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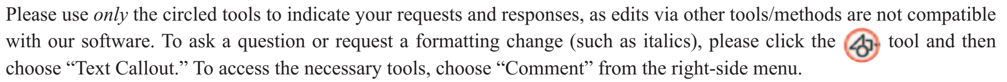

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'We can't live without beliefs': Self and society in therapeutic engagements

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Abstract

Therapeutic technologies of happiness, emotional wellbeing and self-improvement are a highly influential cultural phenomenon and a rapidly growing business worldwide; yet little is known of the motivations for engaging with these technologies. This article addresses this gap by investigating how therapeutic engagements are experienced and what participants hope to gain from them. Therapeutic technologies are conceived as psychologically informed regimes of knowledge and practice which aim to transform one's relationship to oneself and shape the ways in which one makes sense of and acts upon oneself and the social world. Drawing on a set of interviews with consumers of therapeutic technologies in Russia, the article identifies three key motivations for engaging with such technologies: searching for new blueprints for ethical work on the self after a profound transformation of the ideological field; coming to terms with new mechanisms of inequality, particularly in the field of labour; and mobilizing therapeutic technologies as a response to inadequacies in the field of health. By unpacking these motivations and subjective experiences of therapeutic engagements, the article seeks to shed light on the growing popularity of therapeutic technologies under contemporary capitalism.

Keywords

class, experience, psychology, Russia, self-help, subjectivity, therapeutic technologies

Introduction

The therapeutic industry is a highly influential cultural phenomenon and a rapidly growing business worldwide (Illouz, 2008; Madsen, 2014). Self-help books, life coaching, self-improvement exercises, mindfulness sessions and empowerment groups increasingly permeate the terrain of media culture, organizations and everyday life. Fusing together popular psychological, spiritual and scientific discourses, the therapeutic industry is a

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genuinely global assemblage, travelling across borders and circulating ideas and techniques sufficiently abstract to be amenable to appropriation and reworking in different contexts. It also crucially contributes to shaping cultural understandings of selfhood and social reality. Nikolas Rose (1990, 1998) has shown how the therapeutic discourse has crucially come to define the contemporary Western 'regime of the self', cohering around the ideas of individual psychic interiority, autonomy, choice and self-responsibility.

Yet, despite the seismic proliferation of the therapeutic industry in recent decades, little is known of the motivations for engaging with it. This article addresses this gap by investigating why people choose to engage with therapeutic technologies, how they experience them, and what they hope to gain from them. Therapeutic technologies are conceived as psychologically informed regimes of knowledge and practice which aim to transform one's relationship with oneself and shape the ways in which one makes sense of and acts upon oneself and the social world (see Foucault, 1988). The empirical context through which I address these questions is contemporary Russian society which, for two reasons, is an interesting context in which to interrogate therapeutic engagements. First, the overwhelming majority of analyses of the therapeutic industry have so far focused on the American context (Madsen, 2014). Unlike in Western societies, where psychological norms, values and techniques have had a decisive effect on the ways in which persons and social relations are understood (Illouz, 2008; Rose, 1998, p. 62), the therapeutic industry is a relatively novel phenomenon in Russia. Although Soviet society had its distinctive socialist tradition of self-betterment (Kharkhordin, 1999), 'psy' knowledges and psychotherapeutic practices occupied a marginal position. Popular psychology books were published and psychotherapeutic and marital counselling began to develop during late socialism, yet their scope and reach remained limited (Kelly, 2001; Matza, 2009). The therapeutic industry as such began developing only after the Soviet Union's collapse and constitutes today a highly visible cultural phenomenon in Russia.

Second, the therapeutic industry has been developing in Russia in tandem with the transition to capitalism. As a number of commentators have argued, there is a symbiotic relationship between capitalism and the therapeutic emotional culture (see e.g. Illouz, 2008; McGee, 2005). According to Eva Illouz (2008, p. 60), we are living in an emotional capitalism in which 'emotional and economic discourses mutually shape one another so that affect is made an essential aspect of economic behaviour, and emotional life, especially that of the middle classes, follows the logic of economic relations and exchange'. The ethos of self-improvement constitutes an emblematic feature of emotional capitalism. In Russia, the rise of the therapeutic industry is an important manifestation of broader social and cultural changes under post-socialist conditions. It has played a key role in the introduction and popularization of therapeutic vocabulary and ideas (Lerner & Zbenovich, 2013; Salmenniemi & Adamson, 2015; Salmenniemi & Vorona, 2014) and in the interpretation and legitimization of new symbolic and material orderings following the collapse of the Soviet Union (Matza, 2012; Salmenniemi, 2012). The transition to capitalism in Russia has entailed a radical rethinking of normative ideas concerning personhood, of what counts as a 'proper subject'. Therapeutic engagements constitute a crucial site for this process of unmaking and remaking of subjects, as it is a site in which subjectivity is problematized and at stake.

In this article, I shall unpack how therapeutic consumers seek to shape their subjectivity in relation to the shifting logics of social fields triggered by social transformation. The interview accounts were saturated with stories of this transformation and what it had meant for research participants' sense of self and perceptions of society. The accounts reveal that therapeutic technologies were employed as a cultural resource with which to reposition and reorient oneself in relation to the new capitalist social formation. From the interview accounts, I have identified three key motivations for engaging with therapeutic technologies, each displaying a specific dynamic between subjectivity and fields. These motivations include: (1) searching for new blueprints for ethical work on the self following the profound transformation of the ideological field, (2) coming to terms with new mechanisms of inequality, particularly in the field of labour, and (3) mobilizing therapeutic technologies as a response to inadequacies in the field of health. By unpacking these motivations and the subjective experiences of therapeutic engagements, this article seeks to shed light on the growing popularity and appeal of therapeutic technologies in Russia, and in contemporary capitalism in general.

In order to do this, I draw on 15 individual and three group interviews with 30 consumers of therapeutic technologies in Saratov, a city with about 837,000 inhabitants located in western Russia. The interviews were conducted in 2010–2011 in cooperation with scholars of the Saratov State Technical University. Previous research has highlighted that therapeutic services are consumed particularly by women and the middle class (Dubin & Zorkaia, 2008; Matza, 2012; Mazzarino, 2013), and the participants in this study had a similar profile. Twenty-one of them were women and nine men, and they were aged between 20 and 70 years. All but three had attended higher education and the majority reported having an average level of income. Among them were students, medical doctors, teachers, psychologists, creative workers, service personnel, housewives, pensioners and entrepreneurs. We relied on the personal networks of my research associates and used the snowballing technique to identify the participants for the study. This strategy is probably reflected in the high proportion of educated professionals among the participants.

The research participants were recruited on the basis that they had been reading popular psychology self-help books. We used the terms 'self-help' and 'popular psychology' interchangeably to query research participants' reading patterns. These terms turned out to be highly flexible, encompassing everything from international and domestic self-help bestsellers (e.g. Rhonda Byrne, Louise Hay, Dale Carnegie, Andrei Kurpatov, Nataliia Pravdina) to religious and spiritual books, Soviet advice literature (e.g. Vladimir Levi) and 'psychological' novels that were seen as dealing with existential questions (e.g. Carlos Castaneda).

However, it quickly became clear that, for nearly everyone, therapeutic engagement was much broader than merely reading books. They had experience of a range of popular psychological and spiritual practices, such as attending psychological training, yoga lessons and meditation, practising neuro-linguistic programming (NLP), spiritual dances, breathing exercises and feng shui. A few participants had already begun to practise therapeutic methods during the late socialist years, while the overwhelming majority had become acquainted with them only during the post-socialist period. The intensity of therapeutic engagement varied among the participants: some practised therapeutic

activities periodically, while for others therapeutic work was a crucial aspect of their everyday lives.

The rest of the article unfolds as follows. First, I shall contextualize my research within broader discussions of therapeutic culture and technologies. I shall then analyse in turn the three motivations for therapeutic engagements emerging from the interview accounts, before drawing conclusions.

Subjectivity and the changing logics of fields

Previous research on therapeutic technologies can be broadly categorized into three main and partly overlapping strands. First, there is a rich body of scholarship on the therapeutic discourse in popular media culture. Analyses have covered, for example, self-help literature (Hazleden, 2010, 2011; McGee, 2005; Rimke, 2000; Salmenniemi, 2012; Woodstock, 2005) and talk shows and reality TV (Lerner & Zbenovich, 2013; Ouellette & Hay, 2008). These have provided incisive analyses of representations of selfhood, gender and class, and key ideas, generic conventions and strategies of persuasion in the therapeutic discourse, shedding light on ways in which therapeutic reasoning produces and sustains relationships of power. Second, the *Zeitdiagnostic* perspective has addressed the therapeutic ethos as a decisive element of late modernity. Cultural critics have taken the therapeutic ethos as promoting individualism, eroding commitment to social institutions, promoting withdrawal from politics, and diminishing public life (e.g. Furedi, 2004; Lasch, 1979), while proponents of reflexive modernization have seen the proliferation of therapeutic discourse as a result of increasing individualization and erosion of the role of traditions and traditional authorities (e.g. Giddens, 1992). The third perspective, drawing on the Foucauldian governmentality tradition, has identified the rise and proliferation of 'psy' knowledges as a key dimension of (neo)liberal biopolitics. It has suggested that therapeutic knowledge and techniques constitute a mode of governmentality, calling into being self-managing and enterprising subjects (see e.g. Ouellette & Hay, 2008; Rose, 1998).

These bodies of scholarship have significantly advanced our understanding of the effects and meanings of the therapeutic discourse and the ideological work it performs in contemporary capitalism. However, the focus has primarily been on dissecting the 'interpellative structure' (Hall, 1988) of the therapeutic discourse and the ways in which it has been mobilized to govern populations, while less has been said about the lived experience of therapeutic technologies and the ways in which people make sense of them. The few extant studies addressing this aspect have mainly covered the Anglo-American context (e.g. Grodin, 1991; Lichterman, 1992; Sointu, 2013; for a few exceptions, see Honey, 2014; Mäkinen, 2014; Matza, 2009, 2012; Salmenniemi & Vorona, 2014). I shall address this lacuna here by delving into the motivations for therapeutic engagements in Russia.

Therapeutic engagements can be seen as a form of ethical work performed in order to transform oneself into a particular type of subject. Therapeutic technologies enable 'the government of the self by oneself', and in so doing subject the self to operations of regulatory power (Foucault, 1994, p. 88). This ethical work happens in 'articulation with relations with others' (Foucault, 1994), in a dynamic relation vis-a-vis the symbolic and material relations of power at work in social fields (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p. 97). Subjectivity – ways of being, thinking and acting in the world – is generated by ongoing

engagement and dialogue with these fields. It is shaped in the process in which, according to de Lauretis,

> … one places oneself or is placed in social reality, and so perceives and comprehends as subjective … those relations – material, economic and interpersonal – which are in fact social and, in a larger perspective, historical. … For each person, therefore, subjectivity is an ongoing construction, not a fixed point of departure or arrival from which one then interacts with the world. On the contrary, it is the effect of that interaction … and thus it is produced not by external ideas, values, or material causes, but by one's personal, subjective, engagement in practices, discourses and institutions that lend significance … to the events of the world. (de Lauretis, 1984, p. 159)

Subjectivity is, in this sense, 'socialized subjectivity' (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p. 126). It constitutes the point of suture between the most intimate and the most general, and is thus a pivotal site in and through which power relations operate and are lived.

By addressing the analytical space between therapeutic persuasion and its lived experience, I seek to underscore the active interpretative process involved in therapeutic engagements. This has often been neglected in Foucauldian-inspired studies, which have emphasized how therapeutic programmes cultivate neoliberal subjectivities in alignment with the imperatives of capitalist logic. However, as my analysis will highlight, rather than seamlessly producing neoliberal subjectivities, therapeutic engagements are fraught with contradiction and ambivalence, as participants negotiate and contest the normalizing power of these technologies (see also Honey, 2014; Matza, 2012; Salmenniemi & Vorona, 2014).

The dramatic reconfiguration of fields and their interrelationships caused by Russia's social transformation during the 1990s forms an important context for understanding the dynamics of subjectivation. During such periods of crisis, subjectivity may fall out of alignment with the fields in which it operates, creating a rupture in habitual and commonsensical ways of acting, being and perceiving the world (Crossley, 2003, p. 44). This was brought sharply into relief in the interview narratives of Russian research participants. The narratives revealed how people had had to refashion themselves to meet the new demands of the fields; essentially, to develop a new 'feel' for and 'belief' in the game (Bourdieu, 1990, pp. 52–55, 66). The interview accounts were pervaded by stories of a faltering transition to global consumer capitalism and a profound reconfiguration of the fabric of social life and the sense of self – a sense of dis- and reorientation and a repositioning vis-a-vis the new logics of social fields. Although the disintegration of the Soviet Union had taken place more than a decade previously, its effects had been so profound that they continued to crucially structure the research participants' narratives. I shall now turn to disentangling this issue in greater detail.

Strategies for life

The trope of 'crisis' abounded in the interview accounts. The research participants recounted how they were living 'in a constant crisis' characterized by a 'rupture of society' (cf. Shevchenko, 2009). This broader societal crisis was seen as having engendered

a 'crisis of subjectivation' (Foucault, 1986, p. 95), a need to refashion one's way of being and acting in the world, and to rethink the purpose of one's existence. The crisis of subjectivation was narrated in relation to a reconfiguration of the field of ideology. The research participants emphasized that moral hierarchies and value systems had shifted profoundly and a host of competing ideological frameworks had emerged to fill the landscape vacated by the Communist ideology. This shift in the ideological field had engendered a need to find new symbolic signposts to which to attach oneself and in relation to which to refashion oneself as an ethical subject. Therapeutic technologies were articulated as providing such signposts. In this capacity, they were likened to religion and political ideologies. Said Mikhail, a teacher in his fifties:

> People don't read classics and we are not forced to read Marxism-Leninism anymore. We believed in all that before, but now new beliefs are arising either from the Orthodox Church or other religions, or from popular psychology. Why? Because a person can't live without beliefs; he needs a soul, which develops by either visiting the church or by reading psychology.

Indeed, the rise of therapeutic technologies in Russia has gone hand in hand with a revival of traditional religions as well as a host of New Age spiritualities, often enmeshed with secular therapeutics (Lindquist, 2006; Redden, 2002). Many of the research participants were interested in spiritual and religious practices, for example shamanistic rites, Orthodox spirituality and physical exercises, drawing on Eastern philosophies.

Finding new blueprints for ethical work on the self following the reconfiguration of the ideological field emerged from the interviews as a key motivation for engaging with therapeutic technologies. Research participants were looking for food for thought and seeking to rework their relationships with themselves and the surrounding world through therapeutic practices. They talked about the need to pursue 'personal growth' (*vnutrennyi rost*) and 'self-realization' (*samorealizatsiia*), increase 'self-knowledge' (*samopoznanie*) and 'self-esteem' (*samootsenka*), and cultivate new dispositions of 'self-confidence' (*samouverennost*):

> *Svetlana:* Reading that kind of [popular psychology] literature somehow makes it possible to overcome the hardships that arise, to understand them in a new way, to reconsider your attitude towards them. This already increases your self-esteem, and if your self-esteem increases, your attitude towards the world changes. For example, feng shui improves your internal feeling, your contacts with people. Popular psychology helps you to learn how to successfully and correctly harmonize your life; in a way, to find a harmony between your internal world and the outer environment, I'd put it that way. (Retired physician, born in the 1940s)[1]
>
> *Ekaterina:* I don't choose books with titles that promise immediate results, like 'how to become rich in 50 hours' or something of the kind. I choose books that don't promise any miracles, but give some techniques, explain why certain problems could arise. And what can be done in this or that case. But the result is not guaranteed, and it is not a concrete thing. It's rather about some inner state, inner balance, about how to solve a problem that has arisen. (Entrepreneur, born in the 1960s)

While, for most research participants, therapeutic engagements represented a wide-ranging philosophical quest and comprehensive self-reflection, some took a more pragmatic approach and used therapeutic technologies to achieve clearly defined and specific goals, such as quitting smoking, losing weight or improving one's economic situation.

The research participants deployed a range of practices in their ethical work on the self. They attended psychological training, performed breathing and meditation exercises, wrote down ideas from self-help books and stuck them on the fridge, undertook various physical exercises and dietary regimes, reiterated affirmations, visualized desired outcomes, and arranged furniture and objects according to principles of feng shui. One of the most committed therapeutic practitioners among the research participants was Dmitrii, who ran psychologically informed breathing exercise sessions. In his thirties at the time of the interview, he was a longstanding practitioner of a number of body-related therapeutic practices and a key figure in what he called the 'esoteric subculture' in the city. This subculture drew together people interested in yoga lessons, spiritual dances, psychological training and shamanistic activities, 'outside the judgemental gaze of the scientific worldview', as Dmitrii put it. For him, the corporal and communal dimension of therapeutic engagement was central:

> We breathe; we just breathe in a little bit different way, that's all. And during it, something really changes, some processes in life. … It's one thing to understand things rationally … but when all of a sudden something happens inside you, some kind of understanding, and you can track it down, not with reason but with something deep down in you. … It's here that the further development of practical knowledge takes place.

Similarly, for many others, ethical work on the self was not a solitary endeavour but a distinctively communal practice. For example, those reading popular psychology self-help literature often exchanged and discussed books with their family, friends, colleagues and neighbours. They also participated in psychological training together with their friends and relatives.

As I have explained elsewhere (Salmenniemi & Vorona, 2014), the research participants' engagements with therapeutic technologies were selective, critical and ambivalent (for similar findings, see Grodin, 1991; Lichterman, 1992; Matza, 2009). They were particularly wary of dogmatic interpretations. They did not want to be given categorical advice, but wanted to draw their own conclusions. Self-help books promising 'quick fixes' and giving advice on how to become wealthy or find a rich husband were particularly criticized.[2] For many, therapeutic technologies served as 'an interlocutor', facilitating work on the self, rather than a set of 'universal truths' to be internalized:

Nadezhda: I read popular psychology books and draw conclusions myself. What I like in these books is that I can think about things, discuss. I can even disagree with the author. That is, I can think, 'I would behave in that situation in that way', or perhaps 'I would behave in a different way'. (Teacher, born in the 1970s)

Oleg: I particularly appreciate the experience of engaging in conversation with the author, the moment of having an interlocutor. When I feel the author is not attempting to be some kind of guru who is trying to convey truths that I must remember. (Photographer, born in the 1970s)

The research participants' aversion to categorical advice, and the fact that they sought to position themselves as active interpreters of knowledge rather than its passive objects can be seen as connected with two broader shifts. First, the reconfiguration of the ideological field undermined the authoritarian and didactic approach characteristic of Soviet pedagogical thought and moral education (Rivkin-Fish, 2005). There was little leeway in public discourse for critical engagement with expert knowledge in Soviet society, and dissenting views were effectively marginalized. The collapse of the Soviet Union disrupted this pattern and engendered a proliferation of competing sources of knowledge and authority. Second, the critical engagement with therapeutic knowledge can be seen as reflecting a move from external to internal authority, which is characteristic of both the therapeutic discourse and holistic spiritualities (Heelas, 2009; Sointu, 2013). Here, social institutions tend to be perceived as inimical to the expression of personal power, while the moral compass and truth are regarded as located in the internal depths of the self (Houtman & Aupers, 2007; Redden, 2002). Such 'therapeutic individualism' (Rimke, 2000) may offer individuals a sense of empowerment and agency (Sointu, 2013), which is likely to find particular resonance in Russia, marked by political disenfranchisement and the reconfiguration of moral authority (Mazzarino, 2013; Salmenniemi & Vorona, 2014).

A central element of the narratives of therapeutic engagements was how to make sense of and come to terms with the new neoliberal value system, and particularly with its normative figure, a certain 'subject of value' (Smith, 1997), or *homo oeconomicus*. This subject was seen as resting on the idea of the self as an object of investment and a repository of capital, oriented to maximizing material success and personal happiness. Research participants reacted to and commented at length on this figure and its centrality in many Western therapeutic practices and their Russian appropriations (see also Salmenniemi & Vorona, 2014). Narratives of therapeutic engagements thus triggered considerable political critique. In search of alternative blueprints for ethical work on the self, many had turned to Eastern philosophies, Soviet advice literature, and what was termed 'esoteric practices'. Valentina, a psychology teacher in her forties, and Vadim, a designer and translator in his twenties, explained:

Valentina: These [Soviet] psychology books that I'm reading right now give an idea of a logic of thinking and how to plan one's future in a correct way, and how our ideas are constructed and how they are related to what's going on around us.[3] … They propose to teach how to think quickly, and in a beautiful and correct way; whereas today's popular psychology proposes to teach how to become rich, or how to find a husband. In the books from the 1970s you are learning to think just for the sake of thinking.

Vadim: There is definitely one really big minus in contemporary psychological literature and it's that it has a very mechanistic approach to relationships. Contemporary NLP literature is a good example of this. A person is seen as an automaton that can be programmed in order to get something – relationships, money, power, sex. And when it doesn't work in that way, a person reaches a dead end and starts asking himself: 'Did I press the wrong buttons? What went wrong?'

The research participants also discussed how the struggle to thrive or at least survive in the new capitalist system had made life hectic and had led to work on the self being disregarded. As Dmitrii recollected wistfully: ‘before we could focus on breathing exercises the whole day. But now it’s really difficult to meet with people anywhere. People don’t have time for themselves or their inner world. It’s just work, worries, getting money, shopping, family, kids, problems, work and home.’ For him, this represented a ‘Western way of doing things’ which was at odds with the ‘communal Russian mentality’.

Navigating inequalities

Another motivation for therapeutic engagements related to shifting social hierarchies and mechanisms of inequality. The collapse of the Soviet Union brought about a meteoric growth in social inequalities and altered the logic of valuation of different kinds of capital. In Soviet society, owing to state ownership of property, economic capital was not a central structuring principle of inequality in the same way as in capitalist societies. Under post-Soviet conditions, however, the relative importance of economic capital grew dramatically. At the same time, the symbolic power of the intelligentsia, which occupied the highest position in the Soviet symbolic hierarchy, notably diminished, and a significant portion of it experienced downward mobility (Shevchenko, 2009, p. 26).

It became clear from the interview narratives that the research participants employed therapeutic technologies in order to make sense of these new mechanisms of inequality and revaluation of types of capital. As Andrei, a medical doctor in his forties, succinctly put it, people were reading self-help books in order to understand ‘why some people are driving with Mercedes, while we follow behind in our small Lada’. The research participants employed therapeutic technologies to position themselves vis-a-vis the new class order and to shape bodily and psychic dispositions to better ‘fit’ the new logics of the ‘game’. By engaging with therapeutic technologies, they sought to understand ‘how the world works’ and how to succeed, or at least survive, in the new capitalist system.

Labour is a key field in which inequalities are made and lived. The role of therapeutic technologies in refashioning subjectivity vis-a-vis the new actualities of this field emerged in repeated expressions of learning ‘how to behave correctly in business’, ‘how to develop oneself’, and ‘how to present oneself’. The research participants had deployed therapeutic techniques and knowledge to acquire new skills, for example in interactive services work and sales work, learning to give public presentations, engaging in entrepreneurial activities, combating unemployment and working in multi-level marketing. Labour markets and entrepreneurship were interpreted as requiring new types of disposition, such as self-confidence and effectiveness, that had to be learnt and instilled into the body and psyche. As Alla, a teacher in her fifties, sighed: ‘We always live in a crisis. So many people are nowadays unemployed, and they need these [therapeutic self-help] books in order to understand themselves and to become more confident people.’ Older research participants, in particular, often felt that many of the skills and dispositions accrued under socialism, and the whole ‘logic of practice’ generated by this embodied history, had become obsolete and unhelpful in navigating the current social order. However, younger participants also voiced the need to transform their dispositions.

Vadim had pursued therapeutic training while seeking a new job and trying to adapt to the new 'game' in the labour market. He recounted:

> When our country was in yet another crisis, people tried to survive and scrape by in life. And I'm no exception in this respect. I was looking for a job at that time and I was dealing with the problem of how to put my best foot forward effectively; I needed to learn how to do it.

However, he was deeply disappointed with the psychological training he had attended. He described these training courses as a form of 'zombieization' and 'shock therapy', where 'you basically pay for your brains to be washed'. Yet they had been instrumental to him in finding employment.

Although, as discussed in the previous section, there was some moral resistance to capitalist values among research participants, some had also consciously sought to inculcate new dispositions in themselves in order to get ahead in the new capitalist order. Svetlana, a retired physician, was an avid reader of self-help books and had used them in order to learn 'how to become successful'. She was critical of the Soviet era policies of 'levelling out' social differences, and welcomed the legitimation of individual wealth and success. For her, self-help books had served as educational 'how-to' materials in entering the new field of entrepreneurship:

> At some point I had to get involved in small business. Self-help helps you to establish business in the right way. In order to run your business in the right way, you need to know psychology: how to behave correctly, how to socialize with people, how to initiate a dialogue.

Boris's life history was also illustrative of the refashioning of subjectivity. He had become an enthusiastic multi-level marketing manager after 30 years of service in the Soviet army. As he joked, Soviet military service had given him a 'psychological preparation of a particular kind'. He was an avid reader of prosperity self-help literature and had participated in numerous motivational training courses. He talked at length about how his orientation in life had changed profoundly after he had familiarized himself with the ideas of the American motivational speaker Randy Cage. He reflected on the new rules of the game and the need to develop a new feel for the game through the example of his daughter, who had graduated from university with excellent marks but had been unable to find a job with a decent salary. This had led Boris to conclude that she had invested in a capital that did not work anymore. During the Soviet years, educational capital was highly valued and the intelligentsia enjoyed considerable symbolic power (Patico, 2005), but now the 'ability to formulate goals and achieve them', as Boris put it, was paramount. Rather than traditional educational capital, it was economic capital that ruled the day. Boris put this succinctly: 'We all understand that, if you command money, you command the whole world. There's nothing you can do without money.'

As this elucidates, therapeutic technologies were intimately entangled with class.[4] On the one hand, they were seen as a middle-class preoccupation, brought about by the social transformation (I shall return to this in the next section). On the other hand, the interview accounts also betrayed how unemployed and socially unprotected people, particularly women, engaged with self-help books in attempts to find a foothold in the new

social order. They used these books as a way to try to 'pull themselves together and somehow help themselves to become more confident people' and to 'find a way to realize themselves', as two of them put it. These books were construed as one of the few available resources to be mobilized in pursuit of a better life.

This theme is connected with a broader discussion in the interview accounts concerning an increasing sense of uncertainty about the ways in which society works. For many research participants, the mechanisms of social mobility and the new rules of the 'capitalist game' appeared to be highly complicated and even incomprehensible. Therapeutic technologies offered them explanatory systems, as plausible as any other, with which to try to mitigate risks, assess in which capital to invest, and make the best of life, or at least try to stop things getting worse. Valentina, a teacher in her forties, offered a perceptive analysis of the situation: 'I think people lost so unexpectedly the stability associated with the previous state system, lost their faith in some sort of official, formal, normal ways of achieving results that they have begun grasping any straws, including these popular psychology books', referring here particularly to positive thinking manuals like those of Louise Hay and Nataliia Pravdina. She illustrated this point with her friends who were keen consumers of therapeutic technologies:

> I have a friend whose house has turned Vietnamese or Chinese. There are toads with money everywhere and there are images of some gods. I say to her: 'This works only for the Chinese! They invented them.' – [the friend replies] 'Well, at least it won't get any worse. We'll put the Orthodox icon here, and we'll put the Chinese one here. Let this and that help.' I also have another friend; she's rich, buying lots of self-help books. And thanks to these books she always knows exactly what to do: how to hang up a painting at home in order to attract attention from men, how to sprinkle food in order to attract more of it, and so on. I have also yet another friend who works in a cloakroom: she's very poor, but when I meet her she's always willing to tell me how to place money in order to attract more, how to invite attention from men.

A desperate need to find tools to master the new capitalist rules of the game was also articulated by Mikhail, who had developed an interest in popular psychology after being caught in a pyramid scam in the 'wild years of the nineties'. He agonized: 'If only someone had given me a book like this [popular psychology] at that time. And when the pyramid collapsed, it became clear to me: I need to learn psychology, need to engage with it.' As this illustrates, therapeutic technologies were mobilized as a way to prepare for and handle the risks and insecurities caused by the capitalist system.

On the road to a 'therapeutic society'

As was mentioned earlier, 'psy' practices and knowledges occupied a marginal position in Soviet society, and there was no comparable rise of the 'therapeutic society' characteristic of postwar Western societies. The provision of mental health services was limited and people with mental disorders were over-institutionalized. Psychiatry, in particular, had a notorious reputation due to the practice of using psychiatric diagnoses to commit dissidents for compulsory psychiatric treatment. Following the disintegration of the Soviet Union, mental health legislation and policies underwent significant changes, with

improved access to mental healthcare, investment in the prevention of mental health problems, and efforts to deinstitutionalize; however, the situation is still in many ways problematic and there is a serious lack of accessible, non-hospital-based psychotherapeutic and psychiatric services (Shek, Pietilä, Graeser, & Aarva, 2010). This reflects a broader crisis of the healthcare sector and the welfare state in Russia. The state has been unable to deliver social and health services and benefits at a sufficient level and, as a result, large segments of the population have been excluded from access to basic services (Cook, 2007, p. 240). The public healthcare system is also widely distrusted (Rivkin-Fish, 2005), creating fertile ground for the proliferation of alternative therapeutic services.

In the interview accounts, therapeutic technologies were articulated in the context of these broader dynamics of the field of healthcare and cultural understandings of health and illness. Engagement with therapeutic technologies was made sense of by referring to the historical absence of psychotherapeutic institutions and traditions and distrust of healthcare professionals on the one hand, and to the developmentalist 'modernization narrative' of Russia 'progressing' towards a Western-like therapeutic society of the middle class on the other.

The inadequate provision of psychotherapeutic services and a lack of tradition in seeking psychological consultation were identified by the research participants as reasons for the growing popularity of alternative therapeutic technologies. In their view, the quality of public psychotherapeutic services could not be trusted, and the few existing private services were expensive and not entirely trustworthy. Reading self-help books and attending therapeutic training were seen as more affordable and accessible forms of help than psychotherapeutic consultation. Moreover, psychotherapy as a practice was seen as uncommon in Russia, familiar mainly 'from American films', as one participant remarked. Ekaterina reflected on this issue:

> *Ekaterina:* In our country, we didn't have a culture of psychological help for a long time and it hasn't really developed since, although we do now have a rather large number of psychologists and firms that provide such help. But because it's not customary for us, people know little of these services and the firms do not really advertise their services. And besides, there is also uncertainty about the quality of these services. So for an ordinary person it's rather difficult to know where to go. Plus, there is also the issue that it's experienced as discomforting and shameful. (Entrepreneur, born in the 1960s)

However, some also felt that a lack of tradition in psychological counselling reflected a more fundamental cultural difference between Russia and the West. In their view, mental support had been 'outsourced' to professional institutions in the West, while in Russia it was 'friends-as-psychoanalysts' who served the same function. As Zinaida explained, in the West 'they don't understand if you come and start pouring out your problems. They'll tell you: "Darling, go and see a psychologist. Why would I need to listen to your problems?" '

The interview accounts also foregrounded a deep-seated distrust of public psychotherapeutic institutions and medical authorities. This is likely to stem from the legacy of

the Soviet authoritarian tradition, as well as the spread of therapeutic individualism discussed in the previous sections. For example, Aleksandra, a psychology teacher in her forties, told how she had gone through a rough patch in her life after divorce; however, being afraid of professional psychologists, she did not seek any professional help but found consolation in popular psychology books. Karina, for her part, explained her engagement with therapeutic books and training in a desire to avoid the authoritarian and potentially disciplinary gaze of professionals and retain control in her own hands. As she explained, 'I'd rather read a book than seek psychoanalytical consultation because reading gives me more freedom. The author tells me his viewpoint and I take from the book what I need, whereas with the psychoanalyst, his task is precisely to explain me, to explore me.'

Research participants also employed therapeutic practices in order to prevent or cure illnesses. Nina, an entrepreneur in her fifties, was a keen practitioner of visualizations and affirmations and had employed them in dealing with her health problems. Natasha, an unemployed woman in her forties, had adopted the core idea of positive thinking self-help, suggesting that health problems result from negative thoughts. She had begun reciting positive affirmations as a way to deal with her longstanding health problems:

> I began reading this type of [popular psychology] literature because it made me think, and because you have to build your behaviour sensibly in order not to be ill. I have been ill for a long time and haven't been able get better in any way. But Sinel'nikov [Russian self-help author] writes in his book that illness is, in general, a consequence of our negative thoughts. … This morning I woke up and said to myself: 'I'm healthy, I'm wealthy' and I think I'm feeling better already [laughs]. So you have to treat your head first.

The interview accounts also show how therapeutic technologies had offered the research participants a new vocabulary to understand themselves, making issues understandable through the language of psychology. A number of them employed concepts familiar from the therapeutic discourse, such as 'self-esteem', 'positive thinking' and 'personal growth'. In their view, the regulation of the Soviet party state had been increasingly replaced by an emphasis on self-regulation, on the individual ethical duty to be aware of, understand and govern one's self (Salmenniemi & Vorona, 2014).

The stories of therapeutic engagements were also underpinned by a developmentalist narrative construing therapeutic services as a symbol of 'progress'. Here, the longstanding cultural meta-narrative of Russia's 'backwardness' vis-a-vis the West and its need to 'catch up with the West' were activated. This was succinctly put by Mikhail, a teacher in his fifties:

> As always, we are behind Europe and America, but now we are gradually reaching their level; a psychoanalytical society is being established in Moscow, and soon I guess we'll have psychoanalytical services. Like in the West, everyone will have their own lawyer and their own shrink. This happens when the majority becomes middle class.

As this quotation illustrates, this narrative was centrally articulated in terms of class. Therapeutic society was seen as a sign of the modern, prosperous, middle-class society to which Russia was aspiring. Psychotherapy was interpreted as a middle-class way of

dealing with the anxieties of post-socialist society. As one of the research participants summarized, 'popular psychological literature emerged *en masse* when the Russian middle class became increasingly faced with the insecurities of the future'.

Conclusion

The massive growth and appeal of therapeutic technologies worldwide cannot be understood without attending to subjective experiences of them. This article has sought to do that by unpacking the motivations for therapeutic engagements and the meanings attached to these engagements by Russian consumers of therapeutic services. I have identified three sets of motivations for turning to therapeutic technologies. First, therapeutic technologies are employed in attempts to find new blueprints for ethical work on the self and renegotiate subjectivity vis-a-vis the shifting ideological field. Second, therapeutic technologies operate as a resource with which to make sense of and navigate new mechanisms and conceptions of social inequality. And finally, therapeutic technologies are mobilized as a response to perceived deficiencies in the field of health services. The West appeared in the interviews both as a discredited source of capitalist values and as an ideal and a norm towards which Russia was seen as progressing.

I have argued that therapeutic technologies serve as a productive prism through which to understand how Russia's social transformation has been experienced and made sense of at the level of subjectivity and everyday life. They constitute an important cultural resource with which one's relationships with oneself and society can been reconfigured, symbolic and material hierarchies negotiated, and new forms of socio-economic precarity confronted and managed. The interview accounts elucidate how the transformation of subjectivity is intimately entangled with the shifting logics of social fields in Russia.

The interview accounts also elucidate that therapeutic technologies can be mobilized both to inculcate dispositions in alignment with and to resist capitalist values. The research participants voiced resistance to the neoliberal regime of the self cohering around individualism and self-interest. Thus, rather than merely producing neoliberal subjectivities, the analysis underlines the contradictory and incoherent nature of subjectivation and the diversity of therapeutic engagements and their effects (see also Honey, 2014; Matza, 2012; Salmenniemi & Vorona, 2014). The research participants negotiate and contest the persuading power of therapeutic technologies in many ways. Future studies should delve more deeply into these contestations and the lived experience of therapeutic engagements through ethnographic research. This would enable a deeper interrogation of the dynamics between socialized subjectivity and the symbolic and material structures of power, and provide a fuller understanding of how contradictions of capitalism are articulated and confronted in therapeutic engagements.

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Notes

1. The quotations have been slightly edited: some words and sentences have been omitted in order to make them more readable.
2. Although critical engagement was characteristic of the research participants in general, men were particularly critical of this strand of self-help literature, while some women found useful aspects in these books. Age did not differentiate the participants in this respect.
3. Valentina had discovered these books through an old relative, a former psychology teacher, whose personal library she had inherited. She was particularly fond of Vladimir Levi's books, such as *Isskustvo byt soboi* (1973), and AA Ivin's *Isskustvo pravil'no myslit'* (1986).
4. Class position is understood here in a Bourdieusian sense, defined by the global volume of different species of capital (economic, social, cultural, symbolic) possessed, the composition of these capitals, and the evolution in time of the volume and composition of capitals (Bourdieu, 1987). Capitals serve as principles of social differentiation and as resources on which agents can draw in social struggles.

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