Modern Tragedies in Self-Help Literature, Blogs and Online Universes

Conceptions of Resilience as a Literary Phenomenon

Abstract

Focusing on the configuration of the relationship between fate and freedom of action, this article analyses recent self-help literature and online communities, particularly the genre that centres on the concept of resilience. The selected works and websites all address readers who suffer from depression, anxiety and stress. The article focuses on how the relationship between fate and freedom is represented in three literary figures: the reader, who is promised recovery; the narrator, who promises to save the reader from the mental illnesses; and the plot that the reader forms by his or her personal thoughts, feelings and experiences. Furthermore, fate and freedom will be analysed in a series of allegories and metaphors. We argue that each literary figure reflects a radical understanding of individual autonomy, i.e. freedom of action. However, we also argue that each literary figure has a shadowy disadvantage, which activates a tragic reversal of fate. The article analyses how this self-help genre reflects a notion of tragedy in relation to mental suffering.

Introduction

In recent years, following statistical increases of stress, depression and anxiety, the mental health self-help genre, and especially the subgenre concerning resilience has become remarkably prominent. Books, blogs, online communities and a number of self-care products are marketed with promises of mental healing and relief from the hassles of everyday life. The genre is continuously expanding onto various analogue and digital platforms with the overall mission to instruct readers, listeners and followers in solving personal problems. The resilience genre argues that its readers have the freedom to eliminate mental health issues by training psychological resilience and robustness. It even claims that mental suffering can strengthen the psychology of the reader and increase quality of life if only the strategies and advice of the genre are performed in everyday life. In many ways resilience is a trendy and very popular buzzword in the widespread industry of self-help and personal development. Yet there is a pronounced lack of literature concerning the literary aesthetics of the genre. Hence, the aim of this article is to make a textual analysis of the literary characteristics of the resilience genre on the genre’s own terms.
Self-help literature and similar tools to increase self-realization are often under fire from branches of academic psychologists and cultural theorists (Gill & Orgad, 2018). The criticism is that self-help literature, directly or indirectly, gives readers the blame for their own pain and the full responsibility for their own mental health – and hereby removes society's responsibility for protecting the individual politically, culturally and socially. Many critical voices point out that the self-help genre overestimates individual autonomy – especially the freedom to choose our own feelings, thoughts and habits - and that the genre creates the illusion that we control our own mental states (Gill & Orgad, 2018). The French sociologist Alain Ehrenberg (1950) believes that the self-help genre leads to actual exhaustion and depression, because it contributes to a social context, where success in every aspect of human life is expected of the autonomous individual (Ehrenberg, 2016). The American author and political activist Barbara Ehrenreich has linked positive psychology and the stereotype of American people as upbeat, cheerful and optimistic with a widespread national self-blame for not being able to live up to this ideal (Ehrenreich, 2010). The historian of ideas Michel Foucault (1926 -1984) has described self-help authors as a Californian cult (Foucault, 1997) and in Denmark, psychology professor Svend Brinkmann (1975) has led the criticism with his genre parody “Stand Firm”, in which he advises the reader to “cut out the navel-gazing”. All you will find is your guts, he points out (Brinkmann, 2014). In some areas of the humanistic-academic tradition, self-help literature is thus considered to be part of a negative situation that the genre otherwise claims to be able to remedy. In the same way, self-help literature is often accused of turning neoliberal efficacy requirements into ethical challenges with which readers can chastise themselves (Gill & Orgad, 2018). Both the Canadian sociology professor Heidi Marie Rimke and British social theorist Nikolas Rose claim that self-help literature is intrinsically linked to political power and the governmental management of populations – whereby self-help literature and other psy disciplines creates less individual autonomy rather than more (Rimke, 2000; Rose, 1990).

The critical sociological and psychological voices often treat the genre as part of a general self-realisation trend, which it surely also is. The self-help critique is in many ways a part of a larger academic research area, the psy-complex which investigates ways of understanding human beings in psychological terms emerged in different social contexts. For example, in “Self Help, Inc.” the cultural theorist and sociologist Micki McGee reviews the history of self-help literature and the various associated genres in an attempt to answer the question: “Why Doesn't Self-Help Help?” (McGee, 2005). In “Saving the Modern Soul: Therapy, Emotions, and The Culture of Self-Help” professor of sociology Eva Illouz investigates the significance of self-help literature and other therapeutic discourses for today's perception of identity (Illouz, 2008). Finally, the Danish psychology professor Ole Jacob Madsen considers social representations in self-help
literature’s sub-genres concerning such topics as neurolinguistics and mindfulness. In “Optimizing the self: Social Representations of Self-Help” he considers the genre as an expression of a global therapeutic culture (Madsen, 2015).

Even though the sociological and psychological critique of the self-help genre is deeply relevant and apt in many ways, there is a pronounced lack of textual analysis of the self-help literature’s literary devices. Bestseller lists and estimated sales figures indicate that self-help tools are pervasive cultural products that also need to be examined as literary phenomena. In-depth literary analysis can add important nuances to cultural criticism. We will therefore expand on and refine the sociological and psychological self-help criticism by analysing how the reader, the narrator and the plot serve as literary figures in contemporary self-help literature and in subgenres such as self-help blogs, magazines and online universes. In this article, we will expose how problematic aspects of self-therapeutic and self-realisation trends are expressed in various forms of self-help literature and other kinds of written self-help tools by means of literary techniques. Thus, our critique is not just aimed at the genre’s ideological level of value, but as a literary analysis also aimed at the rhetorical level at which those values are articulated and indeed constructed.

The latest addition to the self-help genre is a branch that is centred on the concept of resilience. With illustrations depicting elastic bands and springs, the basic idea is that the reader can become resilient to mental disorders such as stress, depression and anxiety by following the books’ instructions – and even grow stronger through experiencing mental disease, in the same way in which a spring must be pressed right down before it can spring back up to its highest point. In recent years the critical political, sociological and cultural discussion of resilience has expanded. A pervasive argument is that the concept of psychological resilience is directly linked to neoliberalist ideas associated with economic liberalism and free market capitalism such as privatization, deregulation, free trade and reductions in government spending in order to increase the role of the private sector in the economy and society (Bloom, 2017; Gill & Orgad, 2018).

Critique has been raised regarding the de-politization of self-care and the increase in mental illnesses as a negative symptom of pervasive capitalism (Fisher, 2009). The precarious work economy has also been criticised for increasing job insecurity and a subsequent rise in population levels of stress and anxiety (Southwood, 2011). In the context of such critique, resilience thinking has been highlighted as an important tool of decision makers to promote individual well-being and survival of the fittest in turbulent high-risk neoliberal societies in terms of ecological, financial and public health risks, especially concerning mental health (Evans & Reid, 2014). Resilience is hereby criticised as the psychological project of neoliberalism – as
an affective governance (Jupp, Pykett, & Smith, 2016) or as Arlie Hochschild argues, an example of feeling rules (Hochschild, 1983) that effectively serves to divert blame from political matters (such as the current economic climate, precarious working conditions etc.) and place them on the shoulders of precarious individual subjectivities as well as select collectives such as unemployed, refugees or mentally ill people.

The concept of resilience has played a role in attitudes towards and the treatment of affective and stress-related diseases since the 1950s; fuelled by the contemporary rise in the incidence of symptoms of stress, depression and anxiety in the western world (Saxena, Funk, & Chisholm, 2013). When the works focused on resilience claim to be able to liberate the reader from mental disorders such as depression, anxiety and chronic stress and give them a chance to choose their mental states, this raises a fundamental existential issue that has always been considered by literature: Where does the boundary lie between our freedom of choice and our inevitable fate?

Even though the concept of fate appears to be anachronistic in relation to the modern self-help tradition, and as such does not appear explicitly in the individual works, the resilience literature renegotiates the tragic and fateful because it promises to give readers control of their own lives, by virtue of the massive priority which it bestows upon individual freedom. This article therefore concerns which implicit fate scenarios are produced by more recent self-help literature as a by-product of the explicit freedom of action (individual autonomy) which the books, blogs and online communities assign to the reader – and not least, we query the consequences of these scenarios for the reader. In this connection, we will focus on how the resilience literature’s explicit appeal to individual agency goes hand in hand with an implicit lack of freedom of choice, which our approach to the genre through literary analysis is especially geared to exposing.

In just a few years, resilience as a psychological self-development tool has become one of the most prevalent ideas within both self-help literature, coaching and management. Resilience thinking is an actual power factor that has achieved massive dissemination worldwide. We draw on a large body of self-help literature and digital tools, but primarily concentrate on four works and one specific online universe, which represent the resilience literature’s fate scenarios most clearly: American author Liggy Webb’s “Resilience: How to Cope When Everything Around You Keeps Changing” (Webb, 2013), nutrition therapist Patrick Holford’s and health journalist Susannah Lawson’s “The Stress Cure: How to Resolve Stress, Build Resilience and Boost Your Energy” (Holford & Lawson, 2015), expert in traditional Chinese medicine David R. Hastings Lloyd’s “Never Give Up: Conquer Stress and Depression” (Lloyd, 2014) and psychotherapist Donald Robertson’s “Build your resilience: teach yourself how to survive and thrive in any situation” (Robertson,
It is not possible to obtain exact sales figures of the four literary works from the respective publishers, but they have all been published in several editions and rank high on a number of bestseller lists. The individual authors are highly exposed in American and British media in particular. Patrick Holford and Susannah Lawson often serve as experts on nutrition and exercise in American television, and they are also the editors of several health and lifestyle magazines. Donald Robertson is a member of the state-supported British public health organisation *The Royal Society for Public Health*. He often features as a lecturer for employees in the British public sector. In the same way, David Hastings Lloyd serves as an expert in clinical medicine and alternative therapy in several media. In particular, the author Liggy Webb holds a powerful position. As director of *The Learning Architect*, an international consortium of behavioural therapists, she functions as a “mental health consultant” in both private and public companies. They include the *BBC*, the *World Trade Organisation WTO* and the industrial giant Citroën ([https://liggywebb.com](https://liggywebb.com)). She advises businesses and institutions on the preparation of their *codes of conduct* and on the management's handling of depression, stress, anxiety and bereavement among employees. She also serves as a consultant to the *UN*, where she holds management courses and continuing education for personnel deployed to war and disaster areas. In other words, she is a prominent figure in terms of the leadership processes that come into play in the workplace when employees all over the world are affected by a mental or emotional disorder.

In addition, we have concentrated on the online universe ‘Tiny Buddha – simple wisdom for complex lives’ run by self-help author Lori Deschene, consisting of a website, several chat forums, nine different blogs, a publishing service, a webshop, a clothing company and five channels on social media. In this online universe the concept of self-help is completely tangled with products which are marketed directly to foster self-care. Hereby the psychological strategies and the promised relief from mental health issues go hand in hand with commercial products which are sold to sweeten life or express affiliation with the global online community. Deschene presents Tiny Buddha as a community that:

“...is about reflecting on simple wisdom and learning new ways to apply it to our complex lives (...) Founded in 2009, Tiny Buddha has emerged as a leading resource for peace and happiness, with close to three million monthly readers and a vibrant community forum. The site features stories, tips, and insights from readers of all ages, from all over the globe” ([https://tinybuddha.com](https://tinybuddha.com)).
Altogether the resilience authors and the Tiny Buddha founders do not only hold a position of economic strength, but the theories and strategies which are presented in the resilience literature also play a significant popular psychological and cultural transformational role in themselves. In the following section we will show how this position of strength is expressed towards the reader, who in all resilience works is addressed as “you”. Later we will show how the narrator’s position and the plot’s structure also to a high degree configure an unequal balance of power that has been seen before in cultural history.

When the reader fails

The underlying idea in the resilience works is that readers can and should help themselves to build up mental resilience to such an extent that the mental disorder is cured. The concept of self-help in itself entails the idea of the individual’s freedom of action. The idea of extensive individual freedom therefore at first glance commands considerably more attention than tragedies and fate scenarios in the resilience works. Liggy Webb herself writes that her book offers the reader “the freedom to change those things you would like to change about yourself and create the life that you really want” (Webb, 2013). David Hastings Lloyd writes a similar admonishment to his readers: “Gather your resources, make yourself strong and you can build a life and circumstances you want to have. This is what freedom gives you” (Lloyd, 2014). Likewise, writer and coach Ed Herzog writes in the Tinybuddha article ‘When It’s Time to Let Go: The Freedom of Accepting What Can’t Be Changed… learning to accept that we may not achieve some of our goals and dreams has the potential to bring us great freedom. Acceptance frees up our emotional energy and allows us to refocus our time and energy on dreams and goals that are still achievable” (https://tinybuddha.com/blog/time-let-go-freedom-accepting-cant-changed/). Hereby both Hastings Lloyd and Herzog place a great deal of responsibility on the reader for realizing the anticipated great potentials of freedom. Therefore, it is interesting to investigate which scenarios the resilience genre produces if the reader does not cash in on this freedom of action advised by self-development.

Symbols, metaphors and allegories show that the reader’s freedom to choose their own mental states is by no means unconditional. If the reader chooses not to follow the self-help strategies (or does not follow them correctly), the freedom to create a non-suffering version of themselves will be replaced by a tragic fate. If the reader, for example, does not succeed in considering depression as an opportunity for personal development, according to Webb, the reader will thrive badly:

“Like the boomerang on the cover of the book, you show true resilience by returning from each experience relatively unscathed and ready to face positively the next challenge that life may throw your way. What you need to avoid is becoming a ‘Doomerang’, returning from each experience loaded with negative baggage,
resentments and pain that could well haunt you for the rest of your life and make the next situation even harder to deal with” (Webb, 2013).

With Webb, a mental disorder thus functions like a boomerang that changes character according to the reader’s view of the disorder. If just one negative thought or reaction affects the metaphorical boomerang, it will be charged with negativity – and the “doomerang” will return and persecuted the reader for the rest of her days. Subsequently, Webb mentions another fate scenario that will arise if the reader is unable to utilise self-development’s full potential:

“If you resist change and remain rigid and inflexible it will be a lot more difficult and even painful. Going with the flow sometimes is the best approach. It may help to think of yourself as a boat in a storm. If you turn against the waves they will crush you, if you go with them they will carry you home” (Webb, 2013).

This potentially fatal scenario is symptomatic of the resilience works, as it shows that the reader’s degree of resilience depends on a personal choice. The storm at sea illustrates the mental disorder, but it is not the waves, or the disorder in itself, that is fatal. On the contrary, it is the reader’s mindset. If the reader has a negative attitude towards the mental disorder, it will not only increase in magnitude, but also fatally crush the reader. The reader is thus responsible for his or her mental collapse. Donald Robertson describes a potentially tragic scenario in “Build your resilience” that shows how it will have fatal consequences if the reader does not consider his depression as a positive resource in his self-development:

“A common analogy for this is that it’s like being engaged in a prolonged tug-o’-war contest with a monster, over a bottomless pit. Acceptance means letting go of the rope, and stopping the futile struggle, so that you can get on with doing what’s really important to you in life. Struggling with painful experiences often simply escalates them into more serious psychological suffering” (Robertson, 2012).

Here, what the literature normally regards as something fatal – a person’s battle against a monster or an all-absorbing, bottomless pit – loses its immediate tragic significance. The tragedy is potentially untragic, and the reader instead becomes his own worst enemy. Here, the shift in fate is not a consequence of external painful situations, but of the reader’s battle with (and against) themselves.

Actual human suffering and death also play an important role in the works. If the reader is unable to create a new and healthy version of themselves, there is a high probability of substance abuse, self-harm and
suicide attempts (Robertson, 2012). If the reader fails to follow actual self-help strategies, such as diet and exercise advice, this will also increase the risk of a large number of fatal diseases such as dementia, blood clots and cancer. Serious diseases are thus actual fate scenarios presented to the reader. These scenarios have in common that they disrupt the position of the tragic fate. While a tragic fate is normally associated with something unavoidable and external, in resilience literature it is linked to the reader’s degree of mental resilience. With reference to René Magritte’s (1898-1967) famous painting “Ceci n’est pas une pipe” (“This is not a pipe”) Robertson writes that the tragic is only tragic, if the reader chooses to consider it as such. Meanwhile he presents a smiley illustration which seems sad with a downwardly mouth but with the caption “This is not a sad face.” (Robertson, 2012):

This is not a sad face 😞

In the resilience genre, serious events such as war, terrorism and disease, which would normally be described as tragedies or disasters in themselves, are referred to as “knockbacks, experiences, challenges and changes” (Robertson, 2012). The scale of the tragic aspect is thus displaced linguistically, by using far less severe words. Stress, depression and anxiety are not referred to as mental disorders, but rather through deft rhetorical manoeuvres as the consequences of a lack of personal competence to handle painful life events. Serious mental disorder does not occur until the moment that the reader is unable to maintain a resilient and positive attitude to life. In the Tiny Buddha article ‘The secret to ending your suffering’ Matt Hattersley writes:

“It looks like the thing that happened is causing the bad feeling, but it isn’t. Being tight and closed up around what happened is what actually makes you feel bad… Events don’t cause suffering on their own, ever. It’s only when you get closed up and tight around them that it causes suffering.”
(https://tinybuddha.com/blog/the-secret-to-ending-your-suffering/).

This quotation is representative for both the Tiny Buddha universe and the resilience genre in general because of the argument that events are neither loaded with positivity or negativity in themselves. Instead positivity and negativity are a result of the reader’s or follower’s personal mind-set. In addition, dramatic events such as war and natural disasters are ranked equivalent to conflicts in the workplace and in relationships, where the degree of the tragic aspect would normally be viewed on a different scale. This scale disruption is to a high degree related to how traditionally tragic events are turned into potential
positive aspects of the reader’s self-development. Webb writes, for example: “Challenges can be stepping stones or stumbling blocks. It’s just a matter of how you view them and how much faith you have in yourself to overcome them” (Webb, 2013). At the same time, she introduces the reader to the term *propertunities* – a contraction of the words *problem* and *opportunity* – to emphasise how the tragic is not only redefined and displaced, but also gains a potentially positive character. When Hastings Lloyd writes “I hope you now understand that you are responsible for the health of your mind” (Lloyd, 2014), the reader is abandoned and left with sole responsibility for their mental disorder if, despite the self-help strategies, it is experienced negatively.

**The narrator’s authority and finger of blame**

In several ways, the reader’s self-development is dependent on the narrator presenting him- or herself as an assisting helper who invites the reader to participate in a healing process. Even though the reader has to do the work, it is the narrator who shows the way out of the mental disorder. The narrator usually appears as an “I” figure, offering him- or herself as a kind of mentor. At the same time the “I” in the text also frequently refers directly to the biographical author - such as when all the Tinybuddha authors as well as Donald Robertson and Hastings Lloyd disclose their personal contact details in their articles and works, for readers to use if they have any unanswered questions in the course of their reading. This serves to create numerical identity between narrator and author.

The same identification between narrator and author applies when the reader is assured that the narrator has the necessary authority to act as a therapist. In some works, this is through a description of the author’s knowledge and educational background, for example when Hastings Lloyd presents himself as a “traditional Chinese medicine practitioner” and Donald Robertson introduces himself as a registered psychotherapist and “cognitive behavioural therapy practitioner”. Tiny Buddha writer Leah de Souza-Thomas is introduced similarly with the words “Leah de Souza-Thomas, BSc MSc MPH is a health and wellness specialist who supports people to move back from the brink of a health crisis... Download Leah’s “5 Easy Ways to Prevent Your Next Health Crisis” here.” (https://tinybuddha.com/author/leah-de-souza-thomas/).

In other works, the author’s personal experience is presented as the actual precondition for the narrator to be able to assist with the reader’s self-help. Liggy Webb thus points to how she has been mentally strengthened by severe depression, and that she can therefore help the reader as a form of experience expert (Webb, 2013). Hence, there are also autobiographical elements in the resilience genre, so that in
several instances the main protagonist, narrator and author merge into one and the same figure. The reader’s meeting with the narrator is therefore also a meeting with an effective literary instrument. Especially on the internet where the constant interaction even serves to blur the line between the reader and the author. Here the reader is expected to share and help others as their guiding figure and thereby take the role as a self-help author. This is a literary instrument that hits the reader as an authoritative and superior judge who has completed the healing self-development that the reader is about to embark on.

An important common feature of the resilience works is that the narrator connects depression, stress and anxiety with modern society. In particular, the technological development and the structure of the labour market are blamed for how mental disorders have become widespread diseases. “Feeling tired for much of the time, or spending most of the day stressed out with a knot in your stomach, is not healthy. Yet, in the twenty-first century, this poor state of being has become the norm” according to Holford & Lawson (Holford & Lawson, 2015). They continue: “In our digital age of mobile phones and smart devices that provide 24/7 email access, drawing a line between your work and leisure time or home life can be challenging. Unsurprisingly, this can be an ongoing source of stress” (Holford & Lawson, 2015). In the same way, the American and European health authorities are also under heavy fire in the self-help literature. For example, there is a general tendency to question the use of antidepressant medicine. The trend is particularly pronounced for Hastings Lloyd. He states that the purpose of his book is not just to help the reader to get rid of a mental disorder, but to eliminate all use of antidepressant medicine (Lloyd, 2014). In this work – which can be viewed as a guide to how readers themselves can phase out their intake of medicine, and as a general criticism of the use of antidepressant medication – the narrator doubts the efficacy of medicine from the outset. Under the heading “Broken trust” he criticises the US health authorities for deliberately misleading the population in order to protect the pharmaceutical industry’s revenue:

“Antidepressants don’t work for most people. Even more disheartening is a finding that the pharmaceutical industry as well as the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) appear to have intentionally betrayed us. They have manipulated us into thinking that these medications are far more effective than they have proven themselves to be. (...) Essentially, modern pharmacological approaches to depression involve renaming variants and original medications as many times as possible to treat the problem and at the same time increase profit”.

The criticism of the labour market, technology and the healthcare system are generally followed by the narrator presenting himself and the actual self-help work as a lifeline for the benefit of both the reader and
society: “The good news is that if you start taking appropriate steps you can stop the wave of problems that come with depression. (...) This is very reassuring. If we treat depression appropriately, we can save the brain”. But rather than encouraging solutions at societal level, the narrator places the responsibility for change squarely with the reader. When Hastings Lloyd, for example, criticises the US health authorities for safeguarding the financial interests of the pharmaceutical industry to a greater extent than citizens’ health, the solution he presents is far from advocating political change. On the contrary, it requires the reader to follow the self-help strategies in his book and to turn to Chinese herbal remedies. Besides replacing an individual medical treatment with an alternative form of individual treatment without scientific evidence, he assigns the reader co-responsibility for resolving society’s health policy problems at an individual level. In addition, claiming that the medical industry increases profit by renaming variants of existing medicine, he may be right – but he and other self-help authors use exactly the same business strategy when writing multiple self-help books that supposedly cure the same mental disorders.

The shift from criticism directed at society to individual responsibility reveals a problematic aspect of the narrator’s position in the resilience works. E.g. it is clear from the fateful allegories (where the readers themselves are to save themselves from the stormy waves and the bottomless pit), or when Webb directly writes:

“Rather than take a defensive stance against risk, resilience theory takes the view that life, with all of its ups and downs, is there to be embraced – and that coping with risk and bouncing back from adversity are positively good for us” (Webb, 2013).

Hence, even though the narrator identifies political and structural problems relating to the labour market, technology and the health care system as the true causes of, for example, depression, stress and anxiety, the problems are not addressed as something that can and must be resolved at a structural level. Instead, the narrator concludes that the depression-promoting structures are terms with which the reader must cope psychologically. The narrator thereby fails to regard the reader as an individual who has a claim to society’s protection. Moreover, if the diagnosis of structural causes is correct the proposed individual, psychological solution will never do any better than a short-term alleviation of symptoms.

The narrator encourages the reader to accept and embrace society’s risk factors, which according to the narrator are the primary reason for the prevalence of widespread mental diseases. Questions about when a situation requires adaptation, and when it requires criticism, protest and opposition, are therefore neither raised nor answered in the works – and the cultural and societal criticism assumed by the narrator is
thereby aborted. Instead, the greatest risk, according to the resilience genre, is that "we are wasting precious time in our lives being unhappy when we could turn it all around by embracing change".16

In “Authenticity as an ethical ideal” philosophy professor Somogy Varga points to how the idea that human beings possess an authentic self, which can be realised, results in a paradoxically destructive movement (Varga, 2013).17 The precondition for an individual to achieve self-realisation is structural and societal, according to Varga, i.e. that the individual is protected democratically, politically, culturally, socially, legally and financially. The structural and societal foundation for self-realisation will be neglected if the self-help literature solely focuses on the mentally suffering individual. If we seek to achieve mental improvement solely through the realisation of an “authentic self”, we actually curtail the opportunity for self-realisation – a movement that Varga calls the paradox of authenticity:

“The concept of paradox proves helpful as an analytical tool, because it is able to capture two problematic dimensions in the practice of authenticity: that authenticity has become an institutionalized demand towards subjects and that the very attempt to realize it creates conditions under which the probability of its realization is reduced. These two paradoxical aspects already render arguable that seeking authenticity might be exhaustive. (...) Pathological conditions no longer arise from the societal barriers that inhibit authenticity and self-realization but from the process of seeking for authenticity and self-realization itself” (Varga, 2013).18

According to Varga, self-realisation falls back to the individual, who as a consequence of the paradoxical movement ends in a state of constant pathological and depressive exhaustion. At the same time, self-realisation results in the forfeiting of political criticism and social battles that could ensure the conditions for the individual’s autonomy. Varga therefore believes that the requirement of personal authenticity reflects unproductive individualisation and de-politicisation of social life (Varga, 2013). This paradoxical turn does not characterise every branch of the self-help thinking or literary genre.

In our view, it is this paradoxical movement that is relevant with regard to the resilience literature’s narrator and self-help genre’s societal and cultural criticism. At first glance, the narrator offers the reader a culture-critical rescue from, for example, a stressful labour market, but nevertheless ends up giving higher priority to an individual-directed resilience idea that in itself undermines the labour-market political solutions to the reader’s problems. The narrator thus tragically changes character from being a supportive mentor figure to indirectly failing to protect the reader from further societally-conditional risk and
suffering. Literary analysis of the narrator as a literary and rhetorical figure – a textual construct – thus adds a specific point to Vargas’ criticism: in more recent self-help literature, the fateful paradox takes place directly at the textual level – in particular in the analysis of the narrator’s position. This analysis emphasises that the reader’s meeting with the narrator in resilience literature is a serious matter with potentially serious consequences. Although the reader may be in need of professional help and treatment of psychological symptoms and although important causal agents may be structural conditions of neoliberal society, the sole responsibility for change is ultimately located, by a textual construct (the narrator), in the individual who at the moment of acute suffering e.g. from severe depression or anxiety may be the least empowered to act.

In the 1980s the American poet and activist Audre Lorde used the concept of self-care as an interventionist act of activism and a way to insist that women and black people matter. She addressed sexism, classism, homophobia, and racism in America with arguments such as “Caring for myself is not self-indulgence, it is self-preservation, and that is an act of political warfare”. The newer resilience genre on the other hand takes self-help out of this radical political origin and distorts it in a way that neglects all political implications.

In our view, the high number of self-help strategies in the resilience subgenres also highlights this problem. If the reader is to follow the books’ or blogs’ instructions, everything must be changed, from sleep to diet, exercise, smoking, thought patterns, relationships, networks and finances. The narrator emphasises that the mental disorders can only be healed if all of the self-help strategies are followed. If the reader succeeds in changing their diet and exercise, but not in accepting their mental disorder, more serious mental and physical illness (the many allegorical doomsday scenarios) will be unavoidable. The reader thus encounters an expectation that a very large number of parameters in life must be changed, if healing is to be achieved. The reader will potentially already give up in despair after reading the works’ lists of contents. In addition, the resilience works’ strategies will in many cases be so vague, contradictory and extremely difficult to live up to:

“The issue with carrying baggage is that you can end up reliving and rehashing all your nightmares and trapping yourself in a paralyzing loop of negativity. Making a conscious decision to let go and free yourself is key. Many people talk about burying the past – however, the danger here is that, if you bury it, you will just go back and dig it up! Without freedom from the past there really is no freedom to embrace the
This strategy is virtually impossible for the reader to follow, since the difference between breaking free of negative experiences in the past and burying past negative experiences is never explained and seems to be two expressions of the same concept. Furthermore, the reader is only rarely informed of when the individual strategies have been adequately executed. Key questions such as “when do you know whether you know yourself?” or “how do you accept pain emotionally?” remain unanswered. If the reader is to follow the genre’s instructions to the letter, this will be an impossible and exhausting process. In other words, our analysis of the resilience-oriented self-help genre reveals a dialectic movement whereby the reader’s opportunity to fight their way out of a mental disorder can, paradoxically, end in further pathology.

The tragic plot

The self-development strategies that the narrator offers the reader manifest themselves stylistically and formally in the resilience genre. The reader can thus co-determine the individual work’s plot structure. The narrator invites the reader to include personal experiences, thoughts and emotions at a specific literary level. The self-help works by no means solely consist of text. Besides illustrations, text boxes and points listed in bullet form, the works typically have a number of empty fields, which readers themselves have to fill in – preferably in pencil, so that exercises can be repeated. The reader is thereby an active co-creator in the production of the individual self-help work.

Reader involvement includes taking a series of tests in which readers must assess their anxiety level or degree of mental resilience. For Webb, the reader must rate their resilience level from 1 to 5 through a multiple choice exercise and, based on an overall score, calculate how often the work’s strategies must be used in their everyday life (Webb, 2013). For Robertson, whenever an anxiety symptom occurs, the reader must complete a row of tables with the categories “Date/time, Situation, Initial thoughts & feelings, Initial suffering (%), Response (Accept/control), Subsequent suffering (%)” (Robertson, 2012). The empty fields in resilience literature are included as tools for the reader’s therapeutic self-development. The reader’s personal experiences, thoughts and feelings are thereby connected to the strategies presented by the narrator. Often, the same tables and forms are printed several times in the individual works, in order to reflect that therapeutic improvement is anchored in the reader’s own life. In the course of the combined reading and writing process, the reader’s self-development is thus directly expressed in the plot structure.
This means that in many passages the reader becomes the protagonist, i.e. the main character. In virtually all other literature, the protagonist is controlled by the hand that writes the work, whereas self-help literature creates a paradoxical subject – in relation to customary literary conventions – of a reader protagonist whose immediate psychological and existential freedom results in a defining co-determination concerning the actual text. A typical understanding of literary fiction sees it as intransitive and far removed from the genre of manual for life, self-help literature to the contrary is transitive and meant to lead to action. For Donald Robertson, this spectacular plot structure results in an extraordinarily radical freedom, since his book contains several empty, lined pages, and under the heading “My personal story” he encourages the reader to adopt the role of autobiographical author.

The co-writing element of the traditional self-help books is elevated to a higher extent at tinybuddha.com and similar online universes. Here the reader is invited to participate in producing the collection of articles, blogs and chat forums. Founder Lori Deschene writes,

“I invite you to get involved in the site by commenting, sharing a post, or introducing yourself on the Tiny Buddha Facebook page. We are all in this together, and we all have something to teach and something to learn. Thank you for sharing your light. You make a difference, and you’re appreciated.

Lori Deschene
Tiny Buddha Founder” (https://tinybuddha.com)

Through interaction, subscribing, tracking and buying physical and e-products such as online courses and exclusive access to specific self-help writers, the reader becomes a follower, a part of a community and even an “appreciated friend”.

Analysis of the allegorical doomsday scenarios – the storm at sea and the struggle at the bottomless pit – reveals that there is only one possible way out of the tragedy, which is that the reader follows all of the resilience literature’s strategies and instructions correctly. This point is also of great significance to the plot structure. In fact, there is only one possible plot structure, in which the reader must make himself the main protagonist, in order to be released from his mental disorder: a plot in which the reader must become more and more “free”, “strong”, “resilient” and “mentally comfortable”, as the reading and sharing progresses. The forms and tables in self-help literature thereby gain an ethical character. In resilience literature, it will, for example, be a wrong and tragic narrative if the reader’s stated percentage level of
anxiety increases or remains unchanged in the course of reading the book. Or if the sleep, diet and exercise forms reveal that the reader is not living healthily. The empty fields must be completed so as to support a positive therapeutic narrative. At tinybuddha.com this plot structure manifests itself as expectations from subscribers and followers, targeted to persons who share their personal stories. For example when the participant Cat under the headline “Everything” writes at a chat forum:

“Hi all, I’m posting on Tiny Buddha because I’m at the lowest point in life and I have lost my faith in the Universe (I’m 24)... I want to grieve yet at the same time know that I need to let go of my depression in order to move on in life... I’d like to hear people’s thoughts on this. Thanks.”
(https://tinybuddha.com/topic/everything/).

By other subscribers Cat is being advised to eat healthier, become more spiritual, go to a healer and to play music – and she is called upon to share her improvements in these activities the following weeks. At self-help online universes the ideal therapeutic plot structure is therefore even more explicit and literarily formulated as questions, advice and anecdotes coming from other people.

The resilience genre thereby draws the contours of an ideal plot, which restricts the freedom and codetermination that at first glance is assigned to the reader. The self-help literature’s direct addressing of the reader as “you” is transformed into an ethical “You” in the meaning of “one” in the works. The plot therefore bears witness to how “You” should handle (everyday) life’s problems and mental disorders. If the empty fields remain empty or reflect a different narrative to the genre’s ideal plot, the works and online posts end up reflecting a derailed self-help attempt, and the books and blogs themselves become a depiction of the reader’s marginalisation, inadequacy and pathology.

A recurring aspect of the empty spaces that are made available to the reader is that the reader must include financial aspects in the therapy process. In Robertson’s case, the reader must, for example, complete a questionnaire about his or her career objectives, since successful self-development entails that readers become more effective in their work and improve their personal finances. In the resilience universe, having the ambition to reduce one’s working hours or take sick leave as a consequence of a mental disorder or bad mental work environment is thus an admission of failure. On the contrary, the reader must turn his or her self-development into a financial success story, if liberation from depression, stress and anxiety is to be possible. On her Tiny Buddha blog, writer Leah de Souza-Thomas, has posted the article ‘Unreasonable Boss? 8 Ways to Honor Yourself in a Toxic Workplace’. The article falls under the Tiny
Buddha blog-category ‘Work Fulfillment’, and advises the reader on how to cope with workplace problems. She gives the reader advice such as ‘Make relaxing rituals a part of your job’, ‘Let physical activity soothe and re-energize you’ and ‘Feed your calm, not your stress’. She explains that a daily self-care routine will “preserve your sanity in the midst of your workplace chaos” (https://tinybuddha.com/blog/unreasonable-boss-honor-yourself-toxic-workplace/). It is characteristic that none of these pieces of advice or strategies are about changing the problems. Instead the reader must change his or her approach to the workplace even though it is the boss and/or the workplace that is described as toxic. In this respect, such concepts as work performance, self-marketing and personal brand are often used to describe the ultimate goal of the reader’s self-development.

Varga links the demand for individual self-realisation with neoliberalism, by which is meant a political rationalism that aims to maximise individual freedom and limit the political sphere as much as possible. He argues that capitalism and ethical ideals can shape each other and actually become merged, and points to how a neoliberal demand for authenticity and performance is easily internalised as an ethical and exhausting requirement of the individual:

“(…) authenticity has become something like a systemic demand. (...) This aims at demonstrating the exhaustive and potentially pathological quality of an institutionalized practice of authenticity that builds on the performative model. (...) The public recognition of personal uniqueness and authenticity seems to encourage subjects to adopt attitudes that conform to capitalist requirements” (Varga, 2013).

Analysis of the plot as a literary figure exemplifies Vargas’ point that self-realisation has become a systemic requirement that equates mental health with financial success. Here, it becomes clear that financial structures must be embedded in the reader’s therapeutic narrative about themselves, if the healing process is to succeed. The empty spaces that in resilience literature must be completed correctly by the reader thus become yet another effective literary tool for maintaining status quo. This self-help criticism can be aimed at both the literary works and Internet communities such as Tiny Buddha, promoting products as “Recreate Your Life Story eCourse - 33% Off Until Monday” (https://tinybuddha.com/blog/recreate-life-story-ecourse-33-off-monday/).

These resilience products show that the concept of resilience is no longer an unequivocal concept in the field of psychology. Rather, the definition has expanded and shifted from being a narrow description of overcoming psychological vulnerability to a designation of a far broader understanding of mental strength.
The concept increasingly designates an idea of positive adaptation, stress resistance, life skills and robustness, as well as psychological and emotional invulnerability. The new definition of resilience under-emphasises the family-related and environmental dimensions of psychological well-being and reduces the concept to a unique, individual competence or ability to handle stressful life events. The Danish philosopher Anders Dræby Sørensen writes in this context:

“(…) social risks are individualised and situated in the individual person, who must themselves overcome a permanent vulnerability by constantly working to maintain and increase their mental strength. (...) This is because the vulnerability to threats, injury and loss must not only be accepted as a condition of human existence, but also be described as an experience that we must learn and develop from, so that we can be strengthened collectively and individually according to a new ideal of hyper-normality” (Sørensen, 2018).

In line with this development, Sørensen identifies a massive popularisation and dissemination of the resilience concept, which he also relates to neoliberalism. Thus, he characterises neoliberalism as a therapeutic rationality and a new form of “psychopolitical government” that operates through the individual’s self-management (Sørensen, 2018). Here, determination, drive, robustness and readiness for change are politically presented as significant values in life, which are expressed in “an increasing glorification of success, happiness and well-being as individual life ideals that, at the same time, are designated as weighty political parameters at the population level” (Sørensen, 2018).

In line with Varga, Gill & Orgad, Sørensen points to how the individual-oriented resilience concept has evolved from a psychological concept into a moral and ethical concept that requires a cultural idealisation of one-dimensional behaviour and a narrow ideal picture of the “good life” (Gill & Orgad, 2018; Sørensen, 2018; Varga, 2013).

Hence, resilience literature’s ideal plot easily ends up serving as a lever for a neoliberal agenda in which the reader must be mentally flexible and willing to take risks in order to achieve success. In other words, it is the narrator’s invitation to the reader to become involved in the plot that prompts the internalisation of neoliberalism, as Sørensen points out. In short, literary analysis of resilience literature’s plot structure contributes a significant new layer to both Vargas’ self-realisation criticism and Sørensen’s resilience criticism: knowledge of how internalisation specifically takes place at the textual-rhetorical level. Furthermore, resilience literature and online universes are used actively to disseminate ethical, financial and political demands of a large population group, namely readers of the traditional and the digital self-help literature.
The return of fate

It can be argued that the history of self-help literature goes back to the beginning of the history of literature itself. We have always searched for advice, acceptance and explanations in books and stories. In the Middle Ages Augustine of Hippo wrote thirteen books entitled “Confessions” on how Christianity became his way out of a sinful and immoral life. In the 1700s and 1800s especially women read “conduct manuals” on how to behave well – even works of authors like Samuel Richardson and Jane Austen can be read as “how to” books. Yet, the conception of personal freedom has changed through history and the history of culture. Throughout the 1950s most self-help books cultivated economic, bodily and career wise ideals. The conception of personal freedom increased but focused on external conditions of everyday life. As the analysis of the resilience works and websites has shown, the emphasis on personal freedom has increased even further and moved into inner areas such as our mental health, personality and identity, while it has also incorporated economic and work life criteria for success.

The analysis of resilience literature’s reader, narrative and plot has shown, that the freedom of action that, at first glance, characterises the three literary instances has a tragic and fatal shadow side. This dark side is embedded implicitly in the basis for the entire resilience genre: that we are free to choose our own mental state. This dark side has an extensive cultural history, which can contribute to putting the literary analysis into perspective. The German philosopher Odo Marquard (1928-2015) writes in the essay “The end of fate” on the relationship between freedom and fate. He describes the cultural-historical development as a transition from “Schicksal” to “Machsal” i.e. from fate to man-made change (Marquard, 1989). According to Marquard, fate has become a hopelessly outdated explanatory model, which stands in direct contrast to the modern, competent, autonomous individual: “Fate has come to an end (...) the triumphal progress of changeability and of making defatalizes reality” (Marquard, 1989). Marquard’s argument is, however, also that fate is again beginning to appear in our modern and individualised society:

“In modern times, after the end of the God who was the end of fate, the official defatalization of the world is accompanied by its unofficial refatalization: or, putting it differently, the outcome of the modern disempowerment of divine omnipotence is not only the official triumph of human freedom but also the unofficial return of fate” (Marquard, 1989).

Marquard sees a relation between freedom and fatalism, whereby man’s official freedom of necessity entails fate’s “unofficial” return. A point that is reminiscent of Søren Kierkegaard’s (1813-1855) reflections
on how the tragedies of ancient times are mirrored in the modern world, especially in the text “The tragic in ancient drama reflected in the tragic in modern drama” (Kierkegaard, 2013). Kierkegaard argues that where tragedy in ancient times was a result of the will of the gods, modern tragedy is a result of man's own fault. As the idea of the free, autonomous individual has gained ground, according to Kierkegaard there has been a significant change in how the existential and tragic elements of human life are acknowledged. He argues that people have lost a language to describe the tragic, which does not, however, mean that the tragic has disappeared. Rather, it means that it has become more difficult to conceptualize how the tragic is part of human life. In Kierkegaard's writings, too, there is thus a difference between explicit and implicit tragic aspects of human life. In an attempt to create a modern existential language to describe the tragic, Kierkegaard therefore reuses the concepts of antiquity and points out that the antique belief in fate is projected as a reflection in the modern world (Kierkegaard, 2013). He thereby uses tragedy and the fatalism of ancient times to depict a darker reverse side of modern individual autonomy or freedom of action. It is with inspiration from Kierkegaard that we have raised the concept of fate in relation to self-help literature. As pointed out by both Marquard and Kierkegaard, fate has disappeared as an explicit interpretative framework in the modern world in general and in self-help literature in particular. That is precisely why this interpretative framework can help to shed light on the dead ends and pitfalls that self-help's literary devices can end up in.

According to Kierkegaard, the projection of fate has tragic consequences for man in modern society. In contrast to the tragedies of antiquity, the modern individual is left standing alone as tragedy's catalyst. “The wrath of the gods is terrible, but still the pain is not as great as in modern tragedy, where the hero suffers his total guilt, is transparent to himself in his suffering of his guilt” (Kierkegaard, 2013). According to Kierkegaard, man cannot be happy without external fate, since it offers a mildness and compassion that man needs. In Kierkegaard's view, this mildness has been blurred during the cultural-historical period from antiquity to his own time, in the mid-1800s.

This blurring can be said to be perfected in the self-help genres' modern resilience proliferation. As our analysis has shown, the reader of self-help literature is left with full responsibility for his or her own tragedy, and therefore cannot share the blame with mitigating external circumstances. In short, at one and the same time, resilience literature expresses a massive faith in individual autonomy and an inevitable tragic lack of freedom of action. In Kierkegaard’s terms, the reader, the narrator and the plot each in their own way mirror an antique tragic reflection, which is cast into modernity and must necessarily affect the
self-help reader severely. Expressed using Marquard’s terms, the resilience genre is a literary expression of a liberating defatalisation, which paradoxically goes hand in hand with a tragic refatalisation.

The analysis of resilience literature and online subgenres therefore adds a new chapter to cultural-historical issues regarding the relationship between individual freedom and fate. This literary analysis has added some important nuances to resilience and self-help criticism. It contributes by exposing how the internalisation of political, ethical and economic ideals of mental resilience functions in self-help literature, blogs, chats and forums. It does so by using specific literary devices such as fateful allegories, idealisation of a specific therapeutic plot and a narrative voice that is potent, authoritative and strong. This has given a deeper understanding of the role assigned to the reader, and why this role – despite the declared intention of release from illness – is virtually impossible to live up to. Based on the revelation of these literary devices, we can say that resilience literature and its subgenres have brought a new modern tale of destiny into the spotlight. This tale of destiny comes into play because the reader does not have any chance of living up to the resilience genre’s ethical demand for autonomy and freedom of action and unlimited mental strength. As in several other instances in cultural history, in the new resilience genres fate ends up being freedom’s tragic companion - despite the genre's persistent attempts to prove the opposite.
Bibliography

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Notes

1 Lloyd, 2014: 100.
2 Webb, 2013: x.
4 Robertson, 2012: 35.
5 Robertson, 2012: 35.
6 Robertson, 2012: 81-82.
8 Webb, 2013: 76.
10 Holford & Lawson, 2015: 10.
12 Lloyd, 2014: 3.
13 Hastings Lloyd, *Never Give Up*, 7 & 15
16 Webb, Resilience..., 55
17 Vargas’ criticism of authenticity and self-realisation trends is reminiscent of a large number of other theorists’ criticism (Banet-Weiser, 2012). We have chosen to highlight Varga because he is the only one to comment on self-help literature specifically as an example of a broader self-realisation trend.
18 Varga, 2013: 147.
19 [www.newyorker.com/culture/culture-desk/the-politics-of-selfcare](http://www.newyorker.com/culture/culture-desk/the-politics-of-selfcare)
20 Webb, 2013: 121.
22 Robertson, 2012: 94.
23 Varga, 2013: 147.
24 Sørensen, 2018: 57.
25 Sørensen, 2018: 58.
26 Sørensen, 2018: 59.