

# Treading the tightrope of femininity: Transforming gendered subjectivity in a therapeutic community

## Abstract

This article examines therapeutic self-transformation process in a self-help group in Russia. Drawing on participant observation and interviews, and engaging with debates on therapeutic technologies and the transformation of gender relations, it explores how the self-help group shapes how participants come to understand and act upon themselves. It shows that the process of self-transformation is profoundly gendered, problematising femininity and identifying it as an object of therapeutic intervention. Rather than collectively contesting gendered power and disadvantage, participants are invited to cultivate traditional notions of femininity and masculinity and learn to draw pleasure from them. We argue that this message may be appealing to women because it speaks to their lived experience of exhaustion and precarity, and offers promises them the prospect of overcoming it through a mythologised heteronormative order. It offers solace and a potential escape route where room for political agency is limited and feminist discourse heavily vilified. Yet the article also shows that participants do not merely internalise the ideological messages of the group, but engage with them in contradictory and ambivalent ways.

## Introduction

On a late Friday evening, a therapeutic training session was about to begin in a tall office building in St Petersburg. Although not far from the city centre, its tranquil atmosphere felt miles away from the bustling street life of the metropolis. A woman dressed in a flamboyant frilled dress welcomed the participants into an auditorium, which soon filled with participants, mostly women of different ages dressed in skirts or dresses. Armed with notebooks and pens, they were ready to take careful notes on a lecture to a therapeutic self-help group called 'Dr Sinel'nikov's friends'.

This article examines the workings of this self-help group and, more specifically, the ways in which its participants make sense of the gender norms and ideals promoted by the group. In the course of the fieldwork, it became clear that gender sits squarely at the heart of the self-transformation projects pursued in the group. Femininity is profoundly problematised and identified as a pivotal object of therapeutic intervention. In analysing the

therapeutic work performed on femininity in the group, we seek to shed light on what urban women find appealing about the group and its conservative gender ideology.

Therapeutic self-help communities such as the one addressed in this paper are part of a proliferating field of therapeutic technologies that increasingly saturate contemporary culture (Illouz, 2008; Madsen, 2014; Nehring et al., 2016). These technologies, including self-help books, self-improvement classes, alternative health and spiritual therapies and life coaching, have also gradually become a staple part of the Russian cultural landscape, shaping the forms of life that people inhabit today (Matza, 2009; Lerner, 2011; Mazzarino, 2013; author B). In this paper, we explore how the therapeutic community and the forms of knowledge it conveys shape how participants come to understand and act upon themselves. As we show below, this process is fraught with contradictions and ambivalence. While the participants are encouraged to understand the social world as distinctively gendered, with women and men having clearly demarcated and complementary dispositions and responsibilities, their everyday life practices often collude with this principle. Moreover, although the therapeutic group hails both women and men as autonomous, responsible and self-sufficient subjects, this subject position is also decidedly destabilised for women by an emphasis on their fundamental relationality and responsibility toward family, kin and nation. Women participants in the group also seek to distance themselves from this subject position by prioritising partnership and family. We suggest that this is connected with their sense of exhaustion and socio-economic precarity.

We begin this paper by situating the group's ethical work on gendered subjectivity within the broader transformation of gender relations and identities and the proliferation of therapeutic technologies in Russia. We then introduce our research methods and materials and provide a more detailed description of the group. The analysis fleshes out the meanings the participants ascribe to gender and how they negotiate them. Finally, we draw conclusions on how to make sense of the logics of this community and the dynamics of gendered power in contemporary Russia.

### **Shifting landscapes of gender and subjectivity**

Therapeutic technologies have become an important part of popular media culture and everyday life in post-Soviet Russia (Matza, 2009; Lerner and Zbenovich, 2013). They also constitute a key site for negotiating gender norms and values (Mazzarino, 2013; author B).

Russian society provides a particularly interesting context in which to interrogate the politics of gender in the therapeutic field for two reasons. First, unlike in post-war Western societies, where psychological norms, values and techniques became pivotal symbolic frameworks for making sense of personhood and social relations (Rose, 1998: 62; Illouz, 2008), therapeutic discourse is a relatively novel language in Russia, and began to circulate more widely only in the aftermath of the demise of the Soviet Union. Although Soviet society had a distinctive socialist tradition of self-betterment (Kharkhordin, 1999; Kelly, 2001), and psychology existed as an academic field, the therapeutic discourse rooted in humanistic psychology and psychoanalytical thought was not popularised among the Soviet masses in the same way as in many Western post-war societies, where it co-occurred and interacted with second-wave feminism (Illouz, 2008). Rather, in Soviet society, selfhood was predominantly articulated through biomedical, physiological and pedagogical discourses that emphasised correct (political) socialisation (for a fuller discussion, see Matza, 2009; Lerner and Zbenovich, 2013).

Second, the therapeutic industry has been developing in Russia in tandem with transition to capitalism. As Eva Illouz (2008) and Micki McGee (2005) have suggested, the ethos of self-improvement and the therapeutic emotional style are crucial ingredients of the cultural logic of late capitalism. In the late 1990s, Nikolas Rose contemplated whether, in former state socialist societies:

the transition to market economies and political pluralism will require, as its necessary corollary, not just the importation of the material technologies of liberal democracy but also their human technologies – the engineers of the human soul that are the other side of what we have come to term freedom (Rose, 1998: 100).

Now, twenty years later, it is safe to conclude that these human technologies have played a pivotal role in domesticating the spirit of neoliberal capitalism in Russia (Zigon, 2011 author B). These technologies have not only provided a novel language for understanding subjectivity and the social world, but have also offered cultural resources for making sense of and navigating shifting value systems and new forms of inequality and precarity (Matza, 2012; Mazzarino, 2013; author B).

Thus, therapeutic technologies clearly constitute a key site for (re)making subjects, and this is a gendered process, deeply enmeshed in the reorganisation of the gender order in the post-socialist era. Following the Soviet Union's demise, the socialist model of emancipation came under heavy criticism. On the one hand, the feminist discourse broke into the public

after decades of suppression and made scathing critiques of the Soviet conception of equality which, rather than emancipating women, had maintained their gendered disadvantage and denied self-organisation around their interests (Funk and Mueller, 1993). On the other hand, conservative criticism also gained strength, arguing that Soviet equality politics were fundamentally flawed and had distorted 'natural gender roles'. It had stripped men of masculinity and created 'over-emancipated superwomen', interested in conquering the cosmos rather than giving birth to a future generation of citizens (Posadskaya, 1994).

Gender continues to be mobilised as a key category through which many societal and political dilemmas are made sense of and debated in today's Russia. Public discourse increasingly frames gender relations within the moralistic and nationalist discourses of the 'demographic crisis', articulating a concern for the declining population, and the 'traditional family and moral values' strongly rooted in Orthodox Christian ideas (Temkina, 2010; Temkina and Zdravomyslova, 2015; Sperling, 2015). Both discourses propagate a heteronormative biopolitical agenda centering on motherhood and family and pathologisation of LGBTIQ individuals and communities. The Russian state, in close collaboration with the Orthodox Church, has initiated misogynistic and homophobic policies, such as the passing of the so-called 'homo propaganda law' in 2013 and proposals to severely curtail access to abortion. In 2013, Patriarch Kirill, head of the Russian Orthodox Church, described feminism as a 'dangerous' phenomenon that offers an illusion of freedom to women who should rather focus on their families and children. He reportedly said, 'Man turns his sight outward, he should work, make money. While a woman is always focused inwards towards her children, her home. If this exceptionally important role of a woman is destroyed, everything will be destroyed as a consequence – family and, if you wish, the homeland' (Baczynska, 2013). Some Orthodox Church representatives have also lauded hate crimes perpetrated against gays (Sperling, 2015: 74). The state-sanctioned media portrays LGBTQ individuals and communities as threatening the survival of the nation and as part of a project to impose Western neo-imperial norms and values on the rest of the world (Persson, 2015: 256–267).

However, although certainly hegemonic in the official public sphere, these discourses are not the only symbolic frameworks through which gender relations are articulated in Russia. Popular culture, in particular, has also supplied other types of symbolic framings, such as postfeminist ideas simultaneously endorsing both traditional gender norms and liberal feminist ideas of equal opportunities and sexual liberation (Gill, 2007; Salmenniemi and

Adamson 2014). Also, new forms of feminist initiatives have emerged in recent years that take issue with the conservative gender ideology. Pussy Riot is the most famous example of this, achieving worldwide fame after the imprisonment of its members following a *Punk Prayer* performance in a Moscow cathedral. Despite the hostile environment, over the past decade, small grassroots feminist groups and art collectives have been developing in Russian urban centres such as Moscow and St Petersburg (Sperling, 2015; Author A). As a result, feminist issues have become more visible in urban alternative and digital media, although feminists are in many ways still vilified and their views marginalised in the Russian public as a whole.

### **Research materials and methods**

The therapeutic group studied here is situated within this conflicting terrain of the politics of gender, constituting one arena in which gender relations are addressed and negotiated. It offers a lens through which to understand how urban Russian women and men seek to negotiate shifting gender norms and ideals in their everyday lives. Our analysis draws on empirical fieldwork conducted in the group in 2011. The group is grounded on and devoted to disseminating the therapeutic programme developed by Valerii Sinel'nikov, a well-known figure in the therapeutic field in Russia. The group is part of a network of Sinel'nikov clubs operating in various parts of Russia and other former Soviet Union countries.

Sinel'nikov is author of numerous bestselling self-help books, in which he characterises himself as a 'psychotherapist-practitioner, psychologist, homeopath, and the author of psychological methods, which are unique in their simplicity and efficiency, and have helped thousands of people's to recover their health, increase their wellbeing, as well as experience the joy of life' (Sinel'nikov, 2010). The ideas propagated in his books, as well as in the groups carrying his name, are an eclectic mix of globally circulating popular psychological ideas and concepts and neopaganist spirituality with a nationalistic twist. They share many of the conservative gender tenets endorsed by the Russian state-sanctioned public discourse. The highly conservative ideology articulated in the books rests on a binary model of gender rooted in the idea of rediscovering the 'natural' gender relations of mythical Slavic ancestors distorted by both the Soviet era and Western liberal influences. In a nutshell, this entails that women and men have clearly demarcated characteristics, responsibilities and spaces of agency: women are invited to invest in domesticity and relationality, while men are associated

with duties in the public sphere. Although women's paid work is not disapproved of as such, motherhood is nevertheless defined as women's primary duty, while men are expected to be breadwinners and political leaders. Practicing this 'natural' and 'ancient' model is portrayed as key to both individual happiness, and to the thriving of the Slavic nation and its reinstatement to superpower status. The books take a critical view on both Soviet gender politics and the global propagation of 'Western' gender norms, such as same-sex marriages. However, despite their critique of the Soviet gender order, the books essentially recycle many of its key features, such as the glorification of motherhood, reproduction of the 'working mother gender contract' (Temkina and Rotkirch, 2007) and the primacy of men in the public sphere. Echoing the globally circulating self-help discourse, the books posit self-transformation as being key to happiness and wellbeing, but also heavily underline the fundamentally communal nature of selfhood. Selfhood is articulated as inextricably linked with the family, kin and the Slavic nation, particularly for women.

The self-help group we address in this paper was established in 2010. It organises monthly weekend seminars, as well as other activities such as dancing classes for women. The instructors running the seminars had been trained by Sinel'nikov himself. The seminars were open to all interested for a small fee, while the dancing classes were provided free of charge. No formal compliance to the therapeutic programme was required. During the fieldwork, the number of participants in seminars ranged from a dozen to around thirty. It was clear that the group was still launching its work, as new curious individuals arrived almost daily. According to the club's leader, around 400 St Petersburgians had been participating in the group's activities.

The fieldwork consisted of participant observation of three weekend seminars, and interviews conducted by one of the authors (Perheentupa) with eight participants of the group. We also read some of Sinel'nikov's key publications in order to familiarise ourselves with their message and to contextualise the ideas circulating in the seminars and interviews. Six of the interviewees were women and two men, reflecting the overall gender composition of the seminars. The participants were aged between their twenties and fifties and had either intermediate or higher education. Some had taken part in many weekend seminars, while others had participated only a few times but were planning to return. All had read at least one of Sinel'nikov's books. The interviews lasted between one and a half and three hours and were conducted either at the club or in nearby cafés. The interviews discussed Sinel'nikov's

books and thoughts, experiences of participating in the seminars, how issues discussed in the seminars were put into practice in everyday life, the research participants' perceptions of a 'good life' and gender relations, and relations between the individual and society. The research materials have been interpreted from a discourse analytical perspective, paying attention to ways in which research participants ascribed meaning to gender and how these meanings were legitimated.

Overall, access to the field was negotiated effortlessly. After approaching the club's leader by e-mail, one of the authors (Perheentupa) visited the club and introduced the research idea to her, which she warmly welcomed. The research participants' reactions to the research were also mostly positive and curious. Some pointed out that this attitude originated from Sinel'nikov: as one explained, 'I'm already absolutely open like Sinel'nikov advises. Ask me anything!'

Participant observation of the seminars was conducted before the interviews and helped us to formulate interview questions, as well as making us aware of how seriously all participants took the seminars. Since the seminars often dealt with quite sensitive and personal issues, to respect the participants' privacy we have used observations mainly as background material, helping us to understand the context more clearly and to interpret the themes arising in the interviews.

### **Dealing with exhaustion by cultivating femininity**

The research participants articulated that a key motivation for seeking out the seminars was to find tools to deal with problematic life situations, relating most often to work, relationships or more existential quests. The participants voiced a 'craving for psychological knowledge'. This knowledge was seen as a new system of meanings that had become available only after the Soviet Union's demise. For example, Nadezhda, a salesperson in her thirties, reminisced about how she had 'gobbled and gobbled' psychological self-help books when they first became available. The Soviet past was described as a 'dark era' that had concealed the 'ancient wisdom' of the Slavic ancestors that now had to be re-discovered.

Knowledge concerning gender played a crucial role in the group's therapeutic agenda, and consequently in the research participants' efforts to transform themselves and their lives. In their view, learning the 'correct' ideas about gender relations and responsibilities by reading Sinel'nikov's books and attending the group activities had helped them to perceive

their gendered subjectivity in a new way. The participants subscribed to the conservative understanding of gender relations put forward in the group. Heterosexual family as the cornerstone of both individual and collective happiness was unquestioned. For many, women's work outside the home appeared to be a particularly problematic issue. According to Marina, a medical doctor in her forties:

Women's job is to create a comfortable home, and men's basic role is outside the home. Working and bringing money to the family. [...] If a woman starts to create wealth in material terms, the important things like cooking dinner, taking care of the children, and comfort at home are pushed only to a secondary place.

Like Marina, Oleg, an entrepreneur, also thought that women were 'unhappy' and 'lost' because they were looking for self-fulfilment in the 'wrong places':

Many women are suffering from not being able to realise themselves... They are trying to find self-fulfilment from business, work – from all these places, and from personal relationships. And they don't find it, because it's not there to be found. It is in the family, in home.

These ideas of women as homemakers enlivening family life might perhaps be seen as an implicit critique of the Soviet gender norm of women's full-time employment. Here, the research participants aligned with the longstanding discursive tradition of scolding women for 'neglecting' their feminine duties (Posadskaya, 1994), a topic that was intensively debated during the Soviet era and the years following its collapse.

Questions pertaining to family and career were particularly pronounced and timely for the young women in the group. Natalia, Alena and Nadezhda were all single women in their twenties and early thirties. All were working as professionals and had achieved a relatively good standard of living. They explained how, in attending the group, they had come to understand themselves and their lives in a new light. They were now all contemplating giving up their careers in order to prioritise finding a husband and establishing a family. Natalia, working as a senior manager, explained:

It was of course not only because of Sinel'nikov, but living alone in St Petersburg and carrying everything on my shoulders – when you have to fully provide for and rely on yourself and not anyone else – I understood that it's better for the man to build a career. Let him go ahead; I will inspire him to the best possible achievements at work, in order to achieve a harmonious, peaceful and beautiful home... No, I'm not against career, of course – on the contrary. But... I worked so hard for two years – you know, the competition is like that. And I understood that I don't need that. I just waste myself there [at work]. I left music, my favourite pastime – and now I wonder, for what?

Nadezhda and Alena also described how their priorities had changed, and how they were preparing themselves for their future husbands. In order to achieve a relationship, they were working on their femininity, particularly on their 'softer side' in order to become 'less dominant'. They felt that they had been 'too masculine' before: too ambitious, independent, successful and capable. Now they were trying to become more tender, humble, creative and emotional. Alena, working as a stylist, explained:

Because I had exactly this obvious problem that I had too much masculinity in me. Basically, I always sought to work and be independent. And it turned out that ... I don't need that at all. It was really hard to change this in my head, that I should be precisely feminine.

As Alena's account illustrates, internalising these new ideas of femininity had not been easy. In order to embody the new knowledge and ideas about gendered demeanour, Alena and others were engaged in a set of bodily techniques. For example, the women sought to instil feminine dispositions by engaging with a meditation programme in which they were supposed to give themselves a symbolic rebirth as women at a waterfall and 'pour' femininity into themselves. As Nadezhda explained, 'there is this image: the lake and a waterfall. You stand under the waterfall of femininity and you bathe and swim there. Moreover, a man always appears there, at least in my own meditation [laughs]'.

Another bodily technique for cultivating femininity was to wear a skirt or a dress. As Alla, a woman in her fifties working as an airport officer, elaborated: 'the female energy comes from below, and the male energy from above. And when a woman is wearing a *sarafan* [a traditional Russian dress], it is loose and the energy will come through it.' In order to embody and 'open up' their femininity, some of the research participants also gathered at the club to sing and dance together after work, dressed in skirts and dresses.

We suggest that engagement with these conservative ideas and the particular embodied work on gender that it entails can be seen as a way for women to grapple with their sense of psychic exhaustion and socio-economic precarity. What they seemed to crave was not so much confinement to the home, but rather an escape from the exhaustion caused by work, and a chance to do things that they enjoyed, such as music and the arts. They contemplated their sense of loneliness and the pressures of working life, pushing them to devote themselves fully to work and leaving very little time for anything else. This experience is connected with the significant gendered disadvantage of Russian labour markets, with

endemic gender discrimination, gender pay gaps, and vertical and horizontal gender segregation (Kosyakova et al., 2015). Moreover, early marriage and motherhood continue to be widely-endorsed cultural norms, which also create pressure for young women (see Mazzarino, 2013). Telling of the entrenched gendered power structures, the only way women imagined they could escape the exhaustion of working life was by finding a husband with sufficient wealth.

We suggest that these young women's endorsement of traditional gender relations can also be interpreted as a reaction to the long cultural historical pattern of the 'working mother' gender contract, under which generations of women simultaneously have juggled paid work and primary responsibility for the household. Natalia reflected on this pattern and its reproduction today:

Woman takes care of everything in Russia today. She is both a woman and a man. And a mother... for the husband. It shouldn't be this way... She cannot say, 'you know, I'm so tired, I just want to take it easy today', so that he would take care of her. That just does not happen. He does nothing while she goes to work, and after returning home she prepares supper, cleans and spends time with the kids. This is the picture here, in Russia.

The interview accounts reveal that women were hoping to receive emotional support and help from men, but were disappointed that they did not get it. In this context, traditional gender ideas might be seen as a tactical tool to legitimate their claims for men's participation in the family and relationships, and to combat exhaustion. However, it is noteworthy that women did not articulate their exhaustion as being caused by the unequal structures of working life, nor envisage structural changes to remedy their situation. Rather, change was sought from individualised strategies to find a partner for economic support and to enable self-realisation.

Earlier studies have documented articulations of disappointment and resentment regarding the prevailing gender division of labour similar to those that emerged from our interviews (see e.g. Ashwin and Lytkina, 2004). This echoes the longstanding popular discourse of the 'crisis of masculinity', according to which Russian men have supposedly become weak, degenerate and passive due to the Soviet gender politics of the postsocialist transition (Zdravomyslova and Temkina, 2002; Ashwin and Lytkina, 2004). However, despite the problematisation of masculinity in the interviews, it was femininity that was placed under the magnifying glass and raised as an ethical subject to be worked on in the group. Both male

and female participants talked at great length about the cultivation of feminine dispositions as a prerequisite for the happiness of the family and, by extension, the whole nation. According to them, through work on femininity, proper masculinity would also flourish. In this way, the participants assigned women an ethical duty to re-fashion not only themselves, but also their partners. Relationships were described as a delicate art, which women needed to learn to master through therapeutic self-work. Alla explained: 'When I begin to transform myself, my husband gradually changes too. He shouldn't come home drunk. But even if he does, I love him anyway. Then he starts to transform. He walks more freely, seems like he's feeling comfortable.' Consequently, men's problems, such as heavy drinking, were ultimately pinned down to women's inability to enact proper feminine dispositions. This effectively positioned women as responsible agentic and therapeutic subjects, and men as objects of transformation. Nadezhda explained:

A woman can turn a man, even the worst bum, into a businessman! He would need to have such a woman next to him, who will inspire him... with emotions, sexuality, femininity, elegance... We have forgotten about it. Women don't know how to create a happy family even if they want to. And precisely because of this, women reach out for this knowledge [in the group], in order to elevate the man. She can either press him down or elevate him.

Femininity thus emerged in the interviews as both the source of and solution to problems: both interpersonal and national issues are seen as either standing or falling with women. Women were effectively celebrated and blamed, elevated and subordinated at the same time. This cultural logic is familiar from the Soviet era, when women were seen as the moral backbones and 'civilising agents' of the nation, and at the same time made responsible for the problems of families, and marginalised from power and privilege (Buckley, 2001).

However, most participants were not necessarily complying in their own lives with the normative gender relations articulated in the interviews. Marina, who prioritised the woman's role as a stay-at-home mother, was herself a single mother working full-time as a doctor. In Oleg's case, although he thought that women should ideally stay at home, his family did not follow this pattern, as it simply had not suited his wife:

She [wife] is working with me in the same company. In fact it has always been a complex question for me. And then I decided at some point that it's better she goes to work, because she couldn't find herself at home... I mean, at home she was constantly depressed.

### **Empowering and threatening autonomy**

A key goal of the group's therapeutic work on the self is to become a 'master of one's life' (*khoziain*), a concept occupying a seminal position in the group's therapeutic agenda. This *khoziain* is an autonomous, responsible and self-sufficient subject who has no need for outside support and takes full responsibility for everything that happens in his/her life. In many ways, it resonates with the neoliberal conception of the self promoted by much of the Euro-American self-help industry (Rimke, 2000; Hazleden, 2003; Nehring et al., 2015).

The research participants recounted how they had been actively trying to learn not to rely on other people and to make do by themselves. For example, Natalia explained how she had learned to listen to herself and find answers from within. She took pride in the newly-found autonomy that she felt had enabled her to solve problems without outside help:

If I have a problem, I just turn to myself and find all the answers to my questions. So I don't have to go to anyone else to ask something. Earlier, I always called my mother or friends or someone. I don't do that anymore.

The research participants underlined how the therapeutic group had helped them realise the importance of personal responsibility. Over and over again, they reiterated how 'everything in your life depends on yourself' and 'everything that happens to you is caused by yourself'. As Alla explained, participation in the community:

makes hopelessness disappear. So I'm not dependent on some auntie or uncle, but I'm master [*khoziain*] of my life. I know that everything is in my own hands, and I can change. So hopelessness disappears, as well as a sense of loss and sorrow.

An important part of this newly-found virtue of responsibility is also independence from the state. Many thought that Russians had been socialised into expecting the state to take care of them, and this harmful disposition cultivated by the Soviet state needed to be erased. Konstantin, a bartender in his twenties, elaborated:

Everything that happens in your life – it's a result of your thoughts, actions and undertakings. And you are responsible for all that. Therefore, you cannot blame anyone else – the country... When people start: 'we have a bad country, no one helps us. The government does not think about us...' and so on and so on. These are moments when the responsibility is shifted to others.

This emphasis on autonomy and responsibility finds fertile ground in Russia for a number of reasons. First, it taps into a pervasive and widely-circulating cultural historical discourse of paternalism that stereotypically essentialises Russians as lacking initiative and

longing for a strong leader (for a detailed discussion of this, see author B, 2008: 239). This discourse has been mobilised to explain both the 'legacy' of Soviet society and flaws in the social transformation process following its collapse. As Konstantin argued above, therapeutic work is envisaged as a way to get rid of this legacy. Second, the emphasis on autonomy and responsibility also resonates with the deep-seated suspicion of state institutions and politics characteristic of the current popular climate in Russia. Many Russians perceive the state as indifferent and unresponsive to their needs (Rivkin-Fish, 2004; author B). This suspicion of state institutions finds backing from the therapeutic self-help discourse, and particularly its New Age variant which portrays social institutions as inimical to the expression of personal power, and opposes the spiritual power of the individual to the putatively oppressive control of social institutions (Woodstock, 2005; Redden, 2002). Thus, cultivation of the autonomous and responsible self in the therapeutic group can be seen simultaneously as an endorsement of therapeutic individualism and as a critique of the structures of Soviet/Russian society. On both accounts, the state acquires particularly negative meanings; claim-making to the state is delegitimised and individual responsibility elevated.

Although such an overarching notion of personal responsibility might easily be interpreted as exhausting and stigmatising, the research participants, both men and women, framed it primarily as a source of empowerment. Like Alla, quoted above, Oleg also felt that the therapeutic group generated hope and a sense of agency. He made a distinction between debilitating guilt and re-energising responsibility:

Before, I always blamed myself for things. Now I don't anymore, even if I understand that I'm responsible for what happens around me. I've started feeling calm and good; my soul feels light. Because when you feel that you are guilty, you feel bad. But when you feel responsible, on the contrary you want to act, change and do something. You see the path ahead of you.

In line with therapeutic individualism, the self appeared for our research participants to be a primary tool to effect both personal and collective transformation. Self and society were seen as intimately interconnected through knowledge: 'correct' knowledge gained in the therapeutic group was articulated as enabling self-transformation, which would eventually lead to changes in society. Such a therapeutic conception of transformation is likely to find particular appeal in Russia due to widespread political disenfranchisement, whereby people see few, if any, meaningful ways to engage in politics and pursue institutional change (Mazzarino, 2013; Rivkin-Fish, 2004, author B, 2008). If the state is perceived as unresponsive

and formal politics futile, then therapeutic engagements may provide a feasible channel through which to try to change one's life 'here and now' and maintain hope for something better (Lindquist, 2006; Salmenniemi and Vorona, 2014). Here, our interview narratives find ample resonance with Michele Rivkin-Fish's (2004) study of Russian reproductive health activists who, alienated from political activism and having no faith in working with officials, stressed the importance of individual-level moral change as a way to resolve reproductive challenges and eventually bring about change at a societal level.

However, the normative subject position of autonomous 'master of one's life' turned out to be contradictory for the women and was difficult for them to inhabit. On the one hand, the women participants were striving to become self-sufficient and autonomous; yet, on the other hand, such qualities were also identified as problematic and were disapproved of. As we saw in the previous section, some of the young women were actively weaning themselves away from 'too much' independence in order to cultivate the desired feminine subjectivity. For them, autonomy was something that they were both striving for *and* disengaging from. The women were thus having to navigate contradictory interpellations in which they were hailed simultaneously as autonomous and independent *and* happily subjecting themselves to others' needs and wellbeing. Autonomy was both encouraged *and* denied. This contradiction is not limited to the Sinel'nikov group, but is a broader feature of Russian self-help culture (see Salmenniemi and Adamson, 2015). Unlike much Western self-help culture, which propagates 'cultural cooling' by encouraging women to detach and endure emotional isolation (Hochschild, 1994; Hazleden, 2003), Russian self-help culture tends to position heterosexual relationships as the unquestioned anchor of women's lives and encourage women to perform traditional emotional labour and maternal care (Salmenniemi and Adamson, 2015).

The seminars observed in this study did not confront these apparently contradictory goals of becoming simultaneously a 'traditional maternal woman' and an 'autonomous self-sufficient subject'. However, the interviews betrayed the subtle balancing act that this required of women. Women sought to hold onto both positions, for example by framing their partner's problematic behaviour as a 'useful lesson' for their own ethical work on the self, as an impulse for further self-growth. Alla's case is instructive in this regard. She had sought to solve her marital problems by changing her tone of voice, which she described as having previously been too 'aggressive', to a 'more feminine and flirtatious' one, which she believed

would eventually lead to a change in her husband's behaviour. She felt that such work on her femininity had also made her feel a 'more confident woman' (*uverennaia zhenschina*). This narrative allowed her to present herself as a 'responsible' subject and as a 'traditional feminine woman', mastering the delicate art of emotional labour. This encapsulates the imperative of treading the tightrope of femininity that emerged from the interviews: one should not be too independent and successful so as to scare away existing or potential life companions or become exhausted; yet one should constantly keep in mind that one cannot ultimately rely on anyone, very least the state. Thus, one must always be prepared to take full responsibility for everything.

### **Conclusion**

As we have shown, self-transformation in the therapeutic self-help group revolves crucially around gendered subjectivity, and more specifically femininity. Our analysis has highlighted the normalising power of the group and how it encourages participants to cultivate certain gendered ways of being in the world.

The women interviewed for this research were convinced that by working on their femininity and following supposedly 'natural' gender relations, they could achieve both personal and societal happiness and harmony. Moreover, in discovering and inhabiting desired femininity, they were seen as also releasing 'proper' masculinity in men. The highly traditional ideas of gender that participants are invited to adopt are legitimised by a mythological origin story of Slavic ancestors. The supposedly natural gender relations of the past are seen as having been distorted by the Soviet state and Western cultural influences.

Women are encouraged to become autonomous and self-sufficient, yet at the same time to cultivate relationality by giving primacy to the needs of husbands, children and family. The interviewees often voiced exhaustion and a wish for support and companionship; yet they themselves, as well as the group's teachings, also gave them responsibility not only for their own wellbeing, but also for that of the family and the whole nation. Thus, although the group draws on criticism of the Soviet gender order, it also continues to recycle the figure of an omnipotent female agent reminiscent of the Soviet 'superwomen'. However, at the same time, the women struggle to divest themselves of the exhaustive responsibility for running everything on their own.

The research participants framed gender relations as individual and psychological questions, ignoring broader constellations of gendered power. This is characteristic of therapeutic individualism, which tends to translate structural issues of power into questions of individual psychopathology. Rather than analysing and collectively fighting gendered power and disadvantage, women (and men) are invited to accept this situation by cultivating traditional notions of femininity and masculinity and learning to draw pleasure from them. We argue that this message may be appealing to women because it speaks to their lived experience of exhaustion and precarity and promises them the prospect of overcoming it through a mythologised heteronormative order. It offers solace and a potential escape route where room for political agency is limited and feminist discourse and activism heavily vilified. Moreover, the gender norms promoted in the group are closely aligned with those propagated by the state apparatus and the Orthodox Church, which is likely to increase their legitimacy and persuasion. Yet we need to acknowledge that the participants do not merely internalise the ideological messages of the group, but engage with them in partly contradictory ways.

Our interpretation of the politics of the therapeutic field echoes those of Rivkin-Fish (2004) and Mazzarino (2013), who argue that embracing individualised strategies of self-change in lieu of a collective struggle to overturn gendered structures of disadvantage is crucially linked with the extremely limited political opportunities in Russia. While the articulation of social change through individual change is a familiar explanatory trope in much of the globally circulating therapeutic self-help industry (Woodstock, 2005), it gains particular resonance in the Russian context of political disenfranchisement. When politics is perceived as futile and corrupt, societal critique may be channelled through therapeutic work on the self as a way to make life more livable 'here and now' (Rivkin-Fish, 2005; author B, 2010).

Our research participants' responses to dilemmas of gender can be contrasted with the more confrontational political responses of young urban women in Russia, who have turned to feminism to challenge traditional gender norms (Author A). We suggest that, although they propose different diagnoses and solutions, both responses address the same pressing problems: the exhaustion and limitations faced by women in contemporary Russian society. The activities of the therapeutic community studied here also resemble those of the informal women's groups that began to emerge in Russia in the 1990s and early 2000s, before the aggressive crackdown on civil society over the past decade (see Kay, 2000; Hemment, 2007).

In a similar vein to these groups, the therapeutic community operates as a loose group bringing together people in need of spiritual, psychic and emotional support and providing space in which to contemplate both practical and existential questions. Although thus far largely neglected in analyses of civil society and political agency in Russia, we suggest that therapeutic communities may constitute an illuminating site through which to gain a deeper understanding of strategies adopted to pursue change within the limited political opportunities of today's Russia.

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