

This is a heavily abbreviated pre-print of a full article which has been published as

How to sell your soul and still get into Heaven: Steven Covey's epiphany-inducing technology of effective selfhood

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In

Human Relations Vol. 62, No. 8: 1231-1254 (August 2009).

Abstract

Steven Covey's *The 7 habits of highly effective people*, one of the most influential and popular contemporary self-help texts, has resulted in the development a large multinational consulting business, several spin-off texts, and much imitation since its publication in 1989. An examination of the text, informed by Critical Discourse Analysis, is conducted with a view to unearthing the textual, discursive and socio-cultural practices that have enabled the work and its message to become so popular. *7 habits* is an epiphanogenic (or epiphany inducing) technology emerging from an 'effectiveness' discipline supported by three socio-cultural trends: the postmodern, saturated self; the coming of neo-liberal society and the financialization of the self; and the subjective turn. Covey's discipline of effectiveness aims to produce a self that is simultaneously de-saturated, financialized and expressivist, but supportive of conservative, universalist and late capitalist modes of being.

Article rationale and outline

The growth of the personal development industry and its gurus continues to be resisted across a number of genres. A clear line of disenchantment can be traced from portions of Micklethwait and Wooldridge's *The witch doctors: What the management gurus are saying, why it matters and how to make sense of it* (1996), through more journalist critiques such as *SHAM: How the gurus of the self-help movement make us helpless* (Salerno, 2005), to critical assessments of guruhood (Clark & Salaman, 1998; Jackson, 1999, 2001; McGee, 2005). Cynicism towards gurus is especially noticeable in film and television dramas that appear to promote the notion that the gurus who preach methods for attaining peace, power and prosperity, on a personal level are people whose personal experiences have least equipped them for doing so. Think of *Magnolia's* (1999) Frank T.J. Mackey, *Donnie Darko's* (2001) Jim Cunningham, or the fictional guru who advocates a set of techniques closest to the one discussed in this article, *Little Miss Sunshine's* (2006) Richard Hoover.

At this late stage of modernity, it is perhaps not surprising to encounter resistance to the idea that one individual and their message can provide us with access to universal truth and contentment; that at the apex of the postmodern, postindustrial trajectory we need witch doctors to make us happy and whole again. However, the self-help movement and its gurus routinely outsell fiction and non-fiction works and are some of the most

sought-after providers of management and human resource development programmes. McGee's (2005) extensive and rigorous critique of the self-help literature published in the United States since the 1970s suggests that personal development activities enable the participation (or endurance) of individuals in working and living in market-based societies, as opposed to facilitating the transformation of existing systems. Claims by personal development gurus to have discovered truths that free individuals from poverty and dissatisfaction, then, reinforce social systems that have produced their conditions in the first place. Clark and Greatbatch (2004) describe how the creation of bestselling management texts follow conventions that create image-spectacles that are designed and manufactured to elicit aesthetic responses, which ultimately serve to 'express and exemplify broader social trends to which they are linked' (p. 403). A clear example of this is Elmes and Frame's (2008) discussion of how a mountaineering expedition disaster has been repackaged in a way which draws attention to how personal and leadership development products prioritize accounts that are supportive of hegemonic social discourses by ignoring both the broader context in which events take place, and the voices of other less influential participants. McGee's (2005) analysis finds the self-help oeuvre to be conservative, phallogentric and productive of a self that is not *actualized*, but *belaboured*.

This article is concerned with examining some of the emerging social forces that have made this situation possible by examining the key work of

Stephen R. Covey, arguably the most successful self-help guru in the world over the last 20 or so years. McGee finds Covey advocating 'a self-centred life mitigated by "universal principles" and facilitated by a sense of roles or participation in the social world through roles; in short, Covey argues for a moral and ethical self' (2005: 68).

The practices and exercises that craft this moral/ethical self are ones which, according to Covey, are based on natural principles and common sense. Such positivistic assertions of a moral universality are clearly at odds with transformative learning theory that challenges the banking concept of education (Freire, 1972) which, through a declared humanitarian orientation 'masks the effort to turn men [*sic*] into automatons – the very negation of their ontological vocation to be more fully human' (p. 48). Moreover, Gramsci's (1998) articulation of 'common sense' as an imbroglio of dissimilar, but generally agreed-upon, arrangements of truths common to particular communities and certain times, functions to maintain established social orders. As such, common sense needs to be *understood*, as opposed to *accepted* or *celebrated*, as a necessary initial step 'before [students] can break from the common sense that prevents them from understanding the socially constructed sources underlying their own self-formative processes' (Giroux, 1988: 203).

Whereas McGee discusses Covey's work as one important example of the various trends within the self-help literature, primarily in the North

American context, this analysis focuses on *The 7 habits of highly effective people* (1989/2004; hereafter *7 habits*) in the light of broader social and cultural trends that have made this particular text popular on a more global level. Utilizing an approach informed by Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), this article attempts to elucidate the specific means by which *7 habits* attempts to induce a transformation in the readers' sense of selfhood and proposes the adoption of an alternative sense of 'effective' selfhood. The implications of this are discussed and further avenues for research are suggested. In short, where McGee (2005) describes *what* the *7 habits* does to readers, this article attempts to determine *how* it does it.

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