

**Do you want to hear a story?**  
**Adventures in collective narrative practice**

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## **PART II**

# **DIVERSIFYING AND DEMOCRATISING NARRATIVE PRACTICE: FOLK CULTURAL METHODOLOGIES**

It is now just over 10 years since the first folk cultural narrative methodology was developed: the Tree of Life narrative approach (Denborough, 2008; Ncube, 2006). Since then, the idea of combining narrative practice with a metaphor from treasured local cultural life has been embraced by practitioners and communities. Colleagues in many different contexts have now developed exquisitely diverse forms of metaphoric narrative practice. These include:

- Team of Life  
(see [www.dulwichcentre.com.au/team-of-life](http://www.dulwichcentre.com.au/team-of-life); Denborough, 2008)
- Seasons of Life (Abu-Rayyan, 2009)
- Recipes of Life (Rudland-Wood, 2012)
- Crossing the River (Hegarty, Smith, & Hammersley, 2010)
- Kite of Life (Denborough, 2010a)
- Rhythm of Life  
(see [www.dulwichcentre.com.au/rhythm-of-life-by-adriana-muller](http://www.dulwichcentre.com.au/rhythm-of-life-by-adriana-muller))
- Narratives in the Suitcase (Ncube-Mlilo, 2014)
- Smartphone of Life (Tse, 2016)
- Bicycle of Life (Leger, 2016)
- Beads of Life (Portnoy, Girling, & Fredman, 2015)
- Mat of Life and Fair Winds, informed by wrestling and sailing metaphors developed in Brazil by Lúcia Helena Abdulla and Recycling Minds.

The popularity of these approaches has been very surprising, at times even baffling, to me. Upon reflection, perhaps there are a number of different reasons for their resonance:

***Speaking through metaphor: not having to speak in the first person***

These approaches were initially developed to enable children and young people to address significant hardship or trauma they had experienced in ways that were not retraumatizing. Significantly, metaphoric narrative practice doesn't require people to speak in the first person about the hardships. It enables meaning to be conveyed through metaphor rather than direct speech. As a young person, there is no way I would have spoken directly about tough or complex times I went through. Speaking through metaphor, however, may have offered different possibilities.

***Starting with a treasured theme***

These methods are infused with key narrative principles in relation to responding to trauma (Denborough, 2006; M. White, 2006c). This includes creating a 'safe territory of identity' (M. White, 2006b) or 'riverbank position' from the outset. This is achieved by speaking about treasured aspects of ordinary life: sports, kites, cooking, the natural world and so on. It is an easy and enlivening place to start – for both practitioners and those who meet with us. I'll always recall the feedback from young people of refugee backgrounds about these ways of working. They asked me to pass on to future facilitators to 'remember it's all about having fun'. This was particularly significant coming from these young folks who had endured significant sorrows, and whose Teams of Life had honoured various family members who had died in wars. They demonstrated to me that double-story development (including the acknowledgment and sharing of significant sorrow) actually becomes much more possible when we are also joined with each other in fun.

***Diversifying narrative practice: cross-cultural inventions***

The development of these methodologies was spurred by the following questions or challenges:

- How can narrative therapy be used in contexts where therapy is either not possible (due to lack of resources) or not culturally resonant?
- Can cross-cultural inventions and partnerships enable narrative practices to be used in ways that limit the likelihood of psychological colonisation?

The imposition of outsider healing knowledges has been powerfully critiqued by many writers (Arulampalam, Perera, de Mel, C. White, & Denborough, 2006; NiaNia, Bush, & Epston, 2017; Pupavac, 2001, 2002a, 2002b, 2006; Tamasese, 2002a, 2002b; Waldegrave, 1998; Watters, 2010). Forming cross-cultural partnerships and then developing methodologies that are based on resonant *local* metaphors can strengthen and richly story *local* healing knowledges. Perhaps basing our work on local folk cultural metaphors can make it more possible to engage in rich story development in culturally resonant ways. Hopefully, taking local folk culture as a starting point for our practice can contribute to diversifying narrative practice.

### *Democratising narrative practice*

These folk cultural methodologies were also deliberately developed so that narrative therapy and community work ideas can be engaged with, not only by highly trained professionals, but also by key community and family leaders who may not have had the privilege of extensive schooling or education. This is what I refer to as democratising narrative practice. How can we ensure that narrative ways of working can be put into practice by aunts, uncles, mothers, fathers and community leaders, especially in contexts where highly trained professionals may be few and far between? This ethic of accessibility has enabled practitioners to partner with concerned community members who may not be trained in counselling or community work. Indeed, some of the most sparkling projects currently taking place are led by community members and peer workers.

### *Creating imagery and words at the same time*

I have come to realise that accompanying the spoken word with the co-creation of visual image and written text brings possibilities for identity development of which I was once unaware. These realms of visual narrativity have become vitally interesting to me and are explored in Chapter 5.

### *Extending a narrative therapy tradition: folk psychology to folk culture*

Whereas the culture of the professional psychological disciplines generally requires us to turn away from “ordinary”, everyday and historical associations’ (White, 1997, pp. 12–13), David Epston and Michael White were inspired by the work of Jerome Bruner (1990) to locate their narrative explorations within traditions of ‘folk psychology’ – the local meanings, preferences and ways of understanding life that people bring to the counselling room (see M. White, 2001a). I believe these metaphoric methods follow this lead and make it possible to build links between the realms of ‘healing’ and the realms of folk culture. Any valued aspect of local folk culture (from cooking to the natural world to kite flying) holds significant meaning for those who treasure it. It has become clear that these meanings can be unpacked and used to scaffold transformative conversations about life and identity. In this way, many of us have become interested in turning to everyday folk culture as a site of practice (see Denborough, 2008).

As practitioners continue to invent further folk cultural narrative methodologies, it seems relevant to examine the particular local circumstances in which they were first created. Chapter 3 traces the histories of the Tree of Life narrative approach, and makes visible some of the thinking that informed its development. I hope that this will further a determination to continually unearth and create ways of working that are resonant and relevant to particular contexts, thus contributing to an ever-diversifying field of narrative practice, rather than simply replicating any of these methodologies across contexts.

Chapter 4 provides an example of how the Team of Life narrative approach has been used to enable young people to speak about racism.

Chapter 5 is a more theoretical exploration of how these methodologies involve the creation of visual images as a way of constructing and conveying a preferred identity and therefore involve a particular ‘visual narrativity’ – a joining of image and story in deliberate ways.