

Reading Self-Help Literature in Russia: Governmentality, Psychology and Subjectivity

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Abstract

Self-help has become a booming business over the past decades and an increasingly visible part of popular media culture worldwide. The paper analyzes the arrival and effects of this cultural technology in post-Soviet Russia after more than seventy years of socialism. It examines how Russians are engaging with popular psychology self-help as a technology of the self and how they are making it meaningful in their lives. Drawing on a set of one-to-one and focus group interviews conducted with self-help readers, it examines how these individuals negotiate the new ethics and the normative models of personhood put forward by the self-help genre. It argues that popular psychology has offered a new language for making sense of the self and the social world, and highlights how the readers critically engage with the normalizing power of popular psychology by drawing on a number of local historically sedimented discourses.

Keywords: Self-help; popular psychology; subjectivity; governmentality; Russia; power

Introduction

Self-help and self-improvement have become a booming business over the past decades and an increasingly visible part of popular media culture worldwide. As an exemplar of the larger therapeutic culture that has come to characterize postwar advanced capitalist societies, it provides an influential cultural matrix of metaphors, narrative schemas and explanatory frameworks for making sense of the self and the social world (Illouz 2008).¹ Self-help literature, reality-TV, lifestyle and women's magazines and life coaching have introduced a host of 'engineers of the human soul' – therapists, healers, motivational speakers, psychologists who advise us on how to 'make over' and manage our lives and selves, and how to become healthy, successful and happy.² Nowhere is this phenomenon more widespread and evident than in the USA, where the figure of the self-made man and the concept of self-help have long been constitutive elements of the national identity (Coyle and Grodin 1993; McGee 2005). Self-improvement is reported to constitute a \$10.5-billion-a-year industry in the USA (*The U.S. Market for Self-Improvement Products & Services* 2010), and the number of self-help books more than doubled in American markets from 1972 to 2000 (McGee 2005:11). The world-wide bestsellers in self-help have also chiefly emanated from the USA (Hazleden 2010: 294).

While existing studies on self-help have predominately focused on advanced liberal societies and in particular the American context, this paper examines what is happening as this cultural technology arrives in post-Soviet Russia, after more than seventy years of state socialism. With the lifting of censorship and the privatization of the publishing industry following the Soviet Union's demise, cultural production in Russia shifted from a didactic and highbrow model characteristic of the Soviet era towards a market-driven and entertainment-centred one. New genres gained ground and cultural practices that existed underground in Soviet society, such as the occult, the paranormal and magic, surfaced and became commercialized (Lindquist 2006). Popular psychology self-help was among the new genres proliferating in the post-Soviet media landscape. It enjoys significant popularity in today's Russia, which is evidenced by the huge amount of self-help books on offer.³

This paper analyses how Russians are engaging with popular psychology self-help as a technology of the self (Foucault 1988), and how they are rendering it meaningful in their lives. Drawing on a set of one-to-one and focus group interviews conducted with self-help readers, it examines the ways in which the readers position themselves and negotiate the new ethics⁴ as well as the normative models of personhood, a certain 'regime of the self' (Rose 1998), put forward by the popular psychological discourse.⁵ In addressing this question, the paper takes the following format. It first discusses previous scholarship on self-help and the therapeutic culture and identifies three lacunae, which it will later address. It then offers a brief historical overview of self-fashioning practices in the Soviet Union. Following that, the paper examines, first, how popular psychological discourse has problematized the self and social relations in a new way, casting them as objects of psychological inquiry and intervention, and second, how readers are critically engaging and negotiating the new 'ethical truths' and normative models produced by the self-help literature.

Researching self-help

The existing scholarship on popular psychology has mainly focused on self-help literature and we can identify two strands within this body of work. First are studies devoted to the empirical analysis of self-help manuals; these have examined, among other things, the history of this genre in the US (Woodstock 2005; McGee 2005; Ehrenreich 2009), representations of gender in relationship manuals (Hochschild 1994; Crawford 2004; Hazleden 2011), generic conventions and techniques of persuasion (Woodstock 2006; Hazleden 2010), and the self-help genre's relationships with larger economic and political formations and shifts (McGee 2005; Ehrenreich 2009; Hochschild 1994). A number of studies have adopted a Foucauldian framework and have detailed the ways in which self-help literature exercises power by normalizing certain understandings of selfhood and the social world, and how it attempts to transform the reader's personhood through the production of 'ethical truths' (e.g. Rimke 2000; Hazleden 2003, 2004; see also Rose 1998).

Second, there is a long-standing cultural critique of self-help informed by a *Zeitdiagnose* of the nature of (late) modernity (see e.g. Rieff 1966; Lasch 1979; Furedi 2004). This body of scholarship is not grounded on a detailed empirical analysis of self-help, but rather approaches it as a quintessential element of the therapeutic culture, which is taken to epitomize various ills of 'our times': the promotion of an individualist ethos, lack of commitment to social institutions, increasing preoccupation with the self, and the promotion

of self-reliance, which leads to a withdrawal from the political domain and deflects a collective protest against structural inequalities (for a succinct review of this criticism, see Illouz 2008; Lichterman 1992). Anthony Giddens' diagnostic analyses of reflexive modernity are an exception to these otherwise quite pessimistic assessments of the therapeutic culture. He views self-help manuals as 'texts of our time' (Giddens 1992: 64) which constitute important resources for the reflexive projects of the self. In his view, self-help and other therapeutic works have an emancipatory potential, as 'they point towards changes that might release individuals from influences which block their autonomous development' (1992: 64).

This paper contributes to this existing scholarship on self-help in three ways. First, it extends the scope of the analysis from advanced liberal societies to contemporary Russia, thus highlighting how popular psychological power/knowledge operates and shapes subjectivities in a post-socialist society. Although selfhood and subjectivity have recently emerged as a key lens for understanding social and cultural change in Russia (see e.g. Rivkin-Fish 2005; Zigon 2011; Lindquist 2006), popular psychological knowledge has so far attracted only little attention (for the few exceptions, see Matza 2009 and 2010; Salmenniemi 2010 and 2012b). Second, unlike previous scholarship, which has predominantly focused on self-help literature, this paper addresses how readers engage with this genre. Self-help consumption has, as a whole, been studied surprisingly little. The few existing studies have all been conducted among US readers, mostly women (see Lichterman 1992; Grodin 1991; Simonds 1992). By analysing readers' engagement with this literary genre the paper helps to highlight the reasons for its increasing popularity in contemporary societies.

The third contribution the paper makes is related to scholarship on governmentality. Informed by a Foucauldian framework, we understand popular psychology as a form of governmentality, i.e. as an encounter between the technologies of domination of others and those of the self (Foucault 1994: 225). Popular psychology governs by encouraging us to shape our ways of being, feeling and acting towards particular normative goals in order to become particular types of subjects, and thus normalizes certain understandings of the self and social relations. The dominant focus in governmentality studies has been on disentangling the strategies, techniques and procedures of government deployed by institutions, while the perspective of those *subject to* governmentality techniques has been largely neglected.

The paper addresses this lacuna in governmentality studies by unraveling self-help readers' ways of negotiating the normalizing power of self-help. Eva Illouz (2008: 4), drawing on Philippe Corcuff's work, has recently criticized governmentality as a 'bulldozer concept' which tends to flatten the complexity of the social and produce overly homogenizing interpretations. In line with this critique, we aim here to produce a context-sensitive analysis of the uses and effects of popular psychological knowledge, with particular attention devoted to analysing readers' agency. In order to do this, we draw on the perspective of positioning developed by Davies and Harre. This theoretical and methodological perspective recognizes the constitutive force of discursive practices, that is, how people are positioned through these practices, how these practices demarcate and constrain the grid of intelligibility (what is sayable and thinkable in a particular historical moment) and how subjectivity is generated through the learning and using of these practices. However, the perspective of positioning at the same time acknowledges that there is room for critical reflection and agency in exercising

choice in relation to discursive practices and in negotiating new positions. (Davies and Harre 1990.)

Self-fashioning in Soviet society

Unlike in postwar western societies, where the therapeutic discourse gained ascendancy as the dominant symbolic framework for making sense of selfhood (Rose 1998; Illouz 2008), ‘psy’ knowledges occupied a relatively marginal position in the Soviet Union. Psychoanalysis flourished in Russia during the first decades of the twentieth century, but it was suppressed during the 1930s (Etkind 1997) and psychiatry was partly harnessed for disciplining dissenting voices in Soviet society.

In late Soviet society psychotherapeutic practices nevertheless began slowly developing and some conceptual ideas from psychoanalysis were adopted (Lauterbach 1984, quoted in Matza 2010: 114). Psy knowledges were not, however, popularized in the same way as they were in post-war Western societies. Biomedical and physiological discourses as well as pedagogical discourse, partly rooted in psychological models but emphasizing correct (political) socialization, constituted the dominant conceptual languages for understanding selfhood in Soviet society (for more details, see Matza 2010).

Despite the marginal role of psy knowledges, self-improvement was nevertheless a key element of the Communist project, which aimed at engendering an entirely new kind subject, the ‘New Soviet Man’.⁶ This New Man was to be characterized by a heightened consciousness and a sense of social duty, sacrifice for the common good, and self-mastery. In the cultivation of this regulative ideal, techniques of governmentality played an important role, particularly advice manuals and individual self-training regimes (*samovospitanie*), which proliferated significantly during late Soviet years (see Kelly 2001; Kharkhordin 1999). This was connected with a shift in the rationality of government. The punitive modality of power characteristic of the Stalin era gradually gave way to an increasing emphasis on governing through guidance and establishing a ‘self-regulating society’ which ‘would correct erring citizens and prevent crimes rather than punish those that have already occurred’ (Kharkhordin 1999: 298). For example, during the 1970s the state began providing pre- and post-marital counselling services and the number of titles and categories of advice literature greatly expanded, especially in the area of inter-personal relationships, the family and private life (Kelly 2001: 317, 332–33). Print material, in general, came to occupy an increasingly pivotal position in cultivating Soviet subjects, signalling a ‘new emphasis on the independent acquisition of knowledge, on self-help, rather than on education by collective means’ (2001: 320). Self-training literature was also among these burgeoning genres in the late socialist period. The ultimate *telos* of self-training was sacrifice for the common good and self-control through strengthening the will. These virtues were to be developed through the techniques of individual self-criticism, hero identification and devising a personal development programme. (Kharkhordin 1999: 237–47.)

Perhaps counter-intuitively, these Soviet techniques and understandings of the self share certain affinities with those circulating today in both Western and Russian popular psychology books. Both Soviet and contemporary discourses call for incessant work on the

self and constant self-monitoring and self-evaluation, emphasize a rational and methodical manner of planning of one's activities, and encourage a careful management of emotions. However, a significant difference is that in Soviet society the work on the self was to be performed for the common good – self-improvement was to support the building of communism – while in the contemporary self-help discourse the *telos* is primarily to gain personal happiness and success. Due to the centrality of the collectivist ideology, self-training was met with some degree of uneasiness in Soviet society. It was suspected that self-training could potentially lapse into 'fruitless self-rummaging' (*samokopanie*), which was viewed as characteristic of bourgeois 'reactionary-idealist psychology'. In Soviet society, self-training was not supposed to be practiced for its own sake, but rather should manifest itself in concrete actions and deeds. (Kharkhordin 1999: 253–55.)

Inventing psychological problems

Despite the certain affinities in the techniques and understandings of the self between Soviet and Western frameworks discussed above, the self-help readers we interviewed conceived of contemporary popular psychology as a fundamentally new system of knowledge brought about by the social transformation. They symbolically associated it with the West and, to a lesser degree, with the East (e.g. Zen Buddhism and feng shui). The overwhelming majority of them said they had not encountered psychological knowledge during the Soviet years and did not mention Soviet advice manuals or self-training in this context. The interviewees described psychology in the Soviet Union as having been confined only to professional circles and as something that 'was not for the common people', as one interviewee noted.

Only a few interviewees had some experience of psychology during the Soviet era. They had either read books by the well-known Soviet psychologist Vladimir Levi, one of the very few writing about psychological issues for the general public, or had been trained as psychologists. For example, 55-year-old Grigorii received psychology education in Moscow and had participated during his student years in a number of psychological *tusovki*⁷, 'personal growth groups' (*gruppy lichnostogo rosta*), as he called them. These groups had experimented with sex therapy, hypnosis and psychotherapy and applied ideas from both domestic and foreign psychological literature. As Grigorii put it, 'at that time, it wasn't possible to conduct psychotherapy. There were no schools, no social support, it was all about personal initiatives, personal inventions'. Such *tusovki* served as hubs of professional and personal self-realization within the nooks and crannies of ideological regulation.

The first experience of popular psychology for the overwhelming majority of our interviewees had been Dale Carnegie's classical self-help book *How to Win Friends and Influence People* (originally published in 1937), which went through 68 editions in Russian from 1989 to 1997 (Kelly 2001: 371). The readers recalled how reading Carnegie had been a 'real fashion' – to such an extent that 'every self-respecting citizen apparently had to read Carnegie', as one interviewee remarked. Popular psychology content also began circulating through other mass media outlets. 43-year-old Varvara recalled how she first encountered Carnegie's ideas in a youth magazine during the last years of the Soviet Union and discovered popular psychology as a new form of knowledge:

I understood that if some situations emerge, then one can consult popular psychology literature... when a child is born, when problems in the family arise, and when they are not exactly problems but one just wants to, perhaps, improve one's interaction (*obshchenie*) with people.

The interviewees felt that the social transformation in Russia had engendered a host of new problems, which self-help literature helped them to grapple with and make sense of. The 'external' socio-economic crisis in Russian society was seen as having engendered an 'internal crisis', a need to rethink and re-orient one's familiar ways of perceiving, acting and being. In this way the interviewees forged an intimate link between macro-level socio-structural changes and their embodied subjectivities. They believed that the general insecurity and instability of everyday life in Russia created stress and was draining people psychologically, and this state of affairs was often juxtaposed with the Soviet social order characterized by stability and predictability. Said Ekaterina, a 45-year-old commercial director:

I think that during the Soviet era people didn't have that many problems. On a mass scale, people had the illusion of complete protection. Your child will be sent to a pioneer camp and if he wants, he can start studying in an institute, or go to work in a factory and will be given a flat. One didn't need to worry about anything. And that's why many of the psychological problems we're having now didn't exist then.

What the interview accounts reveal, however, is that it is not only a question of new problems, but also very importantly of new kinds of problematizations, a new kind of grid of intelligibility, that the popular psychological discourse has been conveying. It has introduced a new symbolic body of knowledge casting issues understandable in the new language of psychology; it has brought new domains under inspection and made them the subject of intervention.

Ekaterina: People simply did not know about them [psychological problems in the USSR]. Or perhaps there were psychological problems, but no one thought about them. But now you cannot help but think about them, they are becoming so obvious, they really disturb your life. But during Soviet times, on the one hand, you didn't have time to dwell on yourself, because we were all engaged in societal labour. And on the other hand, there simply was no need for that. If a husband cheated on his wife, the wife didn't need to soil her hands, she just needed to go to the local party committee, call for a meeting and the husband would be told: 'Vas, what are you doing, you have a son who is a pioneer, why on earth are you fooling around?'

Anna: You know, in general, there were no such [psychological] problems [in the USSR].

Valentina: Such values as health, family life and enjoying life have emerged here only recently.

Interviewer: Why were they absent during Soviet times?

Vera: Well, we gave our health to communism. Our health was for somebody else, not for ourselves. We didn't think about our health. (...) Medicine was responsible for our health, other ministries for money. It didn't seem that popular psychology could solve all that.

Valentina: You know, there was a motto – healthy spirit in a healthy body. To reinforce health, physical culture was the main thing and only after that came the soul. And now it turns out that you have (...) a certain psychological mood (*psikhologicheskii nastroi*), and only after that you are healthy.

The often reiterated view expressed in the interviews that psychological problems 'did not exist' in the Soviet Union and that 'no one talked about them' illustrates how psychological discourse has constituted a new object of knowledge – psychological problems – and has provided a new symbolic framework for making sense of experience and the self. Of course, people were depressed and had inter-personal conflicts during Soviet times, but these were not articulated *as* psychological problems and as requiring psychological intervention. Valentina's quote above illustrates how the introduction of 'psy' has entailed a redefinition of certain social categories, such as what constitutes health. In the Soviet Union the physical dimension of health was prioritized as a prerequisite of a healthy mind, and having a healthy body was also perceived as an ethical duty towards the state.⁸ By contrast, the interviewees interpreted that today the psychological dimension has been foregrounded and instead of collective concern, health has become a personal and increasingly psychological issue.

The interview accounts also highlight how readers interpreted popular psychology to reflect a certain shift in the rationality of government. If the Soviet people were conceived of as objects of government policy – as Ekaterina says in her quote above, 'your child will be sent', 'he will be given' – Russians today were seen as being obliged to become subjects of their own lives, responsible for their own problems. Several interviewees illustrated this with family conflicts. In the Soviet Union these conflicts could be resolved by appealing to the local party committee which disciplined erring husbands and wives (see also Field 1998), while today the interviewees felt that one's problems had to be solved by oneself. In other words, inter-personal problems in Soviet times were conceived of as *communal* and *practical* problems to be solved by the disciplinary machinery of the state, while today these problems were conceived of as *individual* and *psychological* ones to be solved by the individual him/herself, with the help of psy expertise. This highlights how the readers understood the psychological self-help discourse as producing a self-regulating psychological subject with an ethical duty to be aware of, understand and govern one's self. The state regulation was seen as being supplanted by increasing self-regulation.

However, the novelty of the psychological discourse in Russia was not only seen as being linked with the Soviet past, but also as reflecting a more profound 'civilizational difference'. Vadim, a 26-year-old designer, argued that the Russian language and culture lacked concepts with which to understand 'psychological conditions' (*psikhologicheskie sostoiianiia*). He interpreted esoteric literature as a sub-genre of popular psychology and as introducing a new problematic as well as vocabulary to Russia, that of 'inner work' (*vnutrennia rabota*).

Well, we can speak about some (...) civilizational differences. Because I read esoteric literature and there are some things about Zen Buddhism which describe quite specific (...) psychological states by using terms which have no equivalents in the Russian language. So the subject of inner work, which has been in the traditions of so-called Eastern societies since time immemorial, has been absent here as a problem and it must be developed.

Local knowledge, local selves

Our self-help readers engaged in the popular psychological discourse selectively, critically and ambivalently, and in an ongoing dialogue with other cultural frameworks (for a similar finding, see Lichterman 1992; Grodin 1991; Matza 2009). Their reading can be characterized as a kind of ‘pick and mix’ method: they selected elements from the books they found useful, but did not accept the whole package.⁹ They explained that popular psychology should not be seen as a ‘dogma’ or ‘panacea’, but rather as an ‘interlocutor’ (*sobesednik*) facilitating personal reflection, and a ‘whisper’ (*podskazka*) encouraging one to follow a certain direction in life. They maintained that it was important to ‘filter’ the information. Argued Mariia, an economist in her fifties:

After reading [a self-help text] the first thing you must do is comprehend (*osmyslit*) it. Second, you must understand that there are no universal recipes. And third, I think that everyone’s individuality (*individual’nost*) is important. That is, personality must come first, because each human being is a person (*lichnost*), an individual (*individualen*), and there can’t be universal recipes for all.

As Mariia above, the readers in general took a critical stand toward what they felt was a universalizing tendency in self-help books, and stressed the context-bound nature of knowledge, experience and selfhood.¹⁰ Most readers were particularly wary of books written in a ‘how-to’ manner and presented as ‘guidebooks to life’ (*putevoditel’ po zhizni*). They felt these books gave overly categorical advice, and rather wished to find in them food for thought and to draw their own conclusions.

Ekaterina: I don’t choose books which promise in the title immediate results. Like ‘how to become rich in 50 hours’ or something like that. There are lots of such books now, for example, ‘how to get married in three days’. (...) I don’t buy these books because I think that these problems are rather serious, and if there was such a universal recipe, everybody would be married, everybody would be a millionaire and it’s unclear who would sweep the streets then (laughing). So I choose books that don’t promise miracles but nevertheless offer some techniques which explain why for example, such a problem (...) could arise. And what can be done in this or that case. (...) It’s rather about some inner state, inner balance, about how to solve a problem that has arisen.

A recurring trope in this context was ‘imposement’ (*naviazvyvanie*): the readers criticized that the books imposed certain, usually Western, models on the Russian audience and posited them as universal truths. As 48-year-old psychology teacher Mikhail remarked:

We are forced to live according to instructions: do this and do that. This is the main drawback. It seems to me that the books give advice that is too unequivocal. They try to impose a certain mentality.

A too slavish adherence to popular psychology was also seen as leading to a ‘fictional self’, displacing the ‘authentic self’:

Liudmila: The books give a recipe that you take and put to use right away. It doesn’t matter if it suits you or not – you just apply it. And it works. This idea is something that worries me. Perhaps that method doesn’t fit me. (...) Sometimes you can see how a person is trying to do it [apply a method], but it doesn’t work. Because he’s not sincere, because he’s just trying to recall these formulas, the words you must say, and how you must look.

In insisting on this context-bound understanding of the self and of knowledge, the readers drew on a historically dominant discourse of personality (*lichnost*) in Russian culture. Influenced by German romanticism, this discourse emphasizes the uniqueness, individuality and creative potential of every human being (Plotnikov 2008). It has affinities with what Bellah et al. (1985) called ‘expressive individualism’ in their study on American individualism. The discourse of *lichnost* represents the self not as a self-sufficient individual characteristic of the Euro-American tradition, but rather emphasizes ‘a person with self-knowledge, self-respect, and the ability to engage in ethical relations with others’ (Rivkin-Fish 2005: 119). In his conceptual historical analysis, Plotnikov (2008: 11) argues that this discourse has been a highly stable and influential one in Russian intellectual history from the mid-19th century onwards. It has conceived of personality as a ‘project’: it is not something given, but something that must be achieved. Such an understanding of the self also manifested itself in the Soviet project to engender a New Man through continuous pedagogical efforts aimed at developing and shaping the communist personality (2008: 12).

The need to read self-help material critically and selectively was first and foremost articulated by the interviewees in relation to foreign literature. Foreign popular psychology models could not be applied in a ‘one-size-fits-all’ manner, but rather they should be reworked and ‘translated’ into the Russian reality:

Ekaterina: I think that the books by [Dale] Carnegie were very popular in Russia not long ago (...). With all my respect to this author and the understanding that there are a lot of correct things in his books, I think that it’s just impossible to communicate with people who have read them. Because there is the theme that a person should be called by his/her first name... and here it begins: Sveta, hello, Sveta, we want to..., to tell you, Sveta... It’s simply annoying. It’s clear these

people have read Carnegie. (...) Anyway, the result is rather unfortunate, I would say. It's not useful. And it's not typical of our mentality.

Svetlana: Well, maybe not everything is applicable. (...) One has to filter everything in relation to oneself. And not to take it [self-help advice] as some kind of a dogma, a canon, which you should follow. And when you read, you should take a critical attitude, and you should look at something and say: Yeah, this I can take. Our [Russian self-help authors] borrow [from foreign books] (...) and rework it all (...) for the needs of our reality. (...) Feng shui, of course. This is a Chinese philosophy about harmonizing a person and a home. Therefore it's not appropriate [in Russia]. But it's interesting and one can pick something from it for oneself.

Interviewer: So it can be applied partly? Some elements can be borrowed?

Svetlana: Yes, of course, but not entirely. In its totality it's very difficult [to apply].

This selective and critical engagement with self-help literature can be interpreted as being linked with the Soviet modes of power/knowledge. Soviet pedagogical thought and moral education were based upon an authoritarian and didactic approach as well as an unquestionable authority bestowed upon experts (Rivkin-Fish 2005: 93, 115). The Marxism-Leninism underpinning all official expert knowledge was considered to be scientific truth, which could not be publicly called into question. Our interviewees' allergy to categorical advice and their wish to draw their own conclusions can thus be interpreted against this background. Some of our younger interviewees who had not lived during Soviet times also contemplated their reading vis-à-vis the Soviet past. For example, 21-year-old student Karina, who had read both Soviet and contemporary popular psychology, said she shunned the authoritarian line of persuasion and the trumpeting of one absolute truth in Soviet books. However, although the interviewees were critical of categorical advice, most of them nevertheless did value scientific expertise and also evaluated self-help books according to the authors' educational credentials.

One of the fundamental principles of positive thinking, the conviction that words and thoughts directly produce social reality and that everything depends on oneself (Woodstock 2005), was also criticized by the majority of interviewees. Popular psychology was seen as overlooking the socio-structural embeddedness of social actors and the ways it impacts on how one can move in social space. For example, the interviewees pointed out that one can hardly become rich by only changing one's thoughts, without start-up capital or entrepreneurial skills. As Zhanna, a journalist in her twenties, argued:

I personally see, first of all, as a great logical mistake, that what we think about actually exists as such. That is, our thoughts and only our thoughts can objectively change the reality. And, probably, the second thing is that no matter who you are, in any case just by getting this little [self-help] book, (...) you can do whatever you want and become the best. Even if you're a big fat zero.

The emphasis on self-responsibility in the positive thinking literature was also perceived by some interviewees as stigmatizing. 43-year-old Varvara criticized the conception of an

autonomous and responsible self which through increasing self-knowledge can effect a change in one's circumstances. She found this message debilitating and even chauvinistic:

I think they [self-help books] promote this idea that if you understand why something happens in your life, and you change something, then everything else must change as well. (...) I think some authors even sometimes place an additional feeling of guilt on the reader. Because sometimes they sound reproachful, [saying] that you are not adequate and that's why everything is bad for you, that you are to blame for your own problems. (...) I had a negative experience with one book by Lazarev dealing with the diagnostics of karma (...), because I had a difficult family situation. And when I read it, I had the feeling that (...) resolving that situation depended only on me. And since I couldn't resolve it, it was difficult for me to read that so much depends on me. (...) And after that I have thought that there's some male chauvinism [in Lazarev's books].

However, a few of our female interviewees did embrace positive thinking and believed that by changing themselves the world around them would change as well. They were enthusiastic and long-standing self-help readers who employed techniques of self-transformation, such as visualizations and affirmations, on a daily basis. One of them, 48-year-old Natasha, explained:

One has to behave correctly. Everything depends on behaviour. (...) I realized that in general, all our wounds originate from our behaviour. Well, I certainly have been trying (...) never to offend people. If you offend somebody, then you attract illness to yourself.

Such an individual-centred conception of social change has a certain appeal since it resonates with the widespread sense of powerlessness and inability to influence the structural conditions of everyday existence in Russian society (for a fuller discussion of this, see Rivkin-Fish 2005; Salmenniemi 2008). If effecting a broader systemic change is felt to be next to impossible, self-help can provide a sense of agency: one can at least try to change oneself. Such a sense of agency that self-help reading was experienced to have given was mentioned by some of the female interviewees as particularly rewarding. They argued that self-help offered 'awareness that you can do something to change things' and that it 'gives a possibility to understand that there is a way out'. Self-help, in a sense, provided them with 'a way of conjuring hope', a way to 'maintain their engagement with tomorrow' (Lindquist 2006: 8–9).

Questioning *homo economicus*

As was discussed above, popular psychology problematizes new areas and themes and provides a new language for understanding them. Two issues in particular emerged strongly in the interviews as novel ideas popularized by self-help literature: money and sex as key elements of a new normative model of a good life and healthy self. The interviewees thus interpreted self-help literature as raising new ethical substances – sexuality and attitudes toward wealth – to be worked upon and monitored, and as suggesting a new *telos* of sexual

pleasure and economic success instead of the Soviet normative requirement of sacrifice for the common good.

During the Soviet years sexuality was a taboo issue little discussed in public. The official approach emphasized sexual restraint and posited the heterosexual nuclear family as the only legitimate family form. Access to information about sexuality and family planning methods was highly restricted (Rivkin-Fish 2005). Some of our interviewees, such as the self-identified lesbian and LGBT activist Zhanna, welcomed the liberalization and pluralization of discourses concerning sexuality and family that popular psychology was seen to promote, while others felt that these discourses were ‘grotesque’, essentially ‘Western’ and not suitable for the ‘Russian mentality’. The new *telos* and vocabulary of popular psychology was discussed in relation to the Soviet past by 43-year-old psychology teacher Valentina:

In Soviet popular psychology, one could regard as an achievement of goals for example success at work and respect of comrades, but here [in contemporary self-help] the same goal (...) can be conceived of in terms of obtaining the maximum amount of pleasure in bed or a maximum amount of money (...). The words with which these things are described are different. Such words as ‘sexuality’ (*seksual’nost’*) and ‘stylishness’ (*stil’nost’*) have emerged. (...) ‘Oh, you’re so sexy, you’re so stylish.’ Well, people could also say: ‘You are so beautiful, everything fits you, you have good taste.’

A central current in the interview accounts was readers’ criticism toward the new kind of utilitarian individualism (Bellah et al. 1985) and materialist values which the self-help genre was seen to ‘domesticate’ to Russia from the West, in particular from America. The ‘Russian mentality’ was seen as differing from the American one characterized by a ‘love of money’ and the symbolic association between money and success. The interviewees critiqued self-help literature for propagating, to paraphrase one interviewee, the ‘conversion of everything into a monetary equivalent’ and the conviction that ‘the world is spinning around you’. In their view, the self-help discourse put forward the normative model of *homo economicus* marked by goal-orientated, manipulative and calculating behaviour, geared towards maximizing one’s personal happiness and pursuing self-interest instead of the collective good. This *homo economicus* was seen as embodied in the figure of the businessman and entrepreneur, who has displaced the heroic Soviet worker as the new cultural ideal in the Russian symbolic order (Salmenniemi 2012a).

In positioning themselves vis-à-vis and negotiating this new normativity promoted by popular psychology, the readers drew on a historically sedimented discursive formation juxtaposing the West, coded as materialist, immoral and rationalist, with Russia, signified as spiritual, moral and mystical (see Pesmen 2000; Hellberg-Hirn 1998). This discourse has centrally underpinned the understandings of Russian national identity since the nineteenth century, and it also involves a critique of European individualism as something antithetical and alien to Russia as well as an understanding of Russia’s intelligentsia as the nation’s conscience and the embodiment of morality and integrity (Fitzpatrick 1992; Boym 1994). In Russian cultural history, the spiritual has been symbolically lifted over the material: *byt*, everyday existence, has been represented as a numbing daily grind, while *bytie*, spiritual being, has been signified as ‘real’ life (Boym 1994: 29). Money and trade have been regarded with suspicion (Kelly

and Volkov 1998: 291) and the petty bourgeoisie (*meshchanstvo*) has been criticized for its 'non-Russian' and 'egoistic' preoccupation with privacy, material objects and bad taste (Boym 1994:67–8, 89). Such an articulation was a key element of cultural self-understanding in both Imperial Russia and the Soviet Union. Our interviewees mobilized this complex, historically layered discursive formation in critiquing the materialist and individualist tenets of contemporary self-help. As Nadezhda, a 37-year-old teacher, argued:

The bottom line of all these books is that you must love money. This is the basis for business. (...) For example, there are people who can work in business; these are the people who really love money. And there are people who could work in business, but they don't, because money is not of paramount importance for them. (...) I understand that many people must first change their internal concepts in order to orient themselves to these books, so that the books could begin to work. That is, you have to love money. But most people in my circle of acquaintances like their personal freedom and value it much more highly than money, for example.

For 37-year-old Nikolai, who had dropped out of university and had worked at odd jobs, the question of money was a 'painful one', as he felt that he 'earned in no way enough for a guy of my age'. He had tried to change his attitude to money with the assistance of self-help books, but was critical of the conceptions they provided. He balked at the idea of money as an absolute value and posited inner harmony as a *telos* for self-fashioning, as did several other interviewees as well:

It's bad when a man is for money and not money for the man. And, unfortunately, there are many psychological books, or literature disguised as such, that teach us how to make money (...). Again, when they start talking about success in life (...), they assume that everyone reading it is certainly a successful businessman. (...) That's why I read more books that are closer to the esoteric. (...) That is, there are moments when yes, you can become successful in life, and you'll achieve more things in life. (...) [But] that is not an end in itself, to be successful, to earn a lot. The aim is to have harmony within yourself.

The overwhelming majority of interviewees had a sceptical or outright negative attitude toward advice books on acquiring wealth. In their view, Western books about wealth were unsuitable for the 'Russian mentality' and moreover unhelpful in the chaotic and unregulated Russian business environment. In contrast, Russian books on the topic could not really be written, they argued, because of the inevitably dodgy methods involved in accruing wealth within the context of Russia's 'wild capitalism'. As one reader ironically remarked, the books 'could actually never say who you had to kill' in order to make a fortune. Many interviewees also contemplated the symbolic re-coding of material wealth as a measure of success in relation to the Soviet era when wealth was considered immoral, and felt it was difficult to reconcile these two opposite understandings.

However, a few readers employed in the new business sector did regard advice books on wealth and the values they promoted in a more positive light. They argued that the new capitalist logic had enabled social differentiation and legitimized the pursuit of wealth.

Svetlana, a retired physician and entrepreneur in her sixties, symbolically aligned a healthy self with material wellbeing:

Now you can ‘stand out’ (*probit’sia*), and these [self-help] books help you to stand out. This psychology helps to construct yourself, and to (...) become successful. (...) When they [self-help books] began to appear, (...) it was both possible and necessary to achieve success in life. I personally spent most of my life in times when to be wealthy was considered indecent. Everyone had to be equally poor. And now (...) I understand that it’s better to be rich. It’s better, more interesting, it raises one’s self-esteem (*samootsenka*).

The globally circulating individual-centred self-help message of love and care of oneself as an ethical obligation (Hazleden 2003) was also something that the Russian readers viewed critically. In the Soviet Union, self-absorption and individualism were regarded as bourgeois vices and antithetical to communist morality. Also in the West, love of self has historically been associated with pathological egoism and narcissism, but over the past decades popular psychological discourses have destabilized this by promoting the ethic of self-love and self-care as a necessary requirement for a healthy and happy self (Rimke 2000; Hazleden 2003). Our interviewees expressed ambivalence toward this new ethics revolving around a *telos* of self-love and personal happiness, and contemplated it in relation to communist morality. Vera, a housewife in her sixties, had tried to adopt this new ethics, but she admitted: ‘I somehow didn’t manage to love myself. It’s kind of egoism even.’ Iuliia, a teacher in her late thirties, continued:

In the Soviet Union everything was for the common good, for the sake of the country. And now it’s more about psychology. You must follow your interests. Think about how you are and what are you. Now it’s more focused on your own benefit, rather than the interests of the country, or global issues. Now (...) it’s ‘love yourself, and you will achieve everything, believe in yourself, don’t pay attention to obstacles, set goals, and that’s all’. That is, don’t care about the rest, roughly speaking. If you want, love money and you can achieve anything.

Conclusion

This paper has unravelled the analytical space between subjectivity and self-help technology by examining how self-help readers positioned themselves in relation to the new ethics and regime of the self constructed by self-help literature. The psychological discourse has introduced new ‘repertoires of imagination’ (Lindquist 2006: 2) in Russia by coining new terms for thinking and speaking about the self. It invites readers to recognize themselves as particular types of persons and thus seeks to subject them to a certain moral order. In this way, the self is constituted as both an object of knowledge and a subject and object of government (Rimke 2000: 68).

Our analysis highlights that popular psychological knowledge is serving as a cultural resource for making sense of and positioning oneself in relation to the new capitalist logic prevalent in

Russia and the new ethics and models of personhood it is seen to bring with it. Narratives of nationality – of ‘we Russians’ as distinct from the ‘West’ or the ‘East’ – centrally permeate the accounts of popular psychology and personhood. Our interviewees took a critical stand toward what they felt to be the dominant regime of the self in popular psychology, i.e. the supposedly universal subject of *homo economicus* characterized by utilitarian individualism, self-responsibility, goal-orientation as well as maximization of pleasure and material success. This critical engagement can be read as a symbolic struggle against the normalizing power of self-help technology. As Foucault writes:

[t]he main objective of these struggles is to attack not so much “such or such” an institution of power, or group, or elite, or class but rather a technique, a form of power. This form of power applies itself to immediate everyday life which categorizes the individual, marks him by his own individuality, attaches him to his own identity, imposes a law of truth on him which he must recognize and which others have to recognize in him. It is a form of power which makes individuals subjects. (Foucault 1982: 781.)

In negotiating this normalizing power of self-help, our interviewees drew on a discourse of national identity symbolically juxtaposing Russia with the West and positioning the intelligentsia as a bulwark of personal freedom, a discourse of creative and unique *lichnost*, and a discourse of Soviet morality emphasizing collectivist ethos. By so doing, the readers conceived of the self as a relational and unique individual embedded in cultural, social and historical structures, and orientated towards ‘inner harmony’ rather than material success. This highlights how the new therapeutic knowledge of self-help intertwines and articulates with the particular local, historically sedimented understandings concerning personhood, ethics and nationality.

Notes

¹ We are grateful to Anni Kangas and the two anonymous reviewers for their helpful comments on this paper.

² Originally the term ‘engineers of the human soul’ was coined by Joseph Stalin in reference to writers and other producers of culture in the Soviet Union.

³ We have not been able to find reliable figures about the sales of self-help literature in Russia, but self-help books often appear on the bestseller list published by the journal *Knizhnoe obozrenie*. A nation-wide survey on Russians’ reading patterns also reveals a growth in the consumption of advice literature (Dubin and Zorkaia 2008: 26).

⁴ Foucault (1998: 132–37) distinguishes between moral codes and ethical practices concerned primarily with moral subjectivation, i.e., forming a relationship to one’s self through various exercises, techniques and discourses. Although moral codes and ethics are intertwined, self-help as a therapeutic form of knowledge is geared more to the ethical practices of the self, giving prescriptions on how one should work on the self.

⁵ The interviews were conducted in the city of Saratov in co-operation with Galina Karpova and Olga Bendina from the Saratov State Technical University. Saratov has about 837,000 inhabitants and is located in Western Russia. We conducted three focus group discussions and 15 one-on-one interviews with self-help readers. The interviewees were recruited using the snowballing technique, drawing on our research team’s networks. We interviewed 31 self-help readers, 21 women and 9 men. The age of the interviewees varied from 20 to 70 years.

The majority of our interviewees can be classified as belonging to intelligentsia. Among the interviewees were students, medical doctors, teachers, psychologists, service personnel, housewives, pensioners and entrepreneurs. All but three interviewees had a higher education and the overwhelming majority reported having an average level of income. Advice literature is mainly consumed in Russia by women, younger age groups, and highly educated people (Dubin and Zorkaia 2008: 28). Our sample corresponds to this overall profile, albeit it includes interviewees of varying ages.

⁶ Self-improvement has a long history in Russia; for a comprehensive historical review, see Kelly (2001).

⁷ The Russian term *tusovka* refers to a subculture of groups of friends and like-minded people who spend time together.

⁸ This manifested itself particularly in the campaigns for ‘physical culture’, *fizkul'tura*. Exercises in physical culture served as a tool to engender the physically and mentally strong New Soviet Man, and were to prepare the citizenry to defend the Soviet nation. For a fuller discussion, see Simpson (2004).

⁹ The interviewees engaged in the business sector tended to view self-help books more positively than those employed in traditional intelligentsia occupations. Age did not differentiate readers in this respect, but male interviewees tended to be more critical of this genre than female interviewees. Men read more professional and esoteric segments of self-help, while women were more omnivorous and dominated among self-help enthusiasts. These generational and gender dimensions of self-consumption merit still further analysis.

¹⁰ Both Russian and Western self-help texts tend to circulate the notion of universal laws of nature and universal truths (Hazleden 2010; Salmenniemi 2010).

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