Self-Help Books as Consumption Objects: A Panopticon of Self-surveillance in Consumer Culture

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1. INTRODUCTION

The emergence, proliferation and ever-increasing appeal of self-help literature is contingent upon the specific socio-cultural features of our consumer culture. In the past, writing and analysis of self-help literature, presents the phenomena as relatively unproblematic in terms of its impact and continual reproduction in consumer culture (Effing 2009; Gauntlett 2002; Butler-Bowden 2003). However, in this paper, I set out to discuss the ways in which the processes self-help authors use to structure their pre-packaged theorems and promote them as being able to deliver untold wealth and happiness, are implicated in a process of self-surveillance that could exacerbate a form of collective narcissism that has been identified as problematic in the consciousness of those living in Western consumer cultures (Twenge & Campbell 2009). Von Ruediger (2005, p. 1) describes the constitutive character of consumer culture as ‘acting upon’ the individual rather than individuals acting themselves as ‘free agents’ in the constitution of their cultural norms. ‘In fact, we are recipients, members of consumer target groups, who perform quasi-religious acts of substitution in the name of cultural self-conception’ (Von Ruediger, 2005, p. 1). The authors of the books analysed in this paper, require that their readers engage in complex and time-consuming processes in order to dominate and control themselves in consumer culture. Such processes distract individuals from engaging, as concerned citizens, with political and community debates required to address the multiple large-scale social challenges currently facing the world, such as, the relatively recent global financial crisis, environmental global degradation (including global warming), and geo-political instability, to name but a few.

The content of the seminal books of three popular self-help writers, Steven Covey, Anthony Robbins, and Phil McGraw, will be analysed in order to explore whether their strategies can be conceptualised as a form of ‘surveillance of the self’. Apart from the narcissist tendencies discussed earlier, such constant surveillance of the self may have the unintended consequences of leading an individual into perilous psychological territory that may leave them feeling in continuous need of new and different self-help strategies. Such a heightened experience of ‘individuation’ in consumer culture competes with the political need for consensus required if large-scale geo-political change is to come about. However, ‘self-surveillance’ has become increasingly dominant and controlling in recent years due to the exponential success of social networking sites that entrench the process by devolving the human experience to communicative platforms producing not just ‘the lonely crowd’, to borrow from David Reisman’s (1950) term, but the lonely ‘virtual’ crowd.
2. THE SOCI-CULTURAL CONSTITUTION OF SELF-HELP LITERATURE

Historically the antecedents for self-help practices go as far back as the Socratic maxim ‘Know thyself’, the ‘care for the self’ prescribed in Plato’s ‘Alcibiades’, and Augustine’s intensely personal quest for salvation in ‘The Confessions’ (Barglow 1994). Benson (2001) believes the ‘turn to the self’ in Western industrialised cultures comes originally from Descartes’ dualism of mind and body. In such a dualism the individual realises their immaterial nature by objectifying the body and the world and in doing so takes a position of control over their own self. The embodied self must now be understood as a mechanism whose workings are to be unravelled by science. The standards to be met by this mode of inquiry must derive from the thinking activity of the knower. The outcome of the views of the Enlightenment was that at the moral and psychological level men and women must now look within themselves for the sources of their meaning. Where we look for a sense of our own worth also shifts inwards; we look to maintain our worth ‘in our own eyes’. An ideal develops of self as capable of systematically creating and recreating itself (Benson 2001). This idea of the primacy of a self that can survey and control the ‘mechanism’ of each individual is the ontological base of the rise of self-help literature. However, sociologists and anthropologists have since written about the ways in which the turn to the self in Western consumer culture has had the effect of not only objectifying and dividing the self against itself but has also heightened the instability of our conception of ourselves collectively as a culture and allowed the domination of the self to be colonised and reified as a consumption object.

Mead (1934, pp. 136-140) highlighted the importance of language in the formation of the self, how one’s self can be thought of as both subject and object due to its reflexive character, and that the self arises within an individual’s social experiences so that it is contextually based. Reisman (1950) made connections between the pre-eminence of the self in North-American society and the cultural context of consumerism. In his critique of the ‘other-directedness’ of the North-American individual, Riesman problematises the sociological context in which the individuation of social norms had led to the need for what he called ‘advocational counsellors’. He characterised these ‘counsellors’ as individuals that present their audience with guides and signposts that bring them into ‘unfrightening contact with the new range of opportunities in consumption’ (Riesman 1950, p. 299).

The evidence of narcissistic behaviour caused by this ‘turn to the self’ in consumer culture was soon highlighted as problematic by Lasch in 1979 who wrote, ‘The beautiful people - to use this revealing expression to include not merely wealthy globetrotters but all those who bask, however briefly, in the full glare of the cameras – live out the fantasy of narcissistic success, which consists of nothing more substantial than a wish to be vastly admired, not for one’s accomplishments but simply for oneself, uncritically and without reservation’ (Lasch 1979, p. 391).

Berger et al. (1974) discuss how our modern identity is experienced as unstable and unreliable because the plurality of social worlds relativises these worlds, the institutional order loses its reality, and the subjective world then begins to appear more real to us. As a
consequence the individual’s psychology takes on a more differentiated, complex and interesting appeal attaining a high place in the hierarchy of values. Individual freedom, individual autonomy, and individual rights come to be taken for granted as moral imperatives of fundamental importance and foremost among those individual rights is the right to plan and fashion one’s life as freely as possible. However, the continuous management of the self is based on feelings of uncertainty and as a consequence individuals in the consumer culture fall victim to a form of commodified production of ‘self-actualisation’.

Benson (2001, p. 69) concludes this it is a ‘disengaged agent of instrumental reason’ that takes the position of dominating the embodied self in the process of working on oneself. Along the same lines, Taylor (1989, p. 175) conceptualises this as a form of ‘punctual self’ that objectifies and remakes itself. ‘Disengagement demands that we stop simply living in the body or within our traditions or habits and, by making them objects for us, subject them to radical scrutiny and remaking’ (Taylor, 1989, p. 175). Craib (1998, p. 3) includes the economic dynamics of consumer culture in his analysis of the post-modern turn to the self and highlights the tendency of the market to reduce everybody to an ‘abstract individual entity’.

Whilst analysing the practices of ‘self-care’ that he believed to be deeply ingrained in our social psyche, Foucault wrote, ‘Perhaps I’ve insisted too much on the technology of domination and power. I am more and more interested in the interaction between oneself and others and in technologies of individual domination, the history of how an individual acts upon himself, in the technology of the self’ (Foucault in Martin et al 1988, p. 19). Hutton (1988, p. 139) described Foucault’s refocus upon the methods humans employ to understand themselves, as him wanting to analyse the ‘technologies of the self’ employed by humans across the centuries to find possible continuities.

Foucault died before being able to fully develop these ideas and undertake his historical analysis. However, through his careful analysis of the human history of self-care he discovered that the way to self-knowledge was by superimposing truth about the self through memory, that is, by ‘memorising the rules’. Also, he uncovered a process he called the ‘scrutiny of conscience’ that required the continual examination of thoughts within the individual. The process of scrutiny of conscience implies that there is something hidden in ourselves and that we are always in a self-illusion which hides the secret (Foucault in Martin et al 1988, pp. 43-46). Foucault’s theory of the ‘panopticism’ is also important whereby we are all subject to a constant state of ‘visibility’ when we go about our everyday lives. The result being that we are always the ‘object’ rather than the ‘subject’ of interpersonal communication. Due to the fact that we are objectified, Foucault believes we tend to assume responsibility for the constraints of power, allow them to play spontaneously upon ourselves, and in this way become the principle of our own subjection’ (Foucault 1995, pp. 202-203). The broad processes that Foucault identifies, will be explored in the content analysis of the three self-help books focused on in this paper.
Giddens (1991, p. 198) also makes a clear connection between the need for continuous (re)construction of the self and the commodified production of ‘self-actualisation’. He suggests that not only lifestyles, but self-actualisation is packaged and distributed according to market criteria. At the same time, Giddens suggests that self-help books stand in a precarious position with regard to the commodified production of self-actualisation. In some ways they break away from standardised, packaged consumption and at the same time they become marketed as pre-packaged theorems about how to ‘get on’ in life. Consequently, they become caught up in the very processes they nominally oppose a result that has major implications for truth claims and the experience of objectification in our consumer culture.

Bauman (1998, p. 178-179) also focuses on the uncertainty felt by individuals in the context of consumer society. He believes it is based on the overwhelming control humans appear to have over matters of life and death and that any problems or uncertainties that individuals might feel in consumer culture are due predominantly to their inadequate response to them. Consequently, post-modern women and men need expert counsellors who can turn their uncertainty into self-assurance by offering them superior knowledge or access to wisdom that is closed to others. Warde (1994, p. 877) argued for the modifications to Gidden’s, Bauman’s (and Beck’s) analyses because he believed that any direct connection between ‘the process of identity-formation and consumption was tendentious’ and that the reflexive processes consumers engage in when undertaking consumption practices are more loosely aligned with selection rather than a choice. Warde (1994) goes on to say that, ‘personal consumption is not very risky at all: those who might suffer utilise expert systems, the rest are not confronted with a risk situation’ (p. 877).

Finally, he argues for analysis that pays more attention to ‘the counter-tendencies to informalisation and individualisation’ so as not to fall into the trap of ignoring all of the reasons why consumption is significant and/or ‘imputing freedom to an activity that is not in any important sense free’ (Warde 1994, p. 897).

Baudrillard (1998) extended the analysis of the social conditions in consumer society to not only include the requirement for a continual need of individuals for self-reflection and self-reconstruction, but also by identifying the commodification process as an overwhelmingly dominant organising principle that appropriates and consumes all social products, including the need to know oneself (Rindfleish 2005). This turns consumption into the beginnings of a ‘human liberation’ that is to be achieved instead of, and in spite of, the failure of political and social liberation (Baudrillard 1998, p. 85).

At the same time as being the dominant organising principle of society, the process of commodification has the confusing tendency to both homogenise and differentiate human experience simultaneously. ‘The general process (of the logic of personalisation) can be defined historically: it is industrial monopoly concentration which, abolishing the real differences between human beings, homogenising persons and products, simultaneously ushers in the reign of differentiation. Things are much the same here as with religious or social movements: it is upon the ebbing of their original impulse that churches or institutions are built. Here, too, it is upon the loss of differences that the cult of difference is founded’ (Baudrillard 1998, p. 89).
The dialectical dependence between homogeneity and difference is a critical basis for the reproduction of consumption objects in consumer culture and together with Baudrillard’s concept of ‘sign-value’, as opposed to the economists concept of ‘use-value’, our entire consumer culture is organised around consumption and display of commodities through which individuals gain prestige, identity and standing. According to this, the more prestigious one’s commodities (houses, cars, clothes, and so on) the higher one’s value in the realm of sign value (Kellner 2009, p. 5). Holt (2004, p. 8) believes that consumers use ‘iconic brands’, such as the works of the self-help authors analysed in this paper have become in the self-help literature, as ‘symbolic salves’ to lessen the burden of their identity’. So the analysis of the self-help books in this paper sets out to show how the self, as a consumption object, actually itself becomes ‘the sign value’ of the self-help industry and as such the self is objectified, reified and dominated by the process of ‘working on oneself’ using the strategies outlined by self-help authors.

With these aspects of socio-cultural context of self-help literature in mind, the paper analyses the strategies of three highly popular self-help experts. The purpose is to explore how their writing aligns itself with the ways in which consumption objects arise and degenerate, homogenise and differentiate, and objectify and dominate the processes related to self-identity construction and development in consumer culture.

3. METHOD

In the Weberian tradition of ‘Verstehen’ (Tucker 1965, p. 157), the analysis in the paper attempts to understand and make sense of two intertwined social processes. Firstly, it explores the continuous reproduction of new and multifarious forms of self-help prescriptions within the context of Western consumer culture. Secondly, it explores the objectifying and dominating aspects of these prescriptive schemas and their implication in reifying the processes of self-identity projects to the level of consumption ‘objects’ in consumer culture. The method used in the paper is a content analysis of the strategies outlined in the seminal books of three popular self-help authors. Content analysis was used as the method of analysis because it can serve as a ‘technique for making inferences by objectively and systematically identifying specified characteristics of messages’ (Holsti 1969, p. 68). The three authors and their seminal books chosen for analysis were; Steven Covey’s book, ‘The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People’, Anthony Robbins’s book ‘Awaken the Giant Within’, and Phil McGraw’s book ‘Life Strategies’. These three were chosen on the basis of the popularity and worldwide influence of their books. They are presented and analysed in chronological order according to the release of their books. The content analysis focuses on the ways in which these authors make a personal connection of trust with their readers by sharing personal stories of problems they have experienced, the particular characteristics of the ‘immutable laws’ they propose in their writing, how they differentiate their ideas from other self-help writers in order to present them as unique, and finally, how they propose that their strategies must be taken on by the reader to dominate and control the thoughts of the reader so that they can realise the ‘promise’ of untold wealth, happiness or success in life. These aspects were deemed important due to their similarity to the ways in which consumption objects in consumer society are
frequently homogenised so that they can be consumed by as many consumers as possible. At the same time as being homogenised for consumption purposes, consumption objects must also be able to be reified according to their different and unique characteristics so that they have idiosyncratic appeal on the surface.

4. RESULTS

Steven Covey

Steven Covey’s book ‘The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People’ (1990) begins by outlining his bona fides as an experienced and qualified ‘expert’ on success and that even if individuals appear outwardly successful; they still feel ‘something is missing’ in their lives.

In more than 25 years of working with people in business, university, and marriage and family settings, I have come in contact with many individuals who have achieved an incredible degree of outward success, but have found themselves struggling with an inner hunger, a deep need for personal congruency and effectiveness and for healthy, growing relationships with other people. (Covey 1990, p. 15)

He then goes on to discuss numerous examples of the ‘problems’ encountered by his clients and how he experiences the same problems in an attempt to ‘make a connection’ with readers by convincing them that his life experiences are common to all other human beings and that he has a ‘unique solution’ to these problems. The use of quasi-religious language and references to the author’s bona fides in terms of what he has read and studied are often used as a method of convincing the reader that the author is genuine, has credible expertise and can be trusted as being exactly like them. An example of how Covey does this is:

At the same time, in addition to my research on perception, I was also deeply immersed in an in-depth study of the success literature published in the US since 1776. I was reading or scanning literally hundreds of books, articles, and essays in fields such as self-improvement, popular psychology, and self-help. Throughout the course of my study I noticed a startling pattern emerge. Because of our own pain, and because of similar pain I had seen in the lives and relationships of many people I had worked with through the years, I began to feel more and more that much of the success literature of the past 50 years was superficial. (Covey 1990, p. 18)

Covey sets up the scenario that he has had a type of ‘epiphany’ about what should be practiced by everyone in order to achieve personal success. He also dismisses much of the previous literature on the topic as ‘superficial’. By denouncing previous writing in the field he sets his own strategies apart from others and presents them as ‘unique’ for the reader.
Covey also makes the point very strongly that the principles in his book are based on ‘natural laws’. He says, ‘It’s almost as if these principles or natural laws are part of the human condition, part of the human consciousness, part of the human conscience. They seem to exist in all human beings, regardless of social conditioning’ (Covey 1990, p. 34).

Covey outlines seven habits an individual should develop if they want to be successful. Three habits reside in what he calls the ‘private victory’ area of life, the other three reside in the ‘public victory’ area of life, with the seventh being a revisionary one. The first habit is ‘Be Proactive’. In other words, using very basic psychological concepts related to perception he describes and gives examples of how to develop a proactive personality instead of a reactive one. He uses a number of tables and ‘tests’ in the form of question and answer sessions to show the reader how they can identify their reactive habits and modify them.

Habit two is ‘Begin with the End in Mind’, which is a mental exercise based on the visualisation of your own funeral. The exercise is meant to project your mind into a state that reveals your deepest values and vision for your future in order to set your ‘intention’ to act. Habit three is ‘Put First Things First’, a relatively straightforward time management strategy using four ‘quadrants’ based on the importance and urgency of each of the activities based in each quadrant. The way in which this time management plan varies from others is that it is meant to incorporate all areas of an individual’s life and not just their workplace responsibilities. Covey’s trademark ‘weekly worksheet’ that accompanies the four quadrant analysis incorporates every hour of the day from 8am to 9pm with a space at the end of each day for the evening activities. It incorporates both individual role responsibilities and hourly activities. The sheet is complex, time-consuming, difficult to complete and very difficult to sustain and sets out to ‘reprogram’ an individual’s life on an hourly activities.

The next three habits are labelled the ‘three public victory habits’. Habit four is, ‘Think Win/Win’, habit five is, ‘Seek first to understand; Then to be understood’, and habit six is, ‘Synergize’. These are fairly self-explanatory, ‘Think Win/Win’ means to seek outcomes in life whereby both you and your partners in business benefit from the relationship. Habit five outlines Covey’s principles of empathetic communication. Habit six, ‘Synergize’, focuses on the principles of creative co-operation and habit seven, ‘Sharpen the Saw’ outlines principles of balanced self-renewal and discusses how to balance your lifestyle.

Covey’s book homogenises each reader’s experience and attempts to make a connection with readers based on common problematic experiences they may have encountered in their lives. Secondly, he over-simplifies complex and contextually dependent psychological concepts that he tells them they need to apply to their lives to fix their problems. He then differentiates his ‘seven habits’ from other self-help books by asserting their uniqueness and lastly, he prescribes a process based on a trademarked ‘worksheet’ to subordinate the activities of the self to an hourly planned schedule that dominates and controls the self.
Anthony Robbins

Anthony Robbins is one of the world’s most prolific self-help authors and speakers. His seminal book published in 1991 is ‘Awaken the Giant Within: How to take immediate control of your mental, emotional, physical & financial destiny’. In this book, he reduces and over-simplifies the psychological method called Neuro-Linguistic Programming, to prescribe ways in which individuals can ‘release themselves from old patterns of behaviour’ (Robbins 1991, p. 10) in order to get what they want. Like Covey, Robbins begins his book by homogenising the experiences of his readers.

We all have dreams. We all want to believe deep down in our souls that we have a special gift, that we can make a difference, that we can touch others in a special way, and that we can make the world a better place. At one time in our lives, we all had a vision for the quality of life that we desire and deserve. Yet, for many of us, those dreams have become so shrouded in the frustrations and routines of daily life that we no longer even make an effort to accomplish them. For far too many, the dream has dissipated - and with it, so has the will to shape our destinies. Many have lost that sense of certainty that creates the winner’s edge. My life’s quest has been to restore the dream and to make it real, to get each of us to remember and use the unlimited power that lies sleeping within us all. (Robbins 1991, p. 19)

The quasi-religious Judeo-Christian almost evangelical character of such language is repeated numerous times throughout the book but it is particularly strong in the beginning chapters. Such language has a twofold effect. Firstly, it has the effect of homogenising the experiences of the readers giving them the feeling that their personal experiences are common to all and understood by the author. Secondly, it makes a connection with the reader so that they will identify emotionally with the author.

Robbins then relates his personal stories which set out to differentiate him from other self-help writers and it is also the section of the book where he outlines his ‘unique’ blend of self-help strategies. Robbins has chapters in his book covering ‘Decisions: The Pathways to Power’, ‘Belief Systems’, ‘How to Change Anything in Your Life: the Science of Neuro-Associative Conditioning’, ‘Ten Emotions of Power’, and ‘Identity the Key to Expansion’. All of these chapters contain Robbins’ personal and idiosyncratic interpretation of what are actually complex and contextually embedded psychological concepts. However, Robbins reduces the complexity and the contextually dependent character of these concepts to his own simplified, ‘unique’ and trademarked concepts and uses his personal experiences as examples to develop a rapport with the reader. His prescriptions set out ways in which to dominate and control the self with the promise of ‘untold’ wealth and happiness. The prescriptive character of his life strategies follows a very similar structure and a similar form to the other self-help books discussed in this paper.
Phil McGraw


Ask yourself right now: Do you really have a strategy in your life, or are you just reactively going from day to day, taking what comes? If you are, you simply aren’t competitive. There are “a lot of dogs after the bones” out there, and just stumbling along is no way to succeed. The winners in this life know the rules of the game and have a plan, so that their efficiency is comparatively exponential to that of people who don’t. No big mystery, just fact. You too need to know the rules of the game and have a plan and a map. You need to ask yourself: “Am I really headed where I want to go, or am I just out there wandering around?” “Is what I am doing today really what I want to do, or am I doing it, not because I want to, but because it is what I was doing yesterday?” “Is what I have really what I want, or is it what I’ve settled for because it was easy, safe, or not as scary as what I really wanted?” Hard questions, I know, but don’t you really already know the answers? (McGraw 1999, p. 14)

In order to differentiate his methods from others, McGraw promotes himself as the ‘boot camp’ of life strategists, the ‘real’ version as opposed to ‘psychobabble’. However, like Covey and Robbins he makes references in his books to church attendance and the existence of God and is highly critical of the efficacy of psychotherapeutic methods (McGraw 1999, p. 22-23). At the same time he borrows many of his techniques and methods for breaking through into the ‘real you’ directly from that field.

McGraw describes his prescriptive sets of practices through a set of 10 ‘life laws’.

I’ve studied the Life Laws, gathered them into one place, and am going to explain them, I hope, clearly (McGraw 1999, p. 25). Life Laws are the rules of the game. No one is going to ask you if you think these laws are fair, or if you think they should exist. Like the law of gravity, they simply are. You don’t get a vote. You can ignore them and stumble along, wondering why you never seem to succeed; or you can learn them, adapt to them, mould your choices and behaviour to them, and live effectively. Learning these Life Laws is at the absolute core of what you must master in this book to have the essential knowledge for a personal life strategy. (McGraw 1999, p. 32)

The book then goes on to outline these immutable life laws, prescribing ways to behave for each one of them. McGraw appeals to the ‘common man’, the real guy, the real deal, a
promise to demystify oneself and work on yourself to ‘make things happen’. In Chapter Two he makes a clear distinction between winners and losers with his ‘life law’ number 1: ‘You Either Get it or You Don’t’. McGraw clearly indicates his dislike for those he describes as ‘losers’.

Those who get it are enjoying the fruits of their knowledge. Those who don’t spend a lot of time looking puzzled, frustrated, and doing without. Those who don’t get it can often be found beating their heads against the wall and complaining that they never seem to get a break. Those who get it seem to be tuned in and not just playing, but actually controlling. They don’t make foolish mistakes, because they have figured out that there is a definite formula for success, and they have broken the code. (McGraw 1999, p. 34)

When I see people who just don’t get it, stumbling along in life, I wonder how they ever survive. It’s painful to watch people do things when you know, before they ever do it, that their fate is sealed. They are trying, they have hopes and dreams, but you know their outcomes are doomed because they just don’t get it. If you are one of those people, isn’t it time to tune in and quit losing before you ever start because you just don’t get it? (McGraw 1999, p. 35)

The above quote is an example of how McGraw’s writing is full of personal stories categorising people as either ‘winners’ or ‘losers’. ‘Law two’ of McGraw’s prescriptive laws then places the onus directly onto the control of the individual with the following statement.

You are not a victim. You are creating the situations you are in; you are creating the emotions that flow from those situations. This is not theory; this is life. You must be willing to move your position, and, however difficult or unusual it may seem, embrace the fact that you own the problem. (McGraw 1999, p. 59)

In ‘law three’ (People Do What Works), McGraw says we have to look at repeated patterns of behaviour that we dislike in ourselves and then we simply decide to change ourselves. It is his focus on domination and control over our own selves that is of particular interest to the analysis in this paper.

You are shaping your own behaviour by the payoffs you are getting in life. Find and control the payoffs, and you control the behaviour, whether it’s your own or someone else’s. If - but only if - you understand and embrace this concept, your personal control will dramatically increase. (McGraw 1999, p. 108)

Life Rewards Action’, McGraw gets readers to administer a 20 item ‘rut test’ on themselves in order to get them to see how they behave. McGraw states, ‘Resolve now that you will take the risk, make the effort, and be persistent in the pursuit of your goals. Your life should be filled with victories and rewards. If you are losing, that means somebody else is winning, so you know that winning happens’ (McGraw 1999, p. 144).

The overt references to dominating and controlling the self continue throughout the rest of the book. Life law 6: ‘There is no Reality; Only Perception’, is an appeal for us to challenge our ‘fixed beliefs’. McGraw says, ‘If you will acknowledge that you’ve been holding on to certain fixed beliefs that cause you to think and behave in a rigid fashion, you can reopen those subject matters for more active evaluation. In any event, you control your perceptions. Therefore, you control your interpretations of and attitudes about your life. That is power’ (McGraw 1999, p. 166). Life law 7: ‘Life is Managed Not Cured’, states that we are never without challenges in our lives. Drawing again on chosen aspects of psychology taken out of context, McGraw states, ’A long-established fact of psychological functioning is that it is not so much the particular circumstance that upsets that person involved, as it is the violation of their expectations’ (McGraw 1999, p. 168). He states that we must become our own ‘life managers’ and gives us another set of questions to undertake more self reflection on whether or not we can accomplish this. ‘Life law 8: We teach people how to treat us’. ‘Own, rather than complain about, how people treat you. Learn to renegotiate your relationships to have what you want’. (McGraw 1999, p. 184)

Even when it comes to relationships with others McGraw puts the self in control by asking readers to undertake a 24 item ‘relationship questionnaire’. ‘Life law 9’: ‘There is power in forgiveness’, ‘Open your eyes to what anger and resentment are doing to you. Take your power back from those who have hurt you’ (McGraw 1999, p. 200). Finally, ‘life law 10’: ‘Naming what you truly want means that you can begin to guide your life like a ship toward the harbour light, because you now have a goal that is exactly, precisely, and specifically identified’ (McGraw 1999, p. 217). Like Covey, McGraw gives readers a complex table and diagram of how to balance the multiple, complex and different aspects of their lives.

5. DISCUSSION OF RESULTS

Each of the books analysed in the paper follows a similar sequential pattern when presenting their ideas. Firstly, they attempt to make a connection with the reader through a shared personal experience, usually a negative experience of depression or an altered mental state. In doing so, the authors fulfil one of the basic and dominant organising principles of consumer culture, the homogenising of experience. Secondly, they set out to establish a personal connection with the reader by offering either monotheistic religious overtones to the basis of their strategies or the rendering of personal stories of suffering that put them on the same level as the reader. Using Christian language and metaphor allows the authors to build trust with their largely Christian audience in North America. Thirdly, the authors offer their prescriptive strategies up as a ‘unique’ experience for their readers. As such their strategies fulfil the other basic tenet or organising principle of consumer society, the need for differentiation of consumer objects. Fourth, the authors reduce the focus of the reader by listing set methods that can be followed or ‘bought into'
as packaged theorems by the readers to get control over their lives in order to dominate their unsuccessful, unhappy, or financially challenged self. Fifth, the authors make a particular ‘promise’ of an incredible outcome that the reader has never experienced before by applying their strategies. Some of the claims of the ‘payoffs’ these authors promise readers are of stupendous wealth and unrealistic or unsustainable states of happiness.

6. CONCLUSION

The socio-cultural context in which self-help literature is constituted makes fertile ground for its continued emergence, proliferation and ever-increasing appeal. The historical and philosophical underpinnings of Western consumer culture embed the primacy of a self that can survey and control the ‘mechanism’ of each individual so that the self is objectified and divided against itself. Such a process heightens the instability of our conception of ourselves and leaves us open to the technologies of individual domination offered by the three authors analysed in this paper. By memorising the rules through constantly scrutinising our conscience we are always chasing the illusive ‘something hidden in ourselves’. The language and prescriptive strategies sold by the three authors as their unique formulas for attaining ‘never before experienced’ wealth, success and happiness are consumption objects that serve as the ‘sign-value’ for the aspiring self-actualised consumer in the 21st Century. The structure and content of their books closely aligns itself with the need for consumption objects to arise and degenerate, homogenise and differentiate, and objectify and dominate the processes related to self-identity construction and development in consumer culture.

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