



The SAGE Encyclopedia of Political Behavior

Self-Help Ideology

Contributors: Heidi Rimke

Edited by: Fathali M. Moghaddam

Book Title: The SAGE Encyclopedia of Political Behavior

Chapter Title: "Self-Help Ideology"

Pub. Date: 2017

Access Date: June 5, 2017

Publishing Company: SAGE Publications, Inc.

City: Thousand Oaks,

Print ISBN: 9781483391168

Online ISBN: 9781483391144

DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.4135/9781483391144.n337>

Print pages: 734-737

©2017 SAGE Publications, Inc.. All Rights Reserved.

This PDF has been generated from SAGE Knowledge. Please note that the pagination of the online version will vary from the pagination of the print book.

In late modernity, the Western world is understood, organized, and regulated according to what has been called the *psy complex*. Self-help ideology, in particular, has become an increasingly inescapable, enduring, and significant part of popular culture over the past 50 years. As a result, the self-help genre has achieved a spectacular prominence in North American society. Persuaded to understand ourselves in terms of inner fulfillment, good relationships, self-actualization, and so on, we have come to expect the experts or self-help gurus to assist and direct us in our quests for self-transformation. Consequently, psychocentrism, or the view that all problems reside in the individual mind and/or body dominates and characterizes the therapeutic culture of Western society. The self-help genre thus forms an important aspect of the culture of therapy in neoliberal societies and consists of a vast selection of products to lead us to individual happiness or some other kind of positive personal change. The popularity of self-help media rests upon a cultural conviction that “psy” discourses and practices in one way or another can make one better, healthier, or “normal.”

Pervasiveness in North American Culture

A trip to any North American bookstore will confirm the popularity of the self-help genre and demonstrate the huge market for self-help consumerism in the early 21st century. Aisles of shelves are now filled with books dedicated to self-improvement: to helping us to re-make ourselves into better people living healthier, less stressful, and more successful lives. The self-help industry is a big business that encompasses all aspects of self-improvement—how to get rich, improve self-esteem, lose weight, find and keep the love of your life, achieve success and popularity, develop resilience, conquer disease, tap into your hidden powers, and achieve physical fitness. A massive and growing industry with estimates ranging from 10 to 15 billion dollar in profits annually, self-help ideology is the leading and best-selling genre in North America. Furthermore, the immensity of self-help options means that it is an extremely broad and extensive field of media and products that cannot be conceptualized as a single or homogenous, monolithic unity. The heterogeneity of the genre also means that there is likely something for everybody and anybody searching for some kind of relief, therapy, cure, or remedy to their problem(s).

Although self-help advice and tracts date back to ancient society, the contemporary self-help movement can be described as a distinct plurality of approaches, media, and products based on the hegemony of the “psy” complex in 20th-century North America. Taken as a whole, the self-help movement is a form of collective behavior that encompasses the sum total of groups, media, gurus and counselors, products, and techniques currently available for public consumption. However, it is important to note significant variants among different currents within the self-help movement, such as the women’s health movement or disability rights activism, for example. Self-help groups are somewhat different from mutual-aid groups that have always formed an important foundation for human collectivities. Self-help groups, however, are a modern phenomenon, and typically, though not always, are 12-step groups modeled after Alcoholics Anonymous. Since the 1930s, self-help groups have grown considerably in number and generally provide peer-based social support grounded in shared experiences. The La Leche League, Parents without Partners, Narcotics Anonymous, and Overeaters Anonymous, and attempted suicide survivors are just a few of the hundreds of groups available.

The popularity of self-help ideology can be witnessed in a growing and dizzying selection of diverse media—books, seminars, CDs, DVDs, webinars, free videos, institutes, chat rooms, social media feeds, Internet pop-up advertising, online courses, experts/gurus/success

stories, television shows and series, digital files, groups, infomercials, apps, mail-order catalogs, holistic institutes, retreats and treatment centers, motivational speaker seminars, the personal coaching market, weight-loss and stress-management programs, conferences, summits, and so forth to guide us in our exploration or betterment of our inner selves.

A basic typology of the North American self-help genre includes the following: (1) traditional religions (Hinduism, Christianity, Judaism); (2) nontraditional (New Age) spiritual (life after death communication, paganism, paranormal); (3) postmodern science (out-of-body and near-death experiences); (4) career and finances (wealth management, unemployment, professional skills, career advancement); (5) relationships (intimate, finding a spouse, familial issues); (6) health/illness/disability/well-being (physical, mental and emotional distress, diet, exercise); (7) life crisis and/or the grief of loss (divorce, terminal illness, death, aging); and, (8) self-improvement (self-esteem, confidence, resilience, empowerment). Self-help ideology thus comes in numerous different forms of advice, perspectives, narratives, and foci. Modern subjects are incited to seek enlightenment by excavating and exposing ourselves to the therapeutic gaze in multiple forms, such as online diagnostic questionnaires, Facebook feeds, celebrity health and beauty books, week-long seminars, or fashion magazine quizzes. We may be directed to search for our “inner child,” recover our “true” selves, or experiment with Eastern, Indigenous, or otherwise “alternative” healing or spiritual practices.

Media, Digital Culture, and Self-Help Discourse

Self-help ideology also has developed a very public character over the past few decades with the rise of the Internet and digital culture. Far from the privacy of the psychiatrist's or therapist's office, as once was the case, self-discovery increasingly takes place through public media. Self-help discourses circulate and proliferate on television, the Internet (websites and webcasts), in autobiographical books, in celebrity interviews, in magazines and newspapers, on radio shows, in movies and documentaries, and all kinds of social media: the self-help group, the online questionnaire, an Internet blog or YouTube video. Rather than turning to the priest, rabbi, or imam to confess our improbity, modern individuals increasingly seem to rely on psy discourses (psychology, psychiatry, psychotherapy, and pop psych) to address and solve their struggles and problems.

The ideal of normalcy, in particular, has become the modern preoccupation and is often seen as the objective of self-help projects. Often, now, self-help can also be considered a form of popular entertainment, seen especially on shows like *Dr. Phil*, *The Dr. Oz Show*, or multiple series on the Oprah Winfrey Network (OWN) such as *Starting Over* and *Iyanla: Fix My Life*. While certainly not new (for those who remember the daytime 70s hit, *The Phil Donahue Show*) today there is an unparalleled onslaught of talk shows and “reality TV” based on self-helping ideology such as the *Biggest Loser*, *Hoarders*, and *Intervention*. Increasingly, mass-mediated self-help contributes more in terms of popular entertainment rather than enlightenment. Moreover, such television programming center primarily, if not only, on the individual, rarely examining the social contexts in which the suffering person or problematized identity is embedded. Another important and influential dimension of self-help ideology is its celebrity or star power in the form of gurus or prophets seen in household names such as Deepak Chopra, Tony Robbins, Louise Hay, and the late Sylvia Browne and Wayne Dyer.

Self-help ideology, dovetailing with the values of neoliberalism, emphasizes personal development and empowerment. *Self-help practices* can be defined as an activity presumed to be voluntary and individualistic. Based upon notions such as choice, autonomy, and freedom, self-help relies upon the principles of individuality and responsibility that entail self-

modification and “improvement.” Self-help is thus an individualized voluntary enterprise, an undertaking to alter, reform, or transform the self, or some “intrinsic” aspect of it, which is also contingent upon a person’s seeking some external form of authoritative assistance based on professional credentials, a success story, or experiential similarity.

Agency and Self-Help Dynamics

Self-help ideology is based on a conceptualization of the individual as possessing agency, the ability to act upon itself, others, and the world in new and improved ways. The subject of self-help is thus conceived as possessing an inner reservoir of power that can be accessed at will or through use of the right technique. Self-help techniques operate not so much by way of negative prohibition but by way of positive, productive application. Nowadays, rather than turning to the priest to confess and be absolved of sins as in earlier historical periods, many modern individuals rely on psy analyses for guidance, comfort, inspiration, empowerment, and direction. One of the main tenets of therapeutic discourses is the assumption that there is an inner core or “truth” about ourselves that proper and effective therapeutic techniques can help reveal.

Self-help ideology is thus based on attempts to teach oneself to become an expert in some aspect of one’s selfhood. Self-help discourses claim to assist individuals in arriving at their own diagnosis, treatment, and reformation or transformation. One may seek advice from external authorities but one is not required to submit to the demands of such figures or commanded to engage in projects of self-help; one does so voluntarily because one wants to improve the self in some way or another. The task of the self-helper is to identify and then attend to or fix the flaw or problem.

Self-help ideology is appealing and popular for many reasons. First, and most importantly, it promises to improve our lives—mentally, emotionally, physically, but also spiritually, sexually, and even financially, if this is what we seek. Second, self-help ideology gives the appearance that normalcy, mental and emotional health, and success of all sorts are readily accessible to everyone and anyone, regardless of income level, educational background, or religious affiliation. Third, self-help techniques might actually help some people. They may provide useful advice on how to feel better about ourselves, or perhaps we can learn to be more kind, compassionate, and forgiving. Perhaps we will find ways to obtain peace or comfort we had not thought of before. Fourth, undoubtedly, is the relatively low cost of these books, CDs, DVDs, podcasts, mental health apps, and their relevance to everyday problems. Fifth, their general availability in stores and online websites is a factor in their extraordinary popularity. Sixth, self-help ideology is popular as it informs practices that can be pursued in the privacy of one’s home, at one’s own pace, thus providing freedom and autonomy from a direct expert gaze. Finally, self-help ideology in any media form might provide comfort, hope, and solidarity.

While self-help reading is often interpreted as a solitary and even individualizing activity, working through experiences with similar others might provide a sense of solidarity by connecting with the recognition that other people share and overcome the same or similar struggles. One such pattern is the tendency for self-help media to promote the idea to think more positively by changing one’s self-defeating patterns of thought and negative thinking processes by practicing the following: (1) have a positive attitude; (2) be confident and optimistic; (3) be grateful; (4) love and nurture yourself; (5) know you are powerful; and (6) change your interpretation of life, for example, by viewing problems as opportunities and challenges as lessons.

Claiming that a deeper commitment to personal and private needs will provide the path to liberation and self-realization, self-help literature at the same time announces the rewards of self-governance. This liberation–regulation paradox further operates by counseling subjects to sculpt a meaningful life without necessarily addressing or questioning the horizon of social relations and the contexts of social power in which they are embedded. Self-help readers become docile subjects in the sense that they learn to think about themselves, their lives, their relationships, and their worlds in more comforting and reassuring ways. The love of self, today probably best referred to as *selfie-ism*, and long prohibited by religion, and then by the human sciences as egoism or narcissism, is no longer discouraged but instead promoted.

Today, “radical self-love,” or “radical self-care,” is deemed necessary for a healthy, normal, and functional self to emerge and prosper. Radical self-care and self-love is presumably distinguished from self-absorption, and presumably such acts of therapy are equally available to all people, everywhere regardless of socioeconomic position or geographical location. What appears personal is socially proscribed and either internalized or resisted. For, after all, even the most private self-examination is tied to social systems of valuation, imposition, judgment, and regulation.

Research Findings

The research on self-help media continues to grow alongside, or as a result of, their popular consumption. Much has been written about self-help literature since its steady climb to cultural dominance. As with other areas of scholarship, the research on whether or not self-help products actually help is inconclusive as there is no consensus in the academic literature. Some researchers have claimed that approximately 80% of self-help consumers are repeat customers, which could indicate that the self-help media are not helping. On the other hand, the argument could also be made that their remarkable popularity may be indicative of self-help’s utility in addressing the myriad problems facing contemporary individuals. Some suggest that buyers of self-help books don’t read more than the first 20 pages, if they open them at all. Others have argued that just the act of buying a self-help book has been reported to make self-helpers feel better. This might be explained by the sense of comfort one experiences in knowing a solution is not far away, or at least a sense of solidarity knowing that others, too, deal with said issue or problem. Although the self-help genres for both mental and emotional health are documented as widely used, studies of their effectiveness show mixed and inconclusive results. Often, the research lacks analytical and theoretical rigor. The massive self-help industry, however, can also be interpreted as an expression of high levels of dissatisfaction and unhappiness among citizens of contemporary North America.

The rise of self-help ideology in contemporary North America should not be dismissed as a passing social fad given its phenomenal popularity; it is probably safe to say that self-help culture is here to stay. Given its staggering commercial success, the social influence of self-help ideology cannot be overstated. Furthermore, the increasing focus placed on individual responsibility and accountability has been concurrent with the dismantling of public health care services, thus forcing individuals to absorb structural deterioration—hence, one could argue that the rise of self-help is the consequence of the dismantling of the welfare state. Self-help ideology can be understood as practices and techniques based on a neoliberal governance of the self, a particularly modern mode of rule based on internal rather than external policing. Self-help ideology is therefore political as much as it is cultural.

By defining human normality, or what is socially desirable, self-help authors and experts offer strategies to achieve a better life, an improved self. Consequently, popular self-help projects

have attempted to affect all areas of social and individual life: how to live, how to work, how to parent, how to date, how to love, and how to behave in various spatial and temporal settings. In self-help books, subjects are cast as damaged and injured commodities, as potential consumers of unique and presumably preferable selves, but also as redeemable from within. However, several scholars have raised a particularly salient point by pointing out that the putative message of contemporary self-help ideology—that individuals are responsible for themselves and should not spend their lives pleasing others through conformism—is undermined by the medium in which it is conveyed as merely buying a self-help book is an act of dependence, the very opposite of self-reliance and autonomy. To quote the late George Carlin, “If you’re reading it in a book, folks, it ain’t self-help. It’s help.”

At one time or another, people are liable to be confronted with any of a vast number of social problems including joblessness; academic failure; relationship problems such as separation, infidelity, or divorce; death of a loved one; direct abuse by authority; loss of a home; mental/emotional/physical/sexual violence; betrayal by a significant person; empty nest syndrome; full nest syndrome; financial problems; forced geographical relocation; health problems; or the squeeze of simultaneously providing childcare and eldercare. Social problems are translated into individual disorders and are taken to be an indication or symptom of personal weakness, all the while negating the socially structured context of difficult life experiences. Viewed against the background of the depth and magnitude of global human suffering due to war and increasing climate disasters, self-help ideology may appear naive or misplaced at best, and shallow and superficial at worst. Social identity, relations, and position exert an influence on access to resources and support, key components in feelings of security and a sense of wellness, and the lack of which often lie at the base of human problems.

Conclusion

Contemporary liberal democracies have witnessed the rise of the popularity of self-help ideologies that capitalize on the socially created insecurities underlying popular self-help consumption, expressed as “low self-esteem” by recent generations. As such, self-help discourses can be said to wield tremendous social power in the current era, as traditional moral authorities and established social safety nets continue to deteriorate. Modern subjects are drawn into the appeal of self-help promises and quick fixes, the effects of a pervasive therapeutic culture that promotes individualization while attempting to deny the necessity of collective needs at the foundation of health and well-being. Addressing social needs seldom becomes part of the self-help ideology or jargon. As numerous authors and critics have pointed out, the imperatives of governmental policies to ensure basic essentials for health care, education, and retirement security, as well as legislation to protect consumers, environment, and workers, have become imperiled by neglect as self-help ideology increasingly colonizes neoliberal culture.

See also [Hegemony](#); [Neoliberalism](#)

Heidi Rimke

<http://dx.doi.org/10.4135/9781483391144.n337>

10.4135/9781483391144.n337

Further Readings

Dolby, S. (2005). *Self-help books: Why Americans keep reading them*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press.

Greenberg, G. (1994). *The self on the shelf: Recovery books and the good life*. Albany: State University of New York Press.

- Kaminer, W. (1992). *I'm dysfunctional, you're dysfunctional: The recovery movement and other self-help fashions*. New York, NY: Addison-Wesley.
- Katz, A. H. (Ed.). (1992). *Self-help: Concepts and applications*. Philadelphia, PA: Charles Press.
- Lichterman, P. (1992). Self-help reading as a thin culture. *Media, Culture, and Society*, 14(4), 421–447.
- Redden, G. (2002). The new agents: Personal transfiguration and radical privatization in New Age self-help. *Journal of Consumer Culture*, 2(1), 33–52.
- Rimke, H. (2000). Governing citizens through self-help literature. *Cultural Studies*, 14(1), 61–78.
- Rimke, H., & Brock, D. (2012). The culture of therapy: Psychocentrism in everyday life. In M. P. Thomas, D. Raby, & D. Brock (Eds.), *Power and everyday practices* (pp. 182–202). Toronto, Ontario, Canada: Nelson.
- Starker, S. (1989). *Oracle at the supermarket: The American preoccupation with self-help books*. New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction.