
POST-TRAUMATIC GROWTH

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ESSAY

Post-Traumatic Growth

I. What is trauma?

The word trauma means wound. It can be psychological and/or physical. Trauma is different from normal stress. Stress can feel positive or negative and at some level can lead to higher creativity and productivity. However, too much stress leads to depression, frustration, anxiety and illness. Traumatic stress is an emotional wound that results from a very stressful, horrific event. The feeling of powerlessness and loss of control takes over.

The ability to respond to a threat in a regulated way is disturbed by excessive demands and overload. Trauma hits us where we are most vulnerable. Whatever order exists in our lives becomes chaos. Trauma can be experienced as a reaction to overstimulation, or to situations and events in which we indirectly participate. Trauma can be historical, (trans-) generational and cultural. Continuous structural violence and systemic oppression due to cumulative events. Being trauma-informed or trauma-sensitive is key to healing and post-traumatic growth. The focus here is on the impact of trauma on our body, mind, nervous and energy systems as oppressed communities. Therefore, healing trauma at the deepest level is spiritual work that evokes nothing less than the resources and resilience of the human spirit individually and collectively. To reach this potential, we need to acknowledge our own history, the history of other affected people/ communities and putting our focus on healing, liberation and transformation of the causes of trauma in our roma* communities.

Systemic trauma therapy taught me that trauma is an inevitable part of life. Our brain is designed to coordinate responses to trauma aimed at protecting us. The amygdala, located in the emotional brain (limbic system) sends a message to the instinctive brain (brain stem), which then responds with fight, flight, freeze or fawn. This happens automatically and instinctively before the rational or thinking part of our brain (cerebral cortex) can engage. Rational thinking is basically bypassed in times of traumatic stress in order to survive, which then affects brain function and behaviour patterns. Later, if we do not engage in rational thinking, we can't effectively address, integrate and transform our trauma in order to heal.

II. Unresolved trauma in Roma* communities

Unhealed trauma leads to cycles of victim status, which are triggered by repetition of violence, power abuse and power asymmetry (re-traumatisation). The current and future generations of Rom:nja are damaged by these behaviours as the most live in survival mode.

Cycles of violence occur when an individual or a community responds to violence with more violence. The cycle of „hurt people hurt people“. It is important to remember three points. First, cycles of violence are not linear but circular. Second, Roma* communities experience structural and environmental racism and are exposed to and survive trauma either for individual or collective reasons. Thirdly, the majority of Roma* communities exist in both cycles: the perpetrator and the victim. Both are destructive and sabotage healing potential. Self-determined healing is possible and important for individuals in Roma* communities.

Rom:nja can share their resources that are burdened in the face of trauma and find new ways to transcend and thrive resiliently. Healing from trauma can only take place through its integration. This integration also serves to prevent future trauma. One indicator of the healing process in the months and years following traumatic experiences is the quality of relationships - how we treat ourselves, our inner family and our families, we are born into. The mutual care in our communities and societies are fundamental for our social belonging. Although we're living in systems that inflict collective violence on Rom:nja and sabotage our relationships, the ability to recover daily and to stay resilient reflects the impact of trauma.

When I started to work as a family and trauma therapist in 2019, I've noticed how dogmatic the medical diagnostics are. And how clinical trials stigmatise and stereotype the mental and emotional health of Rom:nja. Systemic trauma therapy approaches do not seek the pathological within a person. We aim to accept and work with diverse social systems in our life realities in order to carry out a more comprehensive and conceptual therapy framework.

III. Relevance of reality and reflection

The term reality stands for subject-bound construct that, once aligned with other people, can take on the character of the real - that is, of what exists independently from us. Approaches of systemic therapy can open up a wealth of new dimensions and perspectives by freeing us from the „all-too-certain“ of an objective world that's independent from our life reality.

This factor is fundamentally important if we want to look at and understand the life realities of Roma* communities. Instead of questioning the heterogeneous life realities of Rom:nja, categorising their identities and ethnicising their social conditions with clinical-pathological diagnosis, we need to start supporting and accepting their narratives in order to co-create a paradigm shift. The power and privilege of interpretation needs to be decolonised as well.

Reflection is a process in which we recognise our actions and refer them back to ourselves. It allows us the opportunity to discover and acknowledge our blind (deflected) spots and thus being accountable. To understand that other people's certainties and insights are as overwhelming and uncertain as our own is part of our reflection. Acting at eye level with each other is the starting point that empowers us to exist autonomously and self-efficiently.

A system is autonomous when it's capable of specifying its definition of 'justice' or position to it. To understand human autonomy, we need to understand the organisation that defines it as an unit. In the context of Roma* communities and the socio-cultural autonomy of Rom:nja has been deformed, erased, alienated, exoticised and criminalised throughout human history.

We are talking about traumatised systems within an already transgenerational traumatised ethnic „minority“. The systems of different Roma* communities cannot be understood independently from intersectional, historical and transgenerational trauma. Caring and peaceful communities prevent irreparable aftermath of trauma. Self-care is also a critical aspect of trauma healing, including trauma from racism (gadje-racism). Self-care takes care of both, individual and collective. When someone cares consciously for oneself, the community is also served as the individual builds a community of care in itself (inner family), that connects 'me-care' and 'we-care'. Healing begins there, where our wound originated.

Systems and other political as well as social mechanisms are based on trauma-related beliefs. Even when attitudes and values change, systems, laws and relational patterns shift much more slowly, perpetuating trauma-induced and trauma-reactive patterns in societies.

„When we act reactively out through our triggers, we fail to remove the veil of white supremacy (capitalism + patriarchy) that Rom:nja have had to live permanently disenfranchised, disadvantaged and in fear, and this has led to collective, cumulative, systemic and structural trauma. „Just as our bodies know how to heal wounds of the body, we all seem to have an innate ability to heal ourselves emotionally“.¹

IV. Transgenerational trauma

In epigenetics, we talk about the transmission of traumatic wounds to future generations.

Epigenetics is the study of mechanisms that turn various genes on or off without altering the underlying DNA. These epigenetic switches are involved in virtually all aspects of life and are heritable, affecting future generations. They influence health and disease as well as emotional and psychological responses to events and situations. Epigenetic research suggests that racial prejudices rooted in our brains long ago are passed down through (prenatally) and occur throughout our lives. Most importantly, epigenetic changes and environmental influences can be reversed by the choices we make. The world we live in is shaped by us, our practices, our culture, our existence, and our DNA responds. Genes change culture and culture changes genes².

¹ p. 21, R.C. Schwartz, „IFS, - The Inner Family Systems“

² cf. p. 34-59, T. DeWolf, J. Geddes; „The Little Book of Racial Healing: Coming to the Table for Truth-Telling, Liberation & Transformation“

Understanding trauma, becoming trauma aware and talking about trauma is fundamental to healing. This requires that we acknowledge and intersectionally transform all the traumatic wounds that we carry, the trauma that others experience and collective trauma in societies.

Rom:nja as an ethnic „minority“ cannot be separated from other forms of social injustice. Historically - traumatised racism against Rom:nja must be understood through the lens of intersectionality, as well as multiple forms of oppression working simultaneously against the vulnerable and leaving traumatic marks. To understand the complexity of oppression, we need to avoid simple solutions and singular responses. We need a multi-directional approach.

A reproductive approach recognises its intersectionality. A healing journey begins by liberating oneself from the cycles of violence and turning to the three phases of healing. The 1st phase is finding safety and support. The 2nd phase is to acknowledge what has happened in order to understand the wound and to live through the grief. Facing fear, accepting loss and committing to taking new risks. The 3rd phase of healing is to reconnect with one's own parts that we may have buried. And to make inner peace with others that we may have avoided, suppressed or treated differently. How can our different stories of trauma become a common narrative? How can we integrate the results of our wounds into our evolved selves?

V. The structural stigma of ethnic minorities

Not being reduced to a stigmatised identity is a clear statement for marginalised and discriminated people. People who do not see themselves as a „minority“ and make a clear individual statement against foreign-controlled, political language. For Rom:nja, who belong to a so called „minority“ in Europe. Those of us, who had to grow up financially weak or in marginalised milieus, neglected by the system and suppressed in their expression.

Rom:nja, who balance between identity crises and dream journeys in order to re-define themselves. They are our catalyst. Hybrid and resourceful identities in times of hyper-digitalisation and radicalisation allow us to shift paradigms and perspectives.

The perspectives of our resilience give us an unexpected aesthetic and allow it to be read differently in multi-perspective worlds of standards related to identity and growth. An emotional shower of colours and words in traumatic times. When we talk about post-traumatic growth in our Roma* communities, we focus on internalised healing processes while living with external designations, e.g. ~~gypsy~~. A process, that allows vulnerability brings respect in communities. It's our responsibility how we try to heal our wounds individually.

“We all have a reservoir of pain and shame within us and develop protective mechanisms that are reinforced by our culture. We all learn to distrust ourselves and put on a series of masks.”³

Our inner system is organised into parts that protect us and other parts that are vulnerable and need to be protected. Inner polarisation can occur through chaotic dynamics. The ego is what we define as our ‘I’, which protects, defends and projects fear outwards.

³ p. 39, R.C. Schwartz, „IFS - The Inner Family Systems“

Ego work (known as shadow work) has been an important part of my own healing work and is also the part of the self that feels most uncomfortable within us. It will cause the most pain within us for healing to occur through our self. Ego work is not about psychoanalysis, but rather about self-observing.

“Parts of our self change as they witness their own history from the past and experience how they were forced into the roles they are in today. There are no original bad parts, but only good parts in bad roles; good parts carrying extreme beliefs or emotions from past experiences.”⁴

By acknowledging our triggers as feedback rather than judging or labelling them, we receive an emotional-rational resonance of information and healing possibility. The trigger of an unresolved event (trauma) that is emotionally stored in our body is our psycho-somatic indication of our healing potential. The path to more self-leadership is through self-healing.

VI. The power of language

“Our parts carry all the irrational and unhealthy beliefs and feelings that you have absorbed during your life from your family, through traumatic experiences and from your culture. In IFS, these belief and feelings are called your burdens.”⁵

Today’s technology is out of control because it is not used consciously. Our ability to focus our attention on a single object or process for an extended period of time is damaged or disrupted by digitalisation. Our attention is constantly shifting as thought circles aimlessly.

We do not see or hear ourselves without the use of filters or projections, because we are not aware of how to observe ourselves. Traumatization puts multiple stresses on affected attentional functions. And yet, it is possible to direct at least a minimum of attention to the inner processes of reflection (thought, emotion, bodily sensation, movement) in our reality.

I have realised for myself, that I am the attention, because only then the development of attention for post-traumatic growth can begin. And that is one of the tasks I set myself for my unresolved wounds. Retrospective observations showed me my individual behaviour patterns that reduced powerlessness and increased my personal growth. This is what I call conscious suffering, because no one can force me to observe my past behaviour in retrospect. I have to consciously choose to look and acknowledge my own behaviour towards myself and others. I get to know myself when I start to observe myself reflectively.

Rom:nja have developed individual survival strategies in the face of trauma in which they have grown up and have served a very useful function. These functions have protected them from various harms or kept them out of mental institutions. These functions have successfully protected that which is fragile, soft and vulnerable. In the state of gratitude, it is possible for a person to consciously adopt new habits of life and store them mentally.

⁴ p. 135, R. C. Schwartz, „IFS- Inner Family Systems“

⁵ p. 136, R. C. Schwartz, „IFS – Inner Family Systems“

The risk factor of trauma plus racism multiplies fear and this fear blocks our being. Fear is the shadow side of inner security for a survivor, and like a shadow, it has no properties of its own. I cannot measure or even define darkness except as what it is not. It is the absence of light. If we are not aware of the context of our sensations and we cannot express what we are experiencing in language either, it may be that our awareness is limited to “I am afraid“.

As long as we keep secrets and suppress information within ourselves, we are at war with ourselves. Ignoring the inner reality also damages the sense of self. Thus, it is crucial that we let ourselves know what we know. The path to post-traumatic growth demands our truth, even if that truth has been radically painful. Breaking our silence by speaking out the truth.

Discovering ourselves is always a revelation, even if it is agonising to find words to describe the inner reality. We were born into language. Understanding how we use language as a medium is part of our healing process. To find words where there were no words before and to be able to communicate one’s deepest pain and feelings with the help of another human being. Such resonance, allowing previously unspoken words to be discovered, voiced and received, is fundamental to healing the isolated fragments of trauma - especially when other people have ignored, stigmatised or silenced us in our lives. Unhindered and barrier-free communication ability is the opposite of the traumatised state.

When we talk about the limits of our language, we basically mean that we try to tell our story in a way that avoids any trigger. Somatic exercises support our post-traumatic growth. The fact that people are overwhelmed by telling their story and that they experience cognitive flashbacks is due to trauma-induced changes in their brain. According to Freud:

“The psychological trauma, or rather the memory of it, has the effect of a foreign body, which must continue to be considered a present-acting medium for a long time after its penetration. Like a splinter causing an infection, the body’s reaction to the foreign body becomes a greater problem than the foreign body itself.”⁶

Trauma makes people feel like they are either someone else or nobody. To be able to overcome trauma and develop post-traumatic growth, we need community support to re-establish contact with our body, and thus with ourselves. Our sense of self depends on being able to organise our memories into a coherent whole. Telling the full story is only possible after these systemic structures have been restored and the preliminary work has been done. As long as we have not healed all the injured and wounded parts in our inner system (inner family), we will continue to sabotage ourselves and each other and project the pain on our origin and/or chosen families. In conclusion our post-traumatic growth comes with our “growing pains”, so healed people can heal people, that’s real growth.

⁶ p. 34, S. Freud, “Inhibition, Symptom and Anxiety”