as mentioned is presented as a 'perishable commodity'. Accordingly, it is emphasized that the visualization exercise must be done 'on a daily basis' and, in line with the general form of problematization identified in the first part of the analysis, it is not suggested that the self-image at some point might become strong enough to render continued exercise redundant.

Here, we see how the general form of problematization and its elastic telos interacts with the paradox of autonomy. At the same time as the subject – in the hope of becoming autonomous - must continually accept a subjectivation in which it is dependent on external affirmation, thus making autonomy logically impossible, this impossibility is reinforced by the general form of problematization which entails that the telos of full autonomy is unreachable and the development towards it constant and never-ending. The general form of problematization accordingly provides the condition of (im)possibility for the cultivation of autonomy. In addition to the fact that the technologies aimed at cultivating autonomy represent different variations of the paradoxical message 'Follow my instructions - be independent', the self-technological teloi are also open and extendable, meaning there can always be *more* autonomy. This allows for the self-government promoted in self-help – given its claim of universal relevance - to express its inner impossibility over and over again.

Concluding discussion

In this analysis of popular self-help books related to work and career, a *general form of problematization* (Foucault 1983) has been identified. Hence, the point in which the simultaneity of

the problems posited in self-help literature is rooted (Foucault 1991, 389) is the form of *incompleteness*. The subject is always lacking something – be it peace, efficiency, autonomy etc. - which the self-help book promises to help provide. The general form of response suggested to remedy this lack is *constant development* of the self, which is promoted through various self-technological exercises. The general form of telos towards which the constant development is aimed takes the general form of *self-actualization* - understood as the ongoing, never-ending process of ‘becoming the best version of yourself’. The second part of the analysis draws on Dean’s (2010) framework for analysing the ethical government of the self. This is done in order to explore how the paradox associated with the cultivation of autonomy is intertwined with the general form of problematization identified in the first part of the analysis. The constitutive incompleteness and never-ending development towards a goal that can never be reached thus interacts with, and forms the condition of (im)possibility for, the paradox of achieving autonomy through following the instructions of an external authority (the self-help book) on how to achieve it.

This problematization of the subject as a lacking, unfinished project, that must constantly develop itself towards ultimately unattainable ideals such as autonomy, has hitherto remained relatively unquestioned in this paper. This follows from the fact that problematization analysis is primarily interested in *how* things are problematized, and does not provide resources for assessing whether a given problematization or response can be considered as ‘true’ or helpful. In this concluding discussion however, we move beyond the descriptive realm, in order to critically discuss the underlying assumptions embedded in the identified form of problematization.

The notion of the autonomous subject, and even the idea of a stable and discrete identity as such, have accordingly been described as ‘an illusion’ (Knights and Clarke 2017, 338) and no more than ‘a comforting belief in our own willful capacity to determine our own fate’ (Knights and Willmott 2004, 64). In buying into this illusion of the autonomous self, it has been argued, we take identity

for granted as a real and achievable goal for stabilizing meaning and reality, thus ignoring its inherently contingent nature and its dependence on the unpredictable and uncontrollable social confirmation of others (Knights and Clarke 2017, 338). Consequently, striving to secure a certain identity as ‘successful’, ‘autonomous’, ‘happy’ or whatever it may be, is self-defeating insofar as it is ‘a constantly retreating phantom, and the faster you chase it, the faster it runs ahead’ (Watts 1951, 56, quoted in Knights and Clarke 2017, 338). While this figure of the ‘constantly retreating phantom’ is certainly evident in the abstract form of problematization identified in the above analysis as well as in the cultivation of autonomy, it remains unacknowledged in the self-help literature. Recognizing the phantom would thus arguably imply an existential challenge to self-help in its current form, as it would undermine its fundamental logic and promise (xxx 2019). Relatedly, an interesting task for critical researchers would be to affirmatively speculate on what a self-help book would even look like, if it explicitly acknowledged how our identities cannot be solely authored by ourselves or separated from society, and how this in turn implies the impossibility of autonomy.

In addition to its self-defeating nature, the notion of the lacking subject constantly working to secure its identity has also been described as a form of post-bureaucratic ‘control’, which ‘disciplines’ individuals into being (more) productive and obedient employees (Garsten and Grey 1997). Similarly, McGee has suggested that self-help books create ‘belabored’ selves in the sense that ‘workers are asked to continually work on themselves in efforts to remain employable and reemployable, and as a means of reconciling themselves to declining employment prospects’ (2005, 16). Furthermore this intense work on the self has been critiqued for its tendency to individualize structural problems and frame them in terms of (in)adequate self-management (Rimke 2000). When we obsess about our own individual shortcomings, we tend to neglect the structural issues which often play a significant role in contributing to whatever malaise we are experiencing. As a response

to the admonitions to ‘be yourself’ or ‘find yourself’ made in self-help books, scholars in the CMS tradition might accordingly advise the subject to ‘forget yourself’. But given the general form of problematization identified in this paper, we might ask whether this would not merely amount to introducing yet another deficiency in the subject (‘I’m too narcissistic’) that must be eliminated through constant development towards yet another infinitely stretchable telos.

This leads to the question of whether this preoccupation with improving the self always necessarily has to imply the reproduction of status quo in the form of belaboured selves seeking to improve their employability. Can we completely discount the possibility that self-improvement (however self-defeating, endless and omnipresent) might harbour a transformative critical potential and an incipient alternative vision of the good life, particularly if the goal of this personal development violates or contradicts the expectations of the surrounding society? Recently, some scholars have begun to suggest that certain self-help discourses and practices actually ‘contain seeds of potential resistance to – and emancipation from – neoliberal precarity’ (Sharone 2017, 205). Malcolm X, who changed his life by personally developing from being an illiterate convict to a well-spoken and highly influential civil rights activist, might be viewed as an example (McGee 2005, 23). So might the daily meditation practices among Occupy Wall Street-protesters (xxx 2019). Perhaps self-help literature, then, should not merely be interpreted as an arena of narcissism and social domination, but also as a symptom of a widespread dissatisfaction, which has yet to find a form through which it can be expressed as resistance. The idea of an incomplete self, that must continually develop itself towards an ultimately unreachable telos, arguably does not rule this out. Similarly, autonomy in the sense of ‘escaping the clan codes of our tribe’ (however impossible that may be) is perhaps not all that far from Foucault’s ‘critical attitude’, understood as the art of ‘how not to be governed like that, by that, in the name of those principles, with such and such an objective in mind and by means of

such procedure' (1997c, 44). At least it seems reasonable to suggest that future studies of self-help might benefit from a more careful exploration of such questions.

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