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GOVERNING THE NEOLIBERAL SUBJECT THROUGH THERAPY CULTURE – SELF-HELP BOOKS AND 'THE SELF-ENTREPRENEURIAL FANTASY'[1]

Abstract

The paper aims to develop a theoretical framework to understand how therapy culture contributes to the perpetuation of neoliberalism, focusing on self-help manuals as textual embodiments of this culture. We begin by discussing the conceptualization of neoliberalism in governmentality studies, which serves as our primary theoretical framework. However, we identify a theoretical gap in this framework, as it fails to adequately address how power relations intersect with individual subjectivity in the neoliberal governmental regime. To address this gap, we incorporate the theoretical apparatus of Lacanian psychoanalysis. Following this, we develop the concept of the 'self-entrepreneurial fantasy' to elucidate how subjectivity is mobilized into internalizing neoliberal norms of behavior. Building on this framework, we conceptualize therapy culture as the knowledge individuals use to shape their subjectivity in accordance with the scenario the 'self-entrepreneurial fantasy' provides. We define self-help manuals as textual encodings of this fantasy, and the instruments for its fulfilment. Our argument will be that these manuals translate neoliberal governmental rationality into psychological and psychotherapeutic terms, reshaping ethno-psychology and thereby influencing the way individuals form their subjectivity. Ultimately, we argue that self-help manuals and therapy culture serve as mediating instances between neoliberal governmental rationality and individuals' experience of themselves.

Keywords

therapy culture, self-help manuals, governmentality, technologies of the self, fantasy

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UPRAVLJANJE NEOLIBERALNIM SUBJEKTOM KROZ TERAPIJSKU KULTURU – PRIRUČNICI ZA SAMOPOMOĆ I „SAMOPREDUZETNIČKI FANTAZAM“[2]

Abstract

Ovaj članak ima za cilj razvoj teorijskog okvira za razumevanje procesa putem kog terapijska kultura doprinosi reprodukciji neoliberalizma, sa fokusom na priručnike za samopomoć kao tekstualne manifestacije te kulture. Članak počinjemo diskusijom o konceptualizaciji neoliberalizma u studijama upravljanja (*governmentality studies*), koje služe kao naš primarni teorijski okvir. Ukazaćemo na konceptualni nedostatak u ovom teorijskom okviru jer pojmovni aparat studija upravljanja ne uspeva adekvatno da konceptualizuje kako se odnosi moći prepliću sa individualnom subjektivnošću. Da bismo adresirali taj nedostatak, oslonićemo se na teorijski aparat lakanovske psihoanalize i u skladu sa njim razviti koncept „samopreduzetničkog fantazma“. Ovaj pojam nam omogućava da objasnimo kako se subjektivnost podstiče na internalizaciju neoliberalnih normi ponašanja. Oslanjajući se na tako izgrađen teorijski okvir terapijsku kulturu ćemo konceptualizovati kao znanje koje pojedinci koriste kada oblikuju svoju subjektivnost u skladu sa scenarijom koji im samopreduzetnički fantazam ispostavlja. Priručnike za samopomoć ćemo definisati kao tekstualno kodiranje ovog fantazma kao i instrumenata za njegovo ostvarenje. Argumentovaćemo da ovi priručnici prevode racionalnost neoliberalnog upravljačkog režima u psihološke i psihoterapijske termine, time preoblikujući etnopsihologiju i utičući na procese formiranja subjektivnosti. Zaključićemo tvrdnjom da terapijska kultura funkcioniše kao posrednička instanca između neoliberalnog upravljačkog režima i doživljaja koji pojedinac ima o sebi.

Ključne reči: terapijska kultura, priručnici za samopomoć, upravljanje, tehnologije sopstva, fantazam.

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Introduction

In trying to explain the persistence of neoliberalism after the 2008 financial crisis, Mirowski (2013, p. 84–149) coined the term ‘everyday neoliberalism’ to describe the embedding of neoliberalism in the everyday lives of citizens, where it acquires the status of common sense. Various authors give similar explanations, highlighting that the strength of the neoliberal mode of regulation can be explained by it acquiring the status of a hegemonic ‘structure of feeling’ (McGuigan, 2016, p. 25–3; Ratner, 2019; Bailes, 2020). In other words, aside from political and economic institutions, neoliberalism is also reproduced on the level of everyday life where it shapes our habits, social interactions, subjectivities, and generally becomes the rationality that frames our experience (Hamann, 2009, p. 39–41).

This dimension of neoliberalism's reproduction is also noted by authors aligned with the theoretical and research field known as ‘governmentality studies’. This field is based on the work of Michel Foucault, and thus, authors associated with it base their analyses of neoliberalism on Foucault's examination of this mode of regulation in his course *The Birth of Biopolitics.* Analyses based on the concept of governmentality focus on how in neoliberalism the processes through which subjects are governed by mechanisms of power and the processes through which they shape their own behavior are interconnected (Dean, 2010, p. 175–204; McKinlay and Taylor, 2014; Lemke, 2019, p. 171–182). We will call these two processes subjectification and subjectivation respectively (Rosenberg and Milchman, 2009, p. 63–67).

In governmentality studies, research on neoliberalism often relies on the concept of ‘technologies of the self’ (Gill and Donaghue, 2016; Ball and Olmedo, 2023), which Foucault (1988, p. 18) defines as discourses and techniques through which individuals shape their behavior and subjectivity. This concept has proven to be extremely useful in researching the convergence between neoliberalism and what is commonly referred to as ‘therapy culture’ (Carvalho, 2017). By therapy culture we mean the phenomenon of the diffusion of concepts, techniques, signifiers, and practices from the realm of ‘psy sciences’ (psychology, psychiatry, and psychotherapy) into the broader culture (Nehring and Kerrigan, 2022, p. 3). Numerous studies show that psychotherapeutic and psychological knowledge has converged with neoliberal reforms, implemented since the 1980s, across various institutions such as businesses (Rose, 1989, p. 55–122), state agencies (Furedi, 2004, p. 162–174), and educational (Rice, 2004) and medical facilities (Martin, 2006), where it becomes part of governmental technologies that influence subjectivity.

The concept of technologies of the self is also utilized in governmentality studies research to explore how therapy culture perpetuates subjectivities aligned with neoliberal governmental rationality in citizens' everyday lives (Matza, 2012; Nehring and Kerrigan, 2018). In these types of studies, the phenomenon of self-help manuals stands out as exemplary. In governmentality studies research self-help manuals are considered a textual form of technologies of the self, that encode norms of behavior and self-relating aligned with neoliberal governmental rationality. Thus, self-help manuals are seen as an instance through which this rationality is integrated into citizens’ daily lives, shaping their experience of themselves accordingly (Rindfleish, 2014; Rimke, 2000, 2017).

However, the analysis of self-help manuals in governmentality studies research suffers from a significant theoretical deficit. Since research from this perspective primarily relies on semiotic and discursive analysis, it mainly takes the form of illustrating how the norms of neoliberal governmental rationality can be observed in the texts of self-help manuals (Tie, 2004, p. 168–174). The limitation of this type of analysis lies in its inability to conceptualize how the neoliberal governmental regime, through self-help manuals as technologies of the self, mobilizes individuals to adopt certain forms of subjectivity. In other words, the theoretical framework governmentality studies are based on lacks conceptual tools to successfully elucidate the process through which individuals adopt and implement norms for forming subjectivity that technologies of the self contain[3].

We will attempt to address the aforementioned theoretical deficit of governmentality studies by supplementing the analyzes of neoliberalism found in the works of prominent authors from this tradition with the theoretical apparatus of Lacanian psychoanalysis. By relying on this newly constructed theoretical framework, we will proceed to analyze the role therapy culture has in the reproduction of neoliberal forms of subjectivity. Ultimately, by combining the concept of technologies of the self with Lacan's concept of ‘fantasy’ we will conceptualize self-help manuals as a textual codification of therapy culture through which individual subjectivation is governed in neoliberalism.

With this article we aim to provide a better understanding of the processes of neoliberalism's reproduction at the level of everyday life[4]. We believe that by understanding this level of its reproduction we can illuminate some of the reasons why neoliberalism persists as a dominate form of socio-economic organization despite going through numerous crises.

Tthe enigma of the neoliberal subject – homo economicus and ‘the self-entrepreneurial fantasy’

In governmentality studies, ‘governmentality’ refers to the general rationality concerning the optimal and desirable ways of governing individuals' behavior, or what Foucault (1983, p. 221) calls the ‘conduct of conduct’. We will use the term ‘governmental regime’ to refer to what Foucault calls the ‘apparatus’ (*dispositif*), meaning a set of institutions within which governmental rationality is ‘translated’ into concrete programs for regulating behavior (Foucault, 1980, p. 194; Miller and Rose, 2008, p. 32–34). These programs are established through specific knowledge, namely, various discourses that make objects of governing intelligible (Miller and Rose, 2008, p. 30). The goal of these programs is to guide individuals toward adopting a certain form of subjectivity, that is, a certain relationship with oneself and a model for managing one's behavior. We will call the specific combinations of knowledge and techniques

[3] Therefore, we can say that the framework of governmentality studies is unable to conceptualize the relation between subjectivity and the configurations of power and knowledge that comprise a certain governmental regime. Dolar (1993) also notes this theoretical deficit in Althusser’s theory of ideology.

[4] In the existing research on the reproduction of neoliberalism in everyday life, the concept of everyday life is rarely defined (Braedley and Luxton, 2010). We use this term to denote the ‘lived dimension’ of culture (Inglis, 2005, p. 12) or the way social structures are reproduced through habits, behaviors, subjectivities, and lifestyles of individuals (Lorenzini, 2018, p. 8).

for regulating behavior through which these programs are implemented ‘governmental technologies’ (Miller and Rose, 2008, p. 33).

Before researching neoliberalism, Foucault focused on the disciplinary regime of governmentality in his work and used the metaphor of the ‘panopticon’ to describe its rationality. This rationality implies the existence of a virtual figure of social authority that represents the entirety of the governmental regime, or some of its institutions, and prescribes certain norms of behavior to subjects (Foucault, 1995, p. 195–230). Foucault's analysis of institutions such as prisons or mental hospitals represents an investigation into the institutions that constitute the apparatus of that regime, where individuals are subjectified through various governmental technologies. Subjectivation in the disciplinary regime entails the internalization of norms prescribed by the virtual figure of the panopticon, whereby individuals adopt a certain form of subjectivity (Foucault, 1980, p. 146–165).

Unlike the disciplinary regime, neoliberalism doesn’t govern through a virtual figure that is presented as the source of norms for regulating behavior. Instead, it is based on the immanent regulation of institutions, creating conditions within them for individuals to adopt a specific form of subjectivity (Foucault, 2008, p. 255–260). In other words, the governmental technologies of the neoliberal regime don’t subjectify individuals directly but regulate institutions so that individuals subjectivize themselves in a certain way (McNay, 2009, p. 62–63). Therefore, self-relating practices and practices for regulating one's own behavior become direct instruments of governmental technologies in neoliberalism.

The form of subjectivity towards which neoliberal governmental technologies direct individuals Foucault calls the *homo economicus* and claims that it was developed in the economic theory of ‘human capital’. He argues that this theory constitutes the essential discourse on which the neoliberal governmental regime relies (Foucault, 2008, p. 243–252). In this discourse the *homo economicus* is conceptualized as an individual whose every form of behavior is directed towards acquiring some form of income, both monetary and in the form of personal satisfaction. Therefore, this model of subjectivity leads individuals to relate to elements of their subjectivity, such as various skills, acquired educational qualifications, mental processes, health etc, as resources for income accumulation (Foucault, 2008, p. 226–233). *Homo economicus*, therefore, implies a subjectivity that strives for continuous optimization of its elements to increase its future income-generating possibilities.

According to Nikolas Rose, companies face a challenge with employee motivation because of neoliberal reforms that promote employment flexibility and cause increased job insecurity. He points out that as a result, companies develop governmental technologies that portray employment and work as opportunities for achieving authenticity, happiness, and self-realization (Rose, 1996, p. 156–161). Drawing from Foucauldian insights, Binkley (2014, p. 38) observes something similar and argues that the neoliberal regime incorporates affectivity into its governmental technologies by presenting the optimization of subjectivity as means to achieve happiness. More precisely he claims that neoliberal governmental technologies aim to cultivate dispositions for rapid and efficient change in individuals’ behavior and self-relation by portraying happiness as a personal endeavor achieved through optimizing one’s own income-generating potential (Binkley, 2014, p. 31–32).

As we have shown, researchers in the field of governmentality studies recognize that neoliberalism contains a 'psychopolitical' (Han, 2017a) dimension, i.e., that its governmental technologies rely on the development of appropriate psychological dispositions for regulating individual behavior (Deleuze, 1992). However, it seems that authors who rely on this perspective haven't developed theoretical tools to conceptualize the integration of neoliberal governmental technologies with the psychological dimension of the individual. To correct this conceptual deficit in the following we will supplement the conceptualization of the neoliberal governmental regime in governmentality studies with concepts from Lacanian psychoanalysis, before analyzing the role of therapy culture in neoliberal governmental technologies.

Various authors note that Foucault's understanding of the apparatus must be complemented with concepts that could explain the process by which individuals are mobilized to align their practices with its norms. In referring to what Foucault calls the apparatus, Lordon (2014, p. 43) uses the term 'regime of practices' and claims that this concept must be supplemented with the notion of the 'regime of desire', which can explain the incorporation of the psyche into the logic of the apparatus. Gylnos and Howarth (2007, p. 145–152) argue similarly and claim that the conceptualization of a particular regime of practice must be supplemented with the corresponding 'logic of fantasy'. They use this term to describe how the regime of practice prompts individuals to invest libidinally in its norms.

The concept of 'fantasy' leads us to Lacanian psychoanalysis, whose theoretical framework we will use to supplement the understanding of neoliberalism in governmentality studies. In Lacanian psychoanalysis, the subject is understood as 'lacking'. Namely, after separating from the figure of the mother an individual develops self-consciousness which is the result of language acquisition and learning cultural norms (Lacan, 2006, p. 75–82). According to Lacan, this results in the appearance of a 'lack' in the individual's psyche that they seek to satisfy through libidinal investments in various phenomena. This lack is precisely what Lacan refers to as the register of the 'real' (Lacan, 2006, p. 575–584; Chiesa, 2007, p. 104–140).

The register of the 'symbolic' pertains to various cultural norms within which what Lacan calls the 'Big Other' is formed. This concept denotes various virtual figures that emerge in a culture and are seen as sources of 'ego ideals' (Chiesa, 2007, p. 34–69). Ego ideals are forms of subjectivity presented to subjects by the symbolic order as solutions to their lack. As Žižek (2006, p. 79–81) claims, the lack in the subject results from the question 'what am i for the Big Other', that is, which form of identity should i assume. Therefore, fantasies are formed within the symbolic order as scenarios that provide subjects with an answer to the question of what the Big Other desires from them. Fantasies consist of ego ideals and the *object a*, i.e., the object of desire that the fantasy presents to the subject as what will satisfy their lack if they adopt the ego ideal (Flisfeder, 2023, p. 177–178). In this way, fantasy integrates all three registers: the real, the symbolic, and the 'imaginary', a register that consists of the subject's self-consciousness (Chiesa, 2007, p. 13–34).

Fantasy can thus be understood as a concept that bridges subjectification and subjectivation. It enables us to explain how governmental regimes integrate individual subjectivity by offering a framework for conceptualizing the libidinal investment of individuals in the norms of such regimes. Through the

notion of fantasy, we can grasp how desire itself becomes embedded within governmental technologies, thereby revealing how the norms of a governmental regime are inscribed directly into the individual's unconscious.

Although they come from epistemologically and theoretically different perspectives, the works of Foucault and Lacan can be brought into relation precisely through the concept of fantasy. Lacan maps out the logic of various fantasies, which he terms discourses. His notion of the discourse of the master, in its underlying logic, corresponds to Foucault's conception of the disciplinary governmental regime. The fantasy associated with this regime involves the Big Other as the representative of the symbolic order, prescribing specific ego ideals that subjects internalize into their superego (Lacan, 2007, pp. 29–32).

In neoliberalism, however, this fantasy is replaced by what Žižek (1999, p. 362) calls the "collapse of the Big Other." This means that, under neoliberal conditions, the Big Other no longer dictates the adoption of ego ideals (Lacan, 2006, pp. 645–670) but instead issues imaginary injunctions requiring that one's subjectivity embody certain ideals – such as happiness, success, self-fulfillment, self-realization, or authenticity (Dean, 2006, pp. 40–44). This shift leads to the predominance of what is often referred to as the "archaic superego", which continually bombards the subject with demands for the constant adjustment of their subjectivity to these adopted ideals (Tutt, 2022, p. 34–36).

This conceptualization of the neoliberal fantasy can be seen as a phantasmatic logic that follows the form of subjectivity of the *homo economicus*. Through this logic, governmental technologies of the neoliberal regime articulate its governmental rationality with the psyche. As Foucault (2008, p, 230) claims, the *homo economicus* is a form of subjectivity that entices individuals to regulate their subjectivity and behavior according to the 'logic of the enterprise'. By adopting this model individuals become 'entrepreneurs of themselves', which leads them to perceive all aspects of their subjectivity as resources for income generation (Foucault, 2008, p. 226). Therefore, the phantasmatic logic we have previously presented corresponds to this form of subjectivity because it prompts the subject to continuously strive for the *object a* by modifying their subjectivity in accordance with internalized imaginary ideals. Thus, through this 'self-entrepreneurial fantasy', neoliberal governmental rationality entices the subject to invest libidinally in their subjectivity, portraying it as a set of resources for satisfying desire.

The function of therapy culture in the neoliberal governmental regime

The rise of therapy culture, as a consequence of the growing importance of psychological and psychotherapeutic knowledge in the twentieth century has been the subject of research in numerous disciplines since the 1950s. Many authors point out that this form of knowledge started gaining significance in the 1930s and rose to prominence after World War II with the development of the welfare state, when it became one of the discourses used to govern state institutions (Wootton, 1959, p. 17; Donzelot, 1979, p. 188–198). Additionally, authors like Philip Rieff and Christopher Lasch highlight the convergence between therapy culture and the ideology of counter-cultural movements, which reached their peak in the late 1960s. Lasch's research demonstrates how this combination became the foundation for the development of culture in Western societies during the second half of the twentieth century (Rieff, 1966; Lasch, 1991, p. 1–30).

However, the research on therapy culture started significantly developing only from the 1990s onwards, when it became apparent that psychological and psychotherapeutic knowledge had been instrumentalized in the process of neoliberal socio-economic reforms. Miller and Rose observe that neoliberal technologies of 'governing at a distance' heavily rely on discourses based on knowledge from 'psy' disciplines. They claim that as the role of the state is reduced in neoliberalism, citizens are governed, among other things, through actors such as psychological and psychotherapeutic experts (Miller and Rose, 2008, p. 142–172). Rose (1996, p. 74–79) points out that the role of these experts is to lead citizens towards establishing a 'reflexive hermeneutics', meaning a form of subjectivity that constantly surveils and evaluates its elements in accordance with neoliberal norms.

Eva Illouz also observes the growing importance of psychological and psychotherapeutic knowledge, especially in businesses forced to reorganize due to neoliberal economic reforms. She highlights that companies are shifting from a bureaucratic pyramidal model to a model of a network. This implies that companies increasingly rely on communication, interpersonal relationships, and collaboration as well as on the use of information technologies (Illouz, 2007, p. 20–25). Consequently, managers are increasingly utilizing psychological and psychotherapeutic knowledge to cultivate empathetic and reflexive subjectivities among employees, which is becoming crucial in modern enterprises (Illouz, 2007, p. 46–65).

Marxist-oriented authors such as Dana Cloud and James Nolan, drawing on Gramsci's idea of 'cultural hegemony', also reflect on the growing significance of psychological and psychotherapeutic knowledge in neoliberalism. They claim that state institutions in the West adopt these forms of knowledge to influence citizens and transform them into 'responsibilized subjects'. They argue that state institutions rely on psychotherapeutic and psychological knowledge to cultivate psychological dispositions in citizens that lead them to perceive their personal difficulties, such as the inability to find employment, as caused by deficient mental attitudes[5] (Cloud, 1998; Nolan, 1998).

We observe that in governmentality studies therapy culture is conceptualized as a set of discourses that mediate between neoliberal governmental rationality and subjectivity. Thus, therapy culture is understood as an instrument of subjectification; it contributes to establishing governmental technologies that, in neoliberalism, guide individuals toward adopting an appropriate form of subjectivity. This form of subjectivation results in a 'synoptic'[6] structure of subjectivity, meaning a form of subjectivity that continuously monitors and evaluates its own elements (Bauman, 2000, p. 85–86). This structure is the basis for adopting the *homo economicus* model of subjectivity.

[5] Theoretical considerations of the significance psychotherapeutic knowledge and practice gained with the rise of neoliberalism can be supplemented with statistical data. Dineen (2001, p. 9) cites data showing that from 1976 to 1995, the number of U.S. citizens who visited a mental health professional increased from 22% to 46% of the total adult population.

[6] The term 'synopticon' refers to the structure of neoliberal governmental rationality, implying that behavioral norms are produced and reproduced within the individual's subjectivity. This contrasts with the panopticon, a term that refers to the structure of disciplinary governmental rationality, which implies that individuals adopt norms originating from a virtual instance embodied in a particular institution (Gane, 2012).

To conceptualize the role of therapy culture in the neoliberal regime more precisely we will now interpret it through a previously developed theoretical framework that combines the conceptual apparatus of governmentality studies with Lacanian psychoanalysis. Gentili (2021, p. 84) argues that subjects in neoliberalism face a compulsion to constantly adapt to market fluctuations in order to continue accumulating income. Krce-Ivančić claims that for this reason neoliberal subjects suffer from increased anxiety. He points out that the neoliberal subject is forced to continuously strive for greater self-control and the elimination of irrational behaviors to be better adapted to market fluctuations in the future. Anxiety is a result of this striving because the subject can never be sure they have achieved optimal self-control. Therefore, anxiety plays a role in disciplining the subject, continuously directing them to re-examine and revise elements of their subjectivity (Krce-Ivančić, 2018).

According to Renata Salecl anxiety is caused by the subject's inability to respond to the injunction of the Big Other. In neoliberalism, since the Big Other doesn't prescribe ego ideals, individuals incorporate the demand for endless modification and optimization of their subjectivity into their superego (Salecl, 2004, p. 14). Therefore, anxiety represents the manifestation of the subject's inability to ever adequately respond to the imaginary injunction of the Big Other and reach the prescribed ideal. Similarly, Dufour (2008, p. 71) suggests that anxiety stems from individuals' constant struggle to develop a coherent subjectivity solely in relation to themselves, as the Big Other in neoliberalism doesn't dictate ego ideals. He describes neoliberal subjects as 'groundless', suggesting that the surge in the popularity of psychotherapy and self-help books during this era reflects individuals' endeavors to establish a foundation for their subjectivity (Dufour, 2008, p. 72).

The discussion surrounding the anxiety experienced by individuals in neoliberalism leads us to the conceptualization of the role of therapy culture in this governmental regime. Therapy culture can be understood as knowledge on which subjects rely to regulate their subjectivity in accordance with the imaginary injunctions of the Big Other. By relying on therapy culture, subjects respond to a scenario delivered by the self-entrepreneurial fantasy and optimize their subjectivity in order to attain the *object a*. Thus, for individuals, using therapy culture as an instrument in the process of forming subjectivity staves off the demands of the archaic superego, thereby keeping anxiety under control (Gentili, 2021, p. 94). Therefore, therapy culture can be conceptualized as a set of discourses according to which technologies of the self are formed in the neoliberal regime and through which individuals perform subjectivation, thereby responding to the injunction of the Big Other. In the following, we will look at self-help manuals as one of the forms that technologies of the self, created in accordance with therapy culture, take.

Everyday governmentality – self-help manuals and 'the self-entrepreneurial fantasy'

Self-help manuals have a long-standing tradition in the Western world. In academic literature, their origins are often traced to works such as Benjamin Franklin's *Autobiography* (1788), which offers business advice grounded in Protestant values, and Samuel Smiles's *Self-Help* (1859), a foundational text that promotes Victorian and liberal ideals by encouraging "industry, energy, and honor" (Nehring et al., 2016, p. 24). In the first half of the twentieth century, self-help literature evolved further, gradually

distancing itself from religious discourse and focusing increasingly on business success. This shift is exemplified in the writings of figures like Dale Carnegie and Napoleon Hill (Effing, 2009, p. 130–131).

By the second half of the century, professional psychologists began to author these manuals, turning their attention to personal discipline and self-management. A notable example from this period is M. Scott Peck's *The Road Less Traveled* (Cheng and College, 2008, p. 16–22). Since the 1990s, self-help manuals have entered a new phase, becoming closely intertwined with New Age ideologies and practices. This development is reflected in books like Rhonda Byrne's *The Secret*, which asserts that individuals can reshape reality through the power of thought to fulfill personal desires (Fernandez, 2008). From the 2010s onward, the genre has aligned itself with discourses in behavioral economics and contemporary psychology, leading to a new wave of manuals focused on habit formation, productivity, and efficiency – especially within the context of work[7] (Urošević, 2023, p. 150–179).

Research on self-help manuals has primarily focused on exploring their history (Effing, 2009), highlighting the influence of individualism inherent in Anglo-Saxon culture on their content (Dolby, 2008), and examining their popularity and consumption practices (Lichterman, 1992). Some authors note that the popularity of self-help manuals has sharply increased in parallel with the rise of neoliberalism. For example, McGee (2005, p. 13) observes a sharp rise in the sales of these manuals since the 1980s, which she explains as a consequence of the growing financial and job insecurity people face due to the implementation of neoliberal economic reforms[8].

Research on self-help manuals in the field of governmentality studies mostly comes from the work of the Canadian sociologist Heidi Rimke. Drawing on Rose, she suggests that self-help manuals can be viewed as a mechanism of 'governing at a distance', where individuals in neoliberalism encounter expert knowledge that shapes their process of subjectivation (Rimke, 2000, p. 62–63). Drawing on Foucault's work in the second volume of *The History of Sexuality* she conceptualizes self-help manuals as 'prescriptive' texts, i.e., texts closely linked to certain practices of subjectivity formation (Rimke, 2000, p. 69). Rimke suggests that self-help manuals serve as textual spaces where individuals interact with psychotherapeutic and psychological knowledge, explicitly presented as prescriptive guidelines for shaping subjectivity.

Rimke argues that self-help manuals serve as a conduit through which neoliberalism becomes intertwined with everyday experiences and through which market logic is embedded into subjectivity. She claims that discourses contained in these manuals are based on a specific understanding of subjectivity that individuals adopt through their consumption. Rimke calls this understanding 'psychocentrism' and

[7] The popularity of self-help manuals has also extended to post-socialist countries. In the post-Soviet and post-Yugoslav states of Eastern Europe and the Balkans, the discourses found in self-help manuals originating from Western capitalist societies are often combined with local spiritual traditions and elements of Orthodox Christianity (Erjavec and Volčić, 2009; Salmenniemi and Vorona, 2014; Gog, 2020). In China, the widespread appeal of self-help literature is exemplified by the success of author Yu Dan, who sold 11 million copies of her book, in which she reinterprets Confucian philosophy through the lens of self-help (Nehring et al., 2016, p. 8)

[8] McGee (2008, p. 11–12) states that the sales of self-help manuals increased from 1.1% of total book sales in the U.S. in 1972 to 2.4% in 2000. She also highlights that by 1998, the total revenue from the sales of these manuals amounted to 581 million dollars.

describes it as a set of assumptions according to which all problems individuals face can be explained as caused by deficits in the psyche or the brain, and thus individuals are solely responsible for resolving them (Rimke and Brock, 2012, p. 183). Therefore, we can say that for Rimke, the primary function of self-help manuals in neoliberalism is to influence everyday ethno-psychology. More precisely, self-help manuals play a role in altering individuals' understandings of emotions, motivation, cognition, and other categories of the human psyche, through which they regulate their behavior and self-relations in everyday life[9] (Frawley, 2024, p. 21–22).

We can observe that Rimke interprets self-help manuals as technologies of the self, that is, as a textual encoding of a specific set of 'techniques that allow individuals to effect by their own means a certain number of operations on their own bodies, minds, souls, and lifestyles' (Foucault, 1988, p. 18). However, in her interpretation, the main function of self-help manuals in neoliberalism turns out to be the dissemination of a certain set of psychocentric understandings of subjectivity. In other words, for Rimke, self-help manuals construct an '*episteme* of subjectivity' (Merquior, 1985, p. 128) that functions as a framework through which individuals shape their behavior and self-relations. However, this understanding of self-help manuals suffers precisely from the aforementioned theoretical deficit; it is unable to conceptualize the process through which individuals are mobilized to reconstruct their subjectivity through the categories contained in that episteme.

Tie (2004, p. 168–174) also observes this theoretical deficit while analyzing the way Rimke conceptualizes self-help manuals. He claims that the theoretical framework of governmentality studies is unable to conceptualize the mechanism that entices individuals to turn to self-help manuals in the process of subjectivation. Rimke (2000, p. 62) argues that individuals rely on expert knowledge when consuming these manuals in a desire to 'improve' their psyche and behavior but fails to offer a satisfactory explanation for the origin of this desire. She argues that psychotherapeutic discourses are 'naturalized' in neoliberal societies, and individuals accept them as common sense, thus being susceptible to their influence. Tie (2004, p. 172) considers such an explanation inadequate because the adoption of a particular discourse through which individuals regulate their subjectivity is explained by a previously adopted set of discourses.

The concept of the self-entrepreneurial fantasy has the potential to fill the theoretical gap we observed in Rimke's understanding of self-help manuals as neoliberal technologies of the self. According to Rimke (2017, p. 737–738), the psychocentric assumptions in these manuals' discourses manifest in two forms: (1) in a set of categories and concepts that provide subjects with the knowledge through which they can understand their psyche and behavior, and (2) in instructions for practices aimed at modifying subjectivity to achieve states like happiness, self-fulfillment, or authenticity. The structure of self-help manuals' discourses aligns with our understanding of the self-entrepreneurial fantasy and, therefore, we can see them as its textual formulation. Providing subjects with knowledge and techniques through which they can modify their subjectivity in order to achieve certain desirable psychological states corresponds to

[9] In her interpretation of how discourses of self-help manuals influence the categories through which individuals relate to their own psyche Rimke (2000, p. 69) relies on the work of Ian Hacking and his concept of the 'looping effect'. According to Hacking (1996), classifications through which subjects interpret reality can in turn influence their behaviors and self-perceptions.

the self-entrepreneurial fantasy's encouragement of subjects to treat their subjectivity as a resource for achieving the object of desire.

Here we can offer several illustrative examples of our understanding of self-help manuals. The first example is the aforementioned book *The Secret* by Rhonda Byrne, probably the best-selling self-help manual in history. The book sold six million copies in its first year of publication, while the DVD of the film on which the book was based sold two million copies in the same year (Fernandez, 2008, p. 3).

In this book, Byrne offers readers advice based on the idea of the so-called "law of attraction", claiming that an individual's thoughts are directly connected with the universe itself, and that our thoughts dictate the events in our lives. Therefore, Byrne argues that by simply changing our thoughts, we can achieve anything we wish, offering readers the fantasy of unlimited fulfillment of all desires (Fernandez, 2008, p. 22–23). The techniques provided in this manual mainly consist of various practices aimed at changing one's "inner attitude", that is, transforming one's thoughts and feelings so that they become focused on the desired goal and eliminate doubts about its realization. According to Byrne, in this way the individual's mind emits "positive frequencies", and the universe adjusts itself so that the desires on which the individual focuses may come true (Byrne, 2006, p. 10).

The second example we can mention is the book *Willpower: Rediscovering the Greatest Human Strength* by psychologist Roy Baumeister and journalist John Tierney. In this book, the authors explore the phenomenon of willpower and conceptualize it as a kind of mental resource. According to them, willpower is like a form of mental energy that can be used to reorganize one's habits and make them more productive. They compare willpower to a "muscle" and claim that it can be used to establish control over one's thoughts, emotions, impulses, and desires, and that through it one can reorganize both one's behavior and mental life (Baumeister and Tierney, 2011, p. 33–34). Consequently, they provide numerous techniques through which readers can increase their own amount of willpower, as well as use it to create new habits and reorganize existing ones. This manual thus operates through a conceptualization of subjectivity as a self-optimizing mechanism, while the authors offer readers techniques underpinned by the fantasy of the individual's endlessly increasing productivity (Baumeister and Tierney, 2011, p. 28–32).

By combining the theoretical frameworks of Lacanian psychoanalysis and governmentality studies, we conceptualized self-help manuals as technologies of the self with a phantasmatic dimension. This allows us to conceptualize the process of mobilizing individuals to shape their subjectivity through the knowledge and techniques contained in these manuals. Therefore, we can interpret self-help manuals as a textual codification of imaginary injunctions of the Big Other or as a textual space through which individuals encounter the self-entrepreneurial fantasy. In this way self-help manuals act like 'relays' between neoliberal governmental rationality and subjectivity (Miller and Rose, 2008, p. 30). Through these manuals, neoliberal governmental rationality is translated into categories of psychotherapeutic and psychological knowledge, which are then diffused through ethno-psychology, thus prompting individuals to adopt the synoptic form of subjectivity in their everyday lives.

Concluding remarks

The aim of this article was to develop a theoretical framework through which we could conceptualize the process of reproducing neoliberalism in the dimension of everyday life. Specifically, this framework was developed to elucidate the role of therapy culture in this process, with a focus on examining self-help manuals as one manifestation of this culture.

In his analysis of neoliberalism Foucault (2008, p. 260) argued that this governmental regime relies on regulating the environment in which subjects act and therefore doesn't require 'the internal subjection of individuals'. In other words, in his view, the neoliberal regime doesn't include the element of subjectivation. Foucault didn't analyze neoliberalism as an established governmental regime but rather as a model of governmental rationality present in the works of certain economists and philosophers. Authors who continued his analysis in the field of governmentality studies identified flaws in his analysis of neoliberalism. In governmentality studies neoliberalism is precisely conceptualized as a governmental regime that regulates behavior by establishing certain psychological dispositions, thus governing individuals towards appropriate forms of self-relating (McKinlay and Taylor, 2014, p. 8).

In attempting to complement this conceptualization of neoliberalism, we drew upon Lacanian psychoanalysis, specifically focusing on the concept of fantasy. This led to the development of the concept of the 'self-entrepreneurial fantasy', which helped us elucidate how the neoliberal regime governs subjects towards adopting a particular form of subjectivity. This form of subjectivity encourages individuals to view aspects of themselves as tools for attaining happiness, self-fulfillment, or authenticity.

Building upon this conceptualization of neoliberalism, we turned our attention to the role therapy culture has in its reproduction. We conceptualized therapy culture as a discourse consisting of concepts and categories that become intertwined with ethno-psychology, thereby influencing how individuals understand their own mental processes and behaviors. We thus interpreted therapy culture as knowledge through which neoliberal governmental rationality is translated into psychological and psychotherapeutic categories, providing individuals with tools to realize the scenarios delivered by the self-entrepreneurial fantasy. In accordance with this interpretation of therapy culture, we defined self-help manuals as textual embodiments of the knowledge encapsulated within therapy culture, that function as neoliberal technologies of the self. More precisely, we interpreted self-help manuals as textual representations of the self-entrepreneurial fantasy and of tools for implementing its prescribed scenarios.

We can conclude that in neoliberalism therapy culture serves as a mediating instance between subjectification and subjectivation. It can be understood as a combination of conceptual categories through which individuals understand themselves in a certain way (Hacking, 1996), and 'anthropotechnics' (Sloterdijk, 2013) through which individuals apply these categories, transforming themselves into certain types of subjects. Self-help manuals represent a textual formulation of these categories and techniques, which also contain a phantasmatic dimension whose role is to mobilize individuals to implement them. These manuals are thus one means through which neoliberal governmental rationality becomes normalized in individuals' everyday lives, shaping their experience of themselves. By applying the concept of fantasy in the analysis of self-help manuals we bridged the

conceptual gap between neoliberal governmental rationality and subjectivity, thus showing how in the everyday dimension of this governmental regime 'power is imposed on the face of subjectivity' (Binkley, 2014, p. 45).

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