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## **The gendered nature of self-help [H1]**

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### **Abstract**

Self-help promises the chance of being ‘better’. Across multifarious platforms, including books, apps and television shows, it offers hope that we can be our own agents of change for a happier life. Critical research troubles this premise, arguing that the recurring trope of the individualistic ideal-self found in self-help literature is at the expense of seeking solutions in collective, feminist, or otherwise politicised activism. Self-help is also problematically gendered, since women are often positioned as particularly in need of improvement, an understanding further intensified by postfeminist sensibility. These issues are examined conceptually before introducing ten articles on self-help published in

*Feminism & Psychology* across three decades and brought together as a Virtual Special Issue to offer a significant body of work for scholars and students alike.

### Key words:

Self-help, individualism, postfeminism, transformation, psy-complex, health

Self-help offers us the promise of being ‘better’. Better people with fewer character flaws, or with more desired characteristics, such as charisma, confidence or self-assurance (e.g. Kay & Shipman, 2014; McKenna, 2017). Better at work, if we develop skills in persuasion, learn to ‘lean in’, or ‘dress to impress’ (e.g. Rothman, 2013; Sandberg, 2013). Better at eating (Beck & Beck Busis, 2015), better at managing relationships (Birch, 2018), or even better at tidying our houses (Kondo, 2014). The allure of self-help is the possibility of being better, with the help of psychological expert advice.

Today, people have unprecedented access to such expert advice. The self-help industry is worth billions<sup>1</sup>, and self-help is offered through many mediums, including a huge range of self-help books and digital technologies. For example, a non-exhaustive search for ‘self-help’ in Apple’s app store brought up guided meditation and hypnosis for issues such as anxiety, insomnia, self-esteem; apps providing daily affirmations and mantras; tools for personal growth based on a range of psychological approaches; and ways to enhance fitness or sleep based on self-tracking practices. In all of these, there is a hopeful message that people can be their own agents of change to obtain a better, healthier, happier life.

Yet critical perspectives on self-help literature question this message. We introduce here a Virtual Special Issue (available on the *Feminism & Psychology* website), in which we have brought together a set of articles published in *Feminism & Psychology* that inform this scholarship. To contextualise this work, we discuss important contributions on self-help from diverse literatures that sit within and outside of psychology. In our discussion, we analyse the way critical scholars of self-help literature identify the recurring trope of an individualist ideal self. The similarity of vision from a range of different psychological frameworks points to shared underlying ideology of individualism that, while couched in the psychological language of self-actualisation, directs desires towards becoming ideal subjects for late capitalist economies.

We follow this discussion with an analysis of the gendered nature of self-help literature, whereby women are often positioned as particularly in need of help to become this ideal individualist self. Developing this gendered analysis, we discuss research on postfeminist sensibility, which troubles representations of women as flawed, yet able to fix themselves through work on the self. Throughout, we highlight a key theme within the critical literature on self-help, namely, that the focus on the individual is at the expense of the social, reducing the possibility of seeking solutions in collective feminist activism. We then introduce the ten articles that make up the Virtual Special Issue on self-help, before suggesting future directions for fruitful feminist scholarship in this area.

## Ideal individualism

Self-help draws on a range of psychological frameworks. These include cognitive behavioural therapy, neuro-linguistic programming, acceptance and commitment therapy, evolutionary psychology, and even neuropsychology. For example, if we experience

anxiety, we might practice mindfulness, which links itself to Buddhist philosophy; alternatively, we might undergo hypnosis, with the belief in a deeply rooted subconscious; or engage in activities organized around cognitive therapy, which offer practices that aim to restructure our thought patterns.

Psychoanalysis, in particular, provides many concepts central to self-help, especially in the idea that early life experiences shape later life (Illouz 2008). These assumptions are in, for example, the bestselling *Women Who Love Too Much* (Norwood, 1985), where a woman's early-life familial experiences could lead to her being an obsessive partner and addicted to destructive relationships, putting herself at risk of self-harm and suicide.

Psychoanalytic accounts can be contrasted with those that draw on positive psychology, another important framework underpinning self-help literature. Positive psychology is often historically understood as emerging from 1970s hippy culture, although it has historical precursors in the New Thought and Mental Hygiene movements of the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century (Becker & Marecek, 2008). Academically legitimated since the late 1990s by the claims of Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi (2000) among others, positive psychology represents a shift away from the 'negative' concerns of traditional psychology and instead proposes that happiness, resilience and 'positive' emotions can be consciously worked on and increased. In so doing, positive psychology does not "seek to 'fight against' negative past experiences, but to fight against the idea that there is something we have to fight against" (De La Fabian & Stecher, 2017, p. 613). But in giving up the 'fight against', such perspectives within self-help minimise structural inequalities and refute collective resistance against such inequality. Such an apolitical

approach was encapsulated by the hugely popular *The Secret* (Byrne, 2006), a self-help book and video which asserted that thinking positively was all that was needed to transform the self and attract a life of success and power.

Different psychological frameworks in the self-help literature appear to suggest different routes to happiness. Yet despite their apparent differences, most share a similar vision of a flawed individual whose route to a better life rests on developing greater self-mastery over their thoughts and/or behaviours. To achieve this, self-help authors construct the self as ‘*ontologically separate* from itself’ (Hazleden, 2003, italics in original) and it is the reader’s relationship with, and responsibility to, the self that becomes their main ethical obligation.

The ideal self in self-help literature is therefore a self-focused, highly individualised subject who works on themselves—often at the exclusion of the social. For example, Twenge and Campbell (2009) accuse self-help literature of creating narcissistic cultures of self-serving inward-looking individuals: “In place of love for another person, put love for the self; in place of caring, put exploitation; and to commitment, add ‘as long as it benefits me’” (p. 213, also see Lasch, 1979, and Furedi, 2004, for similar accusations of narcissism). Twenge and Campbell’s arguments problematically ignore the gendered way that complaints of narcissism may be more easily directed at women who are culturally expected to put others’ needs before their own (Illouz, 2008; Tyler, 2006). However, they share with a range of critical literature on self-help a concern that the psychological discourses of self-actualisation and self-improvement focus on people changing themselves, rather than their social or political context.

Self-help is criticised for taking attention away from questioning the social context that might make a person want to transform the self. Contexts that are effectively obscured include inequalities structured around gender, race, class and sexuality; precarious working practices and tentative life narratives; and global geo-political uncertainty and its attendant risks and fear (Bauman, 2000; Beck, 2000; Illouz, 2008).

The individualistic psychological focus of self-help literature can also work to legitimise the status quo at an institutional as well as ideological level. For example, Richard Layard, a prominent UK happiness expert and government advisor, wrote in *Happiness: Lessons from a New Science* (2011, p.199-200):

So how can public policy help? As we have seen, our happiness depends profoundly on our attitudes, and these can be learned and practised. Unless you acquire good attitudes early, you get into situations where it is ever more difficult to learn them.

In this account, adverse situations happen as a *result* of not practising the right attitudes, rather than being a potential *cause* of unhappiness, allowing Layard to discuss societal influences on happiness, without framing these as a sensible area to work on. Instead, ‘education of the spirit’ (2011, p. 200) is suggested as a government priority. In this way, self-help works to construct thoughts and feelings as modifiable, but the wider world as fixed and unchangeable (Anderson, 2017).

‘Education of the spirit’ is needed because the self addressed by self-help literature is a flawed individual. To seek self-help is to understand oneself as dis-preferred in some way – in need of fixing. Self-help is thus predicated on the idea that ‘normal’ psychological functioning is flawed, understanding people ‘through a prism of illness’ (Brunila & Siivonen, 2014, p. 61). As Illouz (2008, p.176) argues, “*the very*

*injunction to strive for higher levels of health and self-realization produces narratives of suffering*” (emphasis in original). The work of transformation is therefore never done; there are relapses and new areas to improve, so that self-actualisation through transformative self-help remains an elusive goal. As a Norwegian women’s magazine succinctly put it, “we can all be better” (cited in Madsen & Ytre-Arne, 2012, p. 25).

Another concern with the ideal self in self-help literature is the use of psychological language. Psychological language is needed for individuals to ‘look into’ their selves, in order to name and change their thought processes as part of the process of living a better life. But sociologist Nikolas Rose (1996; 1999) argues that such psychological discourse is a key site of the reproduction of power rather than of freedom through self-actualisation.

For Rose (1996), psychology gives us a language with which to make sense of the self, within which is the injunction to understand ourselves as free, agentic and choosing. This creates a paradox, since we must be both freely choosing and choose to work on the self in order to live a better life. The resulting subjects are those who use psychological language to make sense of and better understand themselves. But this is an ‘obligated freedom’; individuals are required to work on themselves if they are to be understood as a good person (Rose, 1999). If they fail to work on themselves, or if this work fails to bring about the desired betterment, the psychological discourse locates this failure within the individual (Rimke, 2000). This creates a context of guilt, shame and blame, where there is both an unforgiving obligation to work on the self and little obligation to help others, since they are held personally responsible for what once might have been considered bad fortune or the outcome of poor government policies.



Being able to use psychological language to reflect on the self is also a core requirement for neoliberal subjectivity. Neoliberal market-led economies require their citizens to be psychologically flexible in order to meet the needs of fluctuating economies (Kelly, 1996; Hall, 2011; Rose & Miller, 1992). Self-help, with its provision of tools to facilitate a reflexive individual is thus a technology of self, providing tools for people to work on themselves in order to produce themselves in line with wider, culturally valued notions of a good self (de Vos, 2015; Evans & Riley, 2014; Foucault, 1988, 2003; Riley, Evans & Robson, 2018; Rose, 1999). Indeed, the bond between self-help and market economies can be seen in the dominance of economic language within self-help, which includes thinking about the self as an ‘investment’, being more ‘efficient’ (with its implications of value for money), and other monetary metaphors (see Frith 2015; Gill 2009; Gregg 2018; Hochschild 2012).

Analysis that ties together self-help, psychological discourse and neoliberal forms of capitalism allows us to see how “the ideals and aspirations of individuals, with the selves each of us want to be, are aligned with wider authorities” (Rose 1999, p. 213). Such work suggests that we should be suspicious about self-help, or at least recognise that a very particular vision of happiness is being offered that opens up some possibilities while closing down others. From this standpoint, it is important to ask: what is being closed down and to what effect?

Rose’s work also helps us to consider how constructions of the individualised ideal self circulate across a range of self-help texts, organizations and associated people, which Foucault (1977a) called the *dispositif* (a range of semi-autonomous institutions, bodies of knowledge, disciplines, organisations and agents who may deliver the same

message across public discourse without necessarily organised cooperation). The individualised ideal self is therefore not just articulated through government sanctioned psychological experts such as those working for health services or psychological professional bodies, but also in a range of commercial and non-commercial media that host a range of ‘psy’ experts who are able to legitimise their expertise through a variety of means. These means include, for example, the number of followers they have on Instagram; endorsements from celebrity clientele; qualifications or extended therapeutic experience; and often representations of their own lives as ones of optimal living (in relation to beauty work, see for example, McRobbie, 2015). These psy experts are essential for self-help to exist, since they offer tools for self-development that the individual does not already have.

Working on the self to widen capacities to act is life-enhancing. But critical perspectives highlight how much of self-help literature directs an individual in only limited, particular ways. As we have argued elsewhere, “The ‘freedom’ of self-help... comes at a price: to understand ourselves as always already flawed, in need of transformation, able to help ourselves but only with experts of psy and only in the direction of an individualised, psychological self” (Riley, Evans & Robson 2018, p.19). Furthermore, women are the primary objects of transformation in contemporary self-help. An important—yet often under developed—aspect of analysis of self-help is the way that femininity is marked as a particular problematic object in need of change.

## Mad women and postfeminism

The first-ever self-help book is thought to be Smiles’ (1859) *Self-Help*. This book was written for men, and was intended for the aspirational man wanting to become more

reputable and prosperous<sup>2</sup>. This early association with self-help and masculinity is not surprising, given cultural associations between masculinity and a rational and self-reliant self (Illouz, 2008; McGee, 2005). Yet, from Smiles' book onwards, self-help became a predominantly feminized genre, interested in shaping feminine subjectivity.

There are long-standing cultural associations between femininity and psychological pathology. These associations can be dated all the way back to Aristotelian times, and concerns about women's 'wandering womb' (see Appignanesi, 2009, for an historical analysis of the associations between insanity and femininity). These ideas are given a modern spin in contemporary self-help literature specifically about women. While self-help is, in general, predicated on a flawed individual, self-help aimed specifically at women (rather than self-help with a more 'gender neutral' tone but with the expectation of a largely female audience) constructs femininity as pathological.

The normative pathology of femininity is perpetuated in media texts, for example *Mean Girls* (2004). While *Mean Girls* sees femininity as ultimately recuperating meanness (e.g. through group therapy), such texts also show teenage experience as defined through inherent meanness, cliques and psychological damage produced by female pathology and/or a toxic cultural context. Other texts, meanwhile, show the progression of this mean girl mentality, producing mentally damaged young adults. See for example, the analysis of the film *The Bachelorette* (2012) in Riley, Evans and Robson (2018), as well as the articles by Ringrose (2006) and Gonick (2004) in the Virtual Special Issue.

The wider cultural understandings of women as more relationship-oriented than men also position women as particularly far from the ideal individualist self of self-help

literature. One critique of self-help, therefore, is that it acts as a disciplinary power, encouraging women to learn to be more like men (or more specifically, to take up characteristics associated with hegemonic masculinity such as autonomy, competitiveness and aggression). Hochschild (1994) for example, critiques the genre of self-help that celebrates women developing a form of rugged individualism, where ideal femininity is conceptualised as not needing others. Other scholars highlight the way that self-help aimed at women in the workplace problematises women's behaviour rather than organisational cultures that support a very limited set of behavioural practices (and the neoliberal economies on which they are predicated) (Rottenberg, 2014). For example, in their analysis of Prozac advertisements aimed at women in professional employment in the USA, Blum and Stracuzzi (2004 p. 279) argue that women are encouraged to develop a form of 'muscular femininity' whereby they should embody traditional femininity in the form of a highly polished feminine look, but combine this with psychological traits associated with hegemonic masculinity.

An important contribution to feminist scholarship on self-help, which brings together both the critical component identified in our first section and the gendered analysis of self-help, is feminist analysis of postfeminism. In this work, contemporary self-help is located within a wider 'postfeminist sensibility', a term introduced by Rosalind Gill (2007) to articulate a set of ideas articulating a form of ideal femininity aligned with neoliberal rationality<sup>3</sup>. According to Gill:

What marks out the present moment as distinctive ... are three features: first, the dramatically increased intensity of self-surveillance, indicating the intensity of the regulation of women (alongside the disavowal of such regulations); secondly, the

extensiveness of surveillance over entirely new spheres of life and intimate conduct; and thirdly, the focus upon the psychological - upon the requirements to transform oneself and remodel one's interior life. (2007, p. 261)

Echoing Rose's analysis of neoliberal subjectivity, Gill argues that postfeminist sensibility calls on the self to reflect and work on the self, but to understand this work as a practice of free will, even while its transformation is towards a subjectivity that best fits modes of good economic citizenship. In this context, self-help offers an important and productive space for the expression of elements of a postfeminist sensibility, such as self-surveillance and psychological transformation.

One element of self-help that interacts with postfeminist sensibility is its focus on forms of self-care and self-love. Women's media have recently shifted their tone from the 'bitchiness' of make-over television programmes like *What Not to Wear* or magazines that highlight female celebrity's imperfections (McRobbie, 2009) to a more affirmative discourse that emphasizes the ways that women need to love themselves. But scholars of postfeminism are concerned by this apparently more positive shift because in a characteristic postfeminist move, these affirmative statements about women that resonate with feminist principles (e.g. that women have intrinsic value) are simultaneously tied to a neoliberal incitation to work on the self. This sense-making locates the problem (e.g. of confidence) in women, rather than, for example, in social contexts where young women find it hard to have confidence (for examples of this critique see, Banet-Weiser, 2015; Gill & Elias, 2014; Gill & Orgad, 2015).

One recent bestseller, *The Goddess Revolution: Make Peace with Food, Love Your Body and Reclaim Your Life* (Wells, 2016), is a good example of the complexity of

‘loving yourself’. In *The Goddess Revolution*, Wells, who deems herself a Certified Health and Eating Psychology Coach, tells her readers to get rid of scales, forget fad diets that are rule-bound, get ‘full of yourself’, and learn to listen to the body and follow the body’s own intuition about the nutrients it needs. But to achieve this, the reader must “work out like a goddess”, “treat self-care appointments with yourself like important business meetings” and “try them [new clothes] on with your favourite music playing!”. The book thus marries seemingly pro-feminist sentiments of body positivity and self-acceptance with appearance concerns (that tie women’s value back to their bodies), the consumption of products, and a blurring of economic and psychological language (see the earlier section on the imbrication of psychological and market discourse). The final page of Wells’ book features links to her ‘Goddess Retreats’. The take-home message, then, is that the route to a better life for women is through individual consumption. In Wells’ approach to feminist activism, change is produced by working on the individual self, rather than engaging in social action to produce changes to the social structure.

Postfeminist ‘love yourself’ discourses exhort women to change the way they think about themselves, creating the expectation that women should not only engage in body work, but also work on the mind in order to improve ‘self-esteem’ and ‘confidence’. This is encapsulated in the much-repeated self-help mantra that for someone else to love you, you must love yourself first. (See for example, *I Heart Me: The Science Of Self-Love* (Hamilton, 2015).) But, in proposing that what is really wrong with women is a problem of confidence, such texts “rely upon and reinforce the cultural intelligibility of the female body as inherently ‘difficult to love’” (Gill & Elias 2014, p. 184).

Gill and colleagues have also argued that contemporary calls to be more resilient are, like those of self-actualisation discussed above, actually new forms of regulation. Their work comes from analysis of a range of media texts that call on (particularly middle-class) women to be resilient, use positive thinking, and ‘bounce back’ (Gill & Orgad 2017). In the context of austerity and growing social inequalities, the authors argue that this psychological focus directs attention away from social critique and delegitimizes demands for social transformation (Barker, Gill & Harvey 2018).

Postfeminist scholarship also points to the importance of complexity in the gendered landscape in which contemporary self-help operates. Postfeminist sensibility is characterised by complexity, contradiction and confusion – meaning that however much work they put into themselves, women can never be confident that they have got it right (Riley, Evans & Robson 2018). Working on the self might, for example, represent vanity or emotional insecurity, not good subjectivity, yet to not work on the self risks being understood as a failed subject. Such complexity and contradiction are confusing, creating anxieties and attendant hopes to find expert advice offering a successful route through this complexity, thus fuelling the market for self-help literature<sup>4</sup>. But, our analysis points to seeking such self-help as a form of what Berlant (2011) calls ‘cruel optimism’ as it offers ‘the promise of health and happiness through practices that might make feeling healthy and happy less likely to happen’ (Riley, Evans & Robson 2018, p. 162).

### Just do it! Contributions made in *Feminism & Psychology*

Analysis of self-help literature highlights a reoccurring trope of highly individualised subjects who works on themselves at the exclusion of the social with view to moving away from a flawed self and towards optimal living. Yet the expectation for optimal

living makes living ‘normally’ —with its associations of perfection and self-mastery - increasingly difficult to achieve (Blackman 2004; de Vos 2015; Illouz 2008; Riley, Evans & Robson 2018).

The dynamics of the self-help industry, the continued dominance of neoliberal economies and associated ideal subjectivities that tie work on the self to good citizenship, and a postfeminist gendered landscape that requires women to work on themselves in ever more intense and complex ways while understanding this work as empowering—all point to the importance of feminist scholarship on self-help. It is thus timely to review the work published in *Feminism & Psychology*, showcasing the contributions made and considering fruitful directions for future research. This Virtual Special Issue is therefore aimed not only at researchers but also at those teaching in a range of programmes and their students. In particular, feminist scholarship on self-help may be a useful vehicle to develop critical thinking in psychology and counselling students in their development as psy-experts.

In this issue, we bring together ten articles on self-help published in *Feminism & Psychology*. These were identified through searches that included the term ‘self-help’, and when few articles were initially identified, a systematic search of all past *Feminism & Psychology* issues. That so few articles on self-help have so far been published in *Feminism & Psychology* is noteworthy, given that women are so often the addressed in self-help and are more likely to buy and read self-help materials (Hochschild, 1994; Simonds, 1992). What has been published in *Feminism & Psychology*, however, points to important foci for feminist scholarship: articles that conceptualise self-help in political terms and seek to develop theory on this subject; articles that critique the way that



women's psychology is represented as inherently flawed or lacking; and articles that explore self-help given to women regarding how they might look after themselves in contexts traditionally associated with women's concerns (e.g. pregnancy and intimate relationships) and the problems women might face as part of the workforce. We briefly describe these articles below.

We start this Virtual Special Issue with an early contribution to scholarship on self-help: Ellis's (1998) critical analysis of the concept of self-esteem. She focuses on self-esteem because she sees it being used in a range of self-help as evidence of a psychological problem that needs intervention. But rather than offer a tool for identifying and supporting marginalized people, Ellis argues that psychological interventions based on self-esteem further marginalize the marginalized, by locating the problem in the person and as characteristic of a category of people. Ellis's examples include Maori people and women. Her paper highlights issues of cultural insensitivity in psychometric measures and offers an important critique that psychological interventions aimed at empowering women might disempower them, in part by offering individual, psychologised solutions to social problems.

Writing only a few years earlier, Squire (1994) examined the Oprah Winfrey Show—which at the time was the most watched daytime talk show in the USA—and its claim to be empowering to women. We include Squire's work as an example of self-help through the medium of television. Squire examined the way that Oprah, the African American female host, interacted with her audience, psychological experts and people invited onto the show in ways that essentialised and psychologised problems that might otherwise have been understood as social or political (e.g. employment). But Squire also

argues that the show did not locate blame in the individual or construct women as essentially flawed, but instead shared marginalised narratives on prime time television in ways that aligned with feminist values. Unlike so much of critical and feminist analysis of self-help, in this feminist analysis of the Oprah Winfrey show, Squire finds that it did what it claimed to do – empower women.

Much of the work in this issue is not, however, celebratory. The earliest engagement with self-help in *Feminism & Psychology* was Schilling and Fuehrer's (1993) problematization of the genre. In their analysis of 28 self-help books that explicitly targeted women (for example, *Smart Women, Foolish Choices*), they argued that most self-help books worked to disempower the reader through the universalised rhetoric of victimisation and survivorhood. They also highlighted the way in which self-help constructed women's problems as individual and psychological in nature, thereby obscuring structural factors and any need for institutional change. By asking of these texts 'what does getting better look like?' and 'how are women enjoined to achieve this?', Schilling and Fuehrer's approach helped to inform a political reading of self-help.

Building on such arguments, Day's (2010) article brings in the important issue of class. In drawing parallels between female 'binge' drinkers and women who engage in online communities centred around anorexic practices ('pro-ana' sites), Day argued that both reflect the contradictory and complex landscape that women negotiate in relation to self-control, morality and gender ideals. The seemingly flawed psychology of femininity was also explored in Gonick's (2004) analysis of self-help and advice literature addressed to the mothers of adolescent girls, which articulated a universal 'mean girl' pathology

that requires work, in contrast to ‘masculine’ physical aggression that is deemed normal and unproblematic, where ‘boys will be boys’ (Gonick 2004).

The apparent universal mean girl is explored further in Ringrose’s (2006) article. Employing a postfeminist and intersectional lens, Ringrose (2006) highlighted how representations of feminine pathology revise feminist agendas, so that the gains made by the feminist movement that saw women enter the public sphere are constructed as the ones that ignite women’s and girls’ aggression, competition and underlying cruelty in ways that particularly problematise women who are not white and middle class.

Self-help texts that address the traditionally feminine concerns of the domestic sphere and intimate relations can also be seen to employ a discourse of ‘sex differences’ to perform ideological work in framing women as inherently flawed and in need of transformation. Gupta and Cacchioni’s (2013) analysis of 17 American sex manuals shows the various ways these texts employ a medical discourse to construct women as needing to do extra work (for example, pretending to enjoy or want sex, or undertaking mental and physical preparation for sex because they are ‘less responsive’ than men and/or more tied to emotion). Such extra work often requires economic capital, so that the ‘norms of sexual practice articulated in these manuals can thus serve to undermine their readers, with the potential to create a sense of failure or exclusion for those who do not have the resources to participate or who do not see themselves represented’ (Riley, Evans & Robson, 2018, p. 82; see also Barker, Gill & Harvey, 2018).

Crawford’s (2004) analysis of the best-seller *Men are from Mars, Women are from Venus* (1992) and associated spin-off reality TV program following six heterosexual couples putting author John Gray’s advice into action highlights the need for analysis that

engages with complexity. Crawford's analysis highlighted how binary differences could be used to entrench and naturalise prevailing inequalities, but that they could also be drawn on (by the TV participants) to address issues of inequality and hold men accountable for some of the work of managing relationships. This highlights the way discourses are never entirely stable and can be subverted and resisted, giving way to new ways of being – an important area of investigation for feminist scholars.

Becker's (2010) wide-ranging analysis of institutional, pop psychology and magazine texts foreshadowed Gupta & Cacchioni (2013) in highlighting a medicalized discourse of stress and working mothers' vulnerability to it. Focusing on the traditionally masculine context of paid employment, Becker's paper identified several 'common-sense' ideas produced by these texts that problematise women in the workplace, with the conclusion that self-help for working women produces an unresolvable ongoing individual project that masks the socio-political source of much of women's 'stress'.

A focus on the functions of medical discourse also formed part of Marshall and Wollett's (2000) critical discursive analysis of eight popular books on pregnancy. They found that readers were exhorted to transform themselves in particular ways that served to universalise the experience of pregnancy, obscuring the different circumstances of women's lives and tying one's 'fitness' to be a mother to a neoliberal idea of being an enterprising consumer. An additional, medicalised repertoire of 'pregnancy as risk' was also identified, which worked to situate the responsibility for ensuring health and a successful pregnancy with mothers, ignoring the many risks that fall outside a woman's control.

Rousseau (1993) argued that scientism often increases whenever societal changes result in tensions in normative gender arrangements. This suggests that a useful starting point for further investigation of self-help is how scientism and medical discourses are used, particularly in the contemporary context in which the effects of neoliberal austerity and far-right policies have been disproportionately felt by women<sup>5</sup>. Further research on how women may be positioned as inherently flawed, particularly within a postfeminist sensibility that constructs work on the self as empowering, is also necessary. Indeed, the articles showcased in this special issue leave us with several important questions: What makes good self-help? How do women reproduce, contest, re-appropriate or otherwise negotiate neoliberal and postfeminist sensibilities of self-help, and what identities and actions are available? Can self-help be compatible with political change? Are there links between self-help and feminist consciousness-raising that could be better developed?

These questions point to the need for work exploring the affordances of contemporary self-help, and since critical textual analysis has so far dominated, it also highlights the importance of research on first-person accounts from women who use self-help. We also suggest useful directions offered by new materialist approaches that decentre the human subject and reconceptualise agency in ways that potentially offer an analytic framework for mapping the material and non-material ramifications of self-help discourses (van de Putte, de Schauer, & Davies, 2018). Equally, Meg-John Barker's work has broached new conceptual ground in regard to self-help by recognising the benefits some people find in developing reflexive skills and new ways of evaluating their lives, but in ways that expose power dynamics and develop a critical approach to gender, class and relationships that does not locate the 'problem' at an individual level (Barker, 2013;

Barker & Hancock, 2017). This creative, critical approach to developing new ideas about what self-help is and what it can do, offers a productive area for future scholarship in *Feminism & Psychology*.

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**Martine Robson** is a Lecturer in Psychology. Her work focuses on how people in long-term relationships negotiate individualistic, neoliberal lifestyle advice, and uses

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#### Footnotes

1. An exact figure is notoriously difficult to give, as what constitutes ‘self-help’ is vague and ever-changing. However, commonly cited figures put it at between \$11-\$12 billion dollars a year in the US alone (Groskop, 2013; Vanderkam, 2012)
2. It’s important to recognize, though, the way that manuals and guides to being ‘ladylike’ or managing the household were popular before Smiles’s (1859) *Self-Help*, see Gregg (2018) for an overview.
3. See Gill (2017) and Riley et al. (2017) for a review of how these ideas have been subsequently used.
4. For a discussion of these issues in relation to wider issues of power, see <https://theconversation.com/what-putins-policies-teach-us-about-post-feminist-power-93824>
5. [https://www.ohchr.org/Documents/Issues/Poverty/EOM\\_GB\\_16Nov2018.pdf](https://www.ohchr.org/Documents/Issues/Poverty/EOM_GB_16Nov2018.pdf)