



Article

Therapeutic politics reconsidered: Power, post-colonialism and the psychologisation of society in the Global South

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Abstract

In this article, we critically interrogate the relationship between the post-political turn and the psychologisation of social life. It has long been argued that psychologisation, in the form the popularisation of psychotherapeutic discourses and practices and their usage across a range of non-specialist institutional domains, contributes to de-politicisation and the current crisis of democratic politics. However, the empirical basis for this argument remains narrow, and there is a dearth of attendant research in the Global South. In response, we consider how the psychologisation of society might intersect with its de-politicisation or, possibly, with its re-politicisation, focusing on Trinidad in the Anglophone Caribbean. We do so through a socio-historical analysis of the implication of psychotherapy in colonial and post-colonial programmes of social control, and by exploring contemporary middle-class people's uses of popular psychotherapeutic discourses to account for everyday experiences of gender and intimate life.

Keywords

Gender, intimate relationships, post-colonialism, post-politics, therapeutic culture

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A perceived crisis of liberal democracy has become a major preoccupation in the Global Northwest. These debates emphasise citizens' frustrations with the democratic process, a decline in public trust, diminishing political participation, and the rise of 'populist' authoritarian political parties and movements (Norris, 2019). They are bound up with long-standing concerns about the socio-political consequences of neo-liberal reform programmes from the 1980s onwards (Couldry, 2010). Both strands of academic conversation emphasise the dismantling of communities and forms of collective political association, concomitant processes of social atomisation and the radical privatisation of social life, and the rise of a post-political condition (Swyngedouw, 2010).

These debates overlap with growing sociological interest in the psychologisation of everyday life and the rise of a 'happiness industry' (Cabanas and Illouz, 2019). Research has drawn attention to the popularisation of psychotherapeutic discourses and practices (Madsen, 2014), and to their uses across diverse institutional domains (Pupavac and Pupavac, 2012). Scholarship has tended to be critical of psychologisation, emphasising its contribution to the individualisation and de-politicisation of modes of self-identity, everyday experience, and social relationships (Rimke, 2000). Notably, though, an influential body of recent research has suggested that therapeutic engagements, that is, the incorporation of psychotherapeutically informed discourses and practices into everyday life, may give rise to a therapeutic politics involving emergent forms of political consciousness and participation (Salmenniemi, 2019; Wright, 2010). This research suggests that, rather than de-politicising, therapeutic engagements may be constitutive of new modes of politics and collective social engagement.

However, these debates have concentrated on the Global Northwest, and have had little to say about the constitution of therapeutic politics in the Global South and in post-colonial societies. Sociological understandings of therapeutic politics are therefore closely limited in their social and geographical. Therefore, sociological research on therapeutic cultures has so far not engaged with sociology's incipient global turn (Al-Hardan, 2018; Connell et al., 2016).

In response, we explore the institutional organisation and meanings of therapeutic politics in Trinidad in the Anglophone Caribbean, part of the larger island nation of Trinidad and Tobago¹ (T&T). We pursue two objectives. First, through a synthesis of extant research, we analyse, from an historical perspective, the institutionalisation of mental health care, and its roles in colonial and post-colonial structures of power and social control. Our second aim considers how Trinidadians today may draw on psychotherapeutic discourses to make sense of their everyday lives, pursue personal development, and, in so doing, construct specific modes of political (dis)engagement. To address this objective, we draw on qualitative research on understandings and experiences of couple relationships among middle-class, female consumers of popular psychology (Nehring and Kerrigan, 2019). Couple relationships are important for an analysis of the interrelationship between politics and gender, in so far as they are a central site in which gendered relationships of power are played out and the personal encounters the political in contemporary Trinidad (Barrow, 1996). Combining historical and contemporary as well as macro- and micro-level analysis, we seek to contribute to holistic understandings of the social conditions of therapeutic politics in post-colonial societies in the Global South.

The psychologisation of society and the problem of therapeutic politics

Writing in the 1950s, the American sociologist C. Wright Mills argued that ‘the sociological imagination is becoming [. . .] the major common denominator or our cultural life and its signal feature’ (Mills, 1959: 14). Mills explained that the sociological imagination, at the time of his writing, constituted a ‘quality of mind’ characteristic not only of specialist academics, but, increasingly, of a wide variety of non-specialist institutional domains, such as ‘literary work’ or ‘political analysis’, rendering sociological reasoning a predominant cultural sensibility (Mills, 1959: 14). In a similar way, the term ‘psychologisation’ denotes the popularisation of psychological and psychotherapeutic knowledge, from specialist, academic and clinical, settings into a range of non-specialist institutional realms.

Psychologisation therefore concerns four areas of sociological analysis: First, it refers to the prevalence of public discourses that explain social processes and problems in terms of psychological and psychotherapeutic knowledge, in reference to individual’s personal troubles of mental health and well-being (Horwitz and Wakefield, 2007; Purser, 2019). Second, it describes the reconfiguration of societal institutions in terms of such knowledge, including new forms of therapeutic governance in specific institutional regimes (Yang, 2018). Third, psychologisation highlights the emergence of actors, technologies, and social, economic, and cultural processes that promote and facilitate such institutional reconfigurations. In this context, the prominence of self-help culture and entrepreneurs dedicated to the commercialisation of self-help has been much discussed (McGee, 2005), as has the constitution of a happiness industry dedicated to the marketing of mental health products and services (Cabanas and Illouz, 2019). Finally, sociological accounts of psychologisation have been attentive to the remaking of common sense and the reorganisation of self-identity, everyday experience, and modes of social interaction through psychotherapeutic narratives (Illouz, 2008). While much of the academic literature on psychologisation has focused on specific societies in the Global Northwest, classically the United States, a growing body of scholarship points to the transnational scale of attendant social processes, and to their impact in the Global South (Nehring, Madsen, Cabanas and Mills, 2020).

The emergence of interdisciplinary debates on psychologisation coincides to a significant degree with the period of global neo-liberal socio-economic reforms from the 1980s to the 2000s, during which many newly independent post-colonial nations, such as T&T, sought their own way in the world as sovereign nations (Foster, 2015; Getachew, 2019). In turn, the burgeoning of this interdisciplinary field across the past decade falls into a period characterised, across much of the Western world, by widespread concern about socio-economic crisis and inequality and the travails of liberal democracy (Norris, 2019). Alongside their coincidence within the same historical period, academic debates about psychologisation and about post-politics and the socio-political consequences of neo-liberalism share key themes and research problems. The latter have, under various labels and from diverse theoretical perspectives, been concerned with the economisation, privatisation, and individualisation of social life (Couldry, 2010), and with the political consequences of these processes in liberal democracies, in terms of citizens’

disengagement from political participation and a loss of trust in the democratic process (Brown, 2019). In turn, much of the literature on psychologisation, beginning with Christopher Lasch's (1991 [1979]) influential *The Culture of Narcissism*, has been critical of its social, cultural, and political consequences. Across diverse theoretical perspectives, most notably those of Foucauldian discourse analysis, Critical Theory, Post-Marxism, and Critical Psychology, scholars have long tended to associate therapeutic culture with the privatisation and individualisation of social problems, and with the promotion of a cognitive and emotional solipsism that is closely bound up with the deconstruction of collective ties and modes of political association (Nehring and Kerrigan, 2019).

This thematic coincidence results, we suggest, from the way in which specialist psychological and psychotherapeutic knowledge has been popularised, as a moral grammar for the conduct of self and everyday social relationships, and for the conceptualisation and resolution of institutional problems. As we have argued elsewhere (Nehring and Kerrigan, 2019), psychological knowledge and its clinical and therapeutic applications operate within and are defined by socio-historically specific structures of knowledge and power. In this sense, Kenneth Gergen (1973) suggests that social psychology is substantially concerned with the explanation of historically contingent forms of psychological life. He goes on to suggest that psychological knowledge is characterised by a strong prescriptive component that reflects the beliefs, norms, and values of its times in its diagnoses of mental life.

Popular and non-specialist forms of psychological and psychotherapeutic knowledge share this moral dimension constituted in broader structures of knowledge and power. Thus, a happiness industry of transnational scale merges public policy agendas, business interests, and the research programmes of psychotherapists and neuroscientists to promise well-being and a better life to individuals, as a solution to larger problems of trans-historical social structure (Cabanas and Illouz, 2019). Popular psychology articulates a moral grammar of personal and societal development, characterised by specific social norms and beliefs about the nature of social life and the relationship between individual and society (Nehring and Kerrigan, 2018). A long-standing conclusion in extant research has been that this moral grammar, in its contemporary forms, is both responsive to and constitutive of the atomisation, de-politicisation, and, by extension, de-democratisation of social life (Rimke, 2000). In an anti-colonial context, there is also connection here to critical scholars like Albert Memmi (1965), Aimé Césaire (2001), Frantz Fanon (2008), and others who highlighted through psychological analysis and metaphor how coloniality extends structures, hierarchies, and worldviews laid down in the past through a system of education or moral grammar in the development of cultural hegemony and resistance to it.

Recently, though, scholarship in sociology, critical psychology, and other fields has sought to unsettle this conclusion and re-appraise the political implications of psychologisation. A common feature of these re-appraisals is that they are limited in their empirical scope, focusing on specific societies and strands of therapeutic culture. Thus, Katie Wright (2010), drawing on multi-method qualitative research in Australia, shows that therapeutic engagements, for example, in therapeutic and self-help groups, may give rise

to new forms of sociability and communal engagement. Likewise, in a recent ethnographic study on alternative health and spiritualities among therapeutic practitioners in Finland, Suvi Salmenniemi (2019) shows that therapeutic engagements may give rise to both collective mobilisation within the framework of party politics and to emergent forms of lifestyle politics. Clot-Garrell and Griera (2019), exploring collective meditations in public spaces and the teaching of yoga in prisons by holistic volunteers in Catalonia, find that therapeutic engagements may reach beyond late-modern privatisation and commercialisation of social relationships, being closely associated with social initiatives aimed at promoting change. Other scholars have arrived at similar conclusions in different spaces (Chari, 2016; Yang, 2018). This strand of critical research on psychologisation thus supports the conclusion that ‘therapeutic culture has at times inspired the politicization of identities, generated critiques of social inequalities, and addressed power imbalances’ (Stein, 2011).

This revitalisation of debates about therapeutic politics is to be welcomed (Wright, 2008). What has been missing from these debates, though, is meaningful engagement with the constitution of therapeutic politics in the Global South and, more specifically, with the implication of psychotherapeutic discourses, practices, and institutions in colonial and post-colonial forms of power and strategies of social control. What emerges from these debates is an analysis of therapeutic politics skewed towards the social realities of the Global Northwest (Connell et al., 2016). It is this lacuna that we seek to address here.

Methods

In the following, we analyse the socio-historical formation of therapeutic institutions in Trinidad, their role in strategies of social control during the island’s British colonial (1802–1962) and post-independence (since 1962) periods, and Trinidadians’ contemporary uses of popular therapeutic discourses and practices in making sense of their everyday experiences. Our historical analysis is grounded in a synthesis of extant research, while the contemporary part of our analysis draws on multi-methods qualitative research on everyday therapeutic engagements among middle-class Trinidadians concluded in 2017 (Nehring and Kerrigan, 2019).

Our fieldwork in Trinidad involved participant information, the collection of documentary sources on local therapeutic culture, the gathering and analysis of historical and contemporary photography, as well as semi-structured interviews with consumers of popular psychological products and services (Nehring and Kerrigan, 2019). Designing and carrying out our research, we drew on established frameworks for the conduct of observational and interview research and the analysis of narrative data. Our argument in the following showcases elements of our ethnographic insights. However, the emphasis for our present argument are narratives from 25 semi-structured interviews with female self-help readers from Trinidad. Our participants’ age ranged from 24 to 40 years. All of them lived in the middle and upper-middle class western suburbs of Port-of-Spain, Trinidad’s capital. All were employed and educated at least to the degree level, in the United States, Canada, and the United Kingdom, as well as in Trinidad, and all worked in white-collar professions, as lawyers, business owners, academics, teachers, and so

forth. The fact that all participants are female highlights the gendered nature of therapeutic culture in Trinidad, with specific political implications we discuss later.

We encountered these participants by hanging out at three bookshops in West Mall, one of Trinidad's most important shopping malls, and we invited them to take part in semi-structured interviews for our research on a later occasion, in a venue of their choice. The interview protocols were developed by us, while the interviews were conducted by two female research students who were postgraduates in sociology at the University of the West Indies, under the supervision of one of us, and who were paid for their data collection work. Following the Statement of Ethical Practice of the British Sociological Association (2017), all participants provided informed consent, and we have taken measures to safeguard their anonymity, privacy, and safety.

The colonial period: History and uses of psychology and psychiatry in Trinidad

The British built the first mental asylum in Trinidad in 1858 (Sharpe and Shafe, 2016: 307). Over the next century, Western psychiatry grew and settled locally. Many treatments reflected the practices found in Britain including forceful physical techniques and 'provided little more than incarceration in the crudest of facilities' (Smith, 2014: 102). Maharajh and Parasram (1999: 174) describe how Western psychiatry in Trinidad during the colonial period emerged into an environment where the main way to treat someone 'suffering from mental illness' was heavily influenced by religion and visiting the local priest, pundit or obeah man, and embracing their socio-cultural cosmologies, such as blaming problems of the mind on superstition, obeah, and spirit possession. Treatments of 'mental illness' came to be bound up with the socio-political construction of conformity and deviance in colonial society.

The asylum that opened in Belmont in 1858 was small, cramped, inadequately staffed, had a poor water supply, and no real drainage and sewerage (Smith, 2014: 102). There were immediate calls for new elements to be constructed and this took place during the 1860s. However, even with expansion in size by the 1870s, the institution was 'much too small for the number of patients', which was now in the hundreds (Smith, 2014: 102) and 'both internally and externally [had] a prison-like appearance' (Smith, 2014: 104). In 1878, a new site at St Ann's just outside the capital was identified for the construction of a new asylum. It would take 20 years before the new asylum opened.

In terms of therapeutic culture within this first institution, there was not much that could be called treatment. The outdoor space for recreation was limited, female patients were all held in a 'small, confined Gallery', staff numbers were inadequate, there was no work given to patients, and the overcrowding produced a climate of endless quarrelling (Smith, 2014: 104). During the 1880s and into the 1900s, the patient numbers increased further, 'from 282 in 1880 to 360 in 1890, and 524 in 1900' (Smith, 2014: 105). By 1888 and into the 1900s, treatment for over half of the patients meant being continually employed on site, many in work-gangs.

The patients were all moved from Belmont to St Ann's in March 1900. The number of patients at that time was 524. Yet the problems of overcrowding continued and the conditions in the new Asylum made it 'almost impossible to maintain a regime

conducive to treatment and recovery’ (Smith, 2014: 106). Over subsequent decades, the colonial authorities expanded and enlarged the facility with new wards, a detached villa for convalescents, improved classifications, and extended work programmes. A private ward was also added for the segregation of patients by race and class. ‘By 1914, the Trinidad Lunatic Asylum was operating as an orderly, model British colonial institution’ (Smith, 2014: 108) – with all the racialised systems and hierarchies that this entailed.

During the 1930s, T&T’s medical association emerged, and the Caribbean’s first regional medical journal was published. This decade marked the start of a new professionalism and a period of planning and development of psychiatric services locally. Still, from its beginnings, psychiatric practice in Trinidad had been closely tied into the construction of colonial society, as part of the disciplinary governance regime meant to maintain social control over the island and demarcate the boundaries of ‘deviant’ and ‘normal’ in a colonial social space.

The post-independence trajectory of clinical and academic psychology

By 1962 and independence, psychiatric services were starting to become a consideration of the newly formed government. This led to the planning and development of a more community-centric approach to mental health issues, where persons were no longer treated in one faraway location, but close to their community where psychiatric care could be provided by psychiatric nurses as close to patients’ own home as possible. The changes included in 1966 the introduction of a psychiatric training programme at the Mona campus of the University of the West Indies in Jamaica. Graduates of this programme, versed in local and regional community mental health programmes, returned to their various Caribbean nations and spread the model and use of Community Mental Health Officers and community psychiatrists, around the region.

Also during the mid-twentieth century, the relationship between Empire and mental health damage did start to become part of the regional research agenda. For example, the British psychologist Madeline Kerr (1963) developed an ethnographic study on conflict and inhibitions in personality development in Jamaica. ‘Her work provided historical perspectives on the cultural tensions stemming from the paradoxical juxtaposition during slavery of African heritage and values and the imposed Western (British) attitudes and ideals’ (Hickling et al., 2013: 860). Frantz Fanon (1968) too developed Caribbean-centric insights into the relationship between the structures and violence of colonialism and their enduring impact on Caribbean mental health. His and Kerr’s work challenged Western-centric models of psychiatry and opened up a space for the emergence of a transcultural psychiatry and psychohistoriography in and of the Caribbean, distinct from the Western model (Hickling et al., 2013: 861).

In this independence period, the field of psychology emerged locally into a multicultural space where the socio-cultural worlds of religion and psychiatry were not completely separate, with the two fields mixing into one (Burroughs, 2010; Maharajh and Parasram, 1999: 173). This is still visible today, for example, in the placement of self-help books with religious and spiritual texts on the same shelves and subject area of local bookstores (Nehring and Kerrigan, 2019).

Psychology as a career in Trinidad first emerges in the 1960s at St Ann's Hospital (formally St Ann's Lunatic Asylum until 1935, and St Ann's Mental Hospital until 1961). The first post was in counselling psychology, and another post in clinical psychology was added shortly afterward (Burroughs, 2010: 9). These changes led in 1975 to the introduction of the Mental Health Act as law and the creation of a new category of mental health workers, including psychologists who would become an important element of the multidisciplinary community health model adopted by the Ministry of Health (Sharpe and Shafe, 2016: 309).

Until the early 1990s, psychologists in Trinidad focused mainly on educational, clinical, and drug rehabilitation/counselling areas through working with psychotic, abusive, addictive, emotionally disturbed, criminal, and learning-disabled people. This focus was expanded from the beginnings of the 1990s as psychologists moved into other fields such as public relations, sports, law, family, education, counselling services, and social settings (Burroughs, 2010: 8). As a result, clinical psychological practice, through psychotherapy and psychiatry, plays substantial role in Trinidadian society today. Clinical psychology has been used with increasing frequency for preventive work and for interventions in communities, and via local health clinic and hospitals. Moreover, applied and clinical psychological knowledge has become important in education, in counselling services, in jurisprudence, and in public debates, as a way to understand and address social problems (Nehring and Kerrigan, 2018). These developments have been accompanied by a rapid growth in evidence-based research and scholarship on locally focused Caribbean psychology and on transcultural psychiatry (Maharajh and Parasram, 1999). In this context, scholars and clinicians have increasingly sought to develop their professional field in relation to the shared post-colonial realities of Trinidadian society, exploring connections between mental life, emotions, and the contemporary social, economic, and political legacies of colonialism (Hickling and Hutchinson, 2012).

Therapeutic culture in contemporary Trinidad

By the twenty-first century, the development of psychiatry and psychology in Trinidad emerges as two distinct strands. The first is the academic and clinical strand under the umbrella of transcultural psychiatry, and the second strand is the diffusion of psychotherapeutic discourses and practices across non-specialist institutional domains and popular culture such as positive psychology. Transcultural psychiatry in the Caribbean begins as a paternalistic Western invention in the 1970s and 80s with foreign researchers coming to do research on the Caribbean and then leaving (Rack, 1982). Over time, however, a version acknowledging the impact of Empire on Caribbean mental health has emerged that has shifted to local studies and researchers from Caribbean universities; local 'training programmes in psychiatry, psychology, sociology, and anthropology'; and rapid increases in 'evidence-based literature on Caribbean psychology and psychopathology' (Hickling et al., 2013: 859). Another element of transcultural psychiatry in the Caribbean is the confidence to challenge the entrenched colonial system of management of mental illness.

This is to say for academic and clinical researchers any research into therapeutic cultures in the Caribbean, the region's historical condition and its impact on the mental

health of local individuals as a form of internalised colonialism, trauma, and oppression are serious environmental considerations (Fanon, 2008). In sociological terms, Caribbean legacies of structural and everyday violence, histories of subordination, and collective historical trauma have long-term psycho-social impacts on the individual and are important considerations for understanding the Caribbean experience (Hickling and Hutchinson, 2012).

Another aspect of the academic and clinical strand of transcultural psychiatry in the Caribbean is recognition of local and indigenous forms of healing and therapeutic culture distinct to Western values and approaches and implicit to Caribbean historical circumstances (Hickling et al., 2013: 864). Such local therapeutic cultures can be seen in syncretic religions and church, forms of dress (Pearce, 2014: 859, 868), art, and folklore; music, dance, and drama (Hickling and Hutchinson, 2012); carnival, playing mas, and celebration culture; light-hearted satire, linguistic word play, and 'picong'; and collective community traditions of mutual aid and group self-help like *sou sou*, *lend hand* and *liming* (Winer, 2009: 824, 188, 377, 524), and more.

At the same time, since the 1990s, there has also been a partial adaptation to Trinidad's post-colonial context, through a diffusion of psychotherapy across non-specialist institutional domains and popular culture. This includes activities by local therapists, motivational speakers, writers, journalists, and other public figures, including happiness campaigns, weekly positive psychology columns in newspapers, radio phone-ins, and podcasts with advice on topics such as depression, relationship advice, intimacy, or self-love. International organisations including the Dale Carnegie Training (2017) conduct personal development workshops in Port-of-Spain, Trinidad's capital, and other locations around the island. In the Western style malls, numerous bookshops are stacked with self-help texts including a large majority imported from abroad. These books address a wide range of topics, such as career development, wealth accumulation, and issues in intimate relationships. They were written by authors in the United States, Europe, Latin America, or South Asia and brought to Trinidad unchanged. This means that they typically do not speak immediately to the post-colonial realities of life in Trinidad, and the ways intimate relationships may develop in their context.

From self-help movements to popular psychology

The community mental health model established in the mid-1960s complimented a larger mutual-aid model of group 'self help' familiar to Trinidad's economically challenged social classes, popular from independence to the mid-1990s (Nehring and Kerrigan, 2019). 'Self-help' in the first two decades of post-independence in Trinidad described working-class communities coming together to volunteer and pool resources such as savings and building tools, alongside government assistance using a 'dollar for dollar' system, where monies raised by communities to do work locally were matched by the State (Sobers, 1998).

These mutual-aid self-help practices were developed into the community-centres movement, and their off shoots like Servol² and the local National Commission for Self Help Ltd. (NCSHL), established in 1987 to aid the 'dispossessed poor' (Sobers, 1998: 376). Their architects saw them as a means to develop traditional ideas of

therapeutic culture such as self-reliance and mutual aid into practical solutions for many low-income families. Mutual-aid self-help practices were the local moral grammar of working class, community development from the 1930s to 1980s. It is into this space that transnational self-help products and popular psychology from the Global North start to circulate and hybridise long-standing local cultures and ontologies of self-help from the 1980s.

Our participants told us they had or were currently reading a variety of self-help texts works including religious self-help and inspirational quote titles including Bibles of every size and kind, such as using faith to conquer problems, find your destiny, and being mindful; more classic self-help texts on topics such as dealing with relationships, loving oneself, getting ahead in the business world, and building self-confidence; and how-to-guides on making a better you, battling with weight, and a lot more. In terms of the more traditional Global North texts, our participants listed a wide range of authors, such as Dale Carnegie, Joyce Meyers, T. D. Jakes, or Eckart Tolle. They also told us that beyond self-help books, they consumed self-help products online via YouTube videos, Facebook posts, Facebook support groups, self-help gurus' personal websites, TED talks, and wellness blogs. Listening to self-help books was also a popular method of consumption as well as foreign led mutual-help workshops and retreats, DVDs, and more. This breadth suggests that access to a consumerist therapeutic culture via products in the mall bookstores and online is generally available and sought out by some of the middle and upper classes in Western Trinidad.

Politics, gender, and personal life

The combined usefulness of commercial popular psychology products, and local therapeutic practices was apparent in the interview data we collected. This observation suggested that on one hand, long-standing cultural solutions to social problems derived from the political and economic realities of colonialism and independence under racial capitalism have emerged locally and still circulate. These include the more clinical and academic forms such as transcultural psychiatry as well as more populist local forms socio-cultural heritage such as mutual-aid societies. While on the other hand for some people, commercial, transnational self-help, and popular psychology products have found an acceptance within the local moral grammar of self-improvement, entrepreneurship, and relationship management.

This is significant for our larger argument around the politicisation of self-help consumers because the content of positive psychology products and self-help logic do not attend to how the transhistorical processes identified in the field of transcultural psychiatry, such as the lasting traumatic impacts of colonialism, slavery, and imperialism, impact individual and collective mental health, or their impact on intimate relationships in Trinidad (Morgan, 2014). Rather, the subject matter of transnational self-help products produced generally in the Global Northwest, with their narratives of self-actualisation, successful intimate relations, and individualism, explicitly ignore structural global and social hierarchies, and the historically specific institutional arrangements under neo-liberal globalisation and established during the formation of capitalism and in the colonial encounter.

Intimate and couple relationships are an analytically fruitful site for unpacking the interrelationship between politics and gender, in so far as they constitute a central institutional arena of gendered power (Connell, 1987). Through intimate relationships, gendered structures of cultural, economic, social, and political power may come to be incorporated into individuals' experiences of everyday life and organise the life course (Connell, 1987). Here, we are interested in the specific forms which the interrelationship between politics, gender, and intimacy may take in contemporary Trinidad, and in the roles popular psychological knowledge may play in establishing this interrelationship.

Today in the context of popular culture, we can say that middle-class Trinidadian society connects transnationally through media, migration, travel, and discourse to relationship advice including intimate relations from psychology, both the clinical and popular psychology forms. For example, academic and clinical psychologists in Trinidad acknowledge how gender inequality and historical trauma impact couple relations locally (Dudley-Grant, 2016: 366). At the same time, the participants who we spoke with seemed more familiar and open to the advice from transnational self-help products and positive psychology in the context of adapting and working on their couple relations, than the former academic and clinical information.

For example, Rosaline told us that self-help texts helped her change into a more preferred version of herself. One more realistic about relationships and intimate life. She then described her journey of personal improvement as spiritual. While it might not be expected for her to reference larger historical and structural processes, she does suggest that religion provides peace, which of course erases the place of religion in the violent expansion of colonialism and neo-colonialism, and in establishing hierarchies of race, gender, and class in the Caribbean:

There's a market for self-help books. People go through a lot of things on this journey, right, this journey called life. They go through a lot of struggles, they go through a lot of things and they're searching. I think that by extension is why churches are so popular in Trinidad as well, because people are searching for that answer and that um seeking that peace or trying to find their balance then. So they go through a spiritual thing or the self-help books are not necessarily spiritual but they could lead there, you know.

A similar sentiment can be identified in the context of gender politics, which in the narrative of Nuwella also appears disconnected from the wider history of the society. While Nuwella clearly knows the pressures and inequalities she experiences as a woman in the society, it is an ahistorical account of them.

I have read the kinds of self-help text that tell you how to be. They tell you that you are not being the right kind of woman; this is the kind of woman you're supposed to be. You know, you dress a certain way, you talk a certain way and you don't say certain kinda things. And it just makes you understand wait, what kind of female am I? If I don't fit into this mould is something wrong with me?

Similarly, when thinking about how to improve her relationship, Rosaline suggested the books' insight – that 'work' in a relationship is about self-reflection – was self-evident.

So I think it, these books really do help your relationship if you want it to and if you're willing to have that um, self-reflection, do that self-reflection and see where you know, where you might be going wrong or where you need to think, yeah, it has to help once you're willing to do the work.

Amanda too seemed to suggest that self-help relationship advice was intrinsically about individual improvement and not working on a partnership together.

I think self-help works by just giving people a guide. By giving them a guide how to work on the relationship, just a guide. Because it falls on the individual itself to work on . . . so yeah it's just a guide for the individual to work on their end then.

We might say that for some of the readers of self-help and positive psychology we talked to in post-colonial Trinidad, their moral grammar reflects a reform-yourself ethos, rather than a way to understand how the historical inequalities and hierarchies of the colonial encounter and racial capitalism such as patriarchy, race, and class have impacted their mental worlds, intimate relations, and communities. Our thematic analysis also suggested that participants in the main adapted to the world, rather than wanting to change it. In the context of relationship management, this is also to say that in structural terms, the women we spoke to seemed to take responsibility for improving intimate relations, rather than men, or both together.

That these responses are ahistorical is not the same as saying self-help readers in Trinidad were not aware of the limited usefulness of the content and solutions obtained in such media. As Pamela told us,

Positive thinking, positive thinking. You know every single book I get except a few would have this positive thinking thing and that is why, you see, I stopped the self-help books, like how to think positive, and that is why I switched to biographies and autobiographies because in that you will see the flaws of the people and you see how they overcome, because the positive thinking books, they only give you the gold, they don't tell you how you get there.

That self-help books can provide community formation in the context of ethno-racial politics and gender was implied by some, such as in the words of Patricia, a 30-year-old Afro-Trinidadian teacher, who explicitly referenced her need to read relationship advice from a Black woman.

I use to read up on Iyanla Vanzant because I think she has some good experiences um, as a black woman too, and it helps you sometimes to cope because every situation is different. You would deal with things differently. Um, no day is the same. No experience is the same. You might say you know I went through something similar to this and I will deal with it differently but um, no situation is the same.

Alongside ethno-racial politics, the difficulties and politics of being accepted in society as a strong woman was also something Patricia recognised as advice that Black female authors can offer not just Black women, but all women.

A lot of the books on black women, young black women, the independent woman and why she is feared, but it's not only black women that experience that but every strong woman. But yes the struggles for the black woman may be a bit different, a bit more strenuous.

The ethno-racial and gender components here, within the content of self-help on relationships, to an extent provide a collective consciousness around identity. However, is this cultural identity politics or structural class politics (Young, 2008)? Recognition of local class relations was not something that was overt in the interviews we coded. Rather, the women we spoke to seemed to connect transnationally to a multihued and globalised middle class. In our global South context, like-minded self-help users collectivising for social critique and social change were not exactly what we found. Instead, while there did seem to be solidarity in ethno-racial and gender terms, there seemed to be a lack of solidarity across race and class.

When class politics was something, our participants spoke about it was in the commodification terms of the production of self-help materials and their content. It was not about how social hierarchies in society have emerged locally to place women differentially in relation to class and wealth. As Nuwella makes clear,

Well I will be very honest, I understand that an author is writing a book because he needs to make money so that I think what one needs to do when going through the self-help aisle is understand that, understand the business and a lot of what these people are offering make have grains of truth but not all of them are deeply grained, ingrained in your situation and what you are going through.

Notable in our interview, moreover, was the impression that self-help, for many interviewees, was more a distraction and habit to kill time, rather than a basis for wider social change and political reengagement. In Patricia's account, self-help helps her out because she is time poor.

My favourite media for self-help is Facebook. It's easy because when you're on the go, when you have a lot of things to do, to sit down and read is a luxury, right? [laughter] That's a luxury, so I think at the touch of the phone, handheld at the touch, sometimes you're sitting down waiting so you could just watch and read this. You know you're probably waiting at the bank or you're waiting for an interview or just something you're waiting for, you could go to it.

While this section has only been a short illustration of some of the nuances in the politicisation claims of communal engagement and subaltern couterpublic of therapeutic politics, a key thematic finding from our small sample of female self-help users was that 'personal survival' – beating some sort of obstacle in life: youth, personal difficulties, hegemonic masculinity, a lack of motivation, escapism – was suggested as a central reason our respondents were attracted to the self-help genre. While the collective politics we identified seemed to be intra class and extend transnationally, and not solidarity across class groups locally.

Conclusion: The thinning of the self

Under what socio-historical circumstances may therapeutic engagements enable the de-politicisation or re-politicisation of social life? In this article, we have made three contributions to answering this question, from the perspective of a post-colonial society in the Global South. First, we offer a critical reassessment of sociological arguments about the psychologisation of society and its contribution to the post-political turn. Second, drawing on qualitative data from post-colonial Trinidad, we have begun to explore the constitution of therapeutic politics in the Global South, in an area of enquiry so far focused on a limited number of societies in Europe and Anglophone North America. While our data do not allow empirical generalisations, they do point to experiences of therapeutic engagement that differ in nuanced ways from those documented elsewhere, in the Global Northwest (Rimke, 2000). We have explained our participants' ways of engaging with popular psychology through institutional configurations in Trinidad that are grounded in the country's colonial and post-colonial history. Looking at our participants' ways on drawing of popular psychology to make sense of their everyday experiences and practices, we have, third, set out a mode of analysis explaining these experiences and practices in conversation with their relative social-structural and historical conditions.

The extant academic literature on the therapeutic turn and its socio-political implications comprises analyses of the institutional shifts that underpin processes of psychologisation (Madsen, 2014), of popular psychological discourses (McGee, 2005), and of individuals' uses of these discourses (Wright, 2010). However, there persists a distinct dearth of studies integrating these levels of analysis to explain how individuals make sense of personal troubles through popular psychology and what the political implications of these therapeutic engagements might be.

Beyond the therapeutic politics of intimate life in Trinidad, the disconnection of psychotherapeutic knowledge from well-grounded structural analysis connected to real-world historical experience is an important sociological insight into the mutual implication of post-colonialism, psychologisation, and politics locally. Self-help as therapeutic politics in Trinidad may not speak of these contexts but it is still situated in these politics. It is also not simply subaltern collectivising, but rather a dialectic of de-politicisation of structural class politics, alongside the continued politicisation of cultural identity politics. The responses we got from our participants suggested they can imagine others in gender and ethno-racial group terms, but it was unclear if this is limited to within-class groups or across them. Many used self-help products on intimate relations to better themselves for others, and for themselves, but those politics are not centrally about bettering the society and lifting up others such as working-class women.

This is all reminiscent of debates about the politics of post-colonialism as culturalism versus the politics of decolonisation as anti-capitalism, familiar to Global South sociologies (Chakrabarty, 2005). The anti-colonial politics of the independence era promised that former colonies in the Caribbean and elsewhere could break free from colonialism and improve the economic and social situation of citizens. However, this break never happened. Instead, decolonisation was replaced by post-colonial

dependency, exploitation, and underdevelopment for many nations (Memmi, 1965). And while some citizens have experienced class mobility and community formation to a global transnational class group via, for example, the moral grammar of psychologisation, ‘emergent forms of lifestyle politics’, and socio-cultural norms around Capital, relatively, this is a minority of the population. Politically, psychologisation functions on the cultural terrain of identity and lifestyles, and not on what maintains structural and hierarchal relations between nations, social classes, and citizens, while the sociological imagination works on the structural terrain to dismantle and deconstruct hierarchies.

In this sense, the therapeutic politics of self-help products we explored appear to promote a form of collectivism and culturalism that is political to a point, but it could also be described as evidence of the continued decline of a politics of change, for a thinning politics of adaptation to the status quo. Our data in Trinidad suggest while therapeutic engagements may be constitutive of a politics of collective social engagement such as recognising and discussing the identity politics around authors and audiences, ‘personal survival’ tips, and ‘leaning in’ gender politics, these aspects did not create a politicisation of resistance around structural inequalities among our participants. All this raises questions about the potential relationship between a ‘thinning of the self’ and a ‘flattened politics’ in terms of the exhausted utopian energies of the state. Our findings may be taken to signal such a relationship. Our participants’ readings of ‘thin’ accounts of personal development, often imported from overseas and without references to the lived realities of intimate life in post-colonial Trinidad, may signal a flattening of politics and a retreat into individualised remedies for societal problems, such as the dynamics of gender and intimate relationships.

At the same time, the qualitative data presented here do not allow for far-reaching empirical generalisations, and it might be argued that resources for alternative imaginings of the relationship between self and society persist in Trinidad, for example, in new approaches to psychotherapeutic practice that are grounded in the social realities of the post-colonial Caribbean (Hickling and Hutchinson, 2012). Therefore, our research draws attention to the reality and potential for a ‘thinning of the self’ and a concomitant ‘flattening of politics’, while also highlighting the need for more extensive research, to identify alternative uses of therapeutic knowledge and new modes of therapeutic politics in Trinidad and the Caribbean. In the context of the current Covid-19 climate, as fears that liberal democracy will come to be replaced by a more authoritarian form of democracy and capitalism, recognising the implications of what therapeutic politics can and cannot do requires urgent sociological re-examination and further elaboration.

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Notes

1. Due to marked social, cultural, and economic differences between the Trinidad and Tobago, we chose to focus on Trinidad only.
2. Servol (Service Volunteered for All) is a grassroots community development organisation established in 1970 founded on a self-reliant approach to development.

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Resumen

En este artículo interrogamos de manera crítica la relación entre el giro pospolítico y la psicologización de la vida social. Durante mucho tiempo se ha argumentado que la psicologización, en forma de la popularización de discursos y prácticas psicoterapéuticos y su uso en una variedad de dominios institucionales no especializados, contribuye a la despolitización y la actual crisis de la política democrática. No obstante, la base empírica de este argumento sigue siendo limitada, y hay escasez de investigaciones al respecto en el Sur Global. En respuesta, consideramos cómo la psicologización de la sociedad podría cruzarse con su despolitización o, posiblemente, con su repolitización, centrándonos en Trinidad en el Caribe anglófono. Lo hacemos a través de un análisis sociohistórico de la implicación de la psicoterapia en los programas coloniales y poscoloniales de control social, y explorando los usos de los discursos psicoterapéuticos populares por parte de la clase media contemporánea para dar cuenta de las experiencias cotidianas de género y vida íntima.

Palabras clave

Cultura terapéutica, género, poscolonialismo, post-política, relaciones íntimas

Résumé

Dans cet article, nous interrogeons de manière critique la relation entre le tournant post-politique et la psychologisation de la vie sociale. On a longtemps soutenu que la psychologisation, sous la forme de la vulgarisation des discours et pratiques psychothérapeutiques et de leur utilisation dans une variété de domaines institutionnels non spécialisés, contribue à la dépolitisation et à la crise actuelle de la politique démocratique. Cependant, la base empirique de cet argument reste limitée et les recherches à ce sujet sont rares dans les pays du Sud. En réponse, nous examinons comment la psychologisation de la société pourrait se croiser avec sa dépolitisation ou, éventuellement, sa repolitisation, en nous concentrant sur Trinidad dans les Caraïbes anglophones. Nous le faisons

à travers une analyse sociohistorique de l'implication de la psychothérapie dans les programmes coloniaux et postcoloniaux de contrôle social, et en explorant les utilisations des discours psychothérapeutiques populaires par la classe moyenne contemporaine pour rendre compte des expériences quotidiennes de genre et de la vie intime.

Mots-clés

Culture thérapeutique, genre, post-colonialisme, post-politique, relations intimes