

Tree of Life Exercise in a Family Finding/Permanency Context

What is the Tree of Life?

The Tree of Life exercise was created by Ncazelo Ncube of REPSSI in South Africa and David Denborough of the Dulwich Centre in Australia (Denborough, 2008; Ncube, 2006). This exercise was designed for use with vulnerable youth as a means to assist them in standing in safe territories of identity before exploring the difficulties of their lives. Ncube and Denborough were initially working with youth in Southern Africa who had been orphaned as a result of AIDS. Ncube had found it difficult to get the young people to speak about their traumatic experiences and wanted to design a method that would allow them to connect with their intentions for life and ways that they had responded to difficult situations before delving into the effects of the trauma. Once the youth were standing in these preferred identities the risk of re-traumatizing was reduced and space was opened up to engage around the traumatic experiences. Many others have applied this exercise in a variety of contexts (see Dulwich Centre website).

What is Family Finding and Engagement?

Family Finding is a methodology originally created by Kevin Campbell in the United States. Many youth within the foster care system in the United States were aging out of care without having any permanent connections to natural supports. Campbell utilized search methods initially used by the Red Cross to find family members who had been disconnected during war in such places as Rwanda. He realized that these same strategies, plus others, could be employed to help find family members for youth stuck in the foster care system. It is estimated that most families in the U.S. have between 100-300 members (Kevin Campbell direct communication). Although there has been some effort to reach out to extended family members when a child is in need, too many of the almost 400,000 youth in foster care in the U.S. will leave the system without lifetime connections to adults. Family Finding and Engagement is a strategy designed to discover family members, fictive kin, and other important people in the life of youth in order to establish permanent connections for those in foster care.

The initial step in the FFE process is to discover at least 40 family members (again, this can include fictive kin, important adults, and anyone the youth or guardians might consider 'family'). Although some search strategies include using the internet and combing through documents, the most useful approach is to ask the youth or other known family members to identify people. This can be tricky as many of these youth are stuck in an identity version of themselves as damaged in some way which can lead them to believing that they don't deserve connection or that others wouldn't want to connect with them. While situated in this construction of identity they often find it difficult to identify people who might become lifetime connections or to even talk about anything 'hopeful' as hope can lead to disappointment and rejection. At the same time, with the best of intentions, many of those responsible for the care of these youth neglect to consult them about their own lives. Decisions are made on their behalf and they can easily get disconnected from any personal agency as it relates to their situations. In the face of these circumstances youth may shut down when an attempt is made to discuss people who

might possibly join a lifetime support network. This silence is then interpreted as the youth not wanting connection and can lead to caregivers giving up on the search.

Another area of difficulty in this process occurs after family/natural supports have been identified and found. Now the task is engaging people in ways that invite them to participate in the life of the youth beyond their time in foster care. This can be tricky for a number of reasons. Sometimes family members are angry with the system and have felt disrespected by those who now have custody of the youth. Other times, identified family members have strained relationships with the parent(s) of the youth and fear reconnecting with them, or they know the youth as 'a handful' and don't want to get involved. If these family members are engaged in ways that don't acknowledge their pain or how it is that they have responded to difficult situations, then they are likely to feel unseen and not trusting of the system people involved. If these newly discovered family members hold a single story of the youth as 'a handful' then they may shy away from connection. If they only see the youth's parents through the impact of whatever traumatic experiences led to their disconnection then re-engagement can be very challenging.

Utilizing the Tree of Life as a Discovery Tool

We started using the Tree of Life as a means to address all of these difficult possibilities. We will begin with a description of this exercise as a means to assist in discovering people who might play a role in the youth's lifetime network. One of the first effects of this exercise when done with foster youth is that it invites a knowing of them outside of the problems that they have faced. This can assist them to see themselves as more than a problem for other people. They begin to recognize that they have values and principles and they have lived by these in a variety of situations. From here they become much more likely to open up to possible connections as they identify themselves as worthy of connection. At the same time, when we as helpers become interested about who the youth are outside of the problems they face we demonstrate that we are willing to see them as more than a problem.

Not only do we use the Tree of Life with foster youth but also with caregivers who may have been marginalized through the process of child protection system involvement. Our intentions in using this exercise with adult caregivers are the same as for the youth.

The Tree of Life in a Family Finding and Engagement context can be carried out in a variety of ways. Sometimes we use the exercise with individuals and at other times we meet with several family members at the same time. When we have people who do not have any interest in doing the drawing component of the exercise, we make sure that we have conversations with people that are informed by the different aspects of the exercise (e.g. we ask about where people are from, what they enjoy doing, what is important to them, how they have been able to continue on in the face of the difficulties they have faced).

Following is a description of the Tree of Life with the design that Ncube & Denborough have created and how we have adapted this to assist in identifying possible lifetime support network members:

We supply big pieces of paper and a variety of colored markers for people to use. We then let them know that they will be creating a tree on the paper. We will often have an example available to demonstrate the idea and to show that one does not need to be an artist to complete the exercise. If someone is opposed to drawing we have a template tree available that people can fill out. We let people know that their tree can look like anything they want and it doesn't even need to look like a tree. We then begin to explain the different components of the tree and what we would like them to represent. We explain these components one at a time and usually have them listed in a place that all in the room can see.

Roots – The roots in this exercise represent where people are from; places, ideas, social movements, etc. When people identify these things in their lives it can lead to places to look for natural supports. You can gather information about who people were prior to the problems that brought them into the foster care system. People often provide information that can set us on a path of where to look for people who might serve as lifetime network members.

Ground – The ground represents where the person is now and the activities in her/his everyday life that they choose to engage in. What people do by choice can often be connected to what they hold as important. These activities can lead to like-minded people, groups, club, etc.

Trunk – In the trunk of the tree people are invited to identify what they hold as important, what they give value to. They can include skills, abilities, purposes, and commitments. Questions can be asked about who taught them these skills and abilities or if their values are connected to any people in their lives. Discovering what people identify as important to them can lead you to uncovering the people who planted these things or those who have helped sustain them over the years. Skills/abilities and intentions for life can open conversations about groups of people that might be fertile ground for new, enduring connections.

Branches – On the branches people describe their hopes and dreams, where they want to be heading in life. When you know something about hopes that people hold you can ask questions such as “do you know others who have done this?” or “who inspired these dreams?” in order to connect this to potential lifetime support network members.

Leaves – Leaves on the tree represent important people, alive or dead, who have contributed in some way to the life of the person constructing the tree. This part of the tree has an obvious connection to discovery work. An interesting piece of this section is the invitation to identify those important people who have passed on. When building teams of natural supports, it might be helpful to include people who held an important place in the lives of the youth and/or family members but have passed on. What people hold onto from these relationships can include values, purposes, commitments, etc. that could help guide the process. In addition, holding onto to these relationships can, in and of itself, be an antidote to isolation. Questions related to important people who have departed such as “are there ways that their legacies can become part of the lifetime support network?” could help the youth hold them in their life and feel less isolated.

Fruits – The fruits on the tree represent gifts you have received from others. Again we have the opportunity to identify people who have contributed in some way to the life of the youth.

Seeds – Seeds in this exercise represent gifts you have given or hope to give to others. Inquiring about who they would like to give these gifts to can lead you to the people that the youth wants to have in their life going forward.

Utilizing the Tree of Life as an Engagement Strategy

Many of those who are consumers within the foster care system have been marginalized in a variety of ways. It becomes easy for them to see themselves as having damaged identities. At the same time others, even those who are trying to be helpful, can also get caught up in these ‘dysfunctional’ versions of the youth’s identity. Foster youth who bounce from place to place begin to believe that they are at fault for their circumstances. If they only behaved better, were more emotionally regulated, were less disturbed, then a family could love them. The years of individual therapy, mental health diagnoses, and pharmaceutical interventions can contribute to the notion that the young person is failing in life. When youth see themselves through this lens of dysfunction they find it more difficult to reach out to others. Whether they believe that nobody would want them or that they will just mess it up anyway the task of family re-engagement can be daunting. Also, if found family members only have a dysfunctional version of the youth to consider connecting with it might be a greater challenge to get them on board.

These views of people as dysfunctional are not held solely for the youth. Family members who have lost a child to the foster care system can also be subjected to similar criticisms of themselves or by others. They may be incapacitated by guilt or see themselves as so incompetent that they are doing the child a favor by staying away. “What did they do to lose their kid?” and, “why didn’t they show up before?” Although these are legitimate questions to ask, if this is our sole focus (or even just our first focus) then we are likely to see dysfunction. When we find relatives or fictive kin and engage them in ways that reify these dysfunctional versions of who they are or who the young person is then we run a greater risk of losing them.

We have used the Tree of Life exercise as a means to, not only, avoid falling into the business as usual of locating dysfunction within the youth or family member but also to invite the possibility of alternative storylines of identity to emerge and be distributed. Because we only do the exercise one time with people we blend the discovery and engagement work. The fact that we are asking questions about what is important in the life of the person at the center of the inquiry is often a new experience for them.

Below are some of the engagement questions we might ask during each section of the exercise. Many of these have been borrowed and/or adapted from practitioners of narrative work (Madigan, 2011; Madsen, 1999; White, 2007). There are times when we cannot do the drawing part of the exercise due to distance in location or because some people just do not wish to draw. In these situations we hold the exercise in our heads as a guide for the conversation. (I will not describe what each component of the tree represents as that was done earlier in this article).

Roots – Do you have any pleasant memories of where you are from? Is there anything about where you are from that has contributed to who you are now in ways that you appreciate? Are there things about where you are from that you want us to make sure to remember as we work with you?

Ground – Can you tell me a story about you engaging in these activities that you choose? Are there reasons why these are the things you choose to do? What might it say about you that you continue to be active in your life?

Trunk – In what contexts do you demonstrate these skills? Can you tell some stories about times when you showed these abilities? How did you learn to do this? Could you tell me about how this became important to you and about how you have been able to stay connected to this importance? Are there people in your life who would not be surprised to hear these things about you? How have they come to know you in this way? Are there people you wish knew you in this way?

Branches – What is it about these hopes and dreams that you are drawn to? How have you kept them alive in the face of all you have been through? What might this tell us about you and what you stand for?

Leaves – In what ways did these people contribute to your life? In what ways did/do you contribute to their lives? If you could let them on to what is important to you, what would you tell them? If you could fill them in on the best of who you are, what would you tell them?

Fruits – Why do you suppose someone offered you this gift? What might they have seen in you that led them to offer it?

Seeds – What might it say about who you are that you would offer these gifts to others?

References

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