

## Perceptions of social workers regarding life story work with children

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*The aim of this article was to explore how social workers perceived life story work. Narrative therapy was used as the theoretical framework of this study, which followed a qualitative descriptive design. Six registered social workers from registered child and youth care centres in the Northern and Southern suburbs of Cape Town were purposefully selected for this study. Data was collected through semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions, and analysed thematically. The findings revealed that social workers perceived life story work as essential for children in alternative care in South Africa. The findings support the theoretical framework of this study, which is the ability of narrative therapy to assist children in care to form identities and a sense of belonging. Therefore, social workers are encouraged to utilise life story work with children in care centres. Training would enable social workers to effectively implement life story work activities in social services in the African context.*

**Keywords:** *alternative care; belonging; identity; life story work; narrative therapy; social workers*

### INTRODUCTION

For over 30 years, life story work has been used as a therapeutic intervention technique in care for children in the United Kingdom (UK). It has been proven to be effective with issues such as identity and a sense of belonging (Rees, 2009: 16; Rose, 2012: 18; Rose & Philpot, 2005: 14). In South Africa, however, research on the topic is limited. A number of organisations in South Africa are aware of the benefits of life story work and utilise it as a therapeutic intervention technique. Life story work, as a method of intervention with children, has become a long-established means of social work intervention. It is defined by Rose and Philpot (2005: 15) as “a therapeutic tool that deals with the child’s inner world and how that relates to the child’s perception of external reality”. The Sinomlando Centre in KwaZulu-Natal offers a training programme in Memory Work (Denis & Makiwane, 2003) to communities and organisations in South Africa using memory boxes. Another example is the shelter for teenage girls in Cape Town, known as *Ons Plek*. This shelter utilises life story books with the girls. The owner, Renée Rossouw, found life story books to be effective in assisting the girls with issues of belonging and the need to know their stories (Jackson & Rossouw, 2006: 46). Life story books or memory boxes are examples of life story work that hold advantages for children in care as these assist the children to understand how earlier life events can impact the present (Rees, 2009: 16).

Life story work is based on the principles of narrative therapy, namely that human beings understand themselves and their experiences and, therefore, their lives through the medium of language (Dryden, 2007: 404; Neukrug, 2011: 390). Through communicating, human beings have a means of sharing, connecting and making sense of their experiences, thereby creating their identities and finding meaning in their lives (Dryden, 2007: 404). This communication, through means such as music, drawing, writing or speech, forms the medium through which life story work is experienced (Rees, 2009: 16; Rymazsewska & Philpot, 2006: 22). The non-verbal means of communication in life story work is especially suited to children in care who often find it difficult to express their concerns verbally.

Children in care often have issues with identity and a sense of belonging because they may be removed from their families without planning and placed in alternative care (Barton, Gonzalez & Tomlinson, 2012: 24; Jackson & Rossouw, 2006: 46; Rose & Philpot, 2005: 24). For the purpose of this study, the term “alternative care” refers to child and youth care centres, foster care and any care facility utilised by children in the care system in South Africa. The social worker’s role in alternative care is to provide programmes suitable for the child that would assist the child with issues of identity and a sense

of belonging or any other needs (Ambrosino, Heffernan, Shuttlesworth & Ambrosino, 2012: 107; Children's Act, 38 of 2005). Edith Nicholls, author of *The New Life Work Model* (2005), which is a model in social work linking social work to life story work, recognised the key role that temporary carers and social workers play in promoting a child's identity formation and self-esteem. They are described as "the link to a child's past and the bridge to their future" (Wrench & Naylor, 2013: 61). Therefore, this study is an exploration of how social workers perceive the use of life story work. Based on the findings it is hoped that social workers will be encouraged to utilise life story work in social services in the African context.

## METHODOLOGY

A qualitative descriptive design was followed to explore and describe social workers' perceptions of life story work with children in alternative care (Fouché, 2011: 267). To explore these perceptions in depth (Hennink, Hutter & Bailey, 2011: 10), semi-structured interviews and focus groups were conducted (Hesse-Bieber & Leavy, 2011: 280). Ethical clearance was given by North-West University (clearance certificate number: NWU-00060-12-A1). Purposeful sampling was used (Houser, 2012: 38) and six registered social workers from the Northern and Southern suburbs of Cape Town, Western Cape, South Africa were included in the study. Informed consent from each participant was obtained before the onset of the interviews (Boeije, 2010: 45). The participants needed no knowledge of life story work before the interviews were conducted as the researcher wanted to ascertain whether or not they were aware of life story work. During the course of the interviews and the focus group discussion, examples of life story work were shown and explained to the participants.

Thematic data analysis was used to transform transcribed data into meaningful information (Braun & Clarke, 2006: 79). The principles and strategies utilised to enhance trustworthiness of the data were achieved through crystallisation which involves using multiple methods of data collection and analysis (Lincoln & Guba, 2008: 109).

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The results confirmed the importance of the therapeutic use of life story work with children through identity formation, embracing the past, a sense of belonging, relationship building, and family reunification. However, there was an initial lack of awareness of what life story work entailed. This will be discussed first, followed by the themes that emerged from the results of the study.

### Awareness of life story work

Some of the participants were not aware of life story work before they were interviewed. When exploring the participants' lack of awareness it became apparent that social workers do the activities of life story work, but they are not aware of life story work as a concept or as a form of therapeutic intervention, as stated by (Participant 3): *"I use the family tree. I use incomplete sentences a lot. I didn't realise I use life story work this much. Maybe social workers don't have the skills and are not aware of it. There is a lack of awareness."*

The participants believed that life story work techniques could assist them to obtain information about the children and their backgrounds when communication proved difficult. Other activities, such as incomplete sentences or drawing the self, were also perceived as useful techniques to get to know the children, and were already used by most of the participants.

Social workers are currently using aspects of life story work, such as the genogram or family tree activity, in isolation with children in alternative care as they find it useful for gathering information and building relationships with the children. The participants believed that encouraging children to disclose and to communicate proved challenging as short-term placements contributed to relational difficulties (Kalland & Sinkkonen, 2013).

Figure 1: Example of a genogram or family tree

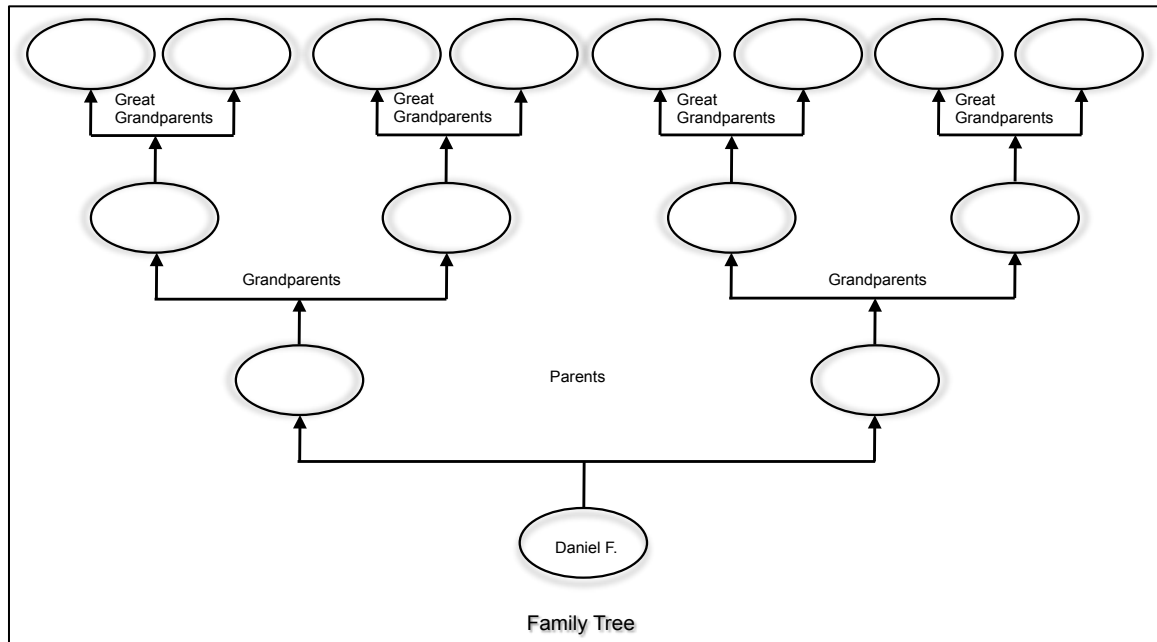


Figure 2: An example of a drawing of the self

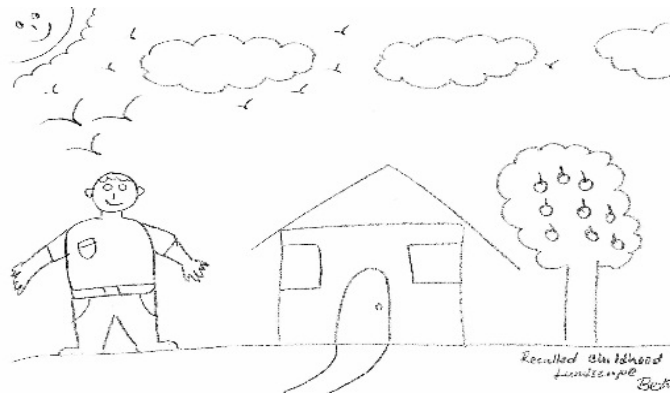
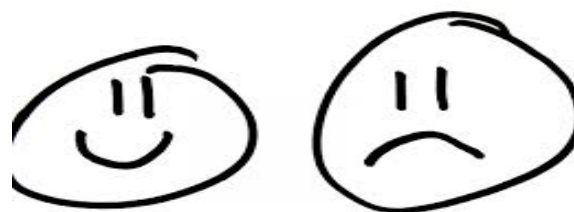


Figure 3: Feeling faces



However, the complete process of life story work entails not only relationship building with the child but also therapeutic intervention (Rose, 2012: 14). The participants lacked the awareness of life story work as a form of therapeutic intervention. Their lack of awareness has led them to using life story work in a fragmented way without understanding the real value of it.. Once this understanding was developed within the focus group, the participants recognised life story work as more than a simple means of collecting basic information about the child. Instead, they recognised the potential of life story work as a form of therapeutic intervention.

**Therapeutic use of life story work**

Life story work is useful as a therapeutic intervention with children in care as it is based on narrative therapy (Crawford, 2010: 37; Mehl-Madrona, 2007: 146). Life story work is therapeutic because it involves “the construction, or reconstruction, of an individual’s life-story and involves the integration of

the individual's internal processes (cognitive, emotional and biological) as well as the relationships and values within the family, community and culture in which the child has developed" (Cook-Cottone & Beck, 2007: 193).

Participants perceived life story work as useful for relationship building within the therapeutic relationship, which is fundamental to any therapeutic encounter with the child. As one participant said: *"This is good for relationship building and there is much healing just in that"* (Participant 2).

Life story work is useful for relationship building as children are able to disclose information about themselves through the use of life story work activities (Gibson, 2011: 130). The information gathered through creative methods – such as listening, talking, drawing, painting, storytelling and family trees is then recorded and utilised to assist the individuals in care to remember their life journey and to understand any confusions about their past (Rees, 2009: 16). Life story work is based on the principles of reminiscence and storytelling, but is unique because it includes a critical review of life events and also identifies the individual's present and future wishes (Bruce & Schweitzer, 2008: 73).

### **Identity formation**

The participants who claimed to be aware of narrative therapy and life story work applied it to help children in care with the difficulties that such children usually have, such as identity formation (Barton et al, 2012:24). One participant said, *"Sometimes we use narrative therapy. They are traumatised and seeking an identity and a sense of belonging. When they were on the streets, they lost touch with themselves and a lot of things about their families, so we help them to remake their lives ... We need to use life story work here otherwise the children struggle with a sense of identity. Life story work helps with forming an identity"* (Participant 1).

Participants in the research study said that children in alternative care are usually in the adolescent phase of development and are struggling with identity issues. These participants perceived life story work activities, such as the life book, to be helpful with identity formation as it gave them a sense of ownership of their lives.

Children in alternative care may have been removed from their own families, which may leave them with confusion regarding their identity (Barton et al, 2012:24). The findings of the current study are consistent with studies where life story work was found to be a useful therapeutic tool in helping to address identity issues for children in alternative care (Barton et al, 2012: 24; Jackson & Rossouw, 2006: 46; Rose & Philpot, 2005: 16; Wrench & Naylor, 2013: 19). Narrative therapy assists with reconstructing identities and perceptions that individuals possess concerning themselves (Crawford, 2010: 37; Mehl-Madrona, 2007: 146; Payne, 2006: 169). For children in alternative care, reconstructing an identity means dealing with the past.

### **Embracing the past**

The findings indicated that the participants perceived life story work to be useful in helping children to embrace their past and gain a sense of belonging. Children placed in care often experience a sense of disconnection or vulnerability (Emmanuel, 2003: 117) and, as Dryden (2007: 305) stated, "a child without the knowledge of his or her life story, or who is lost in his or her community, is left vulnerable". The following comment was made by another participant reflecting on the value of life story work in terms of embracing the past: *"I see the value in it [life story work] because it encourages the child to embrace his story and his past. This is the foundation from which you are functioning from. Then, he can accept the good and the bad and move forward"* (Participant 3).

According to Appiah (2005: 22), the human condition of belonging is experienced through connecting with our past and our narrative – in other words, our life story. Narrative therapy allows individuals to interpret the experiences they bring to therapy through their own cultural and social lenses rather than through biological or psychological factors (Crawford, 2010: 160). Through embracing the past, human beings feel a sense of belonging and are able to feel secure about the future.

### **Sense of belonging**

Children in alternative care struggle with a sense of belonging because they may have experienced the trauma of being removed from their families and adjustment to a new environment (Barton et al, 2012: 24; Jackson & Rossouw, 2006: 46; Rose & Philpot, 2005: 16). The participants saw life story work being applied practically within the context of the care setting to assist children in adjusting to their new

environment. *“We need to start life story work otherwise they feel lost and struggle with a sense of belonging. They are traumatised and seeking a sense of belonging ... I think it is useful. Children in South Africa need to know that they are important and they belong”* (Participant 4).

Life story work may assist social workers and children to integrate fragmented events in their lives and to understand what led them to be placed in care (Walsh, 2005: 10). According to Rees (2009: 18), children in alternative care often experience multiple placements, and through these placements their histories may become fragmented. It is, therefore, through life story work that social workers may have the opportunity to assist children in alternative care to rediscover their histories or to safeguard these histories for them through the use of memory boxes or life story books. Life story work assists children to make sense of their world and clarifies the post-trauma confusion that they may have experienced (Perry, 2002: 79; Rymaszewska & Philpot, 2006: 22).

When participants became aware of the therapeutic benefits of life story work during their interviews, they realised the usefulness of life story work for family reunification services as well. The participants perceived life story work as useful to gain information about the child and as valuable for family reunification.

“I use the family tree to get to know more about them” (Participant 1). “I use life story work with the children to touch on all aspects of the child’s life and try to reconnect the dots for them ... The family tree, for example, can also assist with reunification services as you can trace family members” (Participant 4).

Family reunification is one of the fundamental tasks of the social worker in alternative care. Family reunification does not only entail reuniting children with their families but also preparing the children emotionally to reunite with their past.

Although there were positive perceptions regarding the use of life story work with children, participants also had negative perceptions. These negative perceptions included the practical implementation of life story work due to complexity of the story work, and lack of resources and manpower.

### **Complexity of life story work**

The participants’ perception of life story work was that it is complex. When the participants became aware of life story work as a form of therapeutic intervention, they realised it would require commitment. The participants were also aware of the sensitive issues that may be raised during the process. *“It’s too sensitive a topic just to give to any volunteer or student. We see the need, but because there are so many other needs as well, it is hard to focus on it. A life story or a memory book – you need to commit to the full process”* (Participant 6). The participants also agreed that it is complex in the sense that background information on each child had to be sourced beforehand as they are dealing with vulnerable children and sensitive material. *“You’ll have to look at the individual himself before you do it, and do a bit of background info checks”* (Participant 5).

The participants believed that the complexity of life story work meant that practical implementation could be difficult due to a lack of resources and shortage of social workers.

### **Lack of resources and manpower**

A lack of resources and the scarcity of skilled workers could impact the effective and practical implementation of life story work as the participants, who were social workers, perceived it as a barrier. One participant explained: *There is a shortage of about 60% of social workers in South Africa and I think that is the main problem. We have amazing techniques and amazing therapeutic interventions, but it is impossible to implement it because of us having such big caseloads”* (Participant 3). Due to the shortage of social workers participants also perceived life story work as time consuming. *“It’s time-consuming. In the context of being a social worker in this home, it would be time-consuming”* (Participant 5). Unfortunately, even though social workers may have the knowledge of various therapeutic techniques, such as life story work, they may feel that they do not have sufficient time to apply them effectively. Social workers in South Africa currently work in stressful, time-pressured environments (Gillespie, 2013: 6). This could mean that the life story work process may not be completed with each child, which would leave the children with “unfinished business”. However, Kruger (2012) believed that life story work could be adapted in a more effective manner with children in alternative care, but that a lack of resources and a shortage of social workers could hamper practical implementation.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

Short-term life story work techniques like compiling a life story book (Jackson & Rossouw, 2006: 46) or completing a memory box (Morgan, 2004), which can be completed in one session, can be utilised in the case of time limitations, a lack of resources or when the child has to relocate soon.

The participants were aware of the risks involved with exposing sensitive material and wished to protect the children from feeling frustrated due to any life story work techniques that could possibly make them feel vulnerable. With the correct training, however, the social workers would know how to effectively implement life story work activities with children in alternative care. Due to the current shortage of social workers in South Africa and their high caseloads, the researcher recommends that childcare workers should also be trained in basic life story work skills. Further research would need to be conducted to gain insight into how these life story work programmes could be created and implemented in alternative care settings with the childcare workers and children.

## CONCLUSION

Although social workers in alternative care settings work with time constraints and minimal resources, the participants found life story work to be beneficial and necessary. All of the participants requested further training in life story work and, with the appropriate training, believe they can implement it effectively and assist children with critical issues experienced in alternative care. During the intervention phase, the use of life story work would assist the child and the social worker with therapy. It could also assist social workers with assessment and, potentially, with family reunification services. In a sense, life story work does not have to be viewed as time consuming but as a therapeutic intervention which will assist social workers in addressing several issues for the child simultaneously. Through exposure to the benefits of life story work, such as gaining a sense of belonging and identity, social workers may find it effective to implement life story work in their practices on a daily basis.

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