

Practitioner Perspective

# Exploring The Dynamics of Relational Trauma and the Organic, Energetic Process of Change: Therapeutic, Training, and Research Perspectives

By Rosie Burrows



*Only when we have a direct experience of a collective trauma process, can we really get a glimpse of the effects that such a denied field of experience has on us – even if created many generations ago. Before that I believe we have a mental, rational understanding – but we can't refer it back to a felt experience. That's why I see this as a pioneering field of exploration. (Hübl, T. 2018).*

**Introduction**

Welcome to this exploration in writing, inspired by the overall quality of connection to the therapeutic process of exploration and change that I experienced while offering seven training and research inquiry workshops to over three hundred counsellors, therapists and supervisors throughout Ireland for the Irish Association of Counselling and Psychotherapy during

2017/2018. It is near impossible to do justice to the energy, spirit and atmosphere of experiential work in writing. It also takes us into our heads to explain too much, losing the atmosphere of embodied mindful practice. Nevertheless, I am taking the opportunity to reflect on the workshops overall for research inquiry purposes, and to support ongoing learning to benefit the counseling and psychotherapy

profession. In this paper, I begin by exploring:

- i. why do this work - reflecting on personal memory as imprint of transgenerational and relational trauma?
- ii. how do we do and be in this practice - key relational practitioners drawn on and missing elements; description of the relational inquiry workshops and what participants wished for; organising framework, live demonstration as research, training and therapeutic inquiry.
- iii. key findings and conclusions.

**Personal and Professional reflection**

To begin, an intimate personal memory and reflection: my mother told me at around age three years that I pulled my neck and head away from her, stretching back as she attempted to teach me to sing a nursery rhyme. A dynamic dance of overreaching/ too forced presence, pulling away and absence, as this was part of my mother's embodied trauma imprint, a relational dance that stressed and pained both her and I. We sense, before words, our bodies responding to culture and to our learned developmental movements (Frank, 2001; Clemmens, 2011). I knew instinctively from an early age the

felt need to pull back from family and community transgenerational survival dynamics. I knew, before I knew I knew. The need for nature and other forms of embodied connection to survive and thrive - that the capacity for disconnection from oppressive and distorting aspects of culture – for *individuation-separation* and *differentiation*, was as vital as our complementary need for nourishing connection, if we are to become and be free functioning human beings. An orientation to freeing head, neck and whole body to discover freer expression, autonomy, satisfaction, love, bodily, sensual pleasure, sexuality, creativity, freedom from coercive, and therefore insecure connection and social *shoulds*. The imprint of the early dance has informed and guided my life’s purpose. How do we connect to our own organic, energetic felt sense and maintain this? Our own natural, wild and safe enough connection, free(r) from spoken and unspoken expectations of family, peer group, organization, culture, and larger systems when they tend towards re-enacting and reliving restriction and narrower identities than who we really are? Learning to observe, accept, transform and/or release our relational dance, embodied experience of default survival patterns that no longer serve, at different levels of system, from the individual to the collective is central to my life purpose. To experience, that above all, we are welcomed in our being and not only in our doing (Denham-Vaughan and Chidiac, 2018).

In this purpose, I draw on many renowned relational practitioners and their key works (for an illustrative summary see Table 1 below). Also, my own embodied inquiry and research over three decades of working individually

and collectively in Ireland, north and south, South Africa, Sri Lanka, the Netherlands, Denmark, and Scandinavia. Finally, learning is also informed by experiences that were ineffective or/and retraumatizing. A summary of early and later influences is illustrated in Table 1.

It is my personal and professional experience, that despite the most severe and profound losses and traumatic experiences, “there is a natural impulse within all of us towards connection, aliveness” (Heller, 2015, NARM training, Netherlands). Traumatic experiences are understood here

as sudden or chronic events which overwhelm, that distort our life force and development, sometimes involving shock trauma, loss, terror, horror, helplessness and/or the chronic accumulated stress and developmental/relational trauma that passes from generation to generation. These are passed on by means of dysregulation of the nervous system/physiology, psychology, politics of human relating, poetics/language of connection/disconnection, and performance of identity, who we take ourselves to be, who we are, and the many creative possibilities in the world.

**Table 1 - Key Influences, domain and contributor**

Early Influences	Later influences
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Contact – F. Perls, R. Hefferline and P Goodman</li> <li>• Working with the body and abuse - J. Kepner &amp; R. Frank</li> <li>• Trauma – J. L. Herman, Y. Danieli</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Precise methods for working with trauma</li> <li>• Precise developmental theory and lens</li> <li>• Neuroscience - S. Porges, P Levine, L. Heller, M. McConville, M. Taylor, R. Schwartz, J. Fisher and others</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Support - L. Perls</li> <li>• Anti-Oppressive - P Lichtenberg, P Freire</li> <li>• Theories of Change - A. Beisser</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Precise support of autonomy and connection</li> <li>• Principles, framework, more precise developmental lens</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Action research, context/field, levels of system - K.Lewin, E.Nevis, Burrows and Keenan</li> <li>• Human rights and specific conditions</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Evolving relational ethical frameworks; BACP, IACP and others</li> <li>• Ecological ethics - P Curry</li> <li>• Own practice and research inquiry lens and framework</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Shame – R. Lee</li> <li>• Addiction and Embodied Culture - M. Clemmens</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Gifts of Trauma practice - Burrows</li> <li>• Self compassion and compassion - K. Neff</li> <li>• Sexuality and Love - S. Resnick, E. Perel</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Creativity, play and development</li> <li>• Spirituality and Dialogue– M. Buber</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Intentional use of touch – self and practitioner for somatic trauma healing</li> </ul>

### Workshop inquiry

At the heart of the workshop inquiry was: determining our strengths/resources and vulnerabilities/reactions in working with clients and others. Enquire as to whether our emotions and identifications support what we might call adult consciousness/observer or stronger identification and emotions of earlier and younger trauma survival *parts* (i.e. parentified child, abandoned child, top dog - Fisher, 2017; Schwartz, 2018). Each workshop usually began with connection to particular place, landscape and people, as a vitally alive and grounded aspect of connection. The overall objectives were:

1. Exploring our own and our clients experience: the natural impulse to aliveness, and the relational dynamics of connection and disconnection.
2. Embodiment – somatic mindfulness and somatic experience, with the embodied presence of the therapist as an important focus of the workshop.
3. Awareness of the Physiology and Psychology of Trauma and Relational Trauma Healing – a summary of nervous system, brain, primary and secondary emotions, alongside a framework of organising principles and practices for sessions. (This was not and is not a menu, so much as general guiding principles to support practitioners in recognising relational dynamics and the felt sense of an organic, energetic, healing process kept on track).
4. Practical: embodied activities, live demonstration as an opportunity to observe and experience a full session using organising principles and practices that support

the client and ourselves to be present; to own; understand, and contain the energy in sensations, emotions, images and gestures. Time was given for clarifying questions, work in small groups, and experiential processing.

In pairs, we explored a negotiated contract/working agreement of what each person really wished for, the heart's desire/intention from the workshop. I took responsibility for tracking my own and overall group experience, asking each participant to take ownership/agency for tracking their own experience alongside their intention/heart's desire (Table 2).

A developmental theory was briefly introduced to support therapist awareness of client survival strategies and to allow a focus on what has been compromised in all of our lives to a lesser or greater degree: connection, attunement, trust,

autonomy, and the integration of love, spirituality, sensuality and sexuality (Heller, 2012). Developmental resources are the necessary conditions for development that are strengthened and/or eroded by the conditions of childhood and adulthood living, and practice also draws on other developmental theorists including McConville (1995).

### Framework for Working with Relational Trauma

There was recognition of a need for a framework to help organize practice with fragmented, traumatised clients who find it difficult to focus or maintain focus, and take us with them without such a framework. Practitioners wished for the space and opportunity to explore practical skills for working with trauma relationally (Table 3)

Thanks to those central to my development, I emphasise a strong focus on the social, political and

**Table 2 - Participant Needs from Training**

**What participants wished for and needed can be summarized as follows:**

- Networking and learning
- Exploring abandonment issues – 'parts' work and lack of awareness in clients, and to nourish our own younger self
- Freer to be more fully myself
- To continue to be compassionately present to myself with others
- To feel welcome
- To go beyond thinking
- To develop capacity to contain
- To become more embodied and learn more on self regulation
- Working with suicidal and self-harming behaviours /intense dysregulation
- To experience the wonder of this work
- Confirmation
- To be intentional with confidence
- Courage to trust my own knowing
- Working with hyperarousal – triggers in the client and in myself
- Working with shock states
- Working with the past and developmental trauma
- Demystify trauma
- Simplify the language of new learnings in trauma in order to take in and educate clients
- Embodiment activities
- Know our own limits

**Table 3 - Organising Framework: Burrows (2018)© adapted from Heller (2016, Training)**

<b>Organising Framework for Relational Trauma Sessions and Process</b>
Preconditions: Clarifying the Context (human rights/ethical issues) & Embodied self-care of the Therapist and Grounded Contact
Clarifying the Contract
Inquiry and Exploratory Questions
Integrity as the core process of supporting conditions for Emotional Completion (orientation towards innate resources, embodiment, completing incomplete emotions)
Reflecting Positive Shifts and space for integration
Supporting Autonomy and Agency (and the Integration of Self)
Clear Ethical Framework and Maintaining Developmental Gains

organizational field of the work, and the need to hold the integrity of the process ethically at different levels of system embedded in a grounded connection. Alongside briefly exploring each of these organizing principles for sessions, we engaged with embodied activities, accompanying practices and relevant theory, so that an integrating framework was available to support the practitioner when working with clients and with our own process, with triggers or transference and counter transference reactions. While I find it impossible to do justice to the experience, I have written up further descriptions of each principle for training, supervision and consultation purposes.

The live demonstrations whereby a participant from each workshop volunteered to work on a small though significant piece of their own relational trauma or to role play one of their clients offered the richest learning opportunities for the group and myself, and I am grateful to the volunteers. We worked with exploring anger and the long-term impacts of oppression, repression and abuse, integrating healthy aggression, dis-identifying from an oppressor, a suicidal, self-harming client and a client who had been recently bereaved by the suicide of

her son. In the last two examples of working with transgenerational trauma and enmeshment in families where suicide is an issue, I recognize the need to be very clear about contracting. From both role played examples it was clear on reflection, that these clients were not yet ready for a contract/working agreement. When clients are so dysregulated, we need to slow down the process until a real working agreement becomes possible, and to make it clear to the client that this is a process that can take time when there is high distress and dysregulation of the nervous system, emotions and identifications.

We also worked in concrete detail with what embodied and authentic letting go can mean in the aftermath of abuse by working with the dilemma close in between integrating present centred support and resources, holding the impulse to revenge to support the integration of natural and healthy aggression/anger, choice and freedom in the present into the future. I am still deeply moved and heartened for our work in Ireland, north and south, by the courage of each person who volunteered to work with the live demonstration, as well as the overall sensitivity of each group holding of the work.


### Three key findings from participants:

1. Confirming - the workshop was affirming of counsellors where they are. There is a felt need for validation given the rapid changes in the field of trauma work that show the need to work with the body and emotional completion.
2. Request - to write up the workshop and to offer further practical and experiential training including a focus on live situations for therapists and supervisors that tend to be most challenging with embodied activities.
3. Specific areas where practitioners wished for further exploration included - contracting and interrupting - clear contracting and using the contract for leverage in order to help the client hold themselves accountable on what they say they want and what they do/their survival patterns, as well as interrupting the story was an area of particular interest. Demystifying trauma given the pace of change in the field, how to work with freeze/shut down, how to distinguish between shock and developmental trauma, to not just be in my mind/going beyond thinking, working with story, working with 'the past', practical activities for working with hyperarousal and hypo arousal, feeling freer to be myself working with ease and trust, to be compassionate to myself and with others, to leave our own trauma behind, to process emotions, to feel safe within myself, to work with parts, to not abandon myself, working with suicidal client who is very dysregulated and enmeshed/not yet ready to make a contract/working agreement, looking after

ourselves and maintaining development, working with eros, nature, sensuality, sexuality, and spirituality.

## Conclusions

The workshops received very positive feedback overall. As therapists, we need to understand in more depth, the influence of trauma on our own lives in order to live, work, and play well with others and to create a just and sustainable world, to thrive as well as survive. I recognize the need for a clear session and overall process framework within which to contain relational trauma work at individual and wider levels and to inquire on ethical effectiveness of the process. There is also a need for a clear developmental lens to provide a map and guidance for practitioners. I am deeply grateful to all participants in the inquiry

and training workshops, and to the IACP for organizing, supporting, and the welcome feedback and resulting conversation on additional possibilities as part of developing an evolving relational movement, locally and internationally. 

## Rosie Burrows

Rosie Burrows, PhD. is a Relational Gestalt Psychotherapist, Supervisor, Trainer, Consultant and Researcher. Her focus has been on collective and individual practice to resource groups and individuals experiencing marginalization and trauma. Her Ph'D explored consciousness and leadership. She is offering her own synthesis of Gestalt working with resilience, trauma, creativity, eros, nature and leadership. She is External Examiner at Metanoia Institute, London, and has authored

and co-authored research since 1987, contributing to paradigm shifts on how transgenerational trauma is recognized and worked with. She has been a founding member of organisations that work with trauma, resilience, communities and human rights. Her current interests: relational and ethical leadership, resilience, creativity, ecological perspectives, relational trauma healing, exploring our relationship to nature, writing, photography, spirituality and creative connection to who we really are freer from survival strategies. She is an activist engaged with the politics and spirituality of sustainability. She offers trainings and supervision in Ireland and elsewhere.

Contact details: Rosie Burrows  
www.rosieburrows.com  
drrosieb@gmail.com  
+447717103041

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