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ARTICLE

The Harms of Self-Help Discourse

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Abstract
In this paper, we analyze the potential harms of everyday self-help discourse, particularly in contexts of systemic oppression. After analyzing the core principles of self-help, such as the power of positive thinking, eliminating negative thinking, gratitude, self-knowledge for self-improvement, and individual choice and responsibility, we argue that self-help discourse is likely to perpetuate different forms of harm in conditions of oppression. First, we argue that, when used in contexts of systemic oppression, self-help discourse contributes to victim-blaming. Secondly, we highlight that the harms of self-help discourse include epistemic and affective dimensions. On the epistemic front, self-help discourse carries epistemic risks, including testimonial smothering and hermeneutical injustice, by discouraging the expression of certain perspectives and lived experiences. On the affective front, self-help discourse reinforces oppression by adding emotional burdens to the oppressed, dismissing their emotional experiences, and imposing the emotional norms of the dominant group. Finally, we revisit the principles of self-help, and show how they contribute to the highlighted harms, particularly by reinforcing victim-blaming, and epistemic and affective forms of injustice.

1. Introduction

In recent years, popular culture, driven by ideals of personal growth, empowerment, and resilience, has given rise to self-help discourse—i.e., a discourse focused on providing guidance for self-directed well-being and improvement. From books, podcasts, and seminars to social media platforms, self-help discourse encourages people to take control of their lives by adopting principles such as the power of positive thinking, eliminating negative thinking, or cultivating gratitude, among others. These principles are often presented as universally applicable, and as means to promote individual empowerment and the ability to overcome any life challenges. Yet, framed as a form of self-care, self-help is subject to the same criticism that has been directed at the self-care industry: it overlooks structural constraints and power dynamics (e.g., Franssen 2020: Illouz 2008). Just as within the self-care industry, mainstream self-help discourse also adopts an

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individualistic framework, often framing self-improvement in terms of personal responsibility. Due to its individualistic approach, self-help discourse tends to overlook financial constraints and the complexities and burdens of oppression.[1]

In analyzing self-help discourse, it is important to distinguish between the communicative practice of self-help discourse and the broader self-help industry. By self-help industry we mean the production of books, seminars, and media content aimed at personal improvement, while self-help discourse refers to the broader network of concepts, ideas, values, and practices that the self-help industry promotes and that circulate within and beyond it. While the self-help industry, as a significant cultural phenomenon, has already been widely analyzed (e.g., Illouz 2008), this paper focuses on pervasive, everyday use of self-help discourse and on how its key principles operate when applied within conditions of systemic oppression.

Our methodological assumption is that the most influential works of self-help are those that have most significantly shaped self-help discourse. Accordingly, we take as our starting point the influential works of Martin Seligman, Rhonda Byrne, and Vex King, whose writings have played a central role in shaping contemporary understandings of self-help.

Seligman formally introduced positive psychology in his 1998 APA presidential address, giving a scientific approach to already existing ideas about positive thinking—e.g., in the nineteenth-c New Thought movement—which likely contributed to his public and academic influence. This proposed scientific approach led to a rise in academic papers in this area (Wang et al. 2023), including the 2000 *American Psychologist* special issue on positive psychology, followed by *Authentic happiness* (2002), which brought his ideas into everyday conversations. His subsequent media presence, including a 2004 TED Talk and numerous studies applying positive psychology in areas such as leadership and education, confirm his influence.[2] Byrne's *The secret* (2006) has sold over 30 million copies and been translated into more than 50 languages, making the "law of attraction" a global phenomenon. Finally, Vex King represents the digital era of self-help. His *Good vibes, good life* was the top-selling personal development title in 2021 (Tivnan 2022) and he is particularly popular with young people and celebrities.

We do not treat these authors as exhaustive representatives of the self-help discourse, nor as sharing a common approach, but as the main sources of ideas that have become pervasive within mainstream discourse. Importantly, we understand self-help discourse as circulating and evolving: while the everyday use of self-help discourse draws upon the frameworks established by the work of these figures, it is also shaped by everyday practices. Thus, the self-help discourse used in everyday life might diverge from the original positions of its most influential authors. Despite differences in style and

[1]It is noteworthy that the WHO definition of self-care acknowledges its communal aspect. According to WHO's guidelines, "Self-care is the ability of individuals, families and communities to promote health, prevent disease, maintain health, and cope with illness and disability with or without the support of a health worker." (World Health Organization n.d.) However, the commercial view of self-care has dissolved this communal aspect.

[2]In the remainder of this paper, we focus on Seligman's book *Authentic happiness*. Even though Seligman's influence on positive psychology is not limited to this popular book, as reflected in his numerous and highly cited academic contributions (Wang et al. 2023), we focus on this book because of its impact on lay audiences and on the self-help industry. Seligman's public impact is reflected in his strong media presence. He was featured in *Time* magazine (Wallis 2005), appeared on Larry King Now (2014) and BBC Newsnight (2003), and delivered a widely viewed TED Talk (Seligman 2004).

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approach, these figures converge on a set of principles which, as we argue in the next section, underlie everyday self-help discourse. For instance, the concepts of personal responsibility and individualism and the weight given to voluntary actions are common to all, whether backed up by supposedly empirical evidence, the law of attraction, the law of vibration, or something else.

In this paper, we analyze the potential harms of the everyday use of self-help discourse, particularly in contexts of systemic oppression. In section 2, we analyze the underlying principles of self-help, such as the power of positive thinking, eliminating negative thinking, gratitude, self-knowledge for self-improvement, and individual choice and responsibility. In section 3, we show how, when applied in contexts of systemic oppression, self-help discourse contributes to victim-blaming. Then, we highlight that the everyday use of self-help discourse in contexts of systemic oppression also causes epistemic and affective harms. In section 4, we focus on the epistemic front, and argue that self-help discourse carries epistemic risks, including testimonial smothering and hermeneutical injustice, by discouraging the expression of certain perspectives and lived experiences. In section 5, we focus on the affective front, and argue that self-help discourse reinforces oppression by adding emotional burdens in different ways to the oppressed, dismissing their emotional experiences, and imposing the emotional norms of the dominant group, which are all forms of affective injustice. In section 6, we revisit the principles of self-help, and show how they contribute to the highlighted harms, particularly by reinforcing victim-blaming, and epistemic and affective forms of injustice.

2. The principles of self-help discourse

In this section, we identify some of the prima-facie principles underlying everyday self-help discourse: *the power of positive thinking, eliminating negative thinking, gratitude, self-knowledge for self-improvement,* and *individual choice and responsibility.*

Arguably the most fundamental tenet of self-help, and the one that informs all other principles, is *the power of positive thinking.* While this idea long predates modern psychology—e.g., Norman Peale (1952) already talks about "positive thinking," drawing inspiration from the nineteenth-century New Thought movement, and Christian thought—it gained academic legitimacy through the rise of "positive psychology." A key figure in this movement was Martin Seligman, who, after becoming president of the American Psychological Association in 1998, made it his mission to take psychology in a new, positive direction. Positive Psychology promises a science of human happiness and flourishing, arguing that genuine and lasting happiness comes from development of character and "signature strengths." In *Authentic happiness,* Seligman (2017 [2002]) introduces a formula for understanding happiness: $H = S + C + V$. According to this model, H refers to one's enduring levels of happiness, which is determined by three factors: S, our set-range, which is our biological, inherited composition; C, the circumstances in which we live; and V, the voluntary actions, such as developing our strengths and engaging in self-help (Seligman 2017 [2002], 45). According to Seligman, we cannot change our set-range, but we can move our happiness levels to the top of this range. As for circumstances, Seligman cites numerous studies to argue that, although some of the circumstances presumed to increase happiness do have a positive effect, such as marriage, religion, and a rich social network, others make little to no difference. He claims that to achieve happiness one should not bother to make money, stay healthy, become highly educated, or move to sunnier climates (Seligman 2017 [2002], 61). In

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fact, he says, circumstances make a relatively small impact on happiness overall. Instead, he advocates for the impact of voluntary actions, and argues that most people can increase their happiness through voluntary action. He finds support in studies suggesting that, on average, 50 percent of people's general level of happiness is determined by genetics, and only 10 percent by circumstances, leaving 40 percent under our voluntary control (Solan 2021). This is taken as evidence that circumstances do not preclude us from being happy.

When taken up by popular psychology, the power of positive thinking takes a more mystical turn. This principle was popularized by Norman Peale in his 1952 book *The power of positive thinking*. Peale drew inspiration from the New Thought movement—a spiritual and mental healing movement—combining its ideas with Christian thought (Peale 1952). Positive thinking has had a twenty-first-century resurgence, with two of the most famous and best-selling books being *The secret* by Rhonda Byrne (2006) and *Good vibes, good life: How self-love is the key to unlocking your greatness* by Vex King (2018). Whereas positive psychology has the goal of happiness, popular self-help psychology has the goal of "success" more generally. It is important to note that some positive psychologists are keen to distance themselves from popular psychology, deeming it unscientific. In fact, Seligman dismissed popular psychology as "fraudulent."[3] Yet this criticism has not diminished the mass appeal of popular psychology, particularly the type inspired by positive psychology.

At the heart of positive thinking in popular psychology is the Law of Attraction, a New Thought spiritual belief that our thoughts and energy, as they radiate out, will attract "like" energy. Loosely invoking principles from quantum physics, the Law of Attraction claims that positive thoughts attract positive events and experiences and negative thoughts attract negative events and experiences. Byrne refers to thoughts having "frequencies," and King goes "beyond" the Law of Attraction and prefers "vibrations." It is proposed that through positive thinking, we can manifest our desires, be they love, money, or health. The Law of Attraction is Byrne's "secret" and she claims to have used it to attract wealth, success, improve her eyesight (Byrne 2006, 134) and even lose weight (Byrne 2006, 58–59). Following this trend, dating platforms like Elite Singles (e.g., Coetzee n.d.) encourage users to "visualize your ideal partner" and to maintain a positive attitude toward oneself and others, suggesting that doing so will attract like-minded, positive individuals and bring true love into their lives.

The other side of the coin is the principle of *eliminating negative thinking*. According to King (2018, 20), when we are in a negative mindset, such as hate, anger, or despair, we are vibrating at a lower frequency which will attract more of what we don't want. In other words, the more negative thoughts we allow, the more negative things we will experience. This is in contrast to the "emotional hydraulic" theory which posits that we need to vent our negative feelings such as anger, because repressed emotions are unhealthy and can come out in destructive ways. Seligman claims the opposite is true, and that dwelling on negativity and expressing anger only leads to more anger and even physical illness (Seligman 2017 [2002], 69).

A key aspect of the principle of eliminating negative thinking involves removing "negative people" from our lives, so we are not affected by their negative energy. King claims that some people are "allergic to positivity" and that we should be "so positive that they can't stand to be near you" (King 2018, 120). Eliminating negativity also means eliminating negative talk, according to Byrne (2006), including talk about illness.

[3]Interview with Strawberry Saroyan, "Happy days are here again," *Elle*, December 1998.

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According to her, if we are feeling a little unwell, we should not talk about it unless we want more of it (Byrne 2006, 132).

One area where positive thinking in popular psychology and in positive psychology overlap is in the principle of *gratitude*. Gratitude is "the magic" in Byrne's (2012) book of the same name. According to Byrne (2012), the Law of Attraction will receive grateful thoughts and give you more just like them. Similarly, King (2018) claims that we "cannot feel joy without being thankful" (50). Gratitude is also one of Seligman's examples of voluntary action that can make a difference to our happiness. He provides scales with which to measure our gratitude levels, with exercises to improve if our score is low (Seligman 2017 [2002], 71).

This example of self-assessment brings us to another principle of self-help: *self-knowledge for self-improvement*. According to this principle, self-knowledge is valuable only insofar as it serves a pragmatic purpose, meaning that any insights gained should be continually developed and improved. Self-help literature is full of self-assessments, questionnaires, and surveys promising that, if we can better understand ourselves, identifying our strengths and weaknesses, we can work to improve ourselves. Seligman provides numerous self-assessment scales, including a scale to assess positive and negative affectivity, general happiness, and potential strengths such as perseverance, kindness, optimism, and appreciation of beauty. Following the principle of positive thinking, we should accept ourselves while also, according to the principle of self-knowledge for self-improvement, working toward being better than we are now.

The final principle is that of *individual choice and responsibility*. Self-help is about improving oneself, by oneself. Because we have the power to change our own well-being through positive thought, we can choose wellness, success, and happiness. We are responsible for achieving these things for ourselves. King (2021) claims that, although we cannot change the past, we have the choice to change our future. Ultimately, "it's your responsibility to heal yourself" (King 2021, 93). This is presented as something liberating and positive.

Notice that even though none of the principles reflected in the most influential works on self-help claims that one should have a positive attitude instead of a negative one, or that one attitude precludes the other; when taken together, the principles of self-help discourse give rise to such dichotomous thinking. Given that some principles encourage positivity, such as positive thinking or gratitude, and others discourage negativity, self-help discourse leaves little space for ambiguous attitudes or emotions. A clear example of how such dichotomous thinking might arise can be found in *The secret*, where Bob Doyle states, "When people are completely focused on what's wrong and their symptoms, they will perpetuate it. The healing will not occur until they shift their attention from being sick to being well. Because that's the law of attraction" (Byrne 2006, 133), or a testimony reported by Barbara Ehrenreich (2009, 55) of a woman, identified as author and attorney, who attributes the excess of bad news to the inadequate spread of positive thinking among the world's population. Such statements illustrate how the discourse links well-being to positive focus and implicitly frames negative attention as an obstacle to recovery, reinforcing the underlying dichotomy.

3. Self-help discourse and victim-blaming

A first criticism of everyday self-help discourse is that, when applied in contexts of systemic oppression, it contributes to victim-blaming. In this section, we argue that this happens because self-help discourse makes three interrelated assumptions, all of which

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contribute to victim-blaming. These assumptions are: *psychological authority, hyper-individualized meritocracy,* and *no excuses.*

First, self-help discourse assumes *psychological authority.* The rise of self-help was in part motivated by a move away from the biomedical model of wellness, with its knowledge guarded by medical authorities. In self-help we are still being told to defer to experts, but they are those in psychology (whether clinically trained or not). This deference to professionals "acting at a distance" means that we have to take complete responsibility for our self-improvement, assuming psychologically defined benchmarks for politically and culturally laden concepts such as "success" and "wellness." When we take questionnaires and self-surveys to discover the "truth" about ourselves, we are measuring ourselves against narrow, and even simplistic, criteria. This is reflective of what Heidi Rimke (2000) calls a "psychologistically oriented culture" in which psychology is seen as the expert knowledge.[4] Combined with hyper-individualism we have an "extensive essentialist psychologization of the self in everyday life" where psychology is seen as able to make us happy and "normal" (Rimke 2000, 62–63). The assumption is that all human conflicts, even the structural and historical ones, are personal psychological problems that can be solved individually, resorting to the proper experts through enough "reading, guidance, determination and industriousness" (Rimke 2000, 73). A clear example of such a position in everyday self-help discourse is Barbara Ehrenreich's (2009) experience following her diagnosis of breast cancer. Ehrenreich posted on the message board at Komen.org, a major US breast cancer organization, where she titled her post "Angry" and expressed frustration with chemotherapy as well as with what she described as the movement's "sappy pink ribbons." Rather than receiving support, she was met with rebukes for her "unhelpful attitude," with one commenter urging her to "run, not walk, to some counseling" to get some help (2009, 32). In situations of oppression, the psychological effects of that oppression are likely to be attributed to the oppressed themselves. In other words, those suffering from oppression are likely to be blamed for their failure to cope with or even overcome the psychological impact of oppression.

This leads to the second assumption of self-help discourse that contributes to victim-blaming: *hyper-individualized meritocracy,* a term used by Gaston Franssen (2020) in his discussion of self-care. Certain versions of self-help perpetuate hyper-individualized, meritocratic ideals, fueled by neoliberalism. Paul Heelas states that in this highly individualized meritocracy the individual is believed to be driven by "self-motivation," "self-reliance," engaging in "self-help," and becoming "self-made" (1991, 77–78). The dark side of this is that individuals are responsible not only for their own "success" but also their own "failure." As Franssen (2020) puts it, in what he calls a "hyper-individualized meritocracy" any type of "doing well," including recovery from illness, or self-improvement more generally, is perceived as the result of personal responsibility and ambition, with limitation as the result of individual failure. We are told that "individuals possess the ability to *choose* happiness over unhappiness, success over failure and even health over illness" (Rimke 2000, 73). In contexts of systemic oppression, this high individualism diverts attention from structural inequalities, placing the burden of dealing with oppression on the individuals suffering from it. As Rimke (2000) claims, a life of self-help negates the public sphere and its responsibility. As a consequence, this ethos is "bound to be unhelpful for those struggling with social inequalities, economic

[4]While Rimke's work predates the publication of the books by Seligman, Byrne, and King, the societal trends she critiques were likely already emerging prior to the rise of such literature.

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disadvantage, or … chronic mental illness" (Franssen 2020, 102). Indeed, it has been shown that for people with mental disorders such as bipolar disorder, the internalization of meritocratic worldviews—according to which individuals' perceived success or failure is and ought to be the result of their own efforts (or lack thereof)—results in self-stigmatization and increased feelings of guilt or shame (Rüsch et al. 2010).

This view on people's responsibility over their own "success" or "failure" leads to the third assumption of self-help discourse contributing to victim-blaming: *no excuses*. As we have already seen, positive psychologists claim that circumstances have a minimal effect on happiness, so dwelling on circumstances will be fruitless compared to changing what is in our voluntary control. For instance, Seligman rejects many of the factors that we might have thought impacted happiness, including money, health, race, education, or race (2002, 61), and does not allow childhood trauma as a justification for one's present personality. As he puts it, "Bad childhood events, in short, do not mandate adult troubles" (2002, 67).[5] Yet, as Barbara Ehrenreich points out, if circumstances play only a small role in human happiness, then 'policy is a marginal exercise' (2009, 171). And, as Ehrenreich (2009) aims to suggest, this is a hugely damaging implication. For example, we know that those who are socially and economically disadvantaged experience inequality in accessing high-quality mental healthcare in the UK (Lowther-Payne et al. 2023). Yet the hidden message of self-help is that this inequality is only an excuse, and that one is presenting oneself as a victim and this will hinder personal growth. In King's words, "if you always play the victim when something goes wrong, life always treats you like one. Don't let your circumstances define your future" (2018, 239). Similarly, Seligman (2017 [2002], 68) refers to "the victimology that has swept America since the glorious beginnings of the civil rights movement and which threatens to overtake the rugged individualism and sense of individual responsibility that used to be this nation's hallmark."

Not only does everyday self-help discourse overlook the impact of one's circumstances on one's well-being—and therefore the impact of social policies—it also ignores the influence that people can have on their circumstances, while simultaneously sanctioning them for failing to change those very circumstances. This tension arises because, while everyday self-help discourse is strongly influenced by positive psychology—which draws a sharp distinction between one's circumstances and one's voluntary actions, such as one's attitudes—it presents a simplified version of these ideas, mixed with other, sometimes inconsistent frameworks. As a result, everyday self-help discourse produces an internal inconsistency: it is not clear whether "circumstances" are to be understood as fixed and external, or as elements that people can actively change through effort and determination. This ambiguity blurs the boundary between what is within one's control and what is not, both assuming that people can improve their social circumstances, while overlooking the structural realities that constrain such action. Consequently, when people from marginalized groups complain about their discrimination, they might be sanctioned for both not focusing on what they can control and

[5]This "no excuses" assumption has particularly permeated everyday self-help discourse. For example, the American motivational speaker, author, consultant, and minister Eric Thomas emphasized in an episode of *The model health show* (September 14, 2022) that individuals should not attribute their failures to external conditions such as racism or circumstance, declaring, "We're in a no-fly zone … a no-excuse zone." He insists that "anything a human does, as a human, you can counterattack the attack," framing personal agency as absolute.

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failing to have a positive attitude, and for not taking steps to improve their life conditions.

Apart from victim-blaming, the everyday use of self-help discourse in contexts of systemic oppression is likely to perpetuate other harms. Insights from recent political turns in epistemology and philosophy of emotions can help illuminate these other harms. In section 4 we focus on the epistemic harms of self-help discourse, and in section 5, on the affective ones.

4. The epistemic harms of self-help discourse

The everyday use of self-help discourse in contexts of oppression risks victim-blaming, as we have argued, but it also causes epistemic harms. In particular, in this section we argue that self-help contributes to perpetuating a knowledge imbalance among social identities, not only by encouraging members of those social identities to remain silent against their oppression because they need to eliminate negative talk, but also by promoting certain social practices that generate testimonial smothering (Dotson 2011) and hermeneutical injustice (Fricker 2007), which further obscure and silence the experiences of certain oppressed groups. To argue so, we first introduce the notion of epistemic capacity and its relationship to social identities. Then, we discuss how self-help discourse contributes to testimonial smothering and hermeneutical injustice by exploiting the three assumptions of self-help mentioned above. Let's get into it.

From a social perspective, being recognized as a knower—for the gaining, keeping, and sharing of knowledge (Cassam 2019, 12)—involves being perceived by at least part of the community as a credible source of knowledge, as someone who possesses knowledge (Fricker 2007). That is, in order to be considered a knower you need to receive attributions of credibility and knowledge (Almagro et al. 2021; Spewak 2021).This is because what counts as knowledge, and who counts as a knower, is the product of our common epistemic practices (Fricker 2007; Medina 2013).

Being recognized as a knower gives you more *epistemic capacity*,[6] namely the ability to participate meaningfully in shared epistemic practices.[7] If someone is not perceived as a knower by anyone, then they lack the capacity, or at least are significantly impaired in their capacity, to successfully participate in the regular practices of gaining, keeping, and sharing knowledge, and therefore have a very limited capacity to produce and share knowledge. In such a case, they may not have knowledge at all, since to have knowledge we need to be recognized as a possessor of knowledge by some—after all, from a purely first-person perspective, knowledge cannot be distinguished from mere belief. One of the functions of our shared epistemic practices is determining what counts as

[6]Our use of the concept "epistemic capacity" aligns with Dotson's use of the concept "epistemic agency" (Dotson 2011).

[7]By epistemic capacity we mean not an internal faculty or psychological trait, but a socially mediated ability to participate meaningfully in shared epistemic practices. One's epistemic capacity depends on whether social conditions and interlocutors afford the possibility of being recognized as a knower, of having one's testimony heard, and of contributing to the collective interpretation of experience. It is therefore relational and dynamic: it can expand or contract depending on the credibility one is granted, the hermeneutical resources available, and the structures of power shaping epistemic exchange. In this sense, epistemic capacity measures the degree to which agents are enabled or restricted as participants in epistemic life, rather than the amount of knowledge or cognitive skill they privately possess. In other words, a subject may have knowledge while lacking the epistemic capacity to have that knowledge recognized or taken up within *dominant* epistemic practices.

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knowledge. Consequently, those who are already recognized as knowers are better positioned to shape what counts as knowledge and who counts as a knower.[8] Because epistemic practices are structured by the community—through both institutional and non-institutional practices—those who have greater access to, and authority within, these practices have greater epistemic capacity, which, in turn, leads to additional attributions of credibility and knowledge.[9] As a result, recognition as a knower is self-reinforcing: it both enables and perpetuates one's epistemic capacity to participate in, and shape, collective epistemic practices.

In this sense, knowledge is understood in terms of someone's epistemic capacity: the more one is able to participate in shared epistemic practices, the more one is attributed credibility and knowledge.

It is also a common idea that someone's epistemic capacity is partly determined by their social power, understood as a socially situated capacity to affect others (Fricker 2007; Medina 2013). For instance, a psychiatrist or a police officer have more epistemic power and capacity than a pedestrian: in court, for example, their testimonies receive extra weight. If you've ever contested a traffic ticket, you know that a conviction is often based solely on the officer's testimony. But epistemic capacity doesn't just stem from formally institutionalized practices, as the ones related to being a police officer or a psychiatrist. Celebrities, such as Oprah Winfrey, for instance, would have more epistemic capacity than the waitress at the corner café, since they have more capacity to influence people's opinions and actions.[10] Winfrey, as it happens, has been a key figure in the promotion of self-help culture, endorsing *The secret*, which particularly popularized the Law of Attraction and the principle of positive thinking (e.g., Gravois, 2007). These two subjects, as knowers, differentiate from each other in their capacity to participate and influence in our regular epistemic practices because of their differences regarding social power.

Social power also depends on identity factors. For instance, all things being equal, in Spain, the likelihood of a white British or Danish man to receive knowledge attributions after giving testimony is much higher than that of a Romanian woman. Historically marginalized identities have less epistemic capacity, in the sense that they have less social power, namely, a limited capacity to participate in our everyday practices of knowledge production and exchange (see also Dotson 2012). The unjust social norms, biases, and stereotypes associated with disenfranchised social identities constrain their social power, and thus unjustly limit their epistemic capacity, making them victims of epistemic injustice (Fricker 2007). Broadly speaking, epistemic injustice, as defined by Fricker (2007, 20), occurs when someone is wronged specifically in their capacity as a knower.

[8]This is compatible with the popular idea that oppressed people have some epistemic advantages over privileged groups (Medina 2013).

[9]Since epistemic authority is never distributed evenly across communities, what counts as knowledge at a given time depends on the norms and institutions of dominant epistemic communities—those that exercise the greatest influence over credibility attribution and the circulation of interpretive resources. Yet such dominance coexists with a plurality of counter-hegemonic epistemic spaces in which alternative standards of justification and sense-making are cultivated, and where marginalized subjects can exercise epistemic agency. Our focus in this paper concerns how self-help discourse operates as a hegemonic epistemic formation, constraining who can be recognized as a credible knower in broader social contexts.

[10]Archer and colleagues (2020, 2022) draw a similar analysis, arguing that, because of the substantial attention, trust, and admiration they receive, celebrities have "epistemic power", namely, the capacity to influence what others believe and know (Archer et al. 2020; Dotson 2018; Geuskens 2018), which can be understood as a function of someone's social power.

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In a structuralist framework, someone's epistemic capacity is usually depicted in terms of the *nodes* they occupy in the social structure. Sally Haslanger describes a social structure as a network of social relationships shaped by practices (Haslanger 2015a, 2015b; see also Ayala 2018; Ayala and Vasilyeva 2015). These practices place individuals in specific nodes within the network, and each node allows the person in it to perform a limited set of things. In certain nodes of the network, one is taken to be a knower. However, access to these epistemic nodes is unfairly restricted by unjust norms and stereotypes—such as sexism, racism, and classism—which limit the social power of certain individuals. The norms and practices that lead people from certain disenfranchised identities to unjustly receive less credibility than they deserve when giving testimony are the same norms and practices that prevent them from occupying certain epistemic nodes in the social structure.

Epistemic injustice is certainly not suffered by every single member of disadvantaged groups, but it is structural and, in relevant cases, persistent (Fricker 2007, 29). It forms part of a larger pattern of injustice influenced by social and economic factors, which amplify its effects on individuals. For example, not being given proper recognition as a knower will make it even harder for someone with limited financial resources to access mental health services or to become informed about systemic gender violence.

Self-help discourse, through its principles and assumptions, contributes to perpetuating such an epistemic capacity imbalance among social identities by promoting certain social practices that obscure and silence the experiences of certain oppressed groups, and thus prevent them from occupying certain epistemic nodes, or shifting between them—e.g., shifting their epistemic roles as informant, critic, testifier, questioner, etc.—and thus engage in different kinds of epistemic practices—such as informing, criticizing, testifying, questioning, etc. which is relevant for developing epistemic agency.

An implication of the principles of self-help discourse is that systemic problems, such as mental health struggles resulting from gender inequality or class differences, are framed merely as matters of attitude. They are considered problems which can be addressed individually by cultivating positive thinking, eliminating negativity, showing gratitude, and using one's self-knowledge for self-improvement.[11] As mentioned in previous sections, self-help is about improving oneself, by oneself. Consequently, those suffering from systemic problems are told it is because they are not really trying to change their lives, or have not eliminated negative talk and are attracting bad energy. In an endorsement of the principles of self-help, they are told to eliminate negative thinking and to cultivate positive thinking: "Believe in yourself," "Empower yourself," "Love yourself." Of course, it is important to love and believe in yourself. However, apart from blaming the victim, this discourse promotes a way of living that potentially silences and epistemically harms those who experience gender inequality and mental health struggles. Specifically, because of the psychological authority, hyper-individualized meritocracy, and no excuses assumptions of this discourse, its use in contexts of oppression leads to practices that can result in testimonial smothering and hermeneutical injustice.

[11]In particular, Seligman (2017 [2002]) has advocated for the practice of showing gratitude as a means to prevent depression globally. In Seligman's words: "Gratification dispels self-absorption, and the more one has the flow that gratification produces, the less depressed one is. Here, then, is a powerful antidote to the epidemic of depression in youth: strive for more gratifications, while toning down the pursuit of pleasure . . . A determination to identify and develop these strengths is therefore a great buffer against depression" (118–19).

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Kristie Dotson defines testimonial smothering as "the truncating of one's own testimony in order to ensure that the testimony contains only content for which one's audience demonstrates testimonial competence" (2011, 244). According to her, cases of testimonial smothering are characterized by three distinctive conditions: "1) the content of the testimony must be unsafe and risky; 2) the audience must demonstrate testimonial incompetence with respect to the content of the testimony to the speaker; and 3) testimonial incompetence must follow from, or appear to follow from, pernicious ignorance" (Dotson 2011, 244). Thus, testimonial smothering occurs when a person truncates their testimony and refrains from sharing certain information because their audience, due to their pernicious ignorance of the topic of that testimony, might easily find it unreasonable and form false beliefs that could cause further harm to the victim. The speaker realizes that their audience may not properly understand their testimony and then restrict it.

From a structural point of view, it could be said that in such cases there are no relevant practices and social norms in place—or they are designed to unfairly disadvantage certain groups—allowing certain people to share their experiences and testimonies. Thus, testimonial smothering does not need to be understood as a conscious phenomenon. The victim might restrict their speech subconsciously, as a result of correctly following certain unjust norms and practices. Saray Ayala (2016) explains a similar idea in terms of speech affordances: a speaker might not have certain speech acts available, since the practices in place erode the possibility for people occupying certain nodes to make certain things with their words, or when certain speech acts are available, they impose painful trade-offs. Thus, testimonial smothering can occur simply because one does not have the speech capacity to perform certain speech acts. To be clear, our application preserves Dotson's requirement that an audience demonstrate testimonial incompetence with respect to the relevant content. In the self-help environments we target, that demonstration is structural and advance-signaled by the rules of public uptake of a given practice: avoid "negative talk," cultivate gratitude, and construe hardship as a mindset problem subject to individual control. These rules make it predictable that testimony about harassment, illness, or structural disadvantage will be received as "negativity," "playing the victim," or a failure of self-management. For example, popular self-help explicitly counsels avoiding talk of illness, distancing oneself from "negative people," and warns against dwelling on negative affect. Such norms supply the speaker with precisely the evidence Dotson requires to judge the audience incompetent with respect to this content, and thereby render full testimony unsafe. In these settings, smothering is a rational—often pre-reflective—response to demonstrated incompetence.

Self-help discourse promotes the conditions under which certain oppressed people do not have the speech capacity to perform certain speech acts. Recall that self-help discourse covertly enacts practices governed by the following assumptions: we must defer to experts (psychological authority), individuals have the responsibility to improve their situations (hyper-individualized meritocracy), and circumstances have a minimal effect on happiness (no excuses). Thus, within such a practice, trying to share one's experiences in cases of gender inequality or mental health suffering might be unsafe and risky, since it can be perceived as an indication that one is not trying hard enough to remove negativity from one's life. The discursive norms introduced by self-help discourse could prevent some people from expressing their experiences because, as mentioned, it places the responsibility of well-being on the individual's power to overcome difficulties. When audiences are steeped in self-help norms and practices, they

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will probably show testimonial incompetence, thus leading oppressed people to truncate their own testimony.

Finally, a group can face hermeneutical injustice not only by being deprived of certain concepts, as Fricker (2007) famously argued, but also when, despite the existence of a relevant concept, its application is limited by the presence of competing and distorting concepts which are supported by epistemically and socially powerful rules and practices (Falbo 2022; Mason 2021).[12] In this sense, it is clear why self-help discourse could end up generating hermeneutical injustice. The framework behind the conceptual resources promoted by self-help discourse such as "the Law of Attraction," or its manifestations in "the power of positive thinking" or "the need to eliminate negative thinking," is incompatible with the framework underlying other available—although blocked—concepts, such as mental health struggle or structural inequality. This way, the necessary discursive practices that allow certain individuals to better understand and share their experiences are significantly constrained. This is especially harmful for oppressive experiences, where having the means to share and communicate knowledge about them is crucial to alleviate such harmful situations.

5. The affective harms of self-help

As we have previously seen, the everyday use of self-help discourse in contexts of oppression can risk victim-blaming, and perpetuating forms of epistemic injustice, such as testimonial smothering and hermeneutical injustice. In this section, we introduce the concept of *affective* injustice and use it to highlight the affective harms that might arise when self-help discourse is applied in the face of systemic oppression. We argue that self-help discourse reinforces oppression by adding emotional burdens in different ways to the oppressed, dismissing their emotional experiences, and imposing the emotional norms of the dominant group, which are all forms of affective injustice.

The concept of *affective injustice* has recently emerged from political and feminist approaches to philosophy of emotion. It captures a form of injustice related to people's emotional experiences. More specifically, the concept of affective injustice is defined as a wrong done to someone in their capacity as affective beings (Archer and Matheson 2022; Archer and Mills 2019); in distributive terms, as the morally objectionable deprivation of the affective goods that someone is owed (Gallegos 2021); or from a structural angle, a set of affective norms, practices, and relationships which are embedded in our social conditions of injustice (Stockdale 2023). This type of injustice highlights the political and ethical dimensions of emotions, presenting them not just as private experiences, but as matters of justice and moral concern. It also highlights the affective costs of injustice, complementing its economic and social costs (Krueger 2023).

Affective injustice can operate in interpersonal contexts, but it can also operate at a broader social scale.[13] As we argue in this section, a complete account of the affective

[12]Other analyses of hermeneutical injustice due to the presence of distorting or oppressive concepts are those proposed by Bell (2025), Dular (2023), Jenkins (2017), Picazo (2023), Romdenh-Romluc (2017).

[13]Krueger (2023) distinguishes four approaches to affective injustice: the psychological approach, exemplified by Srinivasan's (2018) account, where affective injustice occurs when victims must suppress their apt emotional responses leading to a normative and psychological conflict; the social approach, exemplified by the form of affective injustice that Archer and Matheson (2022) call "emotional imperialism" and further developed by Stockdale (2023), where affective injustice arises from social pressures to conform to dominant emotional norms; the embodied approach, whose main representative would be Whitney's

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harms of self-help discourse in contexts of systemic oppression must consider its impact both in interpersonal contexts and, especially, within social and intergenerational systems.

5.1 Affective injustice in interpersonal contexts

The concept of affective injustice originated from two paradigmatically interpersonal cases, first examined by Srinivasan (2018) and Whitney (2018), who were also the pioneers in coining the term. Self-help discourse might be analyzed from this interpersonal angle, as people sometimes use self-help discourse in their interactions with each other. For instance, invoking the principles of self-help, someone struggling with gender or racial discrimination might be advised to focus on positive thinking, practice gratitude, eliminate negativity, and take responsibility for their own well-being by acting in a way that aligns with their strengths. In interactions like this one there is risk of both Srinivasan's and Whitney's forms of affective injustice.

On the one hand, when people express their struggles with discrimination, advising them to adopt a positive attitude and to avoid a negative approach places them in a conflict. They must choose between their apt emotions in reaction to that discrimination, such as anger or frustration, and the presumed appropriate ones, such as hopefulness or even gratitude.[14] This constitutes the form of affective injustice that Srinivasan (2018) highlights. Her key example is that of James Baldwin being told by William F. Buckley Jr. that his anger toward racism was justified, but counterproductive as it could amount to more violence against the Black population. According to Srinivasan (2018), in addition to suffering from racism, the person complaining about, and suffering from, racism is put into both a psychological and normative conflict. The psychological conflict involves deciding whether to express or suppress anger; whereas the normative conflict requires choosing between an apt emotion, such as anger, and an appropriate or productive one, such as suppressing that anger. Archer and Mills (2019) have reanalyzed this form of affective injustice as an unfair demand for emotional regulation. According to them, when a person is told to suppress their apt anger because it is considered counterproductive, they are not only put in a normative and psychological conflict, but they are also required to regulate their emotions in a pernicious way.[15] As they argue, the person required to regulate their emotions in response to

(2018) analysis, where affective injustice happens when emotional expressions are denied proper cognition, disrupting the agent's embodied sense of connection and agency; and the ecological approach, for which Krueger makes the case, where affective injustice can be caused by the built environment. For the sake of our argument, we categorize the psychological and embedded approaches as dealing with affective injustice in interpersonal contexts; and the social and ecological approaches as dealing with affective injustice in societal contexts.

[14]It is not that anger and gratitude are mutually exclusive emotions; rather, as discussed in section 2, self-help discourse often promotes one principle that encourages positivity, another that encourages gratitude, and yet another that discourages negativity or resentment. Together, these principles can make expressions of anger or frustration by marginalized individuals reacting to discrimination seem inappropriate or even self-defeating, thus putting them in conflict between their genuine emotional responses and the attitudes deemed acceptable. Thanks to an anonymous reviewer for pressing us to say more about this.

[15]As we will see in the next section on affective injustice at a social scale, these affective practices are linked to implicit affective norms—such as the expectation that Black people should express their complaints in a neutral tone—which both ground and are reinforced by these practices (for a structural account of affective injustice, see Stockdale 2023).

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oppression can only meet such a demand either by ceasing to resist oppression, or by harming themselves.

Self-help discourse causes affective injustice by promoting emotional regulation strategies that encourage positivity and personal responsibility, and sanction valid expressions of anger or frustration toward systemic issues. This places the burden on members of oppressed groups to manage their emotions in ways that align with societal expectations in order to avoid exclusion or sanction, rather than fighting or resisting the oppression they suffer. The reactions to Barbara Ehrenreich's (2009, 32) complaining and angry post about her breast cancer diagnosis in a support forum also illustrates this point. Her anger was deemed "unhelpful," and it was therefore criticized and sanctioned, with some users even suggesting counseling so she could manage such emotions.

On the other hand, self-help discourse can also be used to dismiss or disregard the struggles faced by people experiencing oppression. When someone advises a person struggling with oppression to "stay positive," avoid negativity or take responsibility for their own well-being, it entails a lack of acknowledgment of the emotional experiences that come with oppression. Not only does the everyday use of self-help discourse place unfair responsibility on the person suffering, as we have previously argued, but it also fails to recognize the emotions that arise from being discriminated against. These difficulties, where members of oppressed groups struggle to receive proper uptake of their emotional expressions because those are disregarded or misunderstood, are referred to as "affective injustice" by Whitney (2018). She argues that emotional expressions, such as those of anger or distress, are crucial for the healthy circulation of affective energy among individuals, facilitating reciprocal emotional responses. According to her, oppressive social practices often block this circulation by influencing how emotional expressions are interpreted and responded to. This blockage diminishes the impact and significance of these emotions, leaving them unacknowledged or misunderstood. Apart from being unjust, the lack of uptake of the emotions of the oppressed makes it more difficult for the privileged to empathize with the emotional expressions of those who are oppressed, or affectively marginalized, as Whitney puts it.

Building on Whitney's account, Gallegos introduces the concept of "affect-related testimonial injustice," which he defines as occurring when "a person or group is unfairly subjected to credibility deficits, silencing, smothering … and other practices and circumstances that undermine how others give uptake to their affective assessments of things and their views about which emotional responses may be warranted" (2021, 10). In the case of the person struggling with discrimination, the everyday use of self-help discourse risks unfairly dismissing that person's emotional reactions, and inadvertently encourages that person to self-silence. A reaction that illustrates this emotional dismissal of negative emotions is the one reported by Ehrenreich (2009, 55) of the motivational speaker J. P. Maroney claiming that "Negative People SUCK! That may sound harsh, but the fact is that negative people do suck. They suck the energy out of positive people like you and me … Avoid them at all costs."

Both Srinivasan's (2018) and Whitney's (2018) analyses allow us to illuminate the forms of affective injustice that might be caused by the everyday use of self-help discourse in interpersonal interactions. While these forms of affective injustice are rooted in broader oppressive structures, both demands for emotional regulation (as discussed by Srinivasan) and failures to reciprocate and recognize others' emotional expressions (as discussed by Whitney) manifest in people's interactions and relations to each other. As we have argued, both forms of affective injustice can be observed in the everyday use of self-help discourse in contexts of systemic oppression, placing an unjust

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psychological burden on the oppressed. Yet this interpersonal approach is not sufficient to capture the extent to which self-help discourse is likely to perpetuate affective injustice in oppressive contexts. We also need an analysis of how these issues play out on a societal and intergenerational scale.

5.2 Affective injustice at a social scale

The affective injustice of self-help discourse might particularly manifest in a broader social scale through widespread practices that influence how people experience and express certain emotions. A representative of this account is Stockdale (2023), who advocates for a structural approach toward affective injustice. According to Stockdale, the affective injustice in interpersonal dynamics between members of oppressed and privileged groups does not stem solely from specific encounters between them. Rather, it arises from the affective norms, practices, and relationships that mediate these interactions and which participate in social conditions of oppression. While Stockdale aims to understand all forms of affective injustice—including interpersonal ones—from this structural perspective, we use her analysis to highlight an additional dimension of affective injustice, one that operates at a social scale.

An example of a form of affective injustice with such societal scope is what Archer and Matheson (2022) have called *emotional imperialism*. This form of injustice involves "a powerful group imposing its culture's emotional norms and standards on another less powerful group whilst at the same time marking out the other culture's emotional norms and standards as deviant and inferior" (p. 771). Archer and Matheson's key example is the abuse that a Northern Irish football player, James McClean, faces every year for not wearing a red poppy in commemoration of the British Army, given his principled objection based on the Bloody Sunday Massacre of 1972 and its profound impact on Northern Irish identity. This constitutes emotional imperialism, in addition to abuse, because the powerful group (i.e., the British) imposes its emotional norms (i.e., wearing a red poppy to express admiration and respect for the British Army), onto a member of a less powerful group (i.e., the Northern Irish football player), overlooking and dismissing the emotional norms and experiences of that group.

Despite some differences, the case of self-help discourse can be analyzed as a form of emotional imperialism. The main difference between Archer and Matheson's case of emotional imperialism is that in the case of self-help discourse there is not a clear and identifiable dominant group, such as the British, imposing its norms in a clear and identifiable one, such as the Northern Irish. Yet the case can be built resorting to the concepts of *emotional regime* (Reddy 2001) or *feeling rules* (Hochschild 1979). An emotional regime refers to the set of social norms that shape the emotional life of a society. It dictates which emotions are considered appropriate in a given society, influencing both how individuals experience and express their emotions (Reddy 2001). For instance, in Archer and Matheson's case, the British are expected to admire their army. Emotional regimes include guidelines about rituals, emotional regulation, and feeling rules, among others. In turn, feeling rules are the social norms that dictate how people should manage and display their emotions in particular situations (Hochschild 1979). When part of an oppressive regime, feeling rules can reinforce power asymmetries by enforcing the regime's values

Given its underlying principles and assumptions, self-help discourse can be interpreted as a way to enforce the emotional regime of neoliberalism, particularly that of the upper class or of capitalists (see also Illouz 2008). In self-help discourse the *individual*

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management of emotions is put at the service of each person's productivity and success. As we argued in section 2, through self-help discourse we are encouraged to avoid negative thinking, to adopt a positive attitude and to make ourselves responsible for our circumstances to achieve well-being, or "success." As a consequence, some emotions are praised, such as gratitude, whereas some others are demonized, such as anger. Yet, as we have seen in the previous sections, the hidden principles of self-help assume a context devoid of oppression and structural discrimination in which people can individually resort to psychological resources to attain success, a context in line with neoliberalist models and values. As a consequence, the enforcement of these principles to those in conditions of oppression can be interpreted as the imposition of the emotional regime of the privileged or upper class onto the oppressed. It is from this angle that we can understand how practices of appreciation and gratitude can be weaponized to promote servility and passivity (e.g., Holroyd 2021, Ng et al. 2017); and the suppression of anger can hinder its potential to resist and fight against oppression (e.g., Cherry 2022; Jaggar 1989). Consequently, by encouraging a positive and grateful attitude and by discouraging protest, self-help discourse perpetuates a form of affective injustice, emotional imperialism, by reinforcing the emotional regime of neoliberalism, which aligns with a form of emotional regulation based on individualism, personal responsibility, and the pursuit of one's own success.

The aforementioned case of the woman attributing the excess of bad news to people's lack of positive thinking (see end of section 2) can be interpreted as a practice attempting to enforce an emotional regime. As Ehrenreich (2009, 57–58) reports it, according to this woman the world population "does not live life from the space of a positive attitude. In fact, I believe the majority of the population of this world lives from a place of pain, and that people who live from pain only know how to spread more negativity and pain." Apart from representing some of the principles of everyday self-help discourse, such as the power of *positive thinking*, or *eliminating negativity,* as well as some of its assumptions, such as *no excuses*, it also shows an endorsement of certain feeling rules about positive and negative emotions, and an attempt to endorse, and even impose them.

Apart from imposing an emotional regime, self-help discourse also perpetuates asymmetries in emotional labor. As Villa (2024) argues, under conditions of patriarchy social norms about emotional regulation can lead to further oppression of girls and women. For instance, the expectation that women suppress their anger or discomfort in response to misogynistic behavior—such as street harassment—to avoid disapproval, blame, shame, or marginalization perpetuates patriarchy by placing the responsibility onto the victims (Ciurria 2020; Manne 2017). According to Villa, these norms place a disproportionate burden on women and girls, who are expected to manage the emotional distress caused by misogynistic aggression in favor of the perpetrator. Beyond the emotional burden, this situation reinforces oppression by perpetuating the privilege of misogynistic men, Villa argues.

Self-help discourse can be interpreted as promoting certain feeling rules which, as part of the feeling rules of an oppressive regime, might themselves become oppressive. Indeed, Villa (2024) briefly mentions the culture of self-help as a popular mode of discourse dominated by rules about regulation strategies. In self-help discourse, not only do the oppressed have the feeling rules of the dominant group imposed on them, such as suppressing any anger toward systemic oppression, but they are also expected to accept a disproportionate amount of emotional labor. They are required to individually manage the emotional regulation required to cope with the emotional distress caused by oppression, *and* to not disturb the affective state of the privileged. For instance, women

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might be expected to suppress their frustration with gender-based discrimination in the workplace, as their expression of anger might be labeled as "too emotional" or "oversensitive" (e.g., Eagly et al. 2020; Jaggar 1989; Villarmea 2020). This allows their male colleagues to preserve their privileges, while putting more emotional burden on them. Consequently, apart from preventing any sort of social change, self-help discourse risks generating further asymmetries in emotional labor.

In conclusion, apart from interpersonal forms of affective injustice, the everyday use of self-help discourse under conditions of systemic oppression might cause subtle yet pervasive forms of affective injustice. The everyday use of self-help in conditions of oppression risks gradually imposing the feeling rules and values of the dominant emotional regime, at the expense of the already oppressed, who are burdened with further oppression and psychological costs.

6. The principles of self-help discourse: revisited

Having explored the harms that self-help discourse causes, we can now revisit its underlying principles and uncover what they entail when applied to contexts of systemic oppression. Despite the focus of self-help discourse on individual responsibility to change one's circumstances, the fact remains that some people *are* victims of circumstance, environment, and inequality. Not only does self-help discourse fail to recognize this, but its use in contexts of systemic oppression also leads to further harms, as we have argued. In what follows, we show how the underlying principles of self-help discourse contribute to these harms, particularly by reinforcing victim-blaming, and epistemic and affective forms of injustice.

First, as used in everyday self-help discourse, *the power of positive thinking* suggests that the power to improve people's well-being lies in their own thoughts, particularly in their positive attitude toward life events. Understood in this way, this principle reinforces victim-blaming because it entails that if victims of oppression do not "succeed" then they have not harnessed this inner power, which would be a personal deficit.[16] It also reinforces certain practices that prevent disenfranchised groups from occupying certain epistemic nodes in society, thus making these people prone to suffering testimonial smothering and hermeneutical injustice. Additionally, it reinforces affective injustice by placing an extra burden on the oppressed, who are now responsible for managing their emotions without fighting or resisting the oppression they suffer, in order to fit into an emotional regime that benefits their oppressors. An illustration of how everyday self-help discourse can translate into victim-blaming, testimonial smothering, hermeneutical injustice, unjust demands of emotional regulation, and imposition of certain feeling rules is, for instance, Barbara Ehrenreich's (2009) aforementioned experience of expressing her anger and frustration on a breast cancer support forum after her diagnosis, and being disciplined for failing to display the expected positive attitude.

Secondly, *eliminating negativity* is also interpreted as a personal deficit, that individuals are "attracting" negative events into their lives.[17] For instance, Byrne (2006,

[16]Most positive psychologists would not endorse the claim that failure to "succeed" reflects a personal deficit. Remember that our argument is not directed at positive psychology as an academic field, but rather at everyday self-help discourse, which draws inspiration from the popularized versions of positive psychology and related movements.

[17]In a rather sinister presentation of this victim-blaming, Byrne (2006, 28) suggests that those who suffer events in history where there is mass loss of life must be, according to the Law of Attraction, on the same

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129–30) has a whole section of *The secret* on health, including examples of people healing themselves from cancer (even cases deemed incurable) through eliminating negativity and choosing laughter instead. She uses these examples to argue that, when people are unwell, 'our thought was responsible' (Byrne 2006, 130). On the epistemic front, this is another key piece of the pernicious discourse that reinforces the practices that prevent certain people from occupying certain epistemic nodes. In the realm of affect, this principle entails dismissing the negative emotional experiences of the oppressed, and pressuring them to suppress their feelings in a way that reinforces and sustains their oppression.

Thirdly, the principle of *gratitude*, especially when combined with the principle of *eliminating negativity*, can lead to the view that complaining shows a failure to be grateful and to avoid negativity. Within self-help discourse, gratitude is often encouraged as a way of fostering positivity and well-being, while negativity is portrayed as counterproductive or even harmful. Taken together, these principles discourage people from challenging unjust social structures, out of fear of being perceived as "playing the victim." This is illustrated in the quote by Lisa Nicholls, CEO of Motivating the Masses and Motivating the Teen Spirit, reported by Byrne: "Recognize the beautiful and wonderful things around you, and bless and praise them. And on the other side, the things that aren't currently working the way you want them to work, don't spend your energy faulting or complaining" (2006, 151). As illustrated in the quote, complaining is demonized rather than being seen as a legitimate spotlight on social injustices. Unhappiness is framed as a lack of gratitude, and people should not express anger. Care must be taken not to be seen as one of those "negative people" which must be eliminated from each other's lives. Furthermore, when the principle of *gratitude* is coupled with the principle of *eliminating negativity* it can be weaponized in ways that promote passivity, and hinder any possibility of social change.

Fourthly, *self-knowledge for self-improvement* is really a means to judge oneself according to simplistic benchmarks set by psychological "experts"—although many of these would be better described as influencers than psychological experts. We try to discover our "true self" through self-help, but really, we are being told to improve and to conform to ideals of individualism. We defer to psychology to know what "healthy" and "normal" look like but if we do not achieve it then that is our own doing.

Fifthly, *individual choice and responsibility* become tools of oppression and victim-blaming, as it is thought that it is our individual efforts and self-discipline which dictate "success." Lack of success is the result of a lack of discipline, once again a personal deficit. This principle, far from its promise of liberation and autonomy, reinforces the norms of a hyper-individualized meritocracy which deflects from the public and political sphere, blaming the victim for their own marginalization.

Those engaging with self-help will be doing so in order to improve some aspect of their lives, often their physical or mental health. Many of these individuals will be the victims of the environment and unjust social structures. Yet by placing the sole responsibility for well-being on the individual's power of positive thinking, and minimizing the role of circumstances, we victim-blame. Moreover, the discourse built on the underlying principles and assumptions of self-help discourse enacts practices that

frequency as the event itself. This does not mean they have to be manifesting a tsunami, but if they believe they can be in the wrong place at the wrong time, that they are lacking in control and power, then these "thoughts of fear, separation and powerlessness, if persistent, can attract them to being in the wrong place at the wrong time."

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epistemically and affectively harm the most vulnerable, further marginalizing them by labeling them as deficient in some way, silencing any attempt to complain or change policy.

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