History of Working the Self

Introduction

The introductory chapter laid out the aims for the book. I identified that a key project for the book is exploring the heterogeneity of therapeutic cultures and in particular, personal development approaches as understood by a cultural intermediary occupation, personal development workers. In Chapter 1, I discussed that one of the problems with the current critiques of therapeutic cultures is that the origins and influences on personal development are often overlooked. Personal development has a specific history that informs the kinds of ideas and practices that are mobilised by practitioners and clients. This history also inter-relates with the history of the workplace, its main site of encounter. In this chapter I provide an historical account of personal development and other therapeutic practices in the workplace, drawing on other writers’ historical work to contextualise the data chapters in the book. This will help to demonstrate the multiple strands and varied ideas that interweave in personal development practices today. This account is necessarily brief, schematic and selective. It focuses on the waxing and waning of different therapeutic ideas in recent history in Britain and North America, and in particular on the intersections of therapeutic practices with the workplace. It will not be a history of the concept of the self, but will allude to the implications of changing practices of therapy for the self.

Puritanical self-work

Whilst it may be considered a post-World War Two phenomenon, several commentators such as Philip Cushman (1990, 1995) and Steven...
Starker (1989) argue that therapeutic cultures started in the seventeenth century (see also Plummer, 1995; Miller and McHoul, 1998a; Cameron, 1995). For these writers, self-help books originate in the religious based self-improvement manuals of the New England Puritans. These books laid out prescriptions on how to lead a devout life through self-sacrifice, discipline and hard work. Other writers suggest an even earlier set of origins, for example Nancy Armstrong (1987) and Jane Shattuc (1997) argue that the roots of self-help books are to be found in medieval conduct books. For Charles Lindholm (2001), self-development begins with the Renaissance, as self-knowledge becomes a secular value, rather than as a search for God. This emphasises that ideas on how to improve the self have a long history and varied origins.

Emotions

Emotional expressivism, seen by critics as the quintessential therapeutic objective as will be discussed in Chapter 3, also has a long history (see for example Nolan, 1998 and Sennett, 1986). Many writers point to the influence of eighteenth-century Romanticism on the valorisation of emotions and their public display (see for example Campbell, 1989 and Taylor, 1989). In contrast, psychologist Philip Cushman (1995) argues that this kind of emotionality was also encouraged by an influential eighteenth-century Puritanical sect, which encouraged public displays of intense feelings. This interest in emotions was related to the expansion of the inner life in Puritanism (Zaretsky, 1976). For the Puritans, with their emphasis on self-examination, their anxiety about salvation, and the importance of discerning the voice of the true self as opposed to the devil, self-knowledge was a difficult and complicated process (Baumeister, 1987, 1999; Lindholm, 2001). Leading to the notion of a unique self with a hidden interiority and latent potential, Puritanical and emergent Romantic thinking emphasised that the self wasn’t always what it should be (Baumeister, 1987; Taylor, 1989). These contrasting influences are all part of the debate about the origins and form of the ‘modern’ self.

Inside the self

The concept of interiority is seen to be a key part in the development of the modern self. The concern about the hidden self intensified after Freud lectured in North America in 1909, and his ideas became more