

# Vicarious resilience: A new concept in work with those who survive political violence and trauma

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How do  
academics/professionals/volunteers  
benefit from working with people  
who have experienced trauma due  
to political upheaval &/or “natural  
disasters”?

Why do we need to examine how  
we transform ourselves as a result of  
the work we do with trauma  
survivors?

# Vicarious resilience

- **Process** “characterized by a **unique and positive effect that transforms therapists in response to client trauma survivors’ own resiliency.**”
- It refers to the positive meaning-making, growth and transformations in the therapists’ experience resulting from exposure to clients’ resilience in the course of therapeutic processes addressing trauma recovery.

(Hernandez, Engstrom & Gangsei, 2007, p.237)

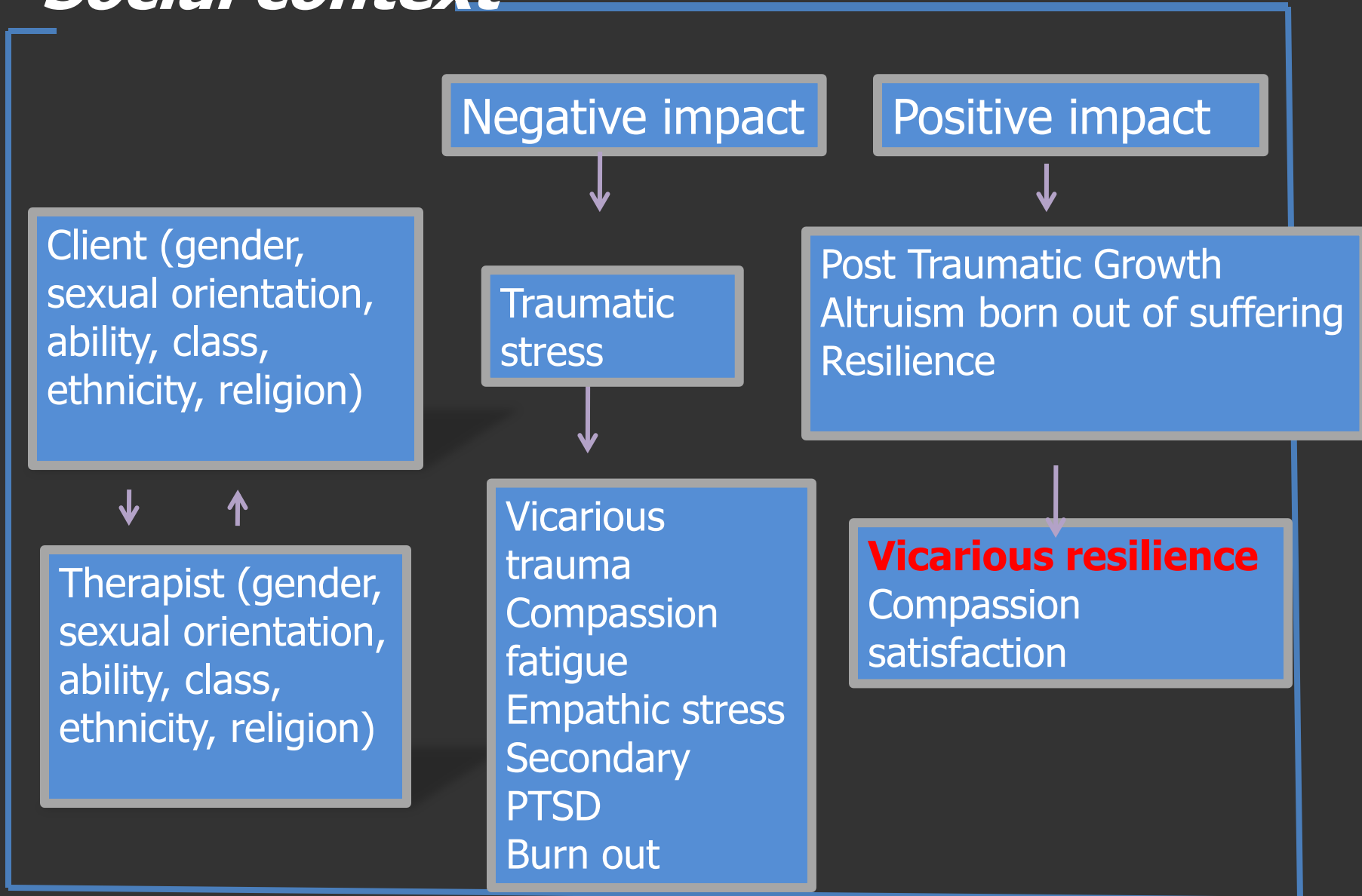
*I think maybe to sum it up, that I see such enormous strengths in my clients. I think that that's helped me to also identify a number of strengths in myself that I wasn't really very conscious of before. And also it has challenged me as a person and as a clinician to rise to some very challenging situations, to draw from things and to develop skills and abilities within myself that really were not developed or perhaps didn't exist in order to deal with and to hopefully interact in a therapeutic way with my clients in some of these... I think I have developed more strength ... as a result of engaging and going on this path, sometimes for quite a number of years with a given client.*

Our work on vicarious resilience **is**  
**not** about supporting...

assumptions that the legacy of human-made traumas can be erased; that one can leave behind or find compensation for what one was forced to experience; and that individual empowerment is the solution for the difficulties that trauma wreaks

# Relationships between vicarious resilience and related concepts

# ***Social context***





# Mutual impact is present in a helping relationship...

- Therapists/helpers and clients exist in the context of a relationship where they mutually influence each other and construct meaning.
- Therapists/helpers are a part of, or participate in the therapeutic relationship.
- The therapeutic relationship is framed within layers of contexts: Organizational, familial, communal, social.
- It includes dimensions of power inherent in the therapeutic relationship and structured by virtue of the parties social locations .
- Implications for our professional role and responsibility

# Vicarious resilience

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- reflecting on human beings' capacity to heal
- reaffirming the value of therapy
- regaining hope
- reassessing the dimensions of one's own problems
- understanding and valuing spiritual dimensions of healing
- discovering the power of community healing
- making the professional and lay public aware of the impact and multiple dimensions of violence by writing and participating in public speaking forums.

# Vicarious resilience cont...

- Timing: healing, listening and creating new narratives
- Learning about one's blind areas
- Learning to be a compassionate witness beyond the therapy room
- Learning about struggles in other parts of the world and their connections to this and other countries
- Learning about change
- Understanding how context shapes possibilities for healing

# Vicarious trauma

“a transformation in the therapist (or other trauma worker’s) inner experience as a result of empathetic engagement with the client’s trauma material”

(Pearlman & Saakvitne, 1995, p. 31)

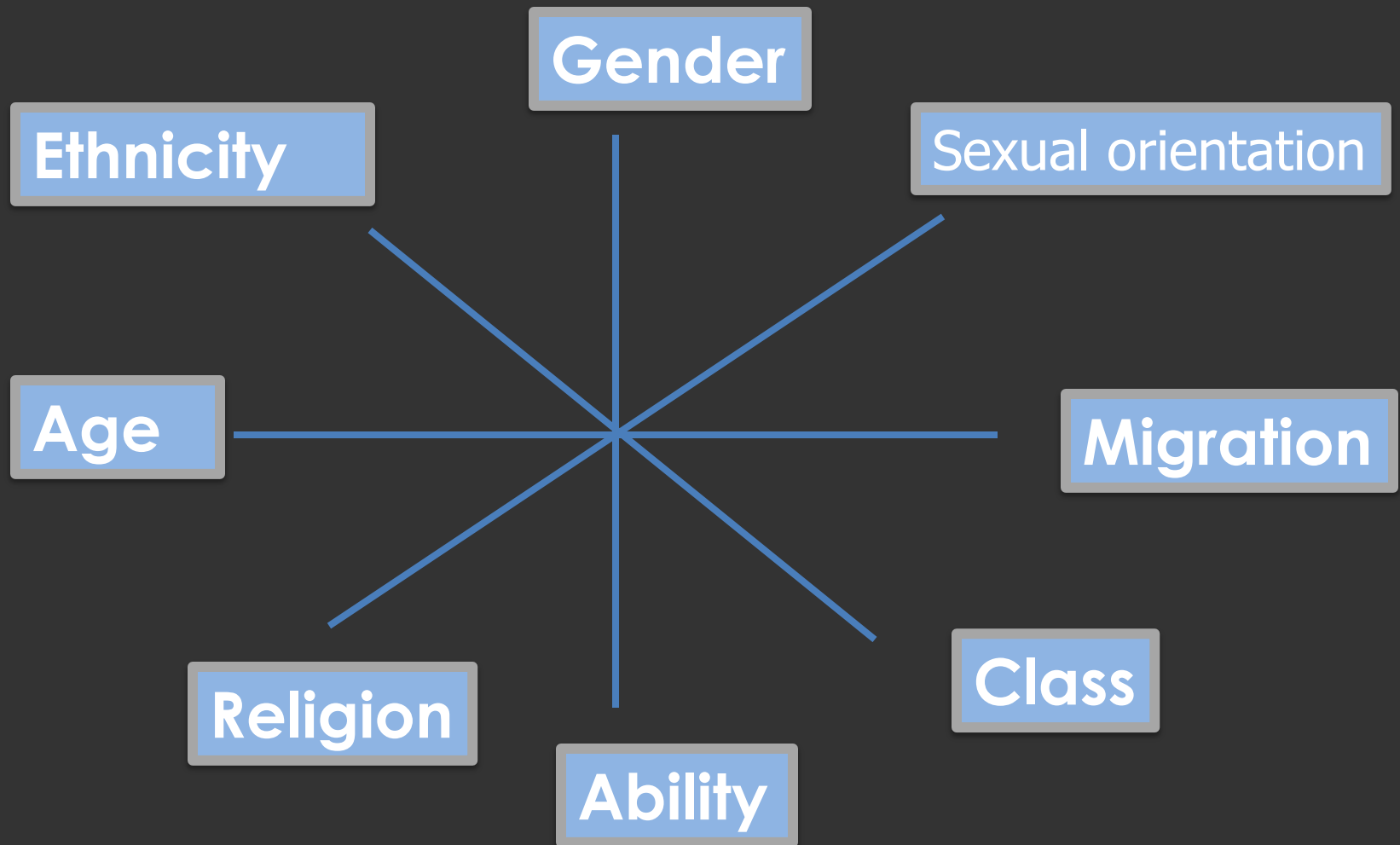
How does **context** shape the  
experience of vicarious  
resilience?

*We understand that in a torture treatment center like this you see people from all over the world, and that this offers the opportunity to learn about people with very diverse backgrounds. When you think about the positive impact that your clients' resilience has had on you, do factors such as ethnicity, class, sexual orientation, religion, or other dimensions play a role in shaping your experience? How?*

*When I came in to this country, I already spoke some English, had a bachelor's degree. I am white. I had so many advantages right there. I was already accepted in graduate school. I had enough money to rent an apartment. I had all of that going for me. I had a hard time obtaining a visa, I experienced interrogations at the airport and I was sent home. I had lots of those experiences, but still, I didn't have to deal with all that. I'm white and that gets me through the door. I don't think, especially in this country, you can ignore the fact that there are skin color differences – it's a racist place. So you have to constantly acknowledge it. And I think acknowledging it out loud is makes it possible to have a conversation about it. For torture survivors and refugees who did not have the experience of being discriminated against because of their skin color, it is necessary to have a conversation about skin color and how things work in this country and whether or not that is right, how they feel about. Because I'm a white person and I'm privileged, I think I can really help them understand not only what is happening to them but also take a stand, whatever stand they feel they want to take.*



# Intersectionality



(Crenshaw, 1994)

# Related concepts

- Resilience
- altruism born of suffering
- post traumatic growth

# Resilience

"In the context of exposure to significant adversity, resilience is both the capacity of individuals to navigate their way to the psychological, social, cultural, and physical resources that sustain their well-being, and their capacity individually and collectively to negotiate for these resources to be provided in culturally meaningful ways" (Ungar, 2010)

- Culturally embedded understanding of well-being.
- About what people themselves term well-being.
- Resilience is more likely to occur when services, supports and health resources are provided in ways that are meaningful
- Result of both successful navigation to resources and negotiation for resources to be provided in meaningful ways.

# Post traumatic growth

- **Growth process** by which survivors are affected by trauma in a way that **transforms in a positive manner**.
- Positive changes that go beyond adjustment in spite of adversity. They do not exclude trauma survivors' experiencing distress and struggling in the trauma's aftermath at the same time.

(Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1995, 2004)

# Altruism born of suffering

- Moving from survivorship to activism in a quest to help others.
- “something about the experience of suffering — either the situation itself, the psychological processes that accompany it, or additional experiences that transform the meaning of suffering may give rise to altruism and prosocial behavior.”
- Altruism requires a focus beyond the self because of suffering.

Vollhardt (2009, p.60; See Staub & Vollhardt, 2008; Staub, 2003, 2005).

# Professional quality of life

- Compassion satisfaction:  
pleasure and satisfaction from working in a helping profession and may be related to the particular helping practice, the system of care in which one works, beliefs about the self, altruism and professional environment.
- Compassion fatigue.
- Burnout

Stamm (2009)

- By **witness** is meant a mode of responding to the other's plight that . . . becomes an **ethical** involvement. One must not only utter a truth about the victim but also remain true to her or him. In this latter mode of response, one is summoned to **attentiveness**, which is to say, to a heartfelt concern for and acknowledgment of the gravity of violence directed toward particular others. In this attentiveness, the wounding of the other is registered in the first place not as an objective fact but as a subjective blow, a persecution, a trauma. . . . We find that our witness of the other who suffers is itself suffered. But this suffering is not one of **empathy**, which is to say a suffering that would find in its own discomfort a comparison to what the victim has suffered. . . . **We suffer, so to speak, the impossibility of suffering the other's suffering.**

Hatley (2000, p. 3,5)



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