**Self-optimisation: Conceptual, Discursive and Historical Perspectives**

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**Abstract**

Self-optimisation has arguably become a central socio-cultural trend in contemporary Western societies. The imperative to optimise our ways of thinking, feeling, and interacting with others features prominently in public discourse, and a range of commercial products and services are available to assist us in our quest to become the best version of our selves. However, self-optimisation has so far received scant attention in sociological research. Addressing this knowledge gap, we aim to introduce self-optimisation as a concept for sociological analysis. We first situate self-optimisation in several closely linked strands of academic debate, on transformations of self-identity under conditions of globalisation and neo-liberal capitalism, and on the spread of a therapeutic culture. We then map the socio-cultural antecedents of self-optimisation, survey its rise as a salient public discourse and as a form of everyday practice and consider some political implications. In the conclusion, we set out an agenda for further research on self-optimisation and discuss its conceptual and empirical relevance beyond the Global Northwest.


**Keywords:** Self-optimisation, self-identity, technologies of the self, therapeutic culture, sociology of psychologies

## 1. Introduction

In this article, we explore the emergence self-optimisation as a salient socio-cultural trend in contemporary societies and provide a conceptually orientated introduction and overview to the topic. Self-optimisation has remained under-researched and underdeveloped as a concept in extant research. It is therefore our objective, first, to chart self-optimisation as a multi-dimensional empirical process, second, to explore salient socio-cultural developments in which it is rooted, and, third, to develop it as a concept and analytical framework for sociological research. With our argument, we add to sociological debates about contemporary transformations of self-identity (Elliott, 2013), and about the attendant significance of therapeutic narratives of personal development (Rose, 2019; Salmenniemi et al., 2020). We argue that self-optimisation opens up new analytic pathways and moves beyond the limitations inherent in previous research on therapeutic cultures, and we set out and attendant initial framework for sociological analysis.

Self-optimisation is on the agenda of societies around the world today, both as 'permanent struggle' (King et al., 2018) and as 'promise' (Dalgalarrondo and Fournier, 2019) for subjects to constantly improve themselves. Broadly speaking, self-optimisation can be defined as a set of discourses and practices that encourage individuals to pursue the optimal imaginable version of their bodies, their mental and emotional constitution, and their conduct of everyday life. More specifically, self-optimisation relies upon 'a continuous process of permanently improving personal characteristics and competences via self-engagement, rational self-control and permanent feedback until one reaches the best possible constitution of oneself' (Fenner, 2020). Self-optimising practices thus aim to improve facets of the self in a constant, potentially open-ended and rational way. Self-optimisation relates to areas such as fitness, nutrition, beauty, cognitive and physical performance, sexuality, and social relations (Röcke, 2021). Seemingly all features of the physical body, the self, and the way of interacting with

others in everyday life can be optimised, using a wide array of different techniques and technologies, such as self-help books and podcasts, self-tracking devices, nutritional supplements, or cosmetic surgery (Bergroth and Helén, 2020; Elliot, 2008; Rose, 2007). This quest for optimisation has become deeply entrenched in a culture of 'upgrade' or 'reinvention' (Spreen, 2015; Elliott, 2013), in public policy, and in marketing strategies for products and services intended to turn people into the best version of themselves (Madsen, 2015).

Self-optimisation has so far received only limited attention in sociological debates. It is sometimes acknowledged implicitly or in passing, for example in academic conversations about the metricisation of social life (Lupton, 2016; Mau, 2019), about digitalised production and algorithmic work control (Schaupp, 2022), or about self-help culture (McGee, 2005). At the same time, different academic fields overlap with research about self-optimisation like, for example, scholarship about (bio-technical) enhancement, about therapeutic cultures, and about techniques and technologies like self-tracking or cosmetic surgery. However, sociological analyses of the very idea and concept of self-optimisation have been few and far between, specifically within the English-language literature (Dalgalarrondo and Fournier, 2019; King et al., 2018; Madsen, 2015).[i] It is this gap in the academic literature that we seek to address with this article. Our argument here is theoretical in focus, and this is intended to be a conceptually oriented position paper, rather than an empirical case study, even though we do draw on examples from published empirical research to support our argument. Consequently, our emphasis rests on the general development of the concept of self-optimisation, including its historic and discursive dimensions. This article primarily draws on a line of research on self-optimisation in the Global Northwest, specifically in Western Europe and, to a lesser extent, North America. Much of our argument will consequently examine self-optimisation in this particular socio-historical setting.

We first situate self-optimisation in several closely linked strands of academic debate, on transformations of self-identity under conditions of globalisation and neo-liberal capitalism (Giddens, 1991; Bröckling, 2016), and on therapeutic culture and the 'psychologisation of society' (Rose, 2019; Madsen, 2015; Illouz, 2008) (2). We then map the socio-cultural antecedents of self-optimisation (3) and survey its rise as a salient public discourse (4) and as a form of everyday practice (5). On this basis, we examine self-optimisation in the context of debates about 'therapeutic politics' (Salmenniemi, 2019) and the association between the therapeutic culture and social fragmentation in neo-liberal capitalism (6). In the conclusion, we set out an agenda for further research on self-optimisation and discuss its conceptual and empirical relevance beyond the Global Northwest (7).

## 2. From psychotherapeutic self-transformation to self-optimisation

Our analysis of self-optimisation as a distinctive element of discourse, practice, and everyday self-experience speaks to sociological interest in transformations of self-identity in the context of modernisation, globalisation, and shifts in the socio-economic order of capitalist societies. Enquiries into the social organisation of the self and self-identity have been central to sociological theorising since the beginnings of the discipline (e.g. Cooley, 2009; Weber, 2007; Simmel, 1972). However, the sociology of self-identity, as a distinct sub-field of theoretical and empirical enquiry in sociology, only took shape from the 1990s onwards, in response to questions about the consequences of late-stage modernisation, de-traditionalisation, globalisation, and individualisation for experiences and practices of self-identity (Giddens, 1991; Giddens, 1992; Beck, 2000; Beck-Gernsheim, 1998). Within this new 'sociology of the individual' (Chalari, 2017) and considering a renewed interest in the 'self' (e.g., Callero, 2003) or diverse 'technologies of the self' (Foucault, 1988) today, debate has continued as to the need or even obligation and the capacity for individuals to autonomously

and reflexively fashion their self-identities within the shifting institutional frameworks of contemporary societies, in diverse societies around the world (e.g. Elliott and Lemert, 2009; Yan, 2010). The analysis of self-optimisation, as a social trend, responds to these concerns about the shifting organisation of self-identity in the context of present-day societies on the Global Northwest.

Specifically, our account of self-optimisation addresses interdisciplinary debates, in sociology and the social sciences, about the role of psychotherapeutic, religious, and spiritual discourses of self-transformation in contemporary transformations of self-identity (Nehring, Alvarado, Hendriks and Kerrigan, 2016). Beginning with the seminal works of Philip Rieff (1966) and Christopher Lasch (1979/1991), these debates have highlighted what might be termed the 'psychologisation of society', in the sense of the emergence and consolidation of psychotherapeutic and associated religious and spiritual discourses as an influential idiom by which self-identity, social relationships, and social problems are understood and addressed in contemporary societies. In this context, much attention has been devoted across the past three decades to the association between neo-liberal socio-economic reforms and psychotherapeutically informed modes of subjectivation (Couldry, 2010). Critics of therapeutic culture have thus highlighted the role of therapeutic narratives of self-improvement in the individualisation and de-politicisation of social problems (Rimke, 2000), the emergence of new forms of 'emotional capitalism' (Illouz, 2007), and the consolidation of an international 'happiness industry', geared towards the surveillance and commodification of human feelings and experience and the marketing of products and services for self-improvement (Cabanas and Illouz, 2019).

Within this debate, self-improvement is related to the making of what Micki McGee (2005: 13ff.) has termed the 'belabored self'. She uses this concept to designate a foundational contradiction in neo-liberal society, between the cultural framing of self-improvement in terms

of autonomous self-fashioning and persistent pressure on workers to improve themselves, e.g. by acquiring new knowledge and skills, in order to remain employable and employed. McGee's analysis of American self-improvement culture is echoed by scholarship on the importance of entrepreneurial self-fashioning in contemporary Western societies (Bröckling, 2016; Dardot and Laval, 2014). Pierre Dardot and Christian Laval describe the socio-cultural mandate towards entrepreneurship as follows:

> 'Every individual has something entrepreneurial about them and the distinguishing feature of the market economy is that it liberates and stimulates human 'entrepreneurship'. […] The pure dimension of entrepreneurship – alertness to business opportunities – is a *relationship of self to self* […]. We are all entrepreneurs, or, rather, we all learn to be; we train ourselves exclusively through the play of the market to govern ourselves as entrepreneurs. This also means that, if the market is regarded as a free space for entrepreneurs, all human relations can be affected by the entrepreneurial dimension, which is constitutive of the human.' (Dardot and Laval, 2014: 111f.; emphasis in original)

Dardot and Laval go on to suggest that entrepreneurial self-government, rather than simply being an expression of individual autonomy in the narrow sense of the term, is a capacity that must be learned and fostered, for individuals to do well in the context of a flexibilised market economy. Narratives of self-improvement, whether framed in psychological or in religious and spiritual terms, in this sense mask structures of socio-economic domination in neo-liberal capitalism. This perspective has been very influential during the last decade, and it also relates to other fields, such as the therapeutic (Rimke, 2000; see section 6).

We partly agree with this critique but argue that it is necessary to take the academic debate a step further, and to sketch a broader panorama of historical and contemporary efforts at re-making and enhancing the social self. This also includes a greater emphasis on the

different ways and modalities people engage with themselves. In other words, our argument on self-optimisation, encompassing the broad diversity of forms it takes in contemporary societies, serves the aims of designating new themes and opening up new lines of analysis for the study of therapeutic processes of self-transformation and the socio-cultural organisation of the self, and of reaching beyond established but limited lines of enquiry.

From a semantic perspective, one could see self-optimisation as a specific example of the more general notion of self-improvement. Moreover, the premise of 'improvability' belongs to the overall principles of self-optimisation practices as will be shown below (see section 5). At the same time, however, self-improvement as concept is to a significant degree grounded in specific and longstanding academic debates: debates about transformations of self-identity under conditions of neo-liberal capitalism and globalisation, and about the role of psychotherapeutically informed narratives of self and social relationships in these transformations (Giddens, 1991), and in attendant processes of individualisation and social atomisation (Nehring, Alvarado, Hendrinks and Kerrigan, 2016). Although ideas and practices of self-optimisation are clearly fostered by the neoliberal transformation of present-day societies, we do not reduce them to this very framework but situate them within a wider socio-historical setting. Moreover, we think it is necessary to move beyond a perspective that largely equates practices of self-improvement or of self-optimisation with an incorporation of the neoliberal agenda by individual subjects and conceives no space for more autonomous, stubborn or emancipatory ways of dealing with it or to deal with hybridisations between different orientations towards the self.

Self-optimisation, as we define it here, thus is a consciously broad concept that encompasses both quantifiable behavioural targets, for example in the context of the 'metricisation' and 'datafication' of social life, and a wider range of therapeutic phenomena. This broad approach to self-optimisation seems analytically useful in two ways at this stage of

attendant academic debates. First, it allows us to systematically situate self-optimisation in relation to longer-standing debates about the therapeutic culture and the wide range of discourses, institutional arrangements, and forms of everyday experience and practice that the latter encompasses. Second, in empirical terms, it allows to conceive self-optimisation as a multi-faceted practice that takes on many forms and does easily hybridise with other practices related to the self.

In the following sections, we lay out our approach that aims to provide an overview and introduction to the topic. We start by dealing with the origins of the idea of self-optimisation. We then turn to self-optimisation as a set of public discourses and finally establish self-optimisation as practice. Before the concluding section, we discuss the politics of self-optimisation.

## 3. Self-optimisation – The origins of an idea

Self-optimisation applies the idea and logic of optimisation to the self. But what does this mean? And where does the idea of optimisation come from? The word 'optimisation' is borrowed from the Latin word *optimum*, which is the noun of *optimus* (the best; superlative of bonus = good) and generally means the 'best' or 'most outstanding'. The use of the term is extremely rare until the middle of the 20th century but gradually increases from the 1950s onwards. This is linked to the invention, around this time, of the method of optimisation (also known as mathematical programming), which is a 'collection of mathematical principles and methods used for solving quantitative problems in many disciplines, including physics, biology, engineering, economics, and business'[ii]. As to the term self-optimisation, it is very rare until the 1970s, when it comes to be used, for example, in relation to cybernetic ideas of self-regulating and self-controlling systems. Like optimisation, the notion is mostly linked to the

sphere of management and production and only in rare cases relates to other areas. This only changes from the year 2000 onwards (Röcke, 2021).

To understand the origins of the idea of self-optimisation, however, it is important to reach beyond a mere semantic analysis. The last section has already highlighted important developments, such like the role of neo-liberalism, individualisation, technical developments, emotional capitalism, the happiness industry, and therapeutic cultures. We suggest that self-optimisation is deeply rooted in Western societies and needs to be understood as a current phenomenon standing in a long genealogy of ideas and processes linked to the realisation, self-discipline, and rationalisation of the self.

Röcke (2021) offers the first attempt to lay out such a genealogy. She argues that the idea of self-optimisation is based on a number of cultural conditions that are constituted since the late 18th and throughout the 19th century. As examples, she takes the idea of *Bildung* (Wilhelm von Humboldt) and its moral appeal to improve oneself (as well as mankind); the idea of progress (Marquis de Condorcet) that introduces the logic of a structurally open process dynamic; and the idea of rationalisation (Max Weber) that, in terms of a formal and purpose-oriented rationalisation process, implies that there is a clearly determinable, best possible path to improvement. These ideas form the antecedents to modern self-optimisation that takes shape throughout the 20th century and particularly in recent decades. In addition to transformations in the sphere of social structure (spread of social mobility), of economic transformations (rise of flexible capitalism), of cultural developments (diffusion of values related to performance, fitness and excellence) and of (bio-)technological innovations (invention and diffusion of internet, digitalisation), Röcke (2021) attaches importance to the rise of a therapeutic culture since World War II.

The rise of psychology as a new discipline with an important impact on (popular) culture is well documented (Illouz, 2008; Reckwitz, 2017; Straub, 2019). Based on a personal

relation to a therapist or mediated by specific instructions (print, digital), it provides people with a language to express themselves and to talk about themselves, and with techniques and practices helping to focus on, to reflect about and to search the 'true' or 'inner self' (Illouz, 2008). As to self-optimisation and the whole self-improvement industry, the consolidation of the self-growth psychology or Humanistic Psychology from the end of the1950s on is of prime importance. It induced a profound change with regard to psychological techniques: from the cure of diseases to the improvement of what is mediocre (Reckwitz, 2017).

The rise of psychology has also played an important role in the diffusion of self-help culture, which partly overlaps with self-optimisation. Despite the 'poorly documented' origins of self-help culture, it is generally acknowledged the Benjamin Franklin belongs to one of its founding fathers (Nehring, Alvarado, Hendriks and Kerrigan, 2016). His aim was not to optimise himself, but the puritan concepts of restless work, discipline, order, and time management that structured his life (Franklin 1986 [1791]) show some striking similarities to present-day optimisation techniques. With writings such like his *Autobiography* he influenced other (classic) thinkers and self-help authors like for instance Samuel Smiles (*Self Help*, 1859), Dale Carnegie (*How to Win Friends and Influence People*, 1936), and Napoleon Hill (*Think and Grow Rich*, 1937). Franklin's principles are still recommended for people seeking to work on themselves[iii]. And although the themes, topics and approaches to self-help have spread widely (e.g. Madsen, 2015; Schaffner, 2021), one still finds advice books in the tradition of Franklin, like for instance the *4-Hour-Workweek* by Timothy Ferriss (2009).

While a fully developed genealogy that takes up all of these aspects and even more (such like quantification, digitalisation, medicalisation, or the diffusion of biomedical knowledge and the neurosciences) still needs to be written, these considerations suffice to highlight the profound historic roots of self-optimisation. We now turn to the current discourse about self-optimisation. It illustrates the controversies about this phenomenon that for some

constitute a useful and powerful means to improve yourself, and for others paths the way to alienation.


## 4. Self-optimisation as discourse

The word 'self-optimisation' captures many of the societal requirements modern individuals are faced with (to perform, to be excellent, to be good-looking, to be attractive, etc.), but also many of the hopes and goals they pursue themselves. Self-optimisation appears to be a positive goal for those who actively seek to optimise their career, productivity, sleep, or lifestyle, and so forth: 'Now it's time to start designing the optimised version of you', as one online self-optimisation guide claims[iv]. One argument in favour of self-optimisation highlights the 'whole energy that lies within self-optimisation'[v], making people reach their goals and realise their potential. The quest for self-optimisation is presented like an engine that pushes people to leave their 'comfort zones' and excel on their own. Another such argument is oriented towards the greatest possible efficiency in different areas of every-day life. It is stated, for instance, that one can learn specific techniques of 'How to triple your Reading Speed' or 'How to Learn Any Language in Record Time and Never Forget It'[vi]. A third argument presents self-optimisation as a way to suspend any form of bodily, mental or other decay. The aim is, either, to maintain all cognitive capacities or to keep a full head of hair and a skin without wrinkles (a myriad of 'Anti-ageing' products are sold for this purpose); or to restore an imagined or real former state of affairs. For example, French CEO and actress Maeva Ghennam, who, in July 2022 was had 3,3 million followers on Instagram and 3 million on Tiktok, on September 2, 2021 posted a video by her gynaecologist, stating that she had 'rejuvenated her vagina'. She claimed to be happy that 'now it's like I'm 12 years old'[vii]. In the fourth variant, the advantages of self-optimisation are seen in the fact that it helps people to find the best possible ratio between different parameters for measuring and assessing the conduct of one's life, such as the perfect 'work-life-balance'. Often presented in form of a personal experience[viii], it is stated that,

for instance, too much work makes people sick or depressive and that self-optimisation is needed to stay healthy. There is a profound tension in this line of reasoning. On the one hand, there is the request for not seeking the maximum out of oneself, as it potentially leads to burnout or depression. On the other hand, this argument omits the fact that seeking to optimise your lifestyle can be tiring as well, because it requires the use of specific optimisation techniques.

It is this supposedly incessant character of optimisation processes that forms one of the core elements within the critical discourse about self-optimisation. Röcke's (2021) analysis of the coverage of self-optimisation in the major German newspaper *Die Zeit* [literally translatable as *Time*] between 1999 (first appearance of the term self-optimisation) and 2015 usefully illustrates this point. A weekly publication with an older, politically liberal, academically minded readership, *Die Zeit* frequently deploys negative framing to cover topics related to self-optimisation. Of a total of 71 newspaper articles analysed by Röcke (2021), only three framed self-optimisation in positive terms, while 33 made use of negative framing. Journalists writing for *Die Zeit* for example characterised self-optimisation as an 'ideologeme', as a 'dystopia', or as an 'endless loop of self-questioning'.

This sort of negative framing has some striking similarities with the mentioned critical perspectives of the 'belabored' or the 'entrepreneurial' self. It stresses the supposedly compulsory, omnipresent, and permanent nature of self-optimisation. In this line of argumentation, optimising the self appears as latest invention of 'NewLiberalSpeak' (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1991) or, in the words of Wolff (2018), as a 'fancy swearword' that is meant to highlight the devastating effects of a performance, competition, and the enhancement society. However, Wolff suggests that this argument relies on a limited set of extreme cases, rather than on comprehensive empirical evidence. On the basis of these extreme cases, self-optimisation is then portrayed as a 'scandalous issue'.

The analysis of *Die Zeit* is based on a small sample of texts that is not widely representative of the entirety of public discourse in Germany, but typical of a specific, rather left, liberal and academic newspaper. Moreover, this example not only illustrates a prominent part of the negative discourse about self-optimisation. It also shows that this idea has expanded to different spheres of society (to work, education, culture, body, beauty, etc.) and is also seen as overall value or requirement to be fulfilled. What is interesting, moreover, is the mismatch between the critical discourse *about* the idea and practice of self-optimisation and a very affirmative way of presenting it from the part of those who are actively seeking to optimise themselves. There are probably differences in terms of age (younger vs. older) or milieu and class affiliations that come into play, but the analysis of this differences lies beyond the remit of our argument here.

Academic and public discourse thus provide arguments for positive and negative assessments of self-optimisation. In the following, we suggest that both have merit. This is, among others, due to the fact that notions of autonomy and heteronomy are closely interwoven in self-optimisation practices, as we will show in the following section. It provides an analytic framework for conceiving self-optimisation as a multifaceted form of practice and improves our understanding of its underlying structure, involved elements and possible tensions.

## 5.  Self-optimisation as practice: an analytical framework

Since the 'practice turn', practice theories have formed a broad, interdisciplinary, and heterogeneous field in social theory and beyond (Savigny, Knorr-Cetina and Schatzki, 2001). Some basic characteristics of a sociological practice-theoretical approach are the sequence-character of practices, as well as their social embeddedness, their connection to 'things', to forms of cognitive knowledge and of 'bodily activities', and the fact that they are influenced by social context, roll out in time, and thus may (and usually do) change their meanings over time (Reckwitz, 2002). Beginning with these premises, self-optimising practices can be

presented as a loosely connected sequence that extends in time, is dependent on the context and implies a certain knowledge - for example, about the effectiveness of specific substances for performance enhancement. These practices also have a material dimension, insofar as they are intrinsically linked to bodily facets or to specific things like technical artefacts. The actors involved in these practices either explicitly or implicitly pursue goals and interests, but their actions are also decisively shaped by the unfolding of the process itself (in its temporal, material as well as social structure). On the basis of these assumptions, we provide a more precise picture of self-optimising practices by specifying ten elements. The result is an analytic framework that can be used both for further theoretical as well as empirical research (cf. (Röcke, 2021).

1) The *subject* is the person who carries out the optimising sequence of practices or mandates someone else to do so, e.g. the plastic surgeon. Self-optimisation is thus a form of individual practice that, however, is always socially embedded is also bound to the conditions of the socio-cultural and socio-historical context.

2) The *object* area of self-optimising practices encompasses all facets of the 'self', i.e. one's body, psyche or lifestyle. The body, psyche or lifestyle can, however, not be optimised as a totality, but only single elements like, for the body, muscle mass, nutrition, appearance, for the psyche moods and well-being, and for the lifestyle the practical planning of everyday life.

3) The *basic orientation* of self-optimisation processes relies on two principles: on the 'improvability' or 'perfectibility' of one's own person, on the one hand, which on the other hand means that the given situation is unsatisfactory, deficient or sub-optimal. If everything can always be done better, no state and no result are permanently satisfactory. The effort to eliminate inadequacies or to further improve achieved results always produces a situation that

is not yet satisfying. To strive for perfection and to focus on (supposedly) existing shortcomings or inadequacies are two sides of the same coin.

4) Practices of self-optimisation are, at least at the beginning, usually *intentional*, i.e. they require a conscious intention and do not happen 'just like that'. They imply a minimal reflection on the part of the involved actors about which means they want to use to achieve which goal. This in turn implies at least a rough knowledge of how the means or techniques that are used work, such as substances for performance enhancement or Botox for the skin. At the same time, such practices can also be or become part of a largely routinised, i.e. semi- or hardly conscious, processes. Particularly in the case of a longer temporal course that extends over several weeks or months, a completely different dynamic can emerge than the one pursued in the beginning.

5) The *overarching goal* of self-optimising practices is instrumental self-improvement. Thus, self-optimisation is not about becoming a better person in a moral sense, but in a strategic-instrumental sense: self-optimisation should 'pay off'' and bring added value to the acting subject. This value does not stem from regular sleeping, eating, exercise, health care or the like, but from outperforming the norm. There is no absolute added value, but it depends on the given means and the context. In the case of older and elderly people, for example, the goals are much more oriented towards maintaining the given situation (in terms of health, appearance or performance) than exceeding it.

There exist different forms of added value: economic, cultural, social, and symbolic. The economic perspective has been described in detail in the figure of the 'entrepreneurial self' (Bröckling, 2016) that seeks to become productive in every single aspect of his or her life. From a cultural perspective, added value is generated by developing oneself into a special or unique personality. It is based on the cultural norm of becoming an autonomous, self-determined and self-realising personality that is rooted in the tradition of Romanticism. In late

modernity, according to Reckwitz, a social-performative version of this trend develops that he captures with the term 'singularity' (Reckwitz, 2020). Advantages in 'singularity capital' also provide advantages in the social competition for scarce goods or relationships, in other words: social capital. Furthermore, self-optimisation can become a source of symbolic capital, in that it ensures the recognition by others.

6) Self-optimising practices imply *conflicts of goals* as they usually involve several, interrelated parameters, e.g. 'work' and 'leisure', and that cannot be equally maximised at the same time. Thus, optimization practices aim a finding the best possible ('optimal') equilibrium or balance between the different goals and parameters involved.

7) The *means* (things, processes) that can be used for self-optimisation purposes are extremely varied, depending on the object and goals of the optimization process. They include self-help books and podcasts, specific substances for enhancing the performance, well-being or physical appearance, sports and fitness equipment, or digital and biotechnical artefacts.

8) Self-optimising practices have a *structurally open and dynamic process logic of permanent adaptation and exceeding of achieved targets*. Following to this logic, every result can and should be changed and further improved. This requires a permanent control of achieved targets as well as a continuous and flexible readjustment of the involved parameters and pursued goals. There is no predefined end that is fixed once and for all, nor is there an overarching, ultimate goal.

9) Practices of self-optimisation *oscillate between autonomy and heteronomy* in the sense that both dimensions are always present and interwoven but can tend more to the one or to the other side. The heteronomous side is dominant when people are, implicitly or explicitly, forced to optimise themselves: because they fear to lose their social position and status due to increased economic competition and less social welfare (McGee, 2005); due to growing social expectations as to the perfect physical look (e.g., Borkenhagen, 2019); or due to ever tighter

schedules regarding the time and output of the work to be done, which is increasingly based on permanent digital control (Schaupp, 2022).

However, one would not grasp the attractiveness of self-optimisation if it were purely reduced to a form of coercion. We argue that self-optimising practices may also include a form of emotional involvement which is supported with and through these practices and leads to an 'affective, positive 'sense of achievement'' (Mau and Gülzau, 2020) that provides satisfaction. In other words, self-optimising practices offer concrete experiences of success 'that can strengthen a person's self-confidence, self-esteem, experience and action potential', lift his or her mood 'and animate the subject to new undertakings'. Moreover, the continuous achievement of goals might provide 'strong experiences of self-efficacy', as it clearly confirms one's 'power to act' (Straub and Balandis, 2018). Following the two authors, these experiences of self-efficacy are particularly strong and attractive when it is a question of one's own improvement. In addition, 'the self' seems to constitute an 'inexhaustible source of self-optimising action'. Contrary to the negative discourse that criticises the 'rat race'- character of optimising the self, Straub and Balandis highlight the 'cumulative experiences of self-efficacy', which not only makes people feel proud of their achievements, but also may lead to recognition by others (ibid, pp. 77-79).

Thus, self-optimisation can lean towards a more autonomous practice when it is anchored in the personal, self-determined value structure of people and is not mainly the result of an openly coercive context, and when it provides people with a sense of self-efficacy. At the same time, of course, individual values are always also related to the overall socio-historic context and thus also reflect overall norms and expectations, which is the reason why there is no 'pure' individual autonomy. Moreover, psychological dispositions of the self-optimising subject also come into play in that they influence the way people react to social requirements for optimising the self (cf. King et al., 2018). Finally, their endowment with economic, social,

cultural, and symbolic capital as well as their position within a given field of power relations have to be considered, too. Overall, the respective weight of the autonomous and of the heteronomous depend on personal, situational and structural factors.

10) The last point concerns the fact that there are *no ultimate criteria for the (normative) evaluation of self-optimising practices* that could indicate whether the achieved result is 'good' or 'bad', whether it has been 'worthwhile' or not. The assessment depends on the criteria and norms that one applies individually, but which also depend on the socio-historical context. Are convinced self-optimisers a role model for others or a bugbear? In the same vein, the idea of a cyborg is a positive utopia for transhumanists, but a dystopia for people who argue from a humanistic-ethical perspective.

The presentation of these ten points provides an idea of the enormous variance of the forms of self-optimisation, depending for instance on the different means that are used or on the different objects. At the same time, it gives a more accurate picture of the general structure of self-optimising practices: their orientation towards instrumental self-improvement and remedying deficiencies, their open process logic and related tendency to transcend extant limitations and boundaries as well as their oscillation between autonomy and heteronomy. It is especially the open process logic that makes it possible to conceive of different forms of hybridisation between practices geared towards self-optimisation and other orientations, such as spiritual, religious, or health-related ways of acting upon the self.

## 6. The politics of self-optimisation

Our analysis on the preceding pages points to the polyvalent political implications of self-optimisation. Here, we can present only a preliminary analysis of self-optimisation as a significant socio-cultural trend, of its socio-cultural roots, and of its implications in the context of broader late modern transformations of self-identity. Nonetheless, it does seem warranted to conclude that self-optimisation, as a feature of contemporary social life, reaches beyond the

sort of social atomisation and de-politicisation that has long preoccupied critics of therapeutic culture. For example, writing about self-help techniques at the height of the neo-liberal project, Heidi Rimke concludes:

> 'Self-help techniques are an apparatus of governance through which external 'psy' authorities are able to prescribe ever more avenues for individual self-management. They encourage some ways of life and living over others. […] By means of that self-fashioning, it is claimed, model citizens can be produced. But it also is arguable that, by means of that self-fashioning, citizenship itself disappears. The public sphere and the public responsibility to which citizenship refers, the interidentified subjectivities to which citizenship has obligations, and on which it depends, are negated by a life of self-help.'
> (Rimke, 2000: 73)

Rimke's much-cited work embodies central features of sociological critiques of what might be termed 'therapeutic politics'. First, thus Rimke, self-help programmes of personal transformation overlap with the socio-political programme of liberal democracy, with their emphasis on autonomous self-fashioning through engagement with popular psychological discourse. Second, this mode of self-fashioning is concomitant with the disappearance of democratic citizenship, in the sense that mutual identification between individuals, collective solidarities, and the public sphere are contested by the solipsism of psycho-centric self-fashioning.

These observations are important, and they have been widely echoed in analyses of therapeutic culture and neo-liberal politics from the late 1990s onwards (Furedi, 2002; Binkley, 2011; Foster, 2015; Dagiral, 2019). Indeed, certain previous studies of self-optimisation (Madsen, 2015) echo some of these criticisms, and their use of the term remains closer to classical diagnoses of therapeutic culture. However, on the preceding pages, we have sought to reach deeper in tracing the historical roots of self-optimisation, and we have attempted to

cast our need wider in identifying its current socio-cultural and political implications. Self-optimisation, in the way in which we have conceptualised it, offers some potential for the de-politicising effects that have been described elsewhere. At the same time, as we have suggested, its intellectual antecedents pre-date neo-liberal political projects considerably, and they are not clearly and unambiguously bound up with liberal notions of self-fashioning and autonomous self-reliance. Simultaneously, self-optimisation is broad in the forms of everyday experience and modes of subjectivation that it may engender, and it seems unduly reductive to interpret it merely as a form of coercion.

In this sense, our analysis of self-optimisation at least partially supports recent accounts of therapeutic culture that have drawn attention to its underpinning of everyday forms of sociability (McLeod and Wright, 2009), and of therapeutic communities and innovative modes of political engagement (Wright, 2010; Salmenniemi, 2019). In part, these accounts may be taken to shed light on aspects of everyday therapeutic engagements that have long been obscured by – entirely warranted and important – critiques of their implication in neoliberal politics. In part, they also highlight the need to arrive at new understandings of the therapeutic, as well as of the broad field of diverse 'technologies of the self' (Foucault, 1988), at a time when the world seems to move past its predominantly neoliberal moment and new modes of politics and forms of engaging with personal troubles and social problems are beginning to emerge (Beck, 2016). Our account of self-optimisation contributes to these projects.

## 7. Conclusion: Self-optimisation and the sociology of psychologies

Throughout this paper we laid out different facets of self-optimisation and discussed it in relation to transformations of self-identity and the role of therapeutic cultures. In doing so, the article provides an introduction and overview to a topic that is notably influential in contemporary societies and that helps to explain everyday discourses, experiences, practices,

and technologies of the self. So far, it has received little attention within sociology or has been interpreted along pre-existing lines of research that, however, do not suffice any more in the light of recent social and political developments.

The sociological analysis of self-optimisation highlighted in this article may contribute materially to an innovative programme of research, with the aim of re-examining the historical, socio-cultural, political, and economic roots of therapeutic culture and of the spread of various practices and technologies aimed at improving and optimising the self. These practices partly relate to this culture but also need to be seen in relation to broader cultural, (bio-)technological and economic developments. For the conclusive lines of our argument, however, we focus on the relation between self-optimisation and therapeutic culture.

Some seminal and much cited works in this area notwithstanding (Illouz, 2008; McGee, 2005; Binkley, 2014; Cabanas and Illouz, 2019; Wright, 2008; Rimke, 2000), enquiries into therapeutic culture have arguably remained somewhat marginal in academic sociology. At the same time, there is an obvious case to be made for a 'sociology of psychologies', at a time when psychological knowledge has come to define common-sense thinking about the self, personal troubles, interpersonal relationships, and social problems, across a diverse range of non-specialist institutional domains and cutting across heterogeneous societies (Nehring and Kerrigan, 2019); Klein and Mills, 2017). The case for such a sociology of psychologies is strengthened by the assumption that established modes of explaining the prominence of the therapeutic in contemporary societies, via the hegemony of neo-liberal political programmes, do not hold anymore, as we have suggested above.

A more detailed historical genealogy of self-optimisation would contribute materially to this project, by mapping out the heterogeneous ontologies and epistemologies of the therapeutic in different societies and historical moments, and by overcoming a dearth of historical scholarship on therapeutic cultures. A second, equally important line of research, to

build on the present study, might seek to engage with both empirical as well as theoretical studies that provide a more detailed account of the structure of self-optimising practices, of the similarities, differences and hybridisations with other technologies of the self and of the (new) forms of power, control and domination related to them. Third, and with regard to the transnational and global diffusion of these practices and technologies, there is the need to analyse the uses of narratives of self-optimisation in non-democratic, authoritarian or totalitarian, societies (Yang, 2018).

Finally, and in relation to the last aspect, it is particularly important to move beyond the Global Northwest in enquiries on self-optimisation and therapeutic cultures. The very limited extant research on self-optimisation, in any language known to us, has remained confined to the Global Northwest, and broader lines of research on therapeutic cultures have only recently involved some dialogue between scholarship in the Global South and the Global North (Nehring and Kerrigan, 2019). Globally focused and comparative research on self-optimisation would need to depart from and move beyond the definition of self-optimisation offered in this article, to take into account diverse and socio-historically idiosyncratic intellectual, religious, and spiritual developments, as well as broader social, cultural, and economic trends, that organise the ways in which self-optimisation is understood, experienced, and practised in heterogeneous societies around the world. While there is a range of analytically productive starting points in extant research (e.g. Cassaniti, 2018; Plotkin, 2003; Yang, 2017), self-optimisation has not been discussed in significant detail in these diverse contexts, and this offers important pathways for future original research. With the present article, we have sought to lay the groundwork for future enquiry in these directions.

**Notes**

[i] There exists a larger (although still limited) body of literature across the social sciences and humanities in German as 'self-optimisation' has been debated for a longer time in Germany.

[ii] https://www.britannica.com/print/article/430575, accessed 2 September 2021.

[iii] https://servetolead.com/benjamin-franklin-self-improvement-project/, accessed 8 September 2021.

[iv] See the audio piece 'The Beginner's Guide to Optimizing Yourself' on https://optimizeyourself.me/beginners-guide-to-optimizing-yourself/, accessed 9 September 2021.

[v] Franziska Bulban: 'Fein gemacht! Lebenshilfe-Apps sollen uns fitter, gesünder und organisierter machen. Werden wir mit ihnen zu Kontrollfreaks oder wirklich zu besseren Menschen?', in: Die Zeit, 44/2012 (25 October 2012), p.59.

[vi] https://tim.blog/category/performance-psychology/, accessed 9 September 2021.

[vii] https://www.lemonde.fr/societe/article/2021/09/08/rajeunir-son-vagin-la-polemique-maeva-ghennam-nouvel-exemple-des-injonctions-pesant-sur-les-corps-des-femmes_6093938_3224.html, accessed 9 September 2021. Faced with a wave of criticism, she later apologised for her statements.

[viii] https://optimizeyourself.me/beginners-guide-to-optimizing-yourself/, accessed 9 September 2021.

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