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Trump therapy: Personal identity, political trauma and the contradictions of therapeutic practice

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journals.sagepub.com/home/ecs**Eeva Sointu**  and **David W Hill** 

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Abstract

The election of Donald Trump as US President in 2016 has been felt by many as a political trauma. In response, this trauma has been worked through using therapeutic talk and practice. In this article, we examine the media representations of these responses across a wide range of news sources in order to understand the way that attitudes and values regarding the politicisation of therapy are captured, reinforced and shaped. It is shown that therapy provides a legitimate ground for self-management of feelings of political hurt; that this is seen as valuable for the formation of political communities of action and resistance; and that it then comes under attack from the right precisely because of this community-forming function. Criticism of therapeutic engagement emerges as a rhetorical means of disrupting solidarity and silencing political dissent. It is concluded that these representations need to be situated within the contradictory character of a therapeutic culture that heals and empowers individuals as it situates subjects within medicalised and neoliberalised structures of power.

Keywords

Media representation, medicalisation, neoliberalism, political discourse, US politics

The election of Donald Trump as US President in 2016 has been felt by many as a political trauma. The election itself has been associated with increased levels of stress for Hillary Clinton supporters, who also reported a decrease in positive emotions after the event (Solomonov and Barber, 2018). These responses have filtered into therapeutic

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spaces, especially among those critical of the Trump administration or negatively affected by Trump's policies and rhetoric (LiVecchi and Obasaju, 2018). The trauma associated with the election has then been met with a therapeutic response, whether in clinical settings or with some recourse to the bundle of techniques that makes up a broader 'therapeutic assemblage' (Tiaynen-Qadir and Salmenniemi, 2017). This locates it within what has been identified as the 'emotionalisation of politics' (Yates, 2015: 1) or the heightened prominence of emotion in the civic sphere concomitant to the institution of a therapy culture (Richards, 2007).

The rise of this therapy culture has been met with tenacious criticism in some academic circles. In many theoretical approaches to the therapeutic (see Campbell, 1987; Lasch, 1981; Rieff, 1966), therapy use entwines with the rise of a frail and fragmented self, excessive vulnerability and narcissism, and the dismantling of social bonds. Critics proclaim that a focus on feeling and personal vulnerability not only 'dooms people to the role of helpless victims of the circumstance' (Furedi, 2004: 127), but also erodes the ground for collective action. But these accounts often fail to capture the conceptions and concerns that motivate therapists or the complexity of their practice (Bainbridge and Yates, 2011), and so miss the way that both individuals and communities might find significance in the focus on personal lives and experiences that is embedded in many therapeutic practices and that punctuates everyday life and extraordinary events alike (McLeod and Wright, 2009; Madsen, 2014; Salmenniemi, 2017). By focusing on personal stories and experiences, therapeutic culture has facilitated greater public recognition for private suffering, contributing to the wider recognition of emotional life in the public sphere (Harding and Pribram, 2002). The 'opening up of the private, the legitimising of the emotional realm and the speaking of the hitherto unspeakable' that are central to the therapeutic ethos have, as Katie Wright (2008: 332) argues, been important for allowing those with less power to make their experiences visible. The therapeutic arena is thought to have been especially important in allowing women to express their experiences (Foster, 2016). As Eva Illouz (2008) argues, therapeutic engagement 'encouraged women to develop their individuality and in doing so drove a wedge between women's sense of self and their domestic role' (p. 118). A focus on personal experience, combined with critical reflection on social roles, meant that therapeutic practices could encompass a challenge to traditional gender relations (Foster, 2016; Salmenniemi, 2017; Sointu, 2012).

This article explores the ways in which therapeutic practices are represented across diverse forms of news media. In light of the polarisation saturating social and political landscapes in the United States and elsewhere (Hahl et al., 2018), therapeutic engagement acquires intensely political undertones. To bring these to the fore, we undertake a critical analysis of media representations of therapeutic talk and practice in the context of the 2016 election and its aftermath. This work is informed by Critical Discourse Analysis (Chouliaraki and Fairclough, 1999; Wodak and Meyer, 2001), with a particular focus on the politics of representation and the ways media capture as well as reinforce existing attitudes and values (Bennett and Iyengar, 2008; Corner, 2011; Gavin, 2018). As such, we are concerned, as Stuart Hall (1997) guides, with 'how the knowledge which a particular discourse produces connects with power, regulates conduct, makes up or constructs identities and subjectivities, and defines the way certain things are represented'

(p. 6). We find that the politicisation of therapy is given significant media representation around the election of Trump in 2016; that this includes both the introduction of political talk to therapeutic settings and of therapeutic techniques into political discussions; that therapeutic self-expression is seen as both an individual and a collective response; and that this has been met in conservative-leaning and right-leaning sources by criticism or ridicule of those historically excluded from political power and targeted by the exclusionary rhetoric of the Trump campaign. It is then argued that therapeutic talk and practice might be understood here as providing for a process of individuation in the wake of a political trauma that seems to separate the individual from the wider public body; that this individuation is essential to the formation of communities of action and resistance; and that, because this therapeutic response represents a wider civic movement, it comes under attack from representatives of a right populism that claims ownership of 'the people' while promoting an extreme form of individualism. Finally, it is concluded that the politicisation of therapy ought to be contextualised within the contradictions of therapy itself, namely that it empowers while medicalising and neoliberalising the subject, since the contrary nature of therapeutic talk and practice provides the grounds for its contestation – in both political discourse and scholarly debate.

Methods and data

The material drawn on in this article emerges through four LexisNexis searches through *all English news* between 31 October 2016 and 31 December 2017. The searches sought to uncover news media sources, ranging from newspaper articles to TV shows, discussing therapy use in the context of the 2016 presidential election in the United States. The aim was to chart the existence and emergence of therapeutic thinking and concepts in relation to the 2016 election across forms of media, but also across national contexts. The four searches combined the initial premise of therapy use in the context of the election with search terms such as feeling or emotion, survive or cope, and anxiety.¹ The time frame of materials included in the searches enabled the inclusion of references to therapeutic engagement immediately prior to the election and continuing past the first-year anniversary of the election. Most of the sources, however, were published in the two months following the election.

The searches resulted in 332 hits. The data generated ranged from newspaper articles to opinion pieces, and to TV news shows. All sources were checked for relevance through a close reading of all the sections in which the search terms were utilised. Following this initial close reading, materials deemed irrelevant were excluded from the dataset. For example, sources discussing Vice President Mike Pence's support for conversion therapy were deemed irrelevant to the specific topic of this article – unless the source also discussed increased therapy use or therapeutic practices apart from conversion therapy – and removed from the dataset. After the removal of duplicates across all the results, the dataset was reduced to 82 sources that all noted or discussed the use of therapeutic practices within the context of the 2016 presidential election and the subsequent Trump presidency. Some of these sources discussed specific therapeutic practices, such as yoga or weaving therapy, while others referred to, for example, increased therapy use in the context of the election. For comparison, four searches that were otherwise identical but

replaced the name Trump with the name Obama through *all English news* from 31 October 2012 to 31 December 2013 returned zero relevant hits. The absence of references to therapeutic practices in the context of the 2012 Obama election indicates that the therapeutic domain is providing an important outlet for feelings pertaining specifically to the 2016 presidential election in the United States.

Initial coding of the material sought to identify important, and at times overlapping, themes. These included the following:

- Increased therapy use and coping advice: 42;
- Therapy as responding to concerns relating to racism, sexism or deportation of friends and family: 18;
- Therapeutic practices on college campuses and schools; ‘snowflakes’: 17;
- Calls to political activism, engagement or resistance; political action as therapeutic: 13.

The initial coding indicated that there were two distinct ways of speaking about therapeutic practices present in the data. On the one hand, therapeutic practices were framed as a means of articulating and addressing dismay and concern. On the other hand, therapeutic practices were characterised as capturing immaturity but also disregard for democracy. These two differing approaches to therapeutic practices form the starting point of the analysis presented here.

Findings

Our sources reveal the acknowledgement of Trump’s election as a traumatic experience; the identification of coping strategies in response; the location of political concern within therapeutic settings; the validation of therapeutic self-expression in progressive media; the disparagement of the politicisation of therapy in conservative media; and the construction of therapy as undemocratic in right-wing media.²

Trump anxiety

Half of the sources in the dataset refer to increased therapy use in the wake of the election and after it. Many also describe the election as a source of considerable anxiety and distress: ‘Across America, therapists relate that people are coming to see them because of the palpable gloom and fear that they are experiencing since the election’ (Irish Independent, 2017). There is, according to a therapist cited in *The New York Times*, ‘a chronic sense of anxiety among my patients that I have never seen before’ (Elias cited in Alderman, 2017). Another clinician estimates ‘that at least 80 percent of his new patients have reported election-related stress, anxiety and fear’ (Clarridge, 2017). ‘Election anxiety’ is thought to have developed into ‘Trump anxiety’ (Abebe cited in Métraux, 2017) with political talk now ‘consuming therapy sessions’ (Crooks, 2017). Sources also note that clients are ‘pushing aside their own personal problems to talk about their election blues’ (Derby, 2016). In addition to the election and Trump presidency filtering into therapy settings, sources also discuss therapeutic practices proliferating in some

educational settings. For example, readers are told that '[t]herapy dogs were brought to a school in Chelsea to help students cope with the results of the election' (Wolfe, 2016), while a university offered students a session titled 'Post-Election Self-Care with Food and Play' (Chamberlain, 2016).

Coping advice

In addition to discussing an increase in therapeutic engagement, progressive sources include guidance on how to deal with anxiety generated in relation to the election, and on managing political disagreements, especially in the context of families gathering for Thanksgiving in November 2016. As one set of guidance explains: 'don't get into discussions about the election if there is even a hint that it could turn into a fight' (Christie, 2016). Another therapist advises readers to reflect on their experience, and to take a 'timeout' when needed:

This holiday season, don't blame someone else's opinions for your outbursts . . . make the choice to take a timeout when you need it so you can do some really positive, healthy self-talk behind the scenes to bring you back to being your best self. (Ruskin cited in Kurtz, 2016)

Feelings emerging in connection with the election are, first and foremost, seen as something for a person to manage and control. As one source explains: 'The key to easing one's post-election pain is self-care and coping strategies' (Chamberlain, 2016).

Coping strategies outlined are not, however, focused solely on managing personal experience and feelings. Therapists are reported to be trying 'to help clients figure out ways to channel their frustration and anger and put it toward something positive' (Derby, 2016). Rather than just individual action and reflection, some coping advice offered also emphasises taking part in collective action related to causes such as immigration or Planned Parenthood. The advice is to '[u]se your anxiety to motivate you' (Hayes cited in Alderman, 2017), or as a *Guardian* article exhorts:

Calmed and centred with all this yoga and meditation, it's time to take the next step. The time for action is now. Let's get up off our [yoga] mats and unfurl those banners. And once more unto the breach. (Delaney, 2016)

The importance of collective action is emphasised also in *The Guardian*: 'What we urgently need now is not inner exploration, but outward engagement. Not "non-judgmental awareness" but critical thinking' (Whippmann, 2017). Political action is seen as not only important, but therapeutic in itself:

So stop talking, get out and do something. Even if it's small, even if it's in just your immediate community and neighborhood, especially for the minorities that feel so disenfranchised, that feel so scared, and to some degree rightfully so, get out and do something. Have your voice be heard. (Hafeez cited in New Day, 2016)

Sources also justify encouraging activism through drawing on psychological concepts and language: 'Taking action can help to instil the sense that you have some control over

your environment – what psychologists call perceived self-efficacy – and leave you feeling less stressed’ (Alderman, 2017).

Voicing concerns through therapeutic engagement

Sources also note how Trump’s victory has generated deep fear articulated within therapeutic settings. As a psychologist working with members of marginalised communities explains: ‘I’ve had people come back to therapy because of this election . . . They feel that they are being targeted as members of a minority group, and they’re afraid’ (Miranda cited in Clarridge, 2017). Another notes: ‘I’ve seen lots of shock, fear and grieving . . . I’ve had clients come in terrified and in tears about what they fear is going to happen’ (Slaughter cited in Clarridge, 2017). Sources also recognise the significance of the election result especially in the context of violence directed at women: ‘women who’ve been sexually abused are having their experiences “re-triggered” by a man who has previously made comments that appeared to condone sexual assault’ (The Associated Press, 2016). Minorities, vilified in Trump’s rhetoric, are also seen to be particularly affected by the election: ‘Therapists mentioned that their Latino and black clients were worried about what to tell their children, some of who are concerned they or their parents will be deported or “sent back to Africa”’ (O’Neil, 2016). In some educational settings ‘second-graders had expressed their fears about racism; the fourth-graders worried about deportation’ (Joyce, 2016). Similarly, an academic focusing on urban youth and cited in one of the sources explains:

I’ve witnessed kids from elementary school to college level stressed out and traumatized . . . If you’re undocumented, it’s not just rhetoric – it’s about survival . . . The potential of losing a parent is one of the most traumatic things a child can experience . . . It’s OK to talk about it. Expressing those feelings is better for a student’s health and well-being. (Acuna cited in Jones, 2017)

Therapeutic practices are seen to provide a valued outlet for articulating as well as addressing fears associated with the election result. As a parent interviewed in *The New York Times* notes:

People feel beaten up . . . especially women and minorities. My daughter, who is in middle school, was very upset. I’ve been advocating the yoga class as an event to regain composure and gather strength. We need to continue this kind of group support. (Katari cited in Green, 2016)

Therapeutic practices such as yoga are explicitly understood as a means of both generating composure and finding a supportive community. The importance of a supportive community is heightened for people, such as women and minorities, made especially vulnerable by the racist and misogynistic rhetoric of the Trump campaign.

The therapeutic value of self-expression

Some sources also emphasise the therapeutic value of self-expression. For example, in New York City, where the majority of voters voted for Hillary Clinton, artist Matthew Chavez launched the *Subway Therapy* project inviting commuters to communicate

feelings about Trump's win through sticky notes. The notes were stuck on subway walls in a therapeutic art installation. By the end of 2016, almost 50,000 sticky notes had been left on the walls of New York City subway stations (Schmidt, 2016).

The *Subway Therapy* project was explicitly conceptualised as providing commuters opportunity for self-expression and, furthermore, constituted 'the most significant public expressions of emotion in response to the election results' (Rosenberg, 2016). The therapeutic potential of sticky notes was seen to lie in expressing feeling. As the artist explains: 'I figured people had a lot of things to get off their chest' (Chavez cited in Green, 2016). Furthermore, while the notes were individually written, through writing their notes, individual participants 'were experiencing this group therapy; group catharsis' (Chavez cited in Lane, 2016). The sticky notes themselves capture not only dismay but also feelings of defiance. As one explains: 'As a non-hetero, colored woman in America, I am afraid but I will not cry anymore. Let's stay strong' (Schmidt, 2016). Some notes also include calls to action, one reading simply: 'Mobilize' (Rosenberg, 2016). These notes capture a sentiment of collective grieving but also organising: 'It gives me hope that such beauty and solidarity is coming out of such chaos' (Schmidt, 2016).

Sources also note how therapeutic providers were framing their practice as a means of dealing with the election result. For example, readers are told that in the *Radicle Herb Shop* in Brooklyn customers were handed free sticks of Palo Santo – or 'holy wood' – to burn as a means of managing feelings about the election. According to the owner of the shop, the stick 'was something people could take home and metaphorically and literally light a fire and cleanse a path towards healing from the ground up' (Alper cited in Green, 2016). Elsewhere in New York, textile designer Cynthia Alberto held weaving therapy workshops to respond to the emotional impact of the election, providing 'a safe space to talk about our anxiety and what happened' (Alberto cited in Green, 2016). Weaving is, furthermore, seen to offer an outlet for emotional expression because 'its rhythms are meditative and soothing, and the tradition of a weaving circle foment community and creativity' (Green, 2016). As such, sources highlight diverse forms of therapeutic activity that share a focus on self-expression and self-responsibility, and that emphasise the importance of communities and collective action in dealing with the election result.

Therapy for 'snowflakes'

The story of therapeutic engagement in more conservative-leaning outlets – that are broadly supportive of the Trump presidency – is markedly different from sources offering coping strategies or adopting a sympathetic tone in their reports of the dismay and fear generated in relation to the election. Here, therapeutic practices are framed as something to 'soothe the wimps' who are 'feeling stressed or vulnerable following the election of Donald Trump' (Gutfield cited in The Five, 2016). The utilisation of therapeutic practices within educational environments garners particular attention within more right-leaning sources. Reports of 'liberal crybaby snowflakes' (Fox Hannity, 2017) and 'sheltered millennial cupcakes' (Sanchez, 2016) utilising therapeutic practices as a response to the election are found in 13 of the sources. Stories discussing increased therapeutic engagement in schools and universities are especially dismissive of therapy use, and of the people engaging in therapeutic practices:

Crying? Panic attacks? Liberals on college campuses – they’re absolutely losing it, and so are the faculty, over President-elect Donald Trump’s victory . . . Now, in order to help these fragile souls cope with the thought of a Trump presidency, some school administrators – they are reportedly offering great services for these kids, including, let’s see, disaster counselling, therapy dogs, faculty-sanctioned cry-ins where the faculty passes out hot cocoa to the poo[r] little students. One university even was handing out coloring books and Play-Doh so they can play with it! (Fox Hannity, 2016)

Not only is the proliferation of therapeutic practices seen to indicate that ‘[f]eelings have become all-important’ (Sanchez, 2016), they are also framed as involving ‘poor pampered little children’ (Fox Hannity, 2016). Therapy use and users are, as such, characterised as immature and infantile. As an editorial in *The New York Post* reports, ‘The University of Michigan offered its traumatized students coloring books and Play-Doh to calm them’, before asking: ‘Are its students in college or kindergarten?’ (The New York Post, 2016).

Politicising therapeutic practices

In more right-leaning media, the rise of therapeutic practices is also represented as antithetical to democracy:

many campuses have pretty openly taken sides in American politics, marginalizing campus Trump supporters and treating Trump’s election more like a terrorist attack – with safe spaces, therapy dogs, and cancelled exams – than like the exercise of democracy that it was. (Reynolds, 2017)

People turning to therapeutic practices in the aftermath of the election are defined as un-American because, as one commentator on the *Fox Business Network* argues, ‘people do not need therapy to cope with democracy’ (MacDonald in Risk and Reward, 2016).

Not only do more right-leaning sources see therapeutic practices as capturing emotional frailty and the weakening of democracy, therapeutic practices are assigned to those with a more progressive political outlook. As such, a critique of the therapeutic domain as furthering vulnerability fuses with a critique of the political left. As a commentator on *Fox* argues: ‘This is the agenda of the left, to weaken people, to make them think that they can’t take a punch and therefore, need government to intervene with therapy’ (Ablow in Risk and Reward, 2016).

Therapeutic practices emerging in the context of the election are also seen to ignore the real issues: ‘We ignore the insane in their private hell until they push tourists in front of trains. But hey, let’s offer workers paid counselling, because Trump’s win threatens to undermine their vegan book club’ (Gutfield in *The Five*, 2016). Therapeutic practices emerging in the context of the election are represented as focused on illusory and unimportant concerns. The discussion draws on stereotypes of veganism and book clubs as out-of-touch and elitist. Membership of a vegan book club is, furthermore, utilised as a rhetorical device to discredit those who might seek counselling for concerns emerging in relation to the election.

The critique of therapeutic practices, in more right-leaning sources, also draws on cultural associations between therapeutic practices, emotional expression and femininity. In this case, therapeutic practices are defined as something that undermines manhood and masculinity. This framing is captured in the way that more right-leaning sources discuss New York City Mayor Bill de Blasio endorsing counselling in the wake of the 2016 election. Reportedly, de Blasio offered New York City workers free counselling after the election. The following exchange (Risk and Reward, 2016) from a right-leaning TV show, between host Elizabeth MacDonald and Keith Ablow, a member of the ‘Fox News Medical A-Team’, captures the manner in which therapeutic practices are framed as emasculating:

- Ablow: . . . This election was absolutely seminal and necessary. And I can – I’m not surprised that somebody like Bill de Blasio who doesn’t favor truly American democracy I don’t believe or entrepreneurial activity or the rights of individuals. He’s undone by it. He’s projected. Everyone needs help when really Bill needs help. And you know what? Here I am, Bill.
- MacDonald: OK.
- Ablow: Come on, I can fix this. Was it your mom? Did she tell you you weren’t a real guy?
- MacDonald: OK.
- Ablow: You’re a leader, let other people have their lives and their autonomy.

Endorsement of therapeutic practices is represented as not only undemocratic but also antithetical to being ‘a real guy’. As such, in addition to undermining core American values, and even the idea of democracy, therapy use emasculates.

Discussion

Where the 2016 election of Trump has been experienced as a political trauma, therapeutic practice and language have been drawn upon to explain and justify personal concerns. Therapeutic settings – or non-therapeutic environments that have seen the introduction of therapeutic practice and language – have also been configured as spaces not only of individual but also collective action and resistance. These developments have been met by a counter-narrative that is critical of this politicisation of therapy. In what follows, we focus on the way that Trump Therapy might encourage self-expression as a form of individuation; that this might form a ground for communal belonging and collective action; and that this ground becomes a target because it represents a civic space at odds with individualism.

Self-expression as individuation

The therapeutic practices captured in the sources resonate with important contemporary conceptions of personal identity – and especially the processes of individuation that allow individuals to situate themselves within and against collective trauma. Bernard Stiegler (2009) explains this process, in somewhat abstract terms, as the act of an ‘I’

individuated by its contribution to a 'we'. What makes the 'I' cohere – what gives it its consistency and endurance – is its placement within the coherence of a group or collective. This is an ongoing process, of individuation or self-making, wherein the 'I' is never fully individuated and the 'we' is constantly altering and dividing. Therapeutic practice as a response to political trauma allows for periods of self-reflection and self-expression that encourage the individual to interrogate the self and resituate it within a body politic that has seemingly shifted. Some degree of knowing oneself is integral to this as a healing process, although, following Judith Butler (2005), this is best understood in a qualified fashion: 'I speak as an "I", but do not make the mistake of thinking that I know precisely all that I am doing when I speak in that way' (p. 84). Self-knowledge is a kind of lack in the sense that every question leads eventually to a question that cannot be answered – bottoming out at the problem of our own origin (Stiegler, 2009: 8). Therapeutic talk is a mode of speaking where, ultimately, *what* we are, is less important than *who* we are. Some attempt at disclosure is what counts. As Adriana Cavarero (2000) argues, an individual undisclosed remains a *what*. Disclosure relates a life story that can then interlock with those of others, so that the *what* becomes a *who* among others. This is captured in responses to political trauma. Practices such as the *Subway Therapy* project understand self-expression as a form of individuation that also relates. Individual acts of communication, through the medium of sticky notes, become in a public space an expression of shared hurt and a possible locus of collective healing.

Some of the sources referring to therapeutic practices and thinking in the context of the election understand these practices as capturing deeply felt, and often justified, socio-political concern. Therapeutic language offers people concerned about the election a vocabulary for talking about their experiences, while the therapeutic process helps in making personal fears and experiences intelligible (Illouz, 2008; Madsen, 2014; Wright, 2008). Criticisms of the turn to therapeutic practice and talk in the context of political trauma have framed such responses as narcissistic or individualistic. In a sense, the first charge is ultimately empty. The idea that there is ever an absence of narcissism, rather than a degree of self-concern that allows the individual to extend themselves towards others, is difficult to motivate. Stiegler (2009: 39), for example, writes of 'primordial narcissism', of the way that solidarity is unimaginable without a measure of self-regard, although we can think more straightforwardly of how care for the self prepares the individual for care for others. Self-work in the form of therapy is only narcissistic to the extent that a self-healing 'I' is better company in a world shared with others. The suggestion of individualism similarly misunderstands the project of selfhood-in-therapy. An individual who brings politics into a therapy session wants to be part of a 'we' at a time that this feels as if it has been made difficult. This is not a problem of individualism but a lack of individuation. When some perceived trauma befalls the sense-making of the public sphere, the pursuit of therapy might be understood as an attempt to relocate the self and reorient the individual within the collective. Denied this possibility there would be, not individualism, but what Stiegler (2014) calls 'the destruction of the primordial narcissism of individuals – the destruction of that which enables individuals to *project* the unity of an *I* in a fashion clearly as fictional as it is indispensable' (p. 83). But given a voice, the project of revealing and healing oneself creates spaces of action – that might yet be plural or shared.

Relating narratives as solidarity

Stories told of therapeutic engagement in the wake of the 2016 election point also to therapeutic practices offering a means not only of articulating and addressing concern, but of forming communities of action. The febrile political climate at large has, as Barry Farber (2018) notes, given rise to ‘a shift in therapy for many, a movement from a primary focus on current personal crises or patterns of behavior to a more expansive, somewhat existential exploration of values, purpose, and commitments’ (p. 716). This mobilisation of personal concern to commitment might be understood as the recognition of the way that the individual flourishes only in a collective of others also permitted to flourish, or what Stiegler (2009) calls ‘collective narcissism’ (p. 84). As Butler (2006: xiii) argues, self-sufficiency is not enough. Self-definition and self-mastery do not suffice. The stories told in therapeutic talk reveal this. As Cavarero (2000) points out: ‘Only in the improbable case of a life spent in perfect solitude could the autobiography of a human being tell the absurd story of an unexposed identity, without relations and without world’ (p. 36). That is, an individual cannot give an account of themselves without including their social conditions; it is always a story of relations and the norms that bind them – taking us beyond personal concern and into the question of values. Ultimately, as Butler (2005: 21) argues, an account of oneself is always addressed to someone else, grounding the act of disclosing and sharing as a moral relationship subtended by talk rather than as a primarily reflexive experience.

In this way, the focus on personal wellbeing is harnessed to political action and activism. Within therapeutic settings, individual feelings such as anger can generate ‘bonds of emotional solidarity’ (Wahl-Jorgensen, 2018: 768–769) that form the basis for shared political action. As such, therapy provides a set of embodied as well as collective practices and rituals that can facilitate the voicing of concerns, and that strengthen communal bonds. Where communities of disclosure are in place, the importance of self-knowing is tempered by that of enquiring to know the other. The *who am I?* is interrupted by the emergency of the *who are you?* The desire for recognition, as something lacking, is met only by recognising others (see also Yar, 2001). This can be impersonal and distributed, as in the case of the *Subway Therapy* project, where the public display of political trauma allows the individual to recognise others and feel their own concerns recognised in a communal setting. Or this can be personal and proximate, as in the case of Cynthia Alberto’s weaving therapy workshops, where emotional expression is situated within communities of creativity and collective action. This strengthening of communal belonging is, however, taking place at a time of increasing political polarisation (Abramowitz, 2010). As such, therapeutic thinking is caught in a reworking of communities and the very idea of collective action in an increasingly partisan political era.

‘Acting out’ as policing

Criticism of therapeutic practices in more conservative-leaning sources stresses that they constitute an over-emotional and undemocratic response. This is encapsulated by the suggestion that political trauma was being experienced as something akin to a terror attack. These criticisms align with theoretical frameworks arguing that therapeutic

engagement captures and produces emotional weakness (Furedi, 2004; Lasch, 1981; Rieff, 1966), but these frameworks offer a limited means of making sense of therapeutic engagement in this context and are, at best, agnostic about the political mobilisation of this framing. In their proper context, these criticisms are best understood as an instance of *acting out*. Stiegler (2009) understands this as an attack on bodies or institutions that symbolise not only a public but also a civic engagement. Therapeutic communities, or the shared spaces in which they might be enacted, such as university campuses, represent a wider body than that envisaged by individualistic politics. Stiegler talks of acting out as the assassination of the 'we' by a 'me' – incidentally, his example here is the mass shooting, often targeted at civic spaces such as town halls or public schools – and we might see this in the way that conservative voices in the media denigrate and delegitimise therapy as a political practice. This acting out then aims at a form of policing, in the sense of Jacques Rancière (2010: 36), as 'a symbolic constitution of the social' and a process of 'dividing up the sensible'. *Sensible* here is intended to pick out the way that policing is not a form of control or repression but a way of defining how we are permitted to partake in the public realm by defining how things can be perceived, although it is possible to lean into the idea that the expression of feeling is contrasted with the sensible conduct of politics. The effect of such policing is to divide and exclude, determining who can participate by determining what is apparent. Right-leaning media portray therapy as a tool of the left and a barrier to autonomy, and as such as antithetical to the 'angry populism' (Wahl-Jorgensen, 2018) of Trump, which constructs 'the people' (Stanley, 2008), in opposition to elites and minorities alike, while lionising individual liberty. This plays out in geographically specific ways, for example the targeting of New York City Mayor de Blasio: the East Coast was central to the history of psychoanalysis in the United States, and New York City has a peculiarly intense association with US therapy culture (see Illouz, 2008: 29–35); this places it firmly in the firing line for a populist rhetoric that seeks to mobilise 'red states' against 'the liberal elites' on both coasts. Therapy is attacked as much for what it represents as what it might achieve.

The turn to therapy in the aftermath of Trump's election is also cast as infantile and emasculating. While therapeutic seeking has long been feminised (Foster, 2016; Illouz, 2008; McGuire, 2008), terms such as *snowflake* or *millennial cupcake* are drawn on to infantilise those turning to therapy. Even though the *snowflake* motif constitutes a means of undermining the experiences of men and women alike, more right-leaning sources are especially dismissive of men whose response to the election involves endorsing, or engaging in, therapeutic practices. The power to emasculate that is subtly attributed to therapeutic practices is especially visible in discussions of political figures, such as de Blasio, offering access to counselling in the aftermath of the election. Endorsement of therapeutic practices is used to cast de Blasio as misguided and weak. In decrying therapeutic engagement, critics in more right-wing media not only disparage skills, such as help-seeking or talking about one's emotions, that have historically been associated with femininity; the condemnation of vulnerability and help-seeking also helps to establish behaviours and values associated with 'confident, savvy, and aggressive' masculinity as ideal (Dignam et al., 2019: 2). Importantly, the idealising of aggressive masculinity that is subtly captured in the 'snowflake' motif and in the disparaging of therapeutic engagement also justifies and enforces patriarchal power (Pascoe, 2017). As Sara Ahmed (2012:

123) notes, talking takes up space – and only speech deemed acceptable constitutes official space. These official spaces then accommodate while they exclude. Some topics and modes of discussion are permitted. And some can speak, while others cannot. The idealisation and enforcement of aggressive masculinity, and the exclusion of emotion and sharing, constitutes another method of policing the space of politics.

Concluding remarks

The sources examined earlier ultimately reveal the prismatic nature of therapy in the context of political trauma: therapy as a process of individual flourishing or as excessive narcissism; therapy as a space of community action or of retreat into individualism; and therapy as emotional healing or as affective profligacy. These differing perceptions are influenced by political position, but they also emerge from contradictions inherent to therapeutic talk and practice. The first is that while therapy empowers, it also situates the individual within the purview of clinical power. Emmanuel Levinas (2008: 170) argues that the coherence of discourse lies in the violent exclusion of subversive discourse by the state. Those who refuse to be reasonable are threatened with medicalisation. As such, the contestation of what is a reasonable response to political trauma is skewed by the medicalisation of the anxieties that it produces, because it already concedes to the logic that stress and anxiety in the face of political trauma constitute an unreasonable response and so that therapeutic talk in a political context (or vice versa) is unreasonable discourse. Therapy here locates the individual within the cultural production of psychopathology (Blackman, 2004). The danger is that a medicalised response to political trauma is essentially silenced because it is automatically located outside of the political. The second is that while therapy heals individuals that may then form stronger communities, it also entrenches key neoliberal values such as personal growth, autonomy and self-reliance (Rose, 1999; Swan, 2010; Woodstock, 2014). Roger Foster (2016) argues that therapeutic practices focusing on personal experience and feeling have melded with neoliberal values such as self-responsibility. The neoliberal ethos is founded on winners and losers, on competition and economised self-interest (Chen, 2013: 449). As such, therapeutic practices provide an uneven ground for political traumas that are, by their very nature, shared and collective struggles. In their strongest form, these contradictions combine as the unreasonableness of the experience of medically excessive political trauma meets a neoliberal ideology of wellness as individual self-responsibility, of health as productivity and of illness as an individual choice (see Cederström and Spicer, 2016).


This is important because the significance of self-expression, and of having one's story heard, is shaped in relation to how stories of people with differing identities have been heard and valued in societies. In a historical context where the experiences of those with less power – generally women and minorities – have been rendered marginal, the call to express oneself can acquire deep and, potentially, empowering meanings. Identities are, as such, central to making sense of the appeal and the significance of therapeutic practices that normalise self-expression. Furthermore, an escalation of a political rhetoric that marginalises women, minorities and immigrants amplifies the importance of outlets for responding to and resisting such rhetoric. This is especially meaningful in the context of the racism and misogyny of the Trump campaign, where

the personal anxieties expressed in the sources are articulated as a wider anxiety for the consequences for women, migrants or other targeted groups, and in the global context of populist governance and strongman politics – although a Brexit Therapy or Bolsonaro Therapy would have their own particular resonances according to geographical variations in therapy culture. With its focus on personal experience, the therapeutic arena is especially well positioned to become an outlet for stories of those whose voices and experiences have been made marginal. Therapeutic spaces and practices can also provide for collective and creative expression and action. But the therapeutic edifice – prismatic and contrary – also renders it vulnerable as a form of political expression. Ultimately, the sources studied here reveal therapy as a key battleground in the conflict of what is acceptable political discourse, of what it is allowed to represent and who is permitted to participate in it.

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Notes

1. The searches were conducted with the following terms and connectors. First: therap! w/50 Trump w/50 election w/100 emotion OR feeling. Second: therap! w/50 Trump w/50 election w/100 surviv! OR cope. Third: election w/1 anxiety AND Trump AND therap!. And fourth: therap! w/10 Trump w/10 election OR postelection.
2. Sources owned by News Corp, such as Fox News, are considered more conservative leaning, while sources such as the New York Times are considered more progressive (Bennett and Iyengar, 2008).

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