

“I hate being cold” – A multisensory door to the territory of repressed traumatic memories

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Abstract

Using the senses to understand the world can profoundly impact researchers’ ability to comprehend differences and the construction thereof. This chapter scrutinizes the bodily sensation of feeling cold as a pivotal factor in various encounters, such as between home and displacement, togetherness and loneliness, and noticeable versus unbearable pain. By delving into the sensory realm, we can interrogate the creation of identity and its implications for human relations. Drawing examples from the mid- and late twentieth century in Czechoslovakia, Eastern Europe, this ethnography and autoethnography-based research examines the nuances of coldness in traumatic experiences and its enduring effects on individuals and their families. It explores how the perception of coldness has evolved over time, and was co-created with the researcher from the harsh conditions of deportation and forced labor to the seemingly contrasting warmth of present-day environments. Furthermore, it investigates the complex dynamics between passive recipients of warmth and active providers, shedding light on the burden carried by those attempting to shield loved ones from past traumas. This study underscores the importance of interpreting sensory experiences in psychological trauma research, highlighting their role as indicators and markers of unresolved trauma. By embracing multimodal, dynamic bodily sensations both of the researched and the researcher, I argue that we can uncover layers of meaning and gain deeper insights into the complexities of trauma.

Key words: sensory memory, research methods, trauma, silenced memories, grief

Introduction and theoretical overview

There is a long tradition in psychology research to study trauma and traumatized individuals by validated questionnaires. Inventories investigating survivors' symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder, and frequent comorbidities, such as depression, generalized anxiety, sleep disturbances, are prevalent across all continents. In the past three decades, psychology researchers increasingly have relied on the toolkit of qualitative research as well, applying structured and unstructured interviews, while oral history and life story interviews are also utilized. Irrespective of the applied methods, the focus of the studies almost exclusively lies on the survivors, where the researcher sees them as a tool for enumerating, analyzing and publishing data. Positivist traditions see the guarantee of objectivity in prescribing the researcher to stay distant emotionally from participants in the sample (Bowtell et al. 2013). In such research, the experiences of the person engaging with the (long-time) traumatized individuals are predominantly omitted from scholarly articles, and can only be heard, if at all, as side remarks during academic conferences (Marshall 1999). Difficulties encountered during data collection are rarely discussed in the scholarly articles. The disseminated material mostly portrays data collection of trauma-related projects as successful and problem-free, providing little space for novices in the field to learn from examples of barriers that are encountered and overcome, such as lack of trust, fragmented memory, wish to avoid triggers, shame, guilt, exhaustion, boredom, etc. (Reed et al. 2023).

Practitioners in closely-related disciplines such as the social sciences have long been attentive to the need for reflexivity and attention to the bodily sensations of researchers while collecting data (Allan 2006, Friberg & Öhlén 2010, Shoshana and Laub 1992). Socio-cultural anthropology has historically emphasized sensory processing of the field, exemplified by early scholars, for instance, Margaret Mead advocating for a holistic sensory approach to research and Claude Lévi-Strauss (Kartal and Kartal 2021) employing senses in myth analysis, extending this focus to fields such as the research methods education and scientific practice of trauma studies is still to be established. Scientists pinpointed that embodied research is only possible, if the researchers are self-aware of everything that is affecting their bodies and minds, and for such, they recommended a multi-sensory approach (Pink 2010, Nakamura 2013, Howes 2019). Getting close and engaging deeply with those being observed, must, however, be done with special care, as according to feminist scholarship, it has many unforeseen emotional threats (Samson et al. 2008, Carroll 2013), which, if they remain unaddressed, might impact the quality of collected data and the published material as well.

In this book chapter, I focus on dynamic sensory modulation, that is, the body's sensation of (extreme) cold and hot temperature across a longer period of time. The skin represents the largest organ within the human body. It serves as a potent instrument through which individuals perceive and interpret alterations in their surroundings. Fluctuations in temperature can exert considerable influence over an individual's affective state, overall well-being, and perception of safety. Survivors of man-made disasters, such as the Holocaust, often exhibit heightened sensitivity to environmental stimuli due to the profound and enduring trauma they have experienced (Bailliard et al. 2017, 2023, Andersson et al. 2021). Temperature fluctuations, including dropping temperatures or overheated rooms, can serve as potent triggers

for individuals with untreated complex trauma (Hinton et al. 2003, Engel-Yeger et al. 2013, Aoki and Nozawa 2024, Pat-Horenczyk et al. 2020, Rowena et al. 2021). For instance, dropping temperatures may evoke memories of the chilling conditions endured during their ordeal, while overheated rooms may trigger sensations reminiscent of suffocating or claustrophobic environments. These triggers can reawaken traumatic memories, resulting in profound emotional distress and physiological arousal (Leal et al. 2023, Silva et al. 2024). Moreover, survivors of man-made disasters often exhibit a heightened need to maintain control over their environment as a coping mechanism to mitigate feelings of vulnerability and powerlessness. By exerting control over their surroundings, individuals may seek to restore a sense of agency and security, thereby alleviating the distress elicited by trauma triggers (Warner et al. 2013, Zelechowski et al. 2013, Dye 2018).

Given the scholarly evidence on the effectiveness of relying on sensory awareness (Harris and Guillemin 2012, Bowtell et al. 2013, Pink 2015 and 2017) and by providing the case of my long-term interaction with an elderly couple that survived a traumatic experience, I show that the sensory awareness of both the researched subjects and the researchers, along with their embodied experiences in the constantly changing physical space, should be considered in a longitudinal manner, as this dynamic interaction offers crucial details for uncovering hidden elements of long-silenced traumatic memories.

Methods

My engagement with the primary participant (male, in his 70s) and his spouse (female, in her 70s) started in the early 2010s when I was a doctoral candidate in psychotherapy science. I initiated contact with them because the primary participant survived ethnic discrimination, forced displacement within their own country, and also eye-witnessed his parents' coerced labor during the presidency of Edvard Beneš, in the second half of the 1940s. Employing a snowball sampling approach (Rowland and Flint 2001), I was directed to him by other individuals who had similar experiences in the rural areas of south-west Slovakia. Over a span of roughly two years, I conducted semi-structured interviews, engaged in participant observation (Emerson et al. 2011), and held numerous discussions aimed at verifying initial findings with both the husband and the wife. These interactions occurred largely within the confines of their domestic setting, alternating between the kitchen, living room, and garden, depending on the season.

Following the completion of my doctoral dissertation degree I continued data collection with the objective of attaining a comprehensive understanding of transgenerational historical trauma, a type of trauma that had been marginalized and silenced for an extended period. My methodological approach evolved to encompass participatory research (Bergolod and Thomas 2012), life-story interviews (Atkinson 2007), and photo-elicited interviews (Harper 2002). I relied on audio recording and incorporated psychotherapeutic techniques such as self-observation and self-reflection through journaling (Hayman et al. 2019). This practice facilitated the documentation of personal considerations, emotional responses evoked during

interactions, and multiple sensory stimuli encountered throughout the research process. Sensory observations extended beyond visual and auditory cues to encompass olfactory and tactile experiences, including the aroma of freshly baked goods or the warmth of a hearth, thereby enriching the contextual understanding of the participants' environment.

The scene

“I hate feeling cold” was a recurring sentiment voiced by the elderly gentleman named Jacob¹ during my research on deportation-related memories in southern Slovakia. Over the span of fifteen years, I made frequent visits to his residence. Often, he could be found seated by the fireplace, clad in layers of attire including corduroy trousers, a checked shirt, a waistcoat, and, notably, a knitted wool sweater. Despite the presence of a meticulously installed and renovated central heating system in the house, Jacob persistently asserted its inadequacy, necessitating the addition of wood to the fireplace. Adjacent to his feet, there always stood a large basket replete with neatly arranged thick logs, awaiting their consumption by the vigorous, dancing flames.

During the careful placement of wood into the well-fed fireplace, the pervasive aroma of smoke would waft through the overheated living room, almost constituting a ritualistic occurrence. Concurrently, the wife, who invariably sat with us, would express apologies upon detecting a deterioration in air quality. In hushed tones, she confided in me, detailing her perpetual discomfort resulting from the combination of central heating and the blazing fire. Despite her efforts, which included surreptitiously cracking open the room's door to allow fresh air to circulate, Jacob remained ignorant. He would constantly reprimand her for what he deemed as “ridiculous behavior,” consistently asserting his aversion to cold. This utterance, akin to a magical incantation, would promptly lead to the door's closure, accompanied by the cessation of his wife's self-narrative. No further elucidation was forthcoming, as all present were expected to acquiesce to the dictates of the household patriarch.

Rosa — The wife

Rosa, the wife of Jacob, was a woman in her early 80s, whose presence radiated warmth and kindness. Her skin, soft, paper-thin and almost transparent, bore the intricate roadmap of a life – serving the family and always staying in the background. The slender posture and hesitant movements, the soft voice all carried the weight of difficult years gone by. Since incurable dizziness prevented her from attending Sunday church services and meeting with friends as often as she would like, she spent much time with her old rosary beads and a well-worn Bible. Her house was the textbook example of cleanness and tidiness. Not once over the years had I spotted dust on the shelves or stains on the windows. She ironed all the tablecloths, and was

¹ For ethical reasons, I renamed both participants in this chapter.

vacuum cleaning and mopping the entire family house at least every other day. Rosa considered the house to be the representation of her worth. In her eyes, a clean house was the mirror of a good housewife.

The elderly woman soon became my voluntary local research assistant. Not by appointment, but by the wish to serve, she turned into the “translator” for the long years of research. Even though I spoke the language, and even the local dialect of the couple, my voice was seemingly too weak, and had to be rearticulated to be understood by the husband (who struggled with minor hearing difficulties). Besides, Rosa could be phoned any time for a follow-up appointment, but she was also eager to introduce me to further former deportee contacts from her church community. She provided the most precise research management over the years: looked up old documents, prepared family photo albums before my visits, helped drawing the family tree and the geographical map of the family’s fate in the turbulent 20th century.

Despite her illnesses, including struggles with balance and the demands of managing diabetes, Rosa became a “grandmother” for me: over the years she knew what food I liked, fed me during long conversations and even packed the leftovers in a small, plastic box for the long journey and the challenging working days in the capital city of the neighboring state. With uncertain steps and somewhat shaky hands, she remained the representation of stability, the guarantee of softness and warmth. Only when she passed away, did I realize that this behavior was partially a coping mechanism – it protected Jacob from triggers, and the entire family from the harsh consequences of his emotional dysregulation.

Jacob – The husband

Jacob, a man in his late 80s, had a robust posture, speaking volumes of a lifetime filled with hard work and resilience. His presence commanded attention from the moment he entered a room. His hands, adorned with big palms, told stories of years spent toiling in the earth, and as a pensioner, shaping his garden into a masterpiece. The sun-kissed tan of his skin, his bright blue eyes, his always meticulously shaved face and a neatly trimmed haircut were strong testaments that despite his old age and habitat in a rural environment, he was committed to staying well-groomed and presentable. The latter was even accentuated when he spoke, as his voice resonated with a robustness.

Yet, throughout the years of data collections and despite the numerous visits, Jacob remained emotionally unavailable. He was present physically, yet, shut down easily after certain questions. It was a privilege to earn his trust, and that trust had to be regained at the beginning of every single one of my visits. Though he partially answered my questions, one could sense a symbolic wall, which consisted of bricks of stereotypes about my younger age, the different perceptions of gender roles (being a young mother I was working on my research instead of taking care of my minor children on those long weekends). But this wall also

consisted of uncountable triggers that my questions, research interest, and also my person and my lifestyle represented to the elderly trauma survivor.

The interviewer

Being a young person in my thirties, who had to travel long distances to make her living, and being a professional, who had to deal with multilingual and multicultural environments to be accepted (i.e., employed in academia) I was the representation of the young self of Jacob. The self that struggled with loneliness and displacement, the self that made enormous sacrifices, and whose traumas remained untreated for long decades. The bus schedules, which provided framework to the beginning and the end of our conversations, my bags, which accompanied me during the journeys across borders of nation states, my occasional difficulty trying to find the right words in the given language were all subtle triggers, which could not be avoided, yet, still could be handled. My claimed “too soft voice” was, time to time, not to be heard, as it conveyed questions, which were to be kept at the gates, and allowed to enter only after the trusted and careful guard, the wife, reformulated and translated them in a way that it did not hurt (or did not hurt that much).

Not knowingly, I was playing “their game” for years. A game, that was carefully staged by Jacob and Rosa. It was based on presentation and representation of a picture that was on the edge of bearability and narratability. Throughout the years, I thought that I was able to gain their trust and understand the memories of lived experiences of child deportees in complexity. I have, however, not been attentive to one of the most important bodily sensations referred by my interview partners: theirs and my own sensation of coldness and warmth during our interactions. Room temperature management remained in the hands of the interviewees, and the small talk about them was proven to be the key to the locked door guarding a no-go-zone of a painful, untreated past.

The opening doors

The last time I visited Jacob was shortly after he lost his wife. It was a highly emotional experience for both of us, having to enter the empty room that used to be filled with warmth by Rosa. We sat down at the same places: he on the armchair next to the fireplace, me on the couch, but there was an armchair left empty. The lack of the elderly woman, the emptiness that remained after her filled the air. It was in the long silences, in the sighs after unfinished sentences. It was there in the unwrapped box of chocolates on the table, which was unimaginable before. When Rosa was alive, she always welcomed visitors with freshly baked cakes (that she was not allowed to eat due to her illness) and served home-made herbal tea. Her loss was there in the unlit fireplace and the unusually chilly early-summer day.

When Rosa was alive, we never experienced long silences. We chatted about the weather, the garden or the visits of the great-grandchildren. This time we were just sitting there silently, playing all these scenes in our heads, and wishing that the wife would walk into the

room and wake us up from this frozen state of grief. I asked a question, he briefly answered. After years of meeting Jacob, to my surprise, it was the very first time he seemed to hear my “soft voice.” He did not ask me to repeat my questions. He was holding on to my gaze while struggling with the overwhelming experience of loss. I unpacked a white candle from my bag and placed it on the table, next to the wife’s picture. Jacob nodded, when I asked whether I was allowed to lit it. I struggled with the matches, and managed only after several tries. My shaky hands and clumsiness gave me a good excuse to slowly start talking about innocent things. Matches, which are no longer as good as they once were, and about how I regretted breaking so many. And as we watched the candle flame in silence, something in Jacob seemed to soften. He started complaining about the unexpectedly cold weather during the burial that happened just a few days prior to my visit. “We all had to wear winter coats in June, can you imagine? And it still did not help. We were all shaking from cold!²” – he explained. I felt the cold of the room too. I let it affect my body, and could feel it up to my bones.

Our mutual absorption in the sadness over the loss, the freezing room, and the liberation of our voices allowed a deep sense of humanness into our conversation. The acute grief, the uncontrollable temperature seemed to evoke such old, traumatic memories, which were kept repressed for a long time. Jacob slowly opened about the so often verbalized “feeling cold.” On that afternoon, I got to know another man, an emotionally engaged one. While he described the stifling loneliness “back in those dreadful years,” the loneliness of the past and the solitude of the present could not be separated.

Behind the scenes of “I hate feeling cold”

“I hate feeling cold” was a door presented to me many times in the past. While sitting well-dressed and warmly by the fireplace in the presence of the “on guard” wife, I did not realize that this sentence was the demarcation line of a no-go zone. A territory never to be entered again! Throughout the years of research, it has been a synonym of a set of significant life events and experiences, which were repressed. The sense of cold has been a trigger, yet, until under strong control, its consequences, the intertwined emotions, could not see the light of the day.

Jacob’s war-torn childhood and the months spent with the “Sudeten” deportees in the post WW2 Czechoslovakia were more or less known to me, as I incorporated them in my doctoral dissertation. I was familiar with their photo albums which Rosa showed me previously many times. This time, however, Jacob asked me to follow him to an unusual place, where he showed me the content of the drawer of his bedside table. There were photos, which should not have been taken at all. They depicted a dirty and dangerous zone, and in there a group of men

² All quotations in the book chapter come from the interview conducted in Iza, Slovakia, in June, 2023.

in checkered shirts and how he called it, “*monterka*.”³ The conversation between us remained slow-paced. I did not “jump” on the topics but gave him time to dive into the long-not-seen construction sites in the middle of corn fields. “This was my life for decades, you see...,” he told me and pointed at his young self, a tall, wide-shouldered man with bright eyes, with a cigarette in his mouth, standing among a group of colleagues of approximately the same age. The parasols above their heads and the codes on the thick pipeline behind them indicated that this picture preserved the traces of a very special industrial site.

Jacob was born as the 8th child and the youngest son in a peasant family. He grew up in a border region that was initially part of northern Hungary in the early 20th century, later becoming part of Czechoslovakia, but during World War II, it was again annexed by Hungary, and after the war, it reverted to being part of Czechoslovakia (Michela 2006, Kusa 2017). At that time, he was discriminated against due to his Hungarian ethnicity, soon also lost his citizenship and was forcibly transferred to a far-away region of Central Europe, where his parents and elder siblings were working in a labor camp. When the Communist party got in power, they were liberated, could return to their village, yet, his parents lost all their land, horses and the equipment, which served for long decades for feeding their numerous children. They were ordered to be employees on the land that used to be theirs and got almost no salary for their hard work. “But the worst of the worst,” he told me, was that they were supposed to be obeying the orders of people who had no education and experience in agriculture. “They did not know how to take care of our wise, well-trained horses, they were shouting at them, kicking and hitting them with sharp objects. It felt even worse than having to go to bed hungry as a teenager...” In the darkest days of Communist terror, a rumor spread among the young men in the village. Jacob also got hints how some lucky ones managed to escape from this hell. He joined “the gang” in 1961. That’s what he calls the group of workers who decided to liberate themselves. “At first, there were about seven or eight of us. Just from there. One brother-in-law, another brother-in-law, and a few friends. After the first one escaped by train and sent us a letter that he was safe, we all followed him. We started working hundreds of kilometers away, near the German border. No one asked us where we were from. They needed young men for the heavy industry, for the construction sites. Many from my village followed us later, but after a while they all gave up. It was terribly difficult... in the coldness of the night, among all the strangers... I do not even like talking about it. And even if I wanted to, there is no one left. I am the only one alive from then.”

A long period of silence sat in the room. We were staring at the few photos of an unspeakable historical period, in which origin, finally after all those years of ethnic cleansing in Central and Eastern Europe, did not matter. “There were Slovaks, Czechs, Hungarians, even Roma. They did not care who was who. Those who could work well could stay. Those who could not were quickly weeded out because the work there was very tough. Winter or summer, we were always outside! And there, a hundred percent of the work had to be done. After each

³ Blue colored workers’ uniform, referred to as “*montérky*” in Slovak language

welding they made an X-ray. It was not visible to the naked eye if someone made a mistake, but the pipeline had to be corrected. Nothing could leak there. And those who had a lot of repairs, well, they were sent away in no time to smaller construction sites, where they did not earn that much.”

In the chilly bedroom, to which I had no access before, I had a chance to see a welding certificate, some stamped papers about further training and special permits. I learned that those who wanted to work, were valued there. “Humans did not matter. Only performance did.” In the first few years, they were taken to the border region in a freight cars, where construction was underway. At that time, they lived in small caravans on the outskirts of the cities. Then, around 1964, when he had already earned it, he was given a bed in a temporary tiny house. “There were only men, because it was tough, very tough. We felt always extremely cold there.”

I learned about the construction in fragments. The unfinished sentences painted a picture in my mind about pipelines arriving to the railway and to rivers. I could only grasp how challenging it must have been for Jacob to survive: “We even welded below the level of the water. And we had to do a hundred percent job there as well. In mud, water, frost, 24 hours a day... as 10-12 fire pumps pulled the water, and if we had stopped, the water and the ground would have collapsed. When the shift was over, we always went to the pub. They already knew everywhere that beer and a shot was our daily bread, and we rarely stopped with having only one. We were actually drinking a lot! It was a tough life. But it was necessary. If you wanted something... How else would I have built a house for my wife and the children?,” he looked at me questioningly.

Yet, soon the other interpretation of this work far from home got articulated. He admitted that he paid way too high price for the good wage. “Even when we were working in this country, we came home after every ten days only for two days. There were times when it was one month or one and a half months of work, continuously. And then you got only 4 days off. That was it. When we were sent to East Germany, we only had Sunday afternoons off. We had to work even Sunday mornings.”

With the recent passing of his wife, he reconsidered much. He regretted those years. He asked me if I had any better solution for having to feed a family but did not want to hear my answer. I was also coming to see him from a city, located in a four-hour-long train ride. Long minutes of silence moved to the chilly room again, when he answered his own question: “Everyone needed to find some way of coping. Going away, escaping the communist terror was my way. I believed that the only thing that mattered was work. How wrong I was, I can feel it now.” And to illustrate what he meant by coping, he added: “The train ride took all night and half a day when we went to East Germany. It took us eight hours to get to Prague, and then we went on, by another train. Back then train ride was nothing like today...” He looked at my backpack, bearing signs of the long international journeys I regularly took to complete my research projects. “There were much more people commuting long distances for work! Sometimes we could hardly get on the train and were standing in the crowd until Prague. Do

you still do that? Standing all the way long? I doubt anyone would be willing to bear those circumstances today... Most of the time we could not even sit down! The toilets were always broken and extremely smelly, and if you had to stand beside them for many hours, you felt like vomiting any minute.” I nodded, and recalled those hot summer days when I was stuck in the Eurocity trains with no air-conditioning and the possibility of opening the windows. The irrepressible memory of the odor of overheated bodies in the almost unbearable heat and the sight of the endless, dull, dried out plains of Central Europe made me fully empathize with my interview partner, who, while rearranging the photos neatly in order mumbled something again. “You know... since I retired, I have had so many surgeries! We were always freezing, in the rain-wind-cold... on the top of that all the noise and dust... That’s why I’m deaf. Everyone who worked there became almost deaf! I endured, and left only on medical recommendation. My kidneys and liver could not handle it anymore. And as I said, I am the only one alive from my generation. The others all passed away. All was for nothing. I am alone again. I know my children have a grudge against me because I was never at home, and even when I was, I was either drunk or sleeping. I hit them a lot. I could not stand noise. When I came home, I wanted my peace. I was working very hard for it. For the house, and for my peace. I could not, I still cannot stand when children scream and argue. I just cannot... And now I am left alone. All was for nothing.”

That night, when I was summarizing my findings of the day, I typed numerous pages about the harsh working conditions of the communist heavy industry. I did what I was instructed to for long years in college: I distanced myself from the researched field, and objectively reflected on the collected data. I was absent from the results of the interview, and in fact, Jacob was as well. I focused only on what he experienced for decades. Then, I slowly shifted towards how he felt during those hard-working years leaving behind his wife, his children, and losing himself in the process. While reflecting on his past senses, I slowly transferred towards contemporary experiences, and became increasingly unable and unwilling to detach the old “cold” from the new “cold,” and intertwined with it, the constant struggle for keeping, managing the longing for the warmth of home and the warmth of human relations. And on this spectrum of different senses, including visual, auditory, tactile, olfactory and multimodal I (the researcher, the trigger) also appeared, as creator and co-creator of various layers of narrated reality over the long years. As a well-behaving woman, not wanting to cross the lines of politeness, I used to play along with both the wife and the husband in their conversations about the proper room temperature. I was trying to “melt in” to get the most out of the conversation. I neglected my own sensations of the suffocating heat, I accepted that I was not loud enough to be understood, and not wanting to offend my elderly male interview partner I sighed all right with a polite smile when he avoided the answer. Not until the loss of the wife I realized that I was not too soft, but quite on the contrary, my presence was almost too much. My efforts for reciprocity (bringing chocolate from the capital city in exchange for the baked cakes) were contributing to the old equilibrium: that of the young worker bringing goods of the world to the rural household. And the goods had to be taken with special care: not to be consumed all at once, but to be carefully stored and cautiously dosed to avoid harm.

Discussion

Using the multisensory approach to understand the world can profoundly impact researchers' ability to comprehend differences and the construction thereof. The bodily sensation of feeling cold was proven to be a key factor in various encounters, such as between home and displacement, togetherness and loneliness, and noticeable versus unbearable pain.

Coldness emerges as a recurring motif in the narratives of individuals who have endured trauma in Central and Eastern Europe. Whether it be the physical chill of inadequate housing (Waters 2020), the emotional coldness of displacement (Laub and Nanette 1989, Kidron 2009), or the existential coldness of separation from loved ones (Kompan-Erzar et al. 2022), the sensation of coldness pervades various aspects of traumatic experiences. Retrospectively, it has become evident from the life narratives of my interview subjects, that the perception of coldness has evolved over time, reflecting changes in social, economic, and environmental conditions. From the freezing cold of communist construction zones to the sweltering heat in the cozy living room of an elderly couple, the changing temperature has adapted to different situations.

In this process, the significance of warmth as a facilitator of comfort and safeguarding has become intricately interwoven with conceptions of despised vulnerability, complicating the dynamics of trauma and recovery.

Secondary trauma stress constitutes a heavy burden for the spouse and contributes to the onset of depression, anxiety and social isolation (Ahmadi et al. 2011, Lambert et al. 2015, Dekel et al. 2018). In Rosa's case all of that had to remain unspoken – in the patriarchal society of rural southern Slovakia declaring it would have been the sign of ungratefulness for protection and privilege provided by the sacrifices of the hard-working husband. The provision and reception of warmth has taken on convoluted and paradoxical roles: the wife, seemingly protected from having to travel long distances for work, was tasked with providing unconditional and limitless warmth. Over the years the role became overwhelming, as Rosa found herself burdened not only by management of the children and the household as a (practically) single mother during the majority of her active adult life, but also by the responsibility of shielding her husband from the harm of being triggered by coldness, while simultaneously grappling with their own unresolved traumas rooted in the Second World War and decades-long domestic violence in her marriage.

Conversely, individuals seeking warmth and comfort may inadvertently perpetuate cycles of trauma by relying on maladaptive coping mechanisms. To avoid the harshness of cold, Jacob engaged in self-sacrificing behavior (“holding on, no matter what”), tuned out by excessive consumption of alcohol. Parallel to this, Rosa struggled with maintaining the warmth, that was extremely difficult to gain. Her coping also involved suppression of her own needs for the good of the family, whereby she sustained an overarching narrative of being lucky, having to be grateful. As neither warmth nor cold can be controlled endlessly, their efforts also required

increasingly more devotion, and finally contributed to the illness and exhaustion of the wife, and the surfacing of long-suppressed traumas of the husband upon the uncontrollable coldness of loss and grief.

By examining dynamic, multi-sensory experiences within the context of historical and socio-political upheavals in longitudinal perspective, we can uncover hidden layers of meaning and gain a deeper understanding of human resilience and vulnerability.

Conclusion: future implications

In this book chapter, it is seemingly the cold that is the object of study. I put the focus on how trauma survivors perceive the world through their senses, in this case the change of (extreme cold and hot) temperature. Cold could remain a perception, separated from everything else. Yet, I take one step further. By relying on the case of my years-long interaction with an elderly couple, I show how the researcher can emerge in the field and actively participate in blocking as well as promoting emotionally invested, multimodal communication. More specifically, I propose that instead of just observing the subjects of research in their sensations, the researchers' body should also be allowed to sense, and the reflection of this dynamic sensing can become a crucial element in extracting meaning. The somatic empathy between interviewer and interviewee can bridge the gap between survivors' inexpressible past experiences and the researcher's knowledge, providing new insights into how unspeakable traumatic memories function. By attuning to physical responses during the interaction, the researcher gains deeper, more embodied understanding of the lived experience of trauma, which verbal accounts alone cannot fully capture.

By providing a rich ethnographic example, I elaborate on the effect of the senses on reexperiencing long-nubbed emotions and verbalizing a traumatic past. I highlight how trauma studies can benefit from encouraging dynamic, multisensory awareness of researchers and understanding perceptual experiences of both the researcher and the researched in their interaction. I explore how the perception of coldness have evolved over time, from the harsh conditions of deportation and forced labor to the seemingly contrasting warmth of peaceful post-millennial environments in the life of a former deportee and the seemingly protected wife. I elaborate on the complex dynamics between passive recipients of warmth and active providers, shedding light on the burden carried by those attempting to shield loved ones from past traumas. I argue the importance of interpreting sensory experiences in trauma research, highlighting their role as indicators and markers of unresolved trauma. As the example of Rosa and Jacob indicate, only by embracing bodily sensations, both of the researched and the researcher, we can uncover layers of meaning and gain deeper insights into the complexities of trauma.

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