

Rampe Reicht – Season 3, Episode 2: The Spoon Theory

Rampe? Enough. 20 minute podcast about the spoon theory.

SR: I'm SchwarzRund and I'm still writing my doctoral thesis for the next few years.

tier: I'm simo_tier and I'm trying to make a new zine right now.

SR: Nice.

tier: Right. Today we're going to talk about the spoon theory or...

SR: Wow, wow, wow, wow, wow. Can you use the word in a sentence?

tier: Yes, of course. For example, "Today I have very few spoons to leave the house." [SR: Hmm.] Then people would usually ask, "What do you mean by spoons? Do you need spoons to leave the house?"

SR: "What do you want with all those spoons?"

tier: Exactly, and here we come to the spoon theory or this example of the spoon, which stands for something specific.

SR: Exactly, for resources. So, I'll try to give you another example. For me, spoons often stand for how much I can withstand external stimuli, and sometimes I have a lot of spoons to withstand stimuli, but at some point they are empty, and then I need stimulus reduction. That would be an example. But tell me, where does that come from and why are we talking about spoons?

tier: Yes, in the, let's say, disabled scene, we've been talking about spoons for a very long time, and there have been communities on the Internet for a long time where people call themselves "spoonies". Or we call ourselves "Spoonies". So, that comes from the English word "Spoon Theory". This also comes from English, or rather US-American. The term or concept was developed by Christine Miserandino. I think in 1994. This is a person who has lupus. The story goes, she was sitting in a café with a friend and tried to explain to her friend what her energy or strength looks like on each day and how different factors affect how

much strength or energy she has for that day. And since they were sitting in a café at the time, there was a jar with a lot of cutleries in it, and then she just took the spoons out and said, well, we can illustrate that with the spoons here. For example, I have five spoons for each day as energy reserves. So, a disabled person with lupus, which robs a lot of energy. And e.g. you as an able-bodied or non-disabled person also have five spoons. Now let's start our day. And what usually happens? So, you make yourself breakfast or take a shower or things like that. And maybe for the girlfriend, who is not disabled, it doesn't cost any energy reserves or spoons or only half a spoon. But for Christine, she said, just getting up, taking care of the food and above all, what we many of us know, showering and getting dressed, that costs her two spoons already. And then she only has three for the rest of the day. And on that day, she might have to go shopping or meet friends or work or take care of food later. And all these things play into these energy reserves. And above all, we know that too, so we, who have problems with energy reserves, or, as you said, with the stimulus reserves and such, on some days all spoons are gone very quickly, and you need more. And then you metaphorically borrow spoons from the next day to get things done that day, but the next day you start with maybe only three spoons instead of five.

SR: Exactly, because you've used one more. But for one, you'll pay two the next day.

tier: Exactly, exactly. And then you only have three spoons that day, but we... You would actually have to work or have a doctor's appointment and then you would also have to take care of food, personal hygiene and the whole household and children, animals or whatever... Care work. It just doesn't come together at the front and back. Exactly, that's the basis of the spoon theory.

SR: One point that she also brings up or brings up in the essay, which I think is super important, is also the question: How quickly are these spoons recharged? [tier: Yes.] So, even if the non-disabled girlfriend also spends all five spoons, for example, I would say, she can just lie down for 20 minutes or drink coffee and have five spoons again. [tier: Exactly, exactly.] While the regeneration time in lupus is much slower. Thanks to you for explaining. So, first of all, this is a theory that we can use, but it can also be used in everyday life. [tier: Totally.] How does the word help in everyday life to talk to each other, I would say, among disabled people?

tier: I think it totally helps in this, when people check in with each other, how are you today? Or it's enough for me if you tell me in the morning, "Hey, I somehow have one spoon today to do it all", then we don't need to have a big conversation about it, but then it's like, okay, how can we somehow get you through the day or something? Right? And just this, when you're on the road, sometimes like this, "Now slowly the spoons are running out, now I'd just set off for home." [SR: Yes, completely.] Stuff like that.

SR: I also find it helpful to be able to better classify a bad mood, for example. Well, I don't always notice when I go grumpy, but I do notice when my spoons go empty, then I can say, "Now my spoons are empty, from now on don't talk to me anymore because I'm struggling with other things right now." And that's exactly how we treat the animals we care for, for example.

tier: Exactly, so my dog is also neurodivergent, I'd say. And with him, it's so clear when the spoons are gone. So, it's really this, I know, when he's well-rested and stuff, and then some negative stimuli happen outside, I say, and then you really notice how the spoons are taken away from him, and he then somehow... For example, if I have planned to go for a longer walk, which is then shortened considerably because the dog has no more spoons and then has to go home to regenerate.

SR: Absolutely. And I think it also helps so that we don't always have to know each other's diagnoses. [tier: Oh yes.] Or having to share our exact specific symptoms on the day, so it's not that it's bad to be disabled now, but sometimes it's nice not to have to name everything again because you might just be annoyed by your own limitations and disabilities.

tier: Totally, and for many of us it's multiple diagnoses or multiple disabilities or illnesses, and sometimes, maybe you have a migraine, and then your spoons are gone, but you don't have a migraine every day. Right? [SR: Totally.] And for the stimuli it's well usable on many levels, this metaphor.

SR: And I also think it's a simplification of language, that's what I find especially when you're language center is overwhelmed, it totally helps to say, "Spoons empty", instead of "Here are my three diagnoses, which in their comorbidity together now blah, this, I need tralala", you just say, "My spoons are empty, bring me a Coke now", or "Hey, my spoons are empty, leave me alone now", or something like that, exactly, yes, and that's enough of a reason.

tier: Exactly. And I also think that in this way of dealing with each other, then it's like you said, with the bad mood or just this, I don't think anyone feels offended when a person says, "Hey, I can't do it anymore, my spoons are running low, please go home" or something like that.

SR: Right, exactly, it's not "You're too exhausting for me because I have migraines", [tier: Exactly.] which is a bit...

tier: Exactly, that sounds really... Yes. [SR: Wow.] That's so individualized again, but that's just the world and my disability and that's it. [SR: That's it.] Exactly.

SR: Right, right, right, so there's just a lot of helpful stuff in this spoon model, yes. Oh, exactly, one thing that would be important to me, which sometimes falls behind us. How does the spoon model help you in terms of dealing with yourself? Because the most important relationship is with ourselves.

tier: Yes, and to check in with yourself, so... As an autistic person, I am known not to be good at checking in with myself and seeing what I feel and so on. Well, I'm one of those people who has alexithymia, which means that we have difficulty naming or expressing our own feelings, at all. [SR: Mhm.] And that's why sometimes it's just... Maybe sometimes I don't notice what I'm feeling or something, but I definitely notice when the spoons are empty [SR: Mmmh.], and then I can, for example, quickly eat something, quickly drink something, and then look, okay, what am I actually feeling now, instead of being overwhelmed by it.

SR: Well, self-care can be done without knowing exactly what it's all about, which is still helpful to know, but maybe easier to figure it out.

tier: Totally, and that helps me a lot with this theory, because I also want to practice memorizing with the feelings or with the needs and so on, but sometimes that just doesn't work because the spoons are just empty, and then I can take care of myself or can just communicate that, say, "Hey, spoons empty", and later I can deal with what was actually going on with me.

SR: Absolutely, well, like an intermediate step.

animal: M-hm.

SR: I brought a quote that I would like to show you. [tier: Yes, of course.] And that's what I only have in English for now, but we can translate it briefly together, that's just one sentence, and that's from Audre Lorde, and that's from an essay that we'll talk about later. But first I would like to follow up with the sentence: [quote in German translation] So, "We were raised to fear the yes in ourselves, our deepest needs." What does this quote tell you in the course of spoon theory?

tier: Yes, that really fits, as you said, with what I just said... Figuring out what my real need is, maybe at any moment, can be difficult enough, but that also with reduced energy resources and so on and so forth [SR: Yes.], makes it very difficult. [SR: Yes.] But I think we all want to develop in the direction that we recognize our deepest needs in order to deal better with ourselves and each other and so on. So, thank you, Audre Lorde, and I think that's where the spoon theory fits in, really, with this example, this might help me to realize, my spoons are all gone, and then maybe... Or, I don't have enough spoons to do something, and then maybe also to prioritize, I'm more likely to take care of myself... So that I somehow have it warm, cozy, beautiful, so that I can actually pay attention to my deepest needs at some point. [SR: Yes.] Or find out what they are.

SR: And to strive for that.

tier: Yes. Very nice, I like it. Yes, and what do you think about the spoon theory, so you have theories about it yourself?

SR: Maybe not theories myself, but definitely a few loose threads, I would say. For me, it's all about... So, I think it makes total sense and is right. I also use them a lot yourself. But what I've just found in relation to white people is that I don't have the level of power in there. Well, it's a theory that's been written in a café. So, it's not a critique of the theory now, rather in how we sometimes deal with it. Because, as you just described, it's hard to find out what you need. And this "we" that Audre describes is very broad. But I believe that we can also understand it differently in each case. What I mean by this is: How far has society taken us away from our needs being allowed to play a role? And how big is the difference we have to overcome?

tier: Yes, and for whom?

SR: For whom? Exactly. And I think for you as a white person, that difference is smaller than it is for a black person. That's exactly why we brought another quote, which we now read directly in German, also from *Uses of the Erotic*, exactly, also from Audre Lorde. And yes, I'll try to read it aloud, and then simo_tier reads it out again in English:

[quote in German translation]

tier: "To share the power of each other's feelings is different from using another's feelings as we would use a kleenex. When we look the other way from our experience, erotic or otherwise, we use rather than share the feelings of those others who participate in the experience with us. And use without consent of the used is abuse."

SR: I really wanted to bring that into the spoon theory, firstly because we've talked about it several times before, but also because there is a totally exciting theory involved. And it's called "The Wheel of Consent", and you can find it online, a little more extravagantly. But what this wheel ultimately describes is that there are four different levels that are consensual. Namely, taking, receiving, allowing, and serving. And if these take place without the consent of both sides, then it's outside of that. And what is outside of this is even clearly named in this theory as enslavement, war, theft, rape, colonialism, and so on and so forth. And allowing yourself to hear something only in terms of feelings, and if you say, for example, "I don't have any more spoons, I'm feeling really bad," then I allow that. Because, for example, if I didn't want to allow that, because maybe I'm not feeling well right now, or I just had enough white people that day, and you don't check in beforehand to see if I want to hear that right now, then that would be outside the wheel of consensus. [tier: That's right!] And that would be, according to the wheel, just a toleration, enduring, doormat, sacrifice. And I think that's something that we, as disabled people, don't want to talk about. This is... So in English this is called oversharing. ... It's always a bit of a game: who screams "I have a need" first, you know what I mean by that?

tier: Definitely. Who will be the first to scream "I don't have any more spoons, I need support!"?

SR: Exactly! And why does the person scream first?

tier: Right, exactly. So, there are several examples from my life, even where it is in groups of people with different impairments, let's put it this way, physical and psychological, mental and so on. Yes, from my experience, it's almost always the white AFABs who scream the loudest first. So...

SR: And that's one of the problems I have with using theory, let's say rather, that... It makes total sense in the sense of: Me individually, [tier: Yes.] I don't have any spoons anymore, so I can't do this one thing anymore. What Christine also writes in her text is this thing of: That's why I sit there at the end of the day after our appointment and think: Can I still manage to cook myself food now? But then I can't take a shower. Or do I have to order food because I have to take a shower to make it to work tomorrow? Or should I have skipped the meeting right away because I don't have money to order food, but I need to eat and take a shower. [tier: Yes.] In this section of the text, I think it comes out really well, this thing about access to money, access to resources. And I would like to see it at the beginning, who is in touch with themselves in the first place to perceive the violation of their own boundaries as a problem.

tier: And also, to be able to name it. [SR: Exactly.] To be able to name so publicly, even.

SR: To expose oneself without danger. [tier: Exactly.] Of course, the question of the Black male body immediately comes to mind, so how much can a Black body say "I'm weak, I can't take it anymore"? In the time of enslavement, this led to death because you could no longer serve. Or how much can a Black feminized body say "I'm weak, I can't take it anymore"? Historically, this has led to rape by the slave master, because you were more likely to be moved into the house and more exposed to danger. So, there are just different layers of power that play into it. Not only: Who is heard?, but: Who can even allow themselves to be in contact with their own body in this way? Because if you don't feel like you're completely finished, the loss that society doesn't give space to that is much smaller. And that's a bit of my struggle with spoon theory. The fact that it is starting to feel a bit like only those who use the right language are allowed to place needs and demands on spaces. [tier: Yes.] Because they have to say, "I want participation, because of the spoon theory, because of inclusion." You know, like that. And they don't even ask whether the refugee with war trauma would perhaps prefer to listen to reggae instead of techno. [tier: Yes.] Because

techno sounds blatantly like the sounds of war. But maybe he doesn't know the spoon theory, or even if he did, he wouldn't take it into account. You know what I mean?

tier: Totally. Yes, that makes a lot of sense and that's definitely what should be considered in, let's say, spoonie circles.

SR: And we talked in the last episode... So, feel free to listen to it again, because we're going to build on it a little bit now. ... We talked about the social model of disability, and I think that would actually be my wish. That if, I'm going to say, three people are out together and the white AFAB person, as you just said, realizes, "Oh, it's too loud for me, my spoons are empty." It might not just be the point "I'm special and different, that's why my spoons are empty and I can't pick up the noises well." Rather, they say: "I don't know about you, but it's a bit too loud for me right now. How do you feel about loud noises?" Because the spoon theory can also be helpful without prioritizing oneself, but...

tier: "I wanted to ask, what's your spoon quota?" That's just a good question.

SR: Exactly. "How are you doing with that right now?" And maybe the next person will burst into tears and say, "Wow, I didn't know that this could be too much for me. Thanks for asking." Exactly what I honestly want to say. I think we're tricking ourselves a little bit with this spoon model, so that we're slipping back into this medical model with it. [tier: Yes.] You know what I mean? So, we see ourselves as an individual problem that can't do something right now. And that... Well, sometimes that's true, but I think it's very often when we're in groups and you realize: It's too much for me right now, and I'm practicing it really well right now, and then you ask, "How are you?", usually three or four people say, "Hey..."

tier: "Yes, thank you for saying that. Wow."

SR: And I think that would be the spoon theory 2.0 that I would like to see.

tier: Yes, really this "Ah, I'm here with several people, my spoons are slowly running out. Do you feel the same way?"

SR: Exactly. "Who feels the same way? And what do we need?" Not in the sense of, that is only valid if several need it.

tier: No, but also for a, I'd say... That's what I find very helpful with these theories. Then even a non-disabled person could just say, "Hey, no, that's right. I had such a busy day today and now this music is really too loud for me and it would be nice to go out a bit somewhere."

SR: Absolutely. And this also dissolves this boundary of: only those who are diagnosed are disabled and are allowed to have the spoon theory as a basis and tralala.

tier: Right, exactly. There have already been several debates and Christine was also asked via the Internet, "Are we depressed people also allowed to use the spoon theory?", "Are we autistic people also allowed to use the spoon theory?" And she was always like, "Yes, if that makes any sense to the reality of your life, then of course you can use the spoon theory. This is not a who-may-and-who-may-not.

SR: I think so, and that's why I use it when dealing with Black people, regardless of their limitations. Once you are exposed to societal oppression, the spoon theory is helpful for you. Because that means you have fewer resources by default. [tier: Exactly.] You can't afford to just blow away the resources, [tier: Yes, and then...] because you can't charge as fast by default.

tier: Totally, and your resources, if you leave your house as a marginalized person, you automatically lose your energy resources much faster, because you are simply exposed to the outside world, I would say.

SR: That's why I think the spoon theory is extremely useful, extremely helpful. I'm very willing for us to take that away from people who ruthlessly turn everything in their direction. But yes, everything can be instrumentalized. A "yay" with a footnote.

tier: Yes, exactly, really good. I think so too. And in any case, I like to explain the spoon theory to other people, I think that always helps. [SR: Definitely.] And just don't engage in gatekeeping. [SR: And...] I think we can say that well.

SR: Yes, and still practice talking about needs without using the word. Because, it should help and not restrict.

tier: Exactly, it's just not a substitute word to talk about needs.

SR: Yes, I think with that we can wrap it up well.

tier: As always, you can find a script on our website and support us like Patreon, where you can donate something to us every month. Or if you would like to donate something to us once, you can also do so via our PayPal account and an account number. It's all in the show notes below.

SR: And many, many, many thanks to everyone who sends us money monthly via bank transfer or Patreon, who sends us emails and just listens, because all of this affirms and encourages us to continue to continue this project. Your resources, whether it's time or money, whatever you give us, means a lot to us. Thank you very much.

tier: Thank you. If you have any questions or topic requests or ideas, criticisms, good or bad, or negative, I'd say feel free to send them to rampereicht@gmail.com by e-mail.

SR: You find all of that on our social medias. The easiest way to find out is to subscribe to us in your podcast app.

tier: Exactly, we can be found everywhere.

SR: I'm SchwarzRund and you can find me everywhere, well, on Twitter and Instagram at @SchwarzRund.

tier: I'm simo_tier and you'll find me, I only have Instagram, as a @simo_tier.

Both: We are crazy, disabled, sick, queer, non-binary, migrated, Black, trans – and so is this podcast.