

**WORKING WITH COMMUNITIES THAT HAVE
EXPERIENCED TRAUMA**

Using the Tree of Life Concept

By

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In Australia, we have traditionally thought of mental health problems as being an illness of the individual, yet increasingly narrative practitioners are looking at community responses to problems. How well do these community responses fit with mental illness? Volden wrote about mental health problems as cultural experiences and asked "*What would it mean if we started to respond to mental health difficulties as not only individual experiences but as cultural experiences*" (Volden, p18).

I would like to explore how a narrative community group program devised for working with children who have experienced trauma might be adapted to use with a group of people who have experienced mental health difficulties.

I am currently working in adult mental health in Melbourne and have in the past worked with a group of Vietnamese men. These men are all consumers of mental health services. Until recently I was case manager for one of these men and my interactions with him brought me into contact with the other men in the group and with their Vietnamese bi-lingual community workers who support them. In early 2006 I attended a Vietnamese family camp and participated in Tet New Year celebrations.

I noticed that there was a strong sense of community among the people who went to that camp; and a great deal of joy in the celebrations. This community camp included families as well as psychiatric patients and a number of year twelve students attended as volunteers as a part of their studies

Most of the men came to Australia in the aftermath of the Vietnamese war-often in open boats. Many people who have travelled to Australia as "boat people" experienced traumatic events during their journeys. Many never made it. What traumas had shaped these men's lives?

Additionally they are being treated for a condition many of them do not fully understand, because there are no words for schizophrenia or mental illness in their language. I wondered how they had dealt with the possible traumas

in their lives. I wondered what skills and knowledges they had developed to deal with the difficulties in their lives.

I was interested in learning to present the Tree of Life (Ncube & Denborough) that was developed as an approach to working with vulnerable children. I thought it might be possible to adapt the Tree of Life for working with people with diagnoses of mental illness. I was particularly interested in trying the exercise with this group. Could the Tree of Life be used to identify the strengths and knowledges of these men? Would it help to identify the traumas they had experienced in (a) being given a diagnosis of serious mental illness and (b) travelling to Australia as refugees. Would this be useful for them?

ABOUT THE TREE OF LIFE

"The Tree of Life: An approach to working with vulnerable children" was described by Ncazelo Ncube of REPSSI ⁽¹⁾, South Africa and David Denborough from the Dulwich Centre of Community Practice in Adelaide, Australia. Ncazelo had previously learned the "Tree of Life" from her colleague and friend Jonathan Brakarsh of REPSSI (Brakash, J). I had met David at a workshop conducted for my Narrative Study Group at the Bouverie Centre in Melbourne where I was studying for a Graduate Certificate in Narrative Therapy from LaTrobe University and was inspired by his presentation. I was particularly interested in his description of the "Tree of Life". I obtained a DVD of Ncazelo Ncube presenting a training workshop on the Tree of Life (Ncube & Denborough) and felt I might be able to adapt the approach to the Vietnamese men.

"The Tree of Life" was developed in Southern Africa in response to the needs of millions of children orphaned as a result of AIDS. The method seeks to provide a safe environment for these young people to establish a "safe territory of identity in which to stand" (Ncube, p.7) before exploring problems in their lives. Ncube is a remarkable woman who has been working with orphaned children for several years in Southern and East Africa. The organisation she works for is REPSSI, which is a regional organisation that provides psychosocial support to children in 13 countries across Southern and Eastern Africa. Ncube works as a child and community counsellor and

her role is to provide support to the most vulnerable children orphaned by AIDS. She writes (Ncube, p.4) of the difficulties of working with and helping the vulnerable children and communities while dealing with the issues of burnout, ideas of defeat and feelings of incompetence among workers. This led to the use and ongoing development of the "Tree of Life" approach.

The project paper from Ncube describes Masiye Camp in Zimbabwe where the "Tree of Life" approach has been adapted to include narrative ideas. Masiye Camp assists orphans and vulnerable children to develop their skills. The children who attend the camp come from a variety of different communities around Zimbabwe and beyond its borders.

A unique and special part of the Camp is the use of young people in providing counselling support services to their peers with the aim of helping children to develop coping skills when they were affected by HIV/AIDS, conflicts, and other emergencies.

This reminded me of reading the work of Paulo Friere who was a campaigner for the education of poor people in Brazil. In his book "The Pedagogy of the Oppressed", he posited the idea that if I help a man, I help one person. If I teach him how, I can help many through him. For example drilling a well for a person helped them to get water, while teaching them *how* to drill a well, empowered them to help themselves and others. I cannot reference the page because I no longer have the book. While his ideas are not post-structuralist they resonate with the idea of training young people to work with and support their peers, particularly in resource-poor African communities. This certainly connects with narrative ideas of people being able to find their own solutions to difficulties through narrative processes.

Prior to the development of the "Tree of Life" Project, there were many tragic stories reported by REPSSI workers. They spoke of the heart-breaking accounts of hopelessness and parental loss suffered by the millions of children orphaned in the countries of Mozambique, Angola, Botswana, Namibia, Malawi, Zimbabwe, Zambia, South Africa, Lesotho, Swaziland, Uganda, Kenya, and Tanzania. These children are forced to live their lives without the joy and support of their parents and are often forced into adult roles of caring for young children themselves.

These were the children the other agencies missed, who slipped through the traditional safety nets. Apart from the challenges of working with these children, Ncube also struggled with the overwhelming feelings of burnout and defeat expressed by the people working to support the children.

Workers felt incompetent in their struggles to help the orphans. They were overwhelmed by the challenge of dealing with crying and wailing children when they sought to talk to them about their experiences. These counsellors sought appropriate tools to assist the children and their families in ways that did not re-traumatise them.

Michael White wrote about this difficulty in addressing people's trauma (White, 2004, p.71). *"It is invariably the case that efforts to directly address people's experience of trauma by encouraging them to revisit this are unproductive at best, and in many circumstances, hazardous. Such efforts can contribute to experiences of re-traumatisation"* White goes on to identify the primary therapeutic task as providing a context for the development or redevelopment of a sense of self.

Ncazelo Ncube reports working for a number of organisations that supported the most vulnerable families and children and their communities. She had been working with vulnerable children for several years when, in 2005, a team from the Dulwich Centre in Adelaide visited Masiye Camp. This group comprised Michael White, Cheryl White, Shona Russell and David Denborough and they had been invited to the Masiye Camp to help develop narrative approaches to working with children.

Narrative draws its inspiration from post-structuralism and its influences. The structuralist ideas influenced, and continue to influence, ideas in psychology about the nature of the self. Self was something deep within the person seeking therapy and in order to learn the truth it was necessary to peel away the layers of self, sometimes called "peeling the onion", in order to reach the inner self and achieve change by learning the "truth" of a person's identity. (Thomas, p.86). Conversely the post-structuralist view of the self is that it is not fixed and that it is *"...always in the process of being created in relationship with others"* (ibid, p.88).

Ncube wrote of Masiye's vision for the young people at the camp to "develop life skills and experience equal opportunities in the social world" (Ncube, *ibid*). She noted that most of the camp counsellors are young people who have experienced significant loss themselves. Ncube wrote about the difficulty for workers who had a sense of failure in their efforts to support *"individuals who you know have faced significant struggles in their lives and who have come to seek support from you"* (Ncube, 4).

Many of the difficulties that the African workers experienced in their work were linked to structured approaches to counselling that seemed to trap counsellors and the people seeking help into problem-saturated accounts of their lives. This can often leave the people and the counsellors feeling drained.

One aspect of this problem is caused by Western ideas based on the notion of "catharsis", which David White has referred to in his paper on Narrative Practice & Community Assignments. He refers to the idea that psychological pain and distress is the natural outcome of trauma which can be seen as substances held under pressure that are best treated by a discharge of these substances, or catharsis (White, 2003, p.39). White goes on to say that *"these practices can contribute to a sense of confinement, of being trapped again in territories of life that give rise to pain and distress."* (*ibid*).

Ncube noted that the use of practices based on these ideas of catharsis had created the belief that the bereaved children and their communities were not given opportunities to express their grief, resulting in deeply rooted feelings trapped inside which need to be vented. (Ncube, p.4). The work had been dominated by this kind of thinking. For a long time the workers at REPPSI had seen themselves assisting in *"providing the space for trapped feelings and emotions to come to the surface"* (*Ibid*). But the reality they had witnessed showed them that this process could overwhelm both counselled and counsellors.

White has elsewhere referred to the traditional Greek understanding of "katharsis" which refers to an experience of being moved by an emotional experience to achieve, among other things, a new perspective on one's life and identity and to *"experience a familiarity with knowledge of life and skills that one was previously barely aware of"* (White, 2007, p.195).

This is a core idea from narrative: the idea of a different knowledge of life, an alternative story or preferred identity. Alice Morgan wrote about this idea and noted that alternative stories are not just any stories. They are stories identified in counselling by which people describe how they would like to live their lives. *"The therapist is interested to seek out, and create in conversations, stories of identity that will assist people to break from the influence of the problems they are facing"* (Morgan, p.14).

In an interview with Christopher McLean about working with victims of abuse Michael White says that in counselling, *"Circumstances can be established that make it possible for people to enter their alternative expressions of their experiences... people find themselves standing in some of the alternative territories of their lives, territories in which they can get in touch with different and more positive stories of their identity"*. (McLean, p.86).

Prior to the involvement of the Dulwich group, the Masiye Camp based their practices on Western ideas of catharsis noted above, the ideas that children were restricted by feelings and emotions of grief trapped inside them, which need to be released. For a long time the workers had seen themselves playing a role in "providing the space for trapped feelings and emotions to come to the surface" (Ncube, *ibid*). But they had also seen that these expressions of emotion had proved overwhelming for the individuals and their counsellors.

During the Dulwich visit Ncube says she became more aware of the responsibility of counsellors to ensure their practices with children enabled them to have a "safe place to stand" where they can experience a preferred identity that is different from their relationship with the problems in their lives.

There was a realisation that it can be re-traumatising for people to tell and re-tell their stories of trauma and loss as this can result in the person living in the problem-laden description of their lives without identifying an "alternative story" or preferred identity. Alice Morgan quotes Freedman & Combs:

"Narrative therapists are interested in working with people to bring forth and thicken stories that do not support or sustain problems. As people begin to inhabit and live out the alternative stories, the results are beyond solving problems. Within the new stories, people live out new self images, new possibilities for relationships and new futures." (Freedman & Combs in Morgan, p.15)

The Dulwich team witnessed the presentation of the "Tree of Life" with the children at the Masiye Camp and noted the work and commitment of the camp counsellors who were sharing their own stories with the children. As a result of the consultations the Masiye team decided to incorporate narrative ideas into the program. The aim was to develop second or alternative stories into children's lives to ensure they had a "safe territory of identity" (Ncube, *ibid*) where they could stand when speaking about the problems in their lives.

THE TREE OF LIFE

Ncube introduced the "Tree of Life" to Masiye Camp in 2003 as part of a training program for people involved in caring for the HIV/AIDS orphans. She had been introduced to it by her friend and colleague Jonathan Brakarsh who employs it as part of a broader training approach called "The Journey of Life" (Brakarsh 2004). The "Tree of Life" employs a metaphor of a tree in a forest. The children at the Masiye camp were encouraged to think of themselves as trees and to describe their lives within the tree metaphor. The approach there involved four steps. The aim of the first two parts was to build the second or alternative stories of people's lives. This told about the skills, knowledges, abilities, hopes and dreams of each person and where they came from. While this allowed the children to focus on the positives and strengths in their lives, there were still times when children became tearful about describing the "bugs" or problems they had experienced. Although the approach was preferred to the old ways of catharsis, camp counsellors were still unsure how to respond to children's intense grief.

When the Dulwich Centre clinicians visited at the invitation of REPSSI they collaborated with the REPSSI workers in developing ways of responding to the children's trauma and loss. This was how the "Tree of Life" exercise was made more effective in enabling the children to develop an alternative or

second story about their lives (Ncube, p.7) to make sure they had a "safe place to stand in relation to the problems and challenges they face..." .

A SAFER TREE

The first part of the exercise involves drawing a tree. The tree represents what they value and hold precious in their lives. In his 2005 workshop notes Michael White says that: *Ongoing psychological pain in response to trauma in the history of people's lives might be considered a testimony to the significance of what it is that person held precious that was violated through the experience of trauma.* (White, 2005, p.19)

When the children draw their tree now, these are the parts of the tree:

The Roots

The roots describe where they come from. Their country, village or town; the history of their family and the people who taught them most in their lives. Here there is the opportunity to invoke "Re-membering" where the person can be asked about what the significant person contributes to their life and how they might see them now. Michael White describes identity as being composed of an association of life that comprises the significant figures from a person's life, past or present. (White, 2007, p.129).

Re-membering involves the person in deliberate and considered re-engagement with the identities in one's life.

The Ground

The ground represents where the person lives now, what sustains them in their living, and what activities they engage in. This is what provides them with their "safe place to stand".

The Trunk

The trunk represents the person's skills and strengths, and in the workshop many of these skills are identified by others: the counsellors and the other participants. Skills and strengths are reminiscent of White's Statement of Position Map 2, which seeks to internalise strengths and knowledges.

The Branches

The branches represent goals and dreams, and again there is a connection with Statement of Position map 2, because here we begin to see the emergence of values.

The Leaves

The leaves represent significant people in their lives living or dead presenting opportunities for counsellors to use re-membering again.

The Fruits

Finally the fruit represents the gifts they have been given in life. These are further opportunities to invoke the influence of others and to recognise the contribution of others to their sense of self.

Forest of Life

In the second stage, the trees are placed together as a "Forest of Life" to show metaphorically how the participants stand together as a community. Here the strengths and knowledges they have to stand together against problems and support one another can be identified and reinforced. At this time individuals can talk about their own tree, explaining aspects of their drawing. This offers an opportunity for some Outsider Witnessing by other participants that may serve to identify additional strengths, skills and knowledges.

These two stages provide the "safe territory" mentioned above so that the participants can move to the third stage called "When the Storms Come". The aim of these first parts is to build a second or alternative story about each person's life, which Michael White has described as re-authoring (White, 2001, p. 4) which *"contributes to the identification of and to the exploration of the very knowledge[s] of life and practices of living that are associated with ... positive identity conclusions."*

In the third part "When the Storms Come" the focus is on participants identifying and discussing the difficulties they may be experiencing and how they may be responding to those problems, how they are coping, Finally there is a celebration of the achievements of the participants in the Certificate Ceremony. This thickens and enriches the alternative strength-laden story and creates links to significant persons in their lives.

"When the Storms Come" allows the children to talk about the problems in their lives, but from the safe place that has been created in the first two steps of the Approach. Now they can talk about problems but in the context of the strengths and knowledges of their lives.

Presentation of Certificates

In conclusion the children receive a certificate, which identifies their strengths, their knowledges and the significant people in their lives. These certificates are generally given in the company of the significant people in their lives, so that there exists the opportunity for Outsider Witnessing.

I approached the Vietnamese community workers who provide support to this group and proposed a workshop that would fit into the men's regular meeting time. Although I do not currently work directly with any of the men in the group, I am known to most of them.

The first step was to talk to the Vietnamese bi-lingual community workers who would be assisting me in presenting "The Tree of Life". A meeting was arranged to discuss the project. I showed them the DVD featuring Ncazelo Ncube and explained my plan.

Issues considered at this meeting were:

1. Would Vietnamese-Australian men with serious mental illness have the same attention span as the African children?
2. Would they understand the concept and be able to work with metaphor?
3. Could we present the program within the normal allotted time for the group: two to two-and-a-half hours?
4. Was language going to slow the process as most of what I said would need to be translated?
5. Was it necessary or desirable to run this workshop for this group?
6. Would it be beneficial?

We presented the "Tree of Life" over four hours, the maximum time we could manage in one day. The group was augmented by the attendance of two carers and three female mental health clients who were supported by

the Vietnamese workers. Two of the workers are trained interpreters and I used them to assist in conversations with the participants.

The participants were initially quite reserved but gradually warmed to the activity. One activity I tried in order to introduce some humour and engage their interest was to get them all to stand up and adopt a yoga-type tree pose standing on one leg with their arms in the air. It worked and they relaxed a little.

We completed the drawing stage and broke for lunch. It should be noted here that food is an important component of any meetings with the Vietnamese community. It is the lubricant of interactions. We lost a couple of the participants after the food but most stayed on.

We had created the "Forest of Life" during the meal and after lunch I spoke about my own tree. Then I invited one of the men to talk about his tree. This worked well but it was difficult to use narrative language in my interactions because of the use of interpreters.

The Storms of Life produced some talk about traumatic experiences during their trips to Australia, which allowed the opportunity for me to engage with them about skills and knowledges they used to cope today. Some people chose not to identify "Storms".

In conclusion of this day, the Vietnamese workers encouraged and documented feedback from each participant. These are summarised in appendix (i).

The next stage will be a follow up to take place three weeks after the first session. At this session the participants will receive a certificate with skills and important people listed.

In conclusion, I feel that it worked well, but would have worked better if my fellow workers, the Vietnamese support workers had more knowledge of narrative techniques. The Vietnamese culture is more deferential to authority than the Australian. I'm not sure if everything fed back to me was the actual words of the participants. Most of the people speak some

English, but once again politeness and convention sometimes makes people say they understand when they may not.

After the session one of the Vietnamese workers told me, "We don't talk about bad things in our culture." This made me more curious about how they do deal with trauma. More conversations are necessary.

Community knowledges

David Denborough et al have looked at the concept of community knowledges in working with aboriginal communities in Australia. They describe how communities which face difficulties, take whatever action is possible based on their particular skills and knowledges. These may not be widely recognised by the community but are significant in response to difficulties. *"Making it possible for community members to identify their initiatives, to richly describe them so that their skills and knowledges implicit within them become more visible can strengthen these initiatives and make further action possible."* (Denborough, Koolmatrie, Munnunggitj, Marika, Dhurrkay, & Yunupingu, p.20).

I remain curious about how the Vietnamese people that I have met have such an apparently joyful disposition in their interactions. Could I learn something to take back to my practice with people from other cultural backgrounds, particularly European/Australians. I have always been interested in learning about how people from other cultures live and celebrate their lives. About their cultural wisdoms. Narrative has given me a framework for learning about these wisdoms.

As I have used narrative practices in my work, I learned a great deal from the people who have come to me for help. I have learned about them and I have learned about myself. Working with the Vietnamese has given me joy as I have learned that they like to celebrate and share achievements.

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