

POLICYBRIEF

No. 06, 2024

Co-creating Resonant Societies in Times of Crises: Trauma, Polarization and Democracy

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Executive Summary

1. This policy brief shines light on the complex interplay of trauma, societal polarization, multiple ongoing crises, and democracy. It highlights the need for a comprehensive sensemaking approach in times of crises and offers a new perspective on understanding collective trauma in the context of democracy.
2. Key findings derived from the trauma-informed large group process presented in this policy paper suggest that participants, following such a process, experience an improved sensemaking, feel more connected to people around them, and experience themselves as increasingly motivated co-creators of society.
3. Our findings indicate that trauma-informed large group processes, when combined with research tools focusing on storytelling and enabling participation, show promise in making diversity both mappable and tangible. This approach supports citizens to respond more effectively to ongoing crises and mitigates societal polarization.
4. To actively deal with feelings of division and experiences of separation among citizens and to meet the need for increased participation, social spaces should be created where citizens can experience a culture of dialogue. The next step involves the model-like implementation of trauma-informed processes on various political levels, possibly in connection to instruments of deliberative democracy.

Introduction

In view of the simultaneity and complexity of the local to global emergencies currently taking place, democracies are coming under increasing pressure. The climate crisis, the rise of disruptive technology, and the lingering effects of the COVID-19 pandemic intensify uncertainty and contribute to societal division. The ongoing war events further contribute to excessive demands and emotional shock.

Decision makers in general and politicians from local to national levels in particular, face the challenges of increasing polarization while also experiencing the political pressure associated with the emerging social, political, and ecological problems (McCoy et al. 2018). As trust in political institutions diminishes (Dryzek et al. 2019), crises intertwine with individual and collective traumatic memories, reactivating emotions associated with past traumatic events.

This policy brief presents key findings from the application-oriented research project “Trauma and Democracy - Overcoming Polarization in Crises”. By involving 350 German citizens in a large group process of 3 days, this pilot project aimed at gaining a better understanding of unconscious, collective dynamics in the context of multiple societal challenges. The central research question guiding the project is whether understanding and dealing more consciously with collective trauma dynamics can help strengthen our democracy and overcome polarization? Our findings indicate that the trauma-informed large group process supports citizens to respond more effectively to current emergencies and mitigates societal polarization.

First, the theoretical and methodological background of the pilot study is outlined. Second, the implementation of the trauma-informed process is characterized. Third, we highlight key findings and trends. To conclude, we present six recommendations for decision-makers and a brief outlook.

Why We Need New Forms of Democratic Sensemaking

Sensemaking as a key to navigate complexity and bridge fragmentation

This policy brief draws on a theoretical framework that integrates different approaches, from political science, sociology, psychology, and trauma research. “Sense-making” serves as a boundary object, which can be found in all mentioned disciplines and facilitates the interrelation of different perspectives. In essence, sensemaking can be understood as a process through which humans organize multiple, sensory impressions into a coherent stream of experience and retrospectively organize these experiences into a more or less structured narrative.

It is a highly dynamic, non-linear social process of engaging with information, experience, and action (Weick 1995). It is crucial for navigating complex life situations, and individuals and groups are constantly engaged in sensemaking. Making sense of experiences and information thereby is less oriented towards accuracy, but emphasizes plausibility (Weick 1995, 17), is anchored in the construction of self-identity, manifested in social interaction, and is a motivator for action. The ways in which people make sense of their lives, and the world,

processes of making identities, institutions, representations, and discourses (Jasanoff 2004). The acceptance and support of policies addressing societal crises not only hinge on established facts, but primarily on how they tie in with existing processes of sensemaking (Schenuit 2017).

Policy making and advisory should innovate in terms of communication and deliberation, steering away from simple, mechanistic thinking that often contributes to more fragmentation in society. Given the complex interactions of multiple social actors, institutions, and social systems in the field of politics, there is an increasing need for spaces in which people can learn to understand, bridge and navigate complexity. This also includes recognizing history as an ongoing process of meaning-making, constantly re-negotiated within society in the present. Understanding patterns of narrative construction as well as the shift of narratives is not only relevant during times of crisis, but for dealing with historical patterns of fragmentation as well.

“Collective trauma” and historical meaning-making

Like the shift from “fact-making” to “sense-making” in politics, a similar transition can be noted for history in general and for collective memory in particular: It is not the exclusive facts but the social acceptance of narratives that is central to historical sensemaking. The understanding that history and the past are not simply “behind us”, but are constantly being reconstructed by people, is illuminated by Straub’s psychological theory of historical meaning-making (1998). History is viewed as a symbolic construct that is actively generated by people through communication. In this context,

past, present, and future behave as a “complex, dynamic set of relations” (Straub 2003, 78). In this respect, developing a shared understanding of narratives is crucial in the process of historical meaning-making. Here, the “standardization or collectivization of memory [is] a normal rather than an unusual

process” (Kühner 2008). Collective trauma introduces a distortion in this process, representing “an event that could not be retrospectively processed with the ‘normally accustomed’ collective memory practices” (Kühner 2008, 250) and “thus [was] not transformed into a narrative accepted by all group members” (Kühner 2008).

Thus, collective trauma involves a crisis of meaning (Hirschberger 2018). This assumption shows parallels with the clinical-psychological trauma perspective. Traumatic

Can understanding and dealing more consciously with collective trauma dynamics help strengthen our democracy and overcome polarization?

are reflected in the stories, the many little anecdotes, and narratives they share in everyday life (Fisher 1985). Sensemaking matters for policy and politics (Jasanoff 2004, Schenuit 2017). Policymakers are confronted with addressing increasingly complex societal challenges, by deciding on, as well as promoting and organizing majority of policies that contribute to solving challenges (Schenuit 2017). Scientifically established facts do matter in policymaking; however, their relevance depends on how they are embedded in societal

experiences are often (re)experienced as fragmented, fragile, and incoherent. Here, the breakdown of the meaningfulness of one's narrative is the rule rather than the exception. According to van der Kolk, narratives provide a realm in which overwhelming experiences find their expression: It is precisely where narratives have gaps, fractures, and inconsistencies that individual and collective sensemaking is often incoherent (van der Kolk 1995 & 2018).

Current crisis as a catalyst of fragmentation

Crises, in turn, can act as catalysts of fragmentation by activating unprocessed traumatic material stored in collective memory. The arousal of unprocessed experiences and associated emotions triggers unconscious dynamics, disrupting individual and collective sensemaking (Volkan 2019). The critical factor lies in how unconscious (often also transgenerational) contents of the collective memory can be reconnected and integrated (Kühner 2008). Collective practices of remembering, also considering emotions such as disquiet, fear, mistrust, and grief, are attributed great importance here to regain access to experiences of resonance. Resonance, in this context, describes the experience of intrinsic connections, that is where relations are marked by "a mutual reaction in the sense of a genuine response" (Rosa 2019, p. 58). It corresponds to an experience of re-connection and reduced fragmentation, and enables action based on a sense of connection and compassion. Mute, functionalistic relations to "the world as an object" represent the opposite of resonance.

According to sociologist Hartmut Rosa, resonance is central not only for integrating traumatic events buried in collective memory, but also for sustaining democracies. His "Sociology of World Relationship" makes an important contribution to theoretically linking resonance capacity, democracy and trauma (Rosa 2016). Resonance capacity is based on openness to share even contradictory and challenging contexts of meaning and not to repress them. Rosa argues that most crises of modern democratic societies – the environmental crisis, the crisis of democracy itself and the psychological crisis – can all be understood and analyzed in terms of (lacking) resonance and our broken or mute relationship to the world. Due to the complexity of emerging crises and unprocessed traumatic events, new formats of collective and trauma-informed sensemaking are needed as outlined below. This opens the possibility for resonant societies capable of responding to crises appropriately, rather than to stay numb and indifferent.

Implementing Trauma-informed Formats of Sensemaking

The trauma-informed large group process

A central piece of the presented research project was a three-day large group process led by Thomas Hübl, Ph.D. with the participation of more than 350 German-speaking citizens in an online format. The project was a cooperation of two NGOs: Mehr Demokratie, focusing on strengthening direct democracy in Germany, and the Pocket Project, focusing on working with collective trauma integration. Accompanying research was provided by The Cynefin Centre, RIFS - Research Institute for Sustainability, and IFIS - Institute for Integral Studies.

The design of the trauma-informed large group process was developed by Thomas Hübl over two decades. Integrating mystical knowledge from the Christian, Judaic and Taoist traditions into an integral model of human development, he has increasingly incorporated trauma-theoretical aspects into the conception and implementation of group processes. The facilitation design makes use of various meditative, dialogical as well as group perception methods. Increasing awareness of personal emotional, cognitive, and physical processes, as well as of the relationship to others and to the group, is central to the group process.

An important learning moment for the participants is the establishment and practice of a "meta-communication". Participants are continuously invited to co-reflect their lived experience of events, dynamics, and unconscious phenomena as they are emerging in the group. The process of witnessing (Matoba, 2023), in the sense of recognizing and acknowledging personal or collective realities, is another core element.

Elements used in the trauma-informed large group process:

- **Meditation and perception exercises:** Through different forms of meditation and perception exercises, participants experience a deepened self-reference and expand their own regulative abilities.
- **Guided writing exercises:** Writing exercises on specific questions open the possibility of thematic self-exploration and differentiation for the participants.
- **Survey or sentiment poll:** Participants provide brief personal statements on a specific question. There is no discussion or commentary on the statements.
- **Individual process work:** Participants in the large group are offered the opportunity to work on personal issues, facilitated by the group leader and witnessed by the overall group. Previously unconscious or undisclosed

personal aspects can be understood more deeply and accepted through the experience of relatedness and witnessing. Co-reflecting and sharing personal traumatic experiences in an appreciative group space is essential to the restorative effect of the process.

- **Discussions with experts and group leaders:** In discussions with experts, questions of content are discussed and co-reflected upon in the sense of a panel.
- **Joint reflection rooms in small groups:** Small groups of 3–5 participants serve as “digestion rooms” in which the experiences made during the large group process are co-reflected upon together and brought into a relationship.

Mapping people’s voices with innovative technology

Because narratives are fundamental to our theoretical approach, we have selected the SenseMaker® software by the Cynefin Centre as a central research instrument (van der Merwe et al. 2019). SenseMaker® allowed the participants of the group to enter and evaluate their stories in the software via mobile phone or computer before, during and after the large group process.

This process allowed for further interweaving of direct experience, reflection, and interpretation of the events by the participants in the form of short narratives (micro-stories). The participants’ perceptions, positions, and aspirations regarding trauma and democracy were thus continuously documented throughout the entire project.

In the form of micro-stories, the participants were able to describe and evaluate their personal experience of democracy in the current political and social situation.

A total of 643 micro-stories and additional data from focus groups and participatory observation provided a rich, complementary database. The data were analyzed using a qualitative-interpretative and exploratory research approach.

The findings of our research are not readily generalizable or transferable to the population as a whole. Rather, the research project makes an innovative contribution to the nascent elaboration of patterns, trends, and interrelationships in the complex assemblage of trauma, crisis, and democracy. The key findings of the trauma-informed large scale group process are presented in the next chapter.

What Can Such a Large Group Process Achieve?

The following results and trends could be identified at the intersection of collective trauma dynamics, democracy, and polarization. The overall picture suggests that the presented large group process can contribute to counteracting polarization tendencies.

Key findings

First and foremost, looking at the SenseMaker®, results showed that participants increasingly shared stories towards the end of the trauma-informed large group process,

- Which they themselves consider to be positive,
- Where they feel more connected to the people around them,
- Which are written out of a sense of compassion,
- In which they feel society’s response to the current crises is appropriate,
- In which they experience themselves as co-creators of society.

Generating human flourishing in the context of democratic engagement

The before and after comparison of the participants’ evaluations of the micro-stories using the categories “positive” and “negative” showed a clear shift: Initially, over 85% were evaluated as very negative, negative and mixed. After the group process, over 85% of the micro-stories were rated as very positive, positive, and mixed.

This research project makes an innovative contribution to the nascent elaboration of patterns, trends, and interrelationships in the complex assemblage of trauma, crisis, and democracy

Strengthening the confidence in democratic practice

While the micro-stories at the beginning of the large group process express a good deal of distance and disenchantment with politics, the micro-stories at the end of the process demonstrate clearly a strengthened confidence in one’s own ability to act and revealed a new courage to actively engage in a renewal of democratic practice. Abstract systems

such as politics, participation, democracy, and society were experienced by the participants as more manageable, accessible and lively in the course of the group process.

Discovering new competencies for democratic participation

The above-mentioned observations were complemented by the insights from the focus groups and the participatory observation. A comparative analysis of the focus groups shows that participants tended to describe numerous additional qualities and competencies as important for dealing democratically with multiple crises after the large group process. In addition to the social structures and institutions previously named as important, as well as the ability to communicate with each other with respect for diversity and differences in opinion, the competencies of forming relationships with oneself and others as well as dialogical communication were increasingly named.

Dealing with difficult underlying emotions in democracies

Furthermore, the participatory observations allowed the reasoned assessment that topics previously experienced as “frozen”, difficult or highly emotional became more accessible and workable in the group process. The process seemed to enable many participants to be in deeper resonance with their own experience and the experience of others with regard to massive crises and past traumatic experiences.

The following overarching trends were identified at the interface of collective trauma dynamics, democracy and polarization:

Trend 1: Within the group process, a more conscious perception and a new understanding of the manifold links between personal injuries, collective memory contents and present crises experiences emerge.

Trend 2: Within the large group process, the participants’ sensemaking and meaning-making change, leading to an expression of more commitment, motivation and responsibility in the context of democracy.

Trend 3: Participants experience themselves as having a powerful voice and influence when the polyphony of democracy is not experienced purely mentally, but rather emotionally and in an embodied way. Democracy then transforms from being a “thing out there” to an internalized resonance experience.

Trend 4: The lived experience of resonance enables a dynamic and connected approach to polarization and conflict. Differences and differing opinions can be better included and contained from which new, related and appropriate response possibilities arise.

Recommendations for Decision-makers

Overall, the results of the research emphasize the need for new formats of democratic practice to sustainably counter the effects of multiple and dynamic crises. The stresses and uncertainties people are exposed to in the face of crises require social spaces in which communicative sensemaking and understanding can take place. Therefore, we would like to present the following recommendations for decision-makers:

1. Feelings of division and experiences of separation among citizens should be actively dealt with not only individually, but also socially. This helps to strengthen political and social trust, social cohesion and the willingness of citizens to participate.
2. A trauma-sensitive perspective enhances awareness of deeper personal and collective dynamics and cross-generational aspects in democratic communication processes. This perspective fosters connection, empathy resilience, and adaptability in social systems.
3. To meet people’s need for more opportunities to participate, and for greater responsiveness, the further development of democracy should not only refer to formal structures. Rather, investment should be made in enabling social spaces where citizens can engage in a culture of dialogue.
4. Given the diversity of what people understand and expect from democracy, more societal spaces should be created in which citizens can voice their experiences. The trauma-informed large group process and the use of the SenseMaker® are promising possibilities to make the voices of citizens audible and representable as well as to strengthen the societal dialogue and to overcome or at least mitigate polarization.
5. The further implementation of model-like trauma-informed processes on different political levels (municipal, regional, national, possibly international) seems to be particularly relevant as a next step. Here, group processes and the use of the SenseMaker® make it possible to explore societal discourses on specific, politically sensitive topics and to work on them together with

citizens. The combination of a trauma-informed process with instruments of deliberative democracy (e.g. citizen participation, citizens' councils) also appears promising.

- The present project is a first attempt to conduct structured research on a model-like trauma-informed large group process in the context of democracy. Further systematic research on public or semi-public trauma-informed processes is necessary, to better understand them in the context of democratic work and to apply them in practice in a goal-oriented manner.

Outlook

Democracy as a complex system needs to be experienced not purely mentally, but emotionally and embodied, moving from an external concept to an internalized experience of resonance. Trauma-informed large group sensemaking contributes to a more conscious perception and a new understanding of the manifold links between personal injuries, collective memory contents and present crisis experiences. It widens the gaze to attune with tenderness to what is in the present moment (Hübl and Shridhare 2022). This enables us to co-reflect on lived experience to grow a shared understanding (Klein & Kadaoui 2021). Not only common citizens, but also politicians, journalists, lawyers, civil servants, and scientists experience injuries and insecurities. In times of stress, excessive demands and significant crises, there is too often no room for trauma-informed sensemaking.

Implementation of trauma-informed processes could therefore lead to more comprehensive sensemaking. Ultimately, further strengthening the ability to resonate and the willingness to responsibly confront past, present and future crises, is indispensable for ensuring flourishing futures of democracies.

This policy paper is based on, and includes condensed and strongly modified sections from Wagner, A., Strasser, J. and Schöpke, N. (2022). [Overcoming polarization in crises: A research project on trauma and democracy with over 350 citizens](#). Warenburg/Berlin: [Pocket Project e. V.](#) / [Mehr Demokratie e. V.](#) More information: [RIFS Potsdam](#)

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Publisher: United Nations University Institute on Comparative Regional Integration Studies (UNU-CRIS), Bruges, Belgium