

Professor Carly Knight, New York University

“How to Manage the Market: The Construction of the Economic Actor in American Bestselling Self-Help Books, 1970-2020”



Description: This paper investigates the portrayal of normative economic action within popular American self-help books. By employing a computational, mixed-method analysis of best-selling titles from the New York Times over the past five decades, we explore self-help’s “promissory discourse”—that is, which actions readers are told will lead them to worldly success. Our findings reveal significant shifts in the depiction of what constitutes “good” economic action, with a decline in “financialized” actions and a reduction in investment-focused advice, particularly following the Great Recession. Instead, authors increasingly emphasize a “therapeutic” perspective, advising readers that disciplined emotions, habits, and practices are essential (and a pre-requisite) to economic success. These trends hold both across the universe of economic self-help books and within financial bestsellers. These findings expand our understanding of the evolution of finance culture, demonstrating—at least within popular financial advice—a transition from hyper-rational, calculative action towards more a therapeutically-inflected economic self.

Carly Knight is an Assistant Professor of Sociology at New York University, and I work on topics in economic sociology, cultural sociology, and social theory. I have particular interests in language and moral discourse, and I am currently working on one large-scale project on the history of corporate personhood and the use of metaphor in legitimating corporate capitalism.

Thursday
February 20, 2025
12:30-2:00pm

Parkes 222
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Evanston, IL 60208

**For Zoom info
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