

POST-TRAUMATIC CRECIMIENTO

Iniciativa Inviolada – inviolateinitiative.org

Monica Esmeralda Ahmad-Yee, Esq. & Dalissy J. Washington, LCSW en conversación, mixing idiomas

M:Parte de nuestra misión para hoy es reconocimiento de nuestra existencia between worlds con respecto a: lenguaje, profesión, áreas de activismo. Existimos, en nuestras vidas diarias, entre el inglés y el español...We exist between languages and there is freedom that can come from allowing our minds to flow between both languages without translation. También queremos reconocer la existencia entre mundos con respecto a profesión. **Iniciativa Inviolada es una organización que existe entre el derecho de inmigración y la psicología forense.** We exist at the juncture between immigration law and forensic psychology. **Y también existimos entre áreas de activismo—los derechos de salud mental, los derechos de inmigración...** Implícitamente y explícitamente trabajamos hacia esas metas cada día, combinando esos áreas pero también existiendo entre ambos mundos y encontrando un tercer mundo....

There is liberation in speaking between languages and switching codes. I'm thinking of Gloria Anzaldúa...Ella habló de la liberación que viene de hablar sin traducción completa, dejando que algunas cosas lleguen en inglés, que otras cosas lleguen en español. Ella habló de las deslenguadas, personas que hablan idiomas que son consideradas no legítimas, personas entre mundos, en los intersticios, y ella hizo mucho para validar la experiencia de existir entre idiomas en el habla y en la escritura.

El título de la presentación [de hoy] es post-traumatic crecimiento. Entonces queremos empezar con algunas definiciones. And so we want to start with defining trauma in the context of immigration. I also wanted to talk about how we got here, to the point of discussing this, why this topic...I asked Dalissy to join me in a conversation...I am very grateful that over the years since Inviolate was founded in 2019, I have felt so much solidarity from Dalissy...Repeatedly since that time I have reached out to her and said, I want to talk about something, I want to run an idea by you, and I've tended to be pretty specific, saying this is what I want to discuss, are you open to talking about it...

I've been very grateful that she's been always open to sharing thoughts and receptive to what I'm offering but also giving genuine feedback. So for this talk, I thought it would wonderful to be a little bit more open-ended...I knew that I wanted to leave it a bit open so I said to her, do you have any suggestions or preferences on topics and she suggested post-traumatic growth. And I'm very glad that she did, but I'll admit that I felt daunted by the topic, and that's partly because I'm not a clinician but also partly because we're recording this in May 2021. And so when we look back on the last year and even the past several years within our fields, which span immigration law and health, specifically mental health, we have seen such changes and such traumas across the fields, that it almost feels like any listing of them would be doomed to be insufficient...

That being said, I think it was a very timely discussion, and I'm glad that she raised it, and as always I'm very grateful for her openness to being in conversation with Inviolante.

So, **the four traumagenic stages of migration**...again this is another type of list that might always feel insufficient, to list the stages of trauma that people pass through when they're experiencing something like migration. It will be hard to ever look at a list and say, yes this is enough, yes this is perfect, yes this covers everything. We look at some previous research and this is one example that has been offered. Pre-migration trauma refers to the original traumas or impetus for fleeing, such as gang violence, government persecution, warfare, natural disaster, financial insecurity, family complications...the general concept is that this is trauma that comes before migration. The second traumagenic stage of migration is transit trauma, which reflects trauma that occurs during the exodus. So that can include the perils of crossing into our country, surviving dangerous natural conditions, inadequate access to resources, and then violence that can happen during the transit itself.

Las dos últimas fases de trauma con respecto a inmigración—one can be called resettlement trauma. El proceso de obtener protecciones legales a través de aplicar para estatus legal, por ejemplo aplicar para asilo, el proceso para aplicar incluye en muchos casos que el inmigrante cuente su historia una y otra vez para el propósito de conseguir el estatus legal, pero nunca con la garantía de que una aprobación vendrá. Y eso cuenta como un tipo de trauma en sí, pero no se enfatiza tanto como se debe...y para muchos inmigrantes, las primeras veces de contar las historias vienen en el momento de estar uno detenido—pero no es sólo un momento de estar detenido, para muchos son días o meses o años mientras que esperan una decisión en su caso o esperan la próxima fase de su caso. Son niveles y niveles de traumas.

Y en la cuarta fase, trauma viene en el proceso de tratar de integrarse en el país en que uno ha llegado. Uno se enfrenta con recursos limitados, insuficiente o falta de apoyo, posible persecución hasta en el nuevo país que uno ha entrado...acceso limitado a vivienda, empleo, oportunidades educativas, and they can also encounter hostility in the host country and be exposed to isolation, bigotry, and racism.

...Quería pausar para también darle un chance a Dalissy en caso de que quiera decir algo sobre estas definiciones iniciales de trauma.

D: Primeramente te doy las gracias por la oportunidad de tener esta conversación y poder compartirla con otros abogados y otros que están ofreciendo los servicios de evaluaciones o trabajando con comunidades de inmigrantes.

That's first and foremost, giving you thanks for what Inviolante is doing. I obviously admire the work and think it's much needed.

Entonces mis intenciones en poder hablar de post-traumatic crecimiento, when I said that I would love to have a conversation or that we should have a conversation about post-traumatic growth, it was really to understand that there is no way in our work that we could deny the fact that we are working with a community that has faced different levels of trauma. No podemos negar el trauma que se presenta a diferentes niveles. No podemos negar eso si vamos a ofrecer servicios de una manera que respeta esa realidad. **I believe there has to be a level of acknowledgment and respect to understand that there is this reality of trauma.**

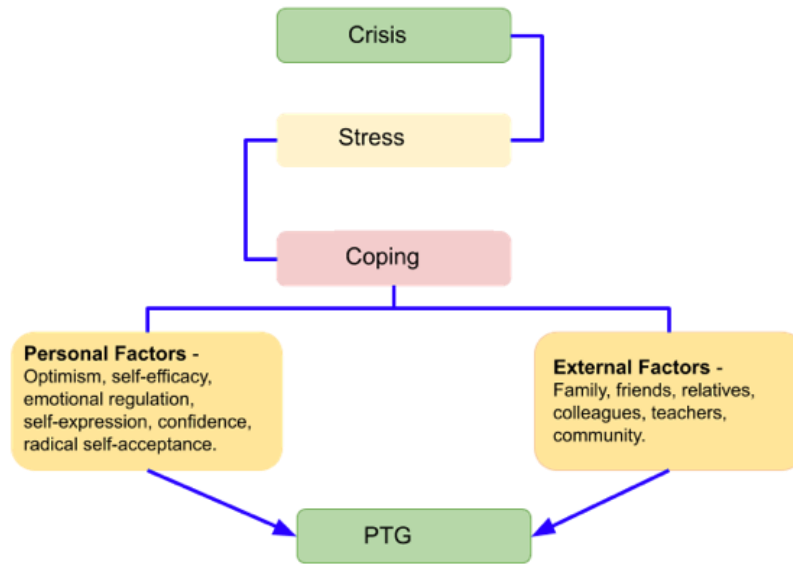
But on the other hand, instead of pathologizing or labeling that this is a traumatized group without strengths per se, in changing the narrative or talking about post-traumatic growth, it gives us an opportunity that our service delivery is trauma-informed. So in thinking about trauma-informed care, I believe we have opportunities to open the door for crecimiento, to open the door for post-traumatic growth, if we're mindful in acknowledging it and thinking of it in different ways. And obviously we'll get into the definition later but that is really the intention, that **as attorneys, as clinicians, as evaluators I believe we have an increased opportunity to add different elements that acknowledge the possibility of positive change and growth within the scope of trauma.**

Repito, hay una oportunidad, ¿verdad?, que para nuestros clientes, les demos la oportunidad que ellos también estén procesando las oportunidades de crecimiento y que estemos ofreciéndoles un nivel de apoyo que no es causándoles más trauma. Que en sí es abriéndoles las oportunidades para una experiencia relacional positiva que ayuda a enfrentar o que ellos también se puedan abrir y expresar y procesar el trauma...Entonces eso para mí es lo más importante y creo que nos ayuda, no nada más a hacer nuestro trabajo mejor, pero con el interés de ofrecerles lo mejor a nuestros clientes. Tenemos la oportunidad de hacer eso si reconocemos los dos—que hay este trauma, pero también hay estas oportunidades de crecimiento...Algunos sí están super al sí de su experiencia y como han ido cambiando y qué cosas positivas le han sacado, y para otros clientes...puede ser que todavía están en un punto donde no reconocen las fortalezas con las cuales se presentan. Entonces es de ahí que estamos basando la conversación.

...So I like to remind myself when people ask how I do the work that I do, and I say I never lose hope. So as we're capturing these stories that certainly cover the worst of humanity or the worst of certain policies that are in place and the harm that we know it's causing, it's also recognizing the strengths in the stories...that's the best of humanity. That in front of us we have examples of how strong we are as human beings and how we are able to cope with really difficult situations on a day to day basis. And so we are opening doors and also expressing that to our clients when we bring in these pieces of what I'm calling post-traumatic growth, post-traumatic crecimiento, and so the way that it's defined...so the concept in itself, it's Tedeschi and Calhoun who came up with the concept of post-traumatic growth, and it's described as growth being an outcome of active coping after a crisis. And another way to define that is positive psychological change experienced as a result of adversity and other challenges in order to rise to a higher level of functioning.

Es importante expresar que con las evaluaciones y con la información que tienen que captar los abogados, a veces estamos pidiendo la información de qué es lo peor que ha pasado. Cuáles son los riesgos anticipados si se tienen que regresar a su país. So the focus is really more on...what is the negative psychological impact. But that's exactly why I thought it was important to talk about post-traumatic growth, because that's our opportunity in conversation to gather more information, and there are still other ways to think about it, and that post-traumatic growth is defined as finding benefits, stress-related growth, how we thrive, and again positive psychological changes is a way to think about it. But it also involves...anticipated or futuristic coping, like what are the coping mechanisms that our clients begin to use as they are integrating in this country or as they're requesting the services they need and trying to cope.

And so I wanted to share this diagram, referred to as the model of life crisis and growth.



The Model Of Life Crisis

So you can see It starts with the crisis, we can say it starts with the trauma. We can also recognize that there are various traumas but then it's, what is the stress or the response to that trauma and then how is it that the person is able to cope...What studies have shown is that both personal factors and external factors are at the...root of how someone can cope and get beyond that crisis and move towards post-traumatic growth. And it's during times of stress that we're triggered into shifting or doing something different to cope. But the personal factors that are taken into account include self-efficacy, emotional regulation, self-expression, confidence, self-acceptance, health, past experiences.

And so we take all of those things into account and as we're asking questions, I believe if we keep that in mind, it not only plants some seeds for the clients of things they can be thinking about that are supports in their life or provide some sort of better understanding of their experience, but even for us it's what allows us to better understand where they stand and meeting them where they are.

Now environmental factors are considered to be the huge buffer. We know that personal, external, and situational factors can collectively become the strength in leading toward post-traumatic growth, and being able to come out of pretty significant setbacks, and so the environmental factors is considering family life, personal relationships, friends, colleagues, any systems that our clients are engaging with. Their supervisors, teachers, mentors, their community, the financial resources, their neighborhood. And so if I extend that for us as professionals, we become a part of that environmental factor. And that's where we're seeing...we must provide services from a place that's trauma-informed because otherwise we are re-traumatizing or engaging in the same oppressive means that have led to trauma in their lives.

...There are actually five factors of post-traumatic growth that are covered and there's an inventory that's used to assess this. In the context of this conversation, I'm not saying that attorneys or mental health providers have to use this inventory. But it gives us—by looking at the inventory

and the questions or the symptoms that are rated, it gives us an idea of things we can keep in our minds.

And so the factors that are typically evaluated in that inventory: Factor 1 is relating to others, and the inventory covers statements like, I have a greater sense of closeness with others, or I have more compassion for others. I've learned a great deal about how wonderful people are. I better accept needing others and asking for support, right? Factor 2 is about new possibilities and I think that's huge in our field, right? ...Although there are no guarantees, they know that with their immigration and the legal proceedings their hopes are that out of that they will have legal status and protections that they need in our country, and so new possibilities covers statements like, I've established a new path for my life. New opportunities are available, which wouldn't have been otherwise.

...And so factor 3 is personal strength and those statements include, I know better that I can handle difficulties. I've discovered that I'm stronger than I thought I was...I have a greater sense of self-reliance. Factor 4 is spiritual change. One example is the statement, I have a better understanding of spiritual matters. And so if we think of some of these statements and we place them in question form, sometimes that's how we're getting more information. Or giving our clients different ideas. And then the last factor, appreciation of life, ...one of the statements is, I changed my priorities about what is important in life. Or, I have a greater appreciation and value for my own life. And so those are the five factors, and I think the question I'm posing Monica, or if we have some time to talk about this, is what do we see in our service delivery? And how do we interpret what this really means for us as providers. I'm also thinking, you mentioned as we prepared for this webinar, this idea that we don't want to fall into this shaming or guilt, that whoever comes here needs to think of their trauma in this way...so I'd love for you to share more about that.

M: I think the main word that brought out that sentiment for me was...the last word of this definition: [positive psychological change experienced as a result of adversity and other challenges in order to rise to a higher level of functioning.] The last word...is functioning and somehow that got me thinking about the importance of meeting clients where they are, right now, and I think it's important to do that with regard to the legal case as opposed to jumping ahead and just to rush to the next aspect of the case, and I think from the mental health perspective also it's very important to meet clients where they are.

So talking about post-traumatic growth is very helpful, certainly, but I did feel, in my mind there is an asterisk that formed next to the word functioning because I thought, well let's make sure that we are not making it seem that we're just telling clients to hurry up and get better or hurry up and move on to the next thing, because that constant hurrying up and moving on is very reminiscent of systems that exploit people's...exploit people altogether, including their labor, it's never enough, you have to move on to the next thing. And...we see that kind of exploitation and devaluation of clients, of immigration applicants themselves, and then we also see symptoms, if you will, of this in professions across the board but if we're keeping the discussion to attorneys and clinicians for example, we can say there is this pressure to keep moving on, keep going keep going keep going, and so I think it's important to remember that there is the possibility of stopping and meeting ourselves and others where we are right now.

...But obviously, I think el concepto de crecimiento es muy poderoso y creo que cada persona debería bajo sus propios términos o de la manera que le parece mejor, conseguir el crecimiento, manejar cada persona en su propio ser, decidir qué contiene el crecimiento, en qué consiste el crecimiento, y conseguir eso de una forma que funciona para ellos mismos. So if we're talking about functioning, I'm saying, well make whatever level of functioning, function for you. **You decide on your terms what your growth will look like and how you achieve it.** And I think that's an element of post-traumatic growth that is important to highlight.

And I think this is perhaps one way or segue into a discussion of meaning making. Unless there was something else that you wanted to cover Dalissy before we move on to meaning making.

D: Just reiterating that post-traumatic growth by no means is this sometimes negative societal way of, pick yourself up by your bootstraps, that it's more recognizing that in front of us we have a human being that is both presenting with strengths and weaknesses if we want to think about it that way. They may be both in distress and at the same time feeling a level of hope, and so kind of going back and forth between some of those negative experiences but then also some of the positive experiences. And also allowing them to begin changing their narrative so that we're empowering them to see how strong they really are. But they are going to present at different stages and so we get to handle and consider these different factors in very different ways in how we're communicating with our clients and helping them make sense of the next steps. Because as you mentioned...the immigration system in itself can be very traumatizing and so even being able to honor that and respect that and understand their urgency to resolve is so important. So yeah, we can move into meaning making because I think that's where we also find our grounding for what we're doing to buffer even what we feel as providers.

M: Right, I agree. I think this is a good way of bringing home the shared humanity between and among clients, clinicians, attorneys, everyone who is involved in these immigration cases. And so **meaning making**—here I'll refer to...Hanna Schwartzbaum's PsyD dissertation, which was published in August 2020. So part of the dissertation was a study focused on the experiences of clinicians performing immigration evaluations. And she wanted to explore to what extent clinicians experience the process of meaning making as they work with clients.

So on a basic definitional level, she was referring to meaning making as first articulated by writers such as Victor Frankl and Crystal Park. So one definition is, "the process of reducing the discrepancies or stressors that are created between the trauma one is exposed to and [their] global understanding of the world." Another way of putting it is that before a trauma is experienced, the person has...their global understanding of the world...They might have some assumptions such as, I am safe and my government is seeking to protect me. And then a trauma occurs that can severely undercut that understanding of the world, and so meaning making is a process in which a person decides how the traumatic experience is going to fit into that worldview that they had. And if a person is able to create a cohesive understanding in which the trauma somehow still fits into that global understanding, then the person is going to move toward self-growth. Then if there's more difficulty in integrating the trauma into that global understanding, then a person will fall into what's described as maladaptive thoughts or cognitions that are more negative and can deepen the trauma. So that the difference in meaning making—if it's done successfully, can lead a person beyond the trauma to post-traumatic growth, or it can lead a person deeper into trauma and can hinder post-traumatic growth.

So one aspect of meaning making is finding a purpose in a person's life, identifying a life purpose in order to survive. This was articulated by Victor Frankl, and...Friedrich Nietzsche also wrote, "He who has a why can live for and bear almost any how." And so, that I think is unfortunately gnedered, I'll just...generalize it and say "they who have a why can live for and bear almost any how."

...Certainly within the context of this dissertation study, for clinicians who were able to fit vicarious trauma into their overall understanding of the advocacy of their work and the fulfillment that they were getting from contributing to something greater than themselves, meaning making was more possible. So in this study the writer mentions, "Some participants were able to differentiate between 1. witnessing asylum seekers make meaning, and 2. identifying an internal meaning process within themselves." ... So this means we get to trauma and then vicarious trauma. So number 1 there, where the clinicians were witnessing asylum seekers making meaning for themselves, that is a process in which a clinician can see an asylum seeker experiencing post-traumatic growth and then the second is a process in which the clinician can then overcome vicarious trauma, in a way, by finding internal meaning within themselves.

So one example of (1) was where "participants were able to identify asylum seeker meaning making as they witnessed asylees describe ways in which they persevered through abhorrent conditions and still maintain hope." So in other words the asylees were making meaning by deciding this traumatic experience still fits into the global understanding, that you could still maintain hope despite traumatic experiences.

Now despite that, ... there were challenges to meaning making, that some of the participants in the study communicated to Schwartzbaum that there are simply conditions that prevent asylum seekers from engaging in meaning making, such as long wait times for court hearings, detention, family separation.... And there were some participants in the study who disagreed with the very idea that trauma that is experienced by asylum seekers can be meaningful, because of its particularly cruel nature. There were some who expressed that it seemed kind of quaint to even imagine that you could make meaning out of experiences that were so horrific. Related to this is the idea that there are some things that are simply unspeakable. *Tratamos de crear un puente entre los idiomas pero la verdad es que hay algunas experiencias que simplemente...no hay palabras para describir el horror de algunos momentos en la historia humana y no importa cuantos idiomas estamos usando, pues hay cosas que simplemente no han debido de pasar. ¿Verdad?* Like there are some things that people should never have been expected to go through, let alone, like, make meaning out of them, so I think that's a little bit of the pushback that the clinicians were expressing here....

...

D: ... I guess the call to action is really that we be committed in whatever way possible to post-traumatic growth. And so again, *no es que queremos ignorar el trauma, entonces en parte es poder reconocer el estrés del proceso de inmigración, de principio a fin, y también reconocer que hay experiencias de niñez o en la vida, el historial, que tenemos que cubrir y tenemos que entender.*

So it's acknowledging adverse childhood experiences just as much as any toxic stress before,

during and after, and using assessment tools, as I guess I'm thinking more as clinicians where we can capture more of that history in addition to acculturation struggles. And by recognizing those signs and symptoms of trauma, es dándole valor a lo que es las fortalezas, aunque estamos mirando también a síntomas negativos de trauma.

Lastly, avoiding pathologizing based on trauma history. I think that one's the most important, and using the psychoeducation to inform ourselves and our clients...what I believe is our duty as we provide our services, which is making sure that we are avoiding re-traumatization and that we're committing to models that actually foster post-traumatic growth. So how is it that we get through our intake? How is it that we are gathering the information? How are we framing our questions that allow for that level of respect and acknowledgment and opportunity for crecimiento? And then obviously continuing to think about long-term system changes and how we can incorporate or integrate our knowledge of trauma into policies, procedures, and practices.

So it's been great to engage in the conversation. I know it's heavy, I know it's a lot. But these are the points that I thought were important to drive home.

M: Thank you so much Dalissy.

D: You're very welcome.

M: ...I just wanted to end it with another piece from Gloria Anzaldúa: "Fuego, inspire and energize us to do the necessary work,/ and to honor it / as we walk through the flames of transformation. / May we seize the arrogance to create / outrageously / soñar wildly--for the world becomes as / we dream it." There's so much more to talk about with regard to post-traumatic crecimiento, with regard to combinando los dos idiomas, existiendo entre mundos. ... For now I just wanted to say thank you so much to Dalissy and as always I'm so grateful for your time and your openness to have discussions. As I mentioned before, ... I've called on you multiple times since Inviolata was founded in 2019 and I've been so grateful that you've been open to having discussions, in hearing ideas and then sharing your perspective. It's always greatly, greatly appreciated. So thank you so much.