**Metaphors and identity in self-help books:**

**An emerging typology**

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**Abstract**

This article presents a snapshot of a typology I have developed to explain the connections between ideology and style in self-help books. I propose that self-help books typically promote one of seven conceptions of selfhood, and that each is communicated through a unique configuration of stylistic features. Here I focus on one of those stylistic features – metaphor – and demonstrate how it is used to convey three different conceptions of selfhood in a corpus of bestselling self-help books.

**Keywords**

Self-help, metaphor, ideology, style, selfhood, identity, corpus

**Introduction**

Global sales of self-help books have skyrocketed over recent decades. A Gallup survey estimates that one in three Americans has purchased a self-help book (McGee, 2005: 11), while Gauntlett (2008: 4) reports that 6.8 million are sold annually in the UK. Even in the grip of recession, the self-help publishing industry continues to thrive, with UK book sales amounting to upwards of £9 million in 2011 (Nielsen BookScan, March 2012, personal communication). Besides the vast numbers who consume self-help literature directly, the language of self-help pervades popular culture and infiltrates other discourses to such an extent that the impact of self-help books is clearly not limited to the large numbers who actually read them. Given the genre’s widespread influence, it is therefore surprising that to date there has been no linguistic investigation of the ideologies encoded in self-help books.

Seeking to address this lacuna, my research investigates how assumptions about selfhood are naturalised through the language of self-help books. I propose that self-help books typically promote one of seven conceptions of selfhood, and that each is communicated through a unique configuration of stylistic features. This article focuses on one of those stylistic features – metaphor – and demonstrates how it is used to convey three different conceptions of selfhood in a corpus of bestselling self-help books.

**Previous studies of self-help literature: The missing link**

In contrast to the dearth of linguistic analysis of self-help books, the disciplines of psychology, sociology and cultural studies have produced a wealth of research on the topic. Yet while several of these studies have provided valuable insights into self-help literature’s role in Western culture (e.g. Dolby, 2008; Simonds, 1992; Starker, 1989), they have largely overlooked the range of identities promoted by self-help books, and the fact that these are encoded in stylistic patterns. Most depict the genre as stylistically and ideologically homogenous, arguing that all self-help books conform to similar linguistic patterns and tacitly support a capitalist agenda by promoting values of competitiveness and self-responsibility (e.g. Rimke, 2000; Hazelden, 2003; McGee, 2005; Hochschild, 1994).

Only two commentators allude to the fundamental connections between ideology and style in self-help books. The first is Askehave (2004: 28), whose analysis of how New Age ideologies are communicated through language in the self-help book *If Life is a Game, These are the Rules* leads her to conclude that ‘linguistic features such as word definitions, metaphors, personifications and parables are extremely value-laden and perform an important role in the construction of [New Age] discourse’. Nevertheless, her analysis stops short of the idea that metaphor choices and other linguistic features can be used to classify books according to the models of identity they promote. Moreover, limiting her study to one self-help book prevents any assessment of whether specific metaphors are typical of, or unique to, books underpinned by New Age ideologies.

Dolby (2008), on the other hand, acknowledges that self-help books promote a finite range of identities, but fails to explore how these are conveyed through language. She identifies four ‘concepts of self’ common in self-help books: the ‘obligated self’, the ‘social self’, the ‘wounded self’ and the ‘detached self’ (Dolby, 2008: 21-24). However, while she broadly distinguishes between self-help books on the basis of their formats – whether they are written as parables, essays or how-to manuals – her study does not engage in any further stylistic analysis or link the books’ structures with these four concepts of self. Furthermore, while I support Dolby’s view that self-help books can be categorized according to their underlying conceptions of identity, I maintain that these identities can only be uncovered through linguistic analysis, and that self-help books are underpinned by seven, not four, distinct conceptions of selfhood.

**My emerging typology**

I propose that self-help books typically promote one of seven conceptions of selfhood, and that each of these is communicated through a unique configuration of stylistic features. I refer to these conceptions of selfhood as:

* the Rational Self
* the Sovereign Self
* the Strategic Self
* the Defective Self
* the Optimal Self
* the Transcendent Self
* the Liberal Self.

Each term encompasses a different set of assumptions about the self and its relationship to society, which tend to be naturalised through the same recurring stylistic patterns.

The stylistic features through which these conceptions of identity are communicated include metaphors, transitivity and modality patterns, and the books’ cover designs. Some features, such as metaphor, are used in different ways used across all seven categories, thus facilitating direct comparisons between different conceptions of selfhood. Others are unique to specific Selves: for instance, books underpinned by the Liberal Self are characterized by frequent expressions of negation, which are not common to the other six categories.

In the following sections, I demonstrate how the conceptual metaphors associated with three of these conceptions of selfhood – the Rational Self, the Sovereign Self and the Liberal Self – naturalise different assumptions about identity.

**Theoretical framework: Conceptual metaphor theory**

My analysis is grounded in conceptual metaphor theory, which asserts that metaphor is not merely a linguistic phenomenon but that we actually think in metaphors – we understand one conceptual domain (the target domain) in terms of another (the source domain) (Lakoff and Johnson, 1980: 6). A conceptual metaphor is a ‘mapping’ of correspondences between source and target domains; for example, the conceptual metaphor ARGUMENT IS WAR conceives of arguments as battles, individuals as opposing sides, and so on, and is realised through metaphorical expressions such as *he attacked my position* (Kövecses, 2002: 6).

The partial nature of metaphorical mappings – the fact that only those aspects of the source domain consistent with the target domain are mapped onto it – means that one’s understanding of a target concept will be influenced by the source domain chosen to conceptualise it (Lakoff and Johnson, 1980: 10). For example, the conceptual metaphors LIFE IS A DANCE and LIFE IS A MACHINE will generate contrasting representations of life because their underlying mappings hide and highlight different aspects of the LIFE target domain. For this reason, it is widely accepted that metaphors have the power to shape our worldviews, and that metaphor analysis can uncover the implicit values and assumptions underpinning those discourses and practices we routinely take for granted (Lakoff and Turner, 1989: 63; Semino, 2008: 31; Charteris-Black, 2004: 24).

**Corpus approach to metaphor analysis**

To investigate how metaphor choices in self-help books reflect different conceptions of selfhood, I used corpus methods to explore patterns in metaphor use across 50 bestselling texts.1 The benefit of applying corpus approaches to metaphor analysis is that they enable quantification of the occurrence of particular metaphors and can reveal collocational patterns in their realisations, thereby facilitating assessment of their ideological functions (Charteris-Black, 2004: 32-33; Semino, 2008: 199-200).

Following Charteris-Black’s (2004) approach, I first created a smaller sample corpus containing the first and last chapter of the top 15 bestsellers, which I manually searched for metaphorical expressions. This approach is based on the theory that manual analysis of a small section of a corpus will reveal most of the key metaphors in the whole corpus (Charteris-Black 2004: 35-6). The first and last chapters of each book were selected for the sample corpus because self-help authors tend to use more metaphorical language at the beginnings and ends of their books, presumably because at these points they are reinforcing particular metaphors that are central to their overall message. This observation is supported by Semino’s (2008: 24-5) claim that metaphor ‘clusters’ typically occur at the beginning and end of texts to frame the discussion.

Having identified all metaphorical expressions in the sample corpus, I extrapolated conceptual metaphors from those that represented TARGET IS SOURCE mappings. I then generated lists of lexemes relating to all source domains and searched the whole corpus for each one, analysing the concordances generated to determine whether each use was literal or metaphorical. Each metaphorical expression was analysed in context to uncover the ideological connotations attached to it; this involved ascertaining which aspects of the target domain were being highlighted or hidden, and identifying any evaluative language embedded in the surrounding text.

This process enabled me to detect patterns in the distribution of certain metaphors across the corpus, and group books according to the conceptions of selfhood being communicated through those metaphors.

For the purposes of this article, I have limited my discussion to those metaphors I deemed to be most salient to the three conceptions of selfhood under investigation. My analysis of the key metaphors associated with the Rational, Sovereign and Liberal Selves is presented in the following sections.

**Metaphors associated with the Rational Self**

The core beliefs underpinning the Rational conception of selfhood are that people are rational, self-determining and mechanical in nature. Self-help authors writing in this tradition tend to assume that thoughts and emotions are subject to conscious control and can be managed and manipulated. Consequently, they view personal development as a logical and relatively straightforward process. They also emphasize goals and outcomes, viewing self-development as a sequential process culminating in the achievement of a predetermined objective.

Self-help books underpinned by the Rational Self include those that discuss happiness and success in terms of goal-setting and step-by-step techniques. They tend to be written from an ‘expert’ perspective and grounded in a specific theory or discipline.

Rational Self authors typically draw on metaphorical source domains relating to technology, such as MACHINES, COMPUTERS and ELECTRICAL CIRCUITS to depict the individual as rational and mechanical in terms of their cognitive processes. For example, in the following extract from *Instant Confidence*, Paul McKenna uses the metaphor THE MIND IS A COMPUTER to reinforce his view that adopting new beliefs is a straightforward process akin to programming a computer.

1. Your mind is like a **computer** - it has its own **software** which helps you to organize your thinking and behaviour. If you have a behaviour you want to change, it's just a matter of conditioning or **programming**… almost all problems stem from the same cause - negative **programmes** **running** in the unconscious mind. (McKenna, 2006: 40)

This metaphorical expression presents the process of changing one’s attitudes as straightforward and systematic, requiring only the application of McKenna’s simple techniques as opposed to a lengthy programme of introspection. Conceptualising ways of thinking as programmes that can be replaced and upgraded also implies that the human mind operates according to rational laws that can be exploited to achieve certain results. The psyche is viewed not as a complex, unchartable territory but as a machine whose processes are systematic, observable and therefore manageable. Thus this metaphor represents the process of personal growth as logical and simple, requiring only the discipline needed to implement the advice being dispensed.

Authors who subscribe to the Rational conception of selfhood also make frequent use of the source domains PLANTS and GARDENS to depict change as a systematic process and emphasize the individual’s control over their thoughts and actions. Conceptual metaphors in this category include A PERSON IS A PLANT and LIFE IS A GARDEN. In most cases, it is the structure of a plant or garden that is mapped onto the target domain in order to highlight the causal connections between the reader’s actions and outcomes and to encourage them to view their life as a manageable project, as in example (2) from *CBT for Dummies*.

1. **Think of your life as a garden**. Unhealthy, rigid ways of thinking […] are **the weeds in your garden**. **The flowers** consist of your healthy flexible thinking… You need to **continuously water and feed the flowers, and uproot the weeds to keep your garden healthy.** (Willson and Branch, 2006: 243)

By encouraging readers to conceive of their life as a garden where ‘healthy’ and ‘unhealthy’ thoughts can be clearly differentiated, the authors imply that it is reasonably straightforward to discard damaging thoughts and cultivate desirable ones. Although readers are warned that this is a ‘continuous’ and demanding process, the fact that they are placed in the role of gardener suggests that they are capable of choosing and disregarding thoughts at will. This set of conceptual mappings encourages readers to aspire to a state of permanent self-consciousness where they are required to constantly monitor their mental processes and take the actions needed to maintain their psychological health.

The metaphor LIFE IS A JOURNEY is also key to books endorsing the Rational Self. Journey metaphors are used across all seven categories, but they are particularly frequent in books promoting the Rational Self, where they are used to emphasize the sequential nature of personal development and the importance of goal-setting. In example (3) from *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People* by Stephen Covey, the ‘destination’ element of the JOURNEY source domain is used to highlight the importance of having clear aims in life, and the conceptual slots for ‘steps’ and ‘direction’ correspond to implementing a plan for achieving these. The focus in this example, as with other Rational Self realizations of journey metaphors, is on forward planning, progress and achievement.

1. To begin with the end in mind means to start with a clear understanding of your **destination**. It means to know **where you’re going** so that you better understand where you are now and so that the **steps** you take are always in the right **direction**. (Covey, 2004: 98)

These examples show that self-help books underpinned by the Rational conception of identity typically draw on source domains relating to technology, plants and journeys to present the individual as self-determining and to depict personal development as a straightforward, methodical process. Authors who subscribe to this conception of selfhood assume that the brain operates according to mechanical principles and that mental processes can be controlled and improved through the application of knowledge and reason. All of the above metaphorical expressions encourage readers to view themselves as fully in control of their lives and their experiences.

**Metaphors associated with the Sovereign Self**

Whereas Rational Self authors emphasise the need for discipline and action in pursuing one’s goals, authors who promote the Sovereign Self argue that readers can manifest their desires through sheer belief. They conceive of success in mainly material terms, and claim that a ‘law of attraction’ at work in the universe means that individuals attract circumstances that resonate with their dominant thoughts. According to this philosophy, a person’s condition in life is entirely a product of their thinking.

The Sovereign Self has its roots in the discourse of New Thought, a religious movement based on a belief in the power of the mind to create success or failure, which emerged in America in the late nineteenth century (Weiss, 1969: 130-134). Its proponents claimed that one could make any desire a reality merely by fervently believing in the desired outcome. This conception of selfhood underpins the recent proliferation of books on ‘cosmic ordering’, which encourage readers to believe that they can attract anything they want through the power of thought.

Self-help authors who endorse the Sovereign Self employ metaphors for invisible forces, such as A PERSON IS A MAGNET and A PERSON IS A TRANMISSION TOWER, to persuade readers of their inner power and to reinforce the idea that thoughts emit an invisible energy that is nonetheless real. They also draw on the source domains OBJECTS and SUBSTANCES to conceptualize thoughts as items that can be discarded at will and thus present the process of changing one’s mental processes as easy and automatic. Other common metaphors are those that represent the universe as a repository of wealth and opportunities from which desires can be ‘ordered’, such as THE UNIVERSE IS A CATALOGUE and THE UNIVERSE IS A RESTAURANT.

In example (4) from *Ask and it is Given*, Esther and Jerry Hicks use the metaphor A PERSON IS A MAGNET to explain how the law of attraction operates and convince readers that they already possess the ability to attract the things they desire.

1. Like a **magnet**, you are **attracting** thoughts, people, events, lifestyles... [A]s you see things as you would like them to be, you **attract** them as you would like them to be. (Hicks, 2004: 153)

This conceptual mapping implies that if the reader thinks the right thoughts, they cannot fail to attract their desires, in the same way that a magnet cannot help but attract other magnetic objects. Furthermore, it implies that the reader does not have to take any action to obtain their desires; they need only wait for their ‘magnetic’ power to exert its force and do the work for them. This outlook runs contrary to the Rational Self’s view that self-improvement requires action and self-discipline. According to the Sovereign conception of identity, improving one’s life requires merely wishing for things and trusting in the desired outcome.

While authors promoting the Sovereign conception of selfhood commonly use metaphors relating to invisible forces to convey the individual’s power to influence the world, they tend to represent thoughts by drawing on the more tangible source domains of OBJECTS and SUBSTANCES, as example (5) from *The Cosmic Ordering Service* demonstrates.

1. It is time, simply, to **dissolve** those thought forms, those habits that are no longer serving you. […] In this moment of awareness, the strength and the intention of this commitment gather energy which begins to **dissolve** that thought form, that habit pattern. (Mohr, 2001: 33)

Here, thoughts are conceptualized as substances that the reader can decide to ‘dissolve’ at will. Viewing thoughts as objects and substances that can be manipulated and discarded suggests that the process of changing one’s thoughts is simple and reinforces the idea that the individual is all-powerful, capable of creating anything they desire.

Sovereign Self authors also employ metaphors that represent the universe as a repository of goods and experiences. In example (6), Byrne uses the conceptual metaphor THE UNIVERSE IS A CATALOGUE to explain the rationale behind *The Secret*’s philosophy.

1. It's like having the Universe as your **catalogue**. You **flip through it** and say, “I’d like to have this experience and I'd like to have that product…” It is You **placing your order** with the Universe. (Byrne, 2006: 48)

By inviting readers to apply their knowledge about the process of ordering from a catalogue to the target domain of THE UNIVERSE, Byrne insinuates that the universe operates according to a similar procedural logic which, once grasped by the reader, can be exploited to obtain their desires. Conceiving of the universe as a catalogue implies that everything one could possibly ‘order’ through the power of thought is already available; one does not need to create it, since everything one could wish for is currently being stored in some kind of cosmic warehouse. Moreover, it suggests that the world’s resources are infinite and that consequently the universe can always satisfy readers’ demands, regardless of their extravagance or how many other people request the same things.

Given that the Sovereign Self is grounded in the belief that a person can achieve anything they want through sheer mind-power, it is not surprising that books in this category make little use of the JOURNEY source domain, which is frequently used in Rational Self books to highlight the need for planning and methodical action. Nevertheless, it is worth noting how the few examples of journey metaphors that do occur in Sovereign Self books are used in an entirely opposite sense, to emphasize the lack of effort required to exploit the ‘law of attraction’, as in example (7) from *The Secret*.

1. The fun is that there are many **shortcuts** to The Secret, and you get to choose the **shortcuts** that work best for you. (Byrne, 2006: 29)

Rather than discuss the ‘obstacles’ readers might face on their ‘road’ to success, Byrne draws on the generally unutilized ‘shortcut’ element of the JOURNEY source domain to underscore the ease with which readers can think their desires into existence. This mapping depicts the process of harnessing one’s mental powers as easy, and reinforces the belief that readers can bypass the conventionally taxing routes to happiness and achieve their dreams with minimal effort.

In summary, Sovereign Self authors typically employ metaphors that represent the individual as all-powerful and represent the universe as a source of limitless wealth, which operates according to simple principles that can easily be exploited for material gain. They also conceptualize thoughts as objects that can be dropped at will, and depict the process of improving one’s life as easy and fun. By selecting metaphors that highlight these beliefs, they simultaneously downplay the potential difficulties one might encounter in trying to alter their thoughts through sheer willpower, and deny that readers are influenced by numerous environmental factors beyond their control.

**Metaphors associated with the Liberal Self**

In contrast to the Sovereign Self’s belief that the individual is omnipotent and impervious to social forces, the Liberal conception of selfhood acknowledges the reader’s embeddedness in society – both in terms of their moral responsibilities and their limited capacity to influence events.

I refer to this conception of identity as the Liberal Self because its values are closely aligned with the philosophies of liberalism and humanism. Self-help books belonging to this category endorse the liberal ideals of individual freedom and equal rights (Gaus, 2003: 1, 4), and the humanist conviction that humans have a responsibility to use their unique capacity for reason to create a fair society (Fowler, 1999: 10).

Yet while the Liberal conception of selfhood is predicated on these values, some of them exist in an uneasy relationship to one another. For instance, the Liberal Self’s insistence on personal freedom jars with its sense of social responsibility, and its belief that individuals must attach their own meanings to life has the potential to conflict with its concern for upholding shared moral principles. The tension between these beliefs is reflected in the ambivalent view of individual autonomy exhibited by self-help books in this category.

Liberal Self authors simultaneously argue that readers are responsible for their own happiness, while encouraging them to accept that they have limited control over the world. They also urge readers to live as they choose, while simultaneously promoting a sense of civic duty. In their attempts to resolve these ambiguities and present a coherent philosophy, books in this category tend to fall along a continuum ranging from a more conservative outlook which prioritizes readers’ responsibilities to others and views them as having some influence on the world, to a more radical attitude which advocates total personal freedom and acceptance of one’s lack of control in life.

The oppositions inherent in the Liberal Self’s outlook are captured in the key metaphors associated with this category, which are often used to reconcile seemingly paradoxical ideas. For instance, authors frequently employ the metaphor LIFE IS A GAME to convey their sense that life is governed by certain moral principles and at the same time their belief that in the absence of any transcendental truth, it is up to the individual to create their own meaning. The different connotations attached to this metaphor are apparent in the following examples from *The Rules of Life* by Richard Templar and *How to Get a Grip* by Matthew Kimberley.

1. … if we follow a few basic **'Rules** of Life' we tend to get more done, shrug off adversity more easily… and spread a little happiness around us as we go. People who **play by the Rules** seem to… have more enthusiasm for life and cope better. (Templar, 2006: xii)
2. … you need to take yourself less seriously. […] Life is not a competition, it’s a **game**. There are no **winners** or **losers**. We all end up dead. (Kimberley, 2011: 1)

Just as a game has its own rules and internal logic, Templar proposes that life is governed by certain ethical principles which are designed to ensure the happiness of the individual and society at large. His observation that people ought to ‘play by the Rules’ reflects an assumption that everyone is obliged to uphold the same basic moral code.

Contrastingly, Kimberley uses the game metaphor to promote a hedonistic attitude to life, urging readers to remember that it does not matter in any transcendental sense, and that they are free to live as they choose. He explicitly instructs readers to ‘take life less seriously’ and reminds them the ‘game’ of life only culminates in death. These examples illustrate how Liberal Self authors can elaborate the same conceptual metaphor differently to emphasise different aspects of their worldview.

Another commonly occurring metaphor in books underpinned by the Liberal Self is LIFE IS A JOURNEY, which we have already seen is key to the Rational conception of selfhood. Yet whereas Rational Self authors use journey metaphors to emphasize the sequential nature of personal development, Liberal Self authors use them to encourage readers to develop a thick-skinned attitude towards life’s difficulties. In example (10) from *Change Your Life in 7 Steps*, John Bird uses a journey metaphor to challenge the assumption that life ought to be easy.

1. Where is it written that life is meant to be a purely rosy **journey?** I know somebody who feels that if she and her husband argue, their marriage is a total write-off. That’s like saying if the car needs cleaning, you should get a new car. (Bird, 2006: 19)

Far from than the ‘rosy journey’ depicted in books underpinned by the Sovereign Self, the Liberal Self views life as a grueling expedition requiring tenacity and perseverance. Bird draws on the analogy of replacing a car that merely needs cleaning to highlight the absurdity of expecting life to be problem-free and perceiving one’s situation as doomed if problems arise. On the contrary, he suggests that we should expect life to be challenging, and cultivate a philosophical approach to tackling its difficulties.

Liberal Self authors also represent life as beyond the individual’s control by drawing on source domains relating to vehicles. In example (11) from *F\*\*k It,* John Parkin uses the metaphor LIFE IS A VEHICLE to encourage readers to accept their lack of control over the world.

1. It’s time to **take your hands off the wheel of life.** And you will indeed discover that **it runs along quite happily without you doing a thing.** It’s time to rest, to put your feet up and sit back and **enjoy the ride** for a change. […] Because the reality is that, whether you want it or not, it’s going to happen (or not). (Parkin, 2010: 111-2)

Parkin urges readers to see themselves not as the self-directing ‘drivers’ of their lives, but as passengers who have little say in what happens to them. Conceptualizing life as a vehicle that drives itself implies that it is a force that operates independently of the reader – a perspective that is clearly at odds with the Sovereign Self’s assurance that a person’s circumstances are entirely a product of their thoughts. However, rather than perceiving this as a cause for concern, Parkin suggests that our lack of power is liberating because it absolves us of the need to take responsibility for everything. By encouraging readers to ‘sit back and enjoy the ride’, he implies that we should simply accept the world the way it is, since we are powerless to change it.

Yet paradoxically, while Liberal Self authors use vehicle metaphors to represent life as a force beyond the individual’s control, they also use the metaphor TAKING ACTION IS STANDING UP to persuade readers to take responsibility for their own happiness. In example (12), Kimberley contrasts those who ‘take responsibility’ and turn negative experiences to their advantage with those who languish in misery and ‘can’t get up off their backsides’. By equating taking action with the simple act of standing up, Kimberley insinuates that unhappiness is a product of laziness and self-pity. The implication of this conceptual mapping is that everyone has the resources to overcome ‘terrible time[s]’ and should deal with setbacks by forging on, rather than blaming others for one’s unhappy state.

1. What’s the difference between those who come through, breathing and laughing and wearing Rolexes on the other side of a terrible time, and those who can’t **get up off their backsides and brush themselves off**? […] The difference is this: Some people TAKE RESPONSIBILITY. (Kimberley, 2011: 13)

Although it might appear contradictory that authors draw on metaphors to represent individuals as having little control over life on the one hand and considerable self-control on the other, in fact both perspectives are compatible with the Liberal Self’s overall philosophy. While the Liberal conception of identity is rooted in the belief that individuals are subject to forces over which they have little control, it also suggests that people should make the best of their situation by taking responsibility for the things over which they do have control, and try insofar as they are able to make life better for themselves and those around them.

The key metaphors associated with the Liberal Self are thus used to encompass a spectrum of beliefs, ranging from more conservative views about the obligation to adhere to a moral framework and accommodate oneself to life’s hardships, to more radical ideas about pushing personal freedom to its limits and embracing life’s uncertainties. Uniting the opposite ends of this ideological spectrum, however, is a fundamental belief in the values of freedom and equality, an acceptance that individuals have limited control over the world, and the conviction that everyone is responsible for their own happiness.

**Conclusion**

The analysis presented in this article reveals that far from being an ideologically and stylistically homogenous body of literature, the genre of self-help is characterized by the diversity of its outlooks and the stylistic patterns used to communicate them. Comparing the values promoted by the key metaphors associated with the Rational, Sovereign and Liberal Selves shows that each conception of selfhood differs in its attitude towards a range of issues, including the extent to which individuals are in control of themselves and the world around them, the degree to which they are responsible to others, and the ease with which they can obtain their desires.

Yet notwithstanding the genre’s diversity, this analysis also demonstrates that self-help books promote a closed set of discrete identities, which are consistently conveyed through the same stylistic features. In both ideological and stylistic terms, self-help literature is therefore simultaneously more varied and more formulaic than any previous studies have recognised: while self-help books do not unanimously endorse the same values, the range of identities they promote is demonstrably finite, and each is associated with specific stylistic conventions.

The findings emerging from this research are obviously significant for our understanding of the discourse of self-help literature, but perhaps even more importantly they can provide an insight into the way ideologies of identity are encoded in language on a broader scale. The consistency with which the Rational, Sovereign and Liberal conceptions of selfhood are encoded in the same linguistic patterns suggests that they (and the remaining conceptions not explored in this article) are not merely products of the self-help publishing industry but reflect the various ways we think and talk about ourselves in the Western world. Although they are explicitly documented in self-help books through recurring stylistic patterns, it is probably more accurate to see them as abstract units of cultural knowledge that transcend the genre of self-help altogether. Self-help books are merely the mediators of these models of identity; they simultaneously reflect and reinforce the dominant conceptions of selfhood available to us in Western culture.

My emerging typology therefore raises significant questions for future research. Firstly, it highlights the need for a reader response study to assess personal and social implications of subscribing to the various conceptions of selfhood being tacitly promoted by self-help books, as well as the extent to which readers are influenced by their messages. Secondly, it points to the need for further work to determine whether the same conceptions of selfhood and their attendant linguistic patterns underpin other discourses. If so, the typology may offer a way to reevaluate and challenge the assumptions on which those discourses are founded. It could also have applications in the therapeutic domain; for example, it could help therapists using self-help books as additional aids to identify the books whose underlying values are most congruent with their approach.

Clearly much work is still needed to unravel the connections between ideology and style in self-help books, but I believe my developing typology offers the most useful way proposed so far of exploring the genre. The analysis I have presented in this article suggests that it is only through stylistic analysis that we can adequately uncover the ideologies underpinning self-help books and, in doing so, derive a nuanced understanding of how our tacit assumptions about selfhood frame the way we live.

**Notes**

1. This list was obtained from Nielsen BookScan, a market research company, and represented the top 50 best-selling self-help books in the UK and Ireland over a five-year period between 2006 and 2011.

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