

10 ‘Living on a razor blade’

Work and alienation in the narratives of therapeutic engagements

*Suvi Salmenniemi, Johanna Nurmi
and Joni Jaakola*

[T]he contemporary psychological discourse summons the individual to a highly autonomous task of psychological self-optimization within a distinctively individualistic therapeutic regime. In short, this is a vision of psychological life as enterprise, one centred on the individual pursuit of well-being as one of calculating self-interest, and a project of repudiation centered on the inherited dependencies of social government.

(Binkley, 2011: 94)

The available cultural scripts, such as ‘self-help’ discourse, reinforce the messages of self-reliance and personal responsibility that are deeply rooted in the trials of individual experience, and hence serve as a therapeutic ethos that hides real economic and social failure and disappointment behind a projected fantasy of individual self-reliance through careful emotional self-management.

(Foster, 2016: 112)

As in the quotations above, much of the literature on therapeutic culture and neoliberalism suggests that therapeutic knowledges and practices have been successfully harnessed to serve neoliberal projects seeking to cultivate self-governing, enterprising and self-reliant subjects (Cloud, 1998; Madsen, 2014; Ouellette & Hay, 2008; Salmenniemi & Adamson, 2015). Therapeutic techniques are argued to operate as powerful instruments to manage subjectivity across social domains, casting structural issues of power as individual psychopathologies, and thus masking and legitimising capitalist exploitation (Foster, 2015). While this interpretation undoubtedly captures important dimensions of therapeutics in neoliberalism, this chapter suggests that the relationship between the two may be more complex. Drawing on fieldwork among practitioners of alternative therapeutic practices in Finland, we argue that rather than being directed merely towards strategic self-optimisation and entrepreneurial self-management, therapeutic practices may also be mobilised to critique, contest and disengage from the destructive and exploitative effects of neoliberalism. Thus, they are neither inevitably nor necessarily allied with neoliberalism, but may have different effects and functions depending

on the assemblage they become part of. They can be assembled both to reinforce regulation of subjectivity for the capitalist production of value (Davies, 2015; Mäkinen, 2014; Ehrenreich, 2009; Peteri in this book) and to foster resistance to alienating and dehumanising aspects of neoliberal work.

Working life was not initially at the core of our research, but in the course of fieldwork we were alerted to its centrality in narratives of therapeutic engagements. Although we did come across a number of therapeutic training activities and practitioners preaching strategic self-management as a prerequisite for success, these were overshadowed by countless stories of work-related exhaustion, depression, burnout, disillusionment and disappointment. These stories articulated a deeply felt and embodied sense of contradiction between ideological interpellations and the lived realities of work. They invited us to delve more deeply into relationships between work, therapeutics and neoliberalism in our research materials. Accordingly, in this chapter we trace how working life is experienced and made sense of by therapeutic practitioners, and the meanings and functions acquired by therapeutic forms of knowledge and practice in this context. We suggest that the interview narratives convey a profound experience of alienation, articulated through the tropes of ‘loss of the self’ and ‘refusal of subjectivity’. In dialogue with assemblage thinking, we show how the practitioners seek to contest and alleviate this alienation by assembling a package of therapeutic self-care practices with which to distance and disengage themselves from the ethic of constant performance and efficiency and the valorisation of waged work. We approach such therapeutic assemblages as a generative force (Newman, 2017: 89) and a form of everyday resistance (Scott, 1989), organised not as publicly visible contestation, but rather as individualised and small-scale acts of non-compliance and subversion in the everyday.

Whereas much previous research has focused on tracing dominant interpellations of therapeutic discourse and how it operates as an oppressive ideology or a form of governmentality (Furedi, 2004; Madsen, 2014; Cloud, 1998; Ouellette & Hay, 2008), this chapter zooms in on the lived experience of therapeutic practices. Echoing Illouz’s (2008: 18) call for studies of ‘what people actually *do* with certain forms of knowledge’ and what these knowledges are ‘good for’, we explore how therapeutic practices are assembled and mobilised to tackle the experience of alienation. Our analysis draws on materials gathered from an ethnographic study among practitioners of popular self-help psychology, complementary and alternative medicine and new spiritualities in various parts of Finland, conducted by the first author, Suvi, between 2015 and 2017. The fieldwork was informed by a multi-sited fieldwork methodology, with the central principle of ‘following’ as a mode for defining the objects of study (Marcus, 1998: 84). The research circulated across diverse sites of the therapeutic field, following the participants and the types of practices they were engaged in, as well as metaphors and storylines, such as belief in the power of thought and interconnections between body, mind and spirit.

In this chapter, we draw on interviews with 32 research participants who were professional healers or practised therapeutic activities as part of their everyday

lives, as well as materials from participant observations of therapeutic events (fairs, training sessions, workshops, lectures, etc.). The interviews mapped practitioners' life stories, as well as their experiences of therapeutic engagements and the meanings attached to them. The overwhelming majority of the research participants (29) were women. This reflects the overall gender profile of the therapeutic field, which continues to be femininely marked and utilised by women more than men (Swan, 2008; Sointu, 2013). The participants ranged in age from their early thirties to their seventies. Only six had a university education, while the others had intermediate or little formal education. Sixteen worked either full-time or part-time as professional healers or therapists. The rest worked in some form of care work or office work, or as teachers, HR managers, salespeople, bookkeepers, entrepreneurs or school assistants, or were unemployed, on pensions or studying. In our analysis, we focus on the interview narratives, with ethnographic observations providing crucial contextual sensitivity for the interpretative work.

In what follows, we first discuss the connections between therapeutics and neoliberalism and the role of therapeutic practices in the workplace. We then explore experiences of alienation in the workplace, followed by an examination of how therapeutic assemblages may be mobilised to contest the destructive effects of work. The concluding section suggests that therapeutic assemblages open up a horizon of hope by creating a space to voice the hidden injuries of neoliberal capitalism and envisage alternative ways of being in and connecting with the world.

The therapeutic spirit of capitalism

Previous research has highlighted the seminal role played by the therapeutic discourse in the historical development and transformation of capitalism (Rose, 1990; McGee, 2005; Madsen, 2014; Illouz, 2008). It has been suggested that the therapeutic discourse has served as an instrument of class power by legitimating capitalist oppression, inhibiting political dissent and turning structural issues into individual psychopathologies to be remedied by commodified self-improvement regimes (MacNevin, 2003; Cloud, 1998). In particular, therapeutic knowledges and practices have been seen as being intimately entangled with neoliberal governing projects promoting a politics of self, whereby work on the self is normalised and posited as an ethical duty (Rimke, 2000; Ouellette & Hay, 2008; Foster, 2016; Salmenniemi & Adamson, 2015). According to Foster (2015), therapeutic and neoliberal discourses converge around the key categories of autonomy, personal growth, self-reliance and self-regulation, hailing individuals to understand themselves as objects of investment and repositories of capital geared to maximising material success and personal happiness (Salmenniemi, 2017). Neoliberalism emphasises the capacity to make enterprising choices and maximise one's interests as a condition of self-rule, and commodified regimes of self-improvement, self-help and life management have emerged to respond to this demand in the context of diminishing state provision of social protection (Ouellette & Hay, 2008: 476). Here, the self becomes a project that is permanently 'under construction',

entangled in a never-ending project of optimising bodily and psychic dispositions (see also Bergroth and Helén in this book).

Boltanski and Chiapello's (2005) historical study tracing ideological changes in capitalism is an important theoretical contribution for making sense of this fusion of the therapeutic with neoliberalism. They argue that the legitimisation narrative underpinning the capitalist system was forcefully questioned during the 1960s and 1970s, not only through traditional social critique of the labour movement, but also through what they call 'artistic' critique. This critique targets the dehumanising aspects of capitalism and criticises it for conformism, hierarchy, and the destruction of creativity, individuality and authenticity. The linking of work with self-realisation channelled the countercultural value of self-fulfilment into the workplace (McGee, 2005: 112); as Boltanski and Chiapello (2005) argue, the capitalist system assimilated the artistic and countercultural critique and turned it into a key ingredient of its new legitimisation narrative. Thus, critique of capitalism was harnessed to engender a 'new spirit of capitalism', centred around the idea of work as a source of pleasure and self-realisation. According to Foster (2015), this new spirit was then imbued with intrinsically individualistic categories of psychology, offering instruments for an ever-deeper colonisation of subjectivity for the capitalist production of value. This new spirit of capitalism was accompanied by a profound reorganisation of work structures, giving rise to the process of precarisation and more flexible and insecure work (Boltanski & Chiapello, 2005).

Although 'psy' technologies have long been instrumental in the organisation of work (see Illouz, 2008), the new spirit of capitalism has paved the way for their increasing utilisation in regulating worker subjectivities (see Peteri in this book). Therapeutic practices are mobilised to make workers more productive, committed and 'resilient' (Swan, 2010), and to incite them to learn to draw pleasure from this. Workers are invited to apprehend all work as fulfilling and enjoyable and develop a positive attitude towards work. This is connected with a broader trend towards individualisation and subjectification of work, where the focus has shifted from structural conditions to individual capacities to manage work, and where subjectivity as a whole is harnessed for the production of value (Julkunen, 2008; Mäkinen, 2014). At the intersection of the individualisation of work and therapeutic culture, problems and conflicts in work tend to morph from structural problems relating to work organisation and resources into individual psychological issues to be remedied by ethical work on the self. Thus, therapeutic practices such as meditation, mindfulness, motivational seminars and yoga have been introduced into workplaces as a way to foster enthusiasm for work, improve workers' performance and help them deal with the pressures of work (Davies, 2015; Peteri in this book).

Neoliberal capitalism, with its new therapeutic spirit, has also given rise to new modalities of alienation. Rosa (2015a: 93) has called for the revival of the concept of alienation in sociology as a 'general term describing subjects' dysfunctional relation to the world'. He identifies self-estrangement from one's body, desires or personal beliefs as an important dimension of alienation. In a similar vein, Browne (2017) has developed the concept of alienation to capture the dynamics

in which subjective involvement and self-realisation are promoted, yet at the same time refused and turned into instruments of normalising and disciplining power. According to Browne, alienation involves:

...the thwarted participation of individuals and experiences that are destructive of subjectivity. Individuals' experiences and interpretations of compelled, but limited, action expose the contradiction between institutions' normative representations and the structural conditions of their reproduction. (Browne, 2017: 61)

We suggest that the experiences of work-related suffering articulated in our research material can be productively interpreted through the concept of alienation. As Browne (2017: 80) and Rosa (2015a, b) suggest, central to the concept of alienation is damage to subjectivity, which finds expression in affective states such as dissatisfaction, frustration, burnout and depression. This resonates with Rikala's (2016) argument that increasing individualisation of the structural contradictions of work results in individual bodies and minds being turned into crucial battlefields in which the contradictions of capitalism are confronted and felt. The concept of alienation is also helpful since it underscores the centrality of the 'hidden injuries' of capitalism: the hidden weights, anxieties and feelings of inadequate control (Sennett & Cobb, 1972: 33). Our analysis foregrounds how therapeutic practices may provide a space and language through which to voice and make sense of these injuries. However, it is important to note that alienation engenders not only suffering and frustration, but also forms of resistance (Browne, 2017). Among our research participants, this resistance manifested itself in attempts to cultivate forms of life that were not entirely conducive to or subsumed to neoliberal capitalist logic (Lilja & Vinthagen, 2014).

The unbearable weight of work

Taking our cue from these ideas, we can now flesh out how alienation is articulated in our research materials. In both the interviews and the therapeutic events Suvi attended during her fieldwork, she heard many stories of neoliberal work life causing exhaustion, depression and stress. Many spoke of having felt 'completely exhausted', 'totally broken' and 'really on the bottom'. Most often, such experiences of psychic and physical overload were referred to as 'burnout'. Nearly half of the research participants had had personal experiences of burnout, and almost all the professional therapists identified burnout as a crucial reason why clients come to see them. As Rosa (2015b: 296) suggests, burnout can be seen as 'an extreme form of alienation' in which 'the world faces the subject in a rigid, harsh, cold and silent form'. Burnout generally has a distinctively gendered profile, particularly affecting women and female-dominated sectors of the labour market (Rikala, 2013).

Many of our research participants problematised the valorisation of waged work as a measure of human worth, which makes losing a job ever more threatening

and makes those out of work feel worthless. The vocabularies through which they talked about working life were often quite violent. For example, Nora, who had been in a supervisory position in a large company before embarking on a career as an alternative therapist, saw in her therapy practice how people were living ‘on a razor blade’ with a ‘constant threat of being made redundant’ and that many were ‘on a final burnout edge’. Pia, a politically active practitioner of meditation, echoed this in lamenting how people were forced to ‘push forward at full speed and just deliver, deliver, deliver’; while Elina, a life coach in her forties, described how people were ‘whipped’ to make profit for companies. Tom, leading a firm offering self-improvement classes, thought that heightened demands in the workplace had resulted in growing numbers of burnouts so that people had to be regularly ‘rebooted’. Maria, an alternative therapist in her forties, contemplated this as follows:

Work life keeps spinning around quicker and quicker, and people are just catapulted from it, or they choose to leave the cogwheel voluntarily because they cannot take it anymore ... Work life has become quite wretched in the sense that those who have work are just drudging so hard, and the demands are getting harder and harder all the time, you need to know and handle thousands of things, all of that at the same time. It’s really stressful. And those who don’t have work are stressed as well.

Similar mechanical metaphors recurred in the interviews, conveying an image of people being caught up in a Weberian ‘iron cage’ (Weber, 1958), or as spinning in a giant machine that also threatens to turn them into a machine, like a computer in need of ‘rebooting’. There was a sense of constant forced movement: one must be on the move, out and about, running and spinning at the mercy of the machine, unable to control or influence it.

The experience of alienation that emerges from these accounts was articulated through two tropes. The first was ‘loss of the self’, which conveys a sense of losing touch with oneself and being estranged and disconnected from one’s body. This was referred to, for example, as ‘going blind’ at work, not ‘seeing’ how tired one was and ‘losing touch with who I am’. Many talked about burnout as something that ‘crept in’ slowly and unnoticed, making one neglect oneself. Sometimes it crept in through a heightened passion for and commitment to work, à la ‘new spirit of capitalism’. This was the case for Salli, a thirty-something mother of a small baby who had trained as an angel therapist after experiencing serious burnout in her previous job as a youth worker, which she described as her vocation. She described herself as a workaholic whose work gradually took over everything in her life. As for many others, burnout appeared for her as a ‘rupture’:

My physical condition collapsed, I was ill all the time and was just crying at home. Work did not give any satisfaction anymore. And I somehow realised that my relationship with work is not healthy, that I want something else in my life than just work. I want peace, I want to feel calmer and more balanced,

I want to laugh and not cry all the time. [...] I liked my work enormously, I did it for a long time. [...] but at the expense of myself. [...] Well, when your body collapses, you are forced to stop and think.

Like Salli, many research participants problematised the imperative of constant performance as 'sick', not allowing them to 'stop, rest and recuperate'. They also viewed this imperative as being amplified by a specific Finnish work ethic idealising hard work and self-sacrifice as a source of moral reward (Kortteinen, 1991; Kettunen, 2008). This articulation was challenged, for example, by Linda, an angel therapist and yoga instructor in her thirties. She felt that the Finnish work ethic was effectively harnessed to support the increasing acceleration of working life, leading to self-estrangement.

If we think about the pressures in working life, how hectic it is, so now in economic crisis people are made redundant and others have twice as much work as before. The pressure is high, and with our sense of always managing no matter what, we always try to do our best. We over-perform which means that we are soon burnt out. [...] But demands are rising all the time and we just give more all the time, show that we can do it even better and better, and we just do not stop for a moment to ask ourselves what it is that we really want or what our body is telling us.

Therapeutic practices were thus narrated as promising to deliver that which neoliberal working life refuses to: an opportunity to slow down the movement, halt the spin, turn off the machine.

Paula, a longstanding work-life coach and energy healer in her fifties, questioned the neoliberal spirit of capitalism centred around self-governance, flexibility and autonomy. In her view, it had turned into an oppressive imperative that constantly demanded one to be more but led to a sense that nothing was ever enough. Interpellations of self-governance led to the loss of one's sense of self. As with the machine metaphors above, there was a sense of being caught in an 'iron cage':

First, there's no working time any more, in the sense of from eight to four or something like that. [...] The more creative the field you are in, or the higher in the hierarchy you go, the meaning of working time decreases. And in many workplaces you have to be self-governing. [...] It's in principle a very fine phenomenon, but I wonder if people are always really ready for that. [...] It's an ideal, you know; we admire people who travel and are self-governing. [...] And we think that gee, what a dream job, she has a car, phone, computer and all, Burberry scarf round her neck and everything. Wow. But at the end of the day, I think many of them are lost with their work. They just simply don't get rid of their role, they don't get away from work, because they are working and self-governing all the time. There's no-one to say that 'Hey, now you can slow down, you don't need to do more'. [...] When you don't have working

time, when you constantly meet new people. [...] well, then you don't necessarily know who you are any more. [...] Well, you really need to halt, simply because there's no one telling you anymore that your work day is over.

The second trope through which experiences of alienation were articulated was 'refusal of subjectivity', stemming from an inability to influence one's work conditions and a sense of being refused as a person. As discussed above, in contemporary working life, people are incited to invest in work and apprehend it as a source of pleasure and self-realisation; yet the narratives of work in our study repeatedly emphasised the imperatives of unconditional obedience, docility and disciplining power over personality. Many of our research participants had actively voiced problems and criticisms in their workplaces, some even in their capacity as trade union representatives, and had tried to negotiate their workloads and work organisation (for similar observations, see Rikala, 2016). They had sought institutional support from health and safety departments or had contacted occupational health staff to deal with their situation, but to no avail. These experiences of not being heard or allowed to express work-related discontent had often been instrumental in leading to burnout.

We illustrate this with three cases. Our first case is Tiina, a middle-aged woman who was employed in university administration for decades and had a history as a shop steward in her workplace. She had gone through a severe burnout involving a period of hospitalisation in a psychiatric ward. She recounted how work had 'swallowed her completely' and 'expanded everywhere', as she was constantly checking her emails and answering phone calls after the workday had finished. Moreover, her workplace had been in a cycle of constant reorganisation, which meant that her tasks had been both changing and increasing all the time. She recounted how her autonomy at work had gradually diminished, which she felt was 'cutting off my fingers one after another'. She contemplated with a sense of disbelief how her workplace had turned from an organisation emphasising critical thinking into one where 'you are no longer allowed to question or criticise, you just have to perform as you are told'. She vociferously problematised what she saw as increasing demands for obedience and 'blind submission' to work: 'Everyone should just be like the managers proclaim. They proclaim that if you're not capable of coping with the change, or if you don't accept the change, then you are automatically somehow a worse person.' Thus, Tiina felt that the structural problems at work had translated into her being dismissed as a person.

Julia, another middle-aged woman, had gone through burnout and had also served as a shop steward in her workplace. She worked in a security company and had experienced serious workplace bullying after voicing her dissatisfaction with the way the organisation was led. She felt that people were nowadays expected to 'work like robots', 'just perform and have no opinions' and 'simply obey those who have power'. Like Tiina, she had a strong sense of having been refused as a person in her workplace: 'I was not accepted in my community as a person'. This expression conveyed a strong personal sense of exclusion on the basis of subjectivity. Julia's criticism had been labelled by the leadership as 'grumbling'

and 'negativity'. She described how the situation at work 'drove her to the edge of madness', which she managed to avoid by starting to read spiritual self-help books and writing down her feelings. Reading and writing had led her to a 'spiritual path' that allowed her to 'care for herself' and gave her moral strength. Unlike Tiina, Julia had stayed in her workplace as a form of resistance:

They tried to oust me out of my job, but I decided that I'm not going away as I haven't done anything wrong. If I had gone then, I feel I would have somehow been accepting all the things that they accused me of ... So, I found spirituality in my life through this kind of hell.

Our last example comes from Carita, a single mother in her forties, working in a facility for the disabled. She was suffering from prolonged ethical strain in her work. As a result of workplace bullying, lack of resources and her own precarious position as a temp, she felt she was unable to work according to her own values, but had to treat her clients in a way that she experienced as humiliating. At the time of the interview, she said she was depressed and was thinking of changing jobs. She felt dismissed and denied as a person, having to 'squeeze herself' into a mould into which she could not fit. Crucial to her sense of alienation was a clash between her enthusiasm for work and its refusal by her workplace:

I'm the kind of person who gets excited about everything and I want to be involved, would like to develop and do things. I'm a cheerful and enthusiastic person, so I'm annoyed that I just have to keep my mouth shut and keep my thoughts to myself [at work]. I have to diminish and reduce myself there.

In her interview, she contemplated at length how a women's therapeutic self-help group that she was attending at the time of the interview had provided her with a 'new language' to make sense of her situation. The group had allowed her to apprehend her problems as stemming from power dynamics in the workplace rather than from herself, allowing her to turn her self-blame into critique against injustice experienced at work:

They can't treat me however they like, tell me whatever they like. Before, I used to withdraw into myself and get depressed, filed for sick leave because I felt too distressed. I'm quite distressed also now. I would like not to go to my work anymore, 'cos I'm nobody there. I feel I'm not appreciated. It's so demeaning. And I think my co-workers won't change even if I change. My thinking is becoming better, and my self-esteem as well, but my co-workers will probably stay the same. They will treat me bad even if I were to change and try to defend myself. I think there's even more resistance and they slate me even more now that I try to voice my opinions. Before, I used to withdraw into myself and scold myself, but now I see that it's not necessarily my fault, that the problems do not stem from me.

The psychological discourse learnt in the self-help group had allowed Carita to see her work from a new angle and formulate criticism of the power relations at work in her organisation. Rather than individualising and psychologising problems at work, the self-help group had helped her to turn the blame away from herself and towards the work organisation. However, as the quote above reveals, she was well aware of the limits of self-transformation as a solution to workplace conflict.

These three examples illustrate how therapeutic practices had allowed the research participants to make sense of their burnout as socially produced, stemming from poor leadership and organisation of work, destructive culture and lack of necessary resources. These narratives are striking, as they reveal a deep contradiction between the neoliberal ‘new spirit of capitalism’ kinds of interpellation promising flexibility, self-realisation and autonomy, and the experienced realities of work ‘on the ground’, where work is seen as characterised by stern discipline and demands for conformism, obedience and subordination – the same characteristics that the ‘new spirit of capitalism’ was supposed to do away with (Boltanski & Chiapello, 2005). This contradiction leads to a deeply felt sense of alienation. In what follows, we discuss how the assembling of therapeutic packages of self-care operates as a way to try to alleviate alienation and escape the grip of neoliberal working life.

Getting out and getting away

All of our research participants were engaged in a host of therapeutic self-care practices through which they attempted to negotiate the destructive effects of working life. By assembling personalised self-care packages, they sought to refuse the norm of ever-performing and productive workers. These self-care assemblages consisted of a range of therapeutic practices (e.g. mindfulness, reiki, life coaching, angel therapy, yoga, art therapy, folk healing, Rosen therapy, acupuncture, reflexology), forms of knowledge (e.g. brain research, popular psychology, Eastern philosophies, religious bodies of thought) and objects (e.g. herbal medicine tablets, tarot cards, angel cards, crystals, flowers). In many cases, dancing, painting, photography, listening to music and writing poetry were also part of the therapeutic assemblage, as well as a range of lifestyle practices, such as following particular diets (e.g. functional nutrition, vegetarianism/veganism or consuming only organic food), ethical consumption, selective or outright refusal of vaccination, voluntary simplicity and efforts to protect the environment in the everyday.

These self-care assemblages were shifting and changing and were subject to constant labour. Many participants talked about ‘roaming around in trainings’, constantly plugging new practices into their personalised packages and dropping others that did not help or had served their purpose. They voiced a hunger for spiritual, alternative medical and psychological knowledge, and spoke of how they ‘gobbled up’ information from various sources, fitting elements of these into their therapeutic package. This process also engendered communities and new forms of sociality.

For our research participants, therapeutic self-care assemblages were not about strategic optimisation and maximisation of the self, but rather about making life more bearable under the conditions of neoliberal capitalism (see also Swan, 2008). Many had made futile efforts to influence the structures of work, so cultivating alternative dispositions and values by assembling personalised self-care packages had resulted in a more feasible strategy of resistance and survival. With these packages, they sought to harness their little remaining energy and agency to implement changes that were deemed possible 'here and now' and to try to 'unlearn' the performance imperative. For example, Tiina, whom we introduced in the previous section, had assembled a package of therapeutic practices that included psychotherapy, antidepressants, Rosen therapy, bible reading, swimming, energy healing, angel healing, psychological reflexology, yoga, goal-mapping and a women's self-care group. She certainly did not employ these practices as a way to accrue value for herself, nor to rehabilitate herself and return to the 'rat race', but rather as a way to drag herself back to life and understand what had happened to her and why. As she put it, she had 'stepped out of the river' and was contemplating whether to return to work and under what conditions.

While Tiina's therapeutic assemblage involved antidepressants and psychotherapy, many interviewees had turned to alternative therapies following disappointment with licensed psychologists and psychiatrists. For example, Katarina, an alternative therapist in her fifties who had gone through a period of depression, felt that a psychologist in a municipal mental health clinic had not given her 'a single tool with which to work on my feelings'. Although publicly-funded rehabilitative psychotherapy is available in Finland for those who can prove that their ability to work or study is impaired by mental health problems, alternative therapies appeared to many participants to be more accessible than official ones, since the latter often suffer from long queues and are unevenly accessible in different parts of the country. Moreover, the purpose of publicly funded therapy is to help people 'remain economically active, or enter or return to working life' (Kela, 2018) – the very idea against which many of our participants were protesting. For many, alternative therapies also appeared more appealing as they were seen as offering a more inclusive frame for making sense of themselves and their lives, allowing the incorporation of spiritual and religious aspects of self-care practices.

Quite often, a preference for alternative therapeutic practices also arose from critique of the medicalisation and pharmaceuticalization of mental health, which was seen as contributing to the exploitative character of neoliberal work life. The research participants felt that medication was being used to erase the suffering caused by the structural organisation of work. Rather than tackling the underlying causes, doctors were seen as prescribing medication to minimise worker absence, making them complicit in reinforcing the market logic and commodifying health. Thus, medicalisation was seen as providing the oil crucial to keeping the neoliberal mills spinning. As Lena, a life coaching client, sighed: 'I feel that in the pressures of this performance society, pills get emphasised. But I think that just giving you pills and sending you home doesn't constitute proper care. ... I think

we should treat the cause, not the effect'. Aino, an alternative therapist in her fifties, thought that one should not just:

...work long days, stress out and try to manage everything by yourself. And when you're feeling really bad and your heart is beating like hell and you have high blood pressure and all sorts of things, you go and see the doctor, get the pills, throw a couple of them in your mouth and just continue as if nothing has happened. Well, it doesn't work that way. You need to start asking yourself why you can't sleep, what is it that is weighing on your mind so much that you can't calm down and have a normal sleep rhythm?

Thus, the research participants saw the logic of maximisation of labour productivity as underlying the structural causes of illness. They took issue with the normative ideal of the high-performing worker always being forced to get back in the saddle as quickly as possible with the help of medication. Many talked about the importance of rest, slowing down, meditation and self-reflection as meaningful alternative ways of caring for the self. While the official healthcare system was seen as merely treating symptoms, alternative therapies were seen as allowing exploration of the underlying causes. Although not solving the structural problems as such, alternative therapies at least provided ethical validation and recognition of the experience of alienation and suffering (see also Sointu, 2013), as well as tools with which to care for the self so that the destructive side of work could be kept somewhat at bay.

As we have highlighted above, while some research participants assembled therapeutic packages of self-care as a way to 'escape the system without leaving it' (De Certeau, 1984: xiii), or in other words as a way to forge a new relationship with work that would be less alienating, others mobilised such packages to sign off from waged work altogether. During fieldwork, and especially during angel evenings, Suvi came across women in their thirties and forties who had left their secure jobs to embark on 'a spiritual path'. They felt that their previous careers had been in conflict with 'who they really were' and they wished to live 'true' to their newly discovered spiritual ideals. Some were living on social assistance; others were doing occasional odd jobs or receiving economic support from their spouses or families. Some of these women told they were frustrated about constantly having to explain themselves to other people and institutions since they were not living a 'normal biography' centred around waged work.

For example, Rosa, who at the time of the interview had been out of work for three years, was in her thirties and was living with her partner in a major Finnish city. She narrated her life as one of constant 'searching'. Over the years, she had gradually moved towards a deeper involvement with angel healing and Ayurveda, leading her to quit her job in sales. At first, she had tried to continue her work part-time, but said that 'I developed such a strong resistance to it [work] and I felt so awful all the time so I couldn't overlook it'. For her, work appeared incompatible with her new, more spiritually devoted self. She said that her disengagement had been inevitable: 'I had no other choice'. For her, therapeutic practices were a way

to realise herself and her values, but she felt that they were in conflict with prevailing social norms which emphasise the need to 'do as others do and run in the rat race'. We suggest that dropping out of waged work, facilitated by therapeutic engagements, can be understood as a form of resistance to the work-centred ethic of neoliberalism. Although our research participants did not articulate this as a conscious political strategy, their non-compliance with the expectation of waged work resonates with autonomous Marxist ideas emphasising refusal of work as a crucial way to protest against capitalism (Weeks, 2011).

Although Rosa was hesitant about becoming a spiritual therapist and establishing her own practice, many others had done so and become professional healers as a strategy to escape the alienation experienced in waged work. For example, Diana, a single mother with a school-aged child, had gone through a burnout and what she called a 'semi-depression' ten years earlier. Like many others, she had first sought help from occupational health services, but had been disappointed as 'they just gave me tissues and that's it'. She had subsequently turned to angel spiritualities and trained as an angel therapist. She had decided to drop out of her job in fashion and devote herself to healing work, as dropping out had become the only obvious option. Like Rosa, she tried at first to continue working, but at a slower pace; however, she soon realised that this was impossible because she felt that she was always being 'drawn back' into the hectic rhythm. Although she had been 'terrified' about leaving her job, she had decided to do so with the conviction that 'I will always survive somehow'. Indeed, for many, the decision to drop out of working life had entailed economic insecurity, living on social assistance or a lifestyle of voluntary simplicity. The economic disadvantages were less consequential than the need to 'be true to oneself' and live according to one's ethical values. Interestingly, entrepreneurship, an emblematic practice of neoliberalism, was represented here as an opportunity to escape the grip of neoliberal structures of work.

However, although becoming professional healers and establishing practices had served for some as a way to escape waged work, many faced exactly the same pressures as entrepreneurs, struggling to keep their practices productive and manage financial uncertainty. Mia's case is illustrative in this regard. At the time of the interview, she was in her thirties and had been an entrepreneur for a couple of years. Trained as an engineer and working in a big company, she had never had an interest in anything spiritual or therapeutic. This changed when she developed an anxiety and panic syndrome as a result of prolonged work stress. In her interview, she spoke of how:

...one day my mind just collapsed. I was just crying and trembling all the time. ... I was on sick leave for a while, I just couldn't go back to work. I was so terribly tired I was just sleeping for two years, twelve hours a day. Then I just decided that I needed to get out of that workplace.

After quitting her job, she had trained as a relaxation instructor and established her own practice. However, although this was meant to allow her to 'get away'

from stressful work, constant financial problems and running her business on her own had worn her down. The practice that was supposed to liberate her from the iron cage gradually became another cage in a new disguise. She had another burnout and decided to close her practice. While some of our research participants were quite successful and content as entrepreneurs, many shared stories of economic precarity and difficulties in making ends meet through therapeutic work. Some had had to take part-time jobs, while others were confined to living with fewer resources. Some had been able to pursue therapeutic work thanks to financial support from their spouses.

Mia's interview also reveals an important tension in therapeutic entrepreneurship. Although she acknowledged the ethic of constant performance as being destructive to subjectivity and wished to avoid it in her own practice, she nevertheless relied on it when selling her therapeutic practices to companies. She talked about devising 'before and after' measurements of stress hormones as part of her meditation programme package in order to 'prove' to companies that meditation brings real benefits. Like many other research participants, she had tried to distance herself from the logic of performance, yet she was constantly pulled back to it in trying to make a living. Her predicament illustrates the intimate entanglement of resistance with the very power that it seeks to undermine.

Therapeutic assemblages and hope

This chapter has explored what it feels like to live and work under neoliberal demands for competition, productivity and performance. While therapeutic practitioners are often presented, implicitly or explicitly, as strategic self-managing subjects buying into the ethos of neoliberalism, we have sought to complicate this interpretation by showing how therapeutic assemblages may also enable and initiate contestation of the neoliberal ethic of work and its destructive effects on subjectivity. The narratives of work analysed here portray how neoliberal capitalism and its alienating effects are lived and confronted at the intimate level of subjectivity. They highlight that therapeutic practices need not automatically and seamlessly coalesce with neoliberal governing projects, but may also be used to disengage from them. Therapeutic practices may thus be 'radical in some ways and reactionary in others' (Swan, 2010: 11) and may also be translated into a form of political critique.

In assembling personalised therapeutic self-care packages, our research participants sought to renegotiate their relationships with work and express moral resistance to neoliberalism and its hidden injuries. They used these therapeutic assemblages to drag themselves back to life from the murky waters of burnout, not to rehabilitate themselves back into work and performance but to carve out possibilities for something different. This chapter highlights the complexities involved in negotiating one's relationship to work and oneself: research participants contest the dominant interpellations of neoliberal working life and seek to escape its disciplining grip with therapeutic assemblages; yet these assemblages may also draw them back into its grip in the form of exhaustion as a professional healer. This chapter also shows that while resistance tends to take the form of individualised politics, it

also incorporates an aspiration for social change, as many perceived the individualised tactics, should more people adopt them, as potentially contributing to transforming the broader social formation (cf. Haenfler et al., 2012).

The interview narratives bring forth another subject from the shadow of the self-optimising subject: a fragile and exhausted subject struggling to rid herself of the alienating forces of neoliberalism. Articulation of this subject position may in itself be seen as a subversive act, destabilising the normative ideal of a heroic, self-improving and productive subject, and revealing what lies in its shadow. Therapeutic assemblages emerged as vehicles of everyday resistance, allowing things to be done 'against the grain' and expressing discontent and suffering. Seeing and acknowledging these practices as forms of resistance, or as processes that can bring about changes regardless of whether or not the actors intended them as political resistance (see Ortner, 2006: 44–45), also helps us understand what made these practices meaningful and transformative for our participants. Although many were seeking to change their lives through ethical work on the self, they nevertheless acknowledged and alluded to structural changes. Indeed, therapeutic engagements had often allowed them to understand their condition as socially produced rather than as an individual pathology.

Neoliberal individualising power in work tends to block collective resistance; therefore, as our research subjects' experiences testify, effecting structural changes at work can be far from easy. In this situation, assembling personalised packages of self-care emerges as an accessible tool to try to disengage from the alienating forces of work and envisage alternative ways of being in and connecting with the world. For many, these packages appeared as an antidote to a sense of getting stuck in the oppressive iron cage. This helps to highlight why therapeutic practices can be experienced as appealing and empowering: they can craft hope and a sense of agency under difficult life circumstances and offer resources to envisage and implement life projects irreducible to the neoliberal logic (see also Swan, 2008: 104). They convey a sense that something can be done 'here and now', and that everything is not lost. To paraphrase Sara Ahmed (2017: 2, 47), therapeutic engagements may offer hope that 'carries us through when the terrain is difficult' and helps to sustain a belief that 'the paths we follow will get us somewhere'.

Acknowledgements

The research for this chapter has been supported by the project *Tracking the Therapeutic: Ethnographies of Wellbeing, Politics and Inequality*, funded by the Academy of Finland (grant number 289004). Many thanks to the contributors of this book for helpful comments and suggestions.

References

- Ahmed, S. 2017. *Living a Feminist Life*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
Binkley, S. 2011. Psychological Life as Enterprise: Social Practice and the Government of Neo-Liberal Interiority. *History of the Human Sciences* 24:3, 83–102.

- Boltanski, L. & Chiapello, E. 2005. *The New Spirit of Capitalism*. London: Verso.
- Browne, C. 2017. *Critical Social Theory*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Cloud, D. 1998. *Control and Consolation in American Culture and Politics: Rhetoric of Therapy*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Davies, W. 2015. *The Happiness Industry*. London: Verso.
- De Certeau, M. 1984. *The Practice of Everyday Life*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.
- Ehrenreich, B. 2009. *Bright-Sided: How the Relentless Promotion of Positive Thinking Has Undermined America*. New York: Metropolitan Books.
- Foster, R. 2015. The Therapeutic Spirit of Neoliberalism. *Political Theory* 44:1, 82–105.
- Foster, R. 2016. Therapeutic Culture, Authenticity and Neoliberalism. *History of the Human Sciences* 29:1, 99–116.
- Furedi, F. 2004. *Therapy Culture: Cultivating Vulnerability in an Uncertain Age*. London: Routledge.
- Haenfler, R., Johnson, B. & Jones, E. 2012. Lifestyle Movements: Exploring the Intersection of Lifestyle and Social Movements. *Social Movement Studies* 11:1, 1–20.
- Illouz, E. 2008. *Saving the Modern Soul: Therapy, Emotions, and the Culture of Self-Help*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.
- Julkunen, R. 2008. *Uuden Työn Paradoksit: Keskusteluja 2000-Luvun Työprosess(e)ista*. Tampere: Vastapaino.
- Kela. 2018. Rehabilitative Psychotherapy. Kela [website]. <https://www.kela.fi/web/en/rehabilitative-psychotherapy> (accessed 24 July 2018).
- Kettunen, P. 2008. *Globalisaatio ja kansallinen me*. Tampere: Vastapaino.
- Kortteinen, M. 1991. *Kunnian Kenttä: Suomalainen Palkkatyö Kulttuurisena Muotona*. Helsinki: Hanki ja jää.
- Lilja, M. & Vinthagen, S. 2014. Sovereign Power, Disciplinary Power and Biopower: Resisting What Power with What Resistance? *Journal of Political Power* 7:1, 107–126.
- MacNevin, A. 2003. Remaining Audible to the Self: Women and Holistic Health. *Atlantis* 27:2, 16–23.
- McGee, M. 2005. *Self-Help, Inc.: Makeover Culture in American Life*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Madsen, O. J. 2014. *The Therapeutic Turn*. London: Routledge.
- Mäkinen, K. 2014. The Individualization of Class: A Case of Working Life Coaching. *The Sociological Review* 62:4, 821–842.
- Marcus, G. E. 1998. *Ethnography Through Thick and Thin*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Newman, J. 2017. The Politics of Expertise: Neoliberalism, Governance and the Practices of Politics. In *Assembling Neoliberalism*, edited by V. Higgins & W. Larner. New York: Palgrave, 87–105.
- Ortner, S. B. 2006. *Anthropology and Social Theory: Culture, Power, and the Acting Subject*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Ouellette, L. & Hay, J. 2008. Makeover Television, Governmentality and the Good Citizen. *Continuum* 22:4, 471–484.
- Rikala, S. 2013. *Työssä Uupuvat Naiset ja Masennus*. Tampere: Acta Universitatis Tamperensis.
- Rikala, S. 2016. Työuupumus ja Vastarinnan Mahdollisuudet. In *Ruumillisuus ja Työelämä*, edited by J. Parviainen, T. Kinnunen & I. Kortelainen. Tampere: Vastapaino, 182–198.
- Rimke, H. M. 2000. Governing Citizens through Self-Help Literature. *Cultural Studies* 14:1, 61–78.

- Rosa, H. 2015a. Capitalism as a Spiral of Dynamisation: Sociology as Social Critique. In *Sociology, Capitalism, Critique*, written by K. Dörre, S. Lessenich and H. Rosa. London: Verso, 67–97.
- Rosa, H. 2015b. Escalation: The Crisis of Dynamic Stabilisation and the Prospect of Resonance. In *Sociology, Capitalism, Critique*, written by K. Dörre, S. Lessenich and H. Rosa. London: Verso, 280–305.
- Rose, N. 1990. *Governing the Soul: The Shaping of the Private Self*. London: Routledge.
- Salmenniemi, S. 2017. 'We Can't Live without Beliefs': Self and Society in Therapeutic Engagements. *The Sociological Review* 65:4, 611–627.
- Salmenniemi, S. & Adamson, M. 2015. New Heroines of Labour: Domesticating Postfeminism and Neoliberal Capitalism in Russia. *Sociology* 49:1, 88–105.
- Scott, J. C. 1989. Everyday Forms of Resistance. *Copenhagen Papers* 4, 33–62.
- Sennett, R. & Cobb, J. 1972. *The Hidden Injuries of Class*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Sointu, E. 2013. *Theorizing Complementary and Alternative Medicines: Wellbeing, Self, Gender, Class*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Swan, E. 2008. 'You Make Me Feel Like a Woman': Therapeutic Cultures and the Contagion of Femininity. *Gender, Work and Organization* 15:1, 88–107.
- Swan, E. 2010. *Worked Up Selves: Personal Development Workers, Self-Work and Therapeutic Cultures*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Weber, M. 1958 [original 1905]. *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons.
- Weeks, K. 2011. *The Problem with Work: Feminism, Marxism, Antiwork Politics and Postwork Imaginaries*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.