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## Tree of Life Model and other Africa-centred interventions

Ncazelo NCUBE-MLILO

### ABSTRACT

*The Tree of Life is a four-part process which involves drawing trees and then there is a second part of the methodology which is about the Forest of Life. So, Tree of Life begins with inviting people to draw their tree. And each part of the tree represents something specific about their lives, their roots, where they come from, their history, their heritage, their ancestry, the ground where they live, who they live with, what they like to do when they're at home, favourite places, favourite songs or dances. The trunk – the skills and their knowledges, the things they're good at, the things that people tell them they're good at. The leaves of their tree – most important people in their lives, people who care for them and support them. And then the branches – your hopes, your dreams for both the near and the distant future. And then the fruits are the gifts that you've received and that you've been given. And so, people are invited to come up with a tree and then they are supported to tell stories around these aspects of their lives by somebody who has been trained, who knows how to help them to thicken their stories, because we want people to stand firmly in the second stories of their lives and the alternative stories – the stories about your hopes, your dreams, your skills, the people that are important to you, your aspirations in your life.*

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### PRESENTER DETAILS

Ms Ncazelo Ncube-Mlilo founder of Tree of Life Model and other Africa-centred interventions and Founder and CEO of Phola. Email: ncazelo@phola.org

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**Speaker 1:** At this moment, I wish to hand over to our first lecturer, Ncazelo Ncube-Mlilo. Ncazelo, over to you.

**Ncazelo Ncube-Mlilo:** Thank you very much to all the esteemed guests present for the invitation to share my work with you and just to speak to what we do using culturally sensitive methodologies to support people who have experienced hardships and trauma. I will be putting up a couple of presentations just to be talking to as we go along. So, my name is Ncazelo. I am based in South Africa and I run a non-profit organisation focusing on responding to trauma. And so, we work with different communities of people who have experienced hardships and using locally developed methodologies that support them in their healing and in their recovery.

So, the history of my work begins in Zimbabwe where I come from early on around 2001 where I was given an invitation to work for a life skills camp program to support children affected by AIDS. As a young psychologist, I was very excited to have the opportunity to participate in an intervention that was addressing some of the very pressing issues of our time during that particular period. And so, this life skills camp program would have children come into an exciting camp environment for ten days. And so, these are children who are impacted and affected by AIDS, many of them had lost their parents. Many of the children were struggling with experiences of abuse and neglect. And during the time, there was stigma and discrimination and fear around contracting HIV. And so, the young people that we were working with were experiencing numerous challenges. And then I was given a responsibility as a team leader to lead a team of young peer camp counsellors who would be working alongside the children as brothers and sisters, but also needed to have basic counselling skills that I was expected to sort of impart to them.

And so, getting to the camp and getting to learn about children's experiences, I was very much struck around the complexity of young people's experiences. A lot of the children that came to our camps had not only lost one parent, but they'd lost both parents. Some of them came to the camp without even knowing that their parents had died because there was just a lot of hesitation around talking to children about issues of death and dying. And so, some of them would express being surprised at being at the camp. And so, I would hear stories from children about that – "Since my parents died, I have moved from one village, one community to another. The different caregivers – the challenge of looking after me and my siblings have been quite a lot –" because sometimes children had to be separated because people could not take in all of them at the same time.

And so, children would worry about issues of identity. "I don't know who I am anymore. I feel totally dislocated. I've forgotten my people." They would also share stories like, "I did not go to my mother's funeral. In my community, children are not allowed to bury anyone. And so, this is very difficult. I have no closure. I could not say goodbye." And so, all these problems that children were talking to, I really found that the resources I had available at the time were really quite minimal. They did not seem to fit from a cultural perspective in terms of addressing the felt needs of the young people. And so, one of the things that really challenged me was hearing children talking about that they'd lost so many people in their lives – parents died, other relatives also passed away. And so, death seems to follow them wherever they go. "And so, I want to be cleansed. I need rituals performed so that I can get rid of this bad luck that seems to follow me." And I'll talk to them about – "What does rituals look like?" And they seem to have a bit of knowledge about what they were hoping for. And so, thinking about what I'd learnt in the psychology classroom did not really seem to have a strong faith.

How do we address issues of identity? That children are so worried about the dislocation from community – how do we talk to children about this? Children who have experienced a lot of hesitation and anxiety around a topic – so, how do we do this in a way that would be helpful for the young people? But also, looking at the camp counsellors and their responsibility of being alongside those children in a ten-day camp program – camp after camp, they witness tragic stories around loss and death and just all the multiple stresses that young people were experiencing, and seeing the burnout that this came with, and then thinking as their team leader, "How do I help these young people to be sustained in their role of caring and supporting children affected by AIDS?" So, all these predicaments and dilemmas brought about a desire to find ways of working that would be culturally resonant, that would allow children's concerns about identity to be addressed, that would allow children to talk about issues of death and dying, and at least to be given an opportunity to express themselves and to talk about their own realities in a way that would be helpful, in a way that would give them a sense of hope.

And so, the search began on my part as the team lead to find that kind of psychosocial intervention that would be meaningful for the young people. So, what we would do on the first day of the camp, I decided that we should sit down and give children in groups an opportunity to tell their story. We knew, of course, that this had not been something that they had been afforded time to do. And so, in these groups, one child would start to share a story about what is going on in their life. And as they're doing that, the other children listening would be triggered by

what the person who's at the centre is sharing. And before we know it, there is a massive wailing and crying and a collapse of the entire camp. And so, this experience is going on in different locations of the camp. And so, this day became known as the day of doom and we could predict with any camp that we run that that fifth day of the camp would result in a total chaos. And so, the day of the doom became a huge issue. The young camp counsellors working with the children would come to me to ask for my support, for my intervention, and I really felt limited in my ability to be able to guide them. They would say, "This feels like opening a can of worms and we just need to find a different way of being alongside the children, so that at the end of the day, we do not have these experiences." And so, just to quickly wind down that story, I then participated in a regional convening, multi-country convening where different countries came together to have conversations around experiences of working with children affected by AIDS, and trying to identify good practices, best practices, and to learn and to inspire each other.

And it is during this convening that someone brought along a tool called the Tree of Life. So, that was the lead facilitator for the meeting and he had picked it up from somewhere. And so, he really spoke to the fact that we have a big, big responsibility to support children affected by AIDS and ensure that their psychosocial and mental health needs are met. And so, he found this tool and thought that we should all have an opportunity to draw a tree and tell stories and use the different tree metaphors to talk about our lives, our own stories. Perhaps starting the meeting in that way might give us inspiration, because we've been children, we have lived experience of overcoming perhaps hardships, although they might be different from what the children were going through. So, he just had an idea. And I participated in this exercise and really loved the idea of using a tree to represent stories of our lives, each part of the tree and representing something quite different. And it is during that particular exercise that I started to think of the children at Masiye Camp and wondered what it would be like to invite them into a more creative exercise that invited them to tell their stories perhaps in a way that would be more fun and less intrusive. And so, this began the journey of using the Tree of Life as an intervention for children. And so, what then happens is along that journey, I then am introduced to narrative therapy by a colleague who saw my love and enthusiasm of using storytelling and finding ways of helping children affected by AIDS to tell their stories. And so, he just said, "You could look up the work of Michael White and the Dulwich Centre and perhaps that could add to what you have started and initiated for children affected by AIDS."

And so, I met Michael White, who is the founder of narrative therapy. Michael White was the social worker who'd spent a lot of time questioning taken-for-granted ways of responding to mental health. And so, a lot of what he had taken to doing involved an appreciation that people are the experts of their lives, and that as therapists, we need to be present alongside people so that they are accessing the stories of their lives that can help them to heal and to recover from trauma. We spoke a lot about the importance of culture and that we needed to be grounded in community and in culture. And so, listening to Michael White teach really resonated in many, many different ways. And I took very strongly to the narrative worldview, started to appreciate that people have knowledge, people have skills, and that it is not about fixing people's lives, but it's about being alongside people in respectful ways, in ways that allow them to access their own knowledges and their skills. And so, listening to him teach really got me thinking about the numerous challenges I had with my work with children affected by AIDS, creating spaces where children would vent out and tell their stories was very problematic, very retraumatizing. And so, his ideas spoke to my heart basically. Meeting Michael White really brought about a huge shift to the way that I started to look at what therapy is and what it is all about.

And so, narrative therapy for those of you who may not be very familiar with the approach is a respectful non-blaming approach to counselling and community work which centres people as the experts of their lives, and it views problems as being separate from people, and assumes that people have many skills and competences and beliefs and commitments that will help them to deal with their predicaments. It's a very empowering approach that focuses on story, on helping people to re-story their lives with this understanding that problem stories, dominant stories as we sometimes call them, can trap people into a very limited way of living their lives and seeing who they are. So, when we work with people in problem-saturated ways, it just doesn't help to create the hope that we want to bring. And so, thinking about the day of doom with the children and how sharing stories was about the problem helped me to understand why children were triggered because it was a very problem-saturated approach to working with young people.

I got to appreciate that life is multi-storied and that there are many stories to people's lives. It's not just the trauma stories. And so, thinking about how to help people to access the other stories of their lives so that they start to experience themselves as being a much bigger and – than the problems they are subject to – acknowledging that people have skills. They have hopes. They've got dreams. And that these are alternative stories that we need to

be equally curious about and that when we invite people who've gone through trauma to talk to us, is not just talking about the trauma stories but is helping them to access stories about their skills, their hopes, their dreams. And when people start to inhabit the second stories, they become less vulnerable to trauma and they become a bit more creative in finding ways to deal with their predicaments.

So, when I met Michael White and I started to learn about his narrative approach, I invited him to come and see a camp and see the work that we started doing with children using the Tree of Life tool. And it was after the meeting and this trip that he made to Masiye Camp that his wife, Cheryl White, then suggested that I take up the tool and find ways to adapt it so that it incorporates these ideas that I'm talking to you about. And so, this began a collaboration between David Denborough and myself to produce a Tree of Life methodology approach that encapsulates these fantastic ideas that speak to culture and that speak to alternative stories and helping people to move from thin conclusions about their lives to something richer and more sustaining. And so, this is how what is now called the Tree of Life methodology was developed. And so, I want to specifically then talk to you about my journey learning about the importance of culture and indigenous knowledges, because it was Michael White's invitation through his teaching that we needed to find ways of being alongside people who've gone through trauma and hardships so that we can be privileging their own knowledges about healing and recovery. And so, I really took this invitation quite strongly because I was aware that a lot of the experiences that children had shared with me had to do with their culture, their traditions, their beliefs, and this very much informed their sense of who they are. And so, I'd come to understand that we cannot provide interventions, mental health interventions that were excluding of people's cultural knowledges, because people tap into their culture to make meaning of their lives, to find healing. And so, this what became sort of the Genesis of my own journey around being curious about issues of culture and so on. So, I just want to just quickly mention that over the years, I have called my work a provision of therapy. And this also has a very long story about how this has become a symbol of what inspires me to do the work that I do with communities.

This is how we hold our children. This is how we keep them safe; we keep them warm. And so, along the course of my journey, I've used and worked with projects that have used this practice as something that represents African knowledges and indigenous knowledges around caring for our children. And so, being involved in these types of projects got me thinking about how I could go beyond looking at [invaluable] as something that represents our own indigenous knowledges but rather as something that talks to how we should be holding communities and people who've experienced trauma. I have my own [invaluable] story. When I was about four years old, three years old, my parents divorced and – which is a very confusing time for us, my siblings and myself. And my mum had to move away from home, and what happened was that there's an aunt who moved in to help look after us. I don't know what my aunt saw in me, but for months on end, she carried me with the [invaluable] blanket and it felt extremely warm and safe and comforting. To this very day, I have very vivid memories of my aunt's intervention. And so, that personal experience and that personal story is partly why I got excited about drawing on the practice and beginning to use it as something that inspires how I hold people in therapy, creating a sense of warmth, of comfort, of reassurance, and that we can only learn how to do this in our own communities if we invite people to educate us about what gives them that sense of warmth.

What is it that we can be doing that gives them that sense of safety and connectedness and so on? It's not just about the methodologies that we use, but it's about how we join in with people and the therapeutic context that we try to establish, inviting people to share their cultural knowledges, their different practices that can help them to heal and to recover from trauma. And so, this is what my work has become more and more about and what excites me is that the blanket metaphor is something that is relatable across different cultures and communities. When we are born, we are born and we are received by a blanket, and throughout the journeys of our lives, a blanket feature – children have a favourite blanket. Some people have kept their blanket that they had as a child even up to adulthood. We give blankets to the poor, to the homeless. Blankets are used in marriage ceremonies, in funeral ceremonies. And so, there's something about the blanket metaphor that really resonates as a way of helping me to think about how to join in with people who have experienced trauma. And so, getting quickly into the Tree of Life methodology – so, Tree of Life then becomes an approach or a methodology that incorporates all these ideas working with the narrative therapy perspective around people being experts of their lives, people being skilled and knowledge-d, thinking about cultural knowledges and how Tree of Life can be an approach that helps people to connect with their histories, with their culture, the things that are protective to them, the things that make them feel strong.

And so, drawing on even ideas around [invaluable] to think that when we do this work, the kind of context that we want to create in terms of what we want people to experience when we offer them these interventions. And

so, it is really something that encompasses all these histories and all these ideas. And so, the methodology, as I say, was introduced to me by someone who'd taken it from a handbook by Anne Hope and Sally Timmel. That's where the first Tree of Life tool came from. And then taking it up with David Denborough and rethinking about how we could make it a narrative approach, one that is really embracing of people's cultures and helping people to tell even their cultural stories in ways that are helpful.

So, it's a four-part process which involves drawing trees and then there is a second part of the methodology which is about the Forest of Life. So, Tree of Life begins with inviting people to draw their tree. And each part of the tree represents something specific about their lives, their roots, where they come from, their history, their heritage, their ancestry, the ground where they live, who they live with, what they like to do when they're at home, favourite places, favourite songs or dances. The trunk – the skills and their knowledges, the things they're good at, the things that people tell them they're good at. The leaves of their tree – most important people in their lives, people who care for them and support them. And then the branches – your hopes, your dreams for both the near and the distant future. And then the fruits are the gifts that you've received and that you've been given. And so, people are invited to come up with a tree and then they are supported to tell stories around these aspects of their lives by somebody who has been trained, who knows how to help them to thicken their stories, because we want people to stand firmly in the second stories of their lives and the alternative stories – the stories about your hopes, your dreams, your skills, the people that are important to you, your aspirations in your life.

So, we need people to experience themselves stepping more and more firmly into these alternative stories. And so, once people have had a chance to be interviewed in groups, because this is a group approach, working with five to six people in a group, everyone in the group has an opportunity to be interviewed on their Trees of Life. And so, the second part of the methodology is then called the Forest of Life. And so, we invite people then to put their trees together and just to form a beautiful forest of trees. And here, the thinking is that we want people to experience a sense of belonging, a sense of connectedness, to be thinking about who stands in their Forest of Life with them, and what does people bring and contribute to their lives, but also how they contribute to other people's lives. The Forest of Life is a very rich metaphor that can help to strengthen a sense of connectedness, a sense of collaboration, and giving people a really rich sense of belonging. And so, we can also inquire about how to keep this forest strong, and some of the things that we do in our day-to-day lives to nurture our Forest of Life and how the different trees in the forest and the different skills can come together and work together to achieve the things that are important. We talk about the values and the things that can be sustaining of this forest and so on, so a very, very rich metaphor to support connectedness and collaboration. And then from the Forest of Life, we then move on to the third part of the methodology, which is the Storms of Life, and this is where we invite people to now talk to some of the hardships and the hazards that beautiful trees in a forest can experience. So, this one is a virtual forest because Tree of Life can be done virtually, and this is a forest from a group of psychiatric nurses working in Uganda, and so, just wanting to show that we can do this work even online. And so, the Storms of

Life metaphor is applied to support people to name and explore the effects that problems have on their lives. And we want to talk about the storms that sometimes visit us in our lives, how they affect us, what they take away from us, what they separate from us, what they diminish in our lives, how sometimes they can recruit us into practices and ways of being that go against our own better judgement and our own values, so very useful metaphor for talking about problems and hardships. What is beautiful about this metaphor is that storms are not always present and that as much as we can be talking to the storms, we can also be talking to the times when there are no storms and how we want to be living our lives. But we also know that during storms, there are things that we can do to hide from the storm, to protect ourselves from the storm, thinking about how animals hide away, hibernate during storms and protect their young ones. We too are not passive recipients of storms. There are things that we do to protect ourselves, to hide away from the storm, to keep our hope that there will be a better day and so on. And so, all these conversations become extremely important. And then finally, the methodology ends with certificate and a song, which is really about celebration. People have been on a journey exploring the second stories, the alternative stories, stories about their culture and people that they love, their leaves, their branches, their hopes and their dreams. And it can really be a journey that really shifts people's sense of who they are, what they want for themselves and so on. And so, we end with a celebration and a public acknowledgement of the gains that people have made through this intervention. So, this is what Tree of Life is about.

**Speaker 3:** Thank you very, very much Dr Ncazelo. This has been extremely inspiring, and I wanted to re-echo what you said that we should not lose some of our own wisdom and knowledge. I know there's a question about validity, there's a question about generalisation, but I think there was also a comment on that the strongest validity is what the people find meaningful, what actually you know the result of these interventions. Sometimes, as

scholars, we sort of fear to try out to develop models. But we want to applaud you for having the courage to develop models that are very relevant and appropriate for use in our context. So, we thank you for making the time to come and talk to us and we really hope that we can remain in touch. Thank you. Thank you once again and please keep them coming. Keep those models coming. We are so grateful. Thank you.

**Ncazelo Ncube-Mlilo:** Thank you very much. Thank you for the invitation. Enjoy the rest of the lecture.

**Speaker 3:** Thank you.