



Reviews: Spaces of health

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Daniel Nehring, Emmanuel Alvarado, Eric C Hendriks and Dylan Kerrigan,
Transnational Popular Psychology and the Global Self-Help Industry: The Politics of Contemporary Social Change, Palgrave Macmillan: Basingstoke and New York, 2016; 198 pp.: ISBN 9780230370852

Reviewed by: Priya Buldeo, *Human Sciences Research Council, South Africa*

Keywords

Individualism, popular psychology, self-help, social change, therapy

In the book *Transnational Popular Psychology and the Global Self-Help Industry: The Politics of Contemporary Social Change*, authors Daniel Nehring, Emmanuel Alvarado, Eric C Hendriks, and Dylan Kerrigan offer insight into modern-day self-help amid the rise of neoliberalism and social transformation. The authors investigate the popular genre of ‘self-help’. They focus the lens on the Global South to present case studies from the People’s Republic of China, Mexico, and Trinidad and Tobago, with the United Kingdom and the United States representing the epitome of ‘self-help worlds’ in the Global North and Global South. The authors explore the production, circulation, and consumption of self-help books in these countries to create a platform for interdisciplinary transnational inquiry. This is done while demonstrating the role of self-help in therapeutic narratives and how identities of the self and social relationships are shaped in the contemporary world (p. 142).

The book consists of eight chapters, and the authors directly address the usefulness of self-help books in ‘Self-Help Worlds’ (Chapter 1) and how ‘Self-Help and Society’ is shaped by the marketplace (Chapter 2). Taking these discussions further, the authors delve into ‘Self-Help’s Transnationalism’ (Chapter 3) via a transnational perspective on therapeutic culture and provide evidence of publishing statistics, size, and scale from different countries. They also describe ‘Self-Help Entrepreneurs in China’ (Chapter 4, p. 63) and the lessons learned (p. 73) to feature the mental life and social changes in Chinese society, China’s ‘glocalized’ self-help field, and self-help in Chinese culture and public life. The authors consider self-help dystopias and challenges in the marketplace in ‘Self-Help in Crisis’ in an age of austerity and diminishing opportunities (Chapter 5). Their arguments include ‘Cultural Struggles, Intimate Life and Transnational Narratives’ in

Latin America and Mexico (Chapter 6, p. 121). This emphasis broadens the sociological imagination by underlining discourses relating to patriarchy, plurality, individual choice, and agency. The authors reflect on their ethnographic fieldwork in 'The Uses of Self-Help Books in Trinidad' (Chapter 7, p. 129), employing thick descriptions of self-help guides, bookstores, and readership in western Trinidad. They find that 'survival' is acquired through effective coping with the challenges of everyday life (p. 137) to achieve success and happiness. The content presented in the first seven chapters leads to the last one, where the authors discuss 'The Politics of Self-Help' (Chapter 8). It is little wonder why the political implications of self-help remain more relevant for transformation than ever.

The book is well-written and detailed and fills two significant gaps in the existing research: (1) the *transnationalization* of self-help culture, and (2) the tension between self-help's *discursive heterogeneity* and its *neoliberal homogeneity* (p. 9). It maintains that self-help has resulted in a transnational industry whereby development can be understood alongside the global spread of neoliberal capitalism (pp. 25, 153). Readers will appreciate that critical concepts have been operationalized throughout the book, with examples, which make the concepts easier to comprehend. Some of these concepts include, for instance, the 'thin' self (pp. 10, 158–162), 'self-making' (p. 20), 'transnationalism' (p. 30), 'glocalization' (p. 33), 'hybridization' (p. 98), 'self-fulfillment' (p. 99), and 'thin culture' (p. 134).

The book provides a nuanced picture of how self-help shapes social practices in which everyday lived experiences and realities are embedded. By looking beyond the Global North, the book makes a unique contribution to research on the self-help industry. It probes the scope of self-help in achieving its purpose of autonomy, agency, empowerment, and fulfillment. Moreover, it addresses current debates and discourses about the processes of globalization as sources of cultural diversity and political-ideological uniformity in a hypercompetitive globalizing world (p. 5). The book extends to the dynamics of therapeutic culture (pp. 123, 148) associated with the process of individuation (p. 138) and identity (re)formation, which others have critiqued as a 'culture of narcissism' (p. 143). The authors shed light on how self-help narratives are adapted, (re)created, (re)framed, and (re)experienced across geographical locations in the Global South.

The book is intellectually engaging and offers readers suggestions for self-help books from popular authors, making it appealing to diverse audiences. In addition, it provides four important points for consideration in future research (p. 168) that will be of particular interest to sociologists, anthropologists, psychologists, and economists. I recommend the book to social scientists, academics, scholars, self-help users, and those interested in popular culture, self-help, and global studies. Over all, the book is a remarkable and enjoyable read written in a persuasive way, much like self-help authors, and presents clear evidence on the transnationalism of 'Popular Psychology and the Global Self-Help Industry' and the consequences for the 'Politics of Contemporary Social Change.'

Author biography

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Shiri Noy,

Banking on Health: The World Bank and Health Sector Reform in Latin America, Palgrave Macmillan: Cham, 2017; 241 pp.: ISBN 9783319617640

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Keywords

Health, Latin America, medical sociology, World Bank

The role of international financial institutions (IFIs) in health sector reform is an understudied area. In this book, Shiri Noy fills an important gap by examining the role of IFIs in health sector reform in the context of neoliberal globalization. She shows how Latin American countries differ in terms of their autonomy and state capacity in reforming their healthcare systems. She used case studies to show how these countries carried out health sector reforms under the influence of international financial institutions such as the World Bank.

Noy clearly explains key terms used in the book such as ‘neoliberalism,’ ‘state capacity,’ and ‘autonomy.’ While autonomy is defined as the ability to formulate collective goals, state capacity is understood to be the ability to implement logistically political decisions and the institutional ability to influence reforms. Noy shows that Peru is weak in terms of state capacity and autonomy. Therefore, Peru failed to exercise capacity and autonomy in carrying out reforms in its health sector. In contrast, Costa Rica is strong in terms of its capacity and autonomy; and Argentina sat in between the two other countries. Although Argentina is shown as weak in autonomy, it is at the high end in terms of state capacity. Noy offers explanations as to why these countries are different in terms of their capacities and autonomy.

After explaining key concepts used in the book, Noy elaborates on how the role of IFIs changed and discusses the importance of the World Bank in health sector reform in developing countries. The context of the reforms and neoliberal policies of IFIs are clearly explained through referrals to the Washington, and post-Washington Consensus. She reviews debates relating to the role of the World Bank, its ideologies, and approaches in health. The author argues that as a global financial institution and major external funder of national health systems in developing countries, the role of the World Bank demands scrutiny and analysis. Noy succeeds in offering a deep analysis of the role of IFIs, especially that of the World Bank.

Noy uses a mixed-method approach involving interviews with World Bank officials and officials of the ministries of Latin American countries, document analysis, and archival data to offer a multilayered analysis of health sector reforms carried out since the early 1980s. She conducted fieldwork in different Latin American countries. In addition,