

INSTITUTIONS AND PRACTICES OF PERSONAL DEVELOPMENT. AN ANTROPOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE

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Summary

In this paper, I analyzed the phenomenon of personal development in Romania. Personal development refers to the process of transformation of individuals by practicing certain methods. The analysis focused on two dimensions: personal development relationship with social and historical context and the exploration of the consequences of practicing personal development. The first level included the historical dimension of the issue; I presented the evolution of the phenomenon over time and have analyzed the consequences that led to the proliferation in recent years. The second level was concerned with the process as it occurs as how it restructures daily activities, from relationships to experiences.

In Romania and in countries like United States (Giddens 1991 McGee 2005 Swan 2010 etc.), Norway (Madsen 2015, 2016), Russia (Salmenniemi and Vorona 2014), Finland (Rimke 2000), Slovenia (Erjavec and Volcic 2009) China (Nehring et al 2016), Mexico (Nehring et al 2016) or Trinidad (Nehring et al 2016), the interest in this topic has grown in the last 20 years. However, practices in regard of personal development have existed since the early twentieth century, including Romania. Even in the socialist period, there were published books on the topic of self-education, by addressing the general issues of educating the citizens. Unlike the capitalist periods, the socialist self-help books stressed the importance of school, family and in particular the state's responsibility in the development of individuals in socialist society. Transformations within the economic system, the increasing share of affective labor (Hardt 1999), outsourcing, the flexibilization of companies (Ho 2009) and employees (Harvey 2002) have built uncertainty and insecurity for individuals, along with new expectations from them - expressed in the term soft skills - from the state and companies. These expectations refer to

communication and sales skills, time, self and team management or spontaneity, creativity and persuasion. Special courses, with influences from psychology, sociology or theater have been developed in order to attain them. In Romania's case, they have proliferated since 2000, with a period of growth in 2007-2008, then going through a period of maturity, as was described by economic newspapers. These type of trainings are recommended by managers after evaluating their employees and assessing their shortcomings. Courses are cyclical, organized when the number of employees who did not benefit from them is significant. Personal development enthusiasts have expressed dissatisfaction with the way this type of activities are organized. They believe these are helpful only for a certain level in their *own* personal development and most helpful for the company's development. Therefore, most of them choose to do it in private. Consequently, practicing personal development has an impact on the way the labor market develops. For a part of the enthusiasts, it is helpful in quitting the jobs that they are unsatisfied with and start a business on their own, often in areas related to personal development practices; others completely abandon the hectic lifestyle, in favor of quieter activities - downshifting.

Compared to when I started researching in 2011, the market for personal development services has diversified and several techniques become available for the enthusiasts from Bucharest and other Romanian cities. Each bookstore in Bucharest has a shelf with personal development books, and in some cases, they represent half of the sales. From techniques that take on spiritual elements of oriental or Christian philosophy to practices based on psychology, neuroscience or power of thoughts, they all addresses issues related to the achievement of goals / desires and personal growth opportunity.

In order to become a personal development practitioner there certain trainings and certifications that differ for every each practice. For coaching, for example, the process is constructed similarly to the formation of psychologists it takes into account the number of hours of coaching sessions attended both in position of coach or as coached. A more experienced coach supervises the student. For Reiki, on the other hand, certification is called initiation and takes much less time; there are several meetings with a tutor and the process is finalized by practicing the techniques in private. I noticed that a practitioner validation clearly depends on the clients' preferences, and certifications serve as proof for this. Customers prefer to choose the practitioner who was certified as closer as can be to the person who created the method. As there are no formal criteria, for most of the practices, except coaching, most people involved in personal development discusses the fear of creating dependence. A

good practitioner does not create a dependency link with the customer; their relation must be limited in time and space and can be interrupted at any time without creating difficulties for the client.

I have noticed that there are personal development practices that reach to all types of persons, regardless of age, gender and education. Nevertheless, the preferred techniques differ according to the individual characteristics. There are special courses according to age or gender, for children, youth, women and men. Regarding education, the techniques that borrow from Eastern philosophies and religions are available to all persons regardless of education, while those like NLP and Coaching are more accessible to those with higher education. However, income is an obvious obstacle in terms of people's access to services for personal development; a coaching session has cost about around 100 euros, while the spiritual kind of personal development have a lower price.

An important proof regarding the popularity of the phenomenon of personal development in Romania is the involvement of formal institutions - state, media, NGOs and church - in its growth. The State, through the introduction of Personal Development curriculum materials for students in primary schooling or through the formal recognition of the profession of coach and trainer, supports the personal development practices' access for the Romanian society. In addition, many local institutions finance the organization of courses; for example, the mayor of Sihlea, Vrancea County or Department of Child Protection in Iasi finances personal development projects for the community. Regarding the presence of personal development in media, it is worth mentioning the TV station Happy that focuses on personal development topics. In addition, numerous other stations have TV shows that discuss personal development. Simultaneously, many TV stars promote personal development (such as Andreea Raicu) or have obtained certifications in various techniques (ex: Andreea Marin or Adriana Bahmuțeanu). Whereas, The Romanian Orthodox Church has also become interested in addressing the themes of personal development, primarily through the publication of books that addressed certain topics, but also by organizing courses, for example The Metropolitan Church of Alba-Iulia organize such courses, as well as a priest in the Cluj County.

Student NGOs are the main places where young people are exposed to personal development; students are seeking such certainties in the hope of finding a job. One of these NGOs has developed an alternative for formal education, called Alternative University, where there are organized predominantly personal development courses. In addition, in recent years several alternative spaces were opened for practicing personal development, such as Incubator 107 Seeds for Happiness and The Happiness Institute. The main place where I conducted my fieldwork was The Happiness Institute, which is a space for personal development events, which started as a project of an NGO - Happiness Initiative. The Institute has four permanent employees and several volunteers. They organize events almost every evening after 19 o'clock; the cost for participation is a donation of about 30 lei. The events could be film screenings, workshops about presentation techniques, community meetings, or discussions about books. The founders decided to close the space in August 2016 and the NGO started collaborating with Teach for Romania - a project that aims to help the education system in Romania by supporting young people to teach in economically disadvantaged areas.

I have constructed the research around the exploration of everyday life influences of practicing personal development. I have started the theoretical exploration with the works that have analyzed this phenomenon and have argued that it is a means of adapting to the conditions of advanced capitalism (Giddens 1991) or have criticized it as a means of governing in the spirit of neoliberalism (Rose 1996). This paper contributes to the field of research aimed at social transformations caused by economic changes such as the shift from a planned economy to a market economy and the transition from welfare state to the neoliberal project. I wanted to fill the gap in the literature concerning the influence these transformations have on the daily lives of individuals. I have presented how practicing personal development can influence the structure of social relationships. The process involves assessing the relationships that a person has. This evaluation may cause the breakup of such relation, the changing of another and / or the construction of new ones with people going also through a process of personal development. The relationships on which the person is advised to break are called toxic relationships because they can divert individual from the personal development process. Throughout the process of personal development, it creates a distinction between those who practice and those who refuse to. Improving existing relations is part of the same process. In this respect, practitioners desire to improve certain abilities, for example communication and listening skills. Building new relationships with people with similar interests is the motivation behind the establishment of the centers like the one where I we have undertaken my research.

I have argued that personal development provides a model of self-government of social life, which on the one hand empowers the individual, but on the other it does not provide any kind of protection from systematic abuse and exploitation. This model is in line with the neoliberal reconfiguration of social security systems that tend to no longer be under state control, and increasingly becoming a choice of the individual; in an individualistic world each person is responsible for his life.

The process of personal development requires high consumption of time, money and emotional, the latter happening due to distress caused by introspection of certain practices. However, in the end, the enthusiast believes that all of these are necessary for the process to work efficiently – the consumption of money encourages the dedication of time for the process and the emotional consumption validates and enhances the success of the process. In addition to the restructuring of social relations, the process influences the way that the present is experienced, the language, the thoughts and the perceived emotions. The dictum „Live in the present” gets to accompany personal development practices and involves a restructuring of the person. Firstly, it revises, the experimentation of activities through becoming aware of them, focusing on the moment and taking into account that it existed. Secondly, it restructures self-reporting. „To live in the present” assumes that memories of past and fears of the future can alter the present existence and suggests a repositioning of individual’s present actions and plans. This repositioning involves the motorization of statuses and feelings, intended to produce recognitions for the accomplishments and the identification of the issues that need to be changed, that produces dissatisfaction. Getting in touch with personal development techniques means interacting with another kind of language that borrows terms from psychology (like assertiveness, introspection, emotional barrier, etc.) and from Oriental philosophies (Zen, Chakra, Energy, etc.). This unintended change of language is accompanied by an intended change that can vary with the technique - avoiding negative sentences or introduction of positive affirmations. Some practices, in addition to modifying the language, suggest the importance of changing the thoughts. Thus, it is recommended the elimination of negative thoughts, such as those that relate to things that a person cannot do or those concerning some person or insults; this thought ought to be replaced with positive ones, such as the reaffirmation of plans or objectives, reassessing one’s own qualities. All these tools are used preferentially by each person and can be ordered on an axis that describes the involvement.



Low importance of
positive thinking

High importance of
positive thinking

Depending practices and personal preferences, determined by age, gender and education, enthusiasts of personal development can be placed at various points along this axis. In addition, graphic illustration describes the proneness a person can have for some practices or instruments that I have described in this paper.

Personal development is a tool through which subjects are governed in advanced capitalism (Rimke 2000, Rose 1996, etc.). The main commandment “You are the most important person in your life!” is translated as “You are solely responsible for your life”. In personal development discourse, the individuals alone can intervene on their own existence. Some of them explicitly condemn blaming other entities (e.g. system, friends) for failure or creating expectations that these entities will resolve individual. Personal development offers tools that people can overcome their problems and achieve their goals. These tools are built strictly by proposing the transformation of a person from changing social, professional relations, the modification of language, emotions and thoughts. All these practices promise success and / or own self-satisfaction.

Personal development contains an implicit model for interpreting one’s own emotions. In its outlook, emotions can be processed and managed. Since it is a product of neoliberal governmentality (Rose 1996), personal development implicitly, propose a neoliberal management of emotions. Due to the current global dissemination across each culture, that adds different shades to it (Nehring 2016), personal development is building a globalizing reporting to citizens' emotions and inner selves