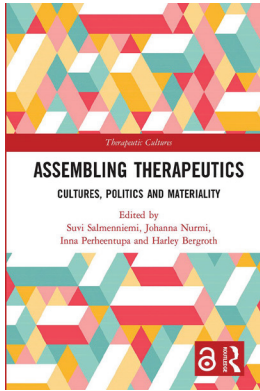


BOOK REVIEW

ASSEMBLING THERAPEUTICS



Suvi Salmenniemi, Johanna Nurmi, Inna Perheentupa, Harley Bergroth (eds.). *Assembling Therapeutics: Cultures, Politics and Materiality*. New York: Routledge, 2019. 237 pp.

Forms of therapeutic help can be seen everywhere as offers in complementary, alternative, and ethnic medicine, massages, exercises, self-help courses, media interviews and TV shows with life coaches, angel therapists, healers who claim to be able to cure even the traumas of your previous lives. Researchers talk about a general therapeutic turn in society and the omnipresence of therapeutic discourse in the Western world, which increasingly create symbiotic forms with new spiritualities and religion and involve an assemblage of approaches to physical, mental as well as emotional health. *Assembling Therapeutics*

mediates a multifaceted *status quo* of this situation, investigating “how human and non-human actors, systems of thought and practice are assembled and interwoven in therapeutic engagements” (p. 2). Based on lived experiences and empirical case studies, the book describes and analyses the impacts of the therapeutic turn on society at the micro as well as macro level – in some cases, in rather surprising settings, viewing the topics through a scholarly gaze that avoids being judgmental and unduly generalising. It is clear that one book cannot cover the expressions of this wide phenomenon in its entirety, but it still gives valuable glimpses through topical examples and explorations.

Several chapters look at the metamorphoses that the initially spiritually grounded practices undergo during the process of mainstreamisation and secularisation. For example, as mindfulness is increasingly visible and perceivable as part of mainstream culture in many Western countries, it is worthwhile to read the elaborations of Steven Stanley and Ilmari Kortelainen on the transformations of mindfulness-based therapies and techniques across time and place. The authors show that, with its roots in Buddhist practices, mindfulness has obtained a much wider spectre of meanings than spiritual self-healing and is used as a tool for enhancing one’s practical competitiveness in capitalist pursuits of success and wealth. Tatiana Tiaynen-Qadir shows that although the roots of modern self-help and therapeutic ethos can be seen in Protestant Christianity, therapeutic knowledge and practices within Finnish Orthodoxy are best understood through the concept of ‘glocalized’ therapeutic assemblage, which involves secular as well as religious interpretations. Julia Lerner makes an attempt to show the global post-Soviet characteristics of new Russian-immigrant religiosity inside and outside Israel, describing how her interviewees merge with what she refers to as a contradictory but meaningful, neoliberal religious-therapeutic subjectivity. Another author dealing with Israeli settings is Ariel Yankellevich, who observes the developments of the local coaching culture.

There are also chapters that explore how therapeutics emerges from secular practices and settings and often acquires a touch of personification and supernaturalism on the way. Harley Bergroth and Ilpo Helén observe the interactions of therapeutic life management and technology, focusing on the use of near-body gadgets and the related software applications that provide measurements of the rhythms and patterns of everyday life – for example, step counts, heart rate, and sleeping patterns, concluding that although similar gadgets have existed for decades or even centuries, the contemporary therapeutic mythos of becoming a better and more holistic person has caused an unprecedented boom in their design and advertisement. Another article on similar technical tools, written by Felix Freigang, describes mood-tracking applications. Virve Peteri gives an overview of existing research on fun and playfulness in organisations and shows, on the basis of empirical examples, how new forms of office decoration, spatial planning, and organised self-help connect with the therapeutic tenor that has brought emotions to the core of organisational culture.

Suvi Salmenniemi, Johanna Nurmi, and Joni Jaakola bring in a political dimension when they look at the fusion of therapeutics and neoliberalism, showing how neoliberal work ethics (e.g., demands for competition, productivity, and performance) shape self-identification but can also cause dysfunctional relationships between the world and the self. In her chapter, Inna Perheentupa points out that the feminist movement was among the first political movements and cultural resources in the 20th century to draw from therapeutic discourse when stressing individual and collective empowerment and overcoming past injuries and memories, but in the 21st-century Russia, feminist activists connect their protest activities increasingly with the conservative state politics related to the control of the body (e.g., sexual and reproductive rights, gendered violence). The author shows how certain recurring keywords are narratively produced and how therapeutic elements are assembled to form contemporary public activism and politics.

Several chapters of the book make an attempt to move beyond the traditional human-centred definitions and description modes used in therapeutic approaches, taking into consideration objects, spaces, imaginations, and the supernatural realm. Marjo Kolehmainen's chapter focuses on relationship and sex counselling practices in Finland, aiming to use the lens of affective atmospheres to map how situational and material therapeutic practices operate through both human and non-human bodies. One article that offers rather innovative conclusions about human and non-human relationships is by Kia Andell, Harley Bergroth, and Marja-Liisa Honkasalo, who discuss the therapeutic potential of uncanny experiences, viewing these as part of people's existential repertoire that helps them make sense of their unusual experiences and perceptions, thus working as a form of self-care and care for others.

It can be concluded that the expressions of therapeutic discourse can indeed be observed everywhere, but the question of vulnerability also emerges, as therapeutic culture simultaneously seems to presuppose a parallelly existing culture of vulnerability and brings up the need for a fine balance within therapeutic assemblage in order to avoid the risk that the wealth of readily available gadgets, courses, books, counselling, organised self-help, etc., especially to the middle-class, would direct their therapeutic life processing in a certain homogenising way, thus robbing them of individual self-reflection and dynamic learning. In any case, this book should be of interest not only

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to sociologists, folklorists, and cultural scholars, but also to psychologists, journalists, health policy makers, and others.

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