New Heroines of Labour: Domesticating postfeminism and neoliberal capitalism in Russia[1]

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Abstract

In recent years, postfeminism has become an important element of popular media culture and the object of feminist cultural critique. This paper explores how postfeminism is domesticated in Russia through popular self-help literature aimed at a female audience. Drawing on a close reading of self-help texts by three bestselling Russian authors, the paper examines how postfeminism is made intelligible to the Russian audience through constructions of femininity and how it articulates with other symbolic frameworks. It identifies labour as a key trope through which postfeminism is domesticated and argues that the texts invite women to invest time and energy in the labour of personality, the labour of femininity and the labour of sexuality in order to become 'valuable subjects'. The paper demonstrates that the domestication of postfeminism also involves the domestication of neoliberal capitalism in Russia, and highlights how popular psychology, neoliberal capitalism and postfeminism are symbiotically related.

Keywords: postfeminism, self-help literature, femininity, domestication, Russia, popular psychology

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Introduction

In recent years, postfeminism has become an important element of popular media culture and the object of feminist cultural critique. The term itself is contested and has been employed in a number of ways (see Budgeon, 2011; Gill and Scharff, 2011; Walby, 2011). In the context of feminist cultural studies, postfeminism has come to refer to the 'double entanglement' of feminist and anti-feminist ideas (McRobbie, 2009: 13). This simultaneous appropriation and disavowal of feminism – engaging with traditional gender norms while partially embracing (liberal) feminist ideas of equal opportunities and female empowerment – is constitutive of postfeminism (Gill, 2007: 161). Rosalind Gill's research on Anglo-American popular media has identified several characteristics of postfeminism: femininity as a bodily property; a shift from objectivation to subjectivation; an emphasis on self-surveillance and discipline; a focus on choice, individualism and empowerment; the crucial role of a 'makeover' paradigm; the celebration of 'natural' sexual difference; a sexualisation of culture; and an emphasis on consumerism and the commodification of difference (Gill, 2007:148).

Building on Gill's conceptualisation, this paper explores how postfeminism is 'domesticated' in Russia through bestselling popular psychological literature aimed at a female audience. More specifically, we ask how postfeminism is translated and made intelligible to the Russian audience, and how it articulates with or confronts other symbolic frameworks. What kinds of subjects are women being called to become, and through what kinds of categories are they invited to understand themselves? We adopt the term 'domestication' from Alasuutari who argues that 'external models are never just adopted; when turned into actual practices and incorporated with local conditions their meaning and consequences are different from the original blueprint' (2008: 67). The metaphor of domestication is illuminating as it draws attention to the fact that, in the process of

domestication, that which is initially perceived as 'foreign' or 'strange' is made familiar, commonplace and 'natural'. We argue that domestication is not a simple process of diffusion, but rather one of complex articulation in which elements of different systems of meanings with diverse trajectories are sutured together to produce a novel interpretation.

Drawing on a close reading of a selection of self-help texts we identify *labour* as a key trope through which postfeminism is domesticated in Russia. We argue that the texts invite women to invest time and energy in three interrelated forms of labour in order to become 'valuable subjects' (Skeggs, 2004): *the labour of personality, the labour of femininity and the labour of sexuality*. This paper advances our understanding of postfeminism through an analysis of these three forms of labour in the following ways.

Firstly, previous research has examined postfeminism primarily in the Anglo-American context, whereas this paper extends the analytical purview to contemporary Russia and seeks to understand how postfeminism, as a globally circulating system of meanings, travels and is transformed when appropriated 'on the ground'. The new material and symbolic orderings of gender and class that have emerged following the demise of the Soviet Union are highly problematic and require sense-making and legitimisation. Popular psychology taps into this demand by opening up 'thought spaces' (Blackman, 2004: 229) for debate and disagreement, and postfeminism is one important symbolic repository mobilised in these thought spaces. This exploration of postfeminism in Russian popular psychology provides valuable insights into symbolic contentions about gender and sexuality in the aftermath of the Communist fall.

Secondly, the paper demonstrates that the domestication of postfeminism crucially involves a domestication of neoliberal capitalism in Russia. Neoliberal capitalism is taken to mean a mutual entanglement of two modalities of neoliberalism: neoliberal governmentality as a specific mode of reasoning and governing, seeking to bring about a self-monitoring,

responsible, optimising and maximising subject (Rose, 1998; Ong, 2006); and neoliberalism as a political-economic rationality which strives to extend the ethic of market logic to ever-broadening spheres of life (Harvey, 2005). Russia has only recently entered the circuits of global capitalism, having embarked on a transition to a market economy following the demise of the Soviet Union, bringing about unprecedented growth in social inequalities and profoundly reconfiguring material and symbolic hierarchies. The logic of social differentiation has shifted and the significance of economic capital as a principle of differentiation has grown enormously. This has resulted in the emergence of new super-rich elites, the *nouveaux riches*, as well as an increase in severe poverty (Salmenniemi, 2012). As a recent phenomenon, capitalism in Russia must be explained, made intelligible and legitimised. This paper elucidates how this is accomplished through self-help literature.

Capitalism is constitutive of the postfeminist sensibility, but this link has received little attention in previous research, which has approached neoliberalism predominantly from a governmentality perspective. While previous scholarship has highlighted the interconnections between capitalism and self-help technologies (e.g. McGee, 2005; Illouz, 2008; Hochschild, 1994), this paper's contribution is to bring postfeminism into the equation and to demonstrate how popular psychology, neoliberal capitalism and postfeminism are symbiotically related. We draw on the concept of the 'economy of personhood' (Skeggs and Wood, 2012) to make sense of this symbiosis. We argue that popular psychology constitutes a part of the economy of personhood; it creates symbolic hierarchies by attaching value to some persons and dispositions while portraying others as valueless, and in so doing works as a key locus for the politics of gender and class. The normative postfeminist figure articulated in the analysed self-help texts is a sexually empowered, maximising and optimising possessive individual who seeks to accrue value for herself through continuous labour (see

Skeggs, 2004), but whose autonomy and agency are firmly constrained by the prevailing gendered power structures.

The paper provides first a brief overview of the history of the 'psy' industry and feminism in Russia as a context in which to understand postfeminism and self-help, and then analyses the three forms of labour before drawing conclusions.

The 'psy' industry in Russia

'Psy' knowledges occupied a relatively marginal position in the Soviet Union. Psychoanalysis and other strands of psychological thought were largely suppressed during the 1930s (Etkind, 1997). Biomedical, physiological and pedagogical discourses, partly rooted in psychological models but emphasising correct (political) socialisation, constituted the dominant conceptual language for making sense of selfhood in Soviet society (for a fuller discussion see Matza, 2010). Self-improvement was a central element of the Communist project, and advice literature, particularly manuals devoted to self-training, played a key role in this (Kharkhordin, 1999; Kelly, 2001). However, 'psy' knowledges were never popularised to the same extent as in post-war Western societies.

In the wake of the Soviet Union's collapse, commercial popular psychology, as well as other new cultural technologies, emerged to fill the landscape vacated by the Communist ideology. In subsequent years the psy industry grew dramatically (Griffin and Karepova, 2011), including the consumption of advice literature (Dubin and Zorkaia 2008: 26). The keenest consumers of the new psy technologies are women, younger age groups and the middle class (Dubin and Zorkaia, 2008; Salmenniemi & Vorona, in print). Self-help literature now constitutes a popular and visible, yet little studied, segment of the Russian popular media culture (see, however, Karepova, 2007; Salmenniemi 2010). Much of the available self-help literature is aimed at a specifically female readership (Karepova, 2007). Self-help books are typically priced at RUB 120-350 (£2-9), making them affordable by the general public. In

bookstores they are usually displayed in the 'Psychology' section alongside professional psychology, which potentially endows them with an aura of 'expert knowledge'. However, more often than not, self-help books are denigrated as 'light' reading devoid of aesthetic or intellectual value (Salmenniemi & Vorona, 2011).

Our analysis here is based on thirteen books by three bestselling Russian authors explicitly addressing a female readership (see Appendix). These authors were chosen because they are particularly popular and prolific. Juliya Svyash has published several bestselling self-help books and runs a psychological centre conducting workshops for women (e.g. 'Discover your femininity', 'Becoming a woman'). Nataliya Pravdina is the author of numerous self-help manuals drawing on feng shui and New Age-inspired positive psychology, and she also runs psychological trainings in Russia and beyond. Evgeniya Shatskaya is the leading author of the so-called 'Bitch' series (*stervologiia*), teaching women 'how to become a bitch (*sterva*)' in order to achieve success in all spheres of life. Most of these books have been on the popular psychology bestseller lists of a number of major Russian bookshops (e.g. Kniga.ru, Ozon.ru, Bookberry.ru, Biblio-Globus.ru). Many of the early editions have also been reprinted by different publishing houses, indicating their continuing success.[1] We have close-read the books using thematic analysis techniques (Guest et al., 2012) and have analysed how the elements of postfeminism identified by Gill (2007) have been appropriated and re-worked into the Russian material. Several books have been read by both authors to ensure thematic consistency.

Feminism, anti-feminism, postfeminism

The new self-help genre and its consumption are crucially shaped by the historical, cultural and political context of gender relations and feminist thought in Russia. The Soviet Union was characterised by the political project of 'emancipation from above', the absence of an autonomous women's movement and the discrediting of feminism as a bourgeois idea.

The Soviet gender order rested on a simultaneous emphasis on equality and difference: gender equality was officially proclaimed, yet at the same time gender relations were apprehended in essentialist terms and male dominance in the public sphere was largely unquestioned. In its attempt to transform gender relations, Soviet modernity shared certain features with late-modern gender arrangements, such as equality as a policy goal, the expansion of women's education and the increasing inclusion of women in politics and labour markets. Driven largely by economic, (bio)political and military concerns, the Soviet state implemented a number of policies which in the West were pursued by women's movements, such as the legalisation of abortion (although banned between 1936 and 1955), a quota for women in parliament and paid maternity leave (Buckley, 1989).

The demise of the Soviet Union prompted a profound rethinking of gender identities and a re-evaluation of Soviet gender politics, with contradictory effects. On the one hand, feminism resurfaced as a critical discourse and as a form of collective action, developing in close collaboration with transnational activist networks and foreign donor agencies (Sperling, 1999; Hemment, 2008). Feminist discourse also began to circulate in the mass media and in the academic community (Tartakovskaya, 2010) and was symbolically aligned with the democratisation process and the liberal discourse of equal rights and opportunities. On the other hand, the socialist model of emancipation was heavily criticised, as elsewhere in the post-socialist region (Ghodsee, 2004; Funk, 2007), resulting in a certain 're-traditionalisation', that is an upsurge of traditional notions of gender as a way of dealing with the allegedly 'distorted' Soviet past (Ashwin, 2000).

Feminism in post-Soviet Russia developed thanks to considerable Western funding, and when this funding gradually dried up in the mid-2000s, feminist organisations largely disintegrated (Tartakovskaya, 2010). Today, gender is predominantly framed within the official discourses of 'demographic crisis', 'traditional family' and 'spiritual and moral

values' (Sereda, 2011). Feminist ideas appear to be in double jeopardy: they are repudiated for echoing Soviet gender politics, and at the same time (and paradoxically) they are understood as an invariably alien, Western-imported ideology incompatible with 'Russian culture'. Thus, while postfeminism in the West evolved as a response to second-wave feminism (Budgeon, 2011), in Russia it has a contentious relationship both with the state-sanctioned equality politics and with feminism as an 'exogenous' ideology. There was no second-wave feminist movement in the USSR, although a small group of dissident women did contest the Soviet conception of equality with an underground publication *Women and Russia* (see Mamonova 1984), which disclosed women's everyday experiences hidden behind the official image of 'equality'. This activism was firmly repressed and the key activists of the group were deported. The postfeminist discourse of Russian self-help literature is situated within this conflicted cultural space and is engaged in a symbolic struggle over normative conceptions of gender. As we show below, postfeminism is mobilised in the books as a resource to critique Soviet gender politics and to envisage new models of masculinity and femininity, disarticulated from both the negative historical association and (Western) feminist endeavours. However, although the books reject the Soviet conception of equality, they treat equality as commonsensical in a postfeminist way: they construe women as autonomous individuals who automatically have full rights and equal opportunities to pursue career and self-realisation.

Labour of personality

Analysis of our data suggests that the task of becoming a valuable feminine subject involves a large amount of *labour*. We have identified three main types of labour which the books invite women to perform: the labour of personality, the labour of femininity and the labour of sexuality. In each form of labour, psychology, postfeminism and capitalism are intertwined and domesticated in a particular way.

The self-improvement project

Russian self-help books call readers to a never-ending project of self-improvement as an ethical obligation, reminiscent of what Heelas (2002: 80) has called a 'self-work ethic' as a key element of contemporary capitalism. The labour of personality, an important dimension of this self-improvement project, refers to work on one's mental dispositions in order to become an autonomous, self-reliant, maximising and optimising subject accruing value to oneself (see Skeggs, 2004). Such a model of personhood is clearly classed and has historically been marked as masculine. It is held up to women as something to which they should aspire, thus construing women as being specifically in need of self-transformation.

> We must use every minute to become at least a tiny bit better, a bit richer, smarter and more experienced … An ideal woman has to be first and foremost self-reliant, independent and successful in the area she herself has chosen (Pravdina, 2007b: 64).

> A woman should embark on a self-realization project … This is your chance to gain the independence that men value so much, as well as self-respect and self-sufficiency. So don't wait for handouts from your partner or parents. Do it yourself (Shatskaya, 2007b).[2]

The idea of continuous work on the self is not entirely new to Russia. A longstanding discourse of personality (*lichnost'*) in Russian culture has conceived personality as a 'project' – as something that is not given but must be achieved (Plotnikov, 2008). Previous scholarship has also identified affinities between Soviet technologies of the self and those associated with neoliberal governmentality, for example constant self-monitoring and self-evaluation and careful management of emotions (Zigon, 2010; Salmenniemi & Vorona, in print). Soviet self-improvement technologies were built on the concept of *lichnost'* and promoted work on the self (*rabota nad soboi*) as an important ethical obligation. The postfeminist self-help literature reframes these meanings of labour: previously one had to better oneself in order to advance the cause of Communism, whereas now one should do it in order to achieve personal success.

Freedom, choice and self-responsibility – key tropes of positive psychology, neoliberalism and postfeminism – circulate intensively in the analysed self-help texts. They subscribe to the grammar of individualism by advancing the notion that our practices are all freely chosen and that we are all autonomous agents, unconstrained by any structural inequalities (Gill, 2007: 153). However, making choices becomes an ethical obligation for which one must bear full responsibility:

> A woman says, 'My married life didn't unfold well. I was unlucky.' But the question is, was this life unfolding without her? Who was unfolding it? […] A person is 90% responsible for what happens to her. And on closer examination, the remaining 10% is also her doing. […] a problem is not a set of circumstances or a fact; it is your own, freely chosen attitude to this fact and your behaviour (Sviyash, 2008: 14).

In propagating autonomy and self-reliance, the texts take issue with two salient aspects of the traditionally-dominant representation of femininity in Russian culture, rooted in both Orthodox Christian and Soviet gendered ethical virtues: motherhood and self-sacrifice. Women are advised to prioritise self-realisation and career and give up the 'traditional' model of femininity:

> Self-sacrifice only damages relationships ... 'I sacrificed everything for you!' – this line is good in soap operas, but in real life it produces a completely opposite impression (Pravdina, 2002: 24).

> If marriage, family and children are permanently top of your list of priorities, it means you are still governed by the old stereotype of a 'woman's lot' … To be the homemaker and to procreate is secondary (Pravdina, 2007b: 76).

However, although motherhood is downplayed as women's primary identity, the obligation of maternal care does not disappear but simply shifts from children to men. Childcare is often described as something which successful women outsource to domestic help, highlighting that class is integral to defining new norms of femininity. This outsourcing 'liberates' women to invest in the labour of personality and in caring for their partners. Despite the fact that the masculine model of personhood is held up in the books as the norm, men are often portrayed as a 'lower species', incapable of managing themselves:

> It is well known that all men are like small children. They need care and love, they are often naughty and demanding, they break their toys and like tasty food. Learn to pity him and to forgive, to forget about his pitfalls (Shatskaya, 2009: 45).

Hence, while firmly retaining the heterosexual matrix, the books shift the emphasis from the family to the heterosexual couple, reframing maternal care. In doing so, this discourse articulates with two traditions. Firstly, it recycles a longstanding discourse in Russian cultural history representing women as morally superior and as 'civilising agents', responsible for educating and cultivating not only individual men but the nation at large (Buckley, 1989). Secondly, it connects with Western postfeminist discourse emphasising women's emotional labour and the obligation to bolster a fragile male ego (Gill, 2009).

Life mediated through men

Interestingly, whilst being called to become active agents in relationships and expected to take responsibility for themselves and their partners, women are paradoxically encouraged to inhabit a subordinate position: they should not only happily serve men's needs, but also learn to draw pleasure from this. Women's work on themselves is thus ultimately performed for their (existing or potential) male partners, rather than for themselves:

> A man does not love a woman, but loves how he feels when he's with her. So a real woman gives him this good feeling [of being a man]… So a real woman should nurture and cultivate her femininity so that she can bestow it on her man (Sviash, 2012).

As our analysis elucidates, autonomy, self-reliance and independence, as the key ethical virtues of the postfeminist subject, are repeatedly destabilised by placing women firmly in a heteronormative hierarchy. Femininity is time and again represented only in relation to masculinity, and women's lives are described as ultimately mediated and regulated by men.

> A woman is created in such a way that the only way she feels happy, beautiful and desired is when she is loved. A woman without a man often commands the pity and suspicion of people around her. A single woman cannot be happy, no matter how hard she tries to convince herself otherwise (Shatskaya, 2007b: 24).

A heterosexual relationship constitutes the ultimate horizon of the signification of femininity in the Russian books. Although women are encouraged to learn emotional detachment and not cling to men, a relationship is always posited as an unquestioned anchor of women's lives. This distinguishes Russian literature from mainstream Western relationship-advice literature, in which the intimate sphere has experienced a 'cultural cooling' (Hochschild, 1994: 14). The normative model of self held up to women is a 'low-maintenance' self (Blackman, 2004), a 'postmodern cowgirl' (Hochschild, 1994). Women are expected 'to detach, to leave and to depend and need less' (ibid: 14). Women are encouraged to disengage from – though not altogether discard – romantic relationships and prioritise career (Hazleden, 2011). By contrast, in the Russian books heterosexual relationships and romantic love take precedence over everything else; they form the grid of intelligibility for femininity.

As is clear from the above discussion, in Russian self-help books women are effectively called to inhabit two contradictory subject-positions: the position of an autonomous and self-sufficient woman, and the position of a maternal care-taker responsible for the emotional support of her male partner. She is warned to downplay her independence, which may 'scare men away', thus turning herself into an undesirable commodity in the heterosexual marketplace. This contradiction between the need to be self-sufficient and self-loving on the one hand, and to be a subservient care-taker on the other, is reconciled by suggesting that self-love does not equate with selfishness. There are limits to independence: as Pravdina (2006: 82) warns, becoming too independent 'is not healthy'. Shatskaya further legitimates this distinction based on national differences:

> To love yourself is the key for Sterva but in the West to 'love yourself' means to be indifferent to the problems... For a Russian, such a thing is unacceptable because we are collective people… we are kinder... While Western civilization is based on the principle that people are foreign to each other, we are different… So Sterva then is not a selfish person, but she is not a complete altruist either (Shatskaya, 2007c: 45).

Self-love and individualism were negatively coded during the Soviet years and are now domesticated by drawing a distinction between the 'individualist West' and 'collectivist and morally superior Russia'.

Hard work and a bit of shopping

Finally, an important component of the labour of personality is the necessity actually to engage in paid labour. Work is described as a disciplining force, propelling women to cultivate postfeminist and neoliberal capitalist dispositions of achievement, self-realisation and self-governance. It also grants recognition as a socially valuable subject. The housewife is evoked as an abject figure, devoid of value, against which the new, postfeminist femininity is constructed (see also Ratilainen, 2012). Rather than 'just sitting at home, polishing the windows and cooking dinners' (Pravdina, 2007b: 79), a postfeminist subject:

> … always works. This is what makes her different from a housewife in an unwashed bathrobe. Work disciplines you, doesn't allow you to leave home without good make-up and with peeling nail polish. Work also provides money which you spend on yourself without a feeling that you owe something to someone ... So always work, even when you don't want to! (Shatskaya, 2007b: 54).

By emphasising work as an integral element of postfeminist subjectivity, the texts align with a key trope of Western postfeminism, that of the 'working girl' (McRobbie, 2009), which finds common semantic ground with a key figure in the Communist project, the Soviet 'working woman' (cf. Ratilainen, 2012). The Soviet gender ideology conceived labour as a key dimension of feminine identity. However, while in the Soviet Union work was posited as a duty which should benefit the collective good, work in contemporary self-help literature is framed in terms of career, pleasure and self-realisation, guided by personal rather than collective success. Unlike the official Soviet discourse which portrayed most kinds of work as important, self-help literature encourages women to pursue a career in well-paid, white collar and managerial jobs, thereby coding class into the discourse of normative femininity:

> More experienced *Stervas* can be found in such jobs as shop manager, chief executive in a firm, professor in a prestigious university, a journalist in a good newspaper; these are women who have some power, success and material affluence

> – and they will never go back ... Think for yourself – it's much nicer to work at the level of management than to be a cleaner (Shatskaya, 2008).

Wealth gained through well-paid work (and successful marriage) is also important for the new feminine subject because it enables consumption – a pivotal practice in performing and displaying identity:

> A woman is created the way that gifts and shopping make her feel good. Why not spoil yourself with a new anti-wrinkle cream, a good restaurant, or with an hour in the aromatherapy room? (Shatskaya, 2010: 75).

The reader is persuaded not to feel guilty about pampering, an idea which is in clear contrast to the Soviet past when women had only limited consumer choice and self-indulgence was regarded as a bourgeois vice. The self-help texts recode the long tradition of contempt and suspicion of (Western) materialism in Russian cultural history, also cultivated by the Soviet state (Kelly and Volkov, 1998: 291), by symbolically associating pleasure and consumption. Consuming luxurious products is framed as an entitlement: it is something which successful individuals have gained through hard work and thus deserve. This again elucidates the centrality of labour in both Soviet and postfeminist identity projects.

Labour of femininity

The labour of personality analysed above is intimately connected with what we call the labour of femininity. As in postfeminist discourse in general, the Russian books endorse the idea of an essential sexual difference. As Pravdina (2007b: 9) states, 'Men and women are created as absolutely different and no modern ploys can make us forget our natural destiny.' This resonates with the essentialist gender discourse of the Soviet era and is also explicitly constructed in contrast to the Soviet language of gender equality (Attwood, 1990). The books claim that, now that the Soviet Union is 'a thing of the past', these 'natural' differences can and *should* be enjoyed without the outdated ideological pressure for equality. Interestingly, a number of texts acknowledge women's subordinate position in society while firmly disavowing feminism:

> I don't like the word 'feminist' or 'emancipation'. Unfortunately, emancipation and women's struggle for their rights did not bring them anything at all ... in addition to the traditional chores of raising children and household duties, women acquired a responsibility to earn money and sponsor their idiot-husbands ... Doesn't really sound like a dream of freedom and independence, does it? (Shatskaya, 2007c: 59).

Having construed feminist strategies as ineffective, the books encourage individualist tactics to deal with inequalities in the spirit of neoliberal capitalism. Rather than fighting the system, women are advised to appropriate femininity as a strategic 'weapon' on the battlefield of life:

> You can manipulate men without them knowing it rather than have a bulldozer-like strategy and the pushiness of a bluestocking businesswoman ... Manipulation is a typically feminine method. In the context of patriarchy… a woman had to find indirect routes to power, using men and her charm over them… [*Stervas*] have begun to think like men, but they nonetheless remain women... (Shatskaya, 2007c: 59).

One of the most powerful storylines in the analysed self-help books is the constant management and control of the feminine body and appearance. Although sexual difference is understood to be natural, femininity is nevertheless something that has to be constantly managed through meticulous aesthetic labour on the body:

> Dear women, take constant care of your appearance! You must always be beautiful and attractive! (Pravdina, 2007b: 128).

> Even when the pressure is high, a real woman always finds time to pull herself back together and look good … What kind of success and career are we talking about if you were too lazy to wipe off the peeling nail varnish last night? (Sviyash, 2012).

This labour is absolutely central to the commodification of the self (see also Ratilainen, 2012) and, much like the other forms of women's work, the labour of femininity has an endless and repetitive nature. However, the texts invite readers to understand it as 'fun', 'pleasure' and as something that women themselves 'choose' to do (see Gill, 2007), while simultaneously naturalising it as something that is essentially in 'women's nature'.

A specific form of heterosexual femininity reminiscent of Connell's (1987) 'emphasised femininity' is construed in the books as the single most important form of capital which women should cultivate and mobilise. The books draw heavily on a market discourse. Female readers are advised that 'a real woman knows her price', and they are

invited to ‘make investments’ and accrue value in themselves through the labour of femininity. This ‘capital’ can then be traded in the fields of work and marriage. The texts offer highly detailed advice on how to perform femininity ‘properly’, ranging from tips on choosing what to wear, how to do hair and make-up and use skincare products and cellulite treatments, to correct posture, the ‘right’ pitch and tone of voice and even the proper way to smoke a cigarette. All these elements highlight the exchange value of femininity (Skeggs, 2004: 136). The message ultimately conveyed by the self-help texts is that women not only need a heterosexual relationship in order to be happy, but that they also need to mobilise femininity tactically in order to make men behave in a desired way. This makes clear the largely illusory nature of women’s autonomy:

> A real woman … will not bang her head against the wall to achieve something ... A real woman does not compete with men ... she does not try to educate or change them ... she does not impose responsibilities. She creates an illusion of being defenceless, thereby awakening a man’s desire to perform noble deeds (Sviyash, 2012).

Body and mind are presented as intimately interconnected in the aesthetic labour of femininity. A well-groomed appearance and elegant clothes are taken to reflect and cultivate postfeminist and neoliberal capitalist dispositions of self-control, self-responsibility and self-confidence, while wearing appropriate consumer symbols on one’s body helps to ingrain these dispositions in the psyche:

> *‘Sterva’* always looks top-notch. She will never let herself wear tatty old clothes, scruffy sports clothing or bland fake jewellery ... Go to an expensive shop and buy only famous luxury labels…. But remember, without an inner state of desire for radical change and a fundamental belief in yourself ... all the expensive cosmetics, stylish clothes, refined manners and secrets of male seduction will be useless (Shatskaya, 2007a: 38-49).

The quote further emphasises how class is clearly coded into the new postfeminist subject by establishing norms concerning what counts as ‘good taste’ and equating expensive items with a ‘healthy’ selfhood.

Labour of sexuality

The labour of femininity is closely related to the *labour of sexuality*, which constitutes another key aspect of the postfeminist subjectivity. Advice concerning sexuality occupies a central position in the self-help books. Sexual pleasure emerges as a new *telos* to which to aspire (Salmenniemi & Vorona, in print). Sexuality is construed to be essential for a good life and a healthy selfhood. Female readers are therefore ethically obliged to explore, work on and manage their sexuality and that of their male partner. This explicit treatment of sexuality in self-help books is a post-Soviet phenomenon. Sexuality was rarely discussed in public in the Soviet Union: the official approach emphasised sexual restraint and restricted access to information about sexuality (Rivkin-Fish, 2005). In the official Soviet discourse, the female body was represented as a productive body harnessed for the economic prosperity of the state, and as a reproductive body in the service of the nation, but not as a source of pleasure. Sexual pleasure was viewed as potentially dangerous and subversive, diverting attention away from political commitments. For these historical reasons, sexuality is an issue that requires intensive recoding and legitimation in the Russian self-help books:

> A real woman sees sex as a healthy part of life. She allows herself not to feel guilty about having sex or wanting to have sex. She likes her body. She can enjoy herself … (Sviyash, 2012).

> Believe me, to love sex and all pleasure connected with it is absolutely normal for all living creatures. … To love sex means that you love yourself and life (Pravdina, 2002).

The self-help texts introduce a sexually liberated woman as a normative figure, rather than the mother figure traditionally dominant in the Russian symbolic order. Being sexy is construed as a form of women's empowerment and freedom in the new capitalist society. The texts domesticate the new postfeminist sexual ethics of 'compulsory sexual agency' (Gill, 2008: 40) by encouraging women to become active, pleasure-seeking sexual agents. As we have emphasised in previous sections, the self-help texts are also structured on the logic of

'compulsory heterosexuality' (Rich, 1980). Sexuality is discussed in exclusively heteronormative terms and women are construed as 'innately' heterosexual. Homosexuality is mentioned only in passing and is presented as a temporary deviation that has 'psycho-physiological roots' and can be 'cured' with 'the right man' (Shatskaya, 2012: 510).

Despite the recurrent invitation to sexual liberation, female sexuality does not appear as important in itself but is, once again, harnessed to serve the sexual pleasure of the male partner. Women can and should enjoy sex, but the ultimate motive for working on their sexuality is to be able to fulfil the sexual needs of their partners. Female sexual pleasure and desire are instrumentalised and conceived as a way to preserve a heterosexual relationship. Some of the texts allow more room for female self-determination. Sviyash (2012), for example, writes that: 'A real woman has sex when she wants to. She won't do it against her will.' Other texts, on the other hand, offer extremely categorical exhortations:

> Experienced women know that it's absolutely unacceptable to deny men oral pleasure and to neglect the male 'love tool'… a woman who really loves a man will find a way to show him that she adores and treasures his 'love truncheon' (Pravdina, 2007a: 130)

Men are often portrayed in the books as passive objects prone to manipulation through sexuality (cf. Gill, 2009). In order tactically to deploy sexuality in pursuit of men's attention, women are advised to rely on 'menology' (ibid.): to study men meticulously as a species in order to find and exploit their weaknesses. The full title of one of Shatskaya's books is telling: *Men – A Manual for Obtaining, Using and Caring: A Step by Step Technology*. The labours of sexuality and femininity are described as essential in order to keep the man from leaving, which is an ever-present risk:

> He can leave any minute. He can leave because of your constant nagging or because you refuse sex too often ... he can leave because you go to bed wearing too much cream on your face or because you stopped putting make-up on and stopped being a woman and began to turn into a comic-book housewife with curlers on her head ... So you can think about it whichever way you like – but the bottom line is that the problem is you (Shatskaya, 2009: 10).

In line with the essentialist conception of sexual difference, men and women are understood as different sexual beings with different needs. Male sexuality is presented as a simple and straightforward biological/physiological phenomenon. Since men like sex, the texts advise that this is what women should give them. In exchange, women can receive material benefits and, most importantly, love:

> And your man, having received in bed everything and even more than he had dreamt about, will give you the love of which you have dreamt so much. Remember, the most certain way to a man's heart is through his pants ... A real woman gives him every piece of herself without asking anything in return, but in the end – she gets everything ... (Shatskaya, 2012: 518).

Thus, sense is made of intimate relationships using the market logic of capital and exchange. In this context, the otherwise disavowed female self-sacrifice is smuggled in under a new guise: women should temporarily sacrifice their needs in order to 'win the jackpot' in the end. The labour of sexuality, however, is ultimately coupled with emotional labour. Not only are women urged to take care of their partners' sexual needs but they also need to show genuine care, love and compassion. Women are held responsible for producing themselves as desirable heterosexual subjects as well as for monitoring both sexual and emotional dimensions of their relationships (cf. Gill, 2009). Women are also categorically advised against sharing their anxieties and problems with men since men 'expect pleasant impressions' and 'want the joys of love' (Pravdina, 2002: 28).

Conclusion

This paper has explored the ways in which self-help books domesticate postfeminism and neoliberal capitalism in Russia. We have argued that self-help literature provides us with an illuminating lens to understand how capitalism as a cultural logic is made intelligible and legitimated in the post-socialist context. As part of the economy of personhood, self-help literature attaches value to persons and dispositions unevenly along the vectors of gender, sexuality and class, and imagines relationships through the logic of exchange.

We have argued that the trope of labour serves as the semantic glue that knits together psychology, postfeminism, neoliberal capitalism and the Soviet symbolic register. Labour was an almost sacred duty and a key criterion of respectable personhood for every Soviet citizen. The mythic and celebrated figures of 'labour heroes' in the Soviet iconography were held up as examples for the masses to emulate. We suggest that it is this 'cult of labour' that is again elevated to a measure of respectable personhood in contemporary self-help books. As our analysis suggests, the meanings of labour in the self-help texts both depart from and remain partly within the same semantic ground as the Soviet discourses of labour.

In addition to labour, the postfeminist discourse also finds resonance with the Soviet gender discourse, as both endorse the notion of essential sexual difference. Moreover, self-sacrifice and maternal care, which are key meanings attached to femininity in Russian cultural history, are both criticised *and* appropriated in a slightly altered form in contemporary self-help books. The postfeminist self-help discourse also introduces a number of themes, such as sexual liberation and the pleasure of consumption, that are seldom articulated in the official public discourse in Russia which construes feminine identity predominantly through motherhood and 'traditional family values'.

Our analysis shows that the self-help texts are full of contradictions, stitching together conflicting elements in an inherently contestable manner. They display an amalgam of (neo)traditionalist ideas of 'authentic' gender relations and 'emphasised femininity', upbeat incitements of female sexual empowerment and success, a rejection of feminism and 'Soviet equality', and a taken-for-granted idea of equal opportunities to pursue career and self-realisation in the new capitalist system.

We suggest that the Russian postfeminist discourse differs from the Western discourse in two crucial respects. Firstly, the Russian books domesticate the postfeminist idea of an emotionally and economically independent woman for the Russian audience, but they

crucially re-work it in the process. They downplay emotional detachment and establish the heterosexual relationship as the measure of proper feminine personhood. Secondly, women's individuality and their concentration on their needs and desires are also issues that require cultural translation in the Russian books. Although the books subscribe to women's autonomy and promote the ideas of self-love and self-care, they constantly put restrictions on them by evoking the Russian tradition of collectivism and the requirement to prioritise the needs of male partners.

The normative postfeminist subject sketched in the books is an optimising and maximising possessive individual who accrues value in herself. However, inhabiting this subject position requires much labour: labour of personality, labour of femininity and labour of sexuality. These three forms of labour operate as seminal value-accrual strategies in the attempt to secure a position in the new class order. The postfeminist subject is thus a highly classed figure who has access to the material and symbolic resources of self-making, can invest in herself and can move freely across social space (Skeggs and Wood, 2012: 50). However, this subject is also inherently fragile, as women's autonomy is constantly destabilised and their value-accrual strategies are firmly constrained by prevailing heterosexual power relations. Much of women's lives are ultimately constructed as regulated by and mediated through men.

We suggest that the importance attached in the books to 'emphasised femininity' as a form of capital and an object of investment is connected with the immense social inequalities in Russia. In the Soviet Union the social welfare and education systems, as well as a guarantee of full-time labour, granted women economic independence. In today's Russia, where social protection is inadequate, educational credentials are rapidly being devalued and labour markets are volatile, femininity presents itself as one feasible resource to be cultivated in the scarcity or absence of other resources. Yet investment in it is bound to be fragile as it is

a capital that devalues over time (Skeggs and Wood, 2012: 8). The books portray the commodification of personality, femininity and sexuality and their tactical deployment as a way to navigate the gendered and classed constraints. Thus, they encourage the use of individual and 'commercial' strategies to manipulate structural constraints rather than collective mobilisation to challenge them.

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Notes

1 Our larger body of data on Russian self-help literature also includes texts by bestselling male authors addressing gender relations and sexuality, but our analysis has revealed that postfeminist ideas are articulated only by the female authors. This interesting difference requires further exploration but is beyond the scope of this paper.

2 Page numbers may vary (or be omitted) depending on the edition of the book and whether it is a paper or electronic edition.

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Appendix

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