Self-help, media cultures and the production of female psychopathology

Lisa Blackman
Goldsmiths College

Abstract This article brings together work at the intersection of critical psychology and cultural studies to explore the psychological and cultural significance of women’s magazine culture. Drawing on rhetorical psychology and Foucault’s later work on ‘techniques of the self’, it explores the complex injunctions and positionings that create the range of gendered anxieties and dilemmas produced within neoliberal relations. Self-help is discussed as a practice that condenses or brings together a range of cultural anxieties, bodily tensions, emotional economies and forms of psychopathology which are ‘already constituted’ lived realities for many of the readers engaging with these magazines. The article concludes that further engagement with critical psychology by cultural theorists will enable cultural studies to bring the body back into cultural theory and to consider the translation of cultural injunctions across the designations of race, class, sexuality and gender.

Keywords dialogue, dilemma, magazine culture, neoliberalism and subjectivity, postfeminism, rhetorical psychology

Introduction

This article provides ways of thinking through the cultural and psychological significance of media forms considered peculiarly feminine and how these cultures work in conjunction with female psychologies. I will argue that although contemporary cultural studies is characterized by an ‘anti-psychologism’, many arguments engaging with the production of identity implicitly and often explicitly draw on generalist understandings of psychology in order to address the production of female subjectivities.1 These understandings are hindered by essentialism, even though this reductionism has been most vehemently opposed. Generalist accounts are indicative of a more general reliance by social and cultural theory on sociological arguments, examining the emergence of new forms of identity and subjectivity, created within changing social, cultural and governmental circumstances (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim,
2001; Rose, 1996). These arguments focus upon the production of particular kinds of psychology through the ways in which institutional practices and the discourses that help to support them create particular kinds of self-practice and understanding. What is glossed over in these accounts, gestured to in some, but never given any serious analytic focus, is the way in which the injunction to understand one’s life (for example, as an autonomous individual) is culturally translated within the realm of popular discourse and can come to mean something entirely different when we look across the designations of race, class, gender and sexuality. This article will bring these arguments together by focusing specifically on magazine culture and what I will term the cultural production of female psychopathology.

One of the key questions raised by this work is how to understand an individual’s subjective commitment to, or investment in, particular fictional identities and practices of the self. Stuart Hall (1996) reminds us in his contestation of the ‘problem of identity’ that theories that can account for our investment in certain discourses, fictions and fantasies (other than passive duping or its counterpart, the voluntarism of many culturalist perspectives) are crucial to understanding media and cultural consumption beyond a model of encoding and decoding. This model, Hall argues, relies upon a homogenization of identity at the expense of any discursive understanding of the production of individual biographies and narratives. It would seem that the only knowledge we have, as cultural theorists interested in these issues, is psychoanalysis, which Hall himself resurrects as a possible way of understanding this question.

Indeed, psychoanalytic concepts are the mainstay of perspectives engaging with the embodiment of cultural categories mapping out the parameters of how these categories are seen to function. Franklin et al. (2000), although not explicit about their reliance on psychoanalysis, invoke psychoanalytic concepts of fantasy and desire to explore the cultural purchase of self-health. Many cultural theorists developing studies of embodiment use the pioneering work of Homi Bhabha (1994) on the colonial stereotype to explore the relationship between visual representation and the mediation of social encounters through fantasies and fictions of otherness organized through both a desire for and fear of the denigrated subject/object (Ahmed, 2000). This work on raced subjects has provided an analytic vocabulary for exploring the mediation of one’s relationship to one’s own and another’s body through the projection of certain fears and fantasies. This work is important for highlighting the interpenetration of the social and cultural with the subjective, but still, for the most part, engages with the body as text rather than the ways in which actual subjects inhabit particular cultural categories. This is a more general problem with media and cultural studies which I explore with Valerie Walkerdine in Mass Hysteria (2001), a book that develops work in critical psychology at the intersection of media and cultural studies.


**Mass hysteria**

In *Mass Hysteria*, we argue that the anti-psychologism of cultural studies is largely a reaction towards screen theory and the shift to the idea of specific gendered subjectivities within cultural locations rather than the grand totalizing theories of femininity in the work of Laura Mulvey (1975), for example. This move is extremely important and cannot be overestimated in its critique of over general theories. Recent work within cultural studies revolves around the tension between those subject positions created within the text and the question of subjective commitment or investment in those positions (Geraghty, 1999; Hermes, 1995; Stacey, 1999). It is recognized that how actual women engage with the textual construction of femininity is ‘complicated, contradictory and ambiguous’ (Stempel Mumford, 1998: 121) and that there is no simple distinction to be made between the active and the passive audience. The problem, however, is still, as Stacey cogently argues, how to argue for a ‘feminine specificity without falling into the trap of biological essentialism’ (1999: 263). I would argue that the issue of psychological essentialism is still important and often creeps in through the back door, even when theorists are at pains to explore the subject as socially situated (Geraghty, 1991, 1996).

It seems that cultural studies is at a crossroads with the danger of either inscribing the homogenization of identity to explain the social and cultural locations through which people consume media forms or invoking a voluntarist subject who can ideally resist media influence.² This oscillation between what Hermes (1995: 5) terms concern and optimism has particularly structured feminists’ encounter with media cultures that are considered specifically feminine. The paradox becomes one of how to talk about female genres without assuming that the audiences are homogeneous and characterized by their shared cultural codes or competences. As Hall and du Gay (1996: 6) suggest, ‘identities are . . . points of temporary attachment to the subject positions which discursive formations construct for us’. The key question is how to explain and analyse audience investment and subjective commitment without imposing structural understandings of identity to read media consumption.

**Magazine culture**

It is this problematic that this article will attempt to reformulate by working through some examples from a recent study of magazine culture.³ The key focus of this work is how to understand the governing of female bodies alongside arguments that suggest that women’s magazines present an ‘unfixing of femininity’ (McRobbie, 1999). The theoretical backdrop to these arguments comes from rhetorical
psychology (Billig, 1997) and the later work of Michel Foucault (1990), who was concerned with the kinds of relationships we develop with ourselves – what he termed ‘processes of subjectification’. Magazine culture is a good site for examining the kinds of cultural translations that occur in relation to recent sociological arguments which suggest that changing economic, social and cultural circumstances are creating new forms of subjectivity and social identity (Beck and Beck-Gernshein, 2001; Rose, 1996). These arguments present generalized statements about new forms of selfhood, linked to novel governmental practices such as neoliberalism, which suggest that we are increasingly understanding success and failure as being subject to one’s own efforts to constantly reinvent and transform oneself. The lack of specificity and generality within these arguments leaves race, class, gender and sexuality as structural positionings enabling or constraining certain ways of understanding the world rather than designations that are embodied and inhabited by actual subjects in complex ways.

The complexity of embodiment and its relationship to the dilemmatic ways in which discourses function and compete within particular contexts are crucial to understanding media consumption beyond a model of encoding and decoding. The concept of dilemma is one that has framed many of the ways in which female magazine culture has been analysed. The concern with both the ways in which femininity is regulated as well as being shaped through a range of contradictory sites has set the parameters of debates within studies that oscillate between the ‘fixing’ and ‘unfixing’ of femininity (Ballaster et al., 1991; Beetham, 1996; Ferguson, 1983). It is recognized that magazine consumption is highly complex and that readers’ subjective commitment or investment is not ‘directly connected with the narrative structure of these texts’ (Hermes, 1995: 152).

Magazines have been credited at different historical moments with the power to dupe (particularly women’s lives), to provide forms of escapism to lives shot through with patriarchal fantasies or as being meaningless recipes of advice, confession and injunctions to consume that are picked up, put down, but do not significantly shape how (mainly women) think about their own aspirations, fears and desires. In line with the shift from structuralism to culturalism, which is played out in the shift from text to audience within Anglo-American cultural studies, there is now more of a commitment to crediting audiences with the agency to resist media influence, often underpinned by an American discourse of empowerment (Walkerdine, 1995). This shift is evident in the work of Angela McRobbie (1999) who, within her own work on women’s magazine culture, has moved from a structuralist position to one where, alongside a change in media representations of femininity in such forms, women are now seen as both being enabled by and having increasing choice as to how they define themselves as women within
neoliberal societies. She argues that magazines’ increasing engagement with feminist issues and themes has transformed the genre to such an extent that the new fictional identities on offer unmake and remake femininity beyond patriarchal concerns.

One issue, therefore, is the extent to which the contradictions and fractured themes through which ‘new femininities’ are articulated within the pages of these magazines represent an ‘unfixing of femininity’. As a critical psychologist concerned with the ‘psychological’, I want to suggest that there is no easy or straightforward inhabiting of any new cultural categories or identities and that the unease — linguistic or otherwise — that is part of how categories function creates hesitancies rather than any simple identification on the part of readers or subjects (see Riley, 2000). McRobbie points to the ways in which most representations are raced, sexed and classed, excluding different sexualities as ‘other’, while representations of black female subjectivities are relegated to a ‘black genre’ and class is almost entirely absent. The postfeminist woman may stand alone, single, happy, working on her self-confidence and achievements in her relationships and the workplace, while the stories of her sisters who cannot or who are unable to achieve such success stand as cautionary tales, marked out as pathological and seen to lack the psychological and emotional capacities to effect their own self-transformation.

**Low-maintenance self**

Through therapy, I’ve learned how hard it is for me to express my displeasure to others. My family has always brushed things under the carpet and we talked about how this had made me nervous of confrontation. When Will felt bad and tried to manipulate me, I would react by trying to make things better. I responded to his mood rather than concentrating on how I was feeling. Anything to avoid a scene. I remember once being really chuffed when he told me I was a low maintenance girlfriend. Now I see that as an insult. After ten years of acting the same way, it’s a relief when you realise it doesn’t have to be like that any more. A year ago, the worst thing that could have happened to me was to lose Will. Now I’m glad it’s finished and feel sad that I thought so little of myself I didn’t leave before. I’ve been in therapy for six months now. Some weeks I’m ready to finish; others, I can’t imagine life without it. I don’t feel dependent on my therapist. I know this is something I’m doing for myself to make my life better. (Relationship Rescue: Would Therapy Improve Your Love Life?, *Marie Claire*, September 2001)

Arlie Hochschild (1994) argues that the rise in advice books addressing the intimate lives of (mainly) women is exemplary of the ways in which feminism has been transposed to address the concerns of the individualized (feminine) self. Her argument revolves around the assumption that
what were once traditionally recognized as masculine ‘feeling rules’ now frame the kinds of injunctions that invite and incite women to be more emotionally detached and ‘cooler’ in relationships. Within this argument, feminism is one of the conditions of possibility for the translation of male feeling rules to create new feminine desires and expectations. However, this ‘right to emotionally detach’ (1994: 15) is one that must be experienced as an act of honesty and authenticity rather than submission to the wishes of another (including, in the above example, a therapist). Hochschild’s use of the term ‘abduction’ in her discussion implies that this is a fraudulent translation of the aims of second wave feminism, arguing that advice books perform work in encouraging women to accept a concept of equality in their intimate relations through their remaking as selves who can get by with relatively little support. Advice books are analysed as vignettes that contain ‘magnified moments’, which Hochschild suggests are indicative of the kinds of regulatory ideals held up to women to understand their own conflicts and dilemmas. Comparing 19th-century advice books with those from the 1970s to the 1990s, she characterizes their difference through contrasting images of the ‘traditional woman’ with the ‘no-needs modern woman’.

The novel *The Hours* written by Michael Cunningham (1999), recently adapted by Paramount Pictures and Miramax Films (directed by Stephen Daldry, 2005), depicts the lives of three women living in three distinct historical periods and two geographical locations, their stories intertwined and connected by Virginia Woolf’s novel *Mrs Dalloway*. Laura Brown, living in suburban 1940s America (played by Julianne Moore), epitomizes Hochschild’s ‘traditional woman’ who ‘should accept patriarchy and keep the marriage (man) happy’ (1994: 8). The ‘dreaded moment’ or feeling within this feminine regime is one where the woman feels anger and assertiveness or has strivings outside of the home and familial responsibilities. Laura Brown embodies the conflict surrounding the repudiation of her own needs through her struggle to find the time to ‘lose herself’ within her frantic reading of the life of *Mrs Dalloway*. The epiphany of this struggle is recalled in a moving scene in both film and book wherein Laura books a hotel room for the afternoon to read instead of baking the perfect birthday cake for her husband Dan and preparing for his return to the family home after work. The moment is dramatized in the film when the audience is constructed as a witness to the ‘dreaded moment’ of Laura’s striving for self-determination, signalled through her ferocious reading, alongside her contemplation of her own longing for death and the extent to which she feels able to choose to take her own life. This moment is restored through the burden of obligation that she feels towards both her son and husband and her desire to ‘want’ this normative set of expectations. This is followed by a scene in which she drives to pick her son up from a neighbour, full of the scenes and images she has read, interspersed with
the ‘unreality’ of her life as a wife and mother and her desire to end her worry, struggle and sense of failure.

In contrast, what might the ‘dreaded moment’ be for what Hochschild describes as the ‘no-needs modern woman’? The ‘no-needs modern woman’ is one who is the primary force in her own life and who is able to work on herself, through particular techniques of self-production, such that she can get by with relatively little support from others – particularly men. The ‘dreaded moment’ is the desire to be taken care of, to be safe and warm, which is embodied in a fear of being dependent on another, even one’s therapist. Hochschild relates this to a process of ‘cultural cooling’ in relationships more generally, which sociologists such as Lasch (1977) and Giddens (1991) relate to the cultural reconfiguration of ideas of love and commitment. Taking this ‘dreaded moment’ dialogically, we can begin to think of the broader discursive context that has helped to produce this self–self and self–other relationship and the dilemmas and conflicts that govern its production. Although, on the surface, women’s magazines such as Marie Claire and Cosmopolitan (both from the UK) appear to be sites in which women’s equality is celebrated and revered, the incitement to present oneself as a self-made or postfeminist woman involves the refutation and repudiation of a range of competing injunctions that construct feminine wants and desires in contradictory ways. These include the warrant or refuting of the kinds of discourses that Hollway (1984) characterizes as traditionally aligning women with certain signifiers of relationships: the need for emotional closeness, security, commitment, and so on. Hollway argues that these kinds of concepts are part of a ‘have-hold’ discourse, repudiated by feminism as patriarchal, which frames heterosex in a particular kind of way. This is an authoritative discourse that creates particular subject positions through which people are able to understand and act upon themselves and position others. These concepts can also be differentiated through divisions that mark them out as signs of a person’s emotional inferiority and weakness (i.e. neediness, dependence, weakness or desperation) when they are read through some of the other discourses that govern what it means to be in a relationship (i.e. the permissiveness and sexual drive discourse) – what Billig et al. (1988) would term the ‘argumentative context’. Hollway argues that these discourses are profoundly gendered and have different consequences and implications depending on the person positioning and being positioned (see Stenner, 1995).

The self-made woman, rather than enacting choice and freedom, is obliged to disavow any desires for emotional security and safety and to experience these as the outcome of her own desire for personal authenticity and self-development. It is within the interstices of these contradictory injunctions that self-help techniques, framed increasingly through the discourses of therapy and counselling, provide practices through which these self–self and self–other relations can be remade.
However, there are further dilemmas, tensions and conflicts that govern the production of this feminine subject. These tensions, contradictions and dilemmas are made visible when we look at the kinds of discourses that govern the dialogic relations that produce the feminine subject position of the ‘low needs’, ‘low-maintenance’ self. Although singledom is celebrated as normative and not an indication of a woman’s desperation, part of the warrant for the production of this feminine regime is an assumption and acceptance that many, if not a sizeable proportion of, men are incompetent and not worth waiting for. Women's choice in the matter is constituted as one of being ‘too good’ in diametric opposition to the construction of male incompetence, both in terms of emotionality, sexual technique and performance. This is mirrored in the pages of men’s lifestyle magazines such as FHM and Loaded, where different kinds of techniques of self-production are proffered to men in order to become better lovers and partners. Although many of these techniques are framed by the discourses of the ‘psy’ disciplines (Rose, 1990), their telos or goal is very different to those specifically addressing feminine anxieties and concerns. The dilemmas and anxieties that govern the production of the self-made or postfeminist woman add weight to Probyn’s (1997: 150) argument that there are at least two contradictory principles governing postfeminist regimes resolved through the invocation of the home as the ‘natural’ place to want to be: that ‘the world’s a crazy place and you have to fight for yourself but at the end of the day you can always go home’.

**The blob**

Blame our education. Young women, you see, were schooled in the blob as a matter of necessity. While we were being savagely beaten on the rugby pitch, they were herded into special PE lessons, where a moustached lesbian rounders coach explained that the vending machine in the changing room did not, after all, dispense Revels. The closest we got to menstrual instruction, however, was a mumbling half-hour chat with the science teacher, where the alarming similarity between IUD coils and fishhooks stuck in the mind. Consequently, surfing the crimson wave became a mystifying feminine preserve just like going to the toilet in twos, or the enduring popularity of Ally McBeal. But the wise man realizes this is a hormonal cycle for two. (‘Periods: Read Our Essential Guide to Periods and Battle Her Monthly Blob No More’, FHM, September 2001)

The dilemmatic argumentative context that shapes women’s magazines exists alongside injunctions within men’s magazines that fix women and their bodies within essentialist discourses that emphasize their unruly and unpredictable bodies. When men are presented with an injunction to work on relationships in men’s magazines, the kinds of practice that they
are encouraged to engage in are what I term ‘practices of self-mastery’. These practices encourage men to acquire knowledge about women's bodies (usually, as the article suggests, women's menstruating bodies), understood through scientific knowledge sanctioned within biological essentialist discourses. Where a relationship is constructed as work, it is through techniques and practices that privilege particular kinds of knowledge acquisition which authorize and validate male authority and commentary. This is not about psychological reinvention or self-transformation, but intellectual mastery of the other. These kinds of knowledge acquisition tend towards intellectual mastery of women's bodies, authorizing and validating male authority and commentary. An important aspect of this construction of female subjectivity is the positioning of women through understandings of biology that emphasize the kinds of wild and animalistic outbursts likely to occur at the time of their periods.

Although, at one level, success and satisfaction in a relationship with an intimate other (woman) are presented as subject to the efforts, work and willingness of the man to engage in certain activities, the kinds of self-practice and self-understanding that govern what it means to ‘work’ at a relationship are radically different to those that address and govern women's concerns. This is in line with previous work on men's magazines which underscores the way in which leisure is the trope through which relationships are generally understood and articulated and how the kinds of injunctions proffered operate as defences against male vulnerability, thus shoring up a particular version of masculine autonomy and independence (Stevenson et al., 2000). When ‘psy’ techniques of self-production are more explicitly engaged with in men's magazines, the problematization of male subjectivity is again radically different to the translation of women's concerns and anxieties in their own magazine culture. Techniques such as neurolinguistic programming (NLP), for example, are presented as cynical practices that will enable a man to manipulate what is constructed as a woman's more complex sexuality in order to improve his own sexual enjoyment and satisfaction. Male sexuality is constructed through what Hollway (1984) terms a 'male sexual drive discourse' whereby male desire is viewed as instinctual, base and simply biological. In contrast, female sexuality is linked to emotionality and intimacy, is seen as more delicate and sensitive, located within the very signifiers of relationship that the self-made woman is required to disavow. The invocation of these radically contrasting differentiations and the discourses that are repeatedly mapped onto them (including the madonna/whore dichotomy, women as passive/men as active, women as asexual and sexually unavailable/men as ‘always already’ ready for sex, and so on), reproduce some of the most essentialized discourses of gender, which many sociologists argue have been subject to processes of detraditionalization (Featherstone, 1990).
One further example will illustrate the complexity of the competing contradictory injunctions that govern heterosexual female subjectivity within neoliberalism. I have already argued, drawing on the work of Hochschild (1994), that the shift from romantic discourses governing femininity to those that advocate female self-determination is produced through cultural practices that encourage women to construct themselves as selves who can get by with relatively little support. As Hochschild (1994: 14) argues: ‘she ardently seeks to develop the capacity to endure emotional isolation. Parallel to the image of the low needs self, is the image of the self that ministers to itself. Who helps the self? The answer is the Self.’ It is not the case that postfeminist women are not waiting for men, but that, while they are waiting (for a man worth waiting for), they are encouraged to engage in emotional practices that produce them as feminine subjects who are capable of emotional detachment from others, but who are also capable of taking their own emotionality as an object of personal development and growth. What we might see as a retraditionalization (or what Probyn [1997] terms a new traditionalism) is occurring in this process whereby women are encouraged to work on themselves so that they remain open to relationships and do not become ‘defensive’. The ‘defensive self’ is one where the very kinds of practices that enable the endurance of emotional isolation are those that are viewed as obstacles to the kinds of growth, maturity and self-development seen as underpinning the ‘open’ communication strategies essential to good relationships. This exists alongside the constitution of a ‘dialogic unconscious’ (Billig, 1997) embodying disavowed desires for warmth, comfort, security and needing another. These concepts and the discourses they regulate appear in the argumentative context as the unspeakable and yet affirmed categories.

**Rhetorical psychology**

Rhetorical psychology (Billig et al., 1988) is a strategic method that enables the dilemmas in speech and popular discourse to be examined in relation to a broader argumentative context. Relationship ‘talk’ and the different discourses that help to produce the conflicts and dilemmas facing individuals when reflecting on their desires for intimacy and their own autonomy are interesting sites for this kind of analysis.

Rhetorical psychology has been developed most convincingly in the work of Mick Billig and is a useful approach to exploring popular discourse as a set of situated practices, as it starts from the premise that popular discourse is dilemmatic. This work develops insights from the arguments of Bakhtin and Voloshinov concerned more with language use, the multi-accentuality of the sign and the ‘dialogic unconscious’ (Billig, 1997). Popular discourse is structured through themes and contrary themes, which are contradictory and produce the kinds of
thought space’ that allow people to debate, disagree, argue and hold contradictory views. Popular discourse is not neatly systematized, and the kinds of concepts and discourses that make people’s self-understanding and practice intelligible are not necessarily easily available for analysis.

In the kinds of thematic analyses employed within magazine studies, where a theme is a coherent regulated cluster that can be read off from the surface of the magazine, the principles of rhetorical analysis pay attention to the often more implicit ways in which dilemmas are articulated, constructed and resolved. Rhetorical analysis makes a distinction between those themes that are explicitly expressed and those that are implicit. The latter are conceptualized in such a way as to pay attention to the kinds of discourses and concepts they are implicitly refuting or refusing. Thus, the implicit (that is, what is absent or silent), if one remains at the surface level of the text, actually makes possible the particular form of articulation or argumentation. This is referred to as the contrary theme. What is unsaid is therefore as important as what is said and the analyst must attempt to engage with these contrary forces or ‘counter-positions’ (Billig, 1997: 222) in relation to the wider argumentative context. This context helps to shape and create the dilemmas and contradictions that govern the kinds of thoughts and beliefs that people might be expected to hold.

As Billig (1997: 225) argues in relation to the project of media and cultural studies, ‘the meaning of any utterance, or piece of logos, must be understood in terms of its dialogical context, and this means in terms of the anti-logos, which it seeks to counter’. This kind of approach also begins to break down the idea of competing discourses to explore the kinds of tensions and cultural anxieties that help to produce as much as to deny particular cultural categories and discourses. This conception of discourse is more dialogic and looks at how discourses speak to each other, through their disavowal, such that they are affirmed in the moments in which they are also denied. This is important to begin to understand the kinds of linguistic tropes and positionings, performative acts and enactments of identity which can be analytically read from silence and absence as much as the more traditional focus upon those themes that repeatedly recur.

Alongside this conception of discourse as dialogic, attention is also paid to the kinds of self-practices in which readers are encouraged to engage in order to resolve conflicts and improve their success and satisfaction in the realm of intimate relationships. The later work of Foucault (1990) on ‘technologies of selfhood’ is useful to explore what kinds of concepts and categories in relation to which readers are encouraged to problematize themselves and what kinds of practices of self-transformation they are encouraged to enact on the basis of these problematizations. The assumption within this work and its development within critical psychology and related disciplines is that what we might
term ‘body techniques and practices’ condense broader cultural values and discourses, bringing to light the more normative ways in which subjects’ fears, desires, aspirations and anxieties are shaped and defined (Blackman, 2001; Franklin et al., 2000). This focus can also begin to tell us about the cultural production of psychopathology and the way in which particular media and consumer cultures work in conjunction with and alongside ‘already-constituted’ fears and desires created in other social practices that ‘make up’ subjects’ lives. Rose (1996) uses these kinds of methodological principles to analyse more regulated discourses such as counselling and therapeutics. He cogently argues that there is usually a privileging of the pathological over the normal in how subjects understand and act upon themselves. The important question is, therefore, how the arena of relationships is made intelligible and what concepts allow the distinctions between the normal and the pathological to be thought. What is sanctioned or valorized as that which must be avoided, regulated, sought after or worked upon in order to manage the dilemma between being, for example, a self-made woman and being in or wanting to be in a relationship with an intimate other?

These dilemmas, and indeed the potential psychopathology created for women by the ambivalence and contradiction produced through these tensions, are managed within the pages of women’s magazines primarily by presenting women with the necessity of self-transformation and psychological reinvention as the means for improving satisfaction and success in intimate relationships. Women are primarily urged to work on relationships through an injunction that privileges their engagement in practices of self-monitoring, evaluation, scrutiny and bodily, emotional and/or psychological transformation in order to achieve certain desired ends. This project of self-transformation is also subsumed within a consumer discourse wherein diet programmes, fitness, cosmetics, health-orientated foods, cosmetic surgery and other body techniques are promoted and valorized through a vocabulary of choice that addresses the (female) reader as being able to achieve success and happiness through her choice from a range of options and preferences.

Thus, the kinds of injunctions that social and cultural theorists have identified as characterizing lived subjectivities under neoliberalism, I would argue, are culturally translated very differently when we look across the categories of gender. The kinds of argumentative spaces that govern what it means to be both an autonomous agent and desiring to be in a relationship with an intimate other are governed through very different discourses and authoritative institutions and create very different dilemmas and resolutions to possible conflicts and struggles for men and women. The very difficulties of living the fiction of autonomous selfhood (Rose, 1990) are contained within self-help discourses as potential stimuli for change and self-improvement. We must begin to recognize how an economy of pain, fear, anxiety and distress may be part of the
apparatus through which this fictional identity is produced, lived and kept in place.

I am aware that the examples I have given are taken from what is a textual form of analysis and it would therefore be inappropriate to read off audience reception from such a study. However, what I am seeking to do is reformulate how we might consider the place of media texts in relation to broader cultures of femininity. This, I would argue, does highlight the need for media and cultural analysts to pay more attention to the dialogue and dilemmas that construct the argumentative spaces through which new feminine and masculine regimes are being constructed and transformed. How, therefore, can we think and rethink the cultural and psychological significance of these media cultures, taking into account that ‘media use is never an isolated process, but a collective process’ (Hermes, 1995: 24)? How can we begin to engage with the questions of subjective commitment and investment, which seem crucial in addressing the rise of self-help practices in our lives? Although I am not offering a foolproof method for reconceptualizing these concerns, I will point to some work within critical psychology on ‘psychologies of survival’ as signalling possible ways forward.

**Cultural production of psychopathology**

This focus would move beyond viewing identities as structural positions enabling or constraining certain ways of making sense of the world to instead examine the kinds of psychopathology created at the interstices of the various contradictory discourses that govern people’s lives. As we have already seen, what governs the kinds of discourses that frame the concerns of normative femininity within women’s magazines is their inherently dilemmatic nature. Rather than simply competing with each other, discourses are dialogic, speaking to each other most visibly at their moments of disavowal or denial. The defensive organization of the interconnections between those discourses that govern the production of modern femininities I think also reveals something about the embodiment of these discourses in actual women’s lives. As argued earlier, linguistic categories or discursive positionings are not inhabited with relative unease. Aside from the presumption of an agentic voluntarist subject underpinning such formulations, this view also glosses over the psychopathology potentially produced by the dilemmas, ambiguities and contradictions that form normative femininity.

Valerie Walkerdine (1996) explores the embodiment of such ambivalences and contradictions in the lives of a group of educated working-class women who have entered typically middle-class professions through education. Walkerdine argues that these women are positioned as the ‘object of hopelessly contradictory discourses’, being addressed as both autonomous, independent and in control, through
practices of consumption, leisure and advertising, as well as stupid, animal, reactionary, dependent and pathological, through discourses, cultural and scientific, which construct the working class as other (Blackman and Walkerdine, 2001). Walkerdine develops Bhabha’s (1994) concept of the ‘colonial stereotype’ to explore how class is both feared and desired, denigrated and envied. These ambivalences exist alongside the more normative addresses of consumer culture whereby selfhood is produced as a project of self-transformation and development. She explores how these contradictions are lived by these women through their own private sufferings and miseries, which are not dealt with through stoic humour, but through painful disclosure of the guilt, shame, humiliation and feelings of powerlessness and persecution they have experienced in wanting to ‘get out’, to leave the working classes behind. The discursive production of their forms of psychopathology provide the very forms that are then read off within scientific discourses and practices as signs of working-class inadequacy, inferiority or even biological illness (Blackman, 1996).

It is in conjunction with, and alongside, the very kind of psychopathology produced through these dilemmatic and contradictory discursive positionings that women’s magazines work. Particular problems of social existence such as losing one’s job, health, beauty, relationships and friendships are constituted as stimuli for self-improvement. The autonomous woman who does not lean on or need others and who, above all, can ‘believe in herself’ stands as the regulatory ideal in these addresses (Blackman, 1999). The self-made woman waits for nobody and through her own hard work, effort and positivity makes things happen. The ‘modern woman’ gets, does, improves and rationalizes her emotions on her path to self-transformation. Jackie Stacey (1997), talking about the kinds of personal narratives that tend to structure ‘cancer stories’, similarly argues that self-help or ‘self-health’ constructs suffering in a particular kind of way. Failure in these practices is constituted as a temporary obstacle to overcome, and, as we have seen, these practices map onto the very kinds of embodied experience that ‘make up’ many women’s subjectivities. Rather than simply viewing these resolutions and the practices promulgated on the basis of these self-relations as progressive and ‘unfixing’ femininity, I want to suggest that the dilemmatic quality of feminine discourses and the regulative practices proffered as resolutions condense a range of bodily sensations, anxieties, tensions and forms of psychopathology that are ‘already constituted’ lived realities for many of the readers engaging with these magazines. This work brings together much work in media studies analysing women’s magazine culture that both emphasizes its fragmentary quality, but also the more systematic and repeated ways in which women are encouraged to see and understand themselves as subjects (Ferguson, 1983). It allows us to explore the cultural purchase and potency of particular practices as
well as highlighting the need to reformulate studies of media consumption in relation to the embodied negotiation of the different kinds of cultural anxieties and personal tensions that readers bring to the text.

Conclusion

The arguments presented in this article suggest, first, that some of the general accounts of new forms of selfhood made by sociologists such as Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (2001) and Rose (1996) do not adequately engage with how these subject positions are translated within different media and cultural forms. The focus of this article has been specifically on gender and its centrality in reconfiguring selfhood within media forms such as women’s magazine culture. The injunction to understand one’s life as an autonomous individual is governed through very different concepts, discourses and broader argumentative contexts, creating very different dilemmas and conflicts for men and women. The dialogic context of these discourses is also very different, showing how the kinds of generalist accounts of subject formation do not engage with how they intersect across the designations of race, class, gender and sexuality. This work also suggests that studies of media consumption have for too long reified audiences as cognitivist subjects, primarily engaging with the media through linguistic structures and codes. This does not explore how certain cultural discourses and practices (such as self-help) condense or bring together a range of cultural anxieties, bodily tensions, emotional economies and forms of psychopathology that are ‘already constituted’ lived realities for many of the readers engaging with these magazines. This is an approach to psychology that considers its cultural production through social and cultural practices and also how media and cultural forms work alongside or in conjunction with these ‘already constituted’ fears and desires. The psychological dimensions of media and cultural forms are central to understanding how they work, particularly in terms of audiences’ investment or subjective commitment to certain practices and understandings. More engagement with critical psychology by cultural theorists will enable cultural studies to bring the body back into cultural theory, to consider its regulation as well as the myriad ways in which the dialogic nature of discourse creates the very dilemmas, conflicts and ambiguities that enable resistance and new forms of identity to emerge.

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Notes
1. For example, Beetham (1996) draws on Kristeva’s account of feminine psychology to argue that the qualities of women’s magazines, such as having many authorial voices and the mixing of medias and genres, resist closure, thus meeting or reflecting the psychology of their readers.
2. As Morley (1992: 88) argues, the key concern is to explore ‘how members of different groups and classes, sharing different cultural codes, will interpret a given message differently, not just at the personal, idiosyncratic level, but in a way systematically linked to their socio-economic position’.
3. This study was funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Board, ‘Inventing the Psychological: Lifestyle Magazines and the Fiction of Autonomous Selfhood’ (AN6596/APN10894). My thanks to the research assistant Laura Miller.
4. ‘To bring these implicit meanings to the surface, the analyst faces a greater interpretative or hermeneutic task, for a counter-theme needs to be interpreted within discourse which seems prima facie to be arguing straightforwardly for a particular point. If contrary counter-themes can be said to be concealed within discourse, they are not hidden away in the way that Freudian theorists believe that certain inconsistent themes are hidden by repression from the conscious mind. The concealment is not a deliberate or even sub-conscious concealment, but may operate within layers of meaning of language. Discourse which seems to be arguing for one point may contain implicit meanings which could be made explicit to argue for the counter-point. Thus discourse can contain its own negation, and these are part of its implicit, rather than explicit, meaning’. (Billig et al., 1988: 22)
5. See the important development of this dialogic approach to discourse in the work of Stacey (1997), who analyses the unspoken tropes of cancer and lesbian sexuality in her cultural study of cancer. She refers to them euphemistically as the C word and the L word.
6. One of the more culturally sanctioned ways in which women have been able to ‘speak’ their pain is through humorous soundbites (see Fielding, 1997) or by being ‘tough and witty’ (see Real Women, television drama broadcast in Britain in 1997).
7. ‘In contemporary western culture, we are encouraged to think of ourselves as coherent stories of success, progress and movement. Loss and failure have their place but only as part of a broader picture of ascendance’ (Stacey, 1997: 9).

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**Biographical note**
Lisa Blackman is a senior lecturer in the department of media and communications, Goldsmiths College and works at the intersection of media studies and critical psychology. Her recent books include *Mass Hysteria: Critical Psychology and Media Studies* (Palgrave, 2001; with Valerie Walkerdine) and *Hearing Voices: Embodiment and Experience* (Free Association Books, 2001). She is currently working on a genealogy of self-help. **ADDRESS:** Department of Media and Communications, Goldsmiths College, New Cross, London SE14 6NW, UK. [email: L.Blackman@gold.ac.uk]