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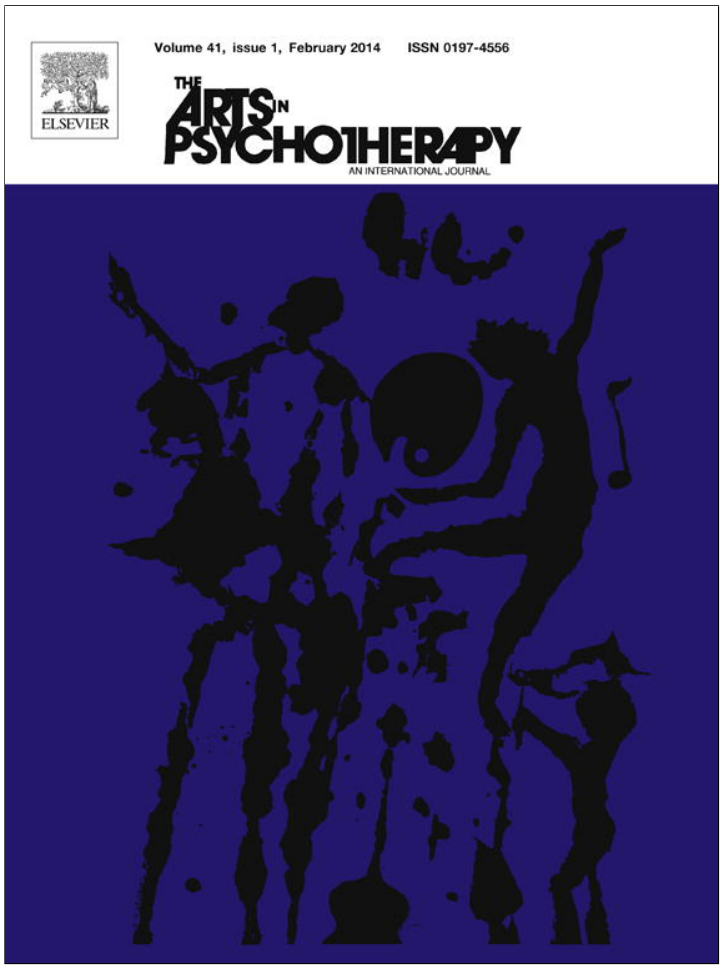

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The Arts in Psychotherapy 41 (2014) 98–106

Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

The Arts in Psychotherapy

Narratives of healing: A case study of a young Liberian refugee settled in Australia

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ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:
Narrative therapy
Refugee mental health
Tree of life
Therapeutic processes
Adolescence
Trauma

ABSTRACT

The Tree of Life group programme is a narrative-based expressive arts intervention, designed to target the psychological difficulties faced by young people from refugee backgrounds. This study utilised a case study methodology to investigate the experience of a single adolescent from a Liberian background resettled in Australia, who participated in a manualised version of the Tree of Life programme. The case study aimed to identify the underlying therapeutic processes that enabled the participant to adopt a preferred self-narrative. The participant was observed to demonstrate positive gains as a result of programme participation. Five therapeutic factors were identified as particularly salient to the program's success: the exploration of alternative stories of self; the fostering of group cohesion; the provision of corrective emotional experiences; the experience of outsider witnesses; and the instillation of hope. These factors were discussed in relation to working with young people from refugee backgrounds. Recommendations for future implementation of the Tree of Life programme are provided.

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Young people from refugee backgrounds have typically experienced a multitude of losses, trauma and change (Kia-Keating & Ellis, 2007). As a consequence, young refugees are at significant psychological risk, with research suggesting up to 40% meet formal diagnostic criteria for one or more psychological disorders upon arrival in a safe country (Ehntholt, Smith, & Yule, 2005). Unsurprisingly, young refugees are at an increased risk for developing Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) (Ehntholt et al.); emotional and affective disorders, such as anxiety and depression; as well as significant behavioural and attentional disturbances (Papageorgiou et al., 2000). However, we currently have limited understanding of the experiential world of these young people. Similarly, few culturally appropriate and effective treatments are available to address the needs of this population (Kia-Keating & Ellis).

The Tree of Life programme was developed by Ncube (2006, 2007) and Denborough (2008) to target the difficulties faced by young people affected by trauma and loss. The programme is founded in a strength-based meaning-making narrative approach, which utilises experiential mediums to facilitate greater awareness of personal, family, and cultural identity (Denborough, 2008). Ncube (2006) first trialled the Tree of Life programme with young people affected by HIV/AIDS in South Africa, and reported some success. Practice-based anecdotal evidence suggests that young people from Aboriginal heritage in Australia (Dulwich Centre, 2009) and adult trauma survivors (Reeler, Chitsike, Maizva, & Reeler, 2009) have also benefited from the programme. Despite multiple implementations of the programme internationally, to date there has been little published investigating the therapeutic processes underpinning the changes observed over the course of intervention. Reeler et al. (2009) undertook qualitative and quantitative research with delivering "Tree of Life" to survivors of torture in Zimbabwe. This research found significant improvement in the psychological state, with more than half of the respondents reporting better coping at three month follow-up. The current case study of a young Liberian female refugee resettled in Australia constitutes an initial attempt to address the limited research in this area by exploring the key processes underlying observed changes across the implementation of a manualised version of the Tree of Life programme with young people from Liberian refugee backgrounds.

Interventions for children and adolescents from refugee backgrounds

The few successful interventions published in the area of child and adolescent refugee mental health have included methodologies

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http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.aip.2013.10.006

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that were individually tailored to meet participants' specific needs. For example, Shea, Hodes, Down, and Bramley (2000) implemented individualised programmes based on a range of psychological, behavioural, and family interventions to assist children from refugee backgrounds, who had psychological difficulties associated with their experiences trauma. After the programme was completed, positive significant changes in the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ) scores were noted. These included reductions in difficulties such as inattention and peer difficulties, as well as a positive shift in observable behaviour (O'Shea et al., 2000).

While this type of intervention appears helpful at an individual level, relevant intervention options that can be readily and easily applied to groups may be more culturally appropriate to people from collectivist refugee backgrounds and have the potential to assist a greater number of young people.

A number of group-based programmes exist to facilitate post-arrival adjustment in young people from refugee backgrounds. Australian examples include Queensland's BRiTA futures programme (Queensland Government, 2010) and Victoria's The Rainbow Programme (The Victorian Foundation for Survivors of Torture Inc, 2002). There is, however, limited quantitative findings regarding the effectiveness of such programmes. Ehntholt et al.'s (2005) study evaluating a cognitive behaviour therapy (CBT) based intervention is one example of a group-based intervention demonstrating moderate success. The six session treatment aimed to address symptoms of PTSD in refugee adolescents with a history of war-trauma, guided by the "Children of War: Teaching Recovery Techniques" manual (Smith et al., 2000). Currently used in Greece and Turkey, the effectiveness of this manualised approach is supported by qualitative practice-based evidence (Smith et al.). In undertaking the study, Ehntholt et al. divided the 26 participants (aged 11–15 years) into treatment and wait-list groups. These groups were then compared using a number of psychometrically sound measures (e.g., SDQ and Revised Impact of Event Scale) pre-treatment, post-treatment and at two-month follow-up. Significant differences were found between the groups at post-intervention. The treatment group exhibited a significant reduction in overall PTSD symptom severity and a reduction in overall behavioural and emotional symptoms. In comparison, the control group showed no significant improvement. Interestingly, these gains were not maintained at two-month follow-up. The treatment group exhibited no significant difference when compared to pre-intervention measures or the control group. The researchers suggested that, in order to maintain the initially noted improvements, future trials of the intervention should include parents and family members. Overall, it is suggested that the consideration and inclusion of social factors would be particularly pertinent to maintaining treatment gains in future interventions targeted at refugee cohorts. This need may be effectively addressed by interventions that draw upon techniques employed in narrative-based therapies, which focus on interpersonal, as well as intra-personal factors.

Narrative therapy and its key techniques

Narrative therapy is based upon the rationale that our self-identities are shaped by our own accounts of our lives and the stories we tell about ourselves (White & Epston, 1990). From a narrative framework perspective, distress and difficulties develop and perpetuate through oppressive "problem stories" that dominate a person's life and self-concept (Carr, 1998). Narrative-based therapy provides people with opportunities to reflect upon their values and aspirations to make meaning of past experiences and "re-author" unique and more satisfying self-narratives (White, 2005). In support of the utility of narrative-based approaches, research into the effectiveness of narrative therapy for adult depression (Vromans, 2008; Vromans & Schweitzer, 2011) demonstrated a significant reduction in depressive symptoms comparable to outcomes from standard psychotherapies. Emerging research suggests that narrative-based therapies may be particularly suited to young refugees. Indeed, narrative-based therapies have recently been acknowledged as a therapy of choice for use with adult refugees (Murry, Davidson, & Schweitzer, 2008).

Narrative therapy employs a number of key techniques to drive the process of change and meaning making. These techniques include: the collaborative position taken by therapists; meaning-making, externalisation of problems; discovering unique outcomes; thickening new plots; linking preferred stories to the past and future; the use of outsider witnesses; re-membering; and documentation (e.g., Bacon, 2007; Carr, 1998; White, 2005; White & Epston, 1990). While these factors are interrelated and interdependent, it is nonetheless argued that some factors may be more important than others when working with particular populations. In relation to young people from refugee backgrounds, we suggest that the exploration of alternative stories of self and the use of outsider witnesses are likely to be particularly important in order to address the impact of trauma. In regard to therapeutic factors, the fostering of group cohesion, provision of corrective emotional experiences, and the instillation of hope are hypothesised to be especially relevant. Rationales for these hypotheses are provided below.

Exploring alternative stories of self

This concept refers to the practice of assisting individuals to discover, explore, and adopt preferred narratives of their lives and self (White & Epston, 1990). Over time negative life events, such as those associated with the refugee experience, can cause individuals to develop maladaptive or "problem self-stories" about themselves that prevent them from living up to their preferred self-narrative. Linked to this concept is that of creating continuity in such narratives – continuity between past experiences, the self in the present, and an individual's future hopes and dreams (Carlson, 1997). Indeed, it has been suggested as a crucial factor contributing to the process of recovery and healing for young people from refugee backgrounds following relocation to a new country (Melzak, 2009). There are three main reasons that the exploration of alternative stories are likely to be important for this population: (1) young refugees have almost certainly experienced trauma, (2) the apparent importance of creating continuity between past, present and future for healing (Melzak), and (3) research suggesting that as a group young people rely primarily on story telling to make sense of their lives (Elkind, Hetzel, & Coe, 1974).

Group cohesion

This concept refers to the sense of relational belonging and togetherness experienced by virtue of an individual's group membership (Yalom, 1995). Shared experience can foster the emergence of a holding environment within a group. A holding environment is a space where an individual feels that their distress is emotionally "held" within a safe and supportive relational environment (Bion, 1962; Winnicott, 1965). Within this space, the individual is able to share and explore their distress, as well as resolve and integrate their emotions (Lemma, 2003). The importance of creating a holding environment is considered by many to be crucial for therapeutic growth (e.g. Herman, 1992; Lemma, 2003), particularly for young people due to their current psychosocial developmental stage. It is anticipated that the experience of group cohesion will assist young refugees to begin experiencing positive peer relationships and the support that can be shared within them.

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Corrective emotional experiences

This process occurs when an individual is exposed to emotional situations that were previously unable to be processed or handled in an adaptive manner. Using the therapeutic relationship, an individual can be supported to work though and integrate difficult emotions. In doing so, the negative influence of previous traumas may be reduced (Alexander et al., 1946). Within a group context, the group as a whole serves as a vehicle for members to have such experiences (Yalom, 1995). Given the relational trauma young people from refugee backgrounds may have experienced (e.g. the death of loved ones, abandonment, violence), these experiences appear to be particularly important when working with this population.

Outsider witnesses

Outsider witnesses refer to the practice of inviting others to witness and acknowledge newly discovered self-narratives (White & Morgan, 2006). The idea of expressing a preferred concept of self before an audience is important as it allows individuals to "rehearse" their new and preferred identity. The idea of outsider witnesses is also linked to the idea that it is important for therapists to "bear witness" to and "hold in mind" their patient's prior trauma experiences and associated emotions (Blackwell, 1997). In a group setting, this translates to the ability of the group to acknowledge past experiences as important aspects of one another's lives and to recognise that they can be incorporated into preferred conceptions of self. Again, the developmental stage of young refugees, and the importance of social connections and integration following trauma (Herman, 1992), suggest that the experience of having peer acknowledgement and support will be important in facilitating healing in this vulnerable group.

Instillation of hope

This refers to a process by which individuals are able to begin recognising and experiencing feelings of hope for their respective futures (Yalom, 1995). It has been suggested that coherent self-stories foster the sense of stability and self-agency necessary for emotions such as hope to be experienced (Sluzk, 1992). The process of instilling hope is related to the narrative principle of creating a coherent link between an individual's preferred narratives of self in the present to those of the past (White & Morgan, 2006). Linking past, present, and future allows individuals to accept negative experiences and enables them to integrate these into preferred self-narrative. The experience of having hope for the future is particularly important for young refugees, as it is considered a precursor to meaning making following trauma (Herman, 1992). Having hope for the future is also important for adolescents who need to be able to consider and plan for their futures (Becker et al., 2003).

Brief overview of the experience of Liberian refugees pre-arrival in Australia

The current study uses a sample of young Liberian refugees. Liberia has been plagued by civil war and conflicts since 1989, with an estimated 150 000 Liberians killed due to fighting and a further 850 000 people reported to have fled as refugees into neighbouring countries (Kuhlman, 2002). Many of the Liberian refugees continue to live in refugee camps in the differing host countries. Food, water, basic shelter and access to health care and education are scarce (Department of Immigration and Multicultural Affairs ([DIMA], 2006). Reports of sexual abuse and exploitation, particularly of female refugees, are common and disease and malnutrition are, in most cases, features of every day life (DIMA).

As a result of the duration of the conflict in Liberia, many Liberian refugees have often experienced a prolonged refugee experience, with many having been displaced for over a decade. Many have also had to relocate to new places of refuge on one or more occasions (Schmidt, 2009). Overall, the experience of Liberian refugees living in Australia has been of multiple traumas over a lifetime, often commencing in their country of birth and extending over the period of transit.

The relationship between participant ethnicity and narratives is complex and a detailed discussion is beyond the scope of this paper. Nevertheless, it is important to consider Erikson's proposal that identity formation is a major task of adolescence (Erikson, 1950). Identity is of course constructed by history, narrative and community relationships. There are multiple conceptions of Liberian national identity (Byrne, 2013). In the Liberian context, identity is linked to informal networks and institutions (Corriveau-Bourque, 2010) including religious institutions, kinship networks, peer age-groups, and groups formed through war, such as those between combatants and their units. Ethnic identity is not static, and the complexity of the Liberian situation with 28 living indigenous languages and dialects (Center for Applied Linguistics, 2005) is noted in the literature, including the many mixed ethnic heritage offspring resulting from interethnic relationships (Dolo, 2007). The refugee young people who participated in this study have been dislocated from home, community and family. For instance, the participant whose therapeutic experience is described in the current study grew up in Guinea, of Liberian parents.

Aims of the study

The purpose of this pilot study was to deliver a manualised version of the Tree of Life programme to a group of young Liberian refugees and explore the therapeutic processes underpinning the changes observed in the participant under focus. Investigating the participants' experience of the programme may provide insight into the experiential world of young refugees, and contribute to our understanding of the healing and psychological growth of participants engaging in therapy through creative arts. The study utilises a case study methodology so as to provide in-depth analysis of a single participant. The study extends the usual case study methodology by directly accessing the therapist's perspective in addition to recording the therapeutic process for the participant.

Method

Participants

The focus of this case study is Mariam, a 14-year-old Liberian refugee who has resettled in Brisbane, Australia. As Tree of Life is a group programme Mariam's experience is noted in the context of group participation. In total four females and four males from Liberia who were enrolled in a special school for newly arrived refugees and immigrants participated in the Programme. Considering the potential vulnerability of the group, detailed histories were not requested of the individuals. However, based on the available demographic information provided these adolescents seemed to have had refugee experiences typical of Liberian refugees (Schmidt, 2009). These experiences include prolonged and numbered stays in various refugee camps and fractured family units. All eight engaged for the duration of the programme, with no participant missing more than one session. Participants ranged in age from 12 to 17 years ($M = 15.5$ years). All participants were deemed to have sufficient understanding of and ability to communicate in English.

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Manualisation of the Tree of Life programme

The Tree of Life programme is a narrative-based programme designed for use with vulnerable individuals affected by trauma, particularly those from refugee backgrounds. The manual comprises guidelines structured around seven sessions. Within each session material is provided covering the purpose, rational, facilitator guidelines and group activities involved in relation to the session. Each of the seven sessions is based around the metaphor of a different aspect of a tree. The sequence of sessions are focused on the tree roots, individual histories; the ground, day-to-day activities; tree trunks, personal strengths; tree branches; future hopes and dreams; and tree leaves, important people. The metaphor of a 'forest of trees' and 'storms' is also used to facilitate a discussion of potential dangers and hardships. The sessions utilise narrative principles to encourage participants to discover, explore, and integrate preferred narratives of themselves into their self-identities within a group context A copy of the manual is available from the second author who was primarily responsible for the development of the manual.

Procedure

Ethical approval for this study was gained from both the Queensland University of Technology and the Queensland Education ethics committees. Based upon the guidelines provided by Ncube (2006), the Tree of Life programme was first manualised by Vromans, Ranke, and Schweitzer (Unpublished). The structure and content for each of the seven 80 min sessions were then based upon this manual. As part of the manualisation process, and to ensure sensitivity to the needs of a potentially vulnerable population, advice was sought in regards to structure, content and mode of delivery from experienced therapists and classroom teachers at the school where the programme was run. Each session was audio-recorded and detailed session notes for each of the participants were completed. While session notes were taken by the author, input and advice on these notes was sought from the other facilitators. Photographs of the participants' "Trees" were also taken after each session.

Sessions were facilitated by two of the authors. The school's music therapist and a trainee music therapist, both well known to the participants and experienced in working with adolescent refugee populations, assisted each week and were able to ensure that the process was contained within the context of the school.

In order to illustrate the experiences of participating in the programme, and to highlight the therapeutic process, a single participant (Mariam) was randomly chosen to be the focus of this case study. Mariam's weekly experiences of the programme, the group's response to her experiences, and the author's impressions as a therapist, are outlined in the following section, along with a brief overview of each session's content. To maintain participants' privacy and anonymity, a pseudonym is used throughout.

Findings and discussion

Week one: home, belonging and trees

Based on the Tree of Life manual, week one focused on "home" and "belonging". Participants were led towards a richer and more diverse understanding of their experience of home and belonging as they relate to their individual and community identities.

Individual observations

Mariam reflected upon feelings of sadness at leaving her mother, as well as those of anxiety and isolation during her journey to Australia. She spoke of feeling scared and excited with regards to being reunited with her father and seeing Australia. Mariam recalled that upon arrival she spent her days sleeping and her nights awake, and shared how she believes she will always feel Guinea is her home, although she also feels connections to Australia and Liberia.

Group observations

Participants appeared interested to hear one another's stories of travel and of living in different countries. Mariam's reflection about the difficulty adjusting to different routines prompted an involved discussion and introduced the concept of there being many places where one can feel "at home" and which can provide a sense of belonging.

Therapist's reflections

Mariam's interactions with others in this session suggested that she craved interpersonal acknowledgement, understanding, and connection. However, her loud and domineering presentation appeared to push people away. Mariam appeared to understand the concepts discussed and was able to personalise them to her own experiences. She also appeared to possess a capacity for self-insight and reflection e.g. displaying an ability to reflect upon places that afforded them a sense of belonging. This understanding and insight was also evident among other group members.

Week two: the roots and ground

Following the manual, participants were invited to consider their country of origin, their family history, and stories of self from the past. Participants' sense of belonging, as it relates to their current life, was also explored in order to highlight and strengthen alternative self-stories, while giving them an increased sense of continuity between their past and present.

Individual observations

In reflecting upon her representation of Roots, Mariam identified African food, school, and church as some of the things that helped her feel grounded in life. She also spoke about family members living in Liberia and Guinea. Mariam brought photographs of these people, which she cut out and pasted onto her Tree.

Group observations

The other participants identified many similar grounding activities in their own lives. During the expressive arts component of the session, representations of these activities were added to individuals' Trees. A sense of unity was observed amongst the female participants who excitedly began discussing their favourite African cooking ingredients.

Therapist's reflections

In an individual conversation Mariam revealed how looking at her photographs reminded her of the connection she felt with her family. I got the sense from this interaction, and in her later sharing with the group, that she enjoyed discussing these people with an attentive audience and feeling that her stories were being listened to and acknowledged.

Week three: the trunk and branches

Participants' stories of self in the present were explored in order to continue deconstructing dominant problem stories and to facilitate the co-construction of alternative stories of self. This process strengthens individuals' reflective awareness of values and the meaning-making processes. Participants were also encouraged to

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project their stories of self into the future and to consider future lives in personally meaningful ways.

Individual observations

As Mariam discussed the representation of her Trunk and the qualities that make her feel strong, she identified her ability to love her family and friends as a personal strength. She also discussed her belief that she is a good friend, and she shared her love of cooking. Mariam was surprised and noticeably pleased when the group shared their ideas about her personal strengths, commenting that she did not realise people noticed. When later sharing and discussing her future dreams – her Branches – Mariam identified a wish to return to Liberia to build schools and a desire to pursue her love of singing.

Group observations

During a group discussion and sharing of strengths that contribute to one another's Trunks, the participants identified Mariam's dancing and singing abilities. They spoke of enjoying her singing and the way in which her dancing made others happy. The group's ability to notice and comment was also evident in the discussion of other participants' unique strengths and abilities.

Therapist's reflections

While discussing her dreams, Mariam became excited, with her posture and body language reflecting expressed hope and expectations for the future. Having the group act as witnesses to her dreams, especially those about returning to Liberia to build schools, helped Mariam strengthen a self-narrative in which she sees herself as a strong, caring, and loving person. Hearing that she was able to make others happy with her singing and dancing also likely strengthened this story and allowed Mariam to realise her choices impact upon others, providing a sense of self-efficacy.

As a group, participants were noticeably more engaged this week. A sense of connection between participants was experienced, as well as group cohesion. An example of this was reflected in Mariam's expressed interest in others' stories as well as her own. It was as if having her own story acknowledged, held, and heard, provided her with the capacity to do the same for others. Having the space to consider and plan for their futures also appeared to aid in the instillation of hope in participants' emerging self-narratives.

Week four: the leaves and fruit

In line with the manual, participants were encouraged to consider people who have been, and who are currently, important in their lives. Group discussions allowed for these people to be identified, acknowledged, and honoured, and for the importance of relationships to be recognised. Participants were also encouraged to reflect upon the notion of given and received "gifts". As in previous weeks, this process of reflecting and discussing as a group was seen as contributing to the building and enrichment of self-narratives and reflective awareness.

Individual observations

This week Mariam shared a narrative concerning the physical abuse her mother suffered at the hands of her father, when Mariam was a young child. Mariam focused on the strength her mother showed in her ability to care for Mariam and her sister despite this hardship – her gift to her daughters. Mariam became visibly upset whilst recounting this story. Further considering the fruits of her tree, Mariam shared a narrative about the gift of traditional African clothing given to her by an Aunt. Mariam was able to share the meaning of this gift as a reminder of her family and of Liberia. During a subsequent group discussion concerning traditional clothing, Mariam's love of dancing was revisited. Wearing traditional costume and traditional dancing was discussed as being Mariam's gift to others, helping them remember and celebrate culture and traditions.

Group observations

While the constraints of the group setting meant Mariam's narrative of her mother's abuse was not further explored, the group did nonetheless appear to provide a supportive environment for sharing these traumatic memories. Mariam's story of her Aunt's gift of clothing facilitated a discussion of family and cultural traditions.

Therapist's reflections

While Mariam shared the story of her father's domestic violence, the group functioned as a containing and holding environment for Mariam's story to be acknowledged, her pain to be recognised, and for her mother's strength to be honoured and celebrated. Mariam appeared to appreciate and use this recognition. The acknowledgement of Mariam's mother's strength highlighted Mariam and the group's ability to notice and strengthen alternative narratives of self and others while also recognising and accepting the presence of stories of pain that are inevitable in individual narratives. This shared experience also led to a further strengthening of group cohesion. It was observed that the participants appeared comfortable with one another and that the boundaries of the group seemed to provide a sense of containment and safety.

Week five: finalising and sharing trees

Once individual Trees were finalised, participants came together to reflect upon and share their Trees and associated self-narratives with the group. Sharing in this way provided participants with an audience and an experience of outsider witnesses to acknowledge and celebrate their preferred self-narratives. As in previous weeks, this process is seen as one that assists participants in building and enriching their own self-narratives, and facilitates their reflective awareness.

Individual observations

When sharing her completed Tree (Fig. 1), Mariam chose to speak predominantly about the people featured in the photographs she had included, and their importance to her. With prompting, Mariam was able to reflect upon the influence these people have had, and continue to have, in her life.

Group observations

The majority of this session was spent finalising individual Trees. Consequently, the sharing aspect was less interactive than previous weeks, with the facilitators providing most of the questions while participants shared their Trees with the group. While finalising her Tree, Mariam was however, observed to question the other girls about their Trees and encourage them with ideas and suggestions. Interestingly, conversations, laughter, and joking were a feature of the group interactions throughout this session, appearing to reflect the participants' excitement in completing their Trees.

Therapist's observations

Hearing Mariam share aspects of her day-to-day life as featured in her Ground highlighted her ability to celebrate and find meaning in the everyday, as well as her ability to recognise these things as contributing to her sense of identity. Mariam's overall manner seemed to lack the "desperation" of earlier weeks, when her desire for others to acknowledge had been so intense that it reduced her ability to respond to the needs and subtle interpersonal cues of others.

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Fig. 1. Mariam's completed tree.

Week six: the forest of life and when the storms come

Individual Trees were placed together this week to form a collective Forest of Life, allowing participants to experience a sense of connection to others. The metaphor of Storms was introduced, enabling participants to begin reflecting upon experiences of hardship and adversity in their lives.

Individual observations

Along with the other participants, Mariam appeared to enjoy reflecting upon the similarities and differences between individual Trees displayed together as a Forest (Fig. 2). She was observed comparing her own strengths, dreams, and day-to-day activities with those of other participants. During the group discussion Mariam offered many suggestions and appeared to grasp the link between the discussion of trees, animals, and humans, and the harm and dangers that may feature in their lives. For example, she spoke of the way in which a person may feel weak and worried if there was not enough food, and also angry and sad. Following this discussion of dangers, Mariam was also able to identify and discuss ways of keeping safe and requesting help.

Fig. 2. The forest of life.

Mariam appeared quite elevated in mood during the session and needed to be reminded to lower her voice on a number of occasions. When discussing activities she enjoys and things that made her happy Mariam became especially excited. She spoke of loving celebrations, particularly Liberian Independence Day. Mariam reflected how she loved dancing and singing at such celebrations and hearing stories of her culture and history.

Group observations

Finding common links between participants' Trees appeared to highlight a sense of group cohesion, while allowing experiences of uniqueness through the realisation that group members' hopes and dreams differed. The group as a whole were quite elevated in their displayed affect this session. This observation was especially marked during the discussion of hardships and adversity. The group also appeared to enjoy discussing shared celebrations.

Therapist's reflections

At times during this session the expressed affect of the group was incongruent with the topics being discussed, taking on an almost manic quality. It is possible that this was a way of unconsciously maintaining a sense of safe distance between the topics discussed and the participants. Despite their elevation, the group members nonetheless did display a level of thoughtfulness in response. They also seemed able to reflect on painful topics and to provide considered responses and insights when discussing ways of coping with adversity. This ability provided a sense of containment and integration of new knowledge.

That the group was able to share in Mariam's experience of community celebrations provided them with a further sense of connection. Ending the session with a focus on shared enjoyment allowed participants to leave with hope for the future, as well as an acknowledgement of the presence of painful affect intertwined in individual stories. Allowing space to reflect upon and recognise painful affect as an integral aspect of self-narratives, without overwhelming an individual's sense of self, was an important aspect of this session.

Week seven: celebration, certificates and group song

As per the Tree of Life manual, a certificate ceremony was utilised this week as a way of acknowledging a new phase in which participants can move forward in their lives, equipped with new learning, understanding, and self-narratives.

Individual observations

Unfortunately Mariam was absent for this final session as she and two of the other participants were away on a class excursion. She did, however, attend the post group evaluation session where a second celebration was held, during which she actively celebrated with her peers. Much of this session was used to further assist group members reflect upon the skills and knowledge they had identified in themselves and one another over the course of the programme.

Group observations

Group members all appeared engaged in the final reflection activity and in celebrating and acknowledging one another's contributions. The general mood was one of celebration.

Therapeutic factors contributing to change

While these weekly summaries focused on the experience of Mariam, it is noted that the other participants also appeared to benefit from the sessions. They were observed to have begun a

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similar process of building, enriching, and strengthening their own preferred self-narratives. None of the participants chose to withdraw from the programme, all appeared engaged and no participant missed more than one session. It is reasonable to infer that participants experienced the programme as a valuable healing experience.

Assessing programme outcome is always complex. Utilising qualitative feedback, class teachers of group members reported high levels of satisfaction with impact of the programme on the participant's functioning within the classroom context. They indicated that benefits were seen in improved class behaviour and improvement in peer relationships: 'When she came back to class after sessions, she seemed more settled. Better able to focus on the task in the room, better at working with others'; 'His behaviour improved. Over the course of weeks, he became a better listener, and had more focus with his class work.'

School therapists observing the group members reported that Mariam socialised more widely and demonstrated increased confidence as the programme progressed: 'She is more open to friendship now than she was before the group work began. She is more friendly to others both in the lunch room and in the playground, and seems to have better self-esteem.'

Overall, based upon their contributions and discussions, all participants demonstrated an increase in reflective awareness of themselves and others. This observation is supported by the weekly case studies reported in this paper, which exemplify the importance of the following five therapeutic processes previously identified.

Exploring alternative stories of self

Over the course of the Tree of Life programme, participants were observed to become more comfortable and free to explore individual and preferred self-outcomes and unique possibilities and, in doing so, thicken their preferred-self stories (White & Morgan, 2006). Using Mariam's developing self-narrative as an example, it may be seen that she was able to begin exploring outcomes such as her ability to be a good friend. She also experienced outsider witnesses hearing, noticing, and helping celebrate her preferred-self stories, for example, the group's ability to help her acknowledge and value her singing and dancing abilities. The experience of having attentive outsider witnesses seemed especially important for Mariam, and this appeared to strengthen her preferred self-narrative. It is hypothesised that through this process she began to develop a capacity to see herself as a caring, loving person, who is able to make positive impacts upon others' lives.

Mariam's experience of the group also seemed to allow her the opportunity to begin linking her new preferred story to the past and future, for example, to begin discussing her dreams to return to Liberia to build schools. Observations of Mariam's interactions with others, her contributions during the programme, and her emerging new self-narrative, indicate that Mariam was developing a capacity for self-insight, reflection, and empathy. A similar observation was also true of the other participants.

Group cohesion

By the third week a strong sense of cohesion among group members was observed to emerge, and appeared to begin providing members with a sense of belonging and relational support. For example, during the discussion of each other's personal strengths and abilities, participants seemed to realise that other group members noticed and were interested in them and their stories. Along with this realisation was a subtle but powerful change in the emotional environment of the room. It was observed that participants appeared more able and comfortable to sit in the space and to experience the content of sessions together. It was this shared experience that appeared to foster the emergence of a holding environment. Even though participants' painful and difficult feelings were not always explicitly named and discussed in detail, it was observed nonetheless, that the group were able to use the space as a "container" for their feelings to be expressed, examined, and reintegrated (Grunbaum, 1997).

Corrective emotional experiences

During the Tree of Life programme it was observed that within the holding environment created by the group, and based upon the respectful and inclusive attitude modelled by facilitators, participants were able to explore relating to one another in new and more adaptive ways. For example, participants were able to allow one another the space to share individual experiences and stories within the group context, as well as to experience being heard and listened to by others. As such, the group was observed to function as a medium through which participants were able to begin learning and modelling adaptive interpersonal interactions. The potentially new type of relational experience provided by facilitators – where participants were recognised as unique and treated as equals – is also suggested to have acted as a foundation for the provision of corrective emotional experiences during the course of the programme.

This observation supports the suggestion that it is the action associated with direct experience that is conducive to therapeutic change, rather than merely explanations or intellectual understanding (Tyber, 2005). This direct experience could be conceptualised as complementing the more abstract notion of contemplating preferred self-narratives. It may also relate to the experience of transferring preferred self-narratives into artwork, i.e. that the construction of Trees allowed preferred self-narratives to be more concretely experienced and, as a result, more likely to be integrated into participants' ongoing conceptions of self.

Outsider witnesses

For all participants, the experience of exploring different aspects of newly discovered preferred self-narratives, and having this process witnessed by others, was observed as assisting in the integration of these new narratives. For example, this was evident when the group was able to assist Mariam in recognising her singing and dancing abilities and the impact they have upon others.

The creativity in the process of Tree of Life was witnessed and valued as an important part of the group process. Participants' Trees contained daily activities included in their Grounds such as going to school and catching the train. Such compositions should not be dismissed as mundane. Consideration of the participant's world view is critical in working within a culturally sensitive approach. For young people who have suffered deprivation, loss and trauma as well as deprivation of education and public transport, these daily activities are celebrated in art and discussion.

The visual elements of the Tree of Life are the result of focused creativity, and participants in this group provided colourful and varied representations. It is suggested that these words and drawings act as symbols for a richer internal experience of the participants and reflect unique and individual rituals of living which, once identified, can be emphasised and celebrated. In this context, the term 'symbol' is used to refer to "a matrix of meaning that actually constitutes the reality in which one positions oneself" (Neimyer & Raskin, 2000, p. 5). It is understood that symbols can act as a way to begin the process of understanding individual experience, in a way that makes sense to the individual in question (King & Kitchener, 2004; Spermon, Gibney, & Darlington, 2009). The use of symbolism is the foundation of play and dreaming, and lies at the heart of creative pursuits such as art and drama. It has also been proposed that the use of symbols can allow for the creation of links between the emotional, cognitive, sensory, and kinesthetic aspects of individuals which leads to psychological growth and healing (Spermon et al.). Indeed, it is well known that the complexity of human experience is often only able to be poorly expressed or even

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conceptualised using language alone (Spermon et al.). The symbol as representing aspects of the self thus transcends language in its capacity for meaning making. The enactment of important aspects of self in art, and through the use of symbols, thus provides a vehicle for the expression and mutation of self (Malchiodi, 2005; Spermon et al.).

Instillation of hope

The exploration of future hopes and dreams was a central component of the programme, as was the linkage of these aspirations to past and present self-narratives. Having participants act as witnesses to one another as they explored these aspects of their Trees was observed to be therapeutic in the sense that it gave them space to consider, formulate, and expect similar positive outcomes in their own lives. It appeared important for participants to feel they had permission to consider their futures in a positive light. This could be due to past experiences of uncertainty during and prior to their refugee journeys, where the focus would likely have been on survival and safety, with very little space to entertain thoughts of uncertain futures (Ehntholt & Yule, 2006). Through modelling (e.g. facilitators sharing their own future hopes and dreams) and listening to peers voice their wishes for the future, a space was created for the future to be considered.

Limitations and recommendations

Despite the apparent positive outcomes of the Tree of Life programme, there were a number of limitations. Firstly, there was inadequate time allocated to each weekly session which meant that, at times, sessions were rushed, resulting in restricted sharing and exploration of self-narratives. Secondly, given the observational nature of this study a key limitation is observer bias. While this case study was based upon audio recordings and detailed session notes, the observations nonetheless are drawn from subjective experience. In addition, and as a result of the qualitative nature of this research, no firm conclusions can be drawn regarding the benefits of the programme other than to hypothesise that it appeared beneficial in nature with participants responding well to the sessions, and feedback from school staff and therapists indicate the value of the programme.

Finally, as a contribution to research in the field of refugee mental health, perhaps the most limiting factor is that all the participants were from Liberia. These results cannot then be generalised to participants from other cultural backgrounds. Despite this, it is suggested that the therapeutic processes hypothesised to be of particular relevance to the changes observed in participants are also likely to be important for young people from other cultural backgrounds. After all, the literature pertaining to therapeutic processes suggests that these processes are a universal phenomenon not limited to individuals from one particular population (Yalom, 1995).

To improve the programme and address the noted limitations it is recommended that the time allocated for each session is increased. This would allow further exploration of individual experiences and self-narrative through prose and via the creation of their Trees. It would also be warranted that any re-running of the Programme should include refugees from a range of different backgrounds and ages. This would permit more robust conclusions regarding the relative benefits of the programme with a variety of populations. It would also be valuable for future research to investigate culturally appropriate empirical measures in order to begin gathering quantitative data pertaining to the program's effectiveness and efficacy.

Feedback was provided through facilitator observation during the programme, and through school teacher and therapist commentary after the programme. Future research should aim to include qualitative and quantitative feedback on the impact and benefits of the programme.

Finally, it seems important to note that although the Tree of Life programme is hypothesised to assist with integration and healing post-trauma, it is not recommended as a substitute for individual therapy in young people demonstrating significant symptoms of distress. While not all individuals affected by traumatic experiences will require individual therapy, there will remain a proportion of adolescents from refugee backgrounds who will require more specialised intervention. These individuals are hypothesised to benefit from the Tree of Life as an adjunct to such intervention.

Conclusion

Having a sense of meaning has long been considered crucial for withstanding, overcoming, and growing as a result of the inevitable hardships and disappointments of life. The Tree of Life programme assists directly in the process of meaning making, adoption of preferred self-narratives, and the development of a capacity for reflective functioning, using a focused creative approach.

This study goes someway to show that the Tree of Life programme may be beneficial in assisting young people from refugee backgrounds to heal psychologically post-trauma, through a process exploring and integrating preferred self-narratives in a group format. It has been observed that the Tree of Life programme appears to assist participants to integrate past experiences with their preferred self-narratives and instils in them a sense of hope for the future. These findings are of great relevance as young people from refugee backgrounds are a particularly vulnerable and at-risk population for a myriad of negative mental health outcomes (Kia-Keating & Ellis, 2007). It is hoped that mental health professionals will realise the benefit and potential of using strength-based narrative and art-based programmes, such as the Tree of Life, to help this population heal and reach their full potential, unhindered by maladaptive self-narratives, problem stories, and unintegrated past trauma.

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