

1 From culture to assemblages

An introduction

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Therapeutic life management is a billion-dollar business worldwide, woven into the fabric of our daily lives through media culture, workplace activities, technology, healthcare and politics. Reality TV propagates self-improvement through countless makeover shows; schools and kindergartens offer training in emotion management; workers are encouraged to cope with structural stress factors with the help of mindfulness sessions and motivational seminars; and bookstore shelves groan under the weight of popular psychology books promising to unleash one's inner potential and deliver happiness, love and harmony. Therapeutic discourses are also intertwined with processes of digitalisation, which are opening up new avenues for everyday therapeutic engagement through wearable, near-body computing and mobile health applications. The therapeutic, referring to psychological, spiritual and holistic discourses and practices that encourage cultivation, care and transformation of the self, is so ubiquitous in the codes and conduct of contemporary everyday lives that its normalising power often goes unnoticed. However, as a variant of a longstanding cultural-historical injunction to 'know thyself', it significantly shapes the everyday lifeworlds we inhabit.

The seminal role and increasingly global reach of therapeutic discourses and practices in contemporary social formations have been taken up and intensively debated in the social sciences and humanities. Scholars have critically discussed 'the psychologisation of everything'; that is, the dominating role of emotions and psychological vocabularies in making sense of and regulating human life (Rose, 1990; Illouz, 2008). This phenomenon has been captured in the concept of therapeutic culture, which suggests that therapeutic discourses thoroughly permeate the cultures and institutions of the Global North and crucially shape how we understand and relate to ourselves and the social world (Aubry & Travis, 2015; Foster, 2015). Therapeutic culture rests on a particular understanding of selfhood, revolving around ideas of psychic interiority, autonomy, authenticity, self-responsibility and continuous self-invention (Rose, 1998; McGee, 2005).

This book arises from a need to advance our understanding and theorisation of therapeutic cultures in our current political conjuncture. It makes novel empirical and theoretical contributions to existing scholarship in three ways. First, while there is now a wide body of literature on therapeutic discourses and techniques and their role in the government of populations, there is a notable lacuna in

understanding of how people engage with these discourses and practices. This book addresses this lacuna and taps into ways in which people incorporate therapeutic practices into their daily lives. It explores how people live with, appropriate, produce, negotiate and transform therapeutic practices, and how these practices shape and are shaped by subjectivities. In zooming into lived experiences through ethnographically informed case studies, this book elucidates the diverse forms, meanings and embodied effects of therapeutic engagements in different settings, as well as their potential for both oppressive and subversive social change.

Second, while the overwhelming majority of previous research on therapeutic cultures has focused on Anglo-American societies (see e.g. Aubry & Travis, 2015; McGee, 2005; Ouellette & Hay, 2008; Furedi, 2004; Cloud, 1998; Foster, 2015, 2016), this book brings in case studies from other countries, including Germany, Russia, Finland and Israel. In this way, it contributes to a growing body of research on therapeutic cultures beyond the Anglo-American purview (see e.g. Matza, 2012; Nehring et al., 2016; Madsen, 2014; Mäkinen, 2014; Hendriks, 2017). Globally, therapeutic practices share many central elements; yet, as this book shows, they also become invested with different meanings and constitutions as they travel to and are adopted and practised within different historical, cultural and geographical contexts.

Third, this book makes a theoretical contribution by introducing the notion of assemblage into discussion of the therapeutic, and by investigating how human and non-human actors, systems of thought and practice are assembled and interwoven in therapeutic engagements. We suggest that, rather than as ‘culture’, therapeutic practices and discourses can be productively conceptualised as diverse, situated and context-specific ‘assemblages’ that may be politicising or depoliticising, individualising or collectively oriented, commonly welcomed or shunned by the public imaginary – and, of course, many of these things simultaneously. By engaging with assemblage thinking, the book seeks to decentre the somewhat totalising narratives of therapeutic culture, which tend to depict it as a coherent and unified entity producing similar effects regardless of time and place. The analytical lens of assemblage allows us to bring to the fore the multiplicity of therapeutic configurations in different contexts, and to underscore their material and political dimensions, which have not been studied enough in previous literature.

The chapters of this book thus dive into the complexity of therapeutic assemblages across various areas, including mindfulness and life coaching (Stanley and Kortelainen; Yankellevich), relationship and sex counselling (Kolehmainen), religious and spiritual self-care practices (Lerner; Tiaynen-Qadir), extraordinary experiences as instantiations of care and healing (Andell et al.), complementary and alternative health practices (Salmenniemi et al.), feminist politics (Perheentupa), organisational fun culture (Peteri) and data-driven digital life management (Bergroth and Helén; Freigang). They examine how the ‘therapeutic’ works in diverse symbolic and material contexts, and ask what makes people’s self-cultivation practices ‘therapeutic’, and how therapeutic assemblages relate to power, politics and the production of social reality. We argue that, rather than

‘therapeutic culture’ imposing itself on lives anywhere in the world, ‘therapeutic’ is always assembled into being from a variety of resources, not only by the masses ‘out there’, but also by the very people who attempt to study it. We thus join scholars who are calling for acknowledgement of the complexity of therapeutic cultures and their capacity to serve many, seemingly incongruous ends (Aubry & Travis, 2015), and for investigation of their diverse manifestations, without *a priori* assumptions about their effects (Illouz, 2008).

We will discuss each of these three contributions in more detail. However, before doing that, we first offer a brief overview of existing research on therapeutic culture.

Mapping therapeutic culture

Self-care and self-betterment are longstanding phenomena dating back to antiquity (Foucault, 1988), and have been part and parcel of many different political, religious and cultural formations (Madsen, 2015; Kelly, 2001; see also Tiaynen-Qadir, and Stanley and Kortelainen in this book). The rise of modern-style therapeutic self-help discourse traces back to American father figure, Benjamin Franklin (1706–1790) who, apart from the Declaration of Independence (US, 1776), produced texts providing simple guidance on how to become wealthy and how to lead a virtuous and happy life, and kept charts monitoring his own virtuousness (Madsen, 2015: 5; Schaupp, 2016: 251). A century later, British publisher and author, Samuel Smiles published *Self-Help* (1859), a pioneering book in the modern self-help genre that popularised rational and utilitarian ideas of self-improvement (Kelly, 2001: 201). Later that century, the New Thought movement gained momentum in the United States, merging psychological and religious discourses in the propagation of positive thinking (Woodstock, 2005). Thus, since its inception, the modern-style therapeutic discourse has been a complex assemblage drawing on religion, spirituality, medicine, psychology, natural science, business management and so on. However, while the phenomenon of self-betterment is old, new to our current moment are its thoroughly naturalised, individual-centred and psychologically infused ontology, and its intensive commodification, digitalisation and global circulation. These aspects are addressed in this book.

Existing scholarship on therapeutic culture can be roughly divided into three strands. The first is a longstanding strand of cultural critique addressing the therapeutic ethos as an emblematic element of late modern ‘cultural decline’. On the one hand, the therapeutic ethos is seen as threatening to undermine public morality and political and communal life, promote individualism and narcissism, and deflect political critique by offering psychological solutions to complex structural problems (see e.g. Furedi, 2004; Lasch, 1979; Rieff, 1966; for a comprehensive and critical review, see Lichterman, 1992; Illouz, 2008; Madsen, 2015). This scholarship has tended, to paraphrase Aubry and Travis (2015: 4), to ‘excoriate rather than analyze’ the therapeutic ethos. On the other hand, proponents of reflexive modernisation (e.g. Giddens, 1992) suggest that proliferation of the

therapeutic discourse is connected with the individualisation process and the erosion of the role of traditions and traditional authorities in late modern societies. In this context, therapeutic practices may have a potentially empowering role by providing individuals with cultural resources with which to reflect on and assemble their identities and biographies.

The second approach is grounded in the (post-)Foucauldian governmentality tradition, which links the rise of ‘psy’ to historically shifting forms of government (Rose, 1990, 1998). Rooted in a genealogical approach, this body of scholarship argues that ‘advanced liberal’ or ‘neoliberal’ government is characterised by governing through freedom, choice and responsibility; ‘at a distance’ rather than through repression and control. Therapeutic knowledges and techniques are seen as crucial ingredients of this art of government, giving rise to self-managing and enterprising subjects (Rose, 1990, 1998; Binkley, 2011; Foster, 2015). In promising liberation of the self, psy governmentalities make the self ‘work seamlessly for and within a system of power’ (Illouz, 2008: 3). Subjects are obliged to be free and to make life meaningful by searching for happiness and self-realisation (Rose, 1998: 151). Through attachment to various therapeutic technologies of the self, ‘we are governed by our active engagement in the search for a form of existence that is at once personally fulfilling and beneficial to our families, our communities and the collective well-being of the nation’ (ibid.: 78).

Third, a vast body of empirical analyses on therapeutic discourses and techniques draws on diverse theoretical resources and focuses particularly on popular media culture as an influential transmitter of the therapeutic ethos. These studies have examined, for example, reality TV, makeover shows and talk shows (Ouellette & Hay, 2008; Ringrose & Walkerdine, 2008; Harvey & Gill, 2011; Lerner & Zbenovich, 2013), women’s magazines (Gill, 2009; Madsen & Ytre-Arne, 2012) and self-help literature (McGee, 2005; Woodstock, 2005; Hazleden, 2003; Rimke, 2000; Nehring et al., 2016; Salmenniemi & Adamson, 2015; Tiainen-Qadir & Salmenniemi, 2017). They have identified key ideas, generic conventions and strategies of persuasion in the therapeutic discourse, as well as analysed representations of gender, sexuality and class and how they produce and sustain relationships of power and privilege. In addition to examining media culture, the therapeutic discourse has also been critically interrogated in the context of education, detailing how therapeutic and neoliberal discourses coalesce to construct normative ideas about autonomous, enterprising and competitive students (Ecclestone & Hayes, 2008; Brunila, 2011; Brunila & Siivonen, 2016), and has been applied to management and corporate culture, highlighting the mobilisation of therapeutic practices in managing worker subjectivities (Swan, 2010; Davies, 2015).

As this review elucidates, a lot of important work has been done to interrogate how therapeutic discourses subjectivate and interpellate, and operate as an oppressive ideology or form of governmentality. However, there is still a paucity of research on the lived experience of therapeutic practices, especially outside the Anglo-American context (see, however, Lichterman, 1992; Illouz, 2008; Matza, 2012; Sointu, 2013; Nehring & Kerrigan, 2019; Salmenniemi & Vorona, 2014; Pagis, 2016).

This book addresses this gap through an ethnographic investigation of what inspires people to engage with therapeutic practices and what makes these practices meaningful to them. In the next sections, we flesh out what this entails.

Ethnographies of the therapeutic

Ethnography is particularly well suited to capturing the complexities and nuances of everyday life that may easily slip under the radar of grand social theory and macro-level indicators. For example, while it may seem plausible to claim that we live in a certain ‘age’ – such as therapeutic or neoliberal – the actual meaning of such ‘age’ is always interpreted, appropriated, put into effect and challenged in everyday practice. The idea of an overarching ‘therapeutic culture’ is a case in point: such a concept can take us only so far in understanding the nuanced functionalities and manifestations acquired by various therapeutic life management discourses and strategies in different contexts. This is mainly because the notion of ‘culture’ tends to invite connotations of a static, monolithic and universal structure of action and thought, and thus overlooks the differences and flexibilities in such structures in personal, national, technological, spatial and historical settings.

Ethnographic sensibility, involving careful contextualisation and attempts to understand other lifeworlds using the self as the instrument of knowing (Ortner, 2006: 42), is thus one of the main threads connecting the contributions of this book. We approach ethnography as an intersubjective practice of ‘engaging in, wrestling with, and being committed to the human relationships’ in the fields we explore (Campbell & Lassiter, 2015: 4–5). In line with recent anthropological discussions (Hannerz, 2003; Huttunen, 2010), we understand the ‘therapeutic’ as a field consisting of multiple sites and social relations, as reflected from many different angles and using different types of research materials in this book.

Through the ethnographic approach, we seek to move away from the ‘epistemology of suspicion’ (Illouz, 2008: 4), which tends to posit therapeutics as politically and culturally dubious and its practitioners as politically reactionary and imprisoned by false consciousness, and to explore how people encounter, engage and live with therapeutic practices. Some chapters examine how people narrate and experience therapeutic practices, while others analyse the practices themselves, such as mindfulness or self-tracking – and many chapters tackle both.

Studies drawing on critical analysis of public discourse have tended to underplay agency and overlook the critical capacities of actors (see Illouz, 2008: 4). They often create an impression of therapeutic practitioners as passive receivers of ideological interpellations. This means that the analytical space between discourse and experience has been neglected. The ethnographic approach adopted in this book allows us to address this space. In addition to ethnography, we also align here with the active audience paradigm of cultural studies, and suggest that therapeutic practitioners are not cultural dopes, but active producers of meaning from within their own cultural contexts (Barker, 2000: 269). Therapeutic discourses carry multiple, and sometimes contradictory, meanings; and how practitioners in different social positions make sense of and work with them is an open empirical

question (see Illouz, 2008: 4; Radway, 1984). As the chapters in this book elucidate, practitioners engage with therapeutic practices and discourses in complex ways, which may both challenge and reproduce ideological formations.

This book's authors use their embodied and sensory experiences to provide rich and empathetic understandings of the therapeutic worlds mapped in their chapters. While emotional detachment and absence of the researcher's body and affect have often been adopted in pursuit of objectivity, embodied researcher experiences form a different 'landscape for analytical insight' (Cerwonka & Malkki, 2007). Throughout this book, the authors create these landscapes through sensory explorations of their field sites and the different therapeutic practices and experiences within them. For instance, Marjo Kolehmainen's chapter on relationship and sex counselling paints a vivid picture of how the researcher's body relates to the therapeutic assemblages scrutinised during fieldwork. Her work shows how examining the researcher's bodily states can strengthen analytical work and help to capture affective atmospheres as they unfold in therapeutic events. In another chapter, Tatiana Tiaynen-Qadir describes her ethnographic process of drawing on her own bodily experiences of Orthodox Christian liturgy to analyse and understand aspects of the sacred and *therapeia* that her participants attempt to put into words. Throughout her fieldwork, she participated in church services and choir practices, which gave her an embodied perspective on the sensory experiences relating to therapeutic and spiritual practices narrated by her participants.

Two other chapters also draw on long-term ethnographic involvement in the lives of research participants. Julia Lerner has studied women's religious practice and how it is informed by therapeutic self-management in a transnational context, combining in-depth interviews with ethnographic knowledge of her research participants' everyday lives. Inna Perheentupa has participated in the activities of feminist and LGBTQ groups in Russia as part of her fieldwork, and also conducted virtual ethnography on feminist online sites. This has allowed her to gain deeper insights into the everyday political struggles in which her interlocutors are engaged and to appreciate the therapeutic dimensions of these struggles.

Sensory and embodied experiences are also an important starting point for the chapter by Steven Stanley and Ilmari Kortelainen. It uses audiovisual recordings and Stanley's experience of a mindfulness training event, as well as the authors' own practices of mindfulness and meditation, to analyse the affective discursive practices of mindfulness from an 'insider-outsider' position. In a similar vein, the chapter by Suvi Salmenniemi, Johanna Nurmi and Joni Jaakola makes use of insights derived from Salmenniemi's participant observation in various therapeutic events and treatments. The chapter by Harley Bergroth and Ilpo Helén, analysing discourses and experiences of self-tracking technologies, is also affected and shaped by Bergroth's personal experimentation with everyday fitness tracking devices during the course of the research.

Virve Peteri and Felix Freigang make use of ethnographic methods to understand the role of technologies and spaces in shaping subjectivities and emotional realms. Peteri examines how new forms of office decoration and spatial planning in the workplace connect with the therapeutic ethos and regulate bodies,

moods and emotions. She describes how her own profoundly embodied sense of uneasiness during fieldwork sensitised and helped her to relate to her interlocutors' experiences of these spaces and the ideological dilemmas with which they wrestled. Freigang's chapter, in turn, traces ways in which mood-tracking applications do or do not work to combat mental illness in the context of inadequate mental health services, and highlights the contradictory effects and reactions to which they may give rise.

Finally, the chapters by Ariel Yankellevich and by Kia Andell, Harley Bergroth and Marja-Liisa Honkasalo, while not rooted in participant observation, adopt an ethnographically inspired approach through comprehensive immersion in their research settings and careful fleshing out of the embodied, sensory and affective experiences emerging in the research materials.

The bottom-up, embodied and sensory research practices used in this book also invite us to rethink notions of participation in ethnographic fieldwork. Conducting interviews and observation using a number of sensory experiences can, in itself, constitute participation (Pink, 2009). As our focus in this book is on plugging gaps in the 'sociology of therapeutic cultures' (Swan, 2010), these rich ethnographic practices help form understandings of people's ways of experiencing and making sense of their worlds and may provide routes to knowledge and memories that would otherwise be hard to reach. Thus, ethnographic perspectives create new ways to understand how and why people choose to engage with various therapeutic practices, and what makes therapeutic practices meaningful for them.

Assembling therapeutics

In addition to advancing an ethnographic approach to therapeutic practices, this book also paves the way for an alternative theorisation of therapeutic engagements through the concept of assemblage. In so doing, it seeks to decentre 'culture' as a deterministic 'force' that is massive, enclosing and sometimes almost invincible. We propose that the therapeutic can be conceptualised as an assemblage of ideas, practices, spaces, objects and bodies yielding multiple, contextually specific and sometimes contradictory effects. This helps to highlight the multifarious and processual nature of the therapeutic, which defies any universalising and totalising effects.

The concept of an assemblage is an open-ended collage of sorts. According to McFarlane (2011: 206), it is usually mobilised to connote 'indeterminacy, emergence, becoming, processuality, turbulence and the sociomateriality of phenomena', and it has become part of the vocabulary of contemporary social theory. For example, French philosophers, Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari (1987) approached it as a 'general logic' of thinking about the world as being in perpetual flux, and French sociologist, Michel Callon (2005) has employed it to develop actor-network theoretical accounts of the functioning of sociotechnical systems. However, the French term preferred by such thinkers is *agencement*. While *agencement* is typically translated into English as 'assemblage', the two terms actually come from different etymological roots and mean different

things, since the word *assemblage* also exists in the French lexicon. Simply put, *agencement* is a play on words that is sensitive to both the idea of ‘an arrangement’ (un agencement) and ‘agency’ (agence). Caliskan and Callon (2010: 9) elaborate that ‘agencies and arrangements are not separate. *Agencements* denote socio-technical arrangements when they are considered from the point [of] view of their capacity to act.’ *Assemblage* denotes a rather narrower meaning, that of ‘a bringing or coming together’ (see also Nail, 2017; Hardie & Mackenzie, 2007).

Perhaps owing to these complexities, in the social scientific literature, assemblage has appeared as a protean concept employed in various ways. For example, it has served as a conceptual tool to explore philosophical questions about ontology, existence and agency, and to argue for a rhizomatic understanding of the social, highlighting complex processes of ‘becoming’ rather than any fixed underlying ‘essences’ of things (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987; DeLanda, 2006; Introna, 2013). In new materialist social research, it has been widely drawn on to highlight processes of human–technology co-construction; object-oriented accounts of social life and power; and the effects, possibilities, restrictions and (unexpected) consequences imposed by the material and technical worlds on human thought and action when human and non-human entities come together to inter- and intra-act (Coole & Frost, 2010; Bennett, 2010; Latour, 2005; Mol, 2002; Lupton, 2016). Yet others, especially in anthropological research, have employed the concept to highlight the active labour of pulling together and sustaining diverse, sometimes apparently incompatible elements that have no inherent allegiance with one another (see Collier & Ong, 2005; Li, 2007; Zigon, 2011a, 2011b). For example, in their highly influential work, Collier and Ong (2005: 4) examine how ‘global forms’, such as neoliberalism, science and expert systems, are territorialised in assemblages, defining new material, collective and discursive relationships. They approach assemblages as ‘the product of multiple determinations that are not reducible to any single logic’ (ibid.: 12).

Assemblage theorisation has also been taken up in the methodological literature, as an idea suggesting that social research and scientific knowledge production are always situated and contingent – craftwork in themselves – and should acknowledge the pitfalls of overreliance on scientific rationalism (see Law, 2004; Fox & Alldred, 2015). What unites these different ways of working with assemblage is a sensitivity to *processuality* rather than stability, and a focus on challenging the persistent binaries (such as human/non-human, social/material, order/chaos, rational/emotional) present in everyday thought.

In this book, we draw insights from these debates on assemblages to analyse and theorise therapeutic practices. The concept of assemblage here denotes not so much a coherent theoretical framework as such, but rather a theoretical-methodological ‘lens of inquiry’ and a ‘style of thought’. On the one hand, the chapters in the book look at the therapeutic as contingent arrangements situated in specific personal, political, material, spatial and discursive contexts. That is to say, ‘the therapeutic’ is never one but many; it is effectively a different entity with different effects and repercussions in different contexts. On the other hand, we focus on the ongoing work of ‘assembling’ the therapeutic. This means that

we look at the active work conducted by human and non-human beings, technological applications, political ideas and various other actants in making the therapeutic happen in everyday lives. Thus, the chapters in this book also suggest, in various ways, that different kinds of practices, beliefs and everyday arrangements are therapeutic only in the sense that they are made therapeutic.

The specific theoretical contribution of this book to the discussion of therapeutic culture is its approach to the therapeutic as a kind of active craftwork (see McFarlane, 2011) in everyday life. Each chapter looks at how people and other-than-people participate in crafting and maintaining therapeutic assemblages, that is, make sense of and act upon themselves, and make promises, paths and possibilities for a good (or at least better) life to happen. The therapeutic happens through a coming together of many different elements: different technologies, beliefs, programmes, discourses, metaphors and beings, whether ‘real’ or ‘imaginary’ (another persistent binary to overcome). This work of ‘assembling therapeutics’ reveals the multiplicity of the therapeutic, and how the meaning of ‘the therapeutic’ itself shifts with shifting assemblages. In this spirit of assembling and craftwork, the chapters in this book also combine assemblage thinking with a number of other theoretical resources, including affect theory, metaphor theory, anthropological and sociological study of religion and spirituality, Foucauldian analytics of power, queer theory and Critical Theory, to provide a nuanced understanding of therapeutic practices.

The politics of therapeutic assemblages

The assemblage perspective is a potent theoretical lens through which to deepen our understanding of two themes that run through this book as key analytical threads: *politics* and *materiality*. Although these themes are enmeshed in complex ways – politics being material, and materiality being political – we elaborate on each in the remainder of this Introduction.

We begin by exploring the politics of therapeutic engagements and, more specifically, the types of political imaginaries and actions that these engagements may enable or foreclose. Historically, therapeutic knowledges and practices have been intimately intertwined with social movements, including the countercultural movements of the 1960s and 1970s, such as the women’s liberation, New Age and alternative health movements and radical community therapy groups (see Aubry & Travis, 2015; Staub, 2015; Saks, 2003; Bondi & Burman, 2001). The rise of humanistic psychology, which challenges behaviourist models and champions the concepts of ‘self-actualisation’ and ‘inner potential’, found particularly strong resonance in countercultural movements that criticised the prevailing capitalist, authoritarian and patriarchal social order. The popularisation of therapeutic discourse, with its focus on trauma and healing, also helped open up new discursive spaces for ‘speaking out’ about forms of injustice and suffering that have long been silenced in public, such as child abuse and violence against women, and has empowered groups and individuals who were previously marginalised (Stein, 2011; Illouz, 2008).

Despite this deep historical interconnection, the predominant interpretation in therapeutic culture scholarship conceives therapeutic practices as a tool for political domination, diverting attention from structural forms of injustice to empowering the psychologised self. It has been argued that the social critique embodied in countercultural movements has been commodified and merged to reinforce a neoliberal agenda (Höllinger, 2004; Redden, 2002), leading to the dissipation of radical collective action against social injustice (Cloud, 1998). By rendering structural relations of power as personal psychopathologies to be solved by ethical work on the self, the therapeutic ethos has been seen as legitimising middle-class norms, targeting the transformative energy towards the self rather than social structures, and cultivating autonomous, self-sufficient and enterprising subjects capable of and willing to engage in constant self-invention and self-governance (MacNevin, 2003; Skeggs & Wood, 2012; Nehring et al., 2016; Cloud, 1998; Mäkinen, 2014; Madsen, 2015; Foster, 2016).

However, the chapters in this book tell a more complicated story. Therapeutic practices may certainly oppress, depoliticise, manufacture political quietism and cement symbolic and material hierarchies of power, but they may also serve as vehicles for social change and animate political critique (see Salmenniemi, 2019). While proponents of the depoliticisation thesis often conceive politics as ‘contentious politics’ (e.g. Cloud, 1998), this book adopts a broader stance on politics by delving into the terrain of micropolitics and everyday resistance, which is often overshadowed by the focus on organised forms of political action (Scott, 1989; Bayat, 1997; Lilja & Vinthagen, 2014). Indeed, this book underlines the need to acknowledge the multidimensional nature of political contestation, ranging from confrontational to circumventing, productive to hindering, individual to collective, accommodating to enforcing, and materialistic to virtual (Baaz et al., 2018: 4). Broadening the notion of politics and revealing often individualised, covert and small-scale acts of resistance allows us to appreciate the complexity of power relations within the therapeutic field, and reminds us that political subjectivity should always be analysed in relation to local and ethical conditions that dictate how political agency takes shape (Mahmood, 2005: 9).

In this spirit, Ariel Yankellevich’s chapter in this book addresses the popularisation of life coaching among the Israeli (mostly Ashkenazi) middle class. He argues that the field of coaching cannot be adequately grasped by a single logic of individualisation or depoliticisation, but should rather be understood as a particular moral and ethical assemblage that combines individual self-development with collectivist dispositions towards the common good of the nation. Coaching entails not withdrawal from, but a reconfiguration of, social responsibility and political engagement. The chapter shows how coaching’s neoliberal therapeutic rationality is assembled with local discourses of the self and the nation, which enable coaches to negotiate their social positions and find new sources of legitimation in the context of shifting social and cultural hierarchies. Julia Lerner’s chapter on Russian-speaking migrant women’s religious experiences also interrogates the relationship between the therapeutic and neoliberalism. Lerner shows how neoliberal, religious and therapeutic elements intertwine in the narratives of

these women, and how, rather than emptying the self of its communal content, this assemblage potentially augments communal attachments. Both chapters highlight the importance of analysing therapeutic engagements through the intersecting categories of class, gender, ethnicity and generation.

While Yankellevich's and Lerner's chapters underline ways in which neoliberal and therapeutic discourses intertwine to support each other, Salmenniemi, Nurmi and Jaakola highlight instead how therapeutic assemblages need not necessarily align with neoliberal governing projects, but may also be mobilised to critique and contest them. Drawing on Critical Theory and analysing therapeutic practitioners' narratives of contemporary working life, they show how therapeutic assemblages operate as forms of everyday resistance to the destructive effects of the neoliberal ethic of work. They highlight how practitioners seek to deal with their deeply embodied sense of alienation by assembling personalised therapeutic packages consisting of diverse practices, objects and forms of knowledge. Rather than optimising and accruing value to themselves, they mobilise therapeutic techniques to pull themselves back to life from the murky waters of burnout and depression. In this sense, these techniques allow them to craft hope and a sense of agency in difficult life circumstances.

In their chapter, Stanley and Kortelainen also critically engage with interpretations of mindfulness as a thoroughly commodified, neoliberal and individualising technology of the self. They suggest that, rather than assuming particular *a priori* effects, one should rather regard them as objects of empirical inquiry, and thus approach mindfulness as a contextually specific practice assembled from different and sometimes contradictory elements.

Virve Peteri's chapter continues the discussion of everyday resistance by analysing the production of playfulness in the workplace. She approaches activity-based office designs as 'therapeutic spaces' seeking to elicit creativity and positive emotions and traces ways in which employees seek to challenge and subvert the new patterns of emotion control introduced by office design. Although the organisation's leadership encourages workers to invest in fleeting sensations and moods as a source of inspiration, and to ignore historically constituted social bonds between them, the workers continue to maintain and invest in long-term friendships and solidarities. Moreover, although they are no longer allowed to have personal spaces, many continue to attach themselves to particular desks and thus refuse to comply with the new culture of mobility and flexibility. In this way, the chapter highlights the centrality of material and spatial arrangements for domination and subversion.

The chapters by Inna Perheentupa and Felix Freigang examine therapeutic practices in the context of collective mobilisation and 'speaking out'. Perheentupa conceptualises feminist activism in Russia as therapeutic politics. She shows how activists come together to deal publicly with their traumatic experiences connected with gendered violence. Holding onto their political agency serves a therapeutic function for the activists in the context of repressive political conditions and a trauma culture. Freigang, for his part, discusses the proliferation of digital mood-tracking applications as a response to inadequate mental health services in

Germany. He shows how the mood-tracking app can facilitate the politicisation of mental health, such as contesting victimisation and stigmatisation relating to mental health problems and inadequate psychotherapeutic care, thus echoing the long tradition of social health movements and patient activism.

As Freigang's chapter elucidates, some chapters in this book engage in readings of politics inspired by new materialism and actor–network theory. Viewed from these perspectives, politics is neither exclusively, nor even primarily, a human domain of action and decision making, but is heavily influenced and directed by the material world (Latour, 2005; Bennett, 2010). This sensitises us to exploring the contingencies and specificities of power and resistance in particular arrangements of human and non-human actors (Law & Singleton, 2013). In this spirit, some chapters empirically explore how human and non-human actors come together to create and restrict avenues of political, socially transformative action. For example, Bergroth and Helén delve into the data-driven, digital milieu of contemporary body-tracking. They show how the sociotechnical domain of tracking one's bodily functions brings together bodies, therapeutic discourses of holistic health, political discourses of 'personalised medicine' and citizen activation policies, and the dividualising, fragmentary logic of algorithmic self-monitoring technologies. This creates regimes of perpetual self-control within which 'the point of self-tracking is to educate people not on their daily step counts or heart rates during sleep *per se*, but mainly on caring for and managing personal "vitality"'. The chapter highlights how self-tracking becomes an everyday political and therapeutic regime for both managing and performing activeness and good health.

Drawing on a unique set of autobiographical narratives on uncanny (i.e. 'supernatural') experiences, Andell, Bergroth and Honkasalo elaborate how experiences of being in touch with mysterious beings, voices, visions and other extraordinary things often interact with pervasive technoscientific-rationalist discourses that reduce such experiences to mental 'errors' or 'disturbances'. As such, these experiences may be both 'sickening' and healing, but are nevertheless crucial actants in people's therapeutic and political assemblages, as they prescribe care for the self, care for others and desires to work on the world.

Materiality: spaces, affects and bodies

As the previous section highlighted, materiality is important for understanding therapeutics as an assemblage. Much of the social scientific literature on therapeutic culture has tended to overlook material culture and embodiment as crucial building blocks for the therapeutic to function in everyday contexts. However, therapeutic culture is not just out there, but functions and is mediated through the mundane material contexts with which human and non-human beings interact. Chapters in this book examine how our mundane material surroundings – objects, gadgets, spaces and bodies – put forward or 'prescribe' (Latour, 1992) the therapeutic in people's everyday lives, and how the therapeutic is embodied in and through the physical realm. They analyse the emergence and transformation of therapeutic practices in complex networks of human and non-human actors and

highlight the centrality of affective attachments to how therapeutic practices work in and through bodies.

Both Julia Lerner and Tatiana Tiaynen-Qadir explore the embodied relationship between religion and the therapeutic in a transnational context. Underlining the importance of embodied and material practices of religion, Tiaynen-Qadir underscores how therapeutic engagements are deeply embodied and irreducible to cognition and reason. She examines Orthodox Christian practitioners' embodied and sensory experiences of religion and healing. In response to the 'therapeutic turn' in society, Finnish Orthodoxy has emphasised the therapeutic effects of its practices, although this has been done mainly by reviving the notion of *therapeia* – the ancient Orthodox cure of soul and body – rather than by secularising psychological narratives of the self. Tiaynen-Qadir shows how, in religious practices, global therapeutic assemblages are produced in complex and historically situated interactions between human and non-human actors, and how divine intervention is channelled through materiality of sound, archaic texts, iconic art and holy objects. Lerner, for her part, explores how women who were raised in the Soviet Union and migrated to Israel and Europe narrate their religious experiences in therapeutic terms. They emphasise the role of religion in overcoming personal difficulty, gaining control, embodying responsibility and discovering the 'true self' in new and challenging life situations. The women's narratives, imbued with powerful embodied and emotional registers, reveal how religion operates in their everyday lives, and how it has transformed the ways in which they perceive themselves, their personal histories and their social relations.

Embodiment and material culture are also discussed by Bergroth and Helén. They theorise how, through digital-tracking practices, the human body is divided into and presented in the form of ever-extending trajectories based on the body's own movements and beats. Self-tracking prescribes conceptions of selves as 'data derivatives' (Amoore, 2011) that focus not on what the self is, but on what it could (and should) be, producing affective and sustaining engagement with the act and technology of self-tracking. Andell, Bergroth and Honkasalo, for their part, show how uncanny beings and sensations become 'real' actants by participating in people's therapeutic knowledge production. Uncanny experiences are often made sense of through the concrete effects and emotions that they induce in the world. The authors thus approach uncanny phenomena as active agents, and uncanny experiences as social practices and 'therapeutic events' that shape and actualise one's relationship with oneself and with the surrounding world. The uncanny also intertwines with materialities. For example, people's narratives on uncanny encounters shed light on how personal relationships and care relations (are made to) transgress the apparently impenetrable boundary between life and death, by and through everyday technologies such as lamps and candles. Furthermore, embodiment and the emotional sphere are narrated in many ways as crucial to actualising knowledge of – and care for – either the self or, for example, a person who is no longer visibly present in this world. Overall, the authors build an argument that uncanny experiences should not be understood as therapy-in-a-time-of-crisis, in a functionalist sense, but rather as part of active assemblages of knowledge production.

Marjo Kolehmainen prepares new ground for theorising therapeutics by delving into atmospheres as affective assemblages. She proposes that atmospheres offer a novel lens through which to interrogate therapeutic engagements, as they enable a move away from human-centred notions of the therapeutic and the self, and foreground how situational and material therapeutic practices operate in and through both human and non-human bodies. Her chapter traces how ‘different objects and bodies come together in situated experiences of registering, engineering or sustaining an atmosphere’ in relationship and sex-counselling events. She suggests that part of the appeal of therapeutic engagements is likely to be connected specifically with affective atmospheres rather than with the actual content or advice delivered in counselling. She also makes an important observation regarding the affective dynamics of inclusion and exclusion: ‘To register an atmosphere is to sense a connection, which may feel therapeutic in itself; and to fail to catch it may intensify feelings of non-belonging, rendering one more vulnerable’.

Continuing the discussion on affect, the chapter by Stanley and Kortelainen draws on Wetherell’s (2013) seminal work on affective practices. This allows a study of meaning-making that does not draw sharp divisions between bodies, discourses, affects and emotions. Stanley and Kortelainen analyse how mindful bodies are assembled in a professional mindfulness training event. They focus on the practical conduct of mindfulness as an assemblage of affective practices, looking into the production of mindfulness meditation, the space, and the practitioners’ bodies. The assemblage perspective allows them to foreground mindfulness as a situated and embodied practice that is not ‘the same thing’ in different settings. Their analysis also shows how mindfulness may be experienced as a ‘post-secular’ sacralising space.

Freigang explores the affective intensities of a mood-tracking app. In dialogue with Lupton (2014), he suggests that mood-tracking apps can be viewed as socio-cultural artefacts into which different aspirations, circuits of societal discourses, economic interests and meanings are inscribed. He coins the concept of ‘therapeutic companion’ to capture ways in which mood-tracking apps operate in users’ everyday lives. The chapter shows how mood-tracking apps may become both empowering and contested, engendering both excitement and disappointment.

Virve Peteri’s chapter foregrounds the need to appreciate space as an active agent in shaping and transforming experiences, emotions and subjectivities. She shows how ‘fun culture’ in organisations can be viewed as an assemblage of bodies, materials and spaces that aim to generate happier, more playful, creative, agile and mobile worker subjectivities. This has profoundly gendered implications, as the ideal subject inhabiting the new playful office space appears to be a young man interested in PlayStation games and relaxing on a beanbag.

Perheentupa adopts another angle on discussions of space and emotion. She shows how feminism in Russia is understood and produced as a therapeutic space, a ‘shelter’ in which activists can momentarily shield themselves from a society in which they feel unsafe. Moreover, she shows how feminist activism revolving around cultural trauma translates experiences of psychic injury and painful memories into collective action that provides a shared forum for healing.

Conclusion: reassembling the therapeutic

This and subsequent chapters underline the need to understand and appreciate therapeutic practices as part of our everyday symbolic and material landscape. In a similar vein to critical scholarship, which has problematised the idea of neoliberalism as ‘an economic tsunami that is gathering force across the planet, pummelling each country in its path and sweeping away old structures of power’ (Ong, 2007: 3), this book calls attention to the therapeutic not as a ‘tsunami’, but as situated and contingent assemblages without predetermined outcomes and effects. Indeed, the chapters in this book challenge the notion of a singular therapeutic culture and testify that therapeutic engagements cannot be tamed under any one narrative, whether it be neoliberal governmentality, depoliticisation or individualisation (see also Illouz, 2008). Combining a bottom-up ethnographic approach with assemblage thinking may, we hope, advance critical understanding of how we live with and assemble our ‘therapeutic companions’.

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