

Governing liberal subjects: Foucault, Psychology and self-help books

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ABSTRACT

There has been a remarkable increase in the availability and popularity of self-help books over recent decades, especially in liberal democratic countries like Australia. Several Foucauldian scholars have linked this trend to the increasing dominance of the ‘psy’ disciplines, which prescribe ever more sophisticated ways for bringing the ideals and aspirations of individuals into alignment with wider political objectives, especially the objectives of liberal governmentality (Rose 1989, 1996; Rimke 2000, Hazelden 2003). From the Foucauldian perspective, psy expertise is assumed to be an important textual authority in self-help literature, yet no studies have been found that specifically explore how and to what effects it is used. This paper investigate how psy expertise is deployed in self-help discourse and what this tells us about the relationship between self-help and liberal government via a critical discourse analysis of Martin E.P. Seligman’s top-selling self-help book *Authentic Happiness –Using the New Positive Psychology to Realise Your Potential for Lasting Fulfilment*. The analysis reveals the ways in which psy expertise confers truthfulness, technical authority and ethical legitimacy upon the self-help advice, and in so doing, appeals to the liberal goals of rationality, privacy and autonomy. Most significantly, the analysis suggests that psy expertise is used throughout the text to construct readers as free and autonomous subjects, while simultaneously constraining how individuality can be expressed. This supports the Foucauldian perspective that self-help advice is a means for “governing citizens” (Rimke 2000). Understanding how readers use, interpret and act upon self-help advice, however, cannot be gained from discourse analysis alone. To further understand the relationship between self-help and liberal government, therefore, research is needed into the ways readers interact with self-help discourses.

Introduction

There has been a remarkable increase in the availability and popularity of self-help literature over recent decades, especially in liberal democratic countries like Australia. Within social science, several excellent studies have examined the political drivers of self-help culture (see McGee 2005, MosKowitz 2001, Giddens 1991, Lasch 1975), but few have specifically examined the relationship between self-help and liberal government. Those that have examined this relationship have successfully employed a Foucauldian approach to governmentality to analyse self-help literature as a means for governing citizens according to distinctly liberal political goals (Rimke 2003, Hazelden 2000). They draw on Nikolas Rose’s work (1989, 1990) to argue that self-help literature is the logical extension of a broader cultural trend towards the ‘psy’ disciplines (psychology, psychotherapy, psychiatry), which prescribe ever more sophisticated ways for bringing the ideals and aspirations of individuals into alignment with wider political objectives such as consumption, profitability, efficiency, and social order.

From the Foucauldian perspective, psy expertise is assumed to be an important textual authority in self-help literature, yet no studies have been found that specifically

explore how and to what effects it is used. This paper investigates how psy expertise is deployed in self-help discourse and what this tells us about the relationship between self-help and liberal government via a critical discourse analysis of Martin E.P. Seligman's top-selling self-help book *Authentic Happiness – Using the New Positive Psychology to Realise your Potential for Lasting Fulfilment*. The analysis supports the Foucauldian perspective that self-help literature can be viewed as a means for governing subjects in an advanced liberal way, while pointing out the limitations of discourse analysis for understanding the relationship between self-help readers and liberal technologies of government.

This will be done in four main parts. First, I define what I mean by self-help literature and provide an overview of its increasing dominance in Australia over the last forty years. Second, I outline Nikolas Rose's Foucauldian analysis of the relationship between psy expertise and technologies of government. Third, I provide a critical discourse analysis of Martin Seligman's self-help. Finally, I discuss the findings of the discourse analysis with regard to the governmentality literature to explore the relationship between self-help culture and liberal government.

My main argument is that a discourse analysis of *Authentic Happiness* reveals the ways in which psy expertise is arranged in the text to confer truthfulness, technical authority and ethical legitimacy upon the self-help advice. In so doing, the text appeals to and reinforces the liberal goals of rationality, privacy and autonomy, revealing a discursive relationship between the self-help advice in Seligman's book and contemporary ways of governing populations in liberal democracies. Most significantly, the analysis reveals how psy expertise is arranged to construct readers as free and autonomous subjects, while simultaneously constraining how individuality can be expressed. This supports the Foucauldian view that self-help advice is a technique for "governing citizens". This perspective, however, assumes an understanding of how readers use and interpret texts that cannot be gained from discourse analysis alone. Further research is therefore needed into the ways readers interact with self-help discourse.

The rise of the self-help book in liberal democracies

Although the term 'self-help' was first used in legal practice in the eighteenth century (Salerno 2005, 23), its meaning has shifted numerous times since then. In her analysis of self-help literature in the United States, Micki McGee argues that since the 1970s self-help has most commonly referred to the largely individual undertaking of pursuing self-improvement or self-fulfilment (2005, 19). While the concept of self-help as self-improvement existed earlier than this, as evidenced by such classics as Benjamin Franklin's *Poor Richard's Almanac* (1732) and Jean-Jacques Rousseau's *Confessions* (1783), the term itself was not used in this sense until much later (Salerno 2005, 25). Even if we view Rousseau and Franklin as the pioneers of self-help, however, McGee argues that from the 1970s onwards the emphasis of self-help changed quite dramatically. The original self-made men aimed to achieve success in largely external and measurable ways, such as the accumulation of wealth, status and power. In contrast, contemporary self-help is focused on the "more elusive and variable state of self-fulfilment" (McGee 2005, 19). Others have also commented on this new emphasis in the meaning of self-help, though they have suggested the change occurred earlier, more like the mid-twentieth century than the 1970s (Salerno 2005, Rieff 1966). Importantly, the timing for the emergence of contemporary forms of self-help roughly corresponds with the emergence of what several Foucauldian scholars have termed "advanced liberal government", as will be discussed below (Rose 1999, Dean, 1996, Dean & Hindess 1999).

Nowadays, then, self-help refers to the individual *practice* of pursuing self-improvement or self-fulfilment, and the *discourses* that seek to guide individuals in this pursuit. With regard to discourses, self-help is usefully understood as a specific genre defined by the author's intentions, how the text is marketed, and stylistic characteristics (such as, "to do lists", diary-writing techniques, "how to" conventions, and conversational expression). Understanding self-help discourses as a *genre* rather than in terms of readers' *uses* of texts rules out publications that may be used for self-help purposes but do not meet the genre's characteristics, such as fiction, poetry, autobiography, philosophy, history and social science (McGee 2005, 193). Based on this broad definition, the topics covered by self-help discourses are vast and expanding. There are self-help texts that offer advice for self-improvement in areas as diverse as health, mental health, interpersonal relationships, employment, family matters, diet and fitness, social etiquette, compulsive behaviours, addictions, sexual intimacy, self-esteem and business ethics (McGee 2005, 200). Moreover, self-help discourses are produced in a plethora of media, including books, audio tapes, CDs, DVDs, newspaper articles, magazine columns, websites, radio programs, TV shows and even government policy.

The most dominant type of self-help discourse is arguably the self-help book, especially in liberal democratic countries. Not only are more and more of them available, they are also increasingly popular. Recent research undertaken in the USA reports that between 1972 and 2000 the number of self-help books available in the USA more than doubled (McGee 2005, 11-12). In dollar terms, the United State's self-help industry is worth an estimated US\$2.48 billion per year (McGee 2005, 11). Moreover, somewhere between one-third and one half of all Americans have purchased at least one self-help book in their lives. Preliminary findings of similar research into Australia's self-help book industry indicate that the American trend is mirrored here. For instance, in 1975 self-help books represented less than one percent (0.78) of the total number of new non-fiction books available on the Australian market. By 2005, 4.78 percent of all non-fiction books released on the Australian market could be classified as self-help¹. Additionally, an analysis of Australian best-seller lists published on a monthly basis by the industry journal *Australian Bookseller and Publisher* reveal that self-help books have become increasingly popular over recent decades. For instance, in 1965 no self-help books made it onto the monthly lists, whereas by 1999, 26 self-help titles appeared on the best-seller lists

¹ These figures are based on my analysis of Bowker's *Global Books in Print* database. Following Whelan's 2004 study of American self-help literature, for every year from 1965 to 2005 I searched the database for all books that were: (a) released on the Australian market (regardless of country of publication); and (b) listed in relevant BIC subject categories. BIC codes are the publishing industry's most standardised and sophisticated genre categories for English language publications. Whelan also used BIC codes in her study. The BIC codes I searched for included: Self-Help and Personal Development (VS); Personal Finance (VSB); Advice on Careers and Achieving Success (VSC); Popular Psychology (VSP); Assertiveness, Motivation and Self-esteem (VSPM); Memory Improvement and Thinking Techniques (VSPM); Self-sufficiency (VSZ); Popular Medicine and Health (VFD); Coping with Personal Problems (VFJ); Coping with Illness (VFJB); Coping with Drug and Alcohol Abuse (VFJK); Coping with Anxiety and Phobias (VFJP); Coping with stress (VFJS); Coping with Death and Bereavement (VFJX); Diets and dieting (VFMD); Giving up Smoking (VFL); Exercise and Workout Books (VFMG); Family and Relationships (VFV); Sex and Sexuality, Sex Manuals (VFVC); Dating, Relationships, Living Together and Marriage (VFVG); Advice on Parenting (VFX); Pregnancy, Birth and Baby Care (VFXB); Child Care and Upbringing (VFXC); and Teenagers: Advice for Parents (VFXC1).

throughout the year². Again, the timing of this increase in the availability and popularity of self-help books in America and Australia points towards some relationship between self-help and advanced liberal government.

One sub-genre within the broader self-help umbrella is self-help books on mental wellbeing, that is, books which provide advice about overcoming depression, anxiety, stress or unhappiness and how to live a happier, more fulfilling life. Martin Seligman's book falls within this category. Numerous books within this sub-genre have appeared on Australia's best-seller lists in recent years³, demonstrating the broad audience for this kind of advice. Most research into such books, however, has been within the biomedical and psychological disciplines, with a focus on their treatment effectiveness (see, for example, Norcross 2006; Richardson and Richards 2006; Jorm & Christensen et. al. 2002). This paper provides a Foucauldian analysis of how psy expertise is arranged in self-help books on mental wellbeing, via a case study of Martin Seligman's *Authentic Happiness*. The objective is neither to reveal a unified or coherent self-help rationality, nor to reveal the falsity or otherwise of the self-help advice. Operating within the Foucauldian framework, my aim is to understand how and to what effect the discourse constructs truth.

Psychological expertise as a technique of advanced liberal government

Before considering Seligman's book, however, it is important to briefly summarise Rose's Foucauldian analysis of psychological expertise. Rose's work needs to be situated within the emerging field of governmentality studies that draws on the work of Michel Foucault. Foucault suggests that government should not be exclusively analysed with reference to state institutions but instead understood in terms of its objectives, and ultimately its practices. In general terms, Foucault understood government as "the 'conduct of conduct': that is to say, a form of activity aiming to shape, guide or affect the conduct of some person or persons" (Gordon 1991, 2). Therefore, governmentality studies focus on government in this broad sense, rather than only studying *the* government in an institutional sense (Dean and Hindess 1998, 2-3).

Government as the conduct of conduct, Foucault suggests, involves the use of certain "technologies". By technologies, Foucault means the characteristic ways in which practices are organised to produce certain outcomes and objectives. He identified two

² The BIC codes listed above were also used to determine which books appearing on best-seller lists could be classified as 'self-help'.

³ There is not one specific BIC code for what I have termed 'self-help books on mental wellbeing'. Instead, I have drawn on several of the BIC codes and book descriptions to determine which books fall into this sub-genre. Self-help books on mental wellbeing that have appeared on Australia's best-seller lists between 1965 and 1999 are listed here, by the year they first appeared on the list: *The Power of Positive Thinking* by Norman Vincent Peal (1977), *Passages – Predictable Crises of Adult Life* by Gail Sheedy (1978); *Pulling Your Own Strings* by Wayne W Dyer (1979); *Secrets of the Inner Self* by David A Phillips (1981); *You and Stress* by Bob Montgomery (1984); *Dreams and the Search for Meaning* by Peter O'Connor (1986); *When am I going to be happy?* by Penelope Russianoff (1989); *Being Happy!* by Andrew Matthews (1989); *Feeling Good* by David Burns (1989); *You'll See It When You Believe It* by Wayne W Dyer (1989); *Handbook for the Positive Revolution* by Edward De Bono (1991); *Learned Optimism* by Martin Seligman (1992); *Life's Little Instruction Book* by H Jackson Brown (1992); *Life's Little Instruction Book, Volume Two* by H Jackson Brown (1993); *Riches Within – The Intimacy and Solitude Self-Therapy Book* by Stephanie Dowrick (1993); *Instant calm: Over 100 Successful Techniques for Relaxing Mind and Body* by Paul Wilson (1995); *Edward De Bono's Mind Pack* by Edward De Bono (1996); *The Little Book of Calm* by Paul Wilson (1996); *Follow Your Heart: Finding Purpose in Your Life and Work* by Andrew Matthews (1997); *Forgiveness and Other Acts of Love* by Stephanie Dowrick (1997); *An Authentic Life: Finding Meaning and Spirituality in Everyday Life* by Caroline Jones (1998).

major types of technology relevant to government: “technologies of power” and “technologies of the self” (Foucault 1994, 225). The first, technologies of power, are used to “determine the conduct of individuals and submit them to certain ends or domination” (Foucault 1994, 225). For example, penal institutions employ various technologies of power to control the behaviour of prisoners, such as structuring space and time, hierarchical observation and normalising judgements (Rose 1996, 26). The second, technologies of the self, “permit individuals to effect by their own means, or with the help of others, a certain number of operations on their own bodies and souls, thoughts, conduct, and way of being, so as to transform themselves in order to attain a certain state of happiness, purity, wisdom, perfection or immortality” (Foucault 1994, 225). For example, the Christian practice of confession is a technology of the self, which aims to make the individual more pure through the public renunciation of impure thoughts (Foucault 1988, 49). For Foucault, the relationship between technologies of power and technologies of the self “combine in the process of government” (1994, 225). We might therefore speak of technologies of government, which include both technologies of power (government by others) and technologies of the self (self-government).

Technologies of government are very much situated within the context of prevailing political rationalities, and in contemporary Australia, liberalism is arguably the most pervasive of these (Dean and Hindess 1998, 9). Foucault sees liberalism not as a theory or an ideology, but rather as a practice; “a ‘way of doing things’ oriented toward objectives and regulating itself by means of a sustained reflection” (1994, 73-4). The central objective of liberalism, Foucault suggests, is to constantly question the legitimacy of government, based on the principle that “one always governs too much – or, at any rate, one always must suspect that one governs too much” (Foucault 1994, 74). From this perspective, liberalism can be understood as both a *critique of government* and a particular *style of government*. This is because of the liberal notion of ‘society’. Dean argues that by inventing ‘society’ as a real and naturally existing space in which issues and problems are generated and debated, liberalism is able to critique government on the basis that it may be “governing too much”, thereby infringing on the natural processes of society (1999,124). At the same time, the concept of society allows liberalism to set itself up as an ideal style of ‘limited government’ (Dean 1999, 124).

Over the last forty to fifty years, however, the concept of society has been somewhat displaced in liberal democratic countries by the new concept of the ‘self-governing individual’. This self-governing individual is situated within a new style of rule that Dean (1999, 165), following Rose (1996, 165), terms “advanced liberal government”. Importantly, this style of governing is not reducible to a particular political philosophy such as neoliberalism or welfarism, but rather is characterised by its type of practices. The particular practices of advanced liberal government involve “a plethora of indirect mechanisms that can translate the goals of political, social, and economic authorities into the choices and commitments of individuals” (Rose 1996, 165). That is to say, advanced liberal government is a way of governing “at a distance” via the autonomy of individuals (Rose 1996, 165).

This is where psy expertise enters the story. Rose (1989, 1996) argues that in seeking to govern at a distance via the autonomy of ‘free subjects’, those governing need detailed knowledge of the individuals to be governed. As such, the psy disciplines emerged as key technologies of liberal government during the late 19th / early 20th century, and have become increasingly important during the post war years. The value of psy disciplines is that they provide various “human technologies” for acting upon and producing certain outcomes in terms of human conduct, such as “reform, efficiency,

education, cure, or virtue” (Rose 1996, 88). In this sense, psy expertise is not intended to crush or dehumanise personhood, but rather to produce it. The human technologies provided by psy expertise, Rose argues, have come to underpin and ultimately transform a range of diverse practices for dealing with persons that were previously legitimised in other ways, including via tradition, moral codes or rules of thumb (88).

Rose identifies four main human technologies associated with psy expertise, which are each concerned with calculating human subjectivity in some way. These four technologies can be loosely described as: (1) calculating subjectivities (for example, via psychological tests); (2) measuring subjectivities (for example, via opinion polls or attitude surveys); (3) establishing ethical authority (for example, through appeals to expert knowledge), and (4) technologies of the self (for example, the practice of confession). I will now draw on these categories to investigate how psychological expertise is arranged in Martin Seligman’s best-selling self-help book, *Authentic Happiness*.

Human technologies in *Authentic Happiness*

Martin E.P. Seligman is a Professor of Psychology at the University of Pennsylvania. He is also the Director of the Positive Psychology Network, which is a new branch of psychology self-consciously focused on mental health as opposed to mental illness. Seligman himself is seen as the pioneer of Positive Psychology. He is also the former president of the American Psychological Association, the biggest professional organisation for psychologists in America. He has published numerous self-help books on mental-wellbeing, including his best selling book *Learned Optimism*, first published in 1992. In 2002, he published another top-selling self-help book, entitled *Authentic Happiness – Using the New Positive Psychology to realise your potential for Lasting Fulfilment*.

I conducted a critical discourse analysis of *Authentic Happiness*, focused on how and to what effect psy expertise is arranged in the text. Four main themes emerged from the analysis, which reflect and support Rose’s analysis of psy expertise as a type of governmentality characterised by certain human technologies. In particular, the discourse analysis revealed how four main ‘human technologies’ are deployed in *Authentic Happiness* in ways that construct the self-help advice as truthful, technically authoritative and ethically legitimate. I will now discuss each technology in turn, to develop my argument that self-help books disseminate psychological expertise to a huge audience, and in so doing, can be linked to liberal governmentality.

1. Calculating subjectivities via psychological tests

The first human technology employed in *Authentic Happiness* concerns the ways in which readers became calculable via the use of psychological tests. Seligman repeatedly uses psychological tests as a technique for categorising and calculating the individual’s subjectivity. In total, Seligman asks readers to complete 12 psychological tests. In fact, all but three of the 14 chapters include at least one test. Readers can complete the tests in the book, or on-line by logging onto the *Authentic Happiness* website. Each of the tests are concerned with assessing some aspect of the reader’s happiness and wellbeing, or that of their partner or child. For instance, Chapter Six begins with the “Test Your Own Optimism” scale, which assesses the reader’s positive emotions about the future, while Chapter Twelve contains the “Children’s Strengths Survey”, for identifying and ranking the strengths of the reader’s child.

The significance of these psychological tests is that they provide an account of

human experience grounded in a claim to objective knowledge and scientific techniques. In so doing, the tests provide the reader with knowledge about himself or herself that is technically authoritative. From the reader's perspective, it might be argued, this helps to make the advice not only authoritative, but also legitimate. Seligman is not arbitrarily telling the individual that they are depressed, lazy or dysfunctional, he's using "unbiased" and "proven" scientific tests to calculate their emotions. For example, at one point he writes:

"Before I continue the story...and run the risk of biasing your test results, I want you first to take the most reliable test of styles of loving and being loved. For those of you with Internet access, please go to www.authentichappiness.com and take the ten-minute Close Relationships Questionnaire....It would also be useful to ask your romantic partner, if you have one, to take it as well. This site will give you detailed and immediate feedback about your styles of loving.

The repeated use of psychological tests in *Authentic Happiness*, then, gives scientific and technical authority to Seligman's advice, which has the effect of establishing Seligman's expertise as truthful, authoritative and legitimate.

2. *Measuring subjectivities against opinion poll and survey data*

The second technology used in Seligman's book is very closely linked to the first. It concerns how the reader is encouraged to measure and judge his or her own behaviour, as determined through the psychological tests contained in the book, against what is normal or average, as determined through opinion polls or survey data. Throughout the book, Seligman describes the findings of numerous opinion polls, attitude surveys and comparative studies that relate to some aspect of mental wellbeing or happiness. Most of these descriptions follow immediately after the passages where Seligman asks reader to complete a psychological test. There are literally dozens of examples, but here's one:

"Tens of thousands of individuals across several cultures have taken this [Satisfaction with Life] test. Here are some representative norms: Among older American adults, men score 28 on average and women score 26. The average North American college student scores between 23 and 25; eastern European and Chinese students on average score between 16 and 19. Male prison inmates score about 12 on average, as do hospital inpatients. Psychological outpatients score between 14 and 18 on average, and abused women and elderly caregivers (both surprisingly) score about 21 on average" (2002, 63).

In this example, Seligman is providing the reader with information about normal or average levels of satisfaction amongst people of a particular social demographic, so that the reader can measure, assess and judge whether their own feelings or behaviours are above or below average. At other points throughout the book, he also encourages readers to visit the *Authentic Happiness* website to view detailed information about where they stand in relation to people with similar demographic profiles, as determined through opinion poll and survey data.

This technology is significant because it activates what Rose, following Foucault, has described as normalising or objectifying judgements (1996, 26). Just as schools use the results of social research to formulate education policies for young

children, the reader's of *Authentic Happiness* can turn the normalising gaze onto him or herself to assess whether their mental wellbeing is above or below average. Where the reader is found to be below average, the implication is that he or she must work hard to improve by following the advice contained in the book. The use of opinion poll and survey data throughout the book serves a similar purpose to the psychological tests by giving scientific authority to Seligman's advice. Seligman is not randomly suggesting that readers can be happier; rather he's drawing on scientifically rigorous research that shows what it means to be abnormally unhappy or depressed. In this way, the individual's normalising judgement of him or herself, and his/her resolve to change is given technical authority, and therefore made legitimate in the reader's eyes.

3. *Establishing ethical authority*

The third technology used in *Authentic happiness* relates to the way Seligman's advice is rendered not only technically authoritative and legitimate, but also ethical. Seligman offers his readers advice on a range of very intimate issues, including personal relationships, raising children, and love. When offering such advice, he repeatedly presents himself as the neutral bearer of objective knowledge. He does not want to tell the reader what to do; he just wants to present the 'facts' as determined through scientific research, and let them make up their own minds about what is best for them. There are numerous examples of this technology throughout the book. For instance, he writes:

"It is not the job of Positive Psychology to tell you that you should be optimistic, or spiritual, or kind or good-humoured; it is rather to describe the consequences of these traits (for example, that being optimistic brings about less depression, better physical health, and higher achievement, at a cost perhaps of less realism). What you do with the information depends on your own values and goals" (129).

In this example, Seligman establishes ethical authority by encouraging readers to use his advice to determine what is best for them, and most in keeping with their personal values.

Importantly, he also appeals to what is best for the reader's friends, family or career to give the advice ethical authority. For instance, in Chapter Three entitled "Why Bother to Be Happy?", Seligman writes:

"[F]eeling positive emotion is important, not just because it is pleasant in its own right, but because it causes much better commerce in the world. Developing more positive emotion in our lives will build friendship, love, better physical health, and greater achievement" (43).

The significance of this technique is that it allows Seligman to present his advice as ethical, insofar as it is based on the best interests of the reader, or the best interests of the reader's partner, children, friends, career or society in general. In this sense, Seligman's approach mirrors the way psychological expertise offers ethical legitimacy to those who wield power in the public sphere - such as the social worker, the prison officer or the teacher. In these public settings, authority is exercised on the basis of a calculable knowledge of what is best for the individuals or group to be governed (Rose 1996, 91-2).

Self-help books such as Seligman's *Authentic Happiness* extend psychology's capacity to "ethicalise" authority into the private sphere, influencing our most intimate

practices and relationships. Part III of *Authentic Happiness* has chapters entitled “Work and Personal Satisfaction,” “Love,” “Raising Children,” and “Meaning and Purpose”. The advice Seligman offers for readers in these private spheres is normalised in line with psy expertise, which is presented as objective and neutral. This allows Seligman to offer advice without breaching the individual’s autonomy, and to present the advice as something that is in the reader’s best interests. So the importance of this third technology is that it renders Seligman’s advice not only technically authoritative and legitimate, but also ethical.

4. *Technologies of the self*

Finally, in *Authentic Happiness* Seligman promotes various “technologies of the self”, as a means for directly governing the individual’s conduct. By technologies of the self, I mean all the ways in which individuals “seek to improve themselves and their lives and the aspirations and the norms that guide them” (Rose 1999, 95). Seligman promotes numerous technologies of the self, including diary-writing techniques, reflection and mediation exercises, confessing to a friend or family member, and relationship role-playing. Here’s one example:

“If you scored in the lower half of either the gratitude or the life satisfaction test, [this] exercise is for you. Set aside five free minutes each night for the next two weeks, preferably right before brushing your teeth for bed. Prepare a pad with one page for each of the next fourteen days. The first night, take the Satisfaction with Life Scale (page 63) and the General Happiness Scale (page 46) once again and score them. Then think back over the previous twenty-four hours and write down, on separate lines, up to five things in your life you are grateful or thankful for. Common examples include “waking up this morning,” “the generosity of friends,” “God for giving me determination,” “wonderful parents,” “robust good health,” and “the Rolling Stones” (or some other artistic inspiration). Repeat the Life Satisfaction and General Happiness Scales on the final night, two weeks after you start, and compare your scores to the first night’s scores. If this worked for you, incorporate it into your nightly routine” (75).

In this example, psy expertise is grafted onto the individual’s ethical practices, so that even the most personal practices such as diary writing and what one does immediately before going to sleep becomes steeped in psychology. Seligman appeals to the reader to monitor and reflect upon their own thoughts and behaviours, and to take steps to bring these thoughts and behaviours into line with proscribed virtues, as determined through psy expertise.

Authentic Happiness also contains several examples of what Rose, drawing on Foucault, has described as ‘the confessional’ technology of the self. Rose describes the confessional technique as the “truthful rendering into speech of who one is and what one does” (Rose 1996, 96). Where previously theological or moral regimes inculcated the confessional, now psychological expertise governs almost all practices where the conduct of personal life is at stake, such as in the doctor’s surgery, therapy, group counselling, and the radio phone-in. Seligman’s book also contains examples of this technique, whereby readers are encouraged to render into speech their thoughts and feelings about a particular person or event. Here’s one example:

“Select one important person from your past who has made a major positive difference in your life and to whom you have never fully expressed your thanks. (Do

not confound this selection with new-found romantic love, or with the possibility of a future gain.) Write a testimonial just long enough to cover one laminated page. Take your time composing this; my students and I found ourselves taking several weeks, composing on buses and as we feel asleep at night. Invite that person to your home, or travel to that person's home. It is important you do this face to face, not just in writing or on the phone. Do not tell the person the purpose of the visit in advance; a simple "I just want to see you" will suffice. Wine and cheese do not matter, but bring a laminated version of your testimonial with you as a gift/. When all settles down, read your testimonial aloud slowly, with expression, and with eye contact. Then let the other person react unhurriedly. Reminisce together about the concrete events that make this person so important to you. (If you are so moved, please do send me a copy at Seligman@psych.upenn.edu) (74).

The significance of this type of confessional technique is that it means as individuals, we "come to think, judge, console, and reform ourselves according to psychological norms of truth" (Rose 1996, 96). In this sense, the technologies of the self in *Authentic Happiness* are potentially powerful tools for governing the way the reader thinks about, and ultimately conducts, him or herself.

Discussion – self-help as a technique of liberal government?

But what does the use of all of these 'human technologies' in *Authentic Happiness* mean, and what can it tell us about the relationship between self-help and liberal governmentality? Building on the analysis above, Martin Seligman's self-help book might be viewed as a technique of advanced liberal government for three reasons. First, the technologies used in *Authentic Happiness* are grounded in a claim to scientific objectivity. This is characteristic of liberal government more generally, because the exercise of power in liberal democracies is legitimised by rationality, not by tradition, sovereign status or reason of state (Foucault 1991). In particular, advanced liberal government finds legitimacy by appealing to reason and rationality to guard against governing too much. Seligman's self-help book uses psychological tests and opinion poll data to provide an account of mental wellbeing that is legitimated by scientific and technical knowledge. Seligman is not trying to tell the reader what to do; he is simply giving him/her the objective facts so that he/she can make an informed decision about what to do. In this way, Seligman's advice can be read as a technique of liberal government as his expert authority over the reader is justified through appeals to reason, rationality and objectivity.

Second, if we understand liberalism as a critique of government animated by the suspicion that one is always governing too much, it follows that liberal government depends on the creation of 'private' spaces such as the family, the market, or the organisation. These private spaces are important to liberalism because they define what exists beyond the formal powers of the state – in other words, they define what is to be protected from "too much government". However, these private spaces also present a problem for liberal government, namely: how to ensure that subjects act virtuously in the private sphere, so as not to threaten the freedom and autonomy of other individuals (Rose 1996, 99-100). Self-help books employ techniques of advanced liberal government by providing an avenue into the individual's private sphere – an avenue which, importantly, is seen as not only legitimate, but also ethical. For instance, in *Authentic Happiness*, Seligman gives his advice ethical authority by presenting his suggestions as not only rational and unbiased, but also as being in the best interests of the readers. In this way, he establishes ethical authority in the private sphere to avoid running the risk of over-

government.

Third, governing in the advanced liberal style involves balancing two competing objectives: ensuring public safety and social order, while simultaneously protecting individual autonomy. Rose has argued that psy expertise provides technologies for the production and regulation of individuals who are both autonomous and competent social beings, and these technologies are manifest in Seligman's self-help book. For instance, the diary writing technique just discussed helps construct readers as autonomous individuals, while at the same time limiting the ways of describing or expressing individuality in line with psychological norms of behaviour. In this way, self-help books such as Seligman's *Authentic Happiness* provide a means for reconciling the need for individuals to conduct themselves as both "subjects of freedom and subjects of society" (Rose 1996, 98).

By considering how self-help books such as *Authentic Happiness* appeal to and reinforce liberal notions of rationality, privacy and autonomy, such books can be viewed as potentially powerful techniques for governing subjects in liberal democracies. Seligman's book uses psychological expertise to construct the reader as autonomous and capable, while simultaneously limiting the ways for expressing individuality to accord with psychological norms of behaviour. In so doing, Seligman's self-help advice can be seen as a means for governing 'at a distance' in the advanced liberal way. This is not to say, however, that Martin Seligman consciously or intentionally tried to write a piece of political propaganda. The analysis presented here does not suggest that Martin Seligman *personally* wants to govern our souls. Nonetheless, a Foucauldian analysis of Seligman's book reveals how the advice given in *Authentic Happiness* is intimately connected with advanced liberal techniques of government. Such an analysis is useful for understanding the relationship between self-help and liberal government as it reveals how such books potentially govern the thoughts, feelings and behaviours of readers.

A critical discourse analysis of *Authentic Happiness*, however, can only take us part way in understanding the relationship between self-help and liberal government. This is because the analysis presented here has not explored the extent to which self-help advice translates into the actions and conduct of readers. Determining this is important for understanding the relationship between self-help and liberal government if, following Foucault, we understand government as conduct of conduct. Some Foucauldian scholars might disagree, arguing that the knowledge produced in discourse necessarily "forms the basis of individual and collective action" (see, for example, Jager 2001, 38). From this perspective, one might automatically assume that self-help discourse governs the reader's thoughts, feelings and behaviours. There are reasons to question, however, the extent to which self-help discourse structures the actions of readers.

First and foremost, one of the few studies conducted on the readership of self-help books found that readers engaged with such discourses "ambivalently", adopting the advice given in the books "loosely, tentatively, sometimes interchangeably, without enduring conviction" (Lichterman, year ? 422-6). Other studies of popular reading make similar points about the limited influence of texts on readers' actions and behaviours (see Radway 1984, Frazer, 1987). We cannot assume, therefore, that reader's of *Authentic Happiness* passively appropriate the advice given in Seligman's book. To further understand the relationship between self-help and liberal government, further research is needed into the ways in which readers read such texts, with a particular focus on their readings of expert authority.

Conclusion

This paper has focused on how self-help books such as *Authentic Happiness* use psychological expertise to construct the self-help advice as truthful, authoritative and ethical. By considering the liberal notions of rationality, privacy and autonomy, it has been argued that the use of psy expertise in *Authentic Happiness* can be viewed as a technique of liberal government. This is because psy expertise is deployed to construct the reader as free and autonomous, while simultaneously limiting the conditions of individuality in line with psychological norms of behaviour. To fully understand the relationship between self-help and liberal government, however, further analysis is needed that explores how readers of self-help discourse appropriate, interpret and act upon the models of subjectivity produced in self-help discourse.

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