

Making Neoliberal Selves: Popular Psychology in Contemporary Mexico

Daniel Nehring

This chapter looks at narratives of personal development in self-help books in contemporary Mexico. In so doing, it explores the sociocultural significance of the ‘happiness industry’ that has come to play an outsized role in contemporary life. Across much of the world, from East Asia to the Americas, counseling sessions, personal development workshops, newspaper advice columns, self-help books, life advice apps for smartphones and a range of other media teach individuals how to be happy, how to be successful, how to make money, how to be happy, how to find love, how to get married, how to get divorced, and so forth (Watters, 2010; Nehring et al, 2016). The success of this happiness industry reflects to the extent to which psychotherapeutic narratives of the self and interpersonal relationships have seeped into everyday life and come to define moral visions of what a ‘good life’ might mean. This popularization of therapeutic narratives is closely bound up with the success of neoliberal political projects around the world, in so far as it tends to reinforce neoliberalism’s emphasis on individual autonomy, choice and competition as basic principles of social interaction (Rimke, 2000; Gershon, 2011). In Mexico, popular psychology has likewise enjoyed considerable success over at least the past two decades, and its recipes for personal development have come to play a significant role in public life (Nehring, 2009a, 2009b).

This chapter has two objectives. First, it seeks to explore the proliferation of popular psychological narratives in contemporary

Mexico. Its second aim is to examine the ways in which these narratives may reinforce or contest neoliberal discourses of the self and social relationships. To address these objectives, the chapter focuses on self-help books. Self-help books are didactic texts that offer their readers life advice on a range of issues, including work and professional development, marriage and family life, health and wellbeing, and spiritual concerns. Self-help books have a long history across the Western world, including Hispanic societies, which dates back at least to the manual of conduct and moral treatises of the 18th century (Secord, 2003; Mur Effing, 2009; Nehring et al, 2016). They set out, typically at considerable length, a moral grammar of personal conduct with regard to a specific reality of everyday life. The term moral grammar refers to a particular set of norms, values and beliefs about the nature of social life and the relationship between individual and society (Nehring and Kerrigan, 2018). The moral grammars of self-help books are typically situated within broader cultural narratives. Thus, for example, the life advice books of the American pastor Joel Osteen (such as Osteen, 2011) draw on the ethical framework of certain strands of Evangelical Protestantism in the USA, while the treatises of Mexican writer Don Miguel Ruiz (for example, Ruiz, 2011) purport to recover ancient Toltec wisdom to enhance readers' spiritual wellbeing. In other words, self-help books may be read as indicators of dominant and alternative public moral discourses. This is, to a large extent, where the sociological significance of these texts lies, and this is how this chapter will approach them.

The following analysis of self-help books excludes questions about consumption, readership and the ways in which readers may or may not use these books to orient their everyday conduct. Rather, it is interested in what a very widely circulating form of popular literature may reveal about the prevalence of neoliberal public narratives of the social in Mexican society today. This chapter looks at self-help books from the perspective of public discourse, and not from the perspective of individual consumption and interpretation, in line. In this, it follows the approach taken in much of the academic literature in this field, which tends to separate discursive analysis (Hochschild, 2003; McGee, 2005) from enquiries into the personal uses of popular psychology (Lichterman, 1992; Simonds, 1992).

This chapter builds on fieldwork conducted in Mexico since the mid-2000s, on popular psychology, self-help narratives and the production, marketing and circulation of self-help books. On the one hand, it draws on the narrative analysis of more than 100 self-help books, both those written and produced in Mexico and those imported from elsewhere

to be translated into Spanish and sold to local audiences. Given the limited space available in this chapter, typical cases are used to document patterns in self-help narratives current in Mexico. While it is not possible to showcase the full range of self-help books analyzed for this study, engagement with typical cases nonetheless makes it possible to highlight important trends in the narrative organization of self-help in contemporary Mexico.¹ On the other hand, this chapter briefly analyses the trajectories of production, circulation and consumption of self-help books in Mexico and shows how popular psychology in Mexico may be embedded in wider, transnational cultural flows. This chapter will thus present statistical data on the production and sales of self-help books in Mexico. These publication statistics were provided by the National Chamber of the Publishing Industry of Mexico (CANIEM). The data analyzed in this chapter do not allow empirical generalizations about self-help culture and popular psychology in Mexico. However, they allow for significant insights into the range of self-help narratives prevalent in Mexico and the relationships of these narratives with neoliberal discourse.

This chapter adds in substantial ways to academic debates on neoliberalism and post-neoliberalism in Latin America. These debates have concentrated, on the one hand, on the political and socioeconomic consequences of Latin America's turn to neoliberalism in the 1980s and its post-neoliberal aftermath in the early 21st century (Harris, 2003; Dello Buono, 2011; Yates and Bakker, 2014; Laurell, 2015; Springer, 2015). On the other hand, scholars in Latin American cultural studies have engaged with the expression of neoliberal discourses and anti-neoliberal resistance in literature, film and the arts (Levinson, 2001; Masiello, 2001; Blanco-Cano, 2014). However, there has been relatively little engagement with the ways in which neoliberalism, anti-neoliberalism and post-neoliberalism have re-organized popular culture and everyday experiences and practices of social life. The 'therapeutic turn' that has accompanied neoliberalism's ascent has remained widely under-researched in Latin America, a few scattered studies notwithstanding (Lakoff, 2005; Nehring et al, 2016). This is due, perhaps, to the development of academic sociology in the region and the fact that the cultural turn that reshaped the discipline in much of Europe and Anglophone North America did not have a similarly far-reaching impact in Latin America (Nehring, 2005). Be this as it may, scholarly interest in Europe, Anglophone North America, East Asia and Oceania in therapeutic culture and its associations with neoliberalism has not been matched in Latin America. The following analysis of self-help books in Mexico addresses this omission.

Popular psychology and neoliberalism in contemporary Mexico

The history of popular psychology in Mexico has so far not been documented through academic research. However, there is some scholarship that points to the long history of psychological knowledge and its application in clinical psychiatry, dating back to the late 19th and the early 20th century (Buffington, 1997; Benassini, 2001; de la Fuente and Heinze Martin, 2014). This coincides with the transnational diffusion of psychological knowledge and the establishment of institutions related to mental health care in other parts of the Americas (Lappann Botti, 2006; Illouz, 2008; Brandão Goulart and Durães, 2010; Ferrari, 2015). The diffusion of psychological knowledge beyond academia and clinical practice into popular culture remains poorly researched. However, from at least the late 1980s onwards popular psychological narratives began to acquire a considerable degree of visibility in public life, through advice columns in newspapers and magazines, TV talk shows, self-help books, and a range of other media (Nehring, 2009a). The extraordinary success of self-help writers such as Carlos Cuauhtémoc Sánchez in the same period speaks to the growing cultural influence of therapeutic narratives of self and social relationships. Sales statistics for the period from 2005 to 2011 speak to the continuing popularity of self-help books in Mexico (Table 3.1). The fact that, in a country of 120 million people, between 3.5 and 4.3 million new self-help books were sold every year in this period

Table 3.1: Sales of self-help books in Mexico, 2005–11

Year	Number of titles sold	Number of copies sold	Total sales value, Mexican pesos
2005	4,642	4,101,759	241,019,606
2006	5,485	4,536,105	311,824,402
2007	3,529	4,557,996	319,399,314
2008	5,966	3,773,438	270,025,220
2009	6,328	3,599,363	224,512,334
2010	8,578	4,328,206	303,168,849
2011	8,572	4,299,865	350,702,536

Source: National Chamber of the Publishing Industry of Mexico (CANIEM); personal correspondence.

Note: Due to substantial fluctuations in the value of the Mexican Peso in this period, the table does not include conversions of sales values into other currencies. For purely illustrative purposes, it may be useful to point out that the sales value of self-help books in 2011 is equivalent to more than US\$19 million, at 2017 exchange rates and following a substantial depreciation of the Peso.

illustrates the extraordinary popularity of the genre. Of the titles on sale each year, only small and decreasing proportion was produced locally in Mexico (Table 3.2).

Table 3.2: Local production of self-help books in Mexico, 2005–10

Year	Total number of titles	Number of locally produced titles	Share of locally produced titles, %
2005	4,642	1,424	30.7
2006	5,485	1,304	23.8
2007	3,529	898	25.4
2008	5,966	1,109	18.6
2009	6,328	968	15.3
2010	8,578	1,074	12.5

Source: National Chamber of the Publishing Industry of Mexico (CANIEM); personal correspondence.

Most self-help books sold in each year therefore were titles by foreign authors and foreign publishing companies imported and sold to Mexican readers. This hints at the transnational scale of popular psychology, in terms of the cross-border circulation of self-help narratives and the media that carry these narratives, and in terms of those narratives' ability to captivate audiences from a range of national and cultural backgrounds (Nehring et al, 2016).

The period of extraordinary popularity of self-help books in Mexico coincides with the country's turn to neoliberalism from the mid-1980s onwards. Following a profound crisis of the Mexican economy in 1982, successive governments embarked on a string of structural adjustment programs guided by the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank (Alvarez Béjar and Mendoza Pichardo, 1993; Christopherson and Hovey, 1996). Until the beginning of the crisis of the 1980s, Mexico had experienced several decades of relative prosperity. The pre-crisis period had been characterized by expanding public and social welfare services, declining income inequality and growing middle classes, in the context of Mexico's pursuit of a development model driven by theories of import substitution industrialization (Hirschman, 1968; Baer, 1972; Careaga, 1983, 1984). During the crisis, the Mexican government abandoned this development, turning instead toward direct foreign investment, the generation of employment and revenues through export-oriented manufacturing in the burgeoning *maquiladora* industry, and the large-scale privatization of public assets and public services (Laurell, 1991; Alvarez Béjar and Mendoza Pichardo, 1993;

Coppinger, 1993; Botz, 1994). As a result, poverty, unemployment and precarious employment in the informal sector grew for much of the 1980s and 1990s and Mexico's middle classes collapsed, while at the same a small number of individuals and firms profited greatly from the privatization of state-owned enterprises (Escobar Latapí and González de la Rocha, 1995; Ramirez, 1995; Hogenboom, 2004). The years since the crisis of the 1980s and 1990s have been marked by a recovery of ambiguous scale. Official data point to a marked decline of the poverty ratio since its high point in the mid-1990s (Table 3.3).

However, the validity of official poverty measurements has been called into question (Rodríguez Gómez, 2009). At the same time, the level of economic inequality in Mexico has remained stubbornly high, as indicated by relatively small variations in the Gini index from the mid-1980s until the mid-2010s (Table 3.4).

The transformation of the macro-structural framework of Mexican society had profound consequences for individuals and families. Growing unemployment and declining unsettled established patriarchal family structures, built around the model of a male breadwinner and household head supported by his wife and mother. Economic

Table 3.3: Poverty headcount ratio at US\$3.10 a day (2011 PPP), Mexico, 1984–2014 (% of population)

Year	% of population	Year	% of population
1984	21	2000	25
1985	n.a.	2001	n.a.
1986	n.a.	2002	23
1987	n.a.	2003	n.a.
1988	n.a.	2004	13
1989	18	2005	18
1990	n.a.	2006	11
1991	n.a.	2007	n.a.
1992	24	2008	12
1993	n.a.	2009	n.a.
1994	23	2010	12
1995	n.a.	2011	n.a.
1996	31	2012	10
1997	n.a.	2013	n.a.
1998	30	2014	11
1999	n.a.		

Source: The World Bank, World Development Indicators (accessed September 2017)

Table 3.4: Gini index for Mexico, 1984–2014

Year	Gini index	Year	Gini index
1984	49	2000	52
1985	n.a.	2001	n.a.
1986	n.a.	2002	50
1987	n.a.	2003	n.a.
1988	n.a.	2004	46
1989	54	2005	51
1990	n.a.	2006	48
1991	n.a.	2007	n.a.
1992	51	2008	48
1993	n.a.	2009	n.a.
1994	54	2010	48
1995	n.a.	2011	n.a.
1996	48	2012	48
1997	n.a.	2013	n.a.
1998	49	2014	48
1999	n.a.		

Source: The World Bank, World Development Indicators, <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SI.POV.GINI?locations=MX>

readjustment at the household level, through the incorporation of multiple, female and male, family members into the labor market, thus entailed a crisis and readjustment of gender relations, through women's expanding participation in extra-domestic labor and concomitant shifts in domestic power relations (Fernández-Kelly, 1984; Escobar Latapí and González de la Rocha, 1995; Fernández-Kelly, 2008). In turn, women's role in Mexico's labor market often occurred on highly exploitative terms, for example through women's incorporation in export-oriented manufacturing in only the most subordinate positions (Alarcón González and McKinley, 1999; Wilson, 1999). The application of neoliberal political-economic models in Mexico was ostensibly to resolve a profound crisis of the state. However, it destabilized Mexican society, and the insecurity it produced was, from the early 2000s onwards, exacerbated by the escalating confrontation between the state and Mexico's drug cartels (Chabat, 2002; Calderón et al, 2015; Shirk and Wallman, 2015). In stark words, Asa Cristina Laurell (2015) describes the long-term consequences of Mexico's neoliberal turn as the "destruction of society." She points to increasing restrictions

of basic human, political and social rights, a pervasive climate of fear and insecurity and a fundamental decline in social solidarity:

Neoliberal ideology promotes the disqualification of representative democracy with the aim of transferring crucial decisions to formal or informal undemocratic structures. This distortion of politics can take on different forms, and the Mexican case is perverse. However, the role of widespread fear—whether of terrorism, violence, immigrants, the poor, the delinquent, or any unspecified “threatening other”—seems to play an important role in disciplining the population. This serves to make acceptable the restriction of civil, political, and social rights The Mexican situation is especially dangerous because formal state institutions are permeated with organized crime to create what some analysts ... consider a Narco-State that practices state terrorism. The ideology of individualism, power, and consumerism has a damaging influence that tends to destroy social values such as solidarity, humanism, and respect for human life. This ideology turns particularly toxic in the absence of the possibility of getting a decent job or access to education. The exaltation of power, money, consumerism, and violence by mass media seems to play an important role in the making of extremely violent criminals under conditions of what Valencia Triana ... named *Gore* capitalism. (Laurell, 2015, p.260f)

The period of neoliberal privatization and marketization since the 1980s thus coincides with a profound crisis of Mexican society, in political, economic and cultural terms. One of the central issues in this book is the question to what extent a post-neoliberal turn has offered Latin Americans alternative developmental pathways that may enable a recovery of the social (Davies, 2009; Radcliffe, 2012; Elwood et al, 2016). In contrast to the post-neoliberal turn in Latin American studies (Springer, 2015), scholars in Europe and in the US have pointed to neoliberalism’s distinctive capacity to retain its political, economic and cultural dominance in spite of the ostensible delegitimization of its basic assumptions (Crouch, 2011; Mirowski, 2013), following the financial crisis of 2008. Likewise, it seems doubtful that a post-neoliberal turn has taken place in Mexico at all, given the persistent consequences of privatization for Mexican society, in terms of the long-term precarization of the lives of a large part of the country’s population

and the still escalating spiral of insecurity and violence (Mercille, 2014; Paley, 2015; Castillo Fernandez and Arzate Salgado, 2016).

In everyday life, neoliberalism's resilience is visible in the thriving market for popular psychological ideas and products, exemplified by the outlined, extraordinary and persistent, success of self-help books among Mexican readers. Self-help fills the gaps left behind by the decline of social bonds and solidarities, in so far as it is usually premised on the assumption that individual solutions to pressing life problems are both feasible and desirable (Nehring et al, 2016). Self-help recipes for personal development tend to emphasize the association between autonomous behavioral modification and improved life chances, in terms of the attainment of a range of material and immaterial goals, from the achievement of wealth and professional success to the realization of happiness and spiritual fulfillment. In this sense, the individualism of self-help appears as closely associated with neoliberalism's emphasis on an entrepreneurial ethic of personal development. This ethic is the social-psychological corollary of neoliberalism's political-economic program; it sustains this program by translating it into the common-sense assumptions that define individuals' everyday experiences and practices, and by rendering its basic tenets—market-based competition, autonomy, choice, private responsibility—unquestionable. Pierre Dardot and Christian Laval characterize neoliberalism's entrepreneurial self along these lines:

Once the subject is fully conscious and in control of his choices, he [sic] is also fully responsible for what happens to him. The correlate of the 'irresponsibility' of a world that has become ungovernable by dint of its global character is the infinite responsibility of the individual for his own fate, for his capacity to success and be happy. Not being weighed down by the past, cultivating positive expectations, having effective relations with others: the neo-liberal management of oneself consists in manufacturing a high-performance ego, which always demands more of the self, and whose self-esteem paradoxically grows with its dissatisfaction at past performance. (Dardot and Laval, 2013, p.274)

The close association between popular self-help narratives and the figure of the entrepreneurial self is documented by the narratives of a wide range of advice books published over the past three decades. At the same time, these books exhibit notable variations on the theme of self-directed entrepreneurialism that merit closer consideration.

Crisis and individual choice

The self-help books analyzed for this study hardly ever portray the crisis of Mexican society in socioeconomic terms. This seems to be due to two reasons. First, in line with the statistics shown above in Table 3.2, most of these books were written by foreign authors, translated into Spanish, and imported into Mexico. Second, the narratives of both imported and locally authored texts share an important feature, in that they tend elide the social context in which individuals' personal development take place. In line with their didactic character, they offer detailed recipes for personal improvement, but they typically frame such improvement as the outcome of individual choices, irrespective of the social-structural arrangements that organize such choices.

A characteristic example of this narrative trend is Carlos Cuauhtémoc Sánchez's *Juventud en Extasis* (*Youth in Sexual Ecstasy*) (1994). Originally published at the height of Mexico's economic crisis, the book became a bestseller and launched its author's enduring career as self-help entrepreneur known across the Hispanic world (Nehring, 2009b). *Juventud en Extasis* addresses young people in their teens and twenties and offers them moral guidance on issues of sex and intimate relationships. Written as a novel, the book tells the story of Efrén, a student with a highly promiscuous way of life. When a former girlfriend undergoes an abortion and Efrén contracts a sexually transmitted disease, he seeks the guidance of Dr Asaf Marín, a medic who cures his illness and turns into Efrén's mentor and moral guide along the way.

To better illustrate what I would like to tell you, I will present the case of two male patients I had recently. Both began to have very serious confrontations with their wives, a few months after getting married. When he was single, one of them belonged to gangs, was an expert seducer, and went frequently to bars and cantinas. The other was committed to his studies and to sports; in addition, for many years he played the guitar with his bohemian friends, and sometimes also for the local church. Afterwards, during his fights with his wife, both men became so upset that more than once they left their homes full of anger. Where do you think that the one and the other went? As is obvious, the first went to see prostitutes, drowned himself in alcohol, and did not return to his wife for several days. In contrast, the second paced the streets calming his anger with exercise, and sometimes he took refuge in the tranquility of a church

to think and recover his calm. These are extreme cases, but they are real. ... If you have a balanced life before marriage, have fun in a decent and measured way, it is difficult for you to become corrupted after getting together with a woman. On the other hand, if you live unhealthily and without control, when marital problems arise, you will have the tendency to flee through the wrong door of licentiousness. In the developed countries the environment among the youth has been degraded so much that it is now very difficult to find successful young marriages; young people are used to so much depravation that after marriage – as seems logical – they do not manage to overcome their promiscuous habits. (Cauhtémoc Sánchez, 1994, p. 37f; author's translation)

This extract is noteworthy on several accounts. First, Cauhtémoc Sánchez depicts the development of an intimate relationship as the result of individuals' moral choices, as evident in the contrast he builds between the faithful husband and the man of low moral fiber who seeks out prostitutes after fights with his wife. Both in the preceding extract and throughout the book at large, Cauhtémoc Sánchez does little to engage with the relational qualities of love, intimacy, marriage, and so forth. Rather, he takes an interest in the moral qualities that allow individuals to create and sustain intimate bonds that correspond to his distinctive Christian vision of human life.

Second, in so far as Cauhtémoc Sánchez accounts for the social context in which individuals' choices are set, he does so by considering the moral influence which society may have on individuals. In the preceding extract, his allusions to prostitutes, alcohol and the escalating moral degradation of contemporary youth hint at a larger theme of his work, namely the corrupting influence of modern life. Cauhtémoc Sánchez's self-help writing ultimately seems geared toward counteracting this moral corruption, and toward promoting his version of Christian morality and judging individuals' choices accordingly.

Carlos Cauhtémoc Sánchez deserves mention here because his work ranks among the big self-help bestsellers in Mexico throughout the late 1990s and 2000s. However, the emphasis on individual choices considered outside their social context pervades is typical of the sample of texts analyzed for this study. Consider, for instance, the words of another bestselling Mexican self-help author. Don Miguel Ruiz writes texts that claim to be inspired by Toltec spiritual traditions. His work

belongs to the long-established New Age movement, and it thus stands clearly apart from the Christian moralism of Carlos Cuauhtémoc Sánchez. In *The Four Agreements*, a 1990s bestseller that is still found frequently in bookshops around the world, Ruiz suggests:

Whatever people do, feel, think, or say, *don't take it personally*. If they tell you how wonderful you are, they are not saying that because of you. You know you are wonderful. It is not necessary to believe other people who tell you that you are wonderful. Don't take *anything* personally. Even if someone got a gun and shot you in the head, it was nothing personal. Even at that extreme. ... Our mind also exists in the level of the Gods. Our mind also lives in that reality and can perceive that reality. The mind sees with the eyes and perceives this waking reality. But the mind also sees and perceives without the eyes, although the reason is hardly aware of this perception. The mind lives in more than one dimension. There may be times when you have ideas that don't originate in your mind, but you are perceiving them with your mind. You have the right to believe or not believe these voices and the right not to take what they say personally. We have a choice whether or not to believe the voices we hear within our own minds, just as we have a choice of what to believe and agree with in the dream of the planet. (Ruiz, 1997, p. 20; author's translation)

Ruiz here discusses interpersonal communication in everyday life, in a language that is noticeably more abstract than that Carlos Cuauhtémoc Sánchez employs. The roots of his writing in New Age thought are apparent in his references to “the Gods”, the nature of reality, and so forth. However, Ruiz shares with Cuauhtémoc Sánchez an emphasis on personal choice. Ruiz's emphatic claim that we “have a choice whether or not to believe the voices we hear within our own minds” implies that individuals have the capacity to define their self-image on their own and as a result of personal choices, regardless of the influence of others.

Here and elsewhere in *The Four Agreements*, Ruiz makes his case for individual choice in an otherworldly language that has nothing concrete to say about everyday life in contemporary Mexico. In this sense, a significant corollary of Ruiz's emphasis on choice lies in his encouragement of a kind of mental inward turn. Personal truths, Ruiz suggests, can be gained through a journey that occurs within

individuals' minds and that removes them, morally, emotionally and cognitively, from engagement with other people and the everyday world. Ruiz has nothing explicit to say about the crisis of Mexican society, but the mental withdrawal he encourages marks an important response to an everyday lifeworld that has little to offer by way of certainties and security. At least in part, this might explain the lasting success of his work.

Autonomy

The works of Carlos Cuauhtémoc Sánchez and Don Miguel Ruiz represent another typical feature of the sample of self-help texts analyzed for this chapter, in that they rely on a strongly voluntaristic model of self-identity. Their contrasting intellectual roots in Christian theology and New Age thinking notwithstanding, they both posit a self that is separate from the social world, autonomous and therefore able to determine its development to a large degree. Both authors' emphasis on the importance of personal choices stems from this assumption of a self-enclosed and autonomous self. This assumption is equally apparent in other self-help texts on a range of subject matters. For instance, in *Los Secretos de la Mente Millionaria* (*The Secrets of the Millionaire Mind*), a translation of an English-language bestseller, Canadian self-help writer T. Harv Eker (2005) argues that accumulating substantial personal wealth is, above all, a matter of developing an appropriate mindset:

You surely have read other books, listened to CDs, taken part in courses and taken an interest in numerous systems to get rich, be it through real estate, stocks or business. But what happened? In the case of most people, not much! They gain a brief charge of energy, and later they return to their prior situation. Finally, we have an answer. It is a simple answer, which also is a law that cannot be mocked. Everything can be reduced to if your subconscious 'financial pattern' is not 'programmed' for success, nothing you might learn, nothing you might know and nothing you might do will change things very much. (Eker, 2005, p.12; author's translation)

Starting with this supposition, Eker goes on to develop a scheme for mental reprogramming that, he suggests, will allow his readers to develop a set of attitudes that will allow them to achieve great financial

gain. His reprogramming exercises depart from statements such as the following:

PRINCIPLE OF WEALTH:

Thoughts engender feelings.

Feelings engender actions.

Actions lead to results.

(Eker, 2005, p. 33; author's translation; emphasis in original)

As this “principle of wealth” illustrates, in Eker’s reasoning, there is a clear path from having the right thoughts to achieving the right results—wealth. Eker thus sells his audience a “get rich quick” scheme in which having the right attitude is all that matters, irrespective of social circumstances, such as one’s social class, pre-existing inherited wealth, family connections, and all the other factors that social research has long tied to individuals’ life chances (Dorling, 2014).

Dealing with a much less facile subject matter, in *Autoboicot (Self-Boycott)*, the Argentinian pastor and motivational speaker Bernardo Stamateas advises his readers on how to overcome negative attitudes that prevent them from leading a fulfilling life. In this context, he discusses the problem of low self-esteem, and he relates it to frequent criticism by others. He suggests:

The self-harming person [*el automaltratante*] does not move by the principle of ‘wanting’, but by ‘having to’ and by orders. [...] Because of this it is necessary that you gain control of your mind; and I am not talking about mind control or New Age, but rather about learning to fill your mind with words of recognition, of self-improvement, of action. Little by little your thoughts will change. Your worst enemy are not others, but your own mind. Your worst enemy are not criticisms by others but those you accept, those you allow to invade you and to slowly destroy you. Criticism and all the actions that are tied to it [...] make you doubt what your real thoughts are and what thoughts others want to impose on you. (Stamateas, 2008, p.37: author’s translation)

Stamateas’s account of mental self-control hinges on his assertion that your “worst enemy are not others, but your own mind.” Negative thoughts and the negative influence of others can be overcome once

individuals realize their power to control their own thoughts. Just like T. Harv Eker, Bernardo Stamateas thus relies in his self-help writing on the figure of an autonomous self that can be analyzed, understood and systematically guided toward ‘better’ thoughts and emotions. The voluntarism that is inherent in this notion of an autonomous self is a defining feature of the self-help texts analyzed for this study. These texts propose that a better life is possible on purely individual terms and as the result of individual action. In turn, this highly individualistic version of self-improvement hinges on the assumption of an autonomous self whose modification can have a far-reaching impact on individual’s life changes, regardless of social context.

Responsibility

As self-help books elide social context and the personal consequences of large-scale institutional arrangements, they also tend to place a heavy burden of responsibility on individuals’ shoulders. As has been noted elsewhere (Simonds, 1992; Hochschild, 2003), the advice literature on women’s intimate relationships is notable in this regard. A prominent example of these texts is Robin Norwood’s *Las Mujeres que Aman Demasiado* (*Women Who Love Too Much*). Originally published in the USA in 1985, the book has since been translated into a range of languages and re-published in various international editions. It has also spawned several sequels, such as Norwood’s *Meditaciones para Mujeres que Aman Demasiado* (*Meditation for Women Who Love Too Much*) (2012), and spin-offs by other authors, such as the recent *Las Mujeres que se Aman Demasiado* (*Women Who Love Themselves Too Much*) by Mexican writer Gabriela Torres de Moroso Bussetti (2017). At the time of writing, *Las Mujeres que Aman Demasiado* is available in Mexico in various print and electronic editions, through booksellers such as Librerías Gandhi. All this illustrates the book’s lasting influence, both in Mexico and at the international level. One of Norwood’s central points lies in the argument that women must take charge of their intimate lives, place their wellbeing center-stage, and apply their entrepreneurial energies to the management of their relationships with their partners, even if this may mean abandoning an unfulfilling or harmful bond:

From the beginning, Jill was willing to accept more responsibility than Randy for the beginning of their relationship and for keeping it going. Just as in the cases of so many other women who love too much, it was obvious that Jill was a very responsible person – a great entrepreneur

[*emprendedora*] who had been successful in many areas of her life, but who, nonetheless, had very little self-love. The accomplishment of her academic and professional objectives was not enough to balance the personal failure she had to bear in her couple relationships. Each time Randy forgot to call her on the phone constituted a heavy blow to the fragile image that Jill had of herself – an image that Jill afterwards would try heroically to strengthen, in order to receive some sign of affection from him. Her willingness to accept all the responsibility for a frustrated relationship was typical, as was her inability to evaluate the situation realistically and to take care of herself by abandoning the relationship when the lack of reciprocity became apparent. Women who love too much have little consideration for their personal integrity in a love relationship. (Norwood, 1986, p.16f)

The story of Jill and Randy plays a large role in Norwood's narrative, and she uses it to illustrate the harmful consequences of women's inability or unwillingness to take responsibility for their intimate lives. This notion features quite clearly, for example, in the final sentence of the quoted extract, when Norwood writes that women "who love too much have little consideration for their personal integrity in a love relationship." Norwood tells the story of Jill and Randy as a series of close personal encounters between two lovers whose intimate bond ultimately proves too weak to sustain their relationship. Broader considerations, for instance about gender or about the ways in which intimate attachment is complicated by the growing burden of work (Hochschild, 1997), do not feature explicitly in Norwood's analysis of what went wrong between Jill and Randy. Intimate relationships, Norwood's narrative implies, are a matter of the emotional bonds between two individuals, and the management of these bonds is likewise a matter of individual responsibility.

Las Mujeres que Aman Demasiado deserves mention here due to its considerable and lasting success. However, the emphasis on individual responsibility cuts across much of the sample of texts compiled for this study. It is central, for instance, to the—in Mexico—equally influential writing of Carlos Cuauhtémoc Sánchez. In *Juventud en Extasis*, individual responsibility is a major theme in the narrative of Efrén's misadventures—he finds himself in trouble, with a sexually transmitted disease, due to his own carelessness, while his life improves dramatically once he realizes his mistakes, accepts Christian sexual

morality, and forms a lasting relationship that involves sexual abstinence before marriage. Just like Norwood, Carlos Cuauhtémoc Sánchez does not interrogate the social, cultural and economic implications of Efrén's life and issues such as Christian morality, abortion, and young people's intimate relationships.

The moral grammar of self-help: neoliberalism, self-identity and the denial of the social

The preceding analysis suggests that self-help writing seeks to empower individuals by encouraging them to adopt an ethos of autonomous self-making, characterized by self-directed choices and the assumption of individual responsibility for major life events. This narrative pattern corresponds to central features of the self-help genre and popular psychology at large identified elsewhere in the Western world (Rimke, 2000; Hazleden, 2003, 2012). However, the academic literature also points to the capacity of therapeutic discourses to empower individuals by facilitating social bonds and collective agency (Wright, 2010). In the sample of books analyzed for this study, this capacity did not feature in significant ways, even though it comprised a broad range of books, both written locally by Mexican authors and imported from abroad.

Central to the moral grammar of these self-help texts is a de-socialized self thinking, feeling, and acting without clear reference to the social processes and institutions in which self-development is situated. In a sense, thus, self-help writing contradicts the central assumption of the sociological project, namely that individual biographical trajectories are in various ways defined by structures and processes beyond immediate individual control or understanding (Mills, 1959; Durkheim, 2013). Importantly, self-help discourses thus underpin the pursuit of neoliberal political and economic projects in Mexico, by promoting the competitive, individualistic ethos of the marketplace in everyday social relationships and rendering invisible the collective ties that sustain these relationships. In turn, when self-improvement is framed in terms of the purely individual agency of autonomous individuals, it becomes difficult to envision it as the result of collective political action. The individual empowerment of popular psychological self-help may therefore be accompanied by collective disempowerment. This collective disempowerment corresponds to the fundamental tenets of neoliberalism, which understands society in terms of market-based exchanges between private individuals, with the market acting as a natural regulator of these exchanges, to be warded off from political intervention (Harvey, 2005; Peck, 2010).

The assumptions that neoliberal theorists have articulated in academic publications are thus raised by self-help authors to the level of everyday common sense.

These far-reaching conclusions seem warranted for two reasons. On the one hand, as this chapter has shown, self-help texts are widely popular in Mexico. In so far as they are consumed by very large audience, they have the capacity to define common-sense assumption about the self, individual agency, and social relationships. On the other hand, given their popularity, these texts may be read as indicators of much broader public discourses that manifest in a variety of narrative forms and media—in political rhetoric and policy discourse, in news media, in TV talk shows, in online social media, in popular psychological texts, and so forth. Read this way, self-help books speak to the pervasiveness of neoliberal common sense in contemporary Mexican society.

Note

- ¹ For a more comprehensive account of self-help texts in contemporary Mexico, see *Transnational Popular Psychology and the Global Self-Help Industry* (Nehring et al, 2016).

Works cited

- Alarcón González, D. and McKinley, T. (1999) “The adverse effects of structural adjustment on working women in Mexico.” *Latin American Perspectives*, 26(3), pp.103–17.
- Alvarez Béjar, A. and Mendoza Pichardo, G. (1993) “Mexico 1988–1991: A successful economic adjustment program?” *Latin American Perspectives*, 20(3), pp.32–45.
- Baer, W. (1972) “Import substitution and industrialization in Latin America: experiences and interpretations.” *Latin American Research Review*, 7(1), pp.95–122, doi: 10.2307/2502457
- Benassini, O. (2001) “La atención psiquiátrica en México hacia el siglo XXI.” *Salud Mental*, 24(6), pp. 62–73, www.medigraphic.com/pdfs/salmen/sam-2001/sam016h.pdf
- Blanco-Cano, R. (2014) “Intimacy, lesbian desire and representation in contemporary Mexican film: Así del precipicio.” In D. Nehring, R. Esteinou and E. Alvarado (eds), *Intimacies and Cultural Change: Perspectives on Contemporary Mexico*. Farnham: Ashgate, pp.57–76.
- Botz, D. La (1994) “Manufacturing poverty: The maquiladorization of Mexico.” *International Journal of Health Services*, 24(3), pp.403–08, doi: 10.2190/HY6R-EY5G-3AXP-VV8N

- Brandão Goulart, M.S. and Durães, F. (2010) “A reforma e os hospitais psiquiátricos: histórias da desinstitucionalização.” *Psicologia & Sociedade*, 22(1), pp.112–20, doi: 10.1590/S0102-71822010000100014
- Buffington, R. (1997) “Los jotos: Contested visions of homosexuality in modern Mexico.” In D. Balderston and D. Guy (eds), *Sex and Sexuality in Latin America*. New York: New York University Press, pp.118–32.
- Dello Buono, R.A. (2011) “Latin America and the collapsing ideological supports of neoliberalism.” *Critical Sociology*, 37, pp.9–25, doi: 10.1177/0896920510383341
- Calderón, G., Robles, G., Díaz-Cayeros, A. and Magaloni, B. (2015) “The beheading of criminal organizations and the dynamics of violence in Mexico.” *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, 59(8), pp.1455–85, doi: 10.1177/0022002715587053
- Careaga, G. (1983) *Mitos y Fantasías de la Clase Media en México*. Mexico City: Ediciones Océano.
- Careaga, G. (1984) *Biografía de un Joven de la Clase Media*. Mexico City: Ediciones Océano.
- Castillo Fernandez, D. and Arzate Salgado, J. (2016) “Economic crisis, poverty and social policy in Mexico.” *Critical Sociology*, 42(1), pp.87–104, doi: 10.1177/0896920513501352
- Chabat, J. (2002) “Mexico’s war on drugs: No margin for maneuver.” *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 582(1), pp.134–48.
- Christopherson, S. and Hovey, R. (1996) “‘Fast money’: Financial exclusion in the Mexican economic adjustment model.” *Environment and Planning*, 28(7), pp.1157–77.
- Coppinger, P.F. (1993) “Mexico’s maquiladoras: Economic boon and social crisis.” *NEW SOLUTIONS: A Journal of Environmental and Occupational Health Policy*, 3(3), pp.19–23, doi: 10.2190/NS3.3.d
- Crouch, C. (2011) *The Strange Non-Death of Neo-Liberalism*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Cuahtémoc Sánchez, C. (1994) *Juventud en Extasis*. Mexico City: Editorial Diamante.
- Dardot, P. and Laval, C. (2013) *The New Way of the World: On Neoliberal Society*. London: Verso.
- Davies, W. (2009) *Postneoliberalism – A beginning debate, Africa*.
- Dorling, D. (2014) *Inequality and the 1%*. London: Verso.
- Durkheim, E. (2013) *The Rules of Sociological Method*. Edited by S. Lukes. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Eker, T.H. (2005) *Las Secretos de la Mente Millonaria: Cómo Dominar el Juego Interior de la Riqueza*. Mexico City: Editorial Sirio.

- Elwood, S., Bond, P., Novo, C.M. and Radcliffe, S. (2016) "Learning from postneoliberalisms." *Progress in Human Geography*, 41(5), pp.676–95, doi: 10.1177/0309132516648539
- Escobar Latapí, A. and González de la Rocha, M. (1995) "Crisis, restructuring and urban poverty in Mexico." *Environment and Urbanization*, 7(1), pp.57–76.
- Fernández-Kelly, M.P. (1984) *For We are Sold, I and My People: Women and Industry in Mexico's Frontier*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.
- Fernández-Kelly, P. (2008) "Gender and economic change in the United States and Mexico, 1900–2000." *American Behavioral Scientist*, 52(3), pp.377–404, doi: 10.1177/0002764208323512
- Ferrari, F.J. (2015) "Historia cultural de la psiquiatría en Córdoba, Argentina: recepción y decadencia de la neurastenia, 1894–1936." *Trashumante. Revista Americana de Historia Social*, (5), pp.288–309, doi: 10.17533/udea.trahs.n5a14
- La Fuente, J.R. de and Heinze Martin, G. (2014) 'La enseñanza de la Psiquiatría en México', *Salud Mental*, 37(6), pp. 523–530.
- Gershon, I. (2011) "Neoliberal agency", *Current Anthropology*, 52(4), pp.537–55, doi: 10.1086/660866.
- Harris, R.L. (2003) "Popular resistance to globalization and neoliberalism in Latin America." *Journal of Developing Societies*, 19(2–3), pp.365–426, doi: 10.1177/0169796X0301900209
- Harvey, D. (2005) *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Hazleden, R. (2003) "Love yourself: The relationship of the self with itself in popular self-help texts." *Journal of Sociology*, 39(4), pp. 413–28, doi: 10.1177/0004869003394006
- Hazleden, R. (2012) "Whose fault is it? Exoneration and allocation of personal responsibility in relationship manuals." *Journal of Sociology*, 50(4), pp.422–36.
- Hirschman, A.O. (1968) "The political economy of import-substituting industrialization in Latin America." *The Quarterly Journal of Economics*, 82(1), pp.1–32.
- Hochschild, A.R. (1997) *The Time Bind: When Work Becomes Home and Home Becomes Work*. New York: Henry Holt and Company.
- Hochschild, A.R. (2003) *The Commercialization of Intimate Life: Notes from Home and Work*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Hogenboom, B. (2004) "Economic Concentration and Conglomerates in Mexico." *Journal of Developing Societies*, 20(3–4), pp.207–25, doi: 10.1177/0169796X04050959

- Illouz, E. (2008) *Saving the Modern Soul. Therapy, Emotions, and the Culture of Self-Help*. London: University of California Press.
- Lakoff, A. (2005) *Pharmaceutical Reason: Knowledge and Value in Global Psychiatry*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Lappann Botti, N.C. (2006) “Uma Viagem na História da Enfermagem Psiquiátrica no Início do Século XX.” *Escola Anna Nery Revista de Enfermagem*, 10(4), pp.725–9.
- Laurell, A. (1991) “Crisis, neoliberal health policy, and political processes in Mexico.” *International Journal of Health Services*, 21(3), pp.457–70, doi: 10.2190/VCHJ-Q67W-MN67-WXV6
- Laurell, A.C. (2015) “Three decades of neoliberalism in Mexico: The destruction of society.” *International Journal of Health Services*, 45(2), pp. 246–64, doi: 10.1177/0020731414568507
- Levinson, B. (2001) *The Ends of Literature: The Latin American ‘Boom’ in the Neoliberal Marketplace*. Stanford, California: Stanford University Press.
- Lichterman, P. (1992) “Self-help reading as a thin culture.” *Media, Culture & Society*, 14(3), pp.421–47, doi: 10.1177/016344392014003005
- Masiello, F. (2001) *The Art of Transition: Latin American Culture and Neoliberal Crisis*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- McGee, M. (2005) *Self-Help. Inc.: Makeover Culture in American Life*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Mercille, J. (2014) “The Media-Entertainment Industry and the ‘War on Drugs’ in Mexico.” *Latin American Perspectives*, 41(2), pp.110–29, doi: 10.1177/0094582X13509790
- Mills, C.W. (1959) *The Sociological Imagination*. London: Oxford University Press.
- Mirowski, P. (2013) *Never Let a Serious Crisis Go to Waste: How Neoliberalism Survived the Financial Meltdown*. London: Verso.
- Mur Effing, M. (2009) “The origin and development of the self-help literature in the United States: The concept of success and happiness, an overview.” *Atlantis. Journal of the Spanish Association of Anglo-American Studies*, 31(2), pp.125–41.
- Nehring, D. (2005) “Reflexiones sobre la construcción cultural de las relaciones de género en México.” *Papeles de Población*, 11(45), pp.221–45.
- Nehring, D. (2009a) “Cultural models of intimate life in contemporary urban Mexico: a review of self-help texts.” *Delaware Review of Latin American Studies*, 10(2).

- Nehring, D. (2009b) “Modernity with Limits: The Narrative Construction of Intimate Relationships, Sex and Social Change in Carlos Cuauhtémoc Sánchez’s *Juventud en Extasis*.” *Sexualities*, 12(1), pp.33–59, doi: 10.1177/1363460708099112
- Nehring, D. and Kerrigan, D. (2018) ‘Thin selves: Popular psychology and the transnational moral grammar of self-identity’, *Consumption Markets & Culture*, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10253866.2018.1516814>
- Nehring, D., Alvarado, E., Hendriks, E.C. and Kerrigan, D. (2016) *Transnational Popular Psychology and the Global Self-Help Industry: The Politics of Contemporary Social Change*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Norwood, R. (1986) *Las Mujeres que Aman Demasiado*. Mexico City: Javier Vergara Editor.
- Norwood, R. (2012) *Meditaciones para las Mujeres que Aman Demasiado*. Barcelona: Ediciones B.
- Osteen, J. (2011) *Every Day a Friday: How to Be Happier 7 Days a Week*. New York: FaithWords.
- Paley, D. (2015) “Drug War as Neoliberal Trojan Horse.” *Latin American Perspectives*, 42(5), pp.109–32, doi: 10.1177/0094582X15585117
- Peck, J. (2010) *Constructions of Neoliberal Reason*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Radcliffe, S.A. (2012) “Development for a postneoliberal era? Sumak kawsay, living well and the limits to decolonisation in Ecuador.” *Geoforum*, 43(2), pp.240–49, doi: 10.1016/j.geoforum.2011.09.003
- Ramirez, M.D. (1995) “The political economy of privatization in Mexico, 1983–92.” *Organization*, 2(1), pp.87–116.
- Rinke, H.M. (2000) “Governing Citizens through Self-help Literature.” *Cultural Studies*, 14(1), pp.61–78, doi: 10.1080/095023800334986
- Rodríguez Gómez, K. (2009) “La política contra la pobreza en México: Ventajas y desventajas de la línea oficial a la luz de experiencias internacionales.” *Gestión y Política Pública*, XVIII(1), pp.107–48.
- Ruiz, M. (1997) *The Four Agreements: A Practical Guide to Personal Freedom*. San Rafael, California: Amber-Allen Publishing.
- Ruiz, M. (2011) *The Mastery of Love: A Practical Guide to the Art of Relationship*. San Rafael, California: Amber-Allen Publishing.
- Secord, A. (2003) “‘Be what you would seem to be’: Samuel Smiles, Thomas Edward, and the making of a working-class scientific hero.” *Science in Context*, 16(1/2), pp.147–73.
- Shirk, D. and Wallman, J. (2015) “Understanding Mexico’s drug violence.” *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, 59(8), pp.1348–76, doi: 10.1177/0022002715587049
- Simonds, W. (1992) *Women and Self-Help Culture: Reading Between the Lines*. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press.

- Springer, S. (2015) “Postneoliberalism?” *Review of Radical Political Economics*, 47(1), pp.5–17, doi: 10.1177/0486613413518724
- Stamateas, B. (2008) *Autoboicot: Cuando el tóxico es uno mismo*. Buenos Aires: Planeta.
- Torres de Moroso Bussetti, G. (2017) *Las Mujeres que se Aman Demasiado*. Mexico City: Grupo Editorial Exodo.
- Watters, E. (2010) *Crazy Like Us: The Globalization of the American Psyche*. New York: Free Press.
- Wilson, F. (1999) “Gendered histories: Garment production and migration in Mexico.” *Environment and Planning A*, 31(2), pp.327–43, doi: 10.1068/a310327
- Wright, K. (2010) *The Rise of the Therapeutic Society: Psychological Knowledge and the Contradictions of Cultural Change*. Washington DC: New Academia Publishing.
- Yates, J.S. and Bakker, K. (2014) “Debating the ‘post-neoliberal turn’ in Latin America.” *Progress in Human Geography*, 38(1), pp.62–90, doi: 10.1177/0309132513500372

