

# SELF-HELP GROUPS IN POST-SOVIET MOSCOW: NEOLIBERAL DISCOURSES OF THE SELF AND THEIR SOCIAL CRITIQUE

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**This article explores anthropological debates about the self and the role of self-help discourses in the production of neoliberal subjectivities in post-Soviet society. Drawing on ethnographic fieldwork and in-depth life story narratives, I analyze these discourses from the perspective of participants in self-help groups, which serve as an entry point for examining the impact of neoliberal reforms and the expansion of consumer capitalism in post-Soviet society. I highlight the multiple ways people make sense of the discourses and the wide range of “cultural resources” they engage to create meaningful experiences within the constraints of the new social conditions. Blending concepts from East and West and selectively drawing from Soviet and post-Soviet ideals, the participants do not easily fit into theoretical or ideological frameworks. The social involvement and multiplicity of meanings within their narratives and practices call into question standard notions about the self-help sphere and indicate a serious challenge to the totalizing power of neoliberal formations within the post-Soviet context.**

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In the spring of 2002 I found myself at a curious presentation at Inward Path, at the time Moscow's premier store for New Age practices and ideas. Standing next to a large chart of a ladder and a flag with religious symbols from around the globe, a small man in a suit and tie and a long gray beard was asking the audience about happiness. “What is it that prevents us from attaining success and happiness in our lives?” he asked the group of listeners who were spilling out into the corridor. “We are not happy,” he said, “because reality is not always the way we want it to be.” To

rectify this dilemma, he continued, "We have two choices: change reality or change ourselves. The first choice is the path generally taken in the West. The second choice is the path of the East. Russia is in the middle between East and West and therefore is able to connect the two paths together." At once inscribing a discourse of binary opposites and blurring the lines between East and West, his metaphorical path for Russia is indicative of the complexity and contradictions involved in any analysis of post-Soviet society, hitting at the heart of recent anthropological debates about the production of neoliberal subjectivities in post-Soviet Russia (Yurchak 2003; Matza 2009, 2012; Lerner 2011; Salmenniemi 2012).

Based on ethnographic fieldwork and in-depth life story narratives, my article explores this debate from the perspective of active participants in self-help groups in post-Soviet Moscow. Drawing on a cross section of stories and self-help practices, my analysis attends to the interpretations, values, and experiences of those deeply immersed in the self-help sphere, which serves as an entry point for examining the impact of neoliberal reforms and the expansion of consumer capitalism in post-Soviet society more broadly. My ethnographic findings indicate that the self-help groups in post-Soviet Moscow are sites for intense social engagement and critique, where participants access a multifaceted repertoire of "cultural resources" (Lerner 2011:134) in their interactions within a changing society. In these groups, participants debate concepts and ideals, build social networks, and create meaningful experiences that inform their conceptualizations of the self. Although engaged in practices aimed at personal transformation, participants provided a wide range of interpretations of their meanings and implications. Blending disparate philosophies, religious beliefs, and healing practices—including Hinduism, New Age spirituality, and Russian and Soviet mysticism—and selectively drawing from Soviet and post-Soviet social and political ideals, the participants do not easily fit into theoretical or ideological categories. The social involvement and multiplicity of meanings I found within their narratives and practices call into question standard notions about the self-help sphere and indicate a serious challenge to the totalizing power of neoliberal formations within the post-Soviet context (Kingfisher and Maskovsky 2008).

## THE NEOLIBERAL SELF

My unit of social analysis is self-help discourse, which has been the subject of extensive theoretical literature in Russia and the West. It has been widely theorized as contributing to new conceptualizations of the self that developed in the West with the emergence of neoliberal market economies (Lasch 1979; Giddens 1991; Brown 1994; Heelas 1996; Rose 1998; Lau 2000; York 2001; Tucker 2002; Lindquist 2004; McGee 2007; Illouz 2008). At the core of the neoliberal self are mechanisms for disciplining the self according to market rationalities. The neoliberal self is characterized by depoliticization, the rejection of institutions of social welfare, and the stigmatization of individual misfortune. In this article I use the term "neoliberal self" to encompass the wide spectrum of characteristics of the self that emerge out of this critical literature. Features that mark self-help discourses as neoliberal include the

centrality of the self in the attainment of wellbeing, practices of self-realization and self-control, and the sale of practices and ideas of the self in the marketplace.

As theorized through Michel Foucault's framework of governmentality, this new neoliberal self is constituted in the West alongside new state rationalities that have emerged with the shift away from the Keynesian welfare state (Ferguson and Gupta 2002). Strategically framed in terms of "freedom, autonomy and choice" (Rose 1999:93), neoliberal modes of governing utilize "technologies of the self" such as self-help practices to produce new subjects who view themselves as responsible for their own social welfare and wellbeing (Rose 1999; Ferguson and Gupta 2002) and, consequently, are induced not only to govern themselves "according to market principles of discipline, efficiency, and competitiveness" (Ong 2006:277) but to feel "empowered" in the process (Ferguson and Gupta 2002:989).

With the "project of transition" (Collier 2011:248) and the influx of self-help oriented books, training courses, and media programs in post-Soviet Russia, scholars have analyzed the self-help sphere as an arena for understanding how changing social structures and relationships of power in post-Soviet society have been deployed to produce post-Soviet subjectivities receptive to neoliberal ideology. Analyses of self-help books (Salmenniemi 2012), training programs for managers (Yurchak 2003), therapeutic talk shows (Matza 2009), and "finishing school" courses for the children of the Russian elite (Matza 2012) illuminate the discursive power of neoliberal formations and point to the institutions, technologies, and sites where neoliberal power inserts itself into the social practices of post-Soviet life. These discourses encouraged subjects to view the self as the locus of change and happiness; encouraged individuals to reorganize their lives according to the rationality of the market by rewarding competitiveness and self-sufficiency; pathologized Soviet institutions and "mentalities" (Matza 2012:808; Salmenniemi 2012:77–78); legitimized the social inequalities of contemporary post-Soviet society; and, ultimately, depoliticized participants.

My analysis builds upon and complements these studies of neoliberal governmentality. These works highlight the immense pressures people face within the context of neoliberal transformation. In their attempts to shift social obligations and responsibility away from the state, neoliberal formations aggressively insert themselves through some of the self-help practices and rationalities found in post-Soviet society. But how successful are these attempts to produce a post-Soviet self in line with these neoliberal ideologies? How are individuals responding to these efforts to transform their lives and rationalities? Are there competing interpretations and applications of these discourses? Julia Lerner's insights into these questions are instructive. She notes that individuals turn to a wide range of discourses and formations within the healing sphere and cautions against overexaggerating the extent and influence of neoliberal discourse. Rather than assume that dominant neoliberal interpretations prevail, she recommends exploring the spaces where competing interpretations and discourses of the self may be present (Lerner 2011:134). With its multiple layers of ever-changing meanings, the self-help sphere, I argue, is one of these very sites.

Turning to the ethnographic accounts, I explore these discourses from the perspective of active participants in the self-help sphere. Their stories attest to Anthony Giddens's assertion that "human agents never passively accept external conditions of action, but more or less continuously reflect upon them and reconstitute them in the light of their particular circumstances" (1991:175). This is precisely what I discovered taking place within the self-help groups in post-Soviet Moscow. My analysis highlights the multiple ways people make sense of these discourses and the wide range of "cultural resources" people engage to create meaningful experiences within the constraints of the new social conditions that shape their lives.

My analysis is organized into three parts. In the first section I sketch out the ethnographic context, outline the significance of the self-help sphere, and provide a general overview of the participants of the self-help groups. Next I turn to an analysis of the formal and informal discourses and practices of two professional self-help healers, tracing ways they align with and diverge from the critical theoretical literature on self-help and the production of the self. In this analysis I highlight how these participants utilize and interpret core concepts within the self-help sphere which have been linked to the production of a neoliberal self: personal responsibility, self control and development, self-blame, commodification, and depoliticization. Here we see the multiple interpretations that can arise even between coauthors and codirectors of the same group, as well as the social meanings their self-help practices provide for members of a group. Lastly, I turn to the life story narratives of self-help participants, highlighting excerpts from three active participants in self-help groups whose professional activities lie outside of the healing sphere. Representing a diverse cross section of the self-help world, their narratives include significant commonalities, reflecting sentiments that I found among self-help group participants more broadly: first, their practices focus on the self; second, they turn to self-help groups for social support and networking; and third, despite the self-orientation of their practices, they demonstrate a concern for economic and welfare issues, do not blame the less fortunate for their conditions, and have complicated perspectives on the social formations of both Soviet and post-Soviet society.

### **ETHNOGRAPHIC CONTEXT: SELF-HELP PRACTICES IN POST-SOVIET MOSCOW**

This ethnographic analysis of the narratives and practices of participants in self-help groups draws on work I have conducted on spirituality and health in Moscow since 1991, but in this article I focus on findings from participant observation and life-story interviews I conducted between 1999 and 2002 and again in 2008. With a background in critical medical anthropology, I began my initial research in 1999 as an investigation of women's health strategies within the context of an increasingly destabilized system of public health care and the expansion of the privatized medical sphere (Barr and Field 1996; Tulchinskii and Varavikova 1996; Hesli and Mills 2000). I conducted ethnographic observations in a state medical facility, a private clinic, a school, and a fitness center and recorded interviews with 40 women and

10 men about their health practices and routines. In the course of these interviews it became clear that women's health strategies included significant participation in alternative and self-help practices. Further investigation pointed to alternative health as a significant phenomenon in post-Soviet Moscow and Russia more broadly.

While overall participation in the self-help sphere is difficult to quantify, particularly given that many groups operate informally, the use of alternative healing methods has been widely observed in post-Soviet society (Lindquist 2004; Shevchenko 2009). Surveys on alternative health by sociologists Julie Brown and Nina Rusinova found that in Saint Petersburg one in five people had been to a healer outside the official medical sphere and that "virtually everyone" knew someone else who had visited an alternative healer (Brown and Rusinova 2002:163). Furthermore, over half made claims to self-knowledge about their health and abilities for self-care (163–164), both of which are characteristic of the self-help sphere. A 2003 report by the World Health Organization notes that 60 percent of the Russian population have used folk healing methods of some sort or another, and between 60 and 70 percent of Russians commonly turn to self-treatment in case of illness (Karpeev, Goryunov, and Tonkov 2005:137–138).<sup>1</sup>

Armed with my health interviews and sociological data, in 2001 I officially shifted my research focus to the alternative health sphere, and I began participating fully in trainings and workshops and attended lectures and demonstrations at the two primary New Age stores in Moscow at the time, Inward Path and White Clouds. As the intellectual, economic, and cultural center of the country, Moscow draws people from around the globe and is a place where spiritual and health practices intersect, providing numerous opportunities for exploration and learning about the self-help sphere. I entered this sphere reluctantly, however. My initial research in the official medical sector had evoked concern about the influence and social ramifications of the American importation of "healthy lifestyle" campaigns and reforms (Rivkin-Fish 2005). The alternative sphere appeared to promote even further disengagement of health concerns from underlying social conditions and institutions. I expected participants in this sphere to embrace a more privatized, healthy lifestyles approach to health care. Visits to the new Inward Path in 2001 did not assuage my fears. Reflecting social changes that have occurred in post-Soviet Moscow, this store was a spectacle of New Age consumer culture. It was vastly different from the Inward Path I had visited in 1994, which, located on a side street, was small, dimly lit, and held its sparse wares Soviet-style behind the counter. The Inward Path of 2001 was dazzling and of a grand scale. Located more prominently along Leningradskii Prospekt, one of Moscow's many wide avenues, it offered a full range of products and included a gift shop, health food store, book and video store, café, and the services of an astrologer, tarot card reader, and an aura photographer/reader. The celebration of the individual and the commodification of spiritual practices were on

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<sup>1</sup> The difficulty of quantifying this sphere is exacerbated by different terminologies in Russia and the United States as well as varying levels of association with official medicine. For further explanation see Karpeev et al. (2005).

full display. For a nominal fee, the "Path to the Self"<sup>2</sup> offered happiness, wealth, enlightenment, and health.

Over the course of the next year I immersed myself in this sphere, participating in a wide range of self-help trainings, including classes in holodynamics, rebirthing, holotropic breathing, kinesiology, neuro-linguistic programming (NLP), Reiki, Norbekov exercises, Anastasiia,<sup>3</sup> spiritual dance, and art therapy. One of my central groups was an alternative self-help organization, Spiritual-Psychological Healing Center, which I refer to here as "S-P." Their methods combine Jungian psychology, American and German self-help practices, Hindu cosmology, and Russian esotericism.<sup>4</sup> The group is well known within alternative spiritual health circles in Moscow, and members are involved with organizing a retreat that attracts hundreds of practitioners from throughout Russia each year.<sup>5</sup> This ethnographic work, which included regular participation in meetings and trainings and interaction with members in homes, cultural centers, parks, and excursions inside and outside Moscow, provided the opportunity to observe formal and informal practices and to clarify key concepts. I followed up on my research in 2008, staying at the home of the directors of S-P, which also serves as a central meeting place for the organization. During this time I revisited longtime members of S-P, interviewed new members, and took part in family constellation therapy,<sup>6</sup> a new practice S-P had incorporated into its healing repertoire.

As I built close bonds and networks over the months and years of my fieldwork, I recorded in-depth life-story narratives with 39 self-help group participants. Of these, six were men. Ten of the participants identified as full time professional healers. The rest had other careers but made self-help groups a significant part of their lives. Through my interactions I began to see the self-help sphere in a vastly different light. While the practices were indeed mystical and esoteric, the participants could be pragmatic, were often socially concerned, and found profound meanings in the practices and social networks they experienced. I began to realize that participants could not be easily categorized along ideological or theoretical lines.

Marked by extremes of wealth and poverty, Moscow is a location for the ongoing negotiation of social values and survival in Russia (Shevchenko 2009:7). The concerns and struggles of self-help practitioners reflect this disparity. While a highly problematic term within post-Soviet society, in terms of education, income, and pro-

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<sup>2</sup> While the official English name of the store is Inward Path, the Russian name "Put' k sebe" translates literally as "Path to the Self."

<sup>3</sup> Anastasiia was a club offering healing courses inspired by Vladimir Megre's book series *The Ringing Cedars of Russia*, part of a Slavic neo-pagan "back to the land" movement, whose main character was named Anastasiia.

<sup>4</sup> Important influences include Daniil Andreev, Elena Rerikh, Elena Blavatskaia, Kora Antarova, and Avessalam Podvodnyi.

<sup>5</sup> See <http://www.zhiznigrad.ru/>.

<sup>6</sup> Their practices were based on the methods developed by German psychotherapist Bert Hellinger.

fession, most of the participants I encountered would be considered “middle class”<sup>7</sup> (see Patico 2008:67–68), with teaching as one of the most frequently mentioned professions. I also came across college instructors, translators, engineers, journalists, lawyers, psychologists, musicians, artists, medical professionals, business people, and a truck driver. With \$150–170 as a commonly noted base monthly salary in the early 2000s, many discussed their reliance on secondary sources of income to make ends meet or enable them to participate in the healing activities they enjoyed. Many grappled with conflicting ideas about money, materialism, and spirituality. Widely connected with spiritual decline in the Soviet era (see Pesmen 2000; Patico 2008; Shevchenko 2009 for elaboration on this phenomenon), money took on a problematic role in post-Soviet Russia, particularly among members of what Nancy Ries refers to as the “creative intelligentsia,” who distinguished themselves by rejecting money and material goods (1997:131). In the self-help sphere, the commodification of healing practices was a serious concern for many for just this reason.

In the context of increased commodification and stratification, self-help groups came to serve as a type of social network. They provided collective spaces for “citizens to manage change and uncertainty” (Caldwell 2004:38), and people utilized them as part of a strategy of “making do” (de Certeau 1984). Participants engaged with these self-help networks as they confronted the challenges of an increasingly stratified society shaped by neoliberal reforms, including widespread privatization and cuts in funding for social programs, education, and health care (Barr and Field 1996; Tulchinskii and Varavikova 1996; Caldwell 2004; Rivkin-Fish 2005; Sachs 2006).

At the same time, participation in the self-help sphere cannot be reduced to purely economic concerns. People found deep meaning and, I dare say, even empowerment, in their practices. This is not to argue that their practices themselves had power, but, illusory or not, participants ascribed personal significance to the feelings of empowerment they experienced. As Giddens suggests, theorists must attend to people’s responses and take seriously their acts lest we wrench them of their humanity and compound the already profoundly alienating experience of the modern self (1991:174–176). It is these very responses that I turn to now in the exploration of self-help practices from the perspective of two long-term professional healers.

## SELF-HELP HEALING PROFESSIONALS

What do the discourses and practices of self-help participants tell us about the post-Soviet self? For insights into this question, I turn first to the experiences and perspectives of David and Sveta, codirectors of the Spiritual-Psychological Health Center, S-P. As professional healers, Sveta and David have been seriously involved with the self-help sphere since the early 1980s, when they joined the group Healthy Family and began experimenting with practices based on the teachings of Porfirii Ivanov,

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<sup>7</sup> According to *The Moscow News*, 54 percent of Russians aged 25 to 64 have some college education (Toohey 2012).

a Ukrainian health guru who promoted healthy living and the benefits of bathing in ice water. In addition to physical health, they worked on psychological and behavioral issues in a section of the club called Self-Perfection, and they studied a range of spiritual traditions, including Theosophy, Hinduism, and Christianity. In the late 1980s they both received degrees in psychology and began working full time as alternative psychologists-trainers in the early 1990s, establishing the spiritual health center S-P in 1994.

I first crossed paths with Sveta and David in 2002 at the second incarnation of Inward Path, where they had come to introduce their self-help methods and promote their recently published guidebook on happiness. Their extensive experience and knowledge of the self-help sphere made them invaluable resources during the course of my ethnographic research. From an analytical point of view, their discourses and experiences offer unique insight into the role of self-help practices in the production of the self in post-Soviet Russia. As coauthors of self-help books, their discourses and practice offer the opportunity to assess formal published discourses in relation to the more informal practices and discourses that arise in the day-to-day context of ethnographic research. Adding further analytical weight, Sveta and David readily identify themselves as members of the broader New Age movement. As such, the discourses and key concepts they employ in many ways parallel those that are highlighted in the critical theoretical literature on self-help practices and the production of the self: personal responsibility, self-realization, control of the self, and the self as the locus of health, wellbeing, and success.

Are such discourses and practices indicative of the appearance of neoliberal subjectivity? Do they point to an embrace of neoliberal ideologies and institutions? I turn for guidance to the meanings and practices that emerged out of ethnographic fieldwork and life-story narratives. First, I provide a brief overview of Sveta and David's formal published discourses, situating them squarely within the self-help frame. Second, turning to my ethnographic findings, I explore these discourses in the context of their day-to-day practices and conversations. Finally, I draw attention to the meanings and social roles these practices play in the lives of members of the self-help organization. At each point of the analysis, the personal and local meanings help elucidate the "cultural repertoire" (Lerner 2011) of self-help participants, reflecting a wide range of experiences, knowledge, and ideas.

Written in bold print, the first page of Sveta and David's book on happiness announces: "A PERSON IS 100% RESPONSIBLE FOR HIS LIFE." Filled with practical advice for self-healing and reaching one's "full potential," the book emphasizes self-understanding as the path to a self-directed destiny of happiness and health. With its characteristic New Age focus on the self, self development, and personal responsibility (Hanegraaff 1996; Heelas 1996; Tucker 2002; Lindquist 2004, 2006), their book could be interpreted as a training manual for neoliberalism: a plea to accept society as it is and to identify the source of problems in individual failings and lack of personal initiative. Indeed, their book references many of the telltale signs associated with the commodification of the self and receptive attitudes toward neoliberal institutions and ideals. Heavily referencing Carl Jung and Richard Bach, their book would



ring true to Western New Age participants. The book's pages detail their "journey" method, which is aimed at revealing the "authentic" self and freeing it from the bonds of the outside world. This method appeals to a "higher self" for inspiration. At the level of formal discourse, most of the concepts that are central to their beliefs and methods directly correlate with Western self-help concepts, which have been linked with individuation, commodification, and subjugation of the self to market rationalities (Giddens 1991; Hanegraaff 1996; York 2001; Tucker 2002). Does this suggest that David and Sveta have adopted a neoliberal conceptualization of the self and are receptive to neoliberal institutions and ideas?

Turning to Sveta and David's informal discourses and practices, it becomes clear that such a straightforward assessment cannot be made. Though coauthors of this guidebook on personal responsibility, they themselves, as becomes quickly evident, do not agree on the everyday implications of their self-focused philosophy. David takes the more extreme position. During a training session, he elaborated on his position, noting:

We need to be happy with all that happens in life. Otherwise we become slaves to circumstances. If we try to change the world around us then it means we are not happy with the world around us. Local disharmony is just part of general harmony. It's necessary for a part of the whole harmony. It's a moment of general harmony, although to part it may not seem positive. We need to accept the situation.

David's interpretation of the self is disconnected and disengaged from the particularities of social context. Sveta's perspective, however, was very different. She found his interpretation inadequate and interrupted his speech, countering that she was not satisfied with the world around her. She saw violence, hatred, suffering, and considered the healing process as geared towards social change. Acceptance, she argued, does not mean doing nothing: "You should accept rain, but why not open an umbrella?" Making the argument more personal, she asked David what a person should do if he or she passed a man beating up a woman on the street. Continuing with his idealist stance of disengagement, David replied, "Be harmonious with your mission, but don't engage in a situation out of a sense of protest." Sveta supplied her own interpretation of this ideal. Referencing the *Bhagavad Gita*, she exclaimed that Krishna clearly states that a person must stand up to oppressors: "If God did not want you to intervene, he would not have placed you at the scene or in a position where you could help."

Out of this seemingly straightforward written declaration about responsibility and the role of the self, two very different interpretations arise in the interactions of dialogue, one calling for external action and the other for inward transformation. In this instance, David's inward looking philosophy coheres closely with characterizations of self-help sphere as disengaged and apolitical. Sveta, on the other hand, expresses a responsibility for taking action and a concern for conditions within the broader social sphere. Their differing conceptualizations of the self are expressed through their self-healing practices and evidenced in their dai-

ly routines. It is here that their cultural repertoires come most vividly into relief. In their kitchen one morning, David reflected on these differences, noting that they derived in part out of the spiritual figures each chose as inspirations for their higher selves, which are understood as ideal forms of the self. David's inspiration was the Indian guru Kalki Bhagavan, who he explained represents a more inwardly directed pure love of everything. During our discussion, he recalled how in the winter of 1999 he had spent a month in Kalki's ashram in India, working 24 hours a day on meditation, chanting, breathing exercises, and silence. He described it as a very ascetic lifestyle and setting, with one daily meal of rice and sauce. Participants slept on the floor and could not leave the premises for the duration of the seminar. We find here evidence of a high level of social disengagement as well as an austere regime of control over the body, recalling a self subjected to the rational logic and no-frills efficiency of neoliberal governmentality (Yurchak 2003; Matza 2009).

Back home in Russia David is more socially active. He develops methods, writes books, and offers workshops and lessons. But his life here also is highly self-regulated and controlled. He lives a healthy lifestyle, refraining from alcohol, maintaining a strictly vegetarian diet, and engaging in complex and strenuous yogic exercises. On a typical early morning, David can be heard chanting in one of the three rooms in their apartment, which also serves as a primary facility for healing treatments and training courses. When he emerges, he sets forth to the kitchen where he busies himself preparing herbs and greens for meals that fit his diet. Midday he may disappear into his room again for reflection or consultation with clients. He could be hosting a group session on chanting techniques or working in dialogue with a client on her "spiritual portrait," a method of self-development he created. Just as likely, however, he will be in another part of the city, helping someone who has called for him in crisis or possibly with a mundane task such as registering a visa, to which he devoted several days for me.

Meanwhile, Sveta will have awoken later and will be deep at work with a steady stream of clients whom she will be guiding on "journeys" into their subconscious. Her day-to-day life is much less regulated and controlled than David's, and, while also a vegetarian, she does not regulate her consumption of sweets. On days without trainings or other events Sveta can work deep into the night, often ending with a Skype session as late as two in the morning. As she works, people will casually drop by for consultations, to socialize, or to practice their self-help methods.

Like David, Sveta has spiritual guides who serve as inspirations for her higher self. Action-oriented, Sveta described herself to me as "a daughter of Shiva, the teacher who destroys all authorities, who destroys all fossilized principles." This philosophy characterizes her antiauthoritarian approach to life more generally and is an important element of her self-help methods. Sveta's primary inspiration is the Indian guru Sai Baba, who, according to David, symbolizes loving and *doing* loving things. Sveta reiterated this point, noting that one of the things she liked about Sai Baba was that he valued service: "He says that the hand that helps others is more valuable than the mouth that says prayers."

Although more outwardly focused and less methodical in her approach, Sveta also works on the transformation and control of the self. These are key elements of her healing and spiritual ideals. In some areas, she notes, she has had more success than in others. For instance, she bemoans that she has not been able to control her weight. Such failure, she explains, can be due to an immature desire or poor choices. This explanation indicates an orientation that blames the individual, placing responsibility on the self. Her interpretation highlights responsibility and control of the self as elements of spiritual elevation, as signs of becoming an aware human being: "When you start to go along the spiritual path, all of that predetermination about the soul goes away. You already are responsible for your fate in many ways. If you want to continue being a robot or zombie, then be that, but I think that most people will make a different choice and will want to become conscious. You're given a signal, in the form of an illness or something else. And you are able to somehow control or have influence on your fate." According to Sveta, for a spiritually aware person suffering is a "signal" of disharmony between a person's life and inner self. S-P's methods teach participants how to recognize these signals in themselves so they can overcome suffering. In this process they see themselves as developing as human beings rather than as assigning blame. Accordingly, she translates her weight issue as a signal and interprets this struggle as the universe telling her she has more important issues with which to concern herself.

She elaborated on this contradictory aspect of self-development in a casual conversation we had one afternoon. Emphasizing that self-development is only the first step, she explained: "A person needs to work on themselves, to cleanse and purify themselves, and fill themselves with love and light before they can help others and work for change. If people themselves are filled with problems, how can they help others? Sometimes of course, people don't take the next step. Sometimes a person just works on herself and doesn't worry about the rest of the world, but selfish people exist in all spheres." In this interpretation, even David's intensely inward practices can be understood in a different light. This is particularly so in the context of the social activities he engages in that contradict his inward focused ideals.

It is to these social aspects of S-P that I now turn. Sveta and David's concerns with the social are reflected in the spaces they create at their center and the practices that take place there. The S-P center is based in Sveta and David's home, a cluttered three-room apartment in the central area of Moscow. Within this space, they have created a community that provides comfort and meaning for its members. This atmosphere is created through their healing methods, meditations, and the organization and use of the space itself. Here they symbolically display their identities and ideals. New visitors to the apartment, which is always bustling with activity, must first wade through the pile of shoes that accumulate near the entranceway. Inside, their apartment is a visual feast of icons, portraits of gurus, diagrams, and maps. The main meeting room is lined with books, religious objects, and pictures. On one wall hang an Orthodox icon of Jesus and a painting of Mary. Another wall is adorned by the Indian guru Kalki and El Morya, a key figure within Theosophy. High above everything else hangs a large orange clock with a picture of the smiling Indian guru Sai Baba.

People visit S-P for a wide range of reasons. One of the primary ones is to experience and learn its healing methods. Drawing largely on an American self-help practice called holodynamics, Sveta and David developed their journey method as a dialogue between a "guide" and a "traveler" who use the body as a map for uncovering and interpreting inner signals locked in the subconscious. S-P's healing methods involve a social process that brings two or more individuals together to solve specific personal and social problems. When available, other people will participate by sending positive energy, which they call a "field of love."

The roles are fluid and change from journey to journey. Everyone regularly experiences the role of traveler, guide, and helper. The guide helps establish an atmosphere of calm and love, directing the traveler to describe aloud their "place of tranquility." The journey focuses on sensations in the body. As the traveler visualizes and describes the sensations, the traveler and guide work to transform images of pain or suffering into images of love. The entire journey can take over an hour and engages the participants in deep discussions about their personal lives and spiritual beliefs. During the journeys travelers confront their fears as well as deep-seated convictions they may have about themselves and the world. The journeys can evoke strong physical and emotional sensations and forge strong bonds between participants. Although the sessions focus on one individual's inner self, all participants contribute to the process. The journey sessions, as well as regularly held guided meditations, serve as spaces for reflecting and are aimed at motivating further action. After the sessions, all participants contribute their thoughts and insights.

During the course of my research I observed and participated as guide and traveler in numerous journeys. One brief, illustrative journey took place during a training course in 2008. In this journey Lena, a young graduate student from Kazakhstan, was guided by Grisha, a former businessman who was training to become a healer. During the journey the other participants worked to create a field of love to help facilitate the process. Grisha began by asking Lena to relax and breathe without pause. This is aimed at evoking a physical reaction to help her gain access to her subconscious self. Next he called on her to find her place of tranquility, which she described as a forest with tall trees. To help her in her journey, Lena gathered together a collection of "helpers," each of whom would represent a different part of her self: higher self, physical self, her personal relationships, her social self, principles, and universal self. With all of the helpers assembled and ready to help, Grisha asked Lena to describe any sensations that stood out in her body. Lena felt a pain in her leg and described this pain as taking the form of an iron chain. Grisha told Lena to fill the iron chain with warmth and love and then began asking her a series of questions about it: When did it first appear in her life? Why did it appear? What did it want? Why did it want that? What would it feel if it attained that? Did her higher self see that as a mature desire? Lena described the chain as appearing in her life when she came to Moscow to work. It was there because it wanted more money. It wanted more money because it did not want to work. It wanted to write books and create. Feeling she had made a breakthrough and believing she had gained an understanding of the chain's desires, Lena signaled that she was ready to end the journey.

Following the journey Sveta advised Lena to look more carefully at her work sphere. The iron chain was comparing and looking for something better, which Sveta said was an immature image. At the same time, it indicated a struggle in Lena's life. After the journey, Lena shared her situation. She had come to Moscow to study piano and music theory at the conservatory. Unhappy in the dorm, she rented a small apartment in the suburbs for \$800 a month, considerably more than she had budgeted and to which she had to add a commute costly in time and money. Born and raised in Kazakhstan, she felt she belonged in Moscow and had recently changed her citizenship to Russian, but without a Moscow residency permit she was required to pay a yearly fee of \$200. Her money problems led her to neglect her studies. Although she covered her basic expenses by working with a publishing agent, she struggled emotionally and spiritually, lamenting that she did not have more time for her creative pursuits, which had recently begun to lean more toward writing than music.

At a purely discursive level, the journey was saturated with elements associated with the neoliberal self: higher self, individuation, the self as the source of change, the mind as the source of change. But in this particular context her healing journey became a social and practical activity. It did not solve Lena's problems, nor was this what she intended. Instead, it opened up a space for social interaction and for serious contemplation about her life and goals. The method itself was an interactive conversation and an emotionally uplifting experience. It afforded her an opportunity to share and consult with others about worries she had about life changing decisions she was considering.

While the journey method focuses on the concerns and wellbeing of one participant, the meditations at S-P are social events that bring individuals together to work on the concerns of the group. The meditations are guided by Sveta, who begins by asking everyone to share their issues and concerns. Anyone can submit a topic, and Sveta will note each one aloud as she guides the meditation. The meditations are not relaxing activities. Each participant works to visualize and transform images of the problem at hand. Participants are expected to watch for signs—physical or symbolic—that can provide insight into the problems. At the end of each meditation, Sveta asks everyone to meditate on Russia, then a global issue, and finally the universe. Afterward, people share their images with the group and explain how they were transformed.

Their meditative interventions are inwardly focused and center on the power of the mind. At the discursive level, this could be interpreted as creating a false sense of empowerment and drawing participants away from engagement with societal change (Ong 2006; Matza 2012; Salmenniemi 2012). The meditations, however, hold real meanings for the participants, who say they feel empowered with a sense of control over the outside world, a feeling of helping others, and gratitude for having a space to reflect upon and engage with social and political concerns. These spiritual practices can also be precursors to more direct action in the physical world. Whenever participants embark on a new endeavor, they bring forth the idea during a meditation. Such meditations have led to involvement in projects with an orphanage, a senior citizens center, and events aimed at teaching religious and ethnic tolerance.

At a more local level, Sveta and David devote considerable time and money to the needs of members of their self-help community. This is not because they are wealthy or part of the economic elite. In 2008 after cobbling together all of their social resources—from healing sessions, rent from their daughter's apartment, and both of their pensions—they made a combined monthly income of \$2,000.<sup>8</sup> Much of the networking and community help takes place between sessions, when everyone retreats to the kitchen to socialize, often over sugary snacks people have brought or the hearty vegetarian soups that David regularly makes. Here the topic frequently turns to social concerns, which may have emerged in a healing session or meditation.

While the kitchen is always more than simply a place for eating (see Ries 1997; Pesmen 2000), at times it also becomes a place for economic strategizing, as with the case of Sveta's ten-year-old client who, after a family crisis, found herself living with eight others in a cramped Moscow apartment. Fearing the little girl did not get enough to eat, Sveta made pains to feed her well whenever she came by for healing sessions, and she and David were both involved with exploring opportunities for a state-subsidized apartment for her mother. Social concerns are built into their annual budget and play a role in determining the prices they set for their work. These concerns were confirmed in my observations of their actions as well as in the interviews with participants who frequently discussed S-P as part of their social safety network and second home.

One particular conversation stands out. During the training session where he served as a guide, Grisha shared how the members of S-P had helped him when he had been seriously injured the previous year. He had been going through a midlife crisis, and the meetings helped him reflect and sort out his priorities. They also helped him confront his fears, leading perhaps to overconfidence in his abilities. At an annual retreat with other members of S-P south of Moscow, he decided to take a chance with skydiving. Unfortunately, he landed improperly and broke his back. His experience illustrates some of the struggles with the post-Soviet health system as well as the networks that self-help groups can provide:

First we took an ambulance to Serpukhov<sup>9</sup> but then [my wife] drove me to a hospital in Moscow. I was there for two weeks and couldn't move very well. Then they did an operation and put an implant in my back, and in a week I started to walk—they put a Swiss or American metal rod in my spine—the operation was fine and I could get around a week later—with some help. But I ended up in a paradoxical situation. It was a big life lesson. I didn't have enough money for the rods—they cost around 2,500–4,000 dollars.... My health turned out to be threatened by a banal matter of lack of money. The operation was free, but I had to pay for the metal band I had to buy. And what really amazed me was that the people here took it upon themselves to get the money together. Sveta and David collected their own money and money from the center and everyone came

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<sup>8</sup> In 2008, the average monthly individual income in Moscow was listed as 37,057 rubles (\$1,165) (Ignatova 2008).

<sup>9</sup> A city with population of about 127,000 located approximately 100 kilometers south of Moscow.

together and contributed what they could and in the end came up with around half—around 2,000 dollars. I had a little bit saved, and my relatives loaned me some money. People whom I had known for the previous two [years] gave me what they could, and my relatives loaned me money and said to pay them back when I could.

From the point of view of his “cultural repertoire,” Grisha’s narrative highlights several significant points. One is the disparity between Moscow and its outlying areas. As soon as possible, he had himself transferred to a medical facility in Moscow. Another is the disparity within Moscow itself, even within the context of the state medical system. While the hospital stay and operation were covered by the state, the necessary devices were prohibitively expensive and required him to access all of his social networks, including the new bonds he had recently forged at S-P. In response to his dire physical needs, the members did not resort only to their inwardly focused self-help practices. While they meditated on his health during regular meetings, their mental work was accompanied by actions in the real world. Furthermore, while his situation could have been interpreted as the result of personal failings and poor choices, the group did not dwell on blame but instead focused on what they could do to help.

As we have seen through this analysis, at each point the discourses and practices at S-P defy easy categorization. In many regards, Sveta and David’s books, practices, and organization are sites where the neoliberal self might emerge. The expected discourses of self-realization, control of the self, individual choice, and personal responsibility are clearly used and put into practice (Lerner 2011). Yet even here neat and straightforward interpretations are confounded by the vagaries of everyday life. In practice, new layers of meanings come through, often more practical and grounded. S-P participants sharply debate the meanings and implications of ideals, principles, and key concepts, but they blur and shift in the face of mundane experiences. The self-help practices themselves are based on inner abilities that might be seen as creating illusions of empowerment. But the social interactions are real, as are the meanings participants create through their practices. Even with methods that are largely drawn from American and European sources, interpretations are mediated through the practitioners and contexts, which intersect with Soviet, post-Soviet, and Western experiences. In such a context, delineations of the self along ideological or theoretical lines become blurred, uncertain, and unproductive.

## **LIFE-STORY NARRATIVES OF SELF-HELP PARTICIPANTS: UNIFYING CONCEPTS**

As demonstrated in the previous section, discourses and practices do not always neatly align with theoretical projections. The self-help sphere is diverse and can be a source of a wide range of interpretations. At the same time, there are several significant features that I found among self-help participants of all backgrounds. In this section I focus on these unifying features that arose out of my ethnographic experiences and narrative analysis of self-help participants. I highlight here three narrative histories. I have chosen these three participants because of their practices and

their backgrounds. They are representative of the range of practices and approaches I encountered in self-help groups in Moscow, and they demonstrate that people of different genders and different socioeconomic and geographic backgrounds share the traits to be discussed in this section. As each of these participants intersects with the S-P center, their narratives build on one another to create a fuller picture.

I will be highlighting the following three commonalities: first, their practices focus on the self; second, they turn to self-help groups for social support and networking; and third, despite the self-orientation of their practices, they demonstrate a concern for economic and welfare issues, do not blame the less fortunate for their conditions, and have complicated perspectives on the social formations of both Soviet and post-Soviet society.

I begin with Dima, whom I first met in 2002. A long-time participant in the self-help sphere, he recounted, in 2008, how he came to Moscow and the negotiations that ultimately led him to S-P, where for a time he worked as a trainer. Employed as a truck driver and one of the few participants without a higher degree, Dima was self-taught and well versed in the literature of self-help, philosophy, and spirituality. He was originally from Naberezhnye Chelny, in Tatarstan, where, upon learning about Bruce Lee and karate, he became interested in spiritual health practices. He started practicing karate as a teenager in 1985, although at that time it was forbidden. Over twenty years later, the penal code still rolled easily off of his tongue: “[article] 219 of the Penal Code of the USSR, illegal teaching of karate.” Because of this, participants had to disguise themselves. His group was listed at the local sports club as an aerobics class. Through karate he became interested in literature from the Far East, and then in the early 1990s he came across the journal *Inward Path*, which had been established by the original owner of the store of the same name:

At that time, we (by which I mean the USSR) ... there was the practice that all of the journals that were published were sent out to all libraries in the country. And the journal *Inward Path* came to our city library. And there I read that there were a lot of seminars in Moscow on a wide variety of themes. I was completely green at that point. I thought that I'd be able to just shake my legs and like Shaolin monks break bottles and walk on broken glass. Well, that was silliness, of course. And what I found was totally different—Dances of the World, rebirthing. All kinds of teachers came here—Lama Ole Nydahl, students of Osha, from America people came and gave seminars on all sorts of topics, and I kept reading and reading the journal. And then I got extra money at my job and money for vacation—everything coincided—and I went to Moscow. First I ended up at one seminar—I didn't understand anything, but I enjoyed it. Actually, to be honest, the seminar was just ok. It was called “Insight.” It cost a lot of money for that time—200 dollars. It was three times my monthly salary. There was a lot of blah, blah, blah, and there were two processes of “rebirthing,” and it was those two processes that captured my interest. At the seminar I got to know people who studied with Sveta, and they said that she gave seminars but much cheaper. I went back home and worked for a few months, saved money, and then returned to Moscow specifically to study with Sveta. That was 1993. I stayed here and there. You could go to a seminar, raise your hand and say, “People, I don't have



anywhere to stay," and they would say, "You can stay with us for free and we'll even feed you."... Everything new came through Moscow. And somehow I managed to get set up in Moscow. I took all of the seminars with Sveta and tried to also attend various other seminars ... like a starving person I went after everything!

In reflections on his spiritual health trajectory, the Soviet Union is never far from Dima's mind. He has a conflicted relationship with it. It created a space that allowed him access to many books and journals, and it was during the Soviet period that he began karate, but his classes were held in secret, and his exposure to *Inward Path* highlighted what was missing in his hometown. These factors contributed to his new sense of self and inspired him to search for new ideas in post-Soviet Moscow, where he found a community of like-minded friends. Not everything was on a level playing field, however. Some of these experiences did not come cheaply. Even in the early 1990s, there is evidence in his narrative of commodification and stratification within the alternative health sphere. But he notes that people networked and helped each other, recommending teachers and practices and offering places to stay. Dima's tale is a decidedly social one. And while he focuses on self-improvement, it is the collective elements that made his move to Moscow possible and that enabled his continued participation.

In his narrative, Dima finds much to criticize in both Soviet and post-Soviet society. He directs some of his critique at the social sphere and some at individuals within these spaces. Sometimes the inability to gain control over the self in contemporary society is couched in terms of the ossification of thinking that has carried over from Soviet times. On one level, this discourse echoes the neoliberal critique of "Soviet mentalities" (see Matza 2012; Salmenniemi 2012) and could be interpreted as a rejection of Soviet institutions and values. During an S-P training session in 2002, this seemed to be exactly what Dima was doing when he noted, "The USSR fell, but people continue to live with the same thought forms." It is important to note, however, that his critique of "Soviet mentality" was not a wholesale critique of Soviet social institutions and by no means did it translate into acceptance of the new social conditions. He continues this line of thought in his 2008 narrative: "Before we had lawlessness. It was so during the time of Ivan the Terrible, during Stalin, Brezhnev. And now for the first time we're learning to live according to the law. So that everyone follows the law. We're learning that—and we're learning poorly. We still continue to steal. People still continue to ride without tickets. And they even are proud of it—how well they fooled the conductor." But he adds here an important addendum—his critique is of the Soviet system and what he viewed as its totalitarian mode of governing. But this is not a rejection of the ideals of socialist or collective ideals:

It's totalitarianism, not of one person but of the law. The thing is, in our time, it's fashionable to kick the communists. To say that everything was horrible then and that during tsarism everything was great. But that's all nonsense. We always had totalitarianism. Power was always in the hands of one person and the rest of the people in the country were his servants ... I was fortunate to have ended up here at the break point. But I felt it.

Dima indicates a positive assessment of the fall of the Soviet Union, but he is not so positive in his views of contemporary post-Soviet society, where he sees people more interested in soccer and television than spiritual development. He is particularly critical of those seeking an easy fix to their problems through external supernatural means. Discussing what he describes as the low level of available literature in post-Soviet society, he notes, "Most books are along the same lines of 'Give me a pill so I'll be happy,' 'How to quickly become a millionaire,' 'How to quickly find a lover,' 'How to quickly get rid of a lover,' 'How to become a supermodel.' The same things that I already went through—how to do everything all at once." Here he critiques some of the very books and practices that have linked the self-help sphere with the production of a neoliberal self that accepts the logic of a market where happiness can be instantly purchased and attained (York 2001; Salmenniemi 2012). Dima's narrative is a critique of both the commodification of spiritual enlightenment and the state of post-Soviet society that thwarts attempts to work toward meaningful self development.

Dima views himself as spiritually elevated, but at the same time he is critical of the social conditions which he faults for keeping people struggling for survival and unable to spend time on spiritual pursuits. Despite his decidedly self-centered subjectivity, in his 2008 narrative he does not blame others for their social position:

The vast majority of people, particularly those who live outside of Moscow, are busy with survival. I just know the income level in Moscow, and in Moscow Oblast it is different by approximately a third. And the difference between Moscow and other regions is three or four times. I was on a business trip to Volgograd—a friend of mine told me she had found a job with such a high income—5,000 rubles—can you imagine? In Moscow no one would lift a finger for 5,000, but there it's a lot of money. But prices there are the same as they are here. Consumer products cost the same. Apartments are less and some other things are less. But people are just surviving.

In the final assessment, it is not a critique of individual moral failing but of the social circumstances that prevent individuals from flourishing and developing.

The second narrative belongs to Zoia, a middle-aged woman who was born and raised in Moscow and works as a music teacher at a private alternative school. When I met her in 2002 her base monthly salary was \$170, and she earned an additional \$100 a month from private lessons. She was a long-time participant in the alternative health sphere, having experimented with Sveta and David in the 1980s. She was a frequent participant at S-P events, but she did not work as a professional healer. She had taken "trainings" in a wide spectrum of practices, including "toughening" (*zakalka*),<sup>10</sup> yoga, and holodynamics. And, despite the expense, she was able to strategize and pull together enough money from private lessons to

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<sup>10</sup> Immersion in cold water, including through holes in frozen bodies of water in the winter.

participate in a healing course led by Mirzakarim Norbekov at his Institute of the Person in 2001.<sup>11</sup>

Zoia considers S-P her base organization and turns to it for social as well as healing purposes, and she uses her network of friends there to help her avoid fraudulent practices, which she worries have become prevalent in the post-Soviet era.

In general, in Moscow now a whole lot of various systems have turned up. And a lot of people play off of that. As they say, whenever things are bad in Russia she always turns to mysticism. And there are of course a lot of groups that just play with people's minds. You need to be careful. It's complicated. You need your intuition probably. I don't even know ... I've tried other systems. I went to Maslova—that's holodynamics like at Sveta's. But I liked it at Sveta's a lot more because with her from the beginning there's the field of love. It's very interesting at Maslova's, but it's all science there. It's completely different there, and the basis of holodynamics—out of which everything grows—the field of love—isn't there.

Having successfully quit smoking, she viewed herself as health conscious and included regular fasts and herbal remedies in her health routine. Occasionally she visited a traditional Russian healer, or *babka*. Although several of her friends were fans of supplements such as Herbalife, she indicated distrust in the supplements. She also was critical of the official state medical system and claimed to avoid it as much as possible, alleging that she could not recall the last time she had been to a doctor. She was particularly critical of the medical system's rejection of alternative forms of healing and overreliance on antibiotics. Despite these negative assessments, when her daughter fell ill with kidney stones, Zoia turned to the state medical system, integrating its technology with her self-help treatments. Noting their diagnostic capabilities, she utilized x-ray machines before and after her daughter's holodynamic sessions. Downplaying the significance of this turn to official medicine, she interpreted its diagnosis as confirmation of the efficacy of her alternative practices.

Zoia was initially enthusiastic about the disintegration of the Soviet Union, which she saw as an opportunity to engage more openly in her alternative health interests. Politically inspired, she even launched a successful campaign to convince her neighbors to vote for Boris Yeltsin. Recently, however, she had become critical of the changes she has witnessed in post-Soviet society. She struggled financially and wor-

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<sup>11</sup> In 2002, when I participated, a ten-day course with one of his students cost 1,800 rubles (\$31). The same course led by Norbekov himself was \$400, more than the 2002 average Moscow salary of \$391. None of the participants I met through S-P even considered taking the course directly with Norbekov, and many found the price of the student-led course prohibitive, choosing instead to read his books and work on the exercises at home. His best-known book is in its fourteenth edition, evidence that this is a common decision. Nonetheless, his courses were popular at the time of my fieldwork, twice a day filling a lecture hall with 50 to 100 participants. As of 2013, the cost of a student-led course is 10,000 rubles (\$322). A seven-day course with Norbekov currently stands at 35,000 rubles (<http://www.norbekov.com/prices>), which is \$1,129 at the then-current rate of 32.8 rubles to the dollar. With an average individual monthly salary in 2012 of 48,000 rubles (\$1,463) (Interfax.ru 2013), this does not leave much for anything else, making the courses less accessible overall and exacerbating stratification within alternative the self-help sphere.

ried about the price of food, but her main concern centered on the elderly who depend on government pensions. She herself was perplexed by many of the social changes taking place around her. She lived with her daughter in the apartment her now deceased parents had received from the government during the Soviet era, but she did not convert it to private ownership it because she did not understand the process and was distrustful of the possible “government tricks” (*khitrosti*) that could be attached to privatization. Her understanding of business, privatization, and government involvement were ambivalent and highly textured: “On the other hand it’s really difficult for the elderly. They need to do something. Or our rich businessmen should. Before, during [Maxim] Gorky’s time there were special homes for the poor, where they could shower and eat. And then that’s also become a business. I read in the paper that there’s now a whole mafia that works on the impoverished.” Tinged with nostalgia, Zoia grapples for a social solution to poverty. She does not implicate the poor as individuals, calling instead on business or government intervention, but at the same time she is critical and distrustful of both forms.

In my final narrative analysis, I turn to Liuba, a career woman, an independent, tough-minded lawyer in her late forties. A successful businesswoman with a repertoire of self-help practices devoted to unleashing her inner potential and the power of her mind, Liuba seems most likely to fit the expectations of the critical literature (Salmenniemi 2012). Characteristic of the “creative intelligentsia,” her narrative is filled with literary references, and she considers the knowledge she has gained from her self-help practices to be part of the required repertoire of a cultured person.

Liuba entered the sphere of alternative spiritual health relatively late in her life, becoming involved with S-P for the first time in 1998, after her divorce. She was introduced to S-P by a woman whose children attended the same school as hers. Although one of the most well-off participants I encountered, she too supplemented her primary income, working as a distributor for the cosmetics company Neways. She did not need this income for economic survival, but it allowed her to afford the many spiritual practices, which she believes have improved her health and expanded her social life:

What I’ve done with myself over the last four years with spiritual practices—that’s where I invest my money. We get together to help ourselves and each other.... Most of it you need to do with another person ... I’ve done so many practices. I have Reiki, holotropic breathing, I have Buddhist practices, meditative, massage, and then I also read a lot of literature and teach myself. And I’m constantly working on my third eye and inner vision. You look and see what sort of block is there inside of you, and you need to get rid of it. And I work with dreams. When I have a dream I work with that dream because that is information from out there. Use it. Don’t neglect it.... Right now I find it so interesting to study my own possibilities.

In Liuba’s narrative she highlights her inner development and the new friendships she has made through her self-help trainings, which she now considers a central part of her life. She turns to these friendships and networks to help her assess practices and to fulfill emotional and intellectual needs:

There are so many different spiritual practices in Moscow right now. There are many unique practices, a lot of literature. Of course there's also a lot of nonsense and even dangerous things that aren't worth trying or reading, but you come to recognize that during the process of practice of spiritual development ... what will happen with me in the future I can't say.... But what I'm able to do in terms of spiritual and energy potential I won't give up because I'm not just attracted to it, it gives me the impulse to live. It's the key to human spirituality and it's the basis of health, business, family, children, and in the end it's our inner right.

Characteristic of the self-help sphere, her narrative focuses on inner abilities and the ways internal changes can affect the outside world. But she connects the value of her inner abilities and the self-help networks with their capacity to help others. Mixed with her self-centered perspective, she notes social concerns. She networks with others and shares her professional skills.

It started in 1998, but trust of my abilities did not develop right away. What is it? What is there about me? How can I help people with this? What if I don't see the right thing or hear the right thing?... we are all gifted. It's not that I have some unusual ability. It's not unusual. You just need to develop in yourself what is inside of you and you need to make sure you don't just throw it away. You have to work, you have to develop yourself because any stopping or falling backwards is a risk that you'll end up in a place that is so uninteresting.... You change and the world around you changes. Old friends fade away and new friends appear, even more beautiful ones. I don't know where they come from. I still go to groups to study holodynamics ... we stay in contact with each other and we help each other. I even give law consultations.

Despite her confidence in the influence of the individual self, Liuba also makes note of the importance of the social environment. And while she is proud of her individual accomplishments as both a lawyer and a practitioner of self-development, Liuba makes clear that desire and ability are not enough to succeed in Russian society today. She laments the passing of state-funded education and is critical of the market economy.

Don't believe any advertisements that claim that in Russia you can start a business with just enthusiasm. It's all nonsense. We have a TV program now that spreads these lies—called *I'll Do It Myself* (*Ia sama*). We don't really have a middle class here. We have contrasts—either very rich or very poor. Although there is a huge professional potential. We have many female specialists who've received excellent educations, because of their work ethic and because education was still free during Soviet times. People were able to develop themselves as individuals, were able to find a social position, and then everything was destroyed in our system of crises—social and economic. I know many women, even with PhDs, who work as store clerks. I have a good friend who's a chemist-technologist and has some other degree as well and she works selling cosmetics at a market.

In her discourse, she highlights both the role of individual work ethic and free education in shaping success. Critical of a contemporary society that she regards as devaluing educational accomplishments, particularly of women, Liuba waxes nostalgic

about key social institutions from the Soviet system, with a particular focus on social safety networks, which she views as important not only for supporting those less well-off economically but also for creating an environment that enables self-development.

We had a wonderful system of resorts, we had a wonderful system of free pathologists, the best specialists.... It was a golden time for Russia when Brezhnev was in power.... From the janitor to the director of a factory, [everyone] could with their own money that they got from their job travel to the south and back, and our trips were paid for out of an insurance fund. Professional unions worked. The system of sick days still worked, although now it's all falling apart. And free medicine—of course there are always good and bad specialists—but there was a certain sense of responsibility. There should be free medicine because there will always be a class of poor people who need it. How can we leave them without help?

Liuba's narrative complicates the standard analysis of self-help in the production of the neoliberal self. She is well-off financially and her practices are focused on developing her inner powers. Highly confident and successful in all aspects of her life, one might expect her to be apolitical, locating the cause of her wellbeing squarely within herself (Matza 2012; Salmenniemi 2012). Certainly, she is proud of her accomplishments, but at the same time she is socially aware and critical. Her perspective is not determined by her self-help practices or her social class. Selectively drawing on her experiences and understandings from Soviet and post-Soviet society, Liuba finds elements to appreciate and critique from both. Drawing on different inspirations and experiences, her self is not easily compartmentalized.

## CONCLUSION

Focused on the inner self, personal responsibility, and choice, the self-help practitioners presented here seem at first like hallmarks of neoliberal subjectivity. Engaged in self-help methods focused on finding happiness within, they could easily be expected to foster a self-oriented culture that justifies social inequalities and engenders disengagement with the political-economic sphere. In fact, their stories are more interesting and complex. Difficult to categorize or quantify, the narratives and practices presented here are significant in the contradictions of their totality. They are significant not because they represent some sort of unique or special phenomenon, nor because the practitioners have access to supernatural powers or depths of emotional and physical strength. On the contrary, in their interactions, interpretations, and critiques of their changing social environments, their stories speak to the everyday struggles of people living in post-Soviet Moscow.

Frustratingly ambiguous and by some accounts a retreat from analyses of power, the narratives here are nonetheless worth conveying. Rather than denying the connection between self-help and neoliberal governmentality, the narratives expose a complementary repertoire of discourses and practices and confirm the importance of Lerner's plea to seek out competing interpretations (2011:134). Finding inspiration and critique in Soviet and post-Soviet institutions, the narratives and practices indi-

cate the increasing entrenchment of neoliberal formations in post-Soviet Moscow, but at the same time they point to an engagement with social concerns that suggests limitations in neoliberalism's totalizing power. As Andrew Kipnis cautions, not all practices commonly associated with neoliberalism can be attributed to neoliberalism as such (2008:283). In some cases, as I have argued elsewhere (Honey 2012), seemingly neoliberal practices have roots in the Soviet social sphere. In other cases, discourses that ostensibly align with neoliberal ideals may not be indicative of neoliberal practices or perspectives at all. Of equal importance, they highlight Kipnis's assertion that even those practices actively engaged in neoliberal promotion, "have rarely led to economic efficiency and growth, well-functioning markets, or autonomous individuals, let alone fully individuated, law-abiding, rational, liberal, and disciplined subjects" (2008:285). It is to this blurry space, so very human in its imperfection, that the self-help narratives presented here most vividly speak. As Sveta attests, most people do not want to be robots.

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## ГРУППЫ САМОПОМОЩИ В ПОСТСОВЕТСКОЙ МОСКВЕ: НЕОЛИБЕРАЛЬНЫЕ ДИСКУРСЫ «Я» (SELF) И СОЦИАЛЬНАЯ КРИТИКА

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*Эта статья основана на исследовании, проведенном при поддержке гранта на научно-исследовательскую работу Совета по международным исследованиям и обменов (IREX–IARO) и гранта на профессиональное развитие Конгресса специалистов Городского университета Нью-Йорка (PSC–CUNY). Я бы хотела поблагодарить Геральда Крида за вдумчивые комментарии. Я также благодарна трем анонимным рецензентам и редакторам Laboratorium за критику и полезные замечания.*

Эта статья посвящена рассмотрению антропологических дискуссий о «Я» и роли дискурсов самопомощи в производстве неолиберальной субъективности на территории постсоветской России. Эти дискурсы исследуются на основе материалов, собранных в ходе полевой работы в сфере самопомощи в Москве, с учетом интерпретаций и опыта ее участников. Анализ историй жизни и практик участников групп самопомощи послужил отправной точкой для оценки влияния неолиберальных реформ и распространения потребительского капитализма в постсоветском обществе. Мои этнографические изыскания подтвердили, что в этих группах имеют место интенсивная социальная вовлеченность и критика, предоставляющие участникам доступ к разнообразным «культурным ресурсам», которые необходимы для осмысления личного опыта в изменившихся социальных условиях. Из-за смешения разных философий, религиозных убеждений и лечебных практик (а также советских и постсоветских идеалов) участников довольно трудно однозначно подвести под какие-либо теоретические или идеологические категории. Их рассказы и практики ставят под сомнение стандартные идеи о сфере самопомощи и тотальной власти неолиберальных формаций в постсоветском контексте.

**Ключевые слова:** личность; самопомощь; Москва; альтернативное здоровье; неолиберализм