Chapter 1: Self-help worlds

How to survive

A *Survival Guide for Life* was published in 2012 by Bantam Press, based in London. Bear Grylls, the book's author, is a well-known British media personality, who, on his website, portrays himself as an outdoorsman, adventurer and survivalist:

> Bear Grylls has become known around the world as one of the most recognized faces of survival and outdoor adventure. His journey to this acclaim started in the UK on the Isle of Wight, where his late father taught him to climb and sail. Trained from a young age in martial arts, Bear went on to spend three years as a soldier in the British Special Forces, serving with 21 SAS. It was here that he perfected many of the skills that his fans all over the world enjoy watching him pit against mother-nature. (Grylls, no date-c)

Along these lines, the story continues. A biographical sketch tells readers of free-fall parachuting accidents in Africa, journeys to remote regions, from Antarctica to the Arctic, and mountaineering expeditions to Mount Everest. It also highlights his high-profile media work for Channel 4 and Discovery Channel, claiming that the 'Discovery Channel's Emmy nominated TV show *Man Vs. Wild* and *Born Survivor* [...] has become one of the most watched shows on the planet, reaching an estimated 1.2 billion viewers' (Grylls, no date-c). Bear Grylls maintains his media presence through numerous channels. All of these highlight his credentials as a tough-as-nails survivalist. His Facebook page (Grylls, no date-a) shows him on what looks like a mountain top in an advertisement for the NBC's television show

Running Wild with Bear Grylls. YouTube carries videos with titles such as *Bear Grylls eats raw snake* (Grylls, 2012a). His online shop, *The Official Bear Grylls Store* (Grylls, no date-b) shows an image of the adventurer with raised arms, holding what looks like an alligator jaw. This online shop sells a broad range of clothing and hiking gear. Similarly, online shopping malls such as amazon.com offer numerous Bear Grylls-themed items, such as the *Bear Grylls Ultimate Knife*, the *Bear Grylls Survival Hatchet*, and the *Ultimate Bear Grylls Survival Pack with Multitool, Flashlight, and Fire Starter*. Grylls' books, moreover, span a variety of genres. There are, for example, his autobiography, *Mud, Sweat and Tears* (Grylls, 2011), *True Grit* (Grylls, 2013), a collection of real-life adventure stories, the exercise manual *Your Life: Train for It* (Grylls, 2014), and *Mission Survival: Gold of the Gods* (Grylls and Madden, 2008), the first part of a series of adventure novels for young adults.

Much of Grylls's work explores survivalism in terms of the skills needed to overcome extreme and hazardous environmental conditions. It is therefore perhaps unsurprising that, in September 2014, online bookseller amazon.co.uk listed *A Survival Guide for Life* (Grylls, 2012b) as the number two bestseller in the rubric 'outdoor survival skills'. *A Survival Guide for Life*, however, marks a noteworthy shift in Grylls's work in that it sets out survival strategies for 'dangerous' and difficult everyday situations. The book offers readers a pathway to a successful life, loosely defined through the metaphor of the dream. The book's opening paragraphs set out the case for dreams:

> Dreams are powerful. They are among those precious few intangibles that
> have inspired men and women to get up, go to hell and back, and change the
> world. [...] Our job is to be the dangerous type. The one who dreams day by
> day and acts to make those dreams come alive and actually happen. So take
> some time to get this right. Go for a long walk. Think big. Think about what

really makes you smile. Ask yourself what you would do if you didn't need the money. Ask yourself what really excites you. Ask what would inspire you to keep going long after most people would quit. (Grylls, 2012b: 1)

Grylls here offers a notably individualistic vision of dreams and their pursuit. Dreams, in the sense of overarching goals and ambitions that define and motivate one's life, appear as the outcome of introspection, and Grylls characterises them as the source of true personal fulfilment – what really makes you smile, what really excites you, and so forth. Throughout the book, Grylls then portrays the pursuit and achievement of one's dreams as a journey whose successful conclusion relies on the cultivation of certain values and attitudes. The image he uses to depict this journey is that of a perilous trek to the top of a mountain:

The greatest journeys all start with a single step. When you stand at the bottom of a mountain, you can rarely see a clear route to the top. It is too far away and the path too twisty and hidden behind obstacles. **The only way to climb the sucker is to start – and then keep putting one foot in front of the other, one step at a time.** (Grylls, 2012b: 7; emphasis in original)

He sets out the values and attitudes that are needed to make it to the peak in a series of 75 short chapters with titles such as 'To be brave, you first must be afraid', 'Paddle our own canoe', 'Failure isn't failure', or 'Humility is everything'. For instance, under the heading 'Cheerfulness in adversity', he invokes his experiences with the Royal Marine Commandos to remind his readers of the importance of positive thinking:

The Royal Marine Commandos, with whom I worked a lot in my military

days, have the phrase 'Cheerfulness in Adversity' as one of their founding principles – and it is a great one to live by. [...] **You can't always choose your situation, but you can always choose your attitude.** [...] So learn from the Commandos, smile when it is raining, and show cheerfulness in adversity – and look at the hard times as chances to show your mettle. "Breakfast is comin'!" (Grylls, 2012b: 246; emphasis in original)

Grylls shares his metaphor of the journey and his belief in the importance of positive thinking with numerous other self-help authors. In certain ways, there is direct continuity between Grylls's prescriptions for a good life and those of much earlier works. Positive thinking, for instance, is central to the argument of Norman Vincent Peale's 1952 classic and still popular *The Power of Positive Thinking* (1952/2003). This may be seen as an illustration of the continuing popularity of self-help texts and the persistence of well-trodden narrative paths in this genre. This connection between the ideas contained in self-help in the past and today is something we develop further in chapter two.

With its survivalist tone and its emphasis on the harsh realities of life, however, Grylls's narrative also differs markedly from those of earlier self-help bestsellers. For example, in the opening paragraph to *The Power of Positive Thinking,* Normal Vincent Peale promises:

This book is written to suggest techniques and to give examples which demonstrate that you do not need to be defeated by anything, that you can have peace of mind, improved health, and a never-ceasing flow of energy. In short, that your life can be full of joy and satisfaction. Of this I have no doubt at all for I have watched countless persons learn and apply a system

of simple procedures that has brought about the foregoing benefits in their lives. These assertions, which may appear extravagant, are based on bona-fide demonstrations in actual human experience. (Peale, 1952/2003: 1)

While Bear Grylls does promise his readers solutions to important life problems, such easy promises of joy and satisfaction are not to be found in *A Survival Guide to Life*. On the one hand, this leaner, darker approach to self-help writing may be explained through the way in which Grylls has marketed himself consistently as a tough survivalist with a life full of extreme, risky and sometimes painful moments. On the other hand, his book is part of a noteworthy trend in self-help writing in an age of austerity and diminishing opportunities in the wake of the 2008 financial crisis, the subsequent Eurocrisis, and slowing worldwide growth in the 21st century. Instead of promising far-reaching professional success, easy get-rich-quick schemes, or lasting love, some self-help bestsellers in recent years offer strategies for simply getting by, surviving, or opting out of society's pressures altogether. Other examples of this kind of survivalist self-help include *F**ck It Therapy: The Profane Way to Profound Happiness* (Parkin, 2012) by John Parkin and *Emergency: This Book Will Save Your Life* (2009) by Neill Strauss, who suddenly turned to 'survivalism' right after having presented himself as a dating coach in *The Game* (2005) and *Rules of the Game* (2007).

A Survival Guide for Life might thus be regarded as a fairly typical contemporary self-help book. The activities of the book's author are less easily classified, however. Bear Grylls has contributed to a wide variety of media genres, from adventure shows on TV to young adult novels, and this makes it difficult to simply describe him as a self-help writer. However, there are interesting parallels between the form of his professional activities and that of many prominent self-help writers. Just as many other authors of bestselling self-help texts, Grylls has strategically promoted himself through a wide variety of media channels and public

appearances. This strategic self-promotion has allowed him to consolidate the image of a tough, worldly adventurer. The products associated with his name, for instance, are consistently themed – his self-help book is titled *A Survival Guide for Life*, his adventure novels are titled *Mission Survival*, his online shop sells the *Bear Grylls Survival Hatchet*, and so forth. Bear Grylls has accordingly turned himself into a brand that stands for a rugged, survivalist approach to life. Self-branding allows Grylls to claim narrative authority when it comes to giving his readers advice in a *Survival Guide for Life*. In addition, there is a notable entrepreneurial dimension to his activities, and this brand image consistently underpins the generation of revenues from product sales and public appearances. The emphasis on survivalism and adventure in the titles of his books is just one of many obvious examples here. *A Survival Guide to Life* in this sense both contributes to and draws on the self-branding on which Bear Grylls's success as an entrepreneur depends; it is as much a self-help book as an instrument in a commercial strategy.

These activities – strategic self-promotion, self-branding, the creation of narrative authority through self-branding, and the pursuit of brand-based commercial success – characterise the work of many prominent self-help authors. The ways in which self-help books are written and marketed therefore must be understood in the context of the entrepreneurial strategies of these authors. The ostensible purpose of self-help texts is to guide their readers through a range of personal troubles, from money worries to unhappy marriages. At the same time, self-help books are written and instrumentalised as part of their writers' entrepreneurial strategies geared towards commercial success.

Our brief review of *A Survival Guide to Life* points to the key concerns of this book. We will explore self-help books and the work of their authors, and consider what self-help narratives may reveal about the social worlds in which they are written. First, we offer insight into self-help's understudied transnational presence in a globalising world. Second, we

explore the tension between, on the one hand, the cultural heterogeneity and broad (surface-level) diversity of self-help narratives that compete for readers' attention today and, on the other, self-help's overwhelming political-ideological homogeneity as a (neo-)liberal recipe for atomised, individual survival in the rat race of our contemporary world.

What are self-help books?

Self-help books offer advice and guidance on a very broad range of topics, such as intimate relationships, sexuality, marriage, divorce, friendship, serious illness, weight loss, workplace relationships, professional success, financial gain, business management, or the achievement of a generally happy and fulfilling life. The narrative form of self-help texts likewise varies considerably, including, for instance, novels, parables, autobiographies, science-based narratives, and myths.

Moreover, the boundaries between self-help and other advice genres – in particular, philosophical ethics, theological ethics, medical advice, and how-to guides for narrow practical tasks – often blur. One interesting example of self-help's weak delineation as a literary genre can be found in Tom Wolfe's 1998 novel *A Man in Full*. In Wolfe's portrait of US society in the late 1990s, Conrad Hensley, a young working class man who has fallen on hard times, comes across the writings of the ancient philosopher Epictetus (CE 55-135) and begins to draw on Stoic philosophy to survive in hard times. Similarly, the popularity of historical figures such as Sun Zi, a legendary Chinese general who may have lived in the 6th century BCE, and Niccolò Machiavelli, an Italian politician and philosopher whose work spanned the late 15th and early 16th century, has arguably been recently amplified because they have come to provide the basis for self-help books such as *Dial M for Machiavelli: Machiavellian Metaphors for Managers* (Attar 2013)*, The New Machiavelli: Renaissance Realpolitik for Modern Managers* (McAlpine 1997)*,* or *Sun Tzu The Art of War for*

Executives (Krause 1996).

Given this ease with which self-help appropriates subject matters, narrative forms and disparate literary sources, it is useful to begin our discussion with a brief characterisation of the genre. A common and defining feature of self-help texts is that they propose a careful and systematic self-examination of certain aspects of readers' conduct in everyday life. Consider the following paragraphs from American pastor Joel Osteen's *Become a Better You*:

> Each of us has an internal dialogue, an inner conversation going on with ourselves throughout the day. In fact, we talk more to ourselves than we do to anybody else. The question is, what are you saying to yourself? What do you meditate on? Positive thoughts? Empowering thoughts? Affirming thoughts? Or do you go around thinking negative, defeated thoughts, telling yourself thinks like "I'm unattractive. I'm not talented. I've made many mistakes. I'm sure God is displeased with me." That kind of negative self-talk keeps millions of people from rising higher. […]
>
> Our internal self-dialogue should always be positive and hopeful. We should always talk to ourselves with empowering, affirming thoughts. We have to get out of the habit of thinking negative thoughts about ourselves. Don't ever say, "I'm so slow. I'm unattractive. I'll never overcome my past." No, get those phrases out of your vocabulary. If you make the mistake of dwelling on that junk, it will set the limits for your life. (Osteen 2007: 121f.)

These sentences are taken from the opening pages of a chapter titled 'Have Confidence in Yourself'. Osteen here asks his readers to scrutinise their internal conversation for 'negative self-talk'. The purpose of such self-scrutiny is to enable readers to diagnose

their condition, such as 'thinking negative thoughts', and to adopt new forms of conduct in order to achieve greater success in specific arenas of their lives. In this sense, self-help books like *Become a Better You* propose techniques for self-control, such as constant self-scrutiny for negative thoughts. In turn, successful self-control may enable readers to gain a sense of self-actualisation, that is to say achievement and personal fulfilment to the fullest of their potential. Thus, Osteen explains that he would like his readers to 'talk to themselves with empowering, affirming thoughts' and avoid the 'negative' mode of thought that 'keeps millions of people from rising higher'. Self-help texts therefore have clear and explicitly stated didactical objectives, and they articulate specific sets of social norms and beliefs about the nature of social life and the relationship between individual and society. With his call for positive thinking, for example, Joel Osteen draws on a much-discussed trope in US popular culture (Ehrenreich, 2009). His declaration that 'negative self-talk keeps millions of people from rising higher' articulates the belief that individuals' attitudes determine their chances for upward social mobility, rather than the social-structural constraints of economy, politics, and culture. If this belief is accepted, pushing oneself to maintain a consistently positive attitude might indeed lead to self-actualisation, and it becomes sensible to turn positive thinking into a behavioural norm. This suggests that self-help books are never just concerned with advising individual readers on how to improve their lives. In order for their advice to become meaningful and turn into behavioural norms, they also have to promote and convince their readers of particular beliefs about the social world. This gives self-help an important political dimension that will concern us later on in this book.

Exploring self-help

In this book, we seek to offer an original perspective on self-help books and, by extension, therapeutic culture. With our analysis of self-help books, we seek to contribute to

broader debates about the roles which therapeutic narratives of self and personal development play in contemporary societies. Self-help books are a significant topic of sociological research because they constitute an important interface between psychological, medical and religious forms of expert knowledge and public narratives of the self, self-development, and the relationships between self and society. As an important genre of popular literature, they highlight the importance of therapeutic culture in the contemporary world, i.e. the role which psychological and psychotherapeutic narratives play in shaping popular understandings of self and social relationships[i].

Self-help culture is highly prominent, not just in the United States, but in many countries around the globe. The size of the entire American self-help industry, including self-help books, infomercials, seminars and trainings, has been estimated to be around 10.5 billion dollars (Marketdata, 2010: 2). The German market for self-help books has annual revenue of around 550 million Euros (*Branchen Monitor*, 2014); see chapter three for a discussion of these numbers. Certain self-help bestsellers climb the charts all around the globe. For example, after Oprah Winfrey's endorsement in 2006, the film and book *The Secret*, which preaches positive thinking as the solution to literally everything, reached large audiences in seemingly every major country on earth, from China to Iran, where some conservative mullahs were annoyed with the film repeatedly airing on state television (Fassihi, 2013). In 2009, China's Yu Dan's reinterpreted Confucius as a self-therapy coach, first in a series of televised lectures, and then in a self-help book that sold 11 million legal copies in China alone, before becoming one of China's few major export product on the international book market (Yu Dan, 2009).

Since contemporary self-help discourses extend into numerous societies worldwide, entering both the mass media and everyday life, they may play an important role in their own right in shaping narratives of the self. At the same time, they can be read as expressions of

dominant and subordinate, mainstream and alternative narratives of personal development in which individual lives are shaped by and shape social structures. The latter dimension – i.e. self-help as reflecting larger socio-economic conditions and concerns – is the focus on in this book.

In this book, we address the two significant omissions in the research literature: 1) the *transnationalisation* of self-help culture and 2) the tension between self-help's *discursive heterogeneity* and its relative *political-ideological (neoliberal) homogeneity*. Let us start with the first omission. During the past three decades, numerous studies have been published on self-help texts and the shaping of self-identity and social relationships through psychotherapeutic discourses (e.g. Ehrenreich, 2009, Hochschild, 2003, Illouz, 2008, Lasch, 1979/1991, Lasch, 1984, McGee, 2012, Elliot, 2013, Simonds, 1992, Wright, 2010, Furedi, 2004, Moloney, 2013, Moskowitz, 2001). These studies cluster in a small number of countries, specifically the USA and Britain. Research on self-help outside the Western world and in the Global South has remained an exception. Daniel Nehring interprets and contextualizes relationship self-help books in Mexico (2009, 2009). Eva Illouz studies therapeutic and self-help discourses in the US and Israel (though, regretfully, she never actually compares the two countries) (2008). Through participant observation and discourse analysis, Eric Hendriks studied dating students and coaches in the United States, the Netherlands and Germany. Suvi Salmenniemi and Mariya Vorona interviewed Russians to grasp the way they understand and relate to American self-help books (2014). Finally, there is an older publication in Portuguese that analyzes self-help in Brazil (Rüdiger 1996). However, none of these studies, though fully or partly situated outside of the Anglosphere, explore the production, circulation or consumption of self-help texts from a transnational perspective.

At the same time, over the past three decades, research on self-help books in particular and therapeutic culture in general has been influenced by academic debates on the

individualisation and fragmentation of social relationships. Therefore, extant lines of enquiry have remained notably partial, and they do not offer a comprehensive understanding of the variety of therapeutic narratives that are significant in contemporary societies. It is for these reasons that in this book we approach self-help texts from a transnational perspective and that we engage with a broader variety of self-help narratives than are common in previous research.

Within this diversity of narratives, however, there are common beliefs about the relationship between self and society and normative prescriptions for self-development. Self-help books tend to construct and propagate conceptions of a 'thin' self; that is, a desocialised, atomised self, one struggling with purely personal challenges to accomplish purely individual objectives. Importantly, this conception of the thin self is much more than merely a content feature of self-help narratives; rather it is a central ideological component of an international (neo)liberal regime that furthers the precarisation of social life. In particular the 'thin self' is a concept and insight we elaborate on at the conclusion of this project.

This precarisation of social life involves the growing instability of basic institutional arrangements of work, personal life and so forth, as well as a growing public awareness of, and attention to, this instability. Under the conditions of neoliberalism, contemporary societies have turned the self from a largely taken-for-granted, unconsidered entity into an object of constant attention – in academic enquiries, in public debates, and in individuals' private thoughts about their present and future lives (Elliott, 2013, McLaughlin, 2012, Dardot and Laval, 2013). This transition has led to self-reform and self-improvement becoming a constant concern.

Self-help books respond to this concern with widely divergent prescriptions for a good life. This is unsurprising, as self-help books are written in many different societies, milieus, and so forth. Nonetheless, besides these divergences, self-help narratives share a

common focus on individual and self-directed development, which is unavoidable, given that the whole genre is predicated on this creed. In summary, self-help texts tend we suggest to develop narratives of a thin self.

These narratives construct the self in terms of a series of projects of personal improvement. Through the introspective questioning of one's character and acts, and the resulting adjustment of one's conduct, one aims to become more resilient and competitive at work, to gain happiness, to build a lasting intimate relationship, to become a good parent, to divorce with as little harm as possible, and so on. These projects form part of the pursuit of a more 'authentic' self that is more in touch with its true goals, feelings and identity (Taylor, 2007). The pursuit and possible achievement of such authenticity is seen as empowering in that it provides individuals with a better self-understanding and skills for managing self and social relationships required to achieve life goals. Thus, self-actualisation, meaning the achievement of such authenticity through such self-recognition and self-control, unavoidably has to be a self-directed and autonomous endeavour; one for which the self is entirely responsible. Hence, the self becomes its own 'entrepreneur'. The self as portrayed in self-help is autonomous and de-socialised; that is, understood as largely independent from social structures and relationships, and as achieving self-actualisation through a potentially never-ending series of self-improvement projects.

A further important characteristic of many contemporary self-help texts is their emphasis on 'self-branding'. Self-help texts invite their readers to imagine themselves in terms of specific brand images, such as Bear Grylls's resilient survivalist or T.D. Jakes' moral entrepreneur. The successful enactment of these personas towards oneself and others is key to success in competitive, market-based societies. The pursuit of an authentic self and the enactment of a convincing brand become enmeshed in self-help narratives that are grounded in the morality of competitive consumer society.

In methodological terms, this book has resulted from multi-sited fieldwork over a period of eight years, including the study of more than 100 self-help books and their context of production, circulation, and consumption in a variety of settings at the international level. Our argument is based on the analysis of self-help narratives in the United Kingdom, the USA, China and Mexico, ethnography in Trinidad, statistical analysis of global publishing data, and sociological contextualisation. This has allowed us to view and understand the phenomenon of transnational self-help from both the top-down and bottom-up perspectives. As such, we have been able to explore how self-help products, ideas and discourses are conceived, packaged, and thought about as their emerge in the Global North West, while also gaining insights in how such products and the discourses they contain are experienced, remade and deployed by readers, writers, and sellers in various geographical locations. This synergy allowed us to move from a basic uni-directional conception of self-help to one more able to discuss and acknowledge the processes and effects of what is more accurately described as a multi-directional phenomenon. We explore self-help texts on a variety of themes, from love, marriage, and sexuality to work and financial success. Our argument also draws on other relevant data, such as authors' and publishers' websites, news and media items on self-help workshops and events, and sales and marketing information on various kinds of self-help products. It also approaches self-help books as sites of agency and resistance while at the same time paying attention to how this manifests in terms of authorship, readership and interpretation.

Structure of the book

After setting out the conceptual basis of our argument in chapters two and three, we look at the transnational production, circulation and consumption of self-help books through five case studies: the People's Republic of China (chapter four), the UK and the USA

(chapter five), Mexico (chapter six), and Trinidad and Tobago (chapter seven). These case studies cover four continents and the world's three largest language zones: Mandarin, Spanish and English. Chapters three and four analyse the production and circulation of self-help texts and make a case for a transnational perspective on self-help culture. Chapters five and six consider narratives of the self and social relationships in self-help books. Finally, chapter seven explores the ways in which readers draw on self-help narratives to account for their experiences and practices in everyday life.

Chapter two develops a conceptual framework for our analysis of self-help culture. It situates self-help in broader academic debates about therapeutic culture, mental health and transformations of self in late modernity. We first situate the history of self-help culture in sociological debates about processes of modernisation and the rationalisation of social life. Looking at early self-help authors, such as Samuel Smiles, Napoleon Hill and Dale Carnegie, we argue that self-help has from its beginnings espoused liberal ideals of selfhood and agency. Against this backdrop, we then explore questions about contemporary self-help as source of empowerment and social control under neoliberal capitalism. Some recent studies have drawn attention to self-help's capacity to empower through directed individual and collective action (Wright, 2010, Wright, 2008). However, the genre has more commonly been criticised for promoting individualism and the privatisation of political concerns. These critiques highlight self-help's ties to neoliberal understandings of self and social relationships. While these assessments have problematised self-help in important ways, they fail to reflect the diversity the genre has acquired in the context of its transnational spread. We explain self-help's transnationalisation through the globalisation of Western understandings of mental health and the institutions of psychiatry and psychotherapy. While this has sometimes been described as a process of cultural standardisation, we draw attention to the diverse, hybrid modes of experience and practice that have resulted from the

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globalisation of therapeutic culture.

Chapter three then explores self-help writing and publishing from a transnational perspective. We conceptualise the geographical flows of discourses transported by self-help books as multidirectional and marked by glocalisation and hybridisation, while nonetheless partly centred on the United States and the Anglosphere as a whole. Concretely, we offer a brief survey of publication statistics about eight major countries. These statistics allow for an initial analysis of the composition of the self-help market of locally and internationally circulating books. They show, at once, the international dominance of American and Anglosphere self-help in countries as different from each other as Mexico and China, as well as the – equally significant – multi-directionality of transnational cultural flows.

Putting flesh on these otherwise abstract numbers and conceptualisations, the remainder of the book turns to three sets of case studies. These case studies not only lead us around the world geographically, but also lead us thematically from the self-help entrepreneurs (the cultural *producers*, alongside publishers and media institutions), to self-help books (the cultural *products*), to, finally, the self-help readers (the cultural *consumers*). The China case study focuses on self-help entrepreneurs operating in the media and book market of the Chinese mainland. We then examine the status of the self-help book markets in, first, the USA and the United Kingdom, the historical cradle of the self-help tradition, and, second, and contrastingly, in Mexico, a Latin American nation in which self-help texts have gained extensive prominence. Finally, the case study of Trinidad and Tobago zooms in on the consumption of self-help books.

The China case offers insight into the transnationalisation of the phenomenon of self-help entrepreneurs, not only because American-style self-help entrepreneurs are prominent in the Chinese media and book market, but also because this is perhaps highly unexpected given China's supposed status as the 'Great Eastern Other.'. China has become a hotspot for a US-

oriented but glocal and creative self-help industry, one feeding off China's own brand of hypercompetitive capitalism. Apparently, when it comes to the transnational spread of self-help culture and self-help entrepreneurs, even the deep-seated cultural and historical differences between China and the United States were no match for the growing socio-economic similarities between the two countries as a result of China's pro-market reforms during the eighties and nineties. The Chinese case, provides new insights about contemporary self-help and its traditionally narrow association to Western or American culture.

Chapter 5 then shifts the focus of our analysis to self-help books and their narratives. The United States and, to some extent, the United Kingdom have been key settings of research about self-help and therapeutic culture. We consider whether the deep socio-economic crisis that has affected both countries since 2008 has tempered self-help's characteristic promise that profound and lasting self-improvement can be achieved as a result of well-considered, decisive individual actions. In this context, we examine to what extent the writings of mainstream self-help authors on topics such as personal finance and career development have changed in the wake of crisis and austerity. We also look at niches of self-help writing and explore the narratives of evangelical Christian self-help in the USA and survivalist self-help texts that emphasise the need to cope with the challenges of everyday life over far-reaching success. Even though these niches highlight the diversity of self-help writing in both countries, neoliberal understandings of self and social relationships cut across the work of both American and British authors. Contemporary self-help is rooted in models of autonomous 'self-making' that highlight the capacity of individuals to transform their life through introspection and well-reasoned choices that result from it.

The case study of Mexico uncovers transnational cultural flows from a position outside of the dominant Anglosphere. Our focus on Mexico sheds light on the self-help publications in the largest Spanish-speaking economy in Latin America. In particular, this

chapter centres on Mexican self-help narratives about intimate and personal relationships written by Mexican authors in the past two decades. This allows us, first, to gain insight into the interaction between cultural imports from the US and UK, on the one hand, and native self-help narratives responding to problems of self-development in Latin American societies, on the other. Second, it allows us to analysis transnational cultural flows beyond, and outside of, the dominant cultural flows from the Anglosphere to the rest of the world. Illustratively, Latin American self-help authors such as Carlos Cuauhtémoc Sánchez and Don Miguel Ruiz have become popular both in the transnational Spanish domain and in Anglophone countries such as the UK and the USA. Hence, they embody the multi-directionality of self-help as a transnational network.

Finally, our exploration of self-help books and their readers in Trinidad and Tobago is intended to shed light on the relationship between self-help narratives and their consumers. Extant research tends to treat as discrete issues the ways in which self-help narratives construct models for life improvement (e.g. Hazleden, 2003, Hazleden, 2010) and the ways in which readers understand and use these models in everyday life (e.g. Lichterman, 1992, Simonds, 1992). Here, we seek to bridge this gap by exploring the ways in which readers relate to transnationally mobile self-help narratives and draw on them to account for their localised experiences of everyday life.

What makes Trinidad and Tobago such a powerful case for studying the reception of foreign self-help products by local readers, is exactly that it is such a tiny, Anglophone country dwarfed by its gigantic American neighbour. Since the proximate self-help market of the United States so enormously overshadows that of Trinidad and Tobago, American self-help book titles and other products fully flood the island state's local self-help market, eclipsing the native self-help industry. In effect, one would also expect the self-help market of Trinidad and Tobago to be marked by the passive importing and consumptions of

American products and discourses. The fact that, as we will show, self-help readers and booksellers in Trinidad and Tobago creatively (re)interpret and appropriate Anglo-American self-help imports is, therefore, particularly telling. In a larger country and economy, with a more developed native self-help industry, such as China, Germany, Mexico or Russia, similar findings would have perhaps been less convincing, as one could have suspected that this creative assertiveness reflects the country's general economic and cultural autonomy vis-à-vis the United States. Yet, if even in the tiny, US-dominated self-help market of Trinidad and Tobago, consumers engage with American self-help imports in a creative fashion, then this is particularly revealing of the importance of local sites of consumption in negotiating the meaning of self-help products and narratives.

Finally, in a concluding chapter, we will reappraise the cultural and political significance of self-help texts and narratives in the early 21st century. Drawing on theories of globalisation as a process of cultural hybridisation, we will demonstrate the transnational constitution of self-help, the multi-directionality of self-help transnational exchanges, and the co-existence of self-help narratives with diverse origins and disparate, sometimes local, sometimes transnational reach. Second, we foreground commonalities and differences in the normative grammar that self-help authors use in response to locally specific as well as transnationally relevant problems of self-development. There is a much broader variety of self-help narratives than has been documented so far, and these narratives are simultaneously responsive to locally specific personal troubles (e.g. in Mexico, in China, in the USA, etc.) as well as to much broader, global socio-cultural conditions, namely the conditions of an internationalising (neo)liberal regime.

Self-help books are bearers and constituents of discourses of the self and personal life. Through their form, but, to varying extents, also through their contents, self-help books conceptualise, idealise and propagate the individual self as a 'thin self' – a self caught up in

constant self-examination in relation to normative frameworks whose coherent realisation in practice must necessarily remain incomplete in the hyper flexible, mobile social environments that give rise to the demand for self-help in the first place. Although self-help recipes, in this sense, thus have an unachievable character, they are consequential in that they cause a privatisation and de-politicisation of personal concerns. They cause personal concerns to become (re)framed as matters of psychotherapeutic, medical, spiritual, or religious significance rather than as collective social problems requiring collective, political solutions. This privatisation of personal concerns is, in turn, a central aspect of the process of re-formation and disciplining of the self in the context of the rise of neoliberal forms of government throughout the Western world since the 1970s.

Notes

[i] In this sense, in this book we make a clear distinction between therapeutic culture, understood in terms of the roles which therapeutic narratives play in popular culture, and medical knowledge and practices in psychotherapy, psychiatry and so forth. While the former is characterised by its wide diffusion among diverse audiences, the latter is mostly restricted to specific audiences, such as medical practitioners, academics, etc.