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# Thin selves: popular psychology and the transnational moral grammar of self-identity

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## ABSTRACT

This article explores popular psychology as a transnational moral grammar. Academic debates have been sharply critical of popular psychology, and they have emphasised its association with neoliberal capitalism's narratives of social relationships. However, scholarship on popular psychology has focused on the Global Northwest. The transnational diffusion of popular psychology remains poorly understood, as do its implications for experiences of self-identity in the Global South. This article conceptualises popular psychology as a moral grammar of transnational scale, whose diffusion is closely associated with the globalisation of neoliberal developmental models. Its argument is grounded in an analysis of the transnational market for self-help books. Drawing on publishing statistics, it documents the transnational circulation and consumption of self-help books. Through ethnographic research in Trinidad it then explores how some female readers in drawing on self-help books to account for their experiences of everyday life against the backdrop of neoliberal structural adjustment, personal insecurity and already existing local socio-cultural traditions of self-help instantiate a moral grammar of transnational popular psychology in potentially syncretic forms.

## KEYWORDS

Popular psychology; self-help culture; neoliberalism; transnationalism; Caribbean; narrative research

## Transnational popular psychology in the global south

In this article, we conceptualise popular psychology as a transnational moral grammar. Across the last four decades, the diffusion of psychotherapeutic models of self, personal development and social relationships into popular culture has been subject to extensive academic debates. Much of this commentary has been critical. Since the 1970s, popular psychology has frequently been interpreted as a manifestation of a growing cultural malaise, in the form of pervasive narcissism (Lasch 1979/1991), a culture of fear (Furedi 2004), the commercialisation of personal life (Hochschild 2003), emotional capitalism (Illouz 2008), and so forth. In line with broader sociological analyses of academic psychology and psychotherapy (Moran 2015; Roberts 2015), notable recent critiques of popular psychology have emphasised the congruence between its recipes for self-improvement and the social and political programmes of neoliberal capitalism (Rimke 2000; Bröckling 2007).

These studies underline the broad sociological significance of enquiries into popular psychology. Their common core is the assumption that popular psychology's pervasive discourse of self-improvement expresses and legitimises contemporary capitalism's modes of social organisation and socio-economic stratification. Mafia Holmer Nadesan (1999) suggests that the narratives of popular

psychology act as a “colonizing force”, enabling corporations to define the conditions for everyday expressions of self-identity. This assumption dovetails with the conclusions of scholarship on contemporary consumer culture. Examining the embodiment of the self through consumption practices, Thompson and Hirschman (1998) argue, “identity construction in postmodern culture occurs largely through consumption activities and lifestyle choices [...]”. Along similar lines, Smith, Fisher, and Cole’s (2007) study on fanaticism and fandom draws attention to the importance branding and commodified identity categories play in contemporary constructions of self-identity. Reflexively fashioning their identities in late modernity, individuals may come to rely on the labels which an increasingly pervasive consumer culture furnishes them. Popular psychology sits at the centre of these processes, in that it commodifies psychological knowledge, turning it into marketable books, magazines, smartphone apps, talk shows and workshops that appeal to consumers with the promise of quick, profound and lasting self-transformation (Rindfleisch 2005). In other words, sociological research on popular psychology draws attention to the cultural narratives underwriting the social, economic and political dynamics of capitalism. In this sense, it contributes to the critical analysis of capitalism foundational to sociology from its beginnings to the present (Weber 1930/2005; Marcuse 1964/1991; Bauman 2005; Dardot and Laval 2013; Davies 2014; Elliot 2015).

At the same time, scholarship on popular psychology has remained subject to notable limitations. Academic debates have focused on the intersection of psychotherapeutic knowledge and popular culture in specific societies, most notably the USA (Illouz 2008; McGee 2012) and some Western European nations (Nadesan 1999; Furedi 2004; Rogge 2011; Salmenniemi and Vorona 2014). Studies conducted beyond the Global Northwest are rare, and they likewise emphasise the development of popular psychology within particular national cultures (Plotkin 2003; Nehring 2009; Yamada 2010; Wright 2010). The transnational production, circulation and consumption of popular psychology and its impact on selfhood in the Global South therefore remain poorly understood. Moreover, as contemporary capitalism operates on a transnational scale (Ong and Collier 2005; Elliot 2015), the cultural and political narratives legitimising it likewise need to be explored from a transnational perspective. This perspective has so far been largely absent from enquiries into popular psychology.

Our study seeks to advance debates on popular psychology beyond these limitations. It is grounded in research on the transnational production, circulation and consumption of self-help books. Self-help books advise their readers on a wide variety of everyday life problems, from career development and financial success to personal issues such as love, marriage and divorce. They are overtly didactic in nature, and they are commonly marketed on the basis of the solutions they offer to a variety of personal troubles (Nehring et al. 2016). They attract a wide variety of readers, and their popularity means they play a significant part in shaping prevalent cultural narratives of self and social relationships (McGee 2005). Self-help books, alongside other forms of popular psychology, set out a moral grammar of norms, values and beliefs according to which a successful life can be achieved.

Here, we ask to what extent and in which ways self-help books and their moral grammar can be described as a transnational phenomenon. To what extent are self-help books written, sold and read across national and cultural boundaries? How do self-help book’s moral recipes for a successful life acquire transnational currency, and how do they remain grounded in locally specific moral systems? To what extent are Western European and US-American critiques of popular psychology and neoliberal capitalism meaningful beyond the Global Northwest? We develop our response to these questions in two steps. First, we look at the publication, circulation and sales of self-help books from a broadly international perspective. Through sales statistics and figures from Western Europe, South and East Asia, Africa and the Americas, we examine the transnational popularisation of self-help. We then consider the ways in which readers engage with transnationally mobile self-help narratives to address socially and culturally situated life problems and explore how readers connect outward to a transnational sensibility and moral grammar associated with the acceptance of Western entrepreneurial individualism. In this context, we draw on in-depth interviews with 12 female, tertiary-educated, middle-class self-help readers in Trinidad in the Caribbean.

In comparison to the Global North, lives and culture in the Global South are underrepresented in international sociology (Connell 2007; Reddock 2014). In particular, there is a need for more scholarship on the politics and negotiation of everyday life in the context of the neoliberal restructuring of Caribbean societies (Klak 1997; Joseph 2013; Freeman 2014). Looking at Trinidadian's engagement with self-help books, we thus extend the remit of academic debates about popular psychology beyond its current focus on the Global Northwest. At the same time, our analysis draws attention to the cultural heterogeneity of transnational capitalism (Nederveen 2000), by bringing to the fore the idiosyncratic and locally specific ways in which some female Trinidadian's draw on self-help narratives to formulate entrepreneurial selves in neoliberal times.

## Methodological considerations

Our argument in this article forms part of a larger research project on transnational self-help cultures. It has resulted from fieldwork conducted over the past nine years in multiple sites. This involved, first, the narrative analysis of more than 100 hundred self-help books. Second, we explored the international market for self-help books and their trajectories of production, circulation and consumption at the international level, drawing on publication statistics, marketing materials produced by self-help authors and their publishing houses, as well as a broad range of other media sources. Finally, we conducted multi-sited ethnographic research on self-help culture and the consumption of self-help media in the USA, Mexico, Trinidad and Tobago, the United Kingdom and the People's Republic of China.

In conceptual and methodological terms, our research offers a reconceptualisation of popular psychology emphasising its diffusion through transnational social processes alongside its locally specific institutional roots. Following Nehring and colleagues, we understand transnationalism as “the converging, interaction and spreading of cultural objects, forms of practice, ways of thought and socio-economic structures across national borders, which, if extensive enough in geographical scope, count for instances of globalisation [...]” (Nehring et al. 2016, 30). In the context of our research, this simple definition is useful in so far as it points to the diverse processes – social, cultural, economic – involved in the transnationalisation of values, beliefs, practices, cultural objects and institutional forms. Against this backdrop, we developed a holistic perspective on the transnationalisation of self-help books that considers simultaneously their production, their forms of circulation, and the ways in which their narratives are consumed and form part of their readers' experiences of everyday life. Self-help books are arguably one of the principal points of intersection between psychotherapeutic expert knowledge and contemporary popular culture, and their popularity highlights the important role which psychological and psychotherapeutic narratives play in shaping everyday understandings of self and social relationships.

Trinidad, the geographical location in which this present study is set, offers significant insights into the transnationalisation of self-help books in the Global South. Trinidad is a post-colonial and multicultural nation with deep historical ties to other Caribbean countries, South America, Africa, South Asia, Europe, the Middle East, and Anglophone North America<sup>1</sup>. Globalisation is a lived reality in Trinidad as much in terms of its ethno-racial diversity and tensions and Trinidadian's multifaceted cultural and religious affinities, as in terms of its local class hierarchy and dependency on imports of consumer goods from diverse international sources (Miller 1997). Its relative wealth and high level of development notwithstanding, Trinidad has also been subject to neoliberal socio-economic reforms since the 1990s (Klak 1997). Self-help books, typically imported from a variety of international sources, are a common feature of the island's bookshops, and, as our ethnographic data collection confirmed, they are popular among its middle class of

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<sup>1</sup>The 2011 demographic census of the 1.3million population reads: 37.6% Indo, 36.3% Afro, 24.2% Mixed, and 1.9% accounting for the various groups: White/Chinese/Amerindian/Syrian/other and unknown.

professionals, civil servants and academics. Our ethnographic work involved participant observation, the collection of a variety of documentary sources, and the portrayal of self-help culture in Trinidad through photography, as well as in-depth interviews with self-help readers. In this context, our fieldwork took us to shopping malls, book shops, residential districts, as well as schools and universities. In addition our photographic work, we recorded our findings systematically in field notes and a gradually evolving set of memos (Spradley 1980; Clarke 2005). Finally, in order to chart the transnational circulation of self-help books, we obtained statistics on their publication and sales from international market research firms such as Nielsen BookScan. In our approach to data collection and analysis, we built on Adele Clarke's approach to Grounded Theory (Clarke 2005; Clarke, Friese, and Washburn 2015), as well as basic principles in the design, conduct and analysis of in-depth interviews (Kvale 2007). While our argument in this article showcases some elements of our ethnographic research, its focus rests on 12 interviews we conducted with female self-help readers.

We met our 12 participants randomly at one of three bookstores in West Mall, Trinidad over two consecutive weekends in August 2013, during the ethnographic data collection for our larger research project. The choice of bookstore was decided based on previous visits and observations. On exiting the bookstore people were asked if they ever read self-help books. If they said yes they were asked if they were willing to share half an hour of their time to discuss self-help guides with us and offered a coffee or water. The interviews were semi-structured and open-ended. An interview protocol was developed to address themes such as everyday living, personal history, and reader style, and to help elicit narrative-length responses. The conversations were all taped and transcribed in full. All participants were women aged between 24 and 40. Our 12 participants also represented the diverse phenotypical hues of local middle to upper class diversity in Trinidad, however we did not specifically ask them to indicate their ethnicity and instead focussed on their class background through discussion of their residential location, profession and education. All participants lived in middle to upper class Western suburbs of Port of Spain. All were employed, all were tertiary-level educated, some in the USA, Canada and UK, and some in Trinidad, and all were in white-collar professions such as lawyer, business owner, architect and high school teacher. As such, our participants while located in the Global South can be described as "typical reader[s]" of self-help guides, similar to those defined by Neville (2013) and Lichterman (1992).

## The psychological imagination

The term popular psychology describes the diffusion of psychotherapeutic models of self-identity, personal development and interpersonal relationships beyond the boundaries of academic and clinical praxis, into everyday life. Looking at Britain and the USA, Paul Moloney writes of the rise of a "psychological imagination":

Therapeutic assumptions and jargon have spread into our lives – from school to university to workplace, from the health advice clinic to the prison, and to popular entertainment programmes, where experts advise lonely people how to attract a partner, or parents how to become better ones. (Moloney 2013)

A striking characteristic of the psychological imagination lies in the extent to which it is mobile and has come to merge with a broad range of institutional arrangements and forms of everyday practice. Therapeutic narratives of the possibility of autonomous self-improvement have long underpinned mutual aid societies such as Alcoholics Anonymous and a broad range of therapeutic self-help groups at the international level (Brandes 2002; Wright 2010). Likewise, contemporary spiritual and religious narratives have often come to be infused with therapeutic notions of self-actualisation, from US-style evangelical Christianity (Lyon 2000) to New Age (Redden 2002, 2011) to mindfulness workshops (Madsen 2015). It is this extraordinary mobility of therapeutic narratives of self and social relationships that entails important questions about their transnational scale

and the ways in which they circulate between societies and come to be incorporated into heterogeneous cultural settings<sup>2</sup>.

Notions of self-improvement or self-help are central to the psychological imagination. Self-help books, newspaper advice columns, motivational talks and a broad range of other products and services promise solutions to significant life problems and offer pathways to professional success and personal fulfilment. Self-help articulates a moral grammar of personal development characterised by specific social norms and beliefs about the nature of social life and the relationship between individual and society. Extant scholarship points to five common features of this moral grammar. First, self-help assumes that individuals can identify the sources of their life problems and formulate remedies through the systematic self-examination of their values, beliefs and conduct (Hazleden 2003; McGee 2005). Second, systematic introspection opens up avenues to instrumentally rational behavioural modification, which in turn will result in significant life improvements (Crawford 2004; Cullen 2009). Third, self-help therefore is the outcome of personal choices, as well as a moral responsibility. In so far as individuals can choose to better their lives through rational strategies of behavioural improvement, they also bear a moral responsibility to do so (Philip 2009; Hazleden 2014; Nehring et al. 2016). Fourth, self-help thus offers the prospect of self-actualisation, i.e. a comprehensive make-over of personal values, beliefs and habits that enables the discovery of an authentic self (Remele 1997; Redden 2002; Hazleden 2003). Fifth, self-help writing is characterised by fundamentally ambiguous constructions of moral authority. On the one hand, it promises autonomous empowerment in the pursuit of a true and authentic self. On the other hand, however, self-help narratives are grounded in the premise that individuals will only be able to achieve self-actualisation if they consistently follow a model of conduct prescribed by commanding and charismatic figures like Oprah Winfrey, Joel Osteen, Bear Gryls, Carlos Cuarhtémoc Sánchez, and many others. In this sense, the acceptance of the moral authority of “self-help gurus” is foundational to self-help culture (Woodstock 2006; Hendriks 2012; Nehring et al. 2016).

This characterisation of self-help as a moral grammar has important implications. Since at least the late 1970s, a wide range of studies has drawn attention to the ways in which popular psychology has become implicated in the formation of late modern selfhood (Lasch 1979/1991; Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2002; McGee 2005; Illouz 2008). Our analysis of self-help as a moral grammar does more than just to re-examine this nexus. In his much-cited *The Struggle for Recognition*, Axel Honneth (1996) argues individual’s understandings of their needs and desires, as well as their ability to pursue these needs and desires, are shaped by processes of (and conflicts over) intersubjective recognition. In this context, Honneth relies on the concept of moral grammar to explore the intersections between individual moral experiences and the discourses and institutions shaping morality and struggles over morality at societal level. Likewise, we use the concept to examine how self-help narratives form part of and manifest broader moral discourses. Analysing self-help as a moral grammar, we draw attention to the ways it translates these discourses into specific normative systems – self-help recipes and thin selves – that simultaneously regiment conduct and structure everyday understandings and experiences of the social world. More specifically, in this article, we look at the ways in which the normative systems of self-help may acquire the power to shape individuals’ moral understandings and experiences of everyday social life.

Extant research has tended to explain the rise of popular psychology and self-help through institutional developments in specific societies. For instance, Micki McGee (2005) attributes contemporary Americans’ appetite for self-help books to the precarisation of the labour market and concomitant instability in both work and private life. In Britain, Frank Furedi (2002) writes of a

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<sup>2</sup>At the same time, the mobility of the psychological imagination raises important and interesting questions about its history. Unfortunately, the socio-cultural pathways through which psychotherapeutic narratives came to play such an important role in contemporary popular cultures remain under-researched. There is to date no significant history of therapeutic culture, beyond a few studies that explore some of its historical dimensions, focusing mostly on the USA (e.g. Illouz 2008). It is not our objective to address this gap, and our argument should be read as a strictly contemporary analysis of a specific manifestation of therapeutic culture.



“politicization of emotion” and the diffusion of therapeutic models of personal development in healthcare, education, business, government and even religious organisations. A notable feature of these explanations is the frequent association of popular psychology with the critique of capitalism and, more recently, neoliberalism. Writing in the early 1980s, Christopher Lasch (1984) problematises mass culture and consumerism in his explanation of a “minimal self” in constant need of reinforcement and shoring up. More recently, Arlie Russell Hochschild (2003, 2012) and Eva Illouz (2007, 2008) have analysed the commercialisation and instrumentalisation of human feeling, while commentators such as Sam Binkley (2015, 2011) and William Davies (2015) have written of the incorporation of therapeutic discourses of happiness into neoliberal commercial and political programmes.

In this sense, popular psychology and the self-help products in which its narratives are embodied might be seen as a form of cultural pedagogy (Kellner 2003a) educating its consumers into specific modes of thought, habits and ways of relating to others. The diffusion of psychotherapeutic knowledge in popular culture thus works to reinforce the hegemonic status of neoliberal imaginaries of self-identity and the social. In one of the very few studies on transnational self-help culture, Nehring et al. (2016) draw on Charles Horton Cooley’s metaphor of the looking-glass self to conceptualise the radical privatisation of the self under neoliberal capitalism. Charles Horton Cooley captured the sociality of the self evocatively (1902/1983) in the metaphor of the looking-glass self, i.e. the assumption that the self develops in terms of imagined and experienced judgements of others. This assumption of the sociality of the self has important implications, in so far as it makes it possible to realise personal troubles as public issues (Mills 1959/1967), and to give voice to these issues in political terms (Couldry 2010). Self-help’s thin self, Nehring et al. (2016) argue, is a desocialised and atomised self; a self stressed by purely personal challenges to accomplish purely individual objectives. There is no backstory to this self, no historical depth, no sociological context, and no connection to the social world, questions of political economy, and public issues of social structure. These points of reference being absent, the thin self is easily and simplistically blamed for its own failures to get ahead in life, and a moral grammar according to which a successful life can be achieved autonomously and on purely personal terms is easily accepted (Davies 2015).

These accounts resonate deeply with broader critiques of clinical psychology and neoliberal capitalism (Dardot and Laval 2013; Moran 2015; Roberts 2015). David Harvey (2005, 2), one of the leading analysts of neoliberalism, describes it as “a theory of political economic practices that proposes that human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterised by strong private property rights, free markets, and free trade”. Other scholars likewise highlight the entrepreneurial dimension of neoliberalism. Rose and Miller (2010) argue that the rationale of neoliberal government is grounded in “the language of the entrepreneurial individual”.

Emphasising autonomous self-improvement, popular psychology might be characterised as a cultural narrative contributing to the diffusion of this language of the entrepreneurial individual in everyday life. Popular psychology promotes the self-directed, instrumentally rational pursuit of objectives that are personal and private in nature, as in the case of the happiness industry described by Binkley (2015) and Davies (2015). In this sense, it renders broader political programmes of de-collectivisation and autonomous individualisation, legitimate and meaningful in everyday life.

Thus, the narratives of popular psychology can be usefully situated in the historical, political and organisational context of capitalism. Transformations of selfhood in the context of capitalism’s rise and transformations have long been central to sociology (Marx 1844/1988; Weber 1930/2005; Marcuse 1964/1991). More recently, sociologists have analysed the roles which psychological knowledge and institutions have played in supporting corporate capitalism (Roberts 2015). Selena Nemorin, for instance, (2017) highlights the convergence of cognitive psychology and neuroscience in marketing techniques that predict and manage consumer’s buying habits. Neuromarketing, she argues, relies on a discursive reduction of consumers to animals responsive to the stimuli of advertising. Her work thus draws attention to the instrumentalisation of psychological knowledge in the advertising

industry's pursuit of commercial profit, and to the reduction of citizens to economic agents open to manipulation. Her conclusions are paralleled by those of Ahir Gopaldas (2016). Gopaldas argues that the economic history of psychotherapy, that is to say its diffusion through its insertion into a commercially viable health care industry, has received insufficient attention in academic debates. His account suggests the medical applications of psychotherapy, its cultural popularisation and its exploitation for economic gain are closely intertwined in contemporary capitalism.

In this sense, sociological analyses of psychology intersect with broader arguments about the socio-cultural consequences of neoliberal capitalism. Nick Couldry (2010), for instance, draws on the concept of voice to suggest that British neoliberal capitalism, through its individualistic idiom of individual competition, opportunity, choice and responsibility, has disabled the articulation of personal life problems as social problems subject to collective action.

These arguments resonate in recent critiques of the globalisation of Western psychiatric knowledge and institutions. Drawing on Frantz Fanon's (1952/2008) critique of psychopathology, China Mills (2014) points to the role which psychiatry has played in disciplining colonised populations, rendering their distress as individual mental conditions requiring individualised interventions, and, more recently, creating spaces in which the economic and political interest of corporations, NGOs and other actors are played out under conditions of neoliberal capitalism. These arguments echo in other recent studies on psychiatry and the operations of the transnational pharmaceutical industry in the Global South, both contemporary (e.g. Lakoff 2005; Fernando 2014) and historical (e.g. Plotkin 2003).

The literature on popular psychology and self-help sits alongside these studies. Its importance lies in its attention to the social, cultural and economic pathways on which psychological expert knowledge acquires currency in everyday life and comes to shape the moral frameworks through which individuals experience their selfhood and social relationships. Within this literature, the concept of neoliberalism has played a large role. While some scholars (e.g. Illouz 2008) avoid it, it is arguably useful in two ways. First, it brings into focus the socio-cultural dynamics through which ideas originating in a relatively marginal strand of economic theory (Peck 2010; Mirowski and Plehwe 2015) have come to be popularised. In this sense, studies on popular psychology (e.g. Binkley 2014) offer important explanations for the persistence of neoliberal hegemony even after its theoretical foundations were discredited in the international economic crisis of 2008 (Mirowski 2013; Davies 2015). Second, discussions of popular psychology in the context of neoliberal capitalism bring to the fore the ways in which anxieties about selfhood, relationships with others and personal life chances have themselves become the subjects of an industry of international scale that sells happiness and peace of mind in the form of a wide range of products and services (Binkley 2014; Davies 2015). In other words, research on popular psychology may bring into focus the processes through which neoliberal capitalism acquires power in individuals' mental life and everyday social interaction. At the same time, it draws attention to the cultural and economic mechanisms through which the psychic power of neoliberalism may be turned into a source of commercial profit.

However, the analytical purchase of these arguments remains limited in significant ways. First, they are grounded in empirical research that has been concentrated in the USA, Western Europe and very few societies beyond the Global Northwest (McGee 2012). Second, the explanation of the rise of popular psychology in terms of institutional shifts within specific societies cannot fully account for the rise of neoliberal capitalism as a distinctively transnational phenomenon. Roy, Denzau, and Willett (2007, 5) draw attention to the transnational dimension of neoliberalism, by characterising it as shared mental model of global scale, whose "importance has varied greatly across countries and regions". In their recent work on transnational popular psychology, Nehring et al. (2016) have begun to address these concerns. However, their account of a "thinning" of the self still does not go far enough in answering important questions. How does the "thinning" or radical privatisation of the self intersect with broader processes of marketisation of social life? Is popular psychology unavoidably implicated in the alienation of the late modern individual, or may it also live up to its promise of empowering its consumers? In which ways is the thinning of the self a



transnational process, and in which ways is it grounded in locally specific institutional arrangements? With the present study, we set out initial answers to these questions.

## Transnational popular psychology

Therapeutic narratives of personal development reach deeply into popular culture in a wide variety of societies around the world. Sales statistics for commercial self-help products provide some basic evidence to support this argument. In the case of self-help books a range of organisations, including national publishers' associations and specialist international market research firms, such as Nielsen Book compiles these statistics. For this study, we compiled publication statistics for six countries: the USA, the UK, Brazil, India, South Africa, and the People's Republic of China (Tables 1–3).

**Table 1.** Sales of self-help books in five countries, 2010–2015.

Year	Sales	India	South Africa	United Kingdom	Australia	Brazil
2010	Sales value	£3.026	£2,420	£2.894	£12,434	n/a
	Copies sold	105,947	332,107	356,951	908,353	n/a
2011	Sales value	£1.926	£2,203	£3.231	£10,340	n/a
	Copies sold	738,121	311,638	407,060	826,883	n/a
2012	Sales value	£2.346	£1,983	£2.449	£8,769	n/a
	Copies sold	872,264	277,004	283,110	719,764	n/a
2013	Sales value	£2.497	£2,927	£2.643	£8,570	n/a
	Copies sold	875,320	261,147	294,797	726,781	n/a
2014	Sales value	£2.343	£2,181	£2.555	£8,140	£9,660
	Copies sold	855,026	251,083	282,293	682,947	2,172,960
2015	Sales value	£2.121	£2,436	£4.447	£9.567	£12,954
	Copies sold	831,234	267,727	486,143	830,590	2,833,186

Notes: All sales values are given in million Pound (£). Source: Nielsen BookScan; personal correspondence; June 2016.

**Table 2.** Sales of self-help books in the USA, 2007–2015.

Year	Sales values (USD and GBP)	Copies sold
2007	\$ 10,974,528	n/a
	£ 7,340,000 approx.	
2008	\$ 13,451,439	n/a
	£ 9,000,000 approx.	
2009	\$ 10,816,539	n/a
	£ 7,234,000 approx.	
2010	\$ 9,829,242	9,645,571
	£ 6,574,000 approx.	
2011	\$ 9,308,077	9,185,684
	£ 6,225,000 approx.	
2012	\$8,103,479	8,103,479
	£5,546,000 approx.	
2013	\$8,546,083	8,546,083
	£5,849,000 approx.	
2014	\$9,847,784	9,847,784
	£6,739,000 approx.	
2015	\$11,552,612	11,279,081
	£7,906,000 approx.	

Source: Nielsen BookScan; personal correspondence; January 2015.

**Table 3.** Market share and sales of self-help books in the People's Republic of China, 2010.

Market share (annual total revenue for print books)	Sales values (billion RMB)	Sales value (billion GBP)
34% approx.	¥ 18.2 approx.	£ 1.9 approx.

Source: Adapted from Nehring et al. (2016).

**Table 4.** Proportion of top 50 bestselling self-help books by international publishers, India, South Africa and the UK, 2014.

	India	South Africa	United Kingdom
Local publisher	78%	24%	14%
International publisher	22%	76%	86%

Source: Nielsen BookScan; personal correspondence; January 2015.

These figures need to be interpreted with some caution. Self-help is an amorphous genre that comprises texts on a wide variety of subjects, such as business management, financial success, career development, love and romance, happiness, stress management, and so forth. These texts are classified in different ways by different agencies, and self-help texts might come to be hidden under different labels. It is therefore likely that the figures shown in the preceding tables somewhat underrepresent the sales of self-help books<sup>3</sup>. Moreover, as they only refer to a small number of countries, they cannot sustain arguments as to a possible globalisation of self-help culture. However, they do seem sufficient to argue that self-help books are widely popular at the international level, far beyond the Global Northwest.

Beyond the relatively simple matter of its international popularity, there is evidence to suggest that self-help is a transnational cultural phenomenon. Steven Vertovec (2009, 3) defines transnational social practices as “sustained linkages and ongoing exchanges among non-state actors based across national borders”. This characterises the trajectories of publication and circulation of a substantial proportion of self-help books, as well as the activities of prominent self-help authors and their publishing houses. In turn, thus, self-help narratives and the moral grammars they contain may be rendered transnationally mobile through the activities of self-help authors and their publishing houses.

A survey of self-help bestsellers illustrates the power of transnationally active publishing houses. Table 4 groups the top 50 bestselling self-help books in India, South Africa and the UK in 2014, according to the scale of operations of their publisher:

In each of the three countries, there is a significant presence of publishing houses operating across borders and often forming part of larger media enterprises, such as Holtzbrinck or Penguin Random House. In the United Kingdom and South Africa, their proportion exceeds 70%. While in India locally active publishing houses play a much larger role, transnationally active publishers still issued 11 of the 50 bestselling self-help books. While there is a need for further in-depth research into self-help publishing and the market for self-help books, this basic set of figures does suggest that self-help publishing operates to a large extent on a transnational scale, in terms of the commercial interests of publishers able to reach across national borders.

The dynamics of transnational self-help publishing deserve further consideration. In the scant academic literature on the subject matter, the argument is prominent that the transnational diffusion of popular psychology amounts to a “globalization of the American Psyche” (Watters 2010), through which a distinctively American moral grammar is spread across the world. Eva Illouz (2008) briefly describes the transnational spread of therapeutic narratives of personal development as a process of cultural convergence on American terms. Similarly, Ethan Watters argues: “Over the past thirty years, we Americans have been industriously exporting our ideas about mental illness. Our definitions and treatments have become the international standards” (Watters 2010, 19). Data on self-help publishing support these conclusions to some extent. Table 5 displays the proportion of texts written by American authors among self-help bestsellers in six countries:

It is notable that American authors have a substantial presence in all five national markets outside the USA, ranging from 22% in Germany to 64% in South Africa. The notably smaller presence of US

<sup>3</sup>For example, the sales figures shown for the United Kingdom in table 1 refer to books that Nielsen BookScan classes under the label “Self Improvement: General”. If books classed under Nielsen’s categories “Careers & Success” and “Popular Psychology” were added, the reported figures would increase substantially. In each year, the sales volume of books classed as “Popular Psychology” in the UK surpassed 1.2 million copies, at an annual sales value of more than £1.2 million.

**Table 5.** Proportion of US titles among self-help bestsellers.

Country	Titles by US authors	Titles by other authors (local and imported)
United States	88%	12%
United Kingdom	46%	54%
South Africa	64%	36%
India	49%	51%
Germany	22%	78%
People's Republic of China	37%	63%

Source: Adapted from Nehring et al. (2016).

authors in Germany and China might be explained in terms of language barriers and the relative strength of local publishing houses. Nehring et al. (2016) explain that the Chinese market for self-help books was dominated by foreign authors, for instance from Taiwan and the USA. As the genre started to gain in popularity and grow, Chinese authors joined the trend and gradually came to dominate the market. On the whole, though, American authors have a considerable presence in the transnational self-help market, perhaps in part due to the ability of commercially powerful US publishing houses to market the works of American authors across the globe.

The comparatively wide reach of some bestselling US authors, however, does not support the conclusion that the transnational diffusions of popular psychology amounts to a process of Americanisation. Rather, the basic data we have presented so far begin to characterise self-help as a complex assemblage of transnational scope, in which authors from a wide variety of national and cultural backgrounds take part. Self-help is often written by local authors for local audiences. For example, of the 50 self-help bestsellers in India in 2014, 19 were written by Indian authors that do not have a traceable presence outside the country. At the same time, bestselling authors may achieve the status of transnational self-help entrepreneurs. Table 6 documents the transnational popularity of four of these self-help entrepreneurs:

Self-help entrepreneurs like Oprah Winfrey or Steven Covey strategically promote their work through a wide variety of media channels, from self-help books to TV shows, motivational workshops, and so forth. Through the overt display of their commercial and personal success in public life, they convey an image of autonomous achievement that corresponds to the entrepreneurial ethos they promote among their audiences. Self-help entrepreneurs have come to define the genre from a wide range of cultural settings. While Table 5 refers to well-known American media figures, the success of authors such as the Mexican Carlos Cuauhtémoc Sánchez, the Chinese Yu Dan and Bi Shumin, the Briton Bear Grylls, or the Japanese Marie Kondo points to the diversity of cultural reference points that characterises contemporary self-help.

## The everyday politics of neoliberalism in Trinidad

Trinidad is one island in the twin island nation-state of Trinidad and Tobago (T&T). T&T has through slavery, indentureship, colonialism and neoliberal globalisation been caught up in processes of primitive accumulation and accumulation by dispossession, and their socio-economic and cultural implications for over 200 years. It became Independent in 1962. T&T is roughly the same size as Northern Ireland, both in terms of land area (5,123 sq. kilometres) and population size (1.3 million people). Oil and gas exports are its major export and revenue stream.

**Table 6.** Bestseller rankings of three self-help books in four countries, 2014.

Book	United Kingdom	USA	India	South Africa
Stephen Covey, <i>The 7 habits of highly effective people</i>	1	7	1	3
Napoleon Hill, <i>Think and grow rich</i>	n/a	42	8	34
Kleon Austin, <i>Steal like an artist</i>	8	19	n/a	14
Oprah Winfrey, <i>What i know for sure</i>	4	9	27	1

Source: Nielsen BookScan; personal correspondence; January 2015.

Thinking about the development of Trinidadian society and its institutions from the 1970s to the present, it is possible to suggest why the moral grammar and thin selves of transnational popular psychology speak to young, upwardly mobile, professional women in Western Trinidad. On one level, the varied and changing socio-economic conditions over this period made it plausible for middle to upper-class multicultural Trinidadians to accept, or at least buy into, the ethos and language of transnational entrepreneurial individualism.

After the 1970s oil boom and bust, and the subsequent consolidation of neoliberal policies via the implementation of structural adjustment directives from the mid-1980s to the early 1990s, an already ethno-plural society underwent far-reaching socio-economic transformations (Hilaire 1992, 2000; Bynoe 2000; Aching 2002). High unemployment, high inflation, currency devaluations, salary cuts, increases in absolute poverty, high crime rates, and high levels of brain drain<sup>4</sup> are just some of the socio-economic consequences unleashed by processes of neoliberal consolidation (Melville 2002). As Deosaran notes, “while decolonialisation by structural changes took place, the society became captured by western values of status competition, debt-ridden consumerism, conspicuous consumption and rugged individualism” (Deosaran 2016).

As local institutions underwent these processes, their political rationalities and moral grammar, much like those of its citizens, began to change. For example, from Independence, the institutional model of community development for the People’s National Movement Government had been community-centre driven social change. Yet this bedrock of low-income development in Trinidad since the 1930s, built on local ideas of “self-help and self-reliance,” including selflessness, community labour, and the goodwill of the people began to collapse (Sobers 1998). First in the period of post-colonial Independence, Prime Minister Eric Williams became heavily reliant on the advice of “foreign experts” and dropped support for mutual aid programmes like the Friendly Societies (Fletcher 1990, 119). Then under cuts in the period of structural adjustment beginning in the 1980s, the community development programme managed by village councils without much centralised Government direction too faded away (Guttman 1994; Ministry of Community Development N.D.).

“Self-help” in Trinidad once described a working class community labouring together voluntarily and providing its own monies and physical resources, combined with the government using a “dollar for dollar” system, where monies raised by a community were matched with a corresponding amount from the State. Under neoliberal structural adjustment, many of these working class communities soon became pockets of poverty reflecting historical racism, and cumulative underdevelopment (Townsend 2009; United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime 2013). These changes left many communities disenfranchised and the wider society segregated. This made it plausible for affluent Trinidadians to desire and pursue personal development (self-help) on their own terms, imagining them as individual life projects, and connecting outwards transnationally to others that imagined the world in similar ways, often through distinctly North American popular media, consumer goods and professional styles, as documented by Miller in Trinidad (1994, 1997).

By the mid-1990s, T&T emerged from its economic woes as a small but significant player on the global energy scene, accounting for a brief time for a large percentage of all US liquefied natural gas imports. As elite economic enclaves across the local ethnic spectrum reaped the capital benefits of this new situation produced by neoliberal consolidation, an intensification of already present forms of structural violence and aggressive class politics entailed increases in private security firms and gated communities (Project Ploughshares 2013), massive growth in the prison population (Seepersad and Williams 2011, 113), and a murder rate that places T&T today among the top 15 most murderous countries in the world (Seepersad and Williams 2011, 126). One understanding of the consequences of such increases in crime and violence in a society is they influence urban governance. And successive local governments have chosen militarised policing, a state of emergency,

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<sup>4</sup>World Bank (2011) statistics note Trinidad and Tobago has an emigration rate of 79.3% of its most skilled nationals to the United States, Canada and United Kingdom

and an on-going war against its own citizens as their twenty-first century mode of community development (Seepersad and Williams 2011; Kerrigan 2015).

This partly explains the explosion of gated communities similar in layout, imagination and residence to the North American model (Mycoo 2006). As Mycoo notes,

“the attraction to living in gated communities in Latin America and the Caribbean is not limited to the very rich or transnational elite. Ordinary middle-class urban professionals across all ethnicities are generating a demand for private ‘quarters’ that provide a better living environment”. (Mycoo 2006, 134)

This imagined community of transnational middle class life has implications for local ideas about community development, which have shifted from the local metaphor of “it takes a village to raise a child” and the development of communal solidarity to notions of class warfare as gated communities symbolise. It is our suggestion that one way middle and upper-class Trinidadians can respond to these socio-economic shifts is through the pursuit of privatised means to personal achievement and stability. The proliferation of self-help texts would form part of this trend. Due to the breadth the subjects they cover, self-help products in Trinidad are well positioned to attract consumers from a wide variety of multicultural backgrounds.

### Feminism and post-colonialism

It is into this environment of post-colonial cultural collision that transnational self-help and popular psychology from the Global North circulate and may come to obscure, as well as hybridise, long-standing local cultures and ontologies of self-help. For example, during colonialism and post-colonialism Trinidad had to deal with the consequences of being forced into the structure of global capital accumulation as a site of low wages and poor working conditions. In response, long-standing and well-documented working-class cultural traditions of self-help with a more mutual aid and collective help ethos than transnational positive psychology including *Sou Sou* (Afro-Trinidadian community savings), *Gayap* (informal housing), *Chaiteyi* (Indo-Trinidadian community savings) and *Lend-hand* (communal labour) emerged in the late nineteenth century and extended to the 1980s (Winer 2009, 824, 188, 377, 524). Due to the relatively late participation by Indo-Trinidadians in local politics and decision-making at the Government level however, (Indo-Trinidadians did not form a Government in the local first-past-the-post system until 1995) these models of social development were not considered equally by all groups in Trinidad as vehicles of national development (Hodge 1986).

Nonetheless, these traditional, mutual-aid self-help practices are reflected in the work and legacies of the community-centres movement, the transplanted Friendly Societies Movement and its various 1888/1934/1950 acts of law (Fletcher 1990), and their off shoots like Servol<sup>5</sup> and the local National Commission for Self Help Ltd. (NCSHL), established in 1987 to aid the “dispossessed poor”, and built on traditional ideas of self-reliance and mutual aid developed indigenously as practical solutions for many low-income families (Sobers 1998, 376). Such cultural and political institutions formed the backbone and local moral grammar of working class, community development from the 1930s to 1980s (Guttman 1994) and helped the post-colonial nation to tackle, albeit with moderate success, through collective action the inequalities inherent and established in the colonial condition and established historically in post-colonialism, such as the “positional difference” and the structural inequalities set up by slavery, colonialism, imperialism and globalisation. Such processes bequeathed cumulative issues of justice-denied, such as exploitation, marginalisation, powerlessness, cultural imperialism and violence (Young 1990). However, the products of the transnational self-help industry do not speak a moral grammar of such cumulative injustices. This raises questions around the ways in which Trinidadian middle to upper class readers of self-help products imagine their national community vs. their transnational class community.

<sup>5</sup>Servol (Service Volunteered for All) is a grassroots community development organization established in 1970 founded on a self-reliant approach to development. Programmes were community based, stressed parental involvement and encouraged personal growth as a way to overcome low self-esteem (Guttman 1994, 7).

In terms of social structure, Caribbean feminists too have noted that gender relations and gender inequality in the Caribbean are shaped by the legacies of the colonial period and multiple localised post-colonial adaptations to the innumerable scenarios bequeathed by such times (Reddock 1984, 2014). These include understanding how Caribbean family units, gender relations and gender inequality have been constantly reshaped by the changing needs of global capitalism and that young women were, and are, often those most affected by the legacies of the overall society (Ho 1999). Again these post-colonial realities are not questions, lessons or ideas contained and addressed within the products of transnational popular psychology. As such, it is reasonable to suggest that rather than liberating or empowering Caribbean women to take back power and address historically determined forms of gender inequality in the post-colonial space premised on the historical intersections of class, race, ethnicity, and gender, there is no contextual understanding of such post-colonial social relations in self-help's moral grammar. Furthermore, in the context of various waves of feminism recognised around the world, it suggests local readers of transnational self-help connect to a thin Euro-American feminism that cannot equate to nor understand the realities of postcolonial Caribbean feminism (Reddock 1984, 1994, 2014).

The transformation of traditional cultural and social institutions of self-help like those described above hint at layers of hybridity and glocalisation on both the micro-individual and macro-institutional level and suggest some of the realities the moral grammar of transnational popular psychology must negotiate in Trinidad. At the same time, while it is true that long-standing community traditions of self-help in Trinidad are not identical to the travelling moral grammar of positive psychology and therapeutic discourses, they do share similar elements of political ideology such as independence, self-determination, and self-respect (Sobers 1998). This suggests that one method transnational positive psychology uses to travel and embed itself in new cultures is to embrace cultural similarities while at the same time eroding the salience and meaning – not necessarily completely or successfully – of such traditional cultural forms.

### Reading self-help books in Trinidad

In Trinidad, a main site for buying self-help products is the mall. One such mall is The Falls at West Mall. It is located in a wealthy western suburb of Port of Spain, T&T's capital. West Mall is widely popular with expats and well-off locals. Amongst its 115 shops, this mall has three bookstores of varying sizes. Each of these stocks a variety of self-help texts, some of which are on display throughout the shops. The books on display include religious self-help and inspirational quote titles, classics such as *How to win Friends and Influence People* by Dale Carnegie, biographies about well-known figures such as Oprah and Malala, self-help books by local, regional and international authors, Bibles of every size and kind, books about crises of faith and keeping faith from a variety of different perspectives, conquering problems, finding destiny, being mindful, dealing with men and relationships, loving oneself, getting ahead in the business world, building self-confidence, how-to-guides, books on battles with weight, and a lot more. Self-help texts thus have a significant presence at West Mall. A large majority of these texts have been produced abroad, in North America, and Europe, with a small number like *New Beginnings* by the Jamaican E. Lloyd Smith produced in the Caribbean. This highlights both the transnational scope of commercial self-help culture among the affluent sectors of Trinidadian society and the transnational flows of popular psychology at large. Alongside these initial observations, informal conversations with customers at these bookshops support the conclusion that self-help culture is well established in Western Trinidad. For example, respondents were quick to indicate that the self-help genre in Western Trinidad is not confined to books and extends beyond into audio books, foreign led mutual-help workshops and retreats, DVDs and more. This breadth suggests that access to a consumerist therapeutic culture is generally available to the middle and upper classes in Western Trinidad.

The semi-structured interviews we conducted with self-help readers suggest that visits to the mall were not alone in shaping their choices of what to read. Recommendations from trusted sources,



such as friends, family, or North American media figures like Oprah and Dr. Phil played a major part, as did suggestions in self-help columns in the local newspapers, in radio shows, and on websites. Searching online for motivational quotes, respondents noted they follow links connecting them to self-help products they might then purchase. As Darcie, a 30 year-old, self-employed mother of one suggested,

‘Mostly, it’s if someone tells me they just read this great book and ‘it really helped me.’ Otherwise it’s Oprah, Dr Phil. Or it could be an interview with the author that catches my eye or somewhere their story is shown and how the book helped their life. And then I’ll see they’ve written a book and I just find it interesting so I read it.’

Hannah, 28 and a civil servant, told us that her friends influence her self-help product choices:

‘The first self help book that I read was from somebody in work who gave me a book, a self-help book for Christmas, as a present and it was really good. The second one I bought for myself. I saw it in a bookstore and a friend was with me and he suggested I should get it.’

This process of choosing self-help products in Trinidad is similar to Litcherman’s insights into “interpretive communities” in the construction and interpretation of genres (Litcherman 1992, 424). Self-help consumers in Western Trinidad understand and choose self-help products based on their participation in interpretive communities that are both local and transnational. In a culturally relative sense, self-help “texts acquire meaning only through the shared interpretive conventions of specific institutions or group of readers. Texts can indeed be constructed to ‘mean’ different things in different interpretive circles” (Litcherman 1992). One way to understand this system of selection and discovery is to describe it as connecting the local to the transnational, and the personal to the neoliberal. A matrix of institutions, such as family, social media, popular culture, and the mainstream media, blend and connect readers to the narratives of therapeutic culture.

### **Personal development, empowerment and radical privatisation among self-help readers in Trinidad**

In order to understand readers’ engagement with the micro-politics and moral grammar of self-help, we asked our participants to describe why they read self-helps texts in the first place. In response, Adriana, an MSc Sociology graduate at the University of the West Indies, and a fan of the *Secret*, spoke of the need to cope with a changing world: “Self-help guides help you to understand your surroundings, the things around you, how to move forward with the circumstances that you have and how to deal with them in the best way”. This is reminiscent of the second part of our definition of the moral grammar of transnational self-help, which addresses the ways in which systematic introspection opens up avenues to instrumentally rational behavioural modification, which in turn results in significant life improvements (Crawford 2004; Cullen 2009). For Adriana, everyone has “circumstances” to deal with. Was this a reference to the post-colonial condition? Perhaps. Yet her suggestion that everyone needs help in modern Trinidad equally, in order to advance beyond and past such circumstances, could also be read as the thin self; for the Caribbean as a region was founded on inequalities of race, ethnicity, gender, and class. It is not an equal place.

Adriana’s discourse ignores the specifics of socio-economic differences on the ground, where the playing field is not level for all (Kerrigan 2015). However, the implication is that such help is a personal and individual undertaking, rather than a collective and social one. As Adriana continued, “Yeah they [self-help guides] show selfishness is good as well, that’s cool.” This observation suggests a difference with the moral grammar of working class collectivism of the NCSHL and Servol, or local cultural institutions like *Gayap*, *Chaiteyi* and *Sou Sou* as traditionally understood. Instead, this narrative drawing on the thin self and its notions of self-reliance and autonomous personal development is frequently associated with neoliberal political programmes and its moral grammar, both in the Caribbean (Freeman 2014) and elsewhere (Bröckling 2007). Adriana went on to suggest that, in an increasingly secular world, self-help products have a spiritual as well as a practical function:

'I really think it is the people that you know don't go to church or don't go to Mosque or don't go to Temple, where they don't have that spiritual guide within an institutionalised form, I think self-help guides are a more secular thing I don't know if any religious people read self-help guides unless you look at motivational things like Joel Osteen.'

The implication here is that self-help can fill a gap in a local institutional landscape characterised by increasing secularisation and a persistent need for moral guidance. Interestingly, Adriana's statement sounds like an acceptance of the idea that the less overtly religious can look within themselves for spiritual answers, rather than turning outward to institutional religion. Inherent in this argument is a subtle logic of de-politicisation, which builds on such inward turns to distract from the potentials of self-help in collective terms (Nehring et al. 2016). She went on to say, "a self help guide in some ways is like a response, a modern response to this added insecurity, and also the lack of kinda religious guidance we use to get in the years past". This is another element in our definition of the qualities of self-help's moral grammar, wherein self-help writing is characterised by fundamentally ambiguous constructions of moral authority and the moral authority of "self-help gurus" is accepted in its place.

Margaret, a 31-year-old from a Trinidadian-American family, told us:

Self-help is like you do it for yourself. Like I would go and read different books, and try to gain knowledge on my own and try to interpret things in different ways to develop who I am as a person.

This sounds like another adaptation of self-help's moral grammar, where self-help offers locals the prospect of self-actualisation via a comprehensive makeover of personal values, beliefs and habits enabling the discovery of an authentic self. Margaret here subscribes to the entrepreneurial narrative of personal development. Pursuing knowledge and personal growth on her own, she appears comfortable with the idea of a thin self. The suggestion is her personal development is fully autonomous and, by extension, disconnected from the local cultural traditions of self-help with their more mutual and collective history and the reality of post-colonial inequality. This makes sense to her.

Laura, 35, married and an architect, told us that self-help books help her on two levels:

'It was spiritual and practical at the same time because I don't go to church or any religious institution so I don't really have that grounding in terms of something to centre me so the self-help books are helpful in terms of giving me a kind of spiritual awareness of myself, of my surroundings and its not caught up in all of the spiritual stuff, doctrines and stories that you don't know if it real or not. It was something based on reality in terms of how you feel and stuff like that.'

These two levels might be described as analogous to the personal and the institutional, and the implication appears to be these two levels blur and blend into each other. In self-help Laura suggests, much like Adriana, she finds a moral grammar for her everyday life that previously might have been gained only through membership in an organised religion. In a somewhat similar vein, Hannah told us, "I think self-help guides are a little bit cooler. Like it's not cool to read the Bible". This throwaway line suggests Hannah is open to the moral guidance of transnational self-help, once it does not arrive in traditional forms. At the same time, Darcie expressed the opposite sentiment: "I think I read a lot less of those self help books because I read the bible more now. It's more of a connection thing, I feel as if the bible is God speaking to me directly". Perhaps we can read Darcie's words as a rejection of self-help books as moral guidance. However, in T&T, where 86% of respondents to the 2011 census reported they were a member of a religion, and where religious books sit on bookstore shelves next to self-help texts and subtly blend with them, such a conclusion misses the local syncretism of positive psychology and religious teachings. In a multi-cultural country that understands itself as overtly religious, the local syncretic blending of religion and popular psychology provides distinctive insights into a localised combination of religious traditions, the moral grammar of the entrepreneurial individual, and neoliberal governmentality, dressed up as secularised self-help under transnational capitalism. It is an example of an anthropological "rich point" wherein the outside culture of transnational self-help meets the historically driven insider culture of post-colonial Trinidad (Agar 1994).

Our interviews suggest that some middle to upper-class readers in Western Trinidad see self-help texts as a form of “cultural pedagogy” (Kellner 2003b, 9). In our interview conversations, we asked questions about self-help guides as potential sources of survival strategies in increasingly precarious world. For Darcie this was suggestive:

‘Hmmm. The first one I read ... I was 17 ... Ok I’ll be very honest. I think it was being a teenager and feeling all depressed and lame and whatever. I think I was like that and the first guide was something like how to manage depression. Something my parents might have given me.’

In supplying their daughter with self-help products to manage her depression, Darcie’s parents demonstrated an understanding of the precariousness of everyday family life resembling arguments made by Lasch (Lasch 1979/1991, 169f.) and others in North America. This suggests that a moral grammar of popular psychology long described as a characteristic feature of America’s belaboured middle classes (McGee 2005) has long since arrived in Trinidad. On the one hand, this might be read as a process of cultural hybridisation (Nederveen 2009), through which transnationally mobile self-help narratives have come to be incorporated into a class-based niche of Trinidadian culture to address locally specific problems of personal development. On the other hand, our participants’ accounts of precariousness might be seen as a response to the transnational spread of neoliberal programmes of economic development that have eroded long-term security for the middle classes, in the Caribbean as much as in the USA and other countries (Harvey 2005; Sennett 2006; Freeman 2014). This idea of precarious living in the neoliberal era connects back to something Adriana, our MSc Sociology graduate and participant told us with great imagery: “In the current climate, a zeitgeist characterised by empire building on the personal level has grown in Trinidad. I think individuals now experience their own forms of discovery, settlement, exploration and conquest in their everyday lives.” Thus, as a moral grammar, self-help assumes individuals can identify the sources of their life problems and formulate remedies through the systematic self-examination of their values, beliefs and conduct.

For Lisa, a 32-year-old teacher, who was currently enjoying Tony Robbins’ DVDs and whose favourite all time self-help book was the classic *Feel the Fear and Do it Anyway* by Susan Jeffers, discovering personal ways to be more empowered about her life was a central reason why she read self-help books: “I really enjoy motivational talks. I’m obsessed with motivational speaking and that kind of thing so that ended up drawing me into the books”. For Margaret the desire to overcome personal difficulties motivated her to read self-help, in line with observations about self-help readers in other parts of the world (Neville 2013):

‘Yeah, for me it’s like tools you are using, tools for life. A lot of people say people who read self-help books are depressed or have issues and can’t deal with life on their own and I do agree that I use less of them as I get older but I think its learning, it’s all knowledge and maybe there are different forms of knowledge but it’s up to you to decide what information you are going to take or not.’

Here, Margaret tells us that self-help books are often aimed at those who cannot deal with life on their own. She suggests this is a common experience for younger members of society. Her implicit suggestion is with time and skills taken from self-help texts, one learns how to make individual choices to improve one’s life. In line with other readers we interviewed, Margaret implies that everyone shares this challenge equally, which misrepresents the post-colonial context. Such sentiments suggest life is simply what you make it and social mobility a choice. This voluntaristic understanding of personal development resonates with neoliberal political programmes foregrounding individual responsibility, competition and choice in justifying the abolition of public welfare systems in the context of structural adjustment (Harvey 2005; Davies 2014). Such sentiments are of course disconnected from the traditional working class, local cultures of self-help found in Trinidad, which emerged from the circumstances of the colonial condition to provide social mobility via collective assistance, and instead suggest a psychological selfhood familiar to Harvey and Davies description of corporate capitalism is more salient to Margaret’s needs.

On the whole, our interviewees suggested the pursuit of empowerment, a new survivalist mentality, and the search for spiritual and personal developments are central reasons for their interest in self-help texts. In this sense, the readers we spoke to appeared to be assembling a privatised narrative of personal survival – a moral grammar – that resonates deeply with accounts of the uses of popular psychology in the Global Northwest (Rimke 2000; Gershon 2011).

As the period from 1970 to 2005 unfolded under the pressures of post-colonial independence, economic change and local transformations, Trinidadian society was remade. Traditional institutions of working class community development with their working class ethos of collective development, declined and their legacy faded away. Today many individuals now comfortably accept the need to find answers to pressing moral questions and personal troubles on their own. Popular psychology's therapeutic narratives in this context come to act as a "political technology of the self": In so far as self-help narratives furnish their consumers with recipes for self-improvement, they also become elements in the broader social and political programmes of neoliberal capitalism.

In this sense, self-help promotes an ethos of conformism and radical privatisation. At the same time, it elides it's the institutional processes within which Trinidadian's personal development must take place, through which the upper and middle classes have increasingly retreated behind gated communities or left due to migration and brain drain (Mycoo 2006), and through which crime and corruption are at levels never experienced before (Seepersad and Williams 2011; Kerrigan 2015). In these scenarios the appeal of transnational popular psychology and its moral grammar of turning inward and away from the social, make sense.

### The politics of self-help

This article adds to academic debates about popular psychology in two significant ways. First, our argument highlights the transnationalisation of popular psychology. In this context, it points to tensions between the relative ideological homogeneity of self-help narratives and the heterogeneous ways in which they come to be incorporated into practices and experiences of everyday life within specific, localised institutional frameworks. Second, in this context we draw attention to the ways in which transnational popular psychology may participate in the construction of a distinctive common sense whose pervasiveness in everyday life legitimises broader political and economic strategies.

The statistics we presented on the production, circulation and sales of self-help books demonstrate the international reach and transnational character of popular psychology. In terms of the entrepreneurs who author and promote self-help texts, in terms of the publishing houses that issue self-help texts, and in terms of the individuals who engage with self-help texts across the world, self-help culture very much operates through sustained linkages and ongoing exchanges that cross national borders (Vertovec 2009, 3). Both these publishing statistics and our encounters with self-help readers in Trinidad suggest that therapeutic narratives of personal development have penetrated deeply into everyday life and shape meanings and experiences of self-identity and social relationships. While its empirical scope is clearly limited, this study suggests that popular psychology might constitute a distinctive transnational form of subjectivity in the early twenty-first century (Brady 2014; Nehring et al. 2016).

Our conclusions parallel those of previous research that has documented the far-reaching impact of popular psychology on subjectivities and forms of everyday life (Moskowitz 2001; McGee 2005; Illouz 2008). However, the almost exclusive focuses of these studies on the USA and Western Europe have obscured the much broader international significance of popular psychology. Moreover, where previous studies have emphasised national-level institutional developments in their explanations of popular psychology's growing prominence, our analysis has foregrounded its transnational character. The rise of popular psychology in Trinidad can at once be usefully explained through particular, localised institutional developments, in national politics, labour markets, education, and so forth, and through political and economic processes of transnational scale that entailed the nation's turn to neoliberalism over the past decades. Against this backdrop, the transnationally mobile

narratives of popular psychology have emerged as meaningful resources on which middle to upper class Trinidadians can draw to make sense of their everyday lives.

That said the theoretical dilemmas posed by how our female readers in multi-cultural Trinidad negotiate and consume self-help products were complex. Intersections of colonial, post-colonial and neo-colonial processes and histories, and the varying class, ethnicity/race and gender contexts they produce locally, inform the background of these choices. At the same time global processes of capitalist accumulation during the twentieth century stretched inequalities and reinforced class and race segregation on the ground, however these process have not played out evenly between the two largest social groups – Indo and Afro Trinidadians – in terms of access to political power, resources and cultural traditions. Under such complex terms, local situations of syncretism, hybridity and glocalisation have unfolded. One space and analogy for these processes in the wider socio-cultural situation is transnational self-help. In the main while our female readers can be said to have adopted the moral grammar of transnational popular psychology, and their own language-in-use supports their imagined membership of such group-think, our readers did so in a complex, over-determined situation. Comparative analysis into how and why self-help is consumed and negotiated in other locations in the Global South can provide further exploration, support and critique for many of the observations we have mobilised into how some female readers in Trinidad in drawing on self-help books understand and negotiate their experiences of everyday life by instantiating a moral grammar of transnational popular psychology in potentially syncretic forms.

China Mills (2014) portrays clinical psychiatry at once as a legacy of Western colonialism in much of the Global South and a device through which relationships of domination, subordination and resistance are negotiated in the contemporary, postcolonial world. Psychiatry in this sense manifests the psychic life of colonial power (Riggs and Augoustinos 2005; Hook 2008; Mills 2014). Thus, writing on post-colonial psychology in the Anglophone Caribbean, Hickling, Gibson and Hutchinson (Hickling, Gibson, and Hutchinson 2013, 869f.) conclude that “overwhelmingly white and Western” psychiatry in the region worked to protect colonial interests in the postcolonial period. Popular psychology might be seen as operating in broadly analogous ways in everyday life, rather than clinical practice. As our participants’ accounts have shown, popular psychology, here in the form of self-help texts, promotes a set of values, norms, beliefs and modes of experience that are broadly congruent with the political and economic programme of transnational neoliberal capitalism. On a local scale, popular psychology constructs entrepreneurial subjectivities that offer pathways for navigating the institutional landscape of neoliberal Trinidad. From a transnational perspective, the diffusion of popular psychology is not just a result of institutional developments in Trinidad, but also an element of the global spread of neoliberal forms of political and economic practice and concomitant cultural narratives that legitimise these practices.

The narratives of the 12 women we interviewed thus must be understood, first of all, in the context of institutional developments that have reshaped Trinidadian society since the 1980s. The relative prosperity of the country’s middle class notwithstanding, decades of neoliberal reforms of economy, labour market, education and other institutions entail uncertainty and the inability to predict life in the long run for young women such as our participants. In the same period, the advent of Anglo-American consumer culture has facilitated the popularisation of self-help books. Our participants’ engagement with these books sustains our earlier arguments as to popular psychology’s contribution to a “thinning of the self”. The young women we interviewed articulated “thin” experiences of selfhood, in which possibilities for autonomous choice and the pursuit of reflexive self-actualisation were overshadowed by weak communal attachments and pronounced uncertainty about the future. In their narratives, their readings of self-help texts offered them the narrative tools to express these possibilities and uncertainties. Cultural models become meaningful in so far as they resonate with the institutional arrangements in which experiences of everyday life are situated (Swidler 2001). In this sense, it might be argued that self-help books are meaningful for some young female Trinidadians as they allow them to make sense of their experiences of everyday life in a society profoundly changed through 30 years of neoliberal policy-making. In other words, the therapeutic moral

grammar of self-help books may give meaning to everyday life under conditions of neoliberal precariousness and express the social, economic and political programmes of neoliberal institutions at the level of individual self-hood.

These conclusions are significant beyond academic debates about popular psychology. Eight years ago, in the wake of the near-breakdown of major economics in the Global Northwest, an international debate began about the future of neoliberalism as a dominant system of socio-economic organisation. On the one hand, the much-cited crisis has engendered popular protests, spawned new social movements and laid bare the escalating inequalities that neoliberal capitalism has produced since the 1970s (Castells, Caraça, and Cardoso 2012; Walby 2015). On the other hand, neoliberalism has proven its extraordinary durability, as shown, for instance, by the recent predilection of European political elites for far-reaching structural adjustment programmes (Dorling 2014; Walby 2015). This durability has been extensively considered in economic and political terms, for instance through the emergence of post-democratic political processes (Crouch 2011) and the dominance of neoliberal dogma among economists (Mirowski 2013). However, as Dardot and Laval argue, the implications of neoliberal capitalism's capacity to shape a "practical normativity of everyday life" have not been sufficiently acknowledged:

The profound error made by those who have announced the 'death of liberalism' is to confuse the ideological representation accompanying the implementation of neo-liberal policies with the practical normativity that specifically characterizes neo-liberalism. As a result, the relative discredit surrounding the ideology of *laissez-faire* today in no way prevents neo-liberalism from prevailing more than ever as a normative system possessed of a certain efficiency – that is, the capacity to direct from within the actual practice of governments, enterprises and, in addition to them, millions of people who are not necessarily conscious of the fact (Dardot and Laval 2013, 2f.)

Neoliberalism has survived and thrived in so far as it has shaped common sense, directing from within the ways in which policy makers, business leaders and common citizens interpret the social world. Popular psychology embodies this neoliberal common sense and contributes to its legitimisation on a transnational scale. Faced with the uncertainty of their everyday lives, that some middle-class Trinidadians recruit popular psychology's narratives of entrepreneurial self-making in order to formulate and maintain their plans and aspirations seems plausible. In this sense, popular psychology might be understood as one of the specific cultural forms through which neoliberal understandings of self, society and social relationships take shape as a moral grammar in every life, defining what a good life means and setting out the means by which it should be pursued.

In this sense, our study suggests that the transnationalisation of self-help is not a simple matter of global neoliberal discourses being taken up – and local cultural traditions fading away – in response to changing institutional dynamics. Thus, the transnational spread of self-help culture should not be understood as part of a process of global cultural convergence and standardisation. In other words, we argue that transnational self-help narratives of self and social relationships have acquired currency in Trinidad and, more specifically, among our participants, precisely in so far as they can mix, merge and blend into locally specific experiences of modernity.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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