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Restoration in collective trauma: the self, the other, and the system in educational psychology

Abstract

Collective trauma disrupts individuals as well as the relationships and systems that provide safety, continuity, and meaning. This qualitative study examined processes of restoration among educational psychologists following the October 7, 2023 attacks in Israel. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with ten educational psychologists working across general Jewish, Arab, and Ultra-Orthodox contexts. Inductive thematic analysis was followed by interpretation through the Growing Approach, a systemic psychoeducational framework.

Three interrelated domains emerged: **restoration of the self, restoration of the other, and restoration of the system**. Restoration involved reclaiming agency and professional identity, rebuilding relational continuity and reflective capacity, strengthening significant adults, and restoring systemic structures of holding, trust, and collective action. Although these processes were evident across contexts, their expression varied according to sociocultural conditions.

The findings conceptualize restoration under ongoing collective trauma not as a return to a pre-crisis state, but as an ecological process of recreating conditions that enable agency, connection, reflection, and continued development across individual, relational, and systemic levels.

Keywords: collective trauma, educational psychology, restoration, growing approach, systemic intervention, relational holding

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Introduction

School as a developmental environment

Schools have traditionally been viewed primarily as institutions responsible for the transmission of knowledge, skills, and academic achievement. Correspondingly, educational psychology developed largely within a medical-diagnostic model, in which intervention focused on identifying, diagnosing, classifying, and treating difficulties located within the individual child.[1–3] Although this model contributed important professional tools, its emphasis on individual deficits often left the relational, educational, and social contexts in which learning and development occur outside the primary focus of intervention.[4,5]

Over recent decades, understandings of learning and development have shifted toward a broader ecological perspective. Bronfenbrenner's[6] ecological model conceptualizes development as emerging through complex, reciprocal interactions between individuals and the multiple systems in which they live, including family, school, community, and broader social and cultural contexts. From this perspective, school is not merely a setting for formal instruction, but one of the central ecological environments in which children develop.[6,7]

This perspective is further supported by the science of learning and development, which emphasizes that developmental and learning trajectories are shaped over time through interactions between individual characteristics and the contexts that support or constrain them.[8] This literature advocates a "whole child" perspective and highlights the interdependence of school experiences, development, learning, and interpersonal relationships.[8–10] Relationships, accordingly, are not secondary conditions that merely facilitate learning, they constitute part of the developmental infrastructure itself. Positive relationships with family members, teachers, and other significant adults contribute to coping, mental health, and resilience, while children's experiences of being seen and valued within the classroom and school community are central to their development.[11]

Within this framework, teachers are understood not only as providers of instruction but as significant adults capable of providing emotional security and developmental support. The quality of teacher–student relationships has been associated with students' sense of belonging, engagement, and school adjustment.[12,13] This conceptual shift parallels changes in educational psychology itself. Mor[5] describes a transition from a medical model centered on diagnosing and remediating individual difficulties toward personal, interpersonal, and systemic paradigms that position the child as an active subject embedded in relationships and social contexts. Accordingly, the role of the educational psychologist expands beyond individual casework to include work with teachers, school leadership, and families, as well as the development of systemic conditions that support growth and development.

This shift is particularly important in contexts of risk and trauma. Relationships with significant adults can serve a protective function for children exposed to violence, conflict, and chronic stress. School-based interventions in which teachers are trained and supported by mental health professionals demonstrate the potential of teachers to serve as frontline sources of emotional support and to promote resilience and recovery among children exposed to political violence.[14,15] Thus, supporting children does not depend solely on direct intervention with the child, but also on strengthening the adults and systems surrounding them so that these environments can provide continuity, safety, and emotional holding.

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Building on these ecological and relational perspectives, the **Growing Approach** conceptualizes human development as emerging within meaningful relational environments that foster emotional security, belonging, agency, and opportunities for growth.[16,17] Rather than focusing exclusively on academic achievement or symptom reduction, the Growing Approach emphasizes the role of educational systems in strengthening resilience, relational capacity, emotional regulation, and agency among both children and adults. Within this framework, educators and educational psychologists are understood as significant holding figures whose emotional availability, reflective presence, and relational responsiveness support developmental continuity, particularly under conditions of stress and adversity.[16,17] This perspective also resonates with critiques of educational models that overemphasize individual achievement and skills at the expense of social belonging, values, and community context.[18,19] The role of educators and educational psychologists, therefore, extends beyond identifying and responding to distress to shaping the relational and systemic conditions in which children and adults can be seen, belong, connect, think, and act as subjects within their environments.

More broadly, the Growing Approach can be situated within international ecological, developmental, and trauma-informed perspectives. Consistent with Bronfenbrenner's ecological framework, it understands development as embedded in reciprocal relationships across individual, relational, and systemic contexts.[6] Contemporary science of learning and development similarly emphasizes the interaction between individual characteristics, relationships, and developmental environments, and the importance of relational conditions for healthy development.[8–10] In contexts of trauma, this systemic-relational orientation is further reflected in research demonstrating the importance of sustained relationships, supportive adults, professional holding, and context-sensitive responses for maintaining resilience and functioning.[14,15,20,21] The Growing Approach integrates these principles within a developmental framework that places particular emphasis on creating relational and systemic conditions that enable agency, belonging, reflective capacity, and continued growth under adversity.

Collective trauma and the challenge to growth-promoting educational environments

Collective trauma poses a particular challenge to this developmental perspective because its effects extend beyond individuals to the relationships, communities, and social structures that provide safety, continuity, and meaning. Accounts of community-based psychological work following the October 7 attacks illustrate how large-scale trauma can simultaneously disrupt personal lives, relational trust, and the communal and symbolic structures through which experience is organized.[20]

A central consequence of collective trauma is the disruption of continuity. Such ruptures occur not only within the individual's psychological experience but also across everyday routines, social roles, relationships, and community structures. Work with communities displaced following October 7 documented profound disruptions in safety, trust, meaning, and familiar structures of daily life. Within this context, the gradual re-establishment of routines, consistent human presence, and renewed meaning became part of a slow and nonlinear process of reorganization.[20]

Trauma also disrupts the capacity for relational engagement. Following October 7, community-based work revealed difficulties establishing closeness, impaired trust, avoidance, and reluctance to engage, alongside moments in which language itself became insufficient. Attuned presence—at times without words—and sustained relational contact gradually supported the re-emergence of trust, regulation, and the capacity to give form and meaning to experience.[20] From this perspective, relationships are not merely vehicles through which therapeutic interventions are delivered, they may themselves constitute a fundamental condition for restoration.

The effects of collective trauma are not confined to those formally identified as trauma survivors. In a shared traumatic reality, professionals are exposed to the same broader field of threat, loss, and uncertainty as those they are expected to support. Alroy et al.,[20] describe how professional knowledge, a shared language, and an ongoing professional framework provided practitioners themselves with a form of safety net, while reflective and containing spaces helped sustain a more stable therapeutic stance. This highlights a central interdependence: the capacity to hold others depends, in part, on whether professionals themselves have access to relationships and structures that can hold them.

At the same time, collective trauma is not experienced uniformly. Pre-existing social, cultural, and political conditions shape both the meaning of traumatic events and the resources available for coping. A study of Arab educational psychologists in East Jerusalem following October 7 found that heightened political tension, fear of self-expression, and psychological insecurity affected professional identity, relationships with colleagues, and organizational belonging. Peer support, local autonomy, context-sensitive practices, and supportive organizational structures, in contrast, helped sustain professional functioning and meaning.[21] The study further documented self-censorship and avoidance of dialogue, as well as the modification or suspension of group-based and dialogical interventions when participants did not feel safe enough to express themselves.[21] These findings underscore that a growth-promoting environment cannot be defined by a uniform set of practices, rather, it depends on the capacity to adapt conditions of safety, connection, and participation to the social and cultural context in which they are enacted.

These dynamics pose a fundamental challenge to the Growing Approach. If emotional security, belonging, relational connection, continuity, and the capacity to think are central conditions for development, collective trauma threatens precisely these conditions. Moreover, within educational systems, disruption occurs simultaneously across multiple levels: children depend on holding adults, while teachers, school leaders, and educational psychologists may themselves be exposed to threat, loss, and uncertainty. The central question, therefore, is not only how to support individual students affected by trauma, but how to preserve or rebuild the capacity of the educational system as a whole to function as a growth-promoting developmental environment.

From the perspective of the Growing Approach, **restoration** under such conditions cannot be understood as a simple return to the pre-crisis state. Community work following October 7 suggests that sustained presence, the gradual rebuilding of relationships, the re-establishment of routines, and the creation of holding structures can begin to restore trust, continuity, and meaning even while external conditions remain unstable.[20] Restoration therefore refers to the ongoing re-creation of conditions that enable individuals and systems to remain connected, think, and act within a changed reality, rather than to the recovery of a previous state.

The present study

The theoretical framework outlined above conceptualizes schools as multilayered developmental environments in which children's

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development is embedded in relational, social, and systemic contexts.[5,6] Within this perspective, educational psychologists function not only as clinicians or diagnosticians but also as professionals who work with the adults and systems surrounding the child to foster conditions that support development, relationships, and resilience.[5]

The October 7, 2023 attacks and their ongoing aftermath placed these functions under exceptional strain. Educational psychologists were called upon to support students, families, educational staff, and communities whose familiar holding structures had been disrupted, while simultaneously working within a shared traumatic reality in which they themselves were exposed to threat, loss, and uncertainty. Emerging work following October 7 has highlighted the importance of sustained presence, professional and systemic holding, and context-sensitive responses across diverse social and cultural settings.[20,21]

Against this background, the present study examines how educational psychologists describe processes of disruption, reorganization, and restoration following October 7. Drawing on qualitative in-depth interviews, the study explores how agency, relational connection, and functioning are re-established across three interrelated domains: **restoration of the self, restoration of the other, and restoration of the system**. The Growing Approach provides the theoretical framework for interpreting how processes of holding, continuity, and reflective thinking are manifested in educational psychologists' work within an ongoing context of collective trauma.

Accordingly, the study addresses the following research question: **How do educational psychologists describe processes of disruption, reorganization, and restoration following the October 7 attacks, and how are these processes manifested at the levels of the self, the other, and the educational system?**

Method

Research design

This study employed a qualitative research design based on semi-structured, in-depth interviews with educational psychologists who worked in educational and community settings following the October 7, 2023 attacks. A qualitative approach was selected to enable an in-depth exploration of participants' professional experiences, the meanings they attributed to their work during an ongoing crisis, and their accounts of processes of disruption, reorganization, and restoration.

Participants

The study included ten educational psychologists working across different educational settings in Israel. Participants represented three sociocultural contexts: the general Jewish population, Arab society, and the Ultra-Orthodox Jewish community. This purposive diversity enabled exploration of professional experiences across distinct social, cultural, and organizational contexts, all operating within the broader reality of ongoing collective trauma.

Data collection

Data were collected through semi-structured, in-depth interviews focusing on participants' professional experiences following October 7. Interviews explored perceptions of professional roles, dilemmas encountered in practice, emotional experiences, and ways of coping with the realities that emerged following the attacks. All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim.

Data analysis

The data were analyzed using interpretive thematic analysis. The initial phase of analysis was inductive and data-driven. The transcripts were read repeatedly to identify meaning units, recurring patterns, and preliminary categories, without imposing the theoretical framework or predetermined thematic categories on the data. These categories were subsequently refined and consolidated into broader themes.

In a second, interpretive phase, the emerging themes were examined in relation to the conceptual framework of the Growing Approach. Through this iterative movement between the empirical material and the theoretical framework, the themes were organized into three interrelated domains of restoration: **restoration of the self, restoration of the other, and restoration of the system**. Thus, these domains were not predetermined coding categories but an interpretive framework developed through the integration of inductively derived themes with the study's theoretical perspective. Throughout the analytic process, attention was given to preserving the complexity of participants' experiences and the meanings they attributed to them.

Ethical considerations

Participation was voluntary and based on informed consent. All participants were informed of the study's aims and of their right to discontinue participation at any time. To protect confidentiality and anonymity, identifying information was removed from the interview material. Given the small sample and the sensitivity of participants' sociocultural and professional contexts, participants are identified in the findings only by broad sociocultural context where analytically relevant.

Findings

The inductive analysis identified recurring themes concerning how educational psychologists experienced and responded to disruption within an ongoing context of collective trauma. In the subsequent interpretive phase, these themes were organized through the conceptual lens of the Growing Approach into three interrelated domains of restoration. Restoration of the self refers to processes through which educational psychologists re-established their own agency, boundaries, continuity, and sustainable professional identity. Restoration of the other refers to processes through which relational connection, trust, reflective capacity, and the capacity of significant adults to remain available to those they support were rebuilt. Restoration of the system refers to processes through which continuity, holding structures, coordination, belonging, and collective capacity for reflection and action were re-established within educational and community systems. Although analytically distinct, these domains were closely intertwined and mutually influential in participants' accounts. Within each domain, both shared patterns and context-specific expressions were identified across participants from the general Jewish, Arab, and Ultra-Orthodox communities.

Restoration of the self

At the level of the self, participants described how October 7 and its aftermath disrupted their sense of safety, continuity, and professional identity. Restoration was not experienced as a return to a pre-crisis state, but as a process of reorganization that enabled continued functioning under conditions of threat and uncertainty. Four interrelated processes emerged: restoring agency through action, acknowledging vulnerability and personal limits, reorganizing professional identity, and drawing on meaning, relationships, and professional support as sources of continuity.

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From passivity to action: restoring agency

A prominent pattern across the interviews was a movement from helplessness toward meaningful action. Among Jewish participants, professional action often emerged as a direct response to the abrupt rupture of continuity following October 7. One participant described the first days as a time when "the world stopped," accompanied by anxiety and uncertainty. In response, she actively approached the system and said, **"Use me."** Looking back, she explicitly linked professional action to her own coping: **"First of all, it was therapy for me—to know that I wasn't helpless... that I was doing something that could be done."**

Another Jewish participant described a similar process despite experiencing a direct personal loss. Initially, she withdrew from professional involvement because, as she explained, **"I was very occupied with my own personal experience."** A week later, however, her position shifted: **"Wait... what do you mean, no? How can you say no?"** Professional engagement did not reflect an absence of vulnerability, rather, it enabled her to connect personal pain with commitment and meaning.

Among Arab psychologists, action similarly served as a means of restoring agency, but against a different contextual background. Alongside war-related threat, participants described suspicion, restricted freedom of expression, and threats to their sense of belonging. One Arab psychologist described a period of despair and stated simply, **"What helped me was taking action."** For him, professional action restored a connection to his role and capacity to influence, but only when grounded in human relationships rather than the technical application of protocols: **"Emergency work has to take place within a relationship, not according to one-two-three."**

For the participant working within the Ultra-Orthodox community, agency was expressed less as an immediate response to crisis and more as continuity with a pre-existing value-based position. Prolonged military reserve service alongside his professional work within the Ultra-Orthodox community reflected commitments that were not always affirmed by his social environment. As he explained, **"I'm there... aspiring to do long and meaningful service... even though I don't have to."** Continued action enabled him to preserve continuity between his values, identity, and behavior.

Across these different contexts, action did not eliminate fear, loss, or uncertainty. Rather, it enabled participants to move from experiencing themselves solely as acted upon by events toward reclaiming some capacity to choose, influence, and act within the reality they faced.

The holding self also needs to be held: boundaries, regulation, and vulnerability

Alongside the movement toward action, participants emphasized that their ability to continue holding others depended on acknowledging their own vulnerability and limitations. Restoration of the self did not involve overcoming vulnerability, but recognizing it, regulating exposure, and establishing boundaries.

One Jewish participant deliberately chose not to work individually with children, instead focusing on the significant adults surrounding them: **"It was very clear to me that I was avoiding that... focusing my work on the significant adults."** Another described a similar decision to avoid direct treatment of people who had experienced the trauma, despite her professional expertise in this area. In both cases, setting limits enabled continued professional engagement without disregarding their own emotional state.

For Arab psychologists, boundaries acquired an additional meaning in the context of social and political threat. One participant described deciding not to expose himself to images from the scene of an attack, asking himself, **"Why am I actually going to see this?"** He explained, **"If I can remain free of the image... my work can remain clearer and more focused."** Here, the boundary did not represent withdrawal from distress, but a means of preserving the capacity to remain professionally present in relation to it.

For the participant working within the Ultra-Orthodox community, boundaries also involved different aspects of identity. Moving between military service and his work as a psychologist within the Ultra-Orthodox community required temporarily setting aside parts of his experience according to context. After a night of military activity, he could arrive at a professional meeting the following morning and tell himself: **"At that moment, I am a psychologist in the Ultra-Orthodox community. I give the best service I can."** This compartmentalization did not erase his other experiences, rather, it allowed him to continue functioning in settings that could not necessarily accommodate them.

A central paradox thus emerged: the capacity not to respond to every need, not to expose oneself to everything, and not to bring every aspect of the self into every setting helped participants preserve their ability to remain present for others.

Reorganizing professional identity

The crisis required participants to reconsider not only what they did, but who they were as professionals. For some, professional identity expanded from the role of an expert who provides solutions toward a broader function of presence, organization, and holding.

One Jewish participant described her role as **"being a partner to the principal and the counselor."** Where holding functions were absent, she adopted a straightforward position: **"Where there are no people, you need to be there."** Professional action began with acknowledging the experience of staff— **"inviting the staff for a moment to hear how they are doing"**—before moving toward solutions.

For Arab psychologists, reorganizing professional identity also involved holding identities and forms of suffering that could be experienced as conflicting. One participant described confronting his own experience of loss in Gaza while supporting professionals whose family members had been harmed in the war. He asked himself, **"Am I holding two opposing forms of pain?"** His point of orientation became a return to a broader professional and human identity: **"Then I came back to who I am... Pain is pain... pain has no national affiliation."** This position enabled him to remain a source of support within relationships marked by national and political tension.

For the participant working within the Ultra-Orthodox community, the challenge involved simultaneously holding Ultra-Orthodox, professional, and military identities. Rather than resolving the tension between them, he described moving between them according to context. When entering one setting, he temporarily left other aspects of himself "outside," and afterward **"returned to being who I am, fully."** Restoration in this case did not involve integrating multiple identities into a single coherent identity, but sustaining their complexity without relinquishing central aspects of the self.

Meaning, connection, and holding the holders

Finally, participants described restoration as a process that could not rely on internal resources alone. Professional relationships,

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supervision, peer support, and a sense of meaning enabled practitioners themselves to be held, thereby supporting their capacity to continue holding others.

This was particularly evident among Arab psychologists. One participant noted that **"psychologists are in supervision almost throughout their professional lives,"** but during this period supervision assumed a function extending beyond professional learning. It provided a space in which fear, anxiety, alienation, and uncertainty could be expressed, allowing the professional to move temporarily from the position of holder to that of being held.

Other participants identified additional sources of meaning. For some, professional purpose itself served as an anchor. For the participant working within the Ultra-Orthodox community, personal biography also became a professional resource. He described himself as a child as **"a corridor child... not bothering anyone... but not learning either,"** and connected this experience to his current professional commitment: **"I want to be the person who enters the setting, specifically reaches those at the margins, and tries to help them... to give them scaffolding."** An early experience of marginality was thus reworked into a source of professional sensitivity and purpose.

Taken together, these findings suggest that restoration of the professional self cannot be understood solely as an individual process of resilience. Rather, it emerged through the interplay of agency, acknowledgment of vulnerability, boundary setting, reorganization of professional identity, and access to relationships and systems capable of holding the professional.

Restoration of the other

At the level of restoration of the other, participants described rebuilding the possibility of relational connection after trauma, loss, mistrust, and uncertainty had disrupted interpersonal safety. Relationships were not described merely as vehicles for intervention, but as a central arena of restoration itself. Across sociocultural contexts, four interrelated processes emerged: establishing presence and continuity, adapting relationships to the other's pace, boundaries, and context, supporting the adults who hold others, and creating spaces in which experience could be spoken, reflected upon, and held in its complexity.

Presence and continuity as foundations for restoration of the other

Among Jewish participants, one central expression of restoration was the capacity to remain present over time. Following experiences of rupture, loss, and repeated turnover of professionals, consistent presence acquired significance beyond any specific intervention. One participant described a teacher who had difficulty trusting after encountering a succession of professionals: **"How can I trust anyone like this?"** The participant summarized what the teacher needed in simple terms: **"What she needs is to know that I'm here... consistently."**

Presence was not necessarily verbal or explicitly therapeutic. Participants described walking alongside school leaders, accompanying them through practical tasks, and simply remaining with them across settings. One psychologist described the importance of providing a clear **"address"**, explaining that **"people need a clear, tangible address."** In a reality characterized by disruption, knowing that there was a person and a place to return to provided a relational anchor.

Participants also emphasized that continuity could not be sustained when professionals themselves were unsupported. One Jewish psychologist described the need to **"pair psychologists with psychologists,"** first determining what each professional needed before reconnecting them with educational settings. Restoring relational continuity therefore involved not only remaining with those directly affected, but also creating conditions that enabled holding figures themselves to remain present.

Restoration of the other thus involved establishing continuity within a world experienced as fragmented. Trust was rebuilt not through a single intervention, but through time, consistency, and repeated encounters with a figure who remained.

Attuned relationships: pace, boundaries, and context

Participants emphasized that restorative relationships cannot be imposed. They require respect for the other's pace, boundaries, and capacity for contact. One Jewish participant described a deliberate **"movement toward contact"** in which control remained with the other person: **"Until the moment when it feels right for them to share with me... and then I say, okay, we've connected."** Another articulated a similar principle as the need **"not to open things that you cannot also close."** Pausing or limiting contact was therefore not necessarily a retreat from relationship, but could protect the other from further emotional flooding.

Participants working with affected communities similarly described the need to balance approaching distress with respect for uncertainty and readiness. Rather than offering certainty where none existed, they sought to provide as much clarity as possible while allowing families and children to determine the timing and intensity of contact.

Within the Arab context, relational attunement acquired an additional meaning. Participants described environments in which people feared expressing emotions and opinions, making the possibility of speaking itself uncertain. One Arab psychologist referred to an **"implicit instruction... don't talk about October 7,"** adding, **"People are afraid, and to this day they are afraid to speak."** Under such conditions, restoration of the other required creating conditions in which expression could occur without fear of judgment, punishment, or relational rupture.

Within the Ultra-Orthodox context, attunement involved sensitivity to language, cultural codes, and concerns about the introduction of external values. The participant working within this community described how cultural nuance could communicate, **"We speak the same language."** At the same time, he emphasized the importance of waiting: **"If I suggest something too early, I may be perceived as though I've crossed a line."** Relational work therefore sometimes required restraint, delay, or choosing not to introduce particular content in order to support change without threatening identity and belonging.

Restoration of the other thus involved a dual movement toward connection and toward restraint. Relationships became restorative when the other retained, as far as possible, agency over the pace, timing, and depth of contact, and when intervention was responsive to the social and cultural context in which that relationship was embedded.

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Holding the holders: restoring the other by strengthening significant adults

Across contexts, participants emphasized that supporting children often required working through the adults who were present in their everyday lives. Rather than replacing teachers, parents, or school leaders, psychologists sought to strengthen their capacity to resume their roles as significant adults.

One Jewish participant described the need to hold simultaneously **"the subjective world of the child... together with the subjective world of the teacher."** Another described work with parents that did not replace them or prescribe what they should do, but gradually restored their sense of responsibility and competence. In this sense, restoration of the child depended partly on restoration of the adult who held the child.

Arab psychologists articulated this principle particularly clearly. One participant stated, **"The most important thing is working with the teachers—to strengthen and help the teachers grow."** Another described a teacher who said, **"I'm not a psychologist... I'm not built for this."** Rather than treating this response as professional inadequacy, he reflected her competence back to her: **"The very fact that you saw him... you should be very proud."** A third participant described working with a principal experiencing helplessness: **"I knew I had to wait... to strengthen her... because ultimately, she is the one who leads."**

The same principle appeared within the Ultra-Orthodox context. The participant emphasized, **"If the educator does not develop, does not grow... we haven't accomplished anything."** In one case, a teacher who had lost his son in the war began having angry outbursts in class. Rather than understanding these solely as disciplinary or professional failures, they were recognized as expressions of the adult's grief. Encountering him as a vulnerable subject without undermining his authority as a teacher enabled him, over time, to meet his students from a less reactive position.

These findings suggest that restoration of the other occurs through a chain of relationships. Rather than replacing the natural figures in children's lives, psychologists supported those figures so that they could once again provide safety, regulation, and developmental support.

From speaking to thinking together: restoring the other as a subject

A further process involved creating spaces in which experience could be spoken, reflected upon, and given meaning even when no clear answer was available. This theme was particularly prominent among Arab psychologists, given participants' accounts of fear surrounding open expression. One participant described the restorative movement as bringing what could not be spoken into language: **"When you bring what is unspoken into speech, that is what makes things happen."**

Speaking also involved making room for tension within the relationship itself. When working with counselors who expressed suspicion and anger toward him because of his identity and professional background, one Arab psychologist chose not to bypass the tension: **"I understand very well what you may think about me... and I really appreciate that you are bringing it here."** Another described genuine contact as the ability **"to really be in contact... to listen... not necessarily to agree."** Relationship, in this sense, did not depend on consensus, but on the capacity to remain connected across difference, anger, and mistrust.

Subjectivity was also restored through questions. One participant described questioning as a central professional tool, using prompts such as, **"What does this incident with the student evoke in me?"** to invite reflection rather than prescribe action. Another suggested shifting attention from problematic behavior toward the question, **"Let's hear the child's story."** The focus thereby moved from a problem to be solved toward a person to be understood within a relational and historical context.

A similar principle emerged within the Ultra-Orthodox context, where the psychologist could be expected to function as an authoritative figure who provides answers. The participant explained, **"If we are the ones who provide the answer, we diminish rather than help people grow."** Suspending certainty and opening questions created room for additional voices and restored the other's capacity to think and participate in decisions.

Jewish participants likewise described the importance of remaining with others when no answer was available. One psychologist framed her decision to enter an unfamiliar affected community not in terms of expertise but through the question, **"Am I willing to be there with them?"** Another described the initial fear that she would have no words at all and the need, within a situation of "no information," to provide minimal anchors of presence, connection, and clarity.

Restoration of the other therefore did not necessarily involve providing solutions, achieving agreement, or eliminating uncertainty. It emerged through relationships capable of holding pain, difference, not-knowing, and disagreement without silencing the other or reducing them to an object of intervention. Sustained presence, contextual attunement, support for significant adults, and the restoration of opportunities to speak and think together created conditions in which trust, subjectivity, and relational connection could begin to re-emerge.

Restoration of the system

At the systemic level, participants described a shift from focusing primarily on affected individuals toward viewing the educational and community system itself as an object of intervention. When students, parents, educators, and professionals were simultaneously affected, systemic restoration could not mean returning to pre-crisis routines. Rather, it involved rebuilding the conditions that enabled systems to hold their members, think, and act within a changed reality. Four processes were particularly prominent: restoring systemic continuity and functioning, creating networks of holding, establishing structures for continuity and reflection, and rebuilding trust, belonging, and collective agency.

The system as an object of restoration: re-establishing continuity and functioning

One of the clearest shifts described by participants was an expansion of the focus of intervention from the individual to the system as a whole. One Jewish psychologist stated explicitly, **"The patient is the entire school community."** In a context in which students, teachers, parents, and school leaders were all affected to varying degrees, an exclusively individual focus was experienced as insufficient.

Systemic restoration was not described as a return to conditions preceding October 7, but as an effort to establish continuity within a reality that remained unstable. One participant described creating **"islands of functioning, islands of life, islands of stability."** Within this context, returning to educational structures itself acquired restorative meaning: **"To give children a functioning educational framework... to return to being students. That is the most meaningful healing process there is."** Resuming roles—as students

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and as educators—helped restore elements of the continuity that had been disrupted.

Another Jewish psychologist described children's mental health as embedded in their **"natural environment,"** particularly the family and school. During the first week of the crisis, she described the immediate task as **"resuscitating the educational staff,"** so that classrooms and educational structures could gradually begin functioning again.

A similar systemic orientation appeared among Arab psychologists. One participant rejected the idea of a single center of intervention: **"I don't have a center—there is a circle, and we are all within that circle."** The child, teacher, principal, psychologist, education department, and local leadership were understood as parts of an interconnected system. Another participant described how, within hours of the attacks, the entire psychological service was convened to plan an emergency response before attention shifted to individual cases.

Within the Ultra-Orthodox context, the system was also understood as a space of identity and belonging. Systemic restoration therefore required working from within the community's language, codes, and values rather than attempting to change it from outside. The participant described concerns that psychology might be perceived as **"trying to introduce certain content, certain values."** Systemic work thus depended on establishing legitimacy and trust in the psychologist as someone capable of working within, rather than against, the community's cultural framework.

Across contexts, systemic restoration involved re-establishing continuity within natural systems of everyday life and supporting their capacity to resume meaningful functions despite ongoing external instability.

Networks of holding: supporting those who hold the system

Participants repeatedly emphasized that systems are sustained not only by formal structures but by networks of people who hold one another. Systemic restoration therefore depended on the capacity to support those who were themselves responsible for holding others.

One Jewish participant described a process that began with the staff: **"First of all, you stay connected with the whole team,"** before turning attention toward students. She explained, **"Once a team manages... to return to its role, that also gives strength and meaning... to the students."** Another participant used the image of a **"matryoshka doll"** to describe this layered process: **"The principal needs to be seen... and that frees her to see the teachers... and the teachers need to be seen so that they have the capacity to see the students."**

This chain of holding became particularly important when professionals were themselves directly affected. One psychologist described the need first to determine **"where each person is and what they need,"** and even to **"pair psychologists with psychologists."** The aim was not to mobilize professionals as quickly as possible, but gradually to restore their capacity to act.

The same principle appeared in the Ultra-Orthodox context, where the participant emphasized, **"If the educator does not develop, does not grow, we haven't accomplished anything."** The ability of teachers and religious leaders to express pain, doubt, and grief without losing their professional or communal standing was understood as essential to systemic functioning.

Systemic restoration thus involved multiple layers of holding rather than reliance on isolated individuals expected to continue functioning despite their own exposure. The creation of a holding network allowed vulnerability to be acknowledged without undermining the system's capacity to act.

Holding structures: routines, reflective spaces, and shared language

Alongside relational support, participants emphasized the importance of stable organizational structures. Systemic restoration required frameworks capable of organizing time, roles, and reflection within conditions characterized by urgency and uncertainty.

Jewish participants described creating **"regular spaces, with a regular setting, in the teachers' room"** where staff could engage in nonjudgmental dialogue and shared reflection. Another emphasized maintaining such structures even during crisis: **"These circles are not cancelled, no matter what is happening outside."** Their regularity itself provided continuity and enabled the development of a shared language for processing experience.

Another participant described the need to create a different rhythm within what she called the **"dictatorship of the here and now"**—a rhythm that allowed staff **"to stop and think."** Once the immediate emergency phase had passed, she argued that **"regular teachers' meetings have to be built into the system."** Such spaces enabled a shift from reactive action toward a team capable of reflecting together on emerging dilemmas.

Within Arab educational settings, crisis sometimes served as a catalyst for creating new structures. One psychologist described a traumatic school event as a **"turning point"** after which relationships between psychologists and the school changed and regular meetings, peer groups, and coordination mechanisms were established. Another described developing an emergency routine through regular online meetings with staff, parents, and classes: **"We didn't know what to expect... so the idea was to start on Zoom."** Rather than waiting for ordinary routines to return, an alternative structure was created that allowed the system to continue functioning amid uncertainty.

Reflective space was also significant within the Ultra-Orthodox context, but here it required a shift in relation to authority and certainty. The participant described a system accustomed to turning to authoritative figures for definitive answers and proposed a different stance: **"If we become the rabbi who gives the answer, we diminish rather than help people grow."** Suspending immediate answers allowed additional voices to enter the conversation and supported a system capable of tolerating uncertainty rather than responding to it solely through rapid decisions.

Holding structures were therefore not synonymous with rigidity or protocol-driven practice. Regular meetings, routines, coordination, and shared language provided a stable framework within which the system could pause, think, and adapt its actions to changing circumstances.

Rebuilding trust, belonging, and capacity for action

The final dimension of systemic restoration concerned relationships between individuals and the systems themselves. Participants described how collective trauma could also be experienced as failure or abandonment by institutions expected to provide protection, holding, and continuity. Restoring functioning alone was therefore insufficient, trust and belonging also needed to be rebuilt.

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One Jewish participant described abandonment as **"one of the greatest blows... abandonment by all the systems."** Anger directed toward school leadership was consequently understood not simply as resistance, but as an expression of injury. Rather than suppressing this anger, efforts were made to recognize what teachers had experienced and restore their sense of being seen. The participant noted that some of the teachers who initially occupied **"the angriest position"** later became **"the most significant teachers."**

Another participant described how ambiguity and contradictory instructions could deepen the sense that **"you can't trust anyone."** Restoration therefore required clarity regarding who was providing support, who served as the point of contact, and what was and was not known. Familiar community figures were also important, allowing support to be experienced as emerging from within the community rather than as another external intervention.

Within the Arab context, rebuilding trust depended on sustained presence and relational infrastructure. One participant warned against professionals who **"come and go,"** arguing that such patterns could deepen despair and abandonment. Another described the psychologist as responsible for maintaining systemic continuity: knowing who had been affected, who was meeting with them, who was supporting staff, and who would continue accompanying them after the acute phase had ended.

Participants from Arab society also described a system coping simultaneously with war and ongoing internal violence. Because safety and routine could not be assumed, systemic restoration depended heavily on building internal structures of connection, coordination, and continuity. One psychologist described a central task as finding a way **"to get out of this despair and help people get out of this despair."** Hope, in this context, did not mean expecting the crisis to end quickly, but experiencing that relationships, structures, and possibilities for action remained available within it.

Within the Ultra-Orthodox context, systemic restoration was likewise associated with maintaining belonging and action during crisis. The participant described an initial tendency to experience the war as **"something over there, not touching us,"** followed by the gradual entry of the crisis into educational life. At the same time, he emphasized the importance of maintaining communal routines: **"I absolutely think our resilience is to keep celebrating as much as possible... not to cancel any holiday."** Routine was not presented as denial, but as a means of preserving continuity, meaning, and collective agency within crisis.

Overall, systemic restoration did not involve returning the system to its pre-crisis state, but strengthening its capacity to reorganize within ongoing disruption. Restoring roles and continuity, developing networks of holding, establishing structures for reflection, and rebuilding trust and belonging enabled educational systems to continue functioning despite persistent threat and uncertainty. In this sense, systemic restoration is not an endpoint but an evolving capacity to hold vulnerability, learn from it, and recreate conditions for meaningful action and growth.

Discussion

The present study examined the experiences of educational psychologists working within an ongoing context of collective trauma following the October 7 attacks, using the Growing Approach as its theoretical framework. The findings conceptualize restoration as a multilayered process occurring across three interrelated domains: restoration of the self, restoration of the other, and restoration of the system. These domains do not represent sequential stages of recovery. Rather, they are mutually dependent: professionals' capacity to remain active subjects depends partly on the relationships and systems that hold them, their capacity to hold others is shaped by their own psychological and professional state, and the system's capacity to function depends on the quality of relationships and on adults' ability to think, tolerate complexity, and act.

This conceptualization is consistent with Bronfenbrenner's[6] ecological model, which locates development within reciprocal interactions between individuals and nested social systems, and with the broader shift in educational psychology from individually focused models toward relational and systemic approaches.[5] The present findings extend these perspectives into the context of collective trauma: not only does disruption occur simultaneously across multiple ecological levels, but restoration itself depends on reorganizing the relationships among these levels.

A further central finding is that restoration cannot be understood as a return to a pre-trauma state. Participants were working within a reality in which threat, loss, and uncertainty remained ongoing, making the restoration of "normality" neither possible nor necessarily desirable as a conceptual goal. This is consistent with accounts of community-based work following October 7, in which recovery unfolded gradually and nonlinearly through the re-establishment of safety, trust, routines, and meaning.[20] The present study conceptualizes this process as restoration: the ongoing recreation of conditions that enable individuals and systems to remain present, think, connect, and act within a reality that remains altered.

Restoration of the self: from renewed agency to the reorganization of professional identity

At the level of the self, disruption extended beyond emotional distress to functions that enable individuals to experience themselves as active subjects: continuity, agency, boundaries, meaning, and the capacity to think. Educational psychologists faced a particular tension in this regard: they were expected to provide organization and holding for others while themselves exposed to the same broader reality of threat and uncertainty.

Literature emerging from the aftermath of October 7 similarly describes a shared traumatic reality in which professionals do not stand outside the crisis but work from within it. Alroy et al.,[20] describe how professional knowledge, shared language, peer relationships, and professional structures served as a form of safety net for practitioners exposed to ongoing collective trauma. The present findings extend this observation by suggesting that being held is not merely important for practitioners' well-being, it also supports their capacity to preserve professional subjectivity and act from a reflective rather than exclusively reactive position.

One of the clearest findings concerned the role of **action in restoring agency**. Participants described moving from helplessness toward professional engagement—taking on roles, establishing contact, or organizing responses—as a way of reclaiming some capacity to influence their circumstances. Alroy et al.,[20] similarly describe movement from passive witnessing toward professional presence and action as part of the search for meaning following October 7. The current findings suggest, however, that agency under conditions of trauma should not be equated with control. Rather, it may reside in the capacity to choose meaningful action despite profound limits on external control.

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Importantly, restorative agency was also expressed through **restraint**: saying "not now," regulating exposure, selecting where and how to engage, and recognizing personal limits. Action and restraint, although apparently opposite movements, served a similar restorative function when they reflected choice rather than helplessness. Both enabled professionals to regulate their degree of contact with a reality that might otherwise overwhelm their capacity to respond.

The relationship between agency, boundaries, and professional identity is particularly salient in Rosenthal et al.'s,[21] study of Arab educational psychologists in East Jerusalem following October 7. Sociopolitical threat, fear of expression, and self-censorship affected participants' professional identity, belonging, and capacity for action, whereas local autonomy, peer support, and professional meaning supported continued functioning and agency. Restoration of the self, therefore, cannot be understood as an exclusively intrapsychic process, the possibility of acting as a subject also depends on whether the surrounding environment permits expression, choice, and belonging.

Differences across the sociocultural contexts in the present study further illustrate this point. For some Jewish participants, trauma was experienced as an abrupt rupture in previously familiar continuity, and action helped restore a sense of movement and coherence. For Arab psychologists, October 7 also intensified pre-existing experiences of suspicion and caution, making selective expression and regulation of exposure important means of preserving professional subjectivity. For the participant working within the Ultra-Orthodox community, restoration involved moving between multiple professional, cultural, and military identities without relinquishing any of them. The same restorative function—renewed agency—thus took different forms depending on the conditions of the surrounding field.

The findings also point to a reorganization of professional identity, from a role centered primarily on expertise and providing solutions toward a broader position of presence, coordination, and holding. This extends the systemic conception of educational psychology[5] by suggesting that, under collective trauma, professional identity itself may become a resource through which psychologists reorganize experience and recover a sense of purpose.

Restoration of the other: relationship, continuity, and the recovery of reflective capacity

At the level of the other, the findings suggest that trauma disrupts not only individual well-being but the conditions that make relationships possible. Loss, displacement, discontinuity, and repeated turnover of professionals undermined confidence that another person would remain available. This finding is consistent with developmental perspectives that position relationships with significant adults as fundamental to safety, resilience, and development rather than merely as vehicles for intervention.[11,13]

The importance of such relationships becomes particularly pronounced under conditions of trauma. Research on children exposed to conflict and chronic stress has demonstrated the protective role of significant adults and the potential of teachers, when professionally supported, to promote resilience and recovery.[14,15] The present study extends this literature by suggesting that under collective trauma, the capacity to use relationships as a source of safety may itself require restoration.

One of the most salient findings was that presence and continuity shifted from being prerequisites for intervention to becoming interventions in their own right. Participants emphasized the importance of a consistent relational "address" and of encountering the same figure repeatedly over time. This resonates with Alroy et al.,[20] who describe sustained presence, including silence and nonverbal contact, as meaningful when immediate solutions or language are unavailable. At the same time, participants emphasized pace and boundaries: relational continuity became restorative when it preserved the other's control over the timing and intensity of contact rather than demanding disclosure.

The importance of contextual attunement was especially evident among Arab psychologists. Rosenthal et al.,[21] found that invitations to emotional expression could themselves be experienced as threatening following October 7, and that dialogical and group-based interventions sometimes required modification or suspension when psychological safety was insufficient. A holding relationship, therefore, cannot be defined by the amount of disclosure it produces. Its restorative quality depends on its responsiveness to the individual's capacity and sociocultural context.

Another central finding concerned the restoration of **reflective capacity**. Participants described movement from answers toward questions, from behavior toward narrative, and from rapid decisions toward shared reflection. From this perspective, the psychologist restores agency not by providing a better answer but by creating conditions in which the other can once again think, interpret, and participate. This is consistent with relational and collaborative developments in educational psychology that position the psychologist not solely as an expert problem-solver but as a partner in strengthening the reflective and relational capacities of adults surrounding the child.[5]

This finding also clarifies why restoration of the other frequently occurred **through holding the adult who holds the child**. Teachers, parents, and school leaders are not simply conduits through which psychological interventions reach children, they are subjects who themselves require recognition, support, and opportunities for reflection. The study therefore adds a restorative dimension to the ecological perspective: before significant adults can function as sources of safety and development for children, their own capacity for relational presence may need to be restored.

Restoration of the system: from a reactive system to a holding and reflective system

The findings extend restoration beyond individual and relational levels by identifying the system itself as an object of disruption and restoration. Schools, educational psychology services, and community structures lost continuity, role clarity, personnel, and planning capacity, compromising the structures expected to support individuals within them. Building on ecological and systemic perspectives,[5,6] the present study therefore suggests that under collective trauma the system should be understood not merely as a context influencing individuals, but as a level that may itself require restoration.

Continuity emerged as a central systemic function. Participants described creating "islands" of stability through educational routines, regular meetings, alternative structures, clearly identified points of contact, and role clarification. Similar processes were described by Alroy et al.,[20] where relationships established during routine periods became safety networks during crisis and collaboration among psychologists, educators, social workers, parents, and community leaders provided an infrastructure for intervention.

This finding highlights an important distinction between **routine as denial and routine as holding**. Systemic restoration does not mean behaving as though nothing has changed. Rather, it involves establishing reliable structures precisely while acknowledging that the

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surrounding reality has changed. In this sense, stability and flexibility are not opposites: stable structures can provide the foundation from which adaptive responses become possible.

The findings also emphasize the importance of **regular reflective spaces**. Emergency conditions naturally privilege immediate action, yet participants described how opportunities to pause, think, and tolerate not-knowing helped systems move beyond reactive functioning. Alroy et al.,[20] similarly describe shared reflective spaces as sources of containment and recovery for practitioners. Reflection, therefore, is not a professional luxury that can be postponed until the emergency has passed, it is one of the functions that enables systems to continue operating professionally within crisis.

A related finding concerns the **networked structure of holding**. Systems do not support children only through direct services, they do so through adults who themselves require support. When principals, teachers, counselors, and psychologists remain unsupported, responsibility becomes concentrated in individuals and increasingly difficult to sustain. In contrast, coordination, recognition, and support across professional roles allow holding functions to be distributed throughout the system. This is consistent with the expansion of educational psychology toward strengthening teacher capacity, supporting teams, and developing systemic resources rather than relying on an external expert as the primary source of intervention.[5]

Cultural context remained important at the systemic level. Rosenthal et al.,[21] demonstrate that organizational support structures are not culturally or politically neutral: psychological safety, freedom of expression, and contextual fit influence whether professionals can make use of them. The present findings similarly suggest that holding structures cannot be transferred uniformly across settings. They must be constructed in relation to the language, relationships, identities, and sociopolitical conditions of the system in which they operate.

Restoration as a multilayered process: theoretical contribution

The central theoretical contribution of this study is the conceptualization of restoration as a multilayered ecological process in which restoration of the self, the other, and the system are analytically distinct yet mutually dependent. This conceptualization builds on established ecological and developmental perspectives that locate human development within reciprocal interactions between individuals, relationships, and broader systems.[6,8,10] It also extends relational and trauma-focused work emphasizing sustained relationships, supportive adults, professional holding, and context-sensitive responses under adversity.[14,15,20,21] The Growing Approach brings these perspectives together by focusing specifically on the conditions that enable continued development within disruption. The present findings extend this framework further by identifying three interconnected loci of restoration: the professional self, the relational field of the other, and the organizational system. In this sense, restoration is ecological not simply because trauma affects multiple levels, but because the capacity for restoration at each level depends on restorative processes occurring at the others.

When systemic structures break down, professionals may be required to function beyond their capacity. When the professional self becomes overwhelmed or depleted, the capacity to remain relationally available to others is compromised. When relationships become reactive or fragmented, the system further loses its capacity to hold its members. Conversely, change at one level may generate movement at others: a stable structure may help a professional regulate, an adult who feels held may become more available to a child, and a relationship in which thinking becomes possible may support systemic reorganization.

This perspective shifts the focus of restoration from an individual attribute toward the conditions of the relational and systemic field. Rather than asking only what resources individuals possess, it asks whether the surrounding environment enables those resources to be used: Is there continuity? Are there reliable boundaries? Is there someone to hold the holder? Is there space to think rather than merely react?

Differences across the three sociocultural contexts reinforce this conclusion. The underlying restorative principles were similar, but their expressions varied according to context. Presence may require direct conversation in one setting and caution or delay in another, a boundary may function as holding in one context and be experienced as exclusion in another, and structure may provide security or be perceived as threatening identity and belonging. Rosenthal et al.,[21] for example, illustrate how political and organizational conditions alter the meaning of speech, relational contact, and professional support. The Growing Approach therefore cannot be translated into a uniform set of practices. Its organizing principles must be adapted to the cultural, relational, and systemic conditions in which they are enacted.

Restoration under ongoing trauma is therefore neither a return to a previous state nor a final outcome. Rather, it is an ongoing capacity to sustain and reorganize conditions that support agency, connection, and reflective thought while external reality remains unstable.

Practical implications

The findings have several implications for educational psychology practice under conditions of collective trauma. First, they support expanding the focus of intervention from the individual child to the educational and community systems surrounding the child. This is consistent with the movement toward systemic-ecological leadership in educational psychology,[5] but becomes particularly important when disruption itself is systemic. Individual intervention may remain essential, but it is insufficient when the adults, relationships, and structures surrounding the child have also been affected.

Second, **holding educational staff and professionals should be understood as part of the intervention itself**, rather than as a peripheral condition for effective practice. Supervision, peer support, and regular reflective spaces enable adults to continue functioning as holding figures without operating indefinitely beyond their emotional capacity. The importance of such professional holding is also evident in community-based work following October 7.[20]

Third, the findings underscore the importance of **holding structures**: continuity of professional figures, regular frameworks, role clarity, and identifiable points of contact. Precisely because crisis demands flexibility, stable anchors are needed to provide continuity and enable adaptive responses without systemic fragmentation.

Finally, restorative practice must be context-sensitive. Presence, boundaries, speech, and reflection do not carry identical meanings across communities. As demonstrated in work with Arab educational psychologists in East Jerusalem, even established professional practices may become inappropriate when they fail to account for psychological safety and the sociopolitical conditions in which relationships occur.[21] Restorative work therefore requires not only cultural sensitivity as an additional consideration, but adaptation of the conditions of intervention themselves.

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Limitations and future directions

Several limitations should be considered when interpreting these findings. First, this qualitative study was based on a small sample of ten educational psychologists and was intended to provide an in-depth understanding of participants' experiences and meaning-making rather than statistical generalization. Representation across the three sociocultural contexts was also unequal. In particular, findings concerning the Ultra-Orthodox context were based on a single participant and should therefore not be interpreted as representative of Ultra-Orthodox society more broadly.

Second, the study reflects the perspectives of educational psychologists only. Because one of its central propositions is that restoration occurs within networks of relationships, future research should examine these processes from the perspectives of teachers, school leaders, parents, and students, allowing comparison of how restorative processes are experienced from different positions within the same system.

Third, the study was conducted within an ongoing and changing reality. The restorative processes described here may not remain stable, and their meanings may change over time. Longitudinal research could examine how relationships among restoration of the self, the other, and the system evolve across different phases of collective trauma and whether processes that provide holding during early phases acquire different functions as circumstances change.

Finally, the study offers an initial qualitative conceptualization of three interrelated domains of restoration. Future research should examine this framework across larger and more diverse samples and in other contexts of collective trauma, as well as explore the mechanisms through which changes at one restorative level may influence the others.

Conclusion

This study conceptualizes restoration under conditions of collective trauma not as a return to normality, but as an ongoing process of reorganization. At the level of the self, restoration involves reclaiming agency, boundaries, and a sustainable professional identity, at the level of the other, it involves rebuilding the possibility of continuous, attuned, and reflective relationships, and at the systemic level, it involves restoring continuity, networks of holding, and structures that enable reflection and action.

The capacity to sustain growth within a disrupted reality therefore depends on creating conditions in which the self can remain an active subject, the other can remain in relationship, and the system can continue to think. Restoration, in this sense, is not simply the repair of what has been broken, but the ongoing recreation of conditions that make development possible while rupture is still present.

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Conflicts of interest

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