RIFS-Blogpost

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Research report

Collective Trauma & Democracy: Overcoming Polarization in Crises

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Does consciously dealing with collective trauma help to strengthen democracy and overcome polarization? To answer this question, we took a closer look at the current crises and tendencies towards social and political polarization in terms of their effects on sense-making and trauma dynamics. Today marks the release of the final report, which reveals patterns, trends, and connections at the intersection of trauma, democracy, and polarization.

2   What do we mean by "trauma"?

Trauma (derived from the Greek for "wound") can be understood as an emotional or mental wound. Trauma arises in connection with distressing events such as catastrophes, violence or accidents, but also when basic human needs are not fulfilled by caregivers or through repeated experiences of powerlessness and being overwhelmed.

The term "collective trauma" refers to the simultaneous traumatization of numerous individuals in the context of slavery, war, colonization, systematic oppression, or genocide. "Collective trauma" can be understood as an event that could not be processed by the collective memory and that affects people, even across generations. Traumatic experiences that have not been adequately processed can be triggered in crisis situations.

3   What does trauma have to do with democracy?

The soul of democracy is conversation. But conversation does not get any easier when crises pile up on top of each other. When views – on the war in Ukraine, the pandemic, or the climate crisis, for example – diverge widely and become increasingly irreconcilable, social faultlines develop that cut through families, friendships, and social and political networks. The mutual understanding that is so essential to democracy is often no longer possible. Democracy itself is increasingly called into question.

One way to approach this challenge is to ask: Why do people react the way they do in crisis situations? Why do divisive tendencies arise? Our research project assumes that past negative experiences (traumas) also influence the way we deal with contemporary conflicts and crises - and are thus relevant to democracy. The conscious integration of past experiences facilitates discourse and the search for solutions.

4   How did the process unfold?

The core element of this research project was a large trauma-informed group process. The process, with around 350 participants who registered at the invitation of [Mehr Demokratie] and [Pocket Project],

was conducted online between 28 April and 1 May 2022. It was preceded by an introductory event with the process leader Thomas Hübl, Ph.D., and Claudine Nierth, speaker of the board of Mehr Demokratie. The IASS, together with the Institute for Integral Studies (IFIS) and the Cynefin Centre, observed the process as part of their research.

The trauma-informed group process focused on the conscious awareness of personal emotional, cognitive, and bodily processes, as well as relationships with others and the group as a whole. During the process, participants practiced "meta-communication," and shared their thoughts on what was happening in the here and now. This approach reveals thoughts and dynamics of which we normally remain unaware. "Witnessing," that is, recognizing and acknowledging personal and collective realities, is another important aspect in this process. The following techniques and elements were used: Meditation and awareness exercises, guided writing exercises, surveys and mood quizzes, one-on-one conversations between volunteers and the process leader in the presence of the whole group, conversations between professionals and the group leader, small group reflections.

5   How did the research proceed?

The research combined three methods: Data collection was primarily carried out using the software SenseMaker. Participants wrote down and self-assessed short stories using SenseMaker at several points in the process. The software shows whether and how narratives and their assessment - and thus participants' sense-making - change in the course of the process. By evaluating and merging the individual micro-histories, patterns, trends, tendencies, exceptions, and more emerge.

In addition to the participants' narratives, process observation was conducted by 16 trained individuals who observed and coded the entire process using predefined categories (e.g., activation, integration, strong emotions). Focus groups with participants were also held before and after the process. At the core was the question: "What qualities/competencies do we need to build a sustainable democracy in the face of current crises?" A team of scientists analyzed and interpreted the data. **The full research report is available here.**

A participant's statement before the process: *I feel powerless. Somehow, democracy is not where I am. When we talk to each other, there is either confirmation of my or your opinion or incomprehension.*

A participant's statement after the process: *I would say that my hope has been restored. That democracy makes sense. That a good coexistence is possible when all our feelings are allowed to be there [...] Democracy is a relationship.*

6   What are the results?

We distinguish here between confirmed results, substantiated hypotheses and outlook/visions. The overall picture that emerged justifies the assessment that the large group process examined here can be used to counter polarization tendencies.

7   Empirically proven results

The participants' relationship to democracy became more positive in the course of the process.

•   At the beginning of the process, "mixed feelings" dominated the narratives, ranging from detachment and disenchantment with politics to trust and the desire to help shape society. By the end of the process, confidence in self-efficacy, compassion, and courage to develop democracy prevailed among the participants.

•   The process brought abstract concepts such as politics, participation, democracy, and society to life and made them more tangible for participants.

•   Following the process, participants had a more precise picture of what qualities and competencies are helpful for democratic crisis management.

•   Connectedness with one's self and others and conversation were identified during the process as being essential to the strengthening of democracy and the resolution of crises.

•   Discussions within the group broke down barriers in communication and enabled participants to engage with topics that were emotionally challenging or repressed.

•   The trauma-informed process rendered distressing experiences more accessible and facilitated understanding of others' difficult experiences.

8   Trends and theses

• Trend 1: During the trauma integration process, participants recognize how strongly personal injuries and collective memories influence the way they deal with current crises.

• Trend 2: Motivation to engage in democracy increases in the course of the trauma-informed group process.

• Trend 3: The trauma-informed group process makes it possible to experience the polyphony of democracy in a concrete fashion. Participants experience resonance: They are heard and experience themselves as capable of agency.

• Trend 4: By feeling heard and experiencing their own influence, participants are better able to acknowledge and cope with differences and disagreements. This allows participants to respond more appropriately to current experiences of crisis.

• It is important for both citizens and actors in politics, media, science, and business to process, communicate, and integrate difficult experiences. We need new formats and democratic tools that facilitate coexistence and our ability to cope with crises. Spaces for exchange and discussion seem to be particularly important.

9   Visions of the future: A new quality of democracy

• Vision 1: Feelings of division and experiences of separation relating to the coronavirus pandemic and other crises should be worked through at both the individual and societal levels. This would strengthen social and political trust, social cohesion and willingness to help shape democracy.

• Vision 2: Democratic processes for mutual understanding benefit from trauma-informedness. More conscious awareness of the personal, collective, and intergenerational aspects of trauma, strengthens relatedness to others and the world.

• Vision 3: Society needs spaces where people can meet and engage with each other on more profound level. People want to participate, and they want to receive feedback on what they say and do. When this occurs, democracy becomes a more tangible experience.

• Vision 4: Trauma-informed large group processes and the mapping of changing narratives (for example with SenseMaker) are promising ways to make diversity tangible and to enable collective sense-making. This strengthens people's ability to engage in dialogue, including on critical issues, and helps to overcome the widening gaps between different social groups.

• Vision 5: In a next step, model trauma-informed processes should be staged with citizens at various political levels.

• Vision 6: Systematic research on trauma-informed group processes is needed to improve our understanding and harness their benefits.

Wagner, A., Strasser, J., Schäpke, N. (2022): Overcoming polarization in crises: A research project on trauma and democracy with over 350 citizens, Berlin, Wardenburg : Mehr Demokratie e. V., Pocket Project e. V., 87 p.