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Dynamics of Self-Optimisation: An Introduction

Anja Röcke, Daniel Nehring & Suvi Salmenniemi *

Abstract: *»Dynamiken der Selbstoptimierung: Eine Einführung«.* This introduction explores the increasing pervasiveness of discourses and practices of self-optimisation in present-day societies. These are evident in activities such as self-tracking, fitness training, cosmetic surgery, neuroenhancement, or the consumption of nutritional supplements. The growing appeal and diffusion of these various practices testifies to the overall cultural attraction of self-optimisation, which is a multifaceted phenomenon. Against the dominant interpretation of self-optimisation as mainly driven by the logic of maximisation and growth, we argue that it can also be about minimalism or balance. At the same time, self-optimisation is strongly connected to dynamics of power and social inequality, potentially reinforcing existing social inequalities and creating new forms of domination and control. The paper starts by charting the existing research and theoretical approaches to self-optimisation, presents the contributions to the special issue, addresses a set of key domains of self-optimisation (therapeutic culture, health and well-being, digital technologies, work, and economy), and finally draws conclusions and suggests some avenues for future research.

Keywords: Self-optimisation, therapeutic culture, digital technologies, health and well-being, power, social inequalities.

1. Introduction

Recent decades have witnessed a burgeoning of discourses and practices that aim to optimise our lives and selves in diverse ways. Self-tracking, mindfulness workshops, anti-ageing, self-help literature, the consumption of nutritional supplements, neuro-enhancement, cosmetic surgery, fitness programs, yoga, and coaching are but a few examples of such self-optimisation endeavours. In the early 21st century, these are particularly omnipresent in social media. Here, influencers express and symbolise the ideal of optimising

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the self and at the same time bear witness to the unattainability of this ideal. Self-optimisation relates first and foremost to individual selves, but also encompasses relationships with others. It is deeply embedded in existing sociohistorical, cultural, political, economic, and technological structures.

In a broad sense, self-optimisation refers to ideas and practices related to self-improvement, personal development, and self-enhancement (Elliot 2011; Kristensen 2022; Madsen 2015; Marquis 2014). More precisely, self-optimisation involves "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; also Fenner 2019). Röcke defines self-optimisation as an "individualistic strategy of instrumentally oriented self-overbidding" that in principle has no end (time-dimension); is focused on improving facets of the body, psyche, or everyday conduct of life (social dimension); and relies upon the principle of improvability, a quest for added value, permanent self-rationalisation, and self-monitoring as well as a constant strive for surpassing reached goals and boundaries (factual dimension) (Röcke 2021, 176, 177-80). She thus conceives of self-optimisation as an "instrumental self-relation" (ibid., 216) that not only aims to *improve* facets of oneself (and not of somebody else), but also to reach the *best possible result* in a given situation. In the messy world of empirical reality, however, it is often impossible to draw a clear distinction between self-optimisation and self-improvement (Röcke 2021, 10; Nehring and Röcke 2023). It is thus an empirical question of how far or to what extent the logic of self-optimisation with its temporal, social, and factual dimensions is present in practices like coaching, yoga, mindfulness, or aesthetic surgery.

Moreover, self-optimisation can take different forms depending on, for example, the objects to be optimised (e.g., parts or elements of the inner or outer body) or on the overarching goal orientation. Beyond the quest for increased performance, self-optimising practices can also be (and usually are) linked to an orientation towards health, beauty, or happiness. We believe that the hybridisation of such orientations is a characteristic feature of self-optimising practices today. Moreover, and as many contributions in this special issue underline, they do not necessarily consist in a logic of pure and endless *increase* (of health, performance, size of muscles, etc.), but on the contrary, they can also be coupled with the aim of *reducing* ones' activities (see, e.g., Fournier and Dalgalarrondo 2024, in this special issue) or of *balancing* the involved parameters with respect to dietary or other bodily, emotional, habitual, or productivity-related aspects (see Krzeminska 2024; Zillien 2024, both in this special issue). This is also the reason why we argue that despite recent crises and the growing attractiveness of ideals like authenticity or naturalness, self-optimisation still constitutes a central cultural principle operative in contemporary late capitalist societies (see also King, Gerisch, and Rosa

2019a; Schreiber 2021). The overarching goal of this special issue is to dig deeper into the dynamics of self-optimising practices in order to advance understanding of this multifaceted phenomenon that is increasingly woven into the fabric of present-day societies.

The overall quest for self-optimisation is deeply embedded in contemporary societies around the world. In 2022, the global amount of aesthetic/cosmetic surgical and nonsurgical procedures added up to 14,986,982 and 18,857,311, which represents an increase of, respectively, 16.7% and 7.2% as to the year 2021 and of 41.3% and 57.8% within the time-span 2018–2022. Liposuction (+21.1% as compared to 2021) and breast augmentation (+29% as compared to 2021) were the top two surgical procedures; the injection of botulinum toxin increased by 51.3% between 2018 and 2022 (ISAPS 2022, 7-10). According to a survey of the personal development market in the US, Canada, Mexico, UK, Germany, China, India, Japan, and Brazil, revenues in 2021 were USD 41.81 billion, with an expected annual growth of 5.5% from 2022 to 2030.[1] Business, fitness, or beauty podcasts and influencer contents provide hundreds of millions of followers and listeners with everyday techniques and practices of how to optimise sleep and performance, nutrition, or self-confidence. Another field is the use of digital wearables like wrests, rings, or glasses. These wearable or near-body mobile technologies and biosensor devices are used to collect data about peoples' lives and bodies. They have proliferated rapidly during the recent years. For example, Oura company declares having sold more than a million smart rings that collect personal health metrics on sleep, activity, and stress, and that cost about 300 to 600 euros.[2] As to the use of smart bands and smartwatches, user numbers worldwide have increased, between 2017 and 2023, from 81.09 million to 260.70 and from 93.36 to 219.40.[3]

The growing appeal and diffusion of these various practices and technological devices testifies to the overall cultural attraction of self-optimisation. At the same time, self-optimisation is strongly connected to dynamics of power and social inequality. This is already obvious in the formulation of "the best possible version of oneself." Who has (and historically has had) the power to define what is conceived of as the "best possible" version of the self? Is the very formulation of "the best possible version" not itself an expression of a powerful and economically grounded discourse that urges people to strive for this specific goal and not, for example, for the best possible living conditions for all human and non-human beings? Or can self-optimisation perhaps also be linked to emancipatory dynamics that enable people to develop more

[1] https://www.grandviewresearch.com/industry-analysis/personal-development-market (Accessed 6 June 2023).
[2] https://ouraring.com/ (Accessed 25 June 2024).
[3] https://www.statista.com/outlook/hmo/digital-health/digital-fitness-well-being/fitness-trackers/worldwide#users (Accessed 12 June 2024).

expertise and power to act with regard to their personal health and well-being, and possibly resist some impulses of normalising power? What happens to those individuals and groups of people who either do not want or are not able to respond to the supposedly growing expectation to optimise oneself? These are some of the questions that will be addressed in this special issue. It delves into the social, cultural, and political dynamics of self-optimisation and contributes to its understanding through a series of empirically grounded analyses, allowing us to better grasp how self-optimisation works and the meanings it gains in different contexts, both in the Global North and South.

We begin this introduction by charting the existing research and theoretical approaches to the topic, and by outlining the contributions that this special issue makes. After that, we address a set of key domains of self-optimisation and discuss how the articles in this special issue contribute to and advance our understanding about the effects and modes of self-optimisation in these domains. Finally, we draw conclusions and suggest some avenues for future research.

2. Self-Optimisation: A New Academic Field?

Research on self-optimisation is embedded in existing scholarship on ideas and practices aiming to improve facets of the body, mind, or everyday activities. The concept of "technologies of the self" coined by Michel Foucault (1988) has been particularly influential in this context. Foucault originally used it to refer to ideas and practices in the ancient world, but it is also widely used for describing present-day processes, either from a specific Foucauldian perspective or as a generic and descriptive term. It is widely acknowledged that these diverse self-related practices "have been part and parcel of many different political, religious and cultural formations" (Salmenniemi et al. 2020, 3), thus also including different overall orientations. Self-optimisation is one of them, while self-care or self-experimentation are others (see also Montlibert 2023). The diverse cultural or political orientations of self-betterment practices, but also the different disciplinary and national perspectives on them as well as the various notions that exist (e.g., self-optimisation, enhancement, self-improvement, self-betterment, personal development), make it impossible to delineate clear lines around the phenomenon of self-optimisation. Nevertheless, we believe that we are dealing with a significant emerging area of academic debate. In this special issue, our aim is to contribute to the further development of this debate, through a set of cross-disciplinary contributions that are broadly international in their empirical remit.

In previous scholarship, contemporary processes of self-optimisation have been analysed and theorised from at least three partly overlapping perspectives. First, self-optimisation has been approached as yet another manifestation

of a neoliberal political rationality and the associated processes of privatisation, deregulation, individualisation, and the creation of entrepreneurial selves. Neoliberal policies put people under constant pressure to be "at their best" in order to survive in the rat race and navigate the competitive structures of late capitalist society, and at the same time they also push risks and structural inequalities to be tackled at the individual level. People invest in optimising every facet of themselves so that they can maximise and make the most out of their abilities and capacities in this uncertain and volatile terrain (Bröckling 2016; Dardot and Laval 2013 [2009]; McGee 2005; Rosa 2015a, 2015b). Self-optimisation encourages the drive towards the rationalisation and the rendering competitive of each and every aspect of life, pushing people towards ever harsher regimes of self-maintenance and self-improvement. One is constantly hailed to perform a little bit better, which engenders a compulsion to prove oneself over and over. Within this broad framework, people remain formally free and autonomous, but largely act on the basis of internalised norms and requirements (responsible, flexible, and investing in ones' potential) and thus constitute themselves as controllable individuals. This shapes profoundly the self's relationship to itself and others. Thus, while neoliberalism promises individual autonomy, in actual terms it increases individual insecurity and competition (Browne 2017, 82).

The second approach has viewed self-optimisation as an emblematic example of broader cultural developments geared towards constant self-making and self-improvement. It encompasses research about "therapeutic culture" (Illouz 2008; Straub 2019) and the "happiness industry" (Davies 2015; Cabanas and Illouz 2019), but also more encompassing investigations about the pursuit of "singularity" (Reckwitz 2020), of "reinvention" (Elliott 2020), or contemporary versions of the old quest for "perfection" (King, Gerisch, and Rosa 2019b). Moreover, Rosa (2018) speaks about a "triple A approach" to the "good life": "The modern way of acting and being-in-the-world is geared towards making more and more of its qualities and quantities available, accessible and attainable" (ibid., 42).[4] This logic gives rise to and invites constant self-optimisation as a way of making the most out of ourselves and our experiences, desires, and options. Within this strand of research, the idea of self-optimisation offers cultural models and techniques for individuals to work on their selves and conduct and is deeply linked to existing norms and values of living an autonomous, successful, and special life (Ehrenberg 2020).

The third approach discusses self-optimisation in the light of the recent digital technologies and processes of quantification and metrics (Bartl, Papilloud, and Terracher-Lipinki 2019; Diaz-Bone and Didier 2016), which have opened up ever new avenues for the relentless pursuit of self-improvement

[4] The research group around Vera King, Benigna Gerisch, and Hartmut Rosa investigates processes of optimisation and self-optimisation from a combined psychodynamic and "theory of modernity"-perspective (King, Gerisch, and Schreiber 2020; King, Gerisch, and Rosa 2019b).

and self-enhancement (Dagiral 2019; Neff and Nafus 2016; Kristensen 2022; Lupton 2016; Ruckenstein 2023). Digital technologies form a digital infrastructure that enables the permanent and automatic generation of self-related data, ranging from the number of steps to the quality of sleep and emotions to blood sugar levels or other bio markers. In addition, gamification elements like trophies or badges or the competition with others on social platforms may constitute additional incentives for self-measurement and self-optimisation. Overall, digital self-optimisation technologies are radically altering relationships between the individual and society and shaping modes of subject-formation, potentially reinforcing existing social inequalities and creating new forms of domination and control (Elliot 2019; Krüger 2019; Mau 2019; Zuboff 2019).

In addition to these discussions, recent scholarship has also increasingly focused on the question of how people concretely respond to, interact with, or resist the quest for optimising the self in different institutional settings like the workplace or the educational system (e.g., Vicars 2023; Pardo-Guerra 2022; Schaupp 2022). Moreover, Dalgalarrondo and Fournier have highlighted the importance of the procedural dimension of self-optimisation. They do not see self-optimisation as a fixed entity or process with a clear-cut structure, but as a phenomenon that (also) involves "the possibility of slippage, a chance of discovery, the establishment of a new relationship to society and its ideologies, to one's body and one's sensations" (Dalgalarrondo and Fournier 2019, 4). Although a number of recently edited, interdisciplinary volumes in German (Dalski et al. 2022; Eulenbach 2022; Glade and Schnell 2022) document the remaining importance of the neoliberal framing of self-optimisation (see Röcke 2024), these and other contributions also address the different forms, ambivalences, and paradoxes inherent in self-optimising practices (e.g., King, Gerisch, and Rosa 2019a; Schreiber 2021; von Felden 2020).

Beyond these contributions to the analysis of contemporary processes of self-optimisation, important historical debates must be mentioned. This special issue focuses on self-optimisation as a set of contemporary social, cultural, economic, political, and technological processes, spanning the final decades of the 20th century and the early years of the 21st century. At the same time, it is important to highlight that self-optimisation can be linked to historically and socio-culturally extensive sets of discourses and practices that reach much farther into the past. These practices are epistemologically, ontologically, and ethically heterogeneous, with equally diverse philosophical and cultural roots. In the Global Northwest, for instance, specific modes or prototypes of current self-optimisation can be distinguished from the late 18th century onwards that are closely bound up with Enlightenment philosophy and the progressive rationalisation of societies (Fielden 1968; Mur Effing 2009; Traue 2010; Weber 2005 [1930]). Here, for example, Harro Maas (2020)

draws attention to strict, religiously motivated moral self-measurement in late 18th-century Switzerland, while Micki McGee (2005) looks at the work of Benjamin Franklin in North America to analyse a distinctively Christian Protestant mode of a rational and autonomous work on the self. In turn, recent scholarship has shown how the social organisation of self-identity and self-optimisation in East Asia may be bound up with distinct and socio-historically deeply grounded ethical discourses, such as Confucianism (Hwang and Han 2010; Jeong 2015). At the same time, historians have highlighted how such discourses may "uproot," acquire transnational mobility, and gain new permutations of meaning in various social settings, as shown in Mariano Ben Plotkin's (2003; also see Damousi and Plotkin 2009) work on the popularisation of psychoanalysis as a widely influential form of self-examination (and maybe also of self-optimisation) in Argentina.

Two important points follow from the foregoing. First, self-optimisation is not co-terminous with the rationality of contemporary neoliberalism and the closely associated digitalisation, tracking, and metricisation of social life, in spite of the attendant emphasis of much recent research and some of the papers in this special issue. Rather, this association highlights a particular, temporally localised modality of self-optimisation, while the concept encompasses a socio-historically broader array of discourses and related practices. Second, while it is useful to look at the emergence, dissemination, and uses of discourses and practices of self-optimisation in specific, clearly bounded social settings, such as specific national contexts, it is of equal importance to consider self-optimisation as a transnational social process, given the well-documented cross-border mobility (e.g., Nehring and Frawley 2020) of the narratives, goods, people, and ways of doing things through which it takes shape. Consequently, and taken together, the papers in this special issue can be read as a mapping of the socio-cultural diversity and the transnational mobility of diverse forms of self-optimisation.

3. Contributions of the Special Issue

In this special issue, we seek to enhance the analysis of self-optimisation from an interdisciplinary perspective, bringing together scholars from sociology, anthropology, and critical and cultural psychology. The papers cover a wide range of domains, ranging from fitness, therapeutic culture, digital technologies and social media platforms, health and well-being, economic activity, and entrepreneurship to fasting. They also trace the historical development of self-optimisation, transnational discourses and practices of self-optimisation, and the diverse systems of knowledge, socio-political dynamics, and forms of governance that have shaped and contributed to the former (see Binkley 2024; Brandt and Straub 2024; Nehring, Esnard, and Kerrigan 2024, all in

this special issue). Furthermore, many of the articles examine lived experiences of self-optimisation by addressing the ways in which people engage with, make sense of, and experience self-optimisation discourses and practices (see Zillien 2024; Krzeminska 2024; Fournier and Dalgalarrondo 2024; Hampel 2024; King et al. 2024; Lupton and Southerton 2024, all in this special issue).

This special issue seeks to enrich theorisation and empirical understanding of self-optimisation in four specific ways. First, it explores paradoxes and ambiguities involved in self-optimisation. The articles complicate the dominant interpretation of self-optimisation as mainly driven by the logic of maximisation and growth, and highlight how it can also be about minimalism, balance, and an ambivalent dialectic between self-care and self-control (Zillien 2024; Fournier and Dalgalarrondo 2024; and Krzeminska 2024, in this special issue). On the one hand, focusing on the self and trying to improve all facets of the self through self-optimisation can operate a way of "taming uncertainty" (Lupton 1995) and harbouring a sense of control (see Zillien 2024; Krzeminska 2024; Cabanas 2024; Fournier and Dalgalarrondo 2024, all in this special issue). On the other hand, the incessant focus on self-optimisation may also cause suffering and lead to diminished well-being. In their contribution about the "Psychic Repercussions of Digital Measurement and Comparison," Vera King and her associates argue that it is paradoxical to try to gain control over things that are in fact beyond our control. They identify a form of "parametric optimisation" that not only includes desperate efforts for adjustment but can also lead to exhaustion and suffering. In this way, it has decidedly oppressive effects and features. Yet, it often seems to be difficult to resist the pull of optimisation despite its negative effects. Finally, the ostensibly paradoxical power relations inherent in practices of self-optimisation also come to the fore in this special issue. For example, Nehring, Esnard and Kerrigan examine contemporary modes of self-optimisation in the Anglophone Caribbean, geared towards the development of an entrepreneurial self capable of autonomous action and consequent success in public life. At the same time, their argument highlights the historical roots of these entrepreneurial practices in colonial forms of domination geared precisely towards the constraint of autonomous agency on the part of colonial subjects. They explain this apparent contradiction through an historical analysis that traces permutations of self-optimisation from colonial times to the present, focusing on their economic and political roots.

Second, this special issue sets out a broadly international and transnational perspective on self-optimisation, looking to chart attendant discourses, everyday understandings, and practices in diverse societies around the world as well as the transnational connections through which they extend across borders. So far, academic debates on self-optimisation have concentrated on (some) European and Anglo-Saxon countries, and the subject has, at most,

been explored obliquely elsewhere (see, for instance, Cassaniti 2018; Yang 2017). The geographical remit of the papers in this special issue encompasses a range of European societies, notably France and Germany, as well as contributions from Australia, China, Trinidad and Tobago, and the USA. Read conjointly, these papers set out a heterogeneous variety of socio-culturally situated narratives, personal understandings, and ways of doing self-optimisation, and they thus draw attention to the need to transcend Eurocentric standpoints in future research. Moreover, they underline the role of transnational circulation and consumption of knowledge, as in Senta Brandt and Jürgen Straub's paper on positive psychology, that has expanded from the United States to other places around the world, or in Deborah Lupton and Clare Southerton's investigation of self-diagnosis of ADHD and autism via the social media platform TikTok, which enables and sustains interpersonal exchanges across borders. In turn, Edgar Cabanas's analysis of the CrossFit exercise literature is concerned with a form of self-optimisation that is sustained by transnational knowledge exchange and media flows, for instance of the fitness books he analyses. The point to be taken from this is that self-optimisation, both in historical and in contemporary perspective, must unavoidably be understood as a social process with important international and transnational dimensions. Understandings and practices can be intensely local and shaped by socio-historically particular institutional circumstance, as, for example, Amir Hampel's paper on self-optimisation and consumer lifestyles in China shows. At the same time, though, the set of public discourses, individual understandings, and personal practices we collectively define as self-optimisation form part of social, cultural, economic, political, and technological structures and processes of a transnational scale (see Nehring et al. 2020).

Third, the papers in this special issue highlight how self-optimisation is a site in which social inequalities come to play and are produced and reproduced. Social inequalities are today conceived increasingly in psychological and individualised terms and attributed to the "defects" of the self rather than to the mechanisms of larger political economy (see Johnson and Lawler 2005; Skeggs 2004), which fuels self-optimisation and encourages to work on the self rather than pursue structural change. More often than not, the ideal subject of self-optimisation appears to be a middle-class and able-bodied person who has both economic and cultural capital to engage with optimisation techniques, such as tracking devices, retreats, healthy food, fitness, and meditation classes. Body is a central site upon which class is inscribed, with bodies operating as "resumes" that communicate human and psychological capital because they are supposed to communicate peoples' choices, identities, and what they are capable of (see Cabanas 2024, in this special issue; also see Howson 2012). Consumption is also a social practice which plays a key role in drawing class distinctions. For example, self-optimisation is an important part of the consumer culture of the young urban professionals and the

formation of class relations in China (see Hampel 2024, in this special issue), and wellness fasting and the consumer and lifestyle choices associated with it operate as a practice of social distinction in France (Fournier and Dalgalarrondo 2024, in this special issue).

Finally, the articles in this special issue also contribute to the discussion of how to define the concept of self-optimisation. Senta Brandt and Jürgen Straub conceive it as "an infinite transgression of self-limits," where all achievements remain relative and provisional. Following their perspective, within contexts of self-optimisation, "subjects are called upon and encouraged to make their own selves the object of incessant treatments in all possible facets in the name of something that will always be better" (p. 161). These subjects are thus "auteronomous subjects" as they act within a setting that both contains possibilities for autonomous action but is also characterised by heteronomous structures. Drawing on ethnographic research on self-help culture in contemporary China, Amir Hampel suggests a different perspective on self-optimisation. He teases out how self-optimisation as a cultural logic shapes people's capacities to realise desired future lifestyles and identity projects. Hampel argues that self-optimisation appears as a conscious retreat from social relationships and dominant values and a way of searching a sense of control in an uncertain world. He thus suggests that self-optimisation should be understood as being crucially about *desires*. The idea of crafting one's life as an expression of uniquely personal desires, ideals, and dreams lies for him at the heart of self-optimisation and distinguishes it from self-improvement. Nicole Zillien, for her part, argues that for self-trackers, self-optimisation is a process that "aims to (re)establish balance and stability, maintain infrastructures and ensure resilience, or at least restore them as quickly as possible in the event of disruptions" (p. 72). In their contribution, in turn, Nehring, Esnard and Kerrigan consider self-optimisation as "an institutionally situated moral grammar" that "articulates socio-historically specific, institutionally rooted beliefs about selfhood and the relationship between individual and society" (p. 272) Moreover, they apply self-optimisation as an analytic lens for analysing the colonial political and economic logic of domination in the Anglophone Caribbean, both historically and in the present-day. In doing so, they aim to move debates away from a focus on individualistic health and psy cultures and thus to challenge some of the key premises of research about self-optimisation.

4. Domains of Self-Optimisation

Self-optimising ideas and practices can be related to facets of the inner and outer body, which includes not only questions of beauty, fitness, and health, but also emotional and psychologic well-being and conduct in everyday life.

Moreover, these ideas and practices can be found within different institutional settings including education, work, or leisure. The contributions in this special issue deal particularly with topics related to four areas: therapeutic culture, health and well-being, digital technologies and quantification, and work and economy.

4.1 Therapeutic Culture

Self-optimisation is intimately connected with research about therapeutic culture, and at least some of the ideas and practices that we here conceive of as examples of self-optimisation have also been dealt with under the heading of a therapeutic culture (Salmenniemi et al. 2020, 2). Moreover, both (clearly overlapping) fields refer to same historical reference points, such as Benjamin Franklin or Samuel Smiles (ibid., 3; Nehring and Röcke 2023; Nehring et al. 2020). "Therapeutic culture" not only involves therapeutic practices in a narrow sense of the term, that is, those with the aim of healing, but also those aiming at improving what is conceived as normal. Overall, therapeutic culture has self-betterment at its core, inciting the constant cultivation, care, and transformation of the self as a route to health, well-being, and happiness. Critical scholars argue that the current therapeutic imaginary tends to summon up a normative subject characterized by rational and strategic display and management of emotions, self-responsibility, and continuous self-invention (Rose 1998; Illouz 2008; Cabanas and Illouz 2019), which places it in close affinity with neoliberalism. Contemporary therapeutic cultures are seen as an integral part of market ideologies and "neo-liberal social and economic rationalities, in which the therapeutic subject embraces a uniquely entrepreneurial attitude," (p. 127) as Sam Binkley argues in this special issue. The focus thus lies on the increasingly commodified industry of therapeutic culture that offers a wide variety of possibilities – wellness retreats, self-help books, mental health apps, life coaching, mindfulness classes, and so on – for optimising psychic, bodily, and affective dimensions of the self.

A number of articles in this special issue address the links between therapeutic culture and self-optimisation. For example, Sam Binkley's paper deals with the metaphorical representations of psychological interiority in therapeutic discourse drawing on a historical analysis of US therapeutic culture. It addresses metaphorical constructions of interiority as they operate within the therapeutic ethos and as part of the optimisation of emotional, bodily, and cognitive potentials. The article traces a paradigmatic shift in the therapeutic ethos in which the interpretative paradigm gives way to a pragmatic one as a result of the dominating ideas of market ideology and entrepreneurial self in neoliberalism. Binkley argues that whereas a classical formulation of therapeutic interiority, prevalent from the post-war period until the 1980s, invited us to look within ourselves in order to understand the dynamic forces within,

this formulation has been replaced by an emphasis to optimise or maximise these internal forces and to apply them to the attainment of goals. Thus, in self-optimisation, Binkley argues, interiority is not principally about self-knowledge but rather it appears as a potential barrier to the mobilisation of forces. The age-old exhortation to "know thyself" transforms into a call to simply optimise yourself.

Senta Brandt and Jürgen Straub, in turn, critically investigate central principles, concepts, and ambitions of Positive Psychology (PP) and the closely related Positive Psychotherapy (PPT), which have been promoted by Martin Seligman, Mihali Csikszentmihalyi, and others. Based on a discourse analysis of selected texts, they interpret PP and PPT as "an ideological and missionary worldview that propagates a 'new human being'" (p. 156). One of the characteristics of PP and PPT is to blur the boundaries between therapy and self-optimisation. PP and PPT aim at making "normal" people stronger, more resilient and positive, and with more fulfilling social relations. According to Brandt and Straub, this is achieved through constant and excessive self-optimisation. They interpret PP and PPT as one of the most important institutionalised forms of "guided, instructed self-optimisation" (p. 157) within current psy disciplines, being intimately linked with significant economic interests and propagating a clear political and ideological agenda. In the United States particularly, but also beyond, principles and programmes of PP and PPT are already in use in a range of institutions, such as educational and military ones.

Deborah Lupton and Clare Southerton focus on self-diagnosis of neurodivergent conditions, such as autism and ADHD, in TikTok. Approaching self-optimisation from a socio-material perspective, the paper explores how TikToks about self-diagnosis of ADHD and autism may contribute to broader discourses and practices related to self-optimisation and open up questions about the dynamics of power and authority at play in this context. They highlight how diagnosis can enable self-optimisation through self-knowledge and feelings of belonging that could potentially lead to improved mental health. They argue that avoiding stigma and shame associated with ADHD and autism can be itself a form of self-improvement and a reframing of identity. They observe that many people are eager and even desperate to be medicalised and often find benefits in it. They suggest that the notion of self-optimisation should be expanded to include the desire to become the subject of medicalisation.

4.2 Health and Well-being

An increasing emphasis on health and well-being is also one important cultural current that feeds into the rise of self-optimisation. Nikolas Rose has argued that contemporary biopolitics is defined not so much by health and

illness as such, but by the optimization of life itself, of which they are part (Rose 2007, 82). The concept of "healthism" underlines that the achievement and maintenance of good health encourages people to continually direct their everyday activities and thoughts towards this goal (Lupton 2013, 397). Lupton, drawing on Crawford (1980), argues that a central belief in healthism is that life can be controlled by personal actions and taking responsibility for one's health. The problem with healthism is that similarly to other individualist discourses, it tends to gloss over the socio-economic determinants of health and focus on individual responsibility and empowerment. Healthism values citizens who "take responsibility," while people who are seen as lacking in this or who are ill are labelled as inferior and morally deficient (Lupton 2013).

Overall, there has been broad changes in the cultural understandings and structures of health and well-being. The older, welfarist idea of well-being, produced and conceptualised through welfare-state institutions, has been increasingly sidelined by an emphasis on well-being understood through categories of choice and a subjective sense of happiness, empowerment, and self-realization (Sointu 2005, 256; Saarinen, Salmenniemi, and Keränen 2014). This construes health and well-being as individualised projects, marked by "rational" and "healthy" lifestyle choices and personal self-care efforts, for which commodified regimes of self-optimisation offer appropriate tools and techniques. This conceives of people as self-responsible consumers capable of producing the conditions for their own independence, and who neither expect much from the state nor blame it for their own misfortune (Ouellette and Hay 2008, 476; Clarke 2005; Salmenniemi 2022).

Self-optimisation is also connected to the rise of personalised medicine, encouraging data-driven and individualised solutions for well-being and preventive self-monitoring, which fits well with the increasing pressure for more efficiency that national health care systems face through the rhetoric of austerity (Bergroth 2020, 19). There is a hope that increased health responsibilization of individuals will reduce healthcare spending, turning "passive" patients to "active" health consumers (Sharon 2017, 97). Tamar Sharon (2017) has observed how self-tracking devices have been increasingly adopted for monitoring health, and Eryk Noji, Karolin Kappler, and Uwe Vormbusch (2021) have analysed aspects of quantifying health in two fields: diet and mood-tracking. Zillien's and Krzeminska's articles in this special issue help to underscore this, as one of the key drivers for self-tracking in their studies emanates from a wish to improve or maintain good health.

Fournier and Dalgalarrondo's paper in this special issue also addresses self-optimisation in the domain of health and well-being by focusing on "wellness fasting." Drawing on empirical research on experiences of wellness fasting in France, the authors coin the concept of "dietary minimalism" to capture the ways in which people "pare themselves down in order to discover more about themselves and improve themselves" (p. 105). They show how wellness

fasting, through the emphasis of "less is more," promises to produce more health, energy, sensations, freedom, autonomy, and meaning. They approach self-optimisation through fasting as a way of self-management that promotes reflexivity and can potentially lead to lifestyle changes. In a similar vein to Krzeminska's and Zillien's papers, they highlight that self-optimisation is not necessarily about growth but can also strive towards balance and "doing more with less."

Edgar Cabanas's paper, for its part, looks at fitness as a form of self-optimisation. Zooming in on popular self-help literature on CrossFit, he argues that CrossFit is a comprehensive program for self-optimisation that includes addressing failure and weakness and embracing passionate commitment and constant self-improvement that benefits from community support. His analysis shows a classical example of self-optimisation that encourages individuals to pursue "the best version of themselves." He shows that in CrossFit, failure is not something that should be avoided, but something to be embraced and learned from, and used for further self-optimisation. As is the case for self-improvement and makeover culture more generally, the self in CrossFit literature is understood as fundamentally flawed and deficient in need of constant improvement in all areas of life. Cabanas concludes that CrossFit circulates and reproduces neoliberal and entrepreneurial tropes of reinvention, autonomy, self-discipline, resilience, and self-improvement.

4.3 Digital Technologies, Self-Tracking, and the Logic of Quantification

A number of articles in this special issue address digital media and technologies, which have proliferated rapidly during the past decade and constitute a particularly important and influential site for self-optimisation. Overall, the digital age has witnessed an unparalleled increase in quantification and measurement. Figures can condense and reduce the complexity of meanings and help to establish unequivocal standards for comparison. However, numbers are not neutral, despite the received wisdom of them being somehow devoid of value judgements and assumptions (Lupton 2013). The ways in which phenomena are quantified and interpreted are always shot through by societal power relations. Excessive trust on numbers obscures the fact that there is always a politics of measurement involved and that numbers are never neutral or impartial (Sharon 2017, 105). Following Krüger (2019), there is an authoritarian tendency inherent in digital self-tracking devices, and perhaps digital self-optimisation technologies more broadly. As these devices becomes diffused and extended to ever more spheres of life and the living body, which before were not considered problematic, they tend to draw "each and every activity and bodily function [...] under the aegis of anxiety and its

containment as well as the affirmative pleasures of self-mastery and control" (ibid., 93).

Zillien's and Krzeminska's papers in this special issue address self-tracking as forms of self-optimisation. Zillien explores digital self-tracking practices as a dietetic form of self-optimisation. With the conceptualisation of dietetics, she takes issue with dominating interpretations of self-optimisation and self-tracking as something geared towards rationalisation, continuous achievement of goals, and quantitative growth. Drawing on online ethnography on self-trackers engaging with sleep and diet tracking, she shows that self-tracking is not guided merely by the logic of rationalisation, but also by aims of maintaining the right balance. Agnieszka Krzeminska, for her part, argues in her article that self-optimisation can be seen as a multifaceted process that encompasses personal growth, self-actualisation, and the strategic navigation of technological affordances to achieve a sense of well-being. She highlights the dialectics of self-care and self-control in self-tracking, and similarly to Zillien, underlines the quest for balance as central for her research participants' understanding and experience of tracking. She argues that the appeal of self-tracking as a form of self-optimisation emanates from the need to gain a sense of control. In this sense she suggests self-tracking devices can serve as an "uncertainty-reducing" technique that helps to orient to the future. These articles highlight the crucial role of digital technologies, and materialities more broadly, for self-optimisation. They offer a nuanced discussion of self-tracking and in this way destabilise the rather polarised understanding of self-optimisation, revolving around empowerment versus surveillance, and autonomy versus discipline (see Sharon 2017).

Vera King and her associates address the ubiquitous nature of rankings, ratings, and optimisation via scores and figures in self-optimisation efforts in contemporary societies. The article highlights the ambivalent social and psychic effects of digital quantification and explores what makes them powerful and attractive. They argue that the ideal of constant improvement and efficiency that is so strongly articulated today chiefly emanates from the competitive structures of contemporary society. Coining the concept of "parametric optimisation of the self," the authors show the importance of metrics and quantification for self-making. They argue that standards of social action are increasingly broken down to numerous and sometimes novel parameters that are then digitally captured, made comparable and visible, and shared with others, fuelling digital parametric optimisation. This parametric optimisation gives rise to a new cultural matrix of permanent comparison and competition that affects how people relate to themselves and others. It easily advances an instrumentalised logic vis-à-vis oneself and others with potentially highly negative effects for psychological and bodily health and well-being.

4.4 Work and Economy

Work is a key arena for self-optimisation, as self-optimisation is intimately connected with the cultural expectations of work society. Self-optimisation emerges both in a top-down form, when workers are pushed to adopt self-optimisation practices as part of worker well-being interventions, and in a bottom-up form, when workers voluntarily engage in self-optimisation practices in order to enhance their vital forces. Self-optimisation promises to make people happier, healthier and more energetic, productive, and efficient (see Binkley 2024, in this special issue), which makes self-optimisation practices attractive for workplaces and organisational cultures. As Binkley writes in this special issue, "optimized subjects get more out of themselves as they cultivate inner forces for discharge into a waiting world" (p. 125). At the same time, self-optimising practices are introduced to workplaces in the name of "corporate wellness" programmes. Workplaces follow the productivity and health behaviour of employees in order to intervene and improve both (Till 2014). These initiatives are framed as being mutually beneficial: they are promised to improve the health and well-being of employees, as well as increasing productivity and lowering costs for employers (Till 2014, 452). For example, self-tracking devices have been brought to workplaces as part of the optimisation drive, potentially enabling new ways of managerial control (Elmholdt, Elmholdt, and Haahr 2021; Okkonen 2023). In particular, Elmholdt, Elmholdt, and Haahr (2021, 173) show how the digital self-tracking devices in the workplace manage workers' health at a distance and "encourage employees to make private lifestyle changes and aspire to certain health ideals to optimise sleep." At the same time, the devices also discourage addressing the structural organization of work and effectively contribute to the depoliticization of work. New digital technologies have thus opened up entirely new ways of optimising work processes and governing and controlling workers. Schaupp (2022) has shown how digital feedback systems in manufacturing and delivery logistics produce "cybernetic modes of control," which encourage workers to identify and eliminate "time waste" in work, and thus engage with optimisation of not only work processes but also of themselves (Schaupp 2022, 19). However, as Schaupp reminds us, these optimisation attempts are not always successful and may also face resistance from below.

Articles in this special issue also address work, workers, and economy as a key site of self-optimisation. Amir Hampel shows how the structures of the authoritarian state shape self-optimisation practices of young urban middle-class professionals in China. For these professionals, self-optimisation is not primarily used to climb the career ladder and enhance one's employability, but rather to reach "colourful hobbies and modest comforts." Hampel argues that the highly restricted socio-political sphere propels young professionals to seek self-optimisation by scaling down and adjusting their dreams and

desires to what they deem is possible in this context. In their contribution about the Anglophone Caribbean, Nehring, Esnard, and Kerrigan analyse the role of self-optimisation within broader economic and political structures. They first focus on the role of self-optimisation in the plantation system of economic production and political domination in colonial Jamaica, followed by an investigation about the contemporary role of discourses of entrepreneurship in the organisation of gendered social inequalities. They consider the idea and practice of entrepreneurship as a specific form of self-optimisation and discuss the premises and consequences of neoliberal policies of promoting entrepreneurship.

5. Structure of the Special Issue

The papers in this special issue are divided into three parts: Part 1 looks at different practices of self-optimisation. It comprises Edgar Cabanas's analysis of CrossFit fitness narratives, Nicole Zillien's account of self-tracking as a dietetic practice, Agnieszka Krzeminska's exploration of self-tracking and the technological mediation of practices of self-optimisation, and Tristan Fournier and Sébastien Dalgalarrondo's examination of fasting as a form of self-optimisation in France.

Part 2 is concerned with the mutual implication of self-optimisation with contemporary therapeutic culture. Here, Sam Binkley discusses the recurrence of metaphorical representations of psychological interiority in contemporary therapeutic discourse and their implications for the theorisation of self-optimisation. Senta Brandt and Jürgen Straub then reconstruct the central premises of positive psychology and critically examine it as an "ideological and missionary" worldview. Finally, Deborah Lupton and Clare Southerton focus on self-optimisation and therapeutic practices in social media, looking at self-diagnoses of autism and ADHD on TikTok.

Part 3 examines how discourses and practices of self-optimisation are bound up with the social organisation of power and politics, from both historical and contemporary perspectives. Vera King and her co-authors consider the "psychic repercussions of digital measurement and comparison," asking how digital tracking, scoring, and ranking has become implicated in the constitution of contemporary biographies and self-identity. Amir Hampel then turns to consumerism and consumer lifestyles in contemporary China, suggesting that self-optimisation, as a sociological concept, may reach beyond the analysis of entrepreneurial self-making and allow for a nuanced analysis of "cultural constructions of labour, leisure, and desire" under conditions of rapid social change. In the concluding contribution to this special issue, Daniel Nehring, Talia Esnard, and Dylan Kerrigan then trace modalities

of self-optimisation in the Anglophone Caribbean, discussing how it is implicated in the social organisation of power.

6. Conclusion

Taken together, the sociological, anthropological, and psychological contributions in this special issue illustrate the different dynamics of self-optimisation. These dynamics are linked to the specific socio-historic, cultural, political, economic, or technological contexts within which self-optimising ideas and practices are used, but also to the diversity of objects and techniques involved. Moreover, they relate to the different underlying logics, including (endless) increase, a quest for the perfect balance, or the reduction of involved parameter. The papers in this special issue witness the possibilities and limitations, ambivalences, and paradoxes related to self-optimisation that can be conceived as highly rewarding, but also increase psychological pressure and suffering. Self-optimisation has blurred boundaries to related ideas and practices of self-care, self-knowledge, or self-experimentation, which involves the risk of conceptual over-stretch, but at the same time allows to consider diverse social phenomena under one heading and to link together hitherto separated strands of research.

What emerges as an overarching picture is that the equation "self-optimisation = neoliberal / enterprising self" does not capture the diverse dynamics linked to this phenomenon (and never has). More research is needed about the specific forms and expressions of self-optimisation in diverse contexts, in Global North and South. While some of the contributions here already embark upon this path, more work is needed. This includes attention to the specific hybridisations of self-optimisation with other cultural orientations and traditions, as well as to its different political dimensions, depending on, for example, whether it rolls out within an authoritarian or liberal political system. In addition, more research is needed about the intersecting dynamics of class, gender, age, race, and ethnicity within self-optimising practices. Do these dynamics produce and reproduce stereotypes related to these socio-structural differences (for instance, that women would be more oriented towards issues of beauty and health, whereas men would be attracted to technological and experimental gadgets), or could self-optimisation practices also offer ways to subvert and overcome them? Overall, there is a lack of empirical research about the question of how widespread self-optimising practices actually are. There exists partial evidence about selected aspects (e.g., the number of cosmetic surgeries or the spread of fitness trackers), but a more general picture awaits to be painted. Finally, the connections between self-optimisation and politics merit further research. How is self-optimisation related to current political tensions and conflicts, for instance, to political

polarisation and the rise of populist and far-right movements and parties? These are but some propositions for further research, but they reveal the socio-political interest, and need, for further inquiries within this emerging academic field.

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"Debating Self-Optimisation: Practices, Paradoxes, and Power

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All articles published in HSR Special Issue 49 (2024) 3:
Debating Self-Optimisation: Practices, Paradoxes, and Power.

Introduction

Anja Röcke, Daniel Nehring & Suvi Salmenniemi
Dynamics of Self-Optimisation: An Introduction.
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