The Arrival of Therapeutic Culture in Australia: Modern Life, Masculinity and the Problem of ‘Nerves’

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Abstract:
Drawing on a study of the ascendancy of therapeutic culture in Australia, this paper considers an important historical dimension of the therapeutic turn through an analysis of the discourse of ‘nerves’. Representations of neurasthenia and nervousness in Australian medical literature and popular print media of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century are drawn upon to examine the significance of ‘nerves’ for a blossoming therapeutic ethos. While psychology, psychoanalysis and psychotherapy were clearly central to the ‘triumph of the therapeutic’, therapeutic dispositions to the self were emerging earlier in medical and popular discourses of nervousness. The nexus of nerves, masculinity and consumerism, I argue, provides an illuminating insight into an early therapeutic sensibility that has been largely overlooked. The emergence of new diagnostic categories such as neurasthenia underwrote a significant cultural shift in which the dualism between madness and sanity was disrupted and complex dimensions of gender, class and consumerism came together in new ways. Perhaps most significantly, the problem of ‘nerves’ was not limited to medical discourses, but also gained currency at the cultural level. These developments, I argue, were central to the arrival of therapeutic culture in Australia.

The ascendancy of a modern therapeutic ethos has been the subject of considerable intellectual interest in recent years (Moskowitz 2001; Furedi 2004; Imber 2004). This paper considers an important historical dimension of therapeutic culture in Australia through an analysis of the discourse of ‘nerves’. While attention has focused on psychology, psychoanalysis and psychotherapy as central to the ‘triumph of the therapeutic’ (Rieff 1966), the cultural significance of ‘nerves’ has been largely overlooked. Through an analysis of professional medical literature and popular print
media, the paper examines neurasthenia and other nervous conditions suffered by men in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. The popularisation of diagnostic categories for nervousness, I argue, underwrote a significant shift in which the dualism of madness and sanity was disrupted and complex dimensions of gender, class and consumerism came together in new ways. Perhaps most significantly, the problem of ‘nerves’ was not limited to medical discourses, but also gained currency at the cultural level.

The Stress and Strain of Modern Life: Neurasthenia and Nervousness

While rising rates of ‘insanity’ had long caused concern in the Australian colonies, during the last decades of the nineteenth century there was also anxiety about the increasing prevalence of neurotic or ‘nervous disorders’ (Walker 1987: 58). ‘Neurasthenia’—literally meaning nerve weakness—became the diagnosis of choice for a range of physical and mental symptoms attributed to the ‘stresses and strains of modern life’. Popularised by American neurologist, George Beard, neurasthenia epitomized fin-de-siècle anxieties. Characterised by chronic fatigue and a dazzling array of symptoms appearing to have no organic basis, it has been argued that neurasthenia was to the late nineteenth-century what ailments of the liver were to the eighteenth century: a fashionable ‘disease’ to which the cultured elite were especially vulnerable (Porter 2001: 39; Davis 1989: 93; Wood, 1973). In its heyday in America and Europe, esteemed sufferers included William James, Virginia Woolf and Max Weber (Schuster 2003, 2005). Durkheim (1951: 181) declared the affliction to be ‘rather considered a mark of distinction than a weakness’. Simmel (1903) reflected contemporary thought that the stimulation of the city strained the nervous system, while Freud (1893) understood neurasthenia as a sexual neurosis.

With the exception of David Walker’s (1985; 1987) work, the cultural significance of neurasthenia in the Antipodes has received scant attention. What is clear, however, is that in Australia, no less than internationally, neurasthenia lent credibility to the belief that the pressures of modern life caused nervousness. At a time in which there was growing unease about urbanisation and the increasing pace of life, neurasthenia appeared to confirm the view that modern civilisation had triggered new types of disease (O’Neill 1892). Beard’s theory of external causation was of signal importance. For as Walker (1987: 56) notes:
In effect, Beard democratized nervous disorders, making them an inevitable consequence of modernity … According to the old rules, exhaustion of the brain tended to occur only after severe intellectual labour, whereas after Beard modern society itself, its pressures, its excitements and manifold anxieties, caused nervous exhaustion.

Walker notes that if modernity itself could induce disease, then entire populations are potentially vulnerable. To more fully draw out the implications of his assertion that Beard’s theory ‘democratized nervous disorders’, attention must also be paid to dimensions of class and gender. Central to Beard’s theory—and accepted by medics of the day in Australia—was that the modern ‘brain worker’ was especially susceptible to neurasthenia. The problem of mental exhaustion or ‘brain-fag’, as it became colloquially known, meant that middle-class men were most at risk. A case study in the Australasian Medical Gazette (Morano 1890: 23) for example, describes a typical neurasthenic patient:

A gentleman having great mental work to perform on account of his many responsible and varied duties … he was sleepless and his sexual power was somewhat impaired. Having to do any mental work he would feel quite unfit for it. A heaviness about his head rendered his ideas confused and his power of concentration gone. Had lost all energy, and felt as if it did not matter to him how things went.

Through the popularisation of neurasthenia, middle-class men became subject to diagnoses of depression and anxiety in new ways. The somatizing of psychological states was clearly an important dimension. The identification of the nervous system and the brain as the locus of the problem not only facilitated the uncoupling of nervous distress and femininity, but it provided a palatable explanation that avoided the more difficult question of psychological dysfunction. In also attributing the strain of modern life as causal, neurasthenia, moreover, challenged the doctrine of heredity and the organic origin of mental disturbance. In doing this, and in facilitating recognition of a broader range of symptoms, problems of nervousness thus radically disrupted the dualism between madness and sanity (Neve 2001; Sengoopta 2001).

In addition to shifting understandings of mental disorder, I argue that these developments were also significant in cultivating the terrain of therapeutic culture more broadly. The creation of categories for sub-acute neuroses that could be applied to men without the stigma attached to a diagnosis of hysteria, for example, is especially important. Women were also diagnosed with ‘nervous’ conditions (see for example Marano 1890; O’Neill 1892; Macpherson 1924) but the more important point
for this analysis is that neurasthenia provided a new and respectable diagnostic category for anxious, depressed and ‘neurotic’ men. The ways in which nervous disorders were democratized then, becomes more complex. For not only was the doctrine of heredity and organic origin challenged, but prevailing views on masculinity and mental health were also disrupted. While this emerged first in medical discourse, nervous disorder as a problem of modern life (particularly for men) also resonated at a cultural level.

Before discussing the ways in which the emerging consumer culture both capitalised on and helped generate discourses of nervousness, some further elucidation of the nexus between nerves and masculinity is necessary. Walker (1985: 13) notes that problems of male sexuality became ‘the subject of a great deal of medical and sub-medical concern’ in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. Central, was the belief that semen was ‘nervous energy in a concentrated form’ and any emission was therefore potentially hazardous (Walker 1985: 3). But it was masturbation, widely regarded as the ‘most pernicious habit’, that was of greatest concern. Masturbation had long been thought a cause of insanity (Garton 1988: 100) but by the late nineteenth century, in the context of the shifting medical discourse of ‘nervousness’, this anxiety assumed another dimension. In the case of neurasthenia, sexual potency commonly diminished as a result of a generalised weakened nervous system. ‘Sexual neurasthenia’, however, was another matter. Diagnosed in cases of sexual dysfunction believed to be the direct result of excessive masturbation and seminal loss, it was a condition doctors were loath to treat. Thomas Clifford Allbutt (1912: 151) for instance, describes what he regarded as the view typical of his contemporary medics:

There is, perhaps, no more unwelcome visitant in the physician’s waiting room that the sexual neurasthenic; and the least welcome are those, who, by slackness or caprice of moral fibre, have dabbled in dirty ideas until mind and body have fallen into common frail.

Problems of male sexuality, be it ‘nervous debility’ (impotence) or ‘self abuse’ (masturbation) potently symbolised the modern threat to masculinity. For Walker, the spectre of nervousness for ‘modern men’ was therefore doubly significant. On the one hand was nervous exhaustion in the form of ‘brain fag’, which could arise from hard work and mental strain. On the other, excesses of the sexual kind could result in neurasthenia or ‘nervous debility’. While medical literature of the day reveals a still
reticent attitude to matters of male sexuality, the problem of nervousness as manifest in male sexual dysfunction found particular currency at the popular level.

**Fortifying the Self: Popular Cures for a Nervous Nation**

The discourse of nerves in the nineteenth century was not limited to professional theory and practice. Medical views on nervousness were popularised and broadly disseminated (Walker 1987; Garton 1988: 65). In the case of ‘nervous problems in men’ cures promising the ‘restoration of manhood’ were widely advertised in the popular press. During the 1880s and 1890s *The Bulletin*, for example, carried large advertisements for ‘doctors’ claiming extraordinary curative powers. Nerve tonics and pills—part of the tide of an emerging consumer culture—tapped into contemporary anxieties. The threat to masculinity that nervous complaints posed was commonly emphasised: perhaps most starkly captured in the concept of ‘lost manhood’. *Mumford’s Medicated Nervine Pills*, emblematic of this kind of advertisement, promised to cure all nervous weakness arising from masturbation, impotence and depression. Readers were alerted that left untreated, nervous conditions could lead to ‘consumption, insanity and suicide’.

Yet alongside the dismal message was an optimistic one, one which stressed the futility of suffering and promoted an ethos of self-care. The empowered consumer, that is, could find relief without the need for expert consultation. If Allbutt’s views were typical of physicians of the time, it is unsurprising that the alternative medicine market prospered. For the merchant, peddling ‘self-cure’ options was extremely lucrative. For the patient, the appeal was no doubt as much about affordability as anonymity, as patent medicines of the late nineteenth century averaged about one tenth the cost of a visit to a physician (Martyr 2002: 100).

By the early decades of the twentieth century, the popular discourse of nerves encompassed a broad range of problems that would later be understood within a psychological paradigm. Before ‘stress’, ‘anxiety’ and ‘depression’ became part of the popular lexicon in Australia, manifold symptoms of mental distress were understood as problems of nerves. Fundamental to the popularisation of nerves as a common malady, was the blossoming of consumer culture and the promulgation of ideas about the possibilities of health and happiness. For a growing number of ‘nervous moderns’ the march of progress may have contributed to new forms of dis-ease, but scientific
knowledge also promised solutions. Nerve tonics were widely advertised, and in the process ideas about nervous distress were also broadly disseminated. In the popular media, lay and professional ideas about health and illness intersected with an emerging consumer culture. The marketing of medicines to fortify the brain and nervous system was facilitated by the fact that the symptoms attributed to nerves could encompass almost anything. As Davis (1989: 101) notes:

…weeping attacks, irritability, depression/melancholy, mental and physical weakness, general debility, fear, heart palpitations, headaches, feelings of profound exhaustion, fear of insanity, constant worry, itching, flying neuralgias, nervous dyspepsia, dizziness, chills, crises of puberty (cholorisis, masturbation), kidney complaints, nosebleeds, weight loss and insomnia.

The concept of ‘needless suffering’—a central motif of therapeutic culture—was frequently depicted in the marketing of remedies for a range of ailments. Advertisements for Kruschen Salts, for example, informed readers that, ‘to suffer with fortitude is heroic, but to suffer needlessly is idiotic’ (The Bulletin, November 1917). Indeed the dissemination of such ideas through advertisements for nerve tonics in particular, became possibly as important to the process of the democratization of nervous distress as Beard’s theory was in attributing external causation. For just as neurasthenia opened up a diagnostic category and cultural space for male dysfunction, widespread advertising enabled a shift from the conceptualisation of nervous conditions as an affliction of the elite (or a problem of male sexuality), to a concern of the general population.

Similar developments were occurring elsewhere. In an analysis of gender, class and nerves in late nineteenth century America, Davis (1989) traces the impact of Beard’s theory of nervousness on the marketing of Lydia Pinkham’s Vegetable Compound, a popular home remedy for ‘female complaints’. Davis illustrates the shift in depictions of women in Pinkham’s advertisements and argues that the origin of nerves as an affliction of the upper-class was used to appeal to a much broader market, as the emotional vulnerability of women became an increasingly widespread motif. In her analysis, Vegetable Compound ads were as concerned with ‘legitimizing nervous complaints, as offering cures for them’ (Davis 1989: 108).

By the 1930s, developments in medicine and advances in the field of psychology diminished the significance of nerves in medical knowledge and practice. An
increasing popular concern with the psychological, however, did not diminish the prevailing views on nerves and modern life. At the cultural level, the somatizing of psychological states under the rubric of nerves persisted well into the 1960s. Indeed ‘calming the nerves’ continued to be depicted in the popular press as an ongoing challenge in a fast-paced modern world. The widely advertised *Sanatogen Nerve Tonic*, alerted readers that ‘feeling tired, run-down, “nervy” and depressed’ is evidence that the body is ‘unable to cope with the ‘stress and strain of modern life’ (*The Sydney Morning Herald*, March 1947). The link between mental states and exhausted nerves, as Beard had discussed it during the 1880s, was a recurrent theme at the cultural level during the first half of the twentieth century. In the 1950s, for example, *Bex* and *Aspro* were advertised as benign prophylactics for ‘nerviness’ (*Women’s Weekly*, April 1952). Indeed the motto ‘a cup of tea, a Bex and a good lie down’ reveals the extent to which the Australian sensibility took on such therapeutic prescriptions. Complaints that could be alleviated with such remedies were not limited to physical ailments, but were increasingly linked with psychological well-being, enjoyment and happiness, advancing notions that suffering was unnecessary. To quote again from an advertisement for *Sanatogen*, this time from 1962, readers were informed that:

> It isn’t right to feel ‘nervy’ and tense. And it isn’t necessary. For with the help of Sanatogen, you can be the happy, contented person you once were.

**Conclusion**

‘Ordinary unhappiness’ and other sub-acute problems of mental distress were for many decades articulated in Australia under the rubric of ‘nerves’. Indeed discourses of nervousness cultivated a therapeutic terrain long before ‘therapy’ or even psychology had made any significant cultural impact. In medicine, nerves provided new understandings of the self and mental distress. In the marketing of remedies for nervous disorder, consumer culture also became a significant driver of the therapeutic ethos. The ‘triumph of the therapeutic’ thus clearly involves more that the triumph of psychotherapy. It cannot be simply understood as driven by the professional interests of psychologists and psychiatrists and popularisation of psychological knowledge. The cultural climate already cultivated by the discourse of nerves, I argue, must also be considered as important to the emergence of a modern therapeutic understanding of
the self. Neurasthenia and nervousness therefore deserve special attention in analyses of therapeutic culture—just as in histories of medicine, psychiatry and social life in the late Victorian era—for not only did these conditions capture quintessential concerns of the time, but they elucidate how the arrival of capitalist modernity brought about a reconfiguration of understandings of the self and mental distress on the one hand, and the hope for cure on the other.

The gender dimensions, in particular, are also critical to understanding the early therapeutic period. For while the alignment between femininity and the therapeutic has been noted, its serious cultural consequences also lie in the way that therapeutic sensibilities challenged prevailing ideas of masculinity. The problem of ‘nervous debility’ is emblematic of anxieties about modern life and modern manhood. Primarily though advertising, the press carried messages about nervous disorder that at once offered solutions and created new markets. These developments, I argue, were central to the destabilization of selfhood and gender and a shifting orientation to suffering, which culminated in new therapeutic ways of thinking about the individual. Nerves were for many decades an ethereal region, on the borderlands not only of mind and body, but also of madness and sanity. A cultural space, I argue, that facilitated the blossoming of a pervasive therapeutic ethos.

References


