



# Self-help and the surfacing of identity: Producing the Third Culture Kid



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## ABSTRACT

In this paper, I argue for a need to expand our understanding of the role that self-help plays in the constitution of identities. Using the example of the Third Culture Kid (TCK) industry, I argue that self-help acts as a space of biopower through its role in managing the emotional experience of having been globally mobile as a child. To do this, the paper looks at how the TCK, as a subject, is surfaced as *comfort* in relation to the ascribed *grief* and *insecurity* of identity that is associated with childhood global mobility. Data are derived from a multi-sited ethnography, including a narrative analysis of TCK literature, reader discussions, participant observation at a TCK event and an online survey. The argument contributes to scholarly critiques of self-help by examining processes of production and consumption of TCK subjectivity enacted through the TCK industry. Thereby, the paper contends that in researching self-help we need a wider understanding of its production and consumption, how people are persuaded to use it, and how they respond to ideas presented within it.

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## 1. Introduction

This paper argues that we need to think more widely about how self-help plays a role in the constitution of identities. Self-help acts as guidance towards self-improvement in different forms, from books to websites to support groups; it is an industry that was worth an estimated \$11 billion in the US in 2013 (Groskopf, 2013). Yet, in spite of this, self-help has received scant attention within the social sciences. The few exceptions include Rimke (2000) on the neoliberal self, Davidson (2001) on agoraphobic self-help groups, Hazleden (2003) on relationship manuals, McGee (2005) on self-invention for the labour market, Sothorn (2007) on disabled sex and organ transfer (Sothorn and Dickinson, 2011).

This existing work on self-help illustrates how it works within Foucauldian understandings of governmentality to produce a normalised self or subject. The management of the self is the focus of analysis, where 'a very particular type of citizen capable of living a particular type of public life is produced by self-help' (Hazleden, 2003, p. 425; emphasis in original). The central concern of this work is to explore how the self is produced as part of wider discourses of power, looking in particular at the role that neoliberal governance plays within this, recognising that neoliberalism has

'new requirements of self-responsibility by individual subjects' (Ong, 2007, p. 4). Through this paper, I extend this argument in two ways. First, I argue that self-help works by governing subjectivity through managing emotions—a form of biopower. Second, I argue that we need a wider understanding of the consumption of self-help: how are people persuaded to use self-help? How do they respond to the ideas presented within it?

To do so, the paper uses a case study of the Third Culture Kid (TCK) industry. TCK is a name given to a child (or adult as ATCK) who has spent a 'significant part of his or her developmental years outside the parent's culture' (Pollock and Van Reken, 2009, p. 13). Third culture refers to an international culture that is placeless. The first culture is the parent's culture; the second is the culture of the country the child is living in; and the third is described as an 'interstitial' culture, a 'culture between cultures' (Pollock and Van Reken, 2009, p. 14). This understanding of personal cultural identity that the TCK industry produces is clearly simplistic, particularly in terms of thinking about contemporary global mobility patterns and societies. This is, in part, due to the fact that the term TCK has a popular usage, but has not been the subject of significant academic research, as Fechter and Korpela (2016, p. 423) argue: 'although the term seems to work as a descriptive label and it is popular outside of academia, it runs into trouble when used analytically because, among others, of the homogenizing, American-centric approach on which it was developed and its very essentializing view of cultures.'

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However, my interest in this paper is how the TCK industry acts as a self-help industry, and therefore the problematic nature of this term will not be the focus of study. Instead, my concern is why the term TCK has significant purchase amongst people who have been globally mobile as children, or why it is 'popular.' I argue that the experience of being globally mobile as a child is seen to evoke a particular response: 'there is something about growing up in and among cultures that creates an emotional experience' (Pollock and Van Reken, 2009, p. 18). The TCK industry acts as the manager of this emotional experience, producing, disseminating and selling knowledge on the best practices of helping people who have been globally mobile as children. The paper will focus on the ways in which grief and insecurity are produced as the normal response to having been globally mobile as a child by the TCK industry, framed as a condition of liminality. This liminality, as the paper will show, is a form of insecurity of being-in-the-world, or ontological insecurity. The TCK industry, then, produces a narrative through which people who have had a globally mobile childhood 'discover' their TCK self and, in doing so, find a comfort in belonging.

The paper is structured as follows. The next section outlines theorisations of the subject, arguing that self-help acts as a form of the psy-disciplines, directing the individual through claiming authority on knowing self-help. Section 3 provides a methodological note. Section 4 explores the TCK industry, examining how authority to know the TCK is produced through claiming expertise, and how this knowledge of a normal emotional response to childhood global mobility works to surface the TCK self. Section 5 provides some conclusions, arguing the paper illustrates how the TCK industry can help us understand self-help as a space in which emotional registers of belonging are produced and managed.

## 2. Governance of the self

The paper follows other work on the governance of the self by utilising a Foucauldian understanding of the subject. That is, the subject, or I, is produced and regulated through power, and is 'not really a pre-existing thing,' but rather a way in which 'we are led to think about ourselves' (Mansfield, 2000, p. 10). With Foucault's (2007) understanding of disciplinary power we can see the ways in which individuals are compared and hierarchized, and normal and abnormal are produced. For example, Sothorn (2007) highlights how self-help manuals for disabled sex work reproduce normative assumptions of sexuality, with the self-help book working to teach the reader what these are and how they can be given expression. Through biopower, the population is seen as a resource that must be protected, supervised and improved; where, for the optimal norm, you can 'identify a number of modifiable variables on which it depends' (Foucault (2007, p. 74). Biopower, then, can be seen as control over life, including emotions. Anderson (2011) indicates that biopower operates as a form of power in two ways. First, it requires an object to refer to, an aspect of life which we have knowledge about. Second, it acts as an intervention, working to improve that aspect of life against a threat (p. 30). In this paper, the object of the TCK industry is the (potentially destabilising) emotional experience of having been globally mobile as a child, with the TCK industry producing knowledge of this aspect of life. The industry works to intervene, by offering a new self, the TCK.

However, while the formulation and characteristics of neoliberal selves in self-help have been the subject of previous research (Rimke, 2000; Sothorn, 2007; Sothorn and Dickinson, 2011), what is missing from these accounts is a wider understanding of the relationship between the subject offered by self-help and the ways in which this is utilised as an identity—that is, the reader of self-help

remains imaginary. In this paper, I address this gap by looking at the production and consumption of TCK subjectivity through the TCK industry.

To examine the ways in which people are persuaded to consume the ideas within self-help, I draw upon understandings of the psy-disciplines. In developing Foucault's theorisations of power, Rose (1999) looks at the ways through which people are persuaded to regulate their self-hoods. He argues that psy-disciplines produce knowledge about the self, acting both as the 'expertise of subjectivity' (Rose, 1999, p. 3) and to produce technologies of the self, methods through which the self can be individually modified. Importantly, within this, Rose illustrates that people are persuaded to use technologies of the self because they are advocated by experts, a 'claim to social authority' (1999, p. 3). In this way, Rose addresses the issue of interpellation, the mechanism by which people take up subject positions. In theorisations of the subject, Althusser argued that individuals are actively constituted as subjects through ideology, as a set of practices which engage us and in which we are engaged (Probyn, 2003). The example used to illustrate this is a policeman hailing someone on the street, that 'by calling out to him, the policeman creates from the solitary walker in the street a certain type of subject—one answerable to the law and to the state and the system behind it' (Mansfield, 2000, p.53). Thus through ideological state apparatuses, we derive an understanding of what it is to be a citizen and thereby bear ideology—we are interpellated. Ahmed (2006) advances this by highlighting the importance of direction: 'the question of direction is crucial to the emergence of subjectivity and the "force" of being given a name' (p. 15). That is, the individual is directed towards the norm by societal pressures. The psy-disciplines, as a 'claim to social authority,' act as this direction, the 'means of the languages, criteria, and techniques offered to us, to act upon our bodies, souls, thoughts and conduct' (Rose, 1999, p. 11).

In this paper, I show how the TCK industry acts as a mechanism through which the TCK subject is interpellated, in that it acts as a space of biopower. Self-help can be seen to act as technologies of the self, whereby they 'assist subjects in arriving at their own diagnosis and treatment' (2000, p. 62). I argue, then, it is by looking at how people are persuaded to use self-help through claims to authority that we can explore why some of the ideas presented within self-help have traction. In this way, understanding how people respond to self-help also becomes important, as Davidson highlights that 'membership of the self-help group could itself become an important factor in mediating the ... sense of self and group identity' (2001, p. 166). That is, for our understanding of self-help, we need to understand where the ideas of the self come from, and what the response is to them.

## 3. Methods

The paper utilises a multi-sited ethnography that sought to 'follow' the production and consumption of the TCK. For Marcus (1995), a multi-sited ethnography is 'designed around chains, paths, threads, conjunctions or the juxtaposition of locations' in and through which one follows the object of research. The TCK industry itself operates in and at a variety of spaces and scales, for example, including people who blog about their experiences, individuals operating out of home offices, authors writing books, to larger-scale service providers and conferences. Like other self-help industries, the TCK industry can be challenging to conceptualise due to the multiple people or actors that identify themselves as being involved. However, the paper focuses on the main reported purpose that unites the actors involved in the TCK industry:

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