

Re-Thinking Therapeutic Cultures: Tracing Change and Continuity in a Time of Crisis and Change

Sociological Research Online

1–12

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DOI: 10.1177/13607804241249284

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Introduction

Across the last 25 years, scholars have devoted increasing attention to the ‘therapeutic turn’ in contemporary societies. A range of high-profile publications has analysed the growing prominence of psychologically and psychotherapeutically informed discourses and practices in everyday life (Madsen, 2018; Rose, 1998), the psychologisation and commodification of human emotions (Horwitz and Wakefield, 2007; Illouz, 2008), the development and everyday uses of hybrid, part psychological part religious or spiritual, therapeutic discourses (Purser, 2019; Salmenniemi, 2019), the concomitant commercial success of the ‘happiness industry’ (Davies, 2015), and the implication of therapeutic discourses and practices in the social organisation of power and governance (Klein and Mills, 2017; Yang, 2013, 2018). Theorising the intersections of technological change, scientific developments in psychology and the neurosciences, and the success of the

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latter in furnishing publics and policymakers with plausible explanations of personal troubles and public issues, research has moreover pointed to profound and accelerating transformations of subjectivation technologies, self-identities, and social relationships (Binkley, 2011; Rose, 2019). Along these lines of cross- and interdisciplinary research, a substantial body of scholarship has taken shape (Nehring et al., 2020).

The present special section takes stock of and extends these lines of enquiry. This seems to us a worthwhile, analytically productive undertaking given the profound social, political, and economic crisis that has been for some years now re-making the world we live in (Walby, 2015). From deep economic crises with profound consequences in the form of lasting and deep socio-economic inequalities (Milanovic, 2016) to the gradual unmaking of neoliberal globalisation (Gerstle, 2022) to the rapid emergence of new information technologies – most notably AI, with deep implications for the ways we act, think and feel (Elliott, 2019, 2022) – societies around the world are changing at such a rapid pace that it seems necessary to re-examine past assumptions on which research in therapeutic cultures has been grounded. For quite some time now, this research has relied to a significant degree on the assumption that contemporary therapeutic cultures are closely bound up with neoliberal capitalism and associated forms of consumption, self-expression, and everyday experience, as well as with processes of individualisation and de-socialising atomisation (Binkley, 2011; Bröckling, 2015; Cabanas and Illouz, 2019; Gill and Orgad, 2018). In response, this special section explores the two questions:

1. To what extent and in which ways does this assumption still hold in the world of the 2020s?
2. What therapeutic discourses and institutionally situated forms of therapeutic experience and practice are salient today?

The papers in this special section set out some initial answers to these questions and highlight some meaningful avenues for future research.

In this introduction, we seek to construct a rationale for this re-examination of contemporary therapeutic cultures and the meanings and uses of the therapeutic in everyday life. Our attendant argument proceeds in three steps. First, we map the interdisciplinary field of research on therapeutic cultures, highlighting key axes of enquiry and their empirical and conceptual fundamentals. Second, we introduce the papers of this special section and discuss how they speak to these questions and concerns. Finally, our conclusion summarises the case for the broader relevance of research on therapeutic cultures to sociology at large.

Therapeutic cultures in social research

In social research, the term ‘therapeutic culture’ is commonly used to refer to the pervasive penetration of knowledge, concepts, and terms originating in the psychotherapeutic domain into a wide variety of other spaces of cultural interaction such as family life, government and even popular culture (Nehring et al., 2020). Social research on this ‘therapeutic turn’ in contemporary societies can be usefully traced back to the work of

Phillip Rieff in the second half of the 20th century, and his observation, in his seminal *The Triumph of the Therapeutic*, that psychological discourses have succeeded spiritual narratives in defining the moral life of American society:

Having broken the outward forms, so as to liberate, allegedly, the inner meaning of the good, the beautiful, and the true, the spiritualizers, who set the pace of Western cultural life from just before the beginning to a short time after the end of the nineteenth century, have given way now to their logical and historical successors, the psychologizers, inheritors of that dualist tradition which pits human nature against social order. (Rieff, 1968: 3)

As Rieff's mention of 'that dualist tradition which pits human nature against social order' suggests, the therapeutic turn in contemporary societies has frequently been associated with the development of a modern, autonomous, individualist self. In the social sciences in the Global Northwest, this association has received close scrutiny in long lines of enquiry on processes of subjectivation and individualisation and on the involvement of psychotherapeutic discourses and practices in these processes (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 2001; Elliott, 2013; Elliott and Lemert, 2006; Giddens, 1992). Across these lines of enquiry, the psychologisation of the social self has tended to be treated critically. Alongside Philip Rieff (1965 [1959] 1968), Christopher Lasch contributed much to defining critiques of the therapeutic turn with his account of 'the therapeutic sensibility' as a source of de-politicised narcissism in a time of profound societal crisis (Lasch, 1984, 1991 [1979]). Lasch summarised the therapeutic sensibility of the 1970s in terms of a radical inward turn – a preoccupation of the self with itself, out of a need for gratification, and emotional security:

The contemporary climate is therapeutic, not religious. People today hunger not for personal salvation, let alone for the restoration of an earlier golden age, but for the feeling, the momentary illusion, of personal well-being, health, and psychic security. Even the radicalism of the sixties served, for many of those who embraced it for personal rather than political reasons, not as a substitute religion but as a form of therapy. Radical politics filled empty lives, provided a sense of meaning and purpose. (Lasch, 1991 [1979]: 7)

The works of Lasch and Rieff have faded into the background of current academic debates, but their tone and many of their central themes have continued to inform these debates in important ways. Notably, across the past two decades, scholarship on therapeutic cultures has, to a significant degree, been driven by a preoccupation with the ways in which therapeutic culture has come to be implicated in processes of individualisation and social atomisation under conditions of hegemonic neoliberal capitalism. Thus, Nick Couldry (2010) argues that the socio-political dominance of neoliberalism has, in the United Kingdom as elsewhere, been bound up with a loss of voice on the part of marginalised individuals, rendered unable to articulate personal troubles, from precarious employment to poverty, as politically relevant social problems by political and media narratives that relentlessly emphasise individual accountability and entrepreneurialism as defining features of personal success and well-being. In turn, Nikolas Rose (1998: 150ff.) points to the ways in which psychological knowledge has come to enable and sustain these individualising narratives of the entrepreneurial self.

In recent decades, the emergence of neoliberalism as a hegemonic vision/experience of the world has, thus go the established scholarly narratives, deepened the process of consolidation of a self-sufficient, hyper-autonomous notion of subjectivity (Binkley, 2011; Nehring and Kerrigan, 2020). At the core of neoliberalism lies a weakened notion of ‘the social’ as a space of interaction. The neoliberal social world is composed of autonomous individuals who can – and should – take care, each of them, of his or her own business, including issues related to mental health and the achieving of well-being (Gershon, 2011). These notions have become part of our common-sense knowledge, and have been diffused by politicians and experts on well-being (coaches, writers of self-help literature, popular psychologists) alike (Rimke, 2000).

However, this account of the association between specific forms of subjectivation and the emergence of modern, (neo-)liberal somewhat lacks nuance and gradations. It is true that the notion of the therapeutic (as Zaretsky, 2004, among others, has shown for the specific case of psychoanalysis), on one hand, and the emergence of the modern self, on the other hand, constitute each other. The realm of the therapeutic requires the existence of an autonomous self to be meaningful, while the existence of this self makes possible and requires the emergence of a set of therapeutic devices to make sense, govern and ‘shape’ it into form (Rose, 1998). In other words, a liberal notion of society, an autonomous individuality and a therapeutic dispositive constitute each other. Neoliberalism, as an extreme form of liberalism, which implies the retraction of the state as a general frame of reference, has taken these processes to extremes (Hochschild, 2012).

Nonetheless, this account of neoliberal therapeutic culture appears to at least some extent a-historical, since it has taken for granted that the same processes of neoliberal psychologisation of the social have taken place around the world in a homogeneous fashion in terms of depth, speed, and shape (Watters, 2010). At least, scholarship on the association between neoliberalism and the psychologisation of society has been characterised by a narrow interest in an empirical basis on research in Europe and Anglophone North America (Nehring et al., 2016).

Recent empirical work has demonstrated that modernisation and its associated process of subjectivation have been a rather heterogeneous and complex phenomenon, involving psychological and psychotherapeutic discourses and practices in equally heterogeneous ways (Hoesterey, 2015; Yang, 2017). Similarly, there has been a rather simplistic vision of what the realm of the therapeutic – usually limited to biological medicine or ‘modern’ psychological knowledge – really consists of. Recent scholarship, drawing on the work of Bruno Latour (2005, 2013), has shown that the notion of heterogeneous and hybrid therapeutic assemblages that included both sacred and secular, ‘traditional’ and ‘modern’ elements proves to be a more useful and powerful analytical tool than the traditional idea of a more or less homogeneous ‘therapeutic culture’, grounded in biomedically informed psychology and psychotherapy (Csúri et al., 2022, Nehring and Kerrigan, 2020). Moreover, such concepts as ‘modernity’, ‘liberalism’, and even the much more recent ‘neoliberalism’ are polysemic: they have different meanings in different historical and cultural contexts and can be mobilised differentially in these contexts (Illouz, 2008). In the particular case of ‘neoliberalism’, the crisis of 2008 has called into question some of its foundations, and challenged its hegemony (Davies and Gane, 2021; Gerstle, 2022). Recent scholarship has shown that, far from individualising and

disempowering individuals, therapeutic discourses may serve as cultural resources for community formation and collective and political engagement (Salmenniemi, 2019). All this has had an impact on the forms that the processes of subjectivation have evolved around therapeutic discourses and, concomitantly, on the way in which the very notion of therapeutic culture has developed.

The foregoing summary most accurately characterises scholarship on therapeutic cultures in the Global Northwest, particularly in academic sociology. In what is an interdisciplinary and broadly international field of research, significant alternative lines of research have emerged. For example, scholarship in disciplines such as anthropology, development studies, and history has been more attentive to cross-national and cross-cultural variations in therapeutic discourses and practices than we have suggested above (Fernando, 2014; Plotkin, 2003; Yang, 2013), and it has also had more to say about the intercalation of bio-medical, spiritual, and religious forms of the therapeutic (Cassaniti, 2018; Csúri et al., 2022; Hoesterey, 2012). In this sense, our account here might be most usefully read as a characterisation of central tendencies and notable gaps in the way in which sociology and sociologists have inserted themselves into this interdisciplinary field of enquiry.¹

Overview of the special section

The four contributions to this special issue complement each other in mapping therapeutic discourses and practices across heterogeneous social contexts, at national and – to some extent – at transnational level. In dialogue with each other, they document the heterogeneity of contemporary therapeutic discourses, the role of technological changes in framing these discourses, and ways in which individuals in diverse societies may come to understand these discourses and incorporate them into their practices of everyday life. These articles explore shifting processes of subject formation as part of the rise of algorithmic governmentality (Rodrigo de la Fabián), shifts in therapeutic discourses in the United Kingdom at a time of profound societal crisis (Daniel Nehring), the uses of therapeutically informed behavioural management in Finnish academia (Antti Saari, Kristiina Brunila, and Saara Vanio), and the socio-political construction of the much-discussed mental health crisis in British higher education (Ashley Frawley, Chloë Wakeham, Kenneth McLaughlin, and Kathryn Ecclestone). Through their common focus on education systems, Saari et al. and Frawley et al. bring to the fore the interaction of therapeutic discourses, strategies of governance, experiences, and practices in contemporary European societies. Rodrigo de la Fabián and Daniel Nehring, in turn, grapple with the question how rapid social change – technological change in de la Fabián’s work and socio-economic crisis in Nehring’s paper – may be bound up with shifts in salient therapeutic discourses (de la Fabián, Nehring) and forms of subjectivation (de la Fabián).

In sum, the papers in this special section thus enter into a dialogue with the arguments we have presented in the preceding section and re-examine their merits at a time of rapid social, cultural, political, and economic change. In doing so, they raise questions and signal potentially important directions for future research.

In particular, the four contributions concentrate on the association between neoliberalism, the realm of the therapeutic, and notions of subjectivity that may emerge from

their association. Antti Saari, Kristiina Brunila, and Saara Vainio's article, on one hand, and Ashley Frawley, Chloë Wakeham, Kenneth McLaughlin, and Kathryn Ecclestone's article, on the other hand, both address the issue of how the retraction of the welfare state brought about by economic crises and neoliberal politics of austerity have impacted the way mental health and mental welfare are conceptualised in institutions of higher education in Finland and in the United Kingdom: two comparable cases in terms of their similarities and differences. In both Finland and in the United Kingdom, there has in recent years been an increasing preoccupation with students' mental health and well-being and a perceived mental health crisis. While the UK was a pioneering country in Europe in the introduction of a 'neoliberal ethos' in the 1980s (Harvey, 2007), this process has taken place at a later date in Finland and in a much more nuanced fashion. However, in both cases, a far-reaching marketisation of education has taken place, as the two papers argue. In the case of Finland in particular, public universities – which, unlike in the UK, have remained free of tuition fees – the level of their state funding is in part determined by the academic performance of the students.

One of the consequences of this new situation has been the pathologisation of poor academic performance and the concomitant diffusion of a 'therapeutic' discourse and practice aimed at improving it. In both cases, Finland and the UK, a focus on students' inner problems has displaced a concern for broader social and economic issues. Moreover, if students' welfare is the students' responsibility as it is claimed, then there is no point in trying to transform the university systems by taking into consideration more general issues. Both papers thus highlight the persistence of a 'de-socialising' vision of the world associated with neoliberal policies, governance, and institutional structures. This vision of the world is grounded, as mentioned above, in the assumption of an autonomous, responsible and rational self that can take care of his or her own business.

Nonetheless, as the authors of both papers show, this is not necessarily the case. The two papers demonstrate the paradoxical contradictions that exist between a discourse that emphasises autonomy and individual responsibility, on one hand, and a definition of welfare and well-being that forces the same supposedly autonomous individual to fit into pre-established institutional models that can be objectivised, on the other hand. In other words, both in Finland and in the UK, students' subjectivities have to fit into externally defined normative models of mental well-being and personal success, in the context of therapeutic discourse pervasive in contemporary higher education.

In both cases, and despite the prevalence of a discourse that emphasises autonomy, an 'ethos of vulnerability', according to Antti Saari and his co-authors, invites the idealisation of more or less heteronomous conceptualisations of subjectivity. In all this there are involved, as Ashley Frawley and her co-authors aptly point out, 'assumptions of the need of intervention that precedes evidence [of existence of this need]'. In some instances, these assumptions are grounded (again, paradoxically) in economic concerns, but also in the very factors that neoliberalism's prioritisation of economic action: those associated with society and culture. Thus, sometimes the distinction between economic (and social) and psychological problems becomes blurred, as framing issues in terms of mental health appears more soluble than calling for expanding opportunities in the context of a contracting, or at least struggling, economy that leads to exclusion.

While Frawley et al. and Saari et al. focus their attention on higher education in two specific countries, Daniel Nehring looks at the relationship between self-help bestsellers in the UK and the construction of modern subjectivity. In his account, the emphasis again rests on the limits of the neoliberal logic of subjectivation in the context of a deep and prolonged societal crisis. As with Ashley Frawley and her co-authors, Nehring looks at therapeutic culture in the United Kingdom. While the country was early and has gone particularly far in adopting neoliberal models of governance and public policy (Dorling, 2014; Peck, 2010), a prolonged period of economic crisis from 2008 onwards, a far-reaching retrenchment of welfare state provisions, and the growing political and socio-cultural influence of far-right populist discourses (Norris, 2019) have arguably called this neoliberal consensus into question (Davies and Gane, 2021). Therefore, Nehring argues, the question becomes significant whether liberal and neoliberal therapeutic discourses of autonomous, entrepreneurial self-making and recovery from mental distress remain as prevalent in the UK as previous research (Nehring et al., 2016) had shown them to be.

In response, Nehring analyses British self-help bestsellers between 2001 and 2021 and examines shifts in the narrative construction of the self and therapeutic self-transformation and recovery across this period. On one hand, his analysis points to distinctive departures from neoliberal models of self-making in the post-2008 period of crisis. Some of the self-help bestsellers in this period still offer now classical neoliberal accounts of self-making in a society presented as amenable to such efforts. Other, often newer, self-help texts, however, advocate for more forceful forms of survivalist self-assertion in a fundamentally chaotic and uncaring society. In the words of one bestselling self-help author, success and well-being may emerge from one's capacity to 'f*ck it' and do what one truly wants.

The assumption of a troubled society is also foundational to a final group of highly successful self-help books. Taking its implications further, these books argue that personal validation and therapeutic healing through material success in the outside world has become so hard to attain that its pursuit is best abandoned. Instead, these books call for therapeutic recovery through a cognitive and emotional inward turn, for example, in the form of deep engagement with meditative and spiritual techniques. While these accounts of the therapeutic ostensibly depart significantly from neoliberal models of entrepreneurial self-making, Nehring suggests that, at their narrative core, they do still retain the vision of a 'thin', de-socialised self, largely reliant on its own cognitive and emotional capacity to re-make itself. Survivalist self-help and calls for a therapeutic inward turn mark a notable break from long-established neoliberal self-help tropes. Nonetheless, they do not manage to set out new and distinctive model of personal transformation. The fact that many of the self-help bestsellers Nehring analyses were written and published outside the United Kingdom points to the broader relevance of the questions he raises, and to the importance of looking at therapeutic culture from the perspective of transnational knowledge flows.

Finally, Rodrigo de la Fabián, from a distinctive point of view, turns to the Foucauldian notion of 'regime of truth', that is, the conditions of possibility that define what is considered truth, to deal with a similar problem. His specific focus rests on the relationship

and contradictions between the neoliberal therapeutic ethos and the constitution of an objectifiable selfhood. In particular, de la Fabián looks at the contradiction between a discourse that emphasises – and a practice supposedly based on – universalisation, objectivation and de-psychologisation, and the actual working of therapeutic practices that may rely on the very categories they are meant to challenge. From this theoretical perspective, de la Fabián analyses the role of digital therapeutic cultures and the role of algorithms in defining subjectivity.

Digital therapeutics, de la Fabián suggests, are supposed to overcome and, at the same time, deny the notion of a psychologised self. Algorithms can tell us who we really are, supposedly without the intervention of our own subjectivity. This would imply a substitution of a probabilistic-predictive model for a previously prevalent causal-comprehensive model of understanding the self. However, as de la Fabián shows, the psychological subject is far from excluded from the digital therapeutic realm, in spite of the latter being based on what is known as ‘passive data’. This is so because, on one hand, the point of departure for producing high-quality, reliable data is a distrust of oneself. What one feels or believes is supposed to be irrelevant for the production of digital information. But, on the other hand, the one who would make sense of the data is, precisely, the psychological subject.

Thus, digital therapeutic culture develops at the intersection between subjectivation and de-subjectivation. The psychological categories digital data must fit into in order to become intelligible are human constructs that precede the invention and the use of such data. As de la Fabián points out, digital psy-knowledge works on already psychologised subjects, as otherwise such subjects would not be interested in the information provided by algorithms in the first place. In other words, the algorithms themselves have been psychologised. Psy-knowledge operates as a surface of contact between digital information and human individuals, as algorithms do not predict future behaviour, but rather to what extent specific forms of behaviour will match specific pre-existent psychological categories.

As any student of statistics knows, correlations do not make any claim to causality. Causality is introduced through a theory that is, by definition, external to correlation. For instance, one could run a correlation between the use of umbrellas and the rain. But determining what is the cause of what – whether the use of umbrellas causes the rain or the other way around – requires a theory that is external to the correlation itself. The same occurs, thus de la Fabián, with the psy-data obtained through digital media. The data may show a strong correlation between, say, a certain number of ‘likes’ for a particular brand of sneakers on social media and certain political preferences. In order to make sense of this correlation, though, the analyst requires a previously established (psychological) theory. Therefore, as de la Fabián concludes, in spite of digital data’s promises about the possibility of capturing and producing new sources of psychological truth, this possibility remains limited. It requires external elements, as well as a pre-existing psychologised subject. What remains is the constitution of a complex therapeutic assemblage.

Conclusion: sociology and the study of therapeutic cultures

Read alongside each other, the papers in this special section demonstrate the extraordinary success of therapeutic, psychologically informed discourses in organising modes of

governance, institutionalised power relations, and everyday forms of experience and practice. Writing in the USA of the 1950s, C. Wright Mills argued that the sociological imagination – the capacity to understand individual biographies and personal trouble as part of larger socio-historical processes – was on its way to becoming ‘the major common denominator of our cultural life and its signal feature’ (Mills, 1959: 14). In the 2020s, a similar claim might be made about the ‘triumph of the therapeutic’ in defining how individuals think, feel, and act and how society’s institutions govern these thoughts, emotions, and actions, and how social change, social problems, and the social organisation of power are expressed in public discourse. The therapeutic has become the defining moral grammar (Nehring and Kerrigan, 2020) of our time, on a transnational scale and across diverse societies.

This conclusion, if accepted, suggests why research on therapeutic cultures matters to academic sociology at large. If the fabric of contemporary societies has become deeply infused with therapeutic reason (Frawley; Nehring; Saari et al.), and in so far as new and emergent technologies (de la Fabián) further contribute to this process, then diverse strands of sociological enquiry, from the sociology of self-identity (Elliott, 2013, 2016) to sociological analyses of social differentiation and inequalities (Couldry, 2010; Wright, 2009), to scholarship on processes of institutional transformation and the governance of contemporary societies (Davies, 2015), must account for this psychologisation of society. The therapeutic has become an inescapable object of sociological analysis.

Funding

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Note

1. For a more comprehensive account of recent scholarship on therapeutic cultures, see: Nehring et al. (2020).

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Author biographies

Daniel Nehring’s research looks at the personal consequences of (de-)globalisation and the ever more rapid and unpredictable remaking of the social world. In this context, he has a particular interest in the transnational diffusion of knowledge and, in particular, the cross-border production, circulation, and consumption of psychotherapeutic discourse. Daniel’s work has been widely published in journals such as the *British Journal of Sociology*, *Sociology*, *International Sociology*, *Consumption Markets & Culture* or *Sociology of Health & Illness*. He is the author of eight books, and he edits the book series *Therapeutic Cultures* for Routledge.

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Date submitted 7 March 2024

Date accepted 11 March 2024