

Beginning the Healing Journey: Re-Storying Violent Loss through Tree of Life Narrative Groupwork

JaShawn Hill
Andrya Soprych

Abstract: *Storytelling is a pathway to healing for youth, families, and communities impacted by gun violence. It allows survivors to re-story the devastation and trauma into narratives that re-member the person lost and find purpose and meaning from the painful experience. Tree of Life is a group storytelling intervention developed in Southern Africa and rooted in narrative traditions that is emerging as a powerful starting point for addressing the traumatic impact of homicide in Chicago. This case study weaves together the narrative of the first author in her work at Chicago Survivors with research on gun violence, homicide bereavement, and Tree of Life in order to make an argument for its relevance in treating survivors of community gun violence in the United States. We contend that Tree of Life has potential to work across systems levels as youth and families find purpose through the pain generated from violent loss. We encourage social work clinicians to bring narrative practices and the Tree of Life approach into their practice and challenge social work researchers to develop partnerships with community organizations such as Chicago Survivors to develop a research base for this promising approach.*

Keywords: *Narrative practice; community gun violence; grief support; Tree of Life*

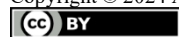
Community gun violence has had a devastating impact on the city of Chicago, leaving many individuals and communities struggling to cope with the trauma and loss caused by these incidents (Hendershot, 2022). Community gun violence refers to interpersonal firearm violence entwined with structural violence. Within this framework, interpersonal firearm violence transpires among unrelated individuals, regardless of their familiarity, while structural violence hinders the community from accessing meaningful opportunities to meet their fundamental health and safety needs (Buggs et al., 2023; Krug et al., 2002).

Community gun violence is pervasive and unevenly “concentrated in racially and economically segregated communities” that are overwhelmingly Black, Latinx, and economically divested (Buggs et al., 2023, p. 2). Media platforms throughout the nation are inundated with a single narrative of violence within Chicago communities that fails to honor the lives and humanity both of those who have been lost to community gun violence and those who survive the murder of their peers and loved ones. As a profession committed to advocating for social and racial justice across system levels, social workers are uniquely situated to respond and challenge the single story (Adichie, 2009) of community gun violence.

The primary author is a Black clinical social worker and Executive Director of Chicago Survivors (2023). She grew up in Chicago, and is a survivor of community gun violence. The second author is a white woman raised in the suburban Midwest who has learned,

JaShawn Hill, LCSW, Executive Director at Chicago Survivors, Chicago, IL. Andrya Soprych, DSW, LCSW, Assistant Professor, Social Work Department, Northeastern Illinois University, Chicago, IL.

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practiced, taught, and supervised social work across Chicago's diverse neighborhoods for the better part of two decades. Through this narrative, we share how the primary author has seen Tree of Life, a narrative groupwork approach, unlock the capacity for marginalized communities to re-story their losses and access alternative narratives of healing, hope, and advocacy. In doing so, we challenge social workers to advocate for social and racial justice and offer a framework for engaging with survivors of community gun violence using the Tree of Life approach as a starting point.

We begin by examining the impact of community gun violence using research literature and the first author's experience with Chicago Survivors. From there we situate social workers as responders to community gun violence and introduce the Tree of Life as a good fit for social workers who engage with survivors. The primary author then shares her reflection on the first four Tree of Life groups facilitated by Chicago Survivors. We wrap up with implications for future social work practice and research.

Examining the Impact of Community Gun Violence

Survivor Experiences

Research on homicide bereavement in the United States offers insight into the experiences of people who have lost loved ones to community gun violence. Key findings include experiencing the loss as trauma (Pabon & Basile, 2022), facing stigma (Bailey et al., 2013), isolation (Metzger et al., 2015), loneliness (Hava, 2023), and undergoing a shift in one's worldview as a result of the violent loss (Englebrecht et al., 2016). Homicide bereavement can be a deeply traumatic experience, with a significant impact on mental health and well-being. Survivors are at a heightened risk for post-traumatic stress and complicated grief (Aldrich & Kallivayalil, 2016; Sharpe, 2015).

Violent Loss as Trauma

Through advances in neurobiology, we know that trauma has a physical impact on the brain (Van der Kolk, 2015). When trauma occurs, such as exposure to violent death, the ability of the survivor to access the parts of their brain that allow for feelings of safety, emotional regulation, and language for processing the violence are restricted (Van der Kolk, 2015). For participants at Chicago Survivors, feelings of being unsafe and disconnected from the world around them often overshadow their ability to connect with alternative narratives and consider present and future possibilities. From a neurobiological perspective (Oberle et al., 2021), the Tree of Life intervention can be seen as attempting to interrupt the trauma reactive part of one's narrative by providing a pathway to explore additional parts of the participants' story in order for them to first feel safe, calm, and regulated. Social work facilitators support participants as they move from a single-story narrative of violence and loss to second stories of connection, relational support, individual strengths, and begin to see potential pathways for an autonomous future.

Anticipatory Trauma

In addition to grieving the loss of their loved one, survivors of community violence are also often navigating ongoing threats to their own safety, which creates a complex web of ongoing and anticipatory trauma to work through (Armstrong & Carlson, 2019; Smith, 2015; Smith Lee et al., 2020). Armstrong and Carlson (2019) define anticipatory trauma as practices and discourses grounded in fear of future events. Smith (2015) found that “homicide deaths of close peers crystallized the lethality of neighborhood violence” (p. S486) creating both a sense of personal vulnerability to their own violent death as well as a bracing of oneself for additional encounters with traumatic loss. The reality of ongoing and anticipatory trauma is exemplified by a youth engaged with Chicago Survivors who while mourning her brother’s murder was being assailed with threats to her own safety. She was inundated daily with both psychological triggers and physical threats. Advocacy and safety planning were needed in conjunction with therapy to help restore her sense of safety.

Stigma, Isolation, and Loneliness

The grief and trauma of violent loss can be exacerbated and become disenfranchised as survivors face the stigma of gun violence and judgment from outsiders for being in a neighborhood with ongoing community violence (Aldrich & Kallivayalil, 2016; Bailey et al., 2013; Hava, 2023). Doka’s (2008) definition of disenfranchised grief, which is grief that “is not openly acknowledged, socially validated, or publicly mourned” (p. 223) offers a useful framework for understanding the grief of losing someone to community gun violence. Bailey et al. (2013) found that Black mothers faced assumptions that their sons were violent and engaged in criminal activity. Regardless of the truth, this stigmatization led Black mothers to feel embarrassment and shame, unable to grieve publicly. Pabon and Basile (2022) considered disenfranchised grief as a common experience for Black youth who were perceived as “professional grievers” (p. 75) not in need of services as a result of living in a neighborhood with high rates of violence. This assumption of resilience is where the lead author has seen youth push back and cry out asking to be treated with compassion and understanding. Youth living in neighborhoods plagued by violence have no choice but to be resilient. It is not a badge of honor or an achievement to be celebrated. It comes out of the depths of despair and trauma. To be resilient for these youth is to be reminded of the significant loss, too often losses, they have faced.

The stigma of gun violence can lead to isolation and loneliness as the bereaved navigate personal narratives of loss that differ significantly from the public narrative of senseless community violence (Bailey et al., 2013; Hava, 2023). Some survivors choose to remain in their homes due to deep positive community ties despite experiencing judgment and blame for staying in a neighborhood with high rates of violence (Aldrich & Kallivayalil, 2016). Others, many of whom have reached out to Chicago Survivors to request emergency relocation, want nothing more than to leave but lack the resources and support to move. The violent, startling loss of a loved one or peer to gun violence can shatter one’s worldview, forever changing the way survivors see the world (Englebrecht et al., 2016; Sharpe, 2015).

Survivor Needs

Research on homicide bereavement in the United States also offers insight into the needs of people who have lost loved ones to community gun violence. In the wake of a homicide, survivors have a heightened need for meaning-making, culturally appropriate treatment and social support.

Meaning-Making

Meaning-making is consistently highlighted as a crucial element of grieving homicide (Bailey et al., 2013; Johnson et al., 2022; Johnson & Zitzmann, 2021; Smith Lee et al., 2020; Sharpe, 2015; Zakarian et al., 2019). Participants at Chicago Survivors continuously expressed a need to re-define their purpose over the pain of the incident. Meaning-making can be searching for answers (Sharpe, 2015), a cognitive-emotional process influenced by racism and stigma (Bailey et al., 2013), a spiritual endeavor (Johnson & Zitzmann, 2021; Smith Lee et al., 2020), and grounded in action to help others (Johnson et al., 2022). One mother, supported by the primary author, created the organization Where Do We Go From Here in her attempt to make sense of senseless violence through action. Meaning-making is a deeply personal process, and in the wake of a homicide is rarely about closure or moving on, but instead about persevering and finding a way to engage in the present (Aldrich & Kallivayalil, 2016). Chicago Survivors has found that working with survivors to explore newfound purposes beyond their painful losses is a critical component for meaning-making.

Culturally Appropriate Treatment

Culturally appropriate treatment is essential for individuals who have lost a loved one to community gun violence. A culturally appropriate treatment approach recognizes that the experience of grief and trauma is deeply rooted in cultural and social contexts, and that the ways in which individuals cope with these experiences may be shaped by their cultural and historical backgrounds. Community gun violence disproportionately affects marginalized and under-resourced communities “that have been affected by and subjected to historical and present-day structural racism and inequity” (Buggs et al., 2023, p. 2). In Chicago, just five out of 25 police districts, all of which are marginalized and under-resourced, made up over 40 percent of all homicides in 2021 (Hendershot, 2022). Treatment approaches ought to reflect and honor the cultural, social, and historical factors inherent in grief and trauma due to community gun violence (Johnson et al., 2022; Sharpe, 2015; Smith Lee et al., 2020). A culturally appropriate approach to community gun violence works both individually and structurally at the intersection of race, stigma, and violence rejecting “the idea that any community is inherently or inevitably violent and instead centers the many strengths of community” (Buggs et al., 2023, p. 2)

Social Support

Given the risk of isolation and loneliness, social support is a crucial element in homicide bereavement (Aldrich & Kallivayalil, 2016). Research has shown that social support can play a key role in promoting healing and resilience as well as having important implications for long-term mental health outcomes (Hava, 2023; Metzger et al., 2015). Englebrecht et al. (2016) found that relationships were impacted because of homicide and survivors found support from others with similar experiences. Losing a loved one to homicide can be a devastating and traumatic event. Social support can provide a sense of comfort, validation, and connection during this difficult time particularly among people who can relate to the unique devastation of homicide loss. Realizing the need for social support, Chicago Survivors created the Community of Survivors program, which is available in perpetuity for families impacted by community violence. This program offers ongoing peer-to-peer support that continues to evolve in order to address the needs of the community.

Research on homicide bereavement and gun violence in the United States suggests that addressing the needs of survivors requires a comprehensive and holistic approach that considers the traumatic impact of homicide, the importance of social support, and the need for culturally appropriate services. Social workers, with a strengths-based, person-in-environment orientation, called to social and racial justice, are positioned to address the individual and collective trauma caused by community gun violence.

Social Workers as Responders to Community Gun Violence

Social workers can offer a compassionate and understanding space for individuals to process their grief, navigate the emotional turmoil, and rebuild their lives in the aftermath of the devastating loss of loved ones and peers to community gun violence. Social workers also play a crucial role in connecting survivors with vital resources and collaborating with local organizations, law enforcement, and mental health professionals to establish comprehensive, culturally sensitive interventions that address the unique needs of those affected by gun violence. Additionally, social workers can engage in advocacy efforts aimed at addressing systemic issues contributing to gun violence, advocating for policy changes, and fostering community to address the root causes of violence. Through their commitment to social justice and their ability to provide holistic support, social workers serve as invaluable allies in the healing journey of those mourning the loss of loved ones to community gun violence.

When a social worker shows up in a person's life after they suddenly and violently lose someone they loved, the social worker arrives on the scene entering into their most vulnerable and heartbreaking moments. At Chicago Survivors, social workers and crisis responders are called upon to stand with survivors, bear witness to their unimaginable pain, and guide them along the many paths of healing that often feel tedious, unfair, relentless, and misappropriated. As one mother told the primary author, "This doesn't belong to me, I did not sign up for this club." Narrative practices offer a compelling and effective framework for social workers to employ as they support survivors of violent loss. Narrative

approaches provide social workers a way to recognize and respect the unique stories and lived experiences of survivors, thereby fostering a more person-centered and empathetic approach to intervention (Yuen, 2007). Through narrative practice, clients reclaim authorship of their stories, promoting a sense of agency and self-determination in the face of adversity (White & Epston, 1990). Moreover, narrative practices facilitate a deeper understanding of the complex interplay between personal, cultural, and societal factors that shape individuals' lives (McTighe, 2018). Through collaborative storytelling, social workers can uncover strengths, resilience, and untapped resources within clients and communities, creating a pathway for more targeted and sustainable interventions (Yuen, 2007). Ultimately, the integration of narrative practices aligns with the core principles of social work, promoting inclusivity, cultural sensitivity, and a strengths-based perspective, while contributing to the overarching goal of empowering individuals to rewrite and reclaim their narratives in the pursuit of positive change.

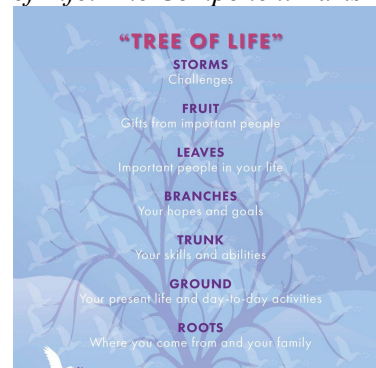
The adults, youth, and families impacted by gun violence, often remain in their community while engaging in services. Many psychological interventions assume the survivor is in a place of safety when they begin therapy, which is often not the case for people who are at risk for and experience ongoing community violence. Group-based interventions that create safe spaces for discussing and reconstructing personal narratives and identify personal and community coping tools have been found to support healing from past trauma amidst ongoing violence (Mpande et al., 2013). The Tree of Life framework is a promising approach for social workers supporting survivors of community gun violence because it begins by having participants create a safe place from which they can explore their trauma despite ongoing civil disturbance in the neighborhoods in which survivors reside. Additionally, the narrative-based intervention intentionally addresses trauma, through social support, in a culturally appropriate way, thereby aligning with the key research findings on responding to homicide bereavement.

Tree of Life Approach

The Tree of Life approach uses the metaphor of a tree and the forest to support participants in decentering their problem story and creating a counternarrative as more than their trauma-driven hardships that is grounded in their strengths, hopes, and dreams. Figure 1 depicts an image of Chicago Survivors' tree that identifies the components participants develop as they create their own tree.

Survivors of violent loss are at heightened risk for complicated grief which involves being stuck in or consumed by the loss and unable to move on (Burke & Neimeyer, 2013). The Tree of Life approach begins to address the social and emotional needs of participants by using holistic and integrative approaches that honor the person lost and helps the participant connect to and find strength in their ancestry and identities using

Figure 1. *Chicago Survivors' Tree of Life: The Component Parts*



creative arts expression and narrative informed techniques. This connection to one's ancestry highlights how Tree of Life is a culturally attuned approach encouraging each participant to celebrate and find strength in their heritage.

The approach was first introduced by Ncazelo Ncube in southern Africa to support children orphaned by HIV/AIDS (Ncube, 2006). Ncube (2006) incorporated ideas from narrative therapy through consultation with the Dulwich Centre. Training with the Narrative Therapy Centre teaches social workers how to facilitate as participants transition out of problem stories and into second stories of their lives using art, music, poetry, and monologue. Skills for reframing negative self-perception and creative techniques for increasing positive interpersonal connection and developing a sense of community in healing from the trauma of violent loss can be developed. In the following section, we explore how the Tree of Life approach has the potential to honor the experiences and begin to meet the needs of community gun violence survivors.

The Fit Between Tree of Life and Community Gun Violence in the United States

As seen in the literature on homicide bereavement and gun violence, and witnessed by the primary author, violent loss is a trauma often accompanied by stigma, isolation, loneliness, and a disruption to one's worldview. In the aftermath of the devastation, survivors need social support and culturally appropriate services as they strive to make meaning from the loss.

Meaning-Making

While originally developed to work with children orphaned by AIDS in southern Africa and then adapted to work with refugees, Tree of Life appears to be a promising approach for survivors of community gun violence in the United States. Underpinning the Tree of Life approach is an understanding that traumatic experiences can shatter individuals' assumptions about themselves, others, and the world, leading to a sense of disorientation and loss of meaning. Survivors are encouraged to explore their personal narratives and the stories that make up their identity through Tree of Life. This process helps participants gain insight into the meaning they attach to their experiences and identify their strengths and resources. As survivors construct a second story that honors but does not center the loss and is grounded in their identity and cultural and spiritual resources, participants begin to regain a sense of control and agency as they develop their own meaning-making process that fosters a renewed sense of purpose and meaning in life. Through this process, individuals can gain a deeper understanding of themselves and their experiences, and work towards healing and growth. A review of the components of the Tree of Life approach shows how it addresses the needs and experiences of community gun violence survivors.

Cultural Appropriateness

The approach recognizes that witnessing a homicide or surviving the death of a loved one due to gun violence is a traumatic event that can have long-lasting effects on individuals and their families. Noticing that retelling the death narrative looking for some catharsis to move on was not only unhelpful but also retraumatizing youth and their caregivers, Ncube (2006) emphasized the importance of creating a safe place to stand before re-storying devastating loss. In this first phase, creating a secure foundation is accomplished as participants craft the main elements of their tree (Hughes, 2014; Jacobs, 2018; Lock, 2016; Ncube, 2006). Drawing the roots of their tree involves connecting to their ancestry and drawing their origins along with the things and people important to them. The ground represents where they live now and what they do on a daily basis. The trunk is where participants highlight their skills and abilities. Branches reflect their hopes, dreams, and wishes, while leaves represent people who are important to the participant. Fruits signify both tangible and intangible gifts they have been given. This first phase of the group work emphasizes the strengths and positive community of each participant. Beginning from strengths instead of the loss helps to decenter the problem story and remind participants they are so much more than the trauma they have faced.

Not only does the creation of their tree establish a safe and supportive environment for survivors to process their trauma and promote healing, but it also allows individuals to draw on their own cultural resources and experiences to cope with their grief and trauma (Hughes, 2014). Tree of Life offers community members an opportunity to explore their narrative outside the social norms and stigmatizations related to the death of their loved ones. Through the use of storytelling, visualization, and art-based activities, Tree of Life group work encourages facilitators to use culturally relevant and age-appropriate approaches to help survivors identify and strengthen their internal and external resources. Participants create their tree with any combination of words, colors, shapes, textures, and images empowering the survivor as they choose how to share their tree and allow others to become curious about their narrative. Participants are encouraged to explore their cultural and spiritual beliefs and practices through the creation of their roots and fruits, which can provide a sense of comfort and meaning during difficult times (Hughes, 2014; Lock, 2016; Ncube, 2006).

Social Support

As a group intervention, the approach emphasizes the importance of social support and fosters a sense of community, which can combat the isolation and loneliness community gun violence survivors often face (Ibrahim & Allen, 2018). The primary author has witnessed this collective work between family systems as a freedom to connect and identify their community, caregivers, and self-assigned “family” as a restorative way to work together, while designing and defining their unique tree. It is a journey of exploration within their present narrative, historical background, and future aspirations. When the trees are constructed and designed from roots to fruits, the finished work is displayed in a shared space (Jacobs, 2018; Lock, 2016; Ncube, 2006). Participants tell the story of their tree while also reflecting and commenting on others’ trees demonstrating a forestry of

connection and community. The primary author has witnessed a residence of joy and intentional presence that vibrates through the room when the stories of each tree are shared, and the members affirm and validate each other's narratives. The lived experiences shared are diverse in physical presentation but when arranged and aligned together provide a view of a collective communal identity. Examples of the diversity of completed trees are shared in Figure 2, which depicts a forestry of trees that includes adult, adolescent, and child trees.

Figure 2. *Example of a Forestry of Trees*



Having built a secure base, the group is ready to talk about their losses in ways that are not re-traumatizing. In the Tree of Life approach, this is called *When the Storms Come* (Ncube, 2006). Storms are a metaphor for the difficult times and traumas participants have faced. The conversation around storms is collective and encourages community members to share their ideas and skills with each other as they talk about weathering the storms (Lock, 2016). Discussing storms can involve acknowledging the stigma survivors have faced due to public perceptions of gun violence and community violence as well as identifying the shifting or disrupted worldview many survivors experience. Additionally, the Tree of Life approach holds space for participants to recognize the social and systemic issues that can contribute to gun violence, such as poverty, racism, and lack of access to mental health resources. Participants can explore these issues as they define their storms and find ways to address them, not just in their personal lives but also on a community and societal level. Considering societal and systemic issues in relationship to the storms participants face can help survivors reframe their experiences and promote post-traumatic growth.

At the completion of the group and development of their counternarratives, a celebratory moment is shared among participants and facilitators to symbolize survivors' progression and the capacity to see themselves differently in this world. Certificates are provided as an offering of passage into their second story. The certificates record their abilities, hopes, and dreams, and represent tangible evidence of movement in the individual and the collective community. Participants are offered a chance to provide feedback, and congruent with the primary author's experience, facilitators report that participants have found the group overwhelmingly positive (Dickson, 2009; Hughes, 2014; Ibrahim & Allen, 2018; Jacobs, 2018; Ncube, 2006). Coming into the group, participants describe feeling stuck and unable to escape the negative impact brought by reminders of their loss. The shift in perspective surrounding senseless gun violence, reduction in feelings of meaningless living, and community created through Tree of Life group work creates an entry point to burgeoning hope and healing. The certificate is a reminder of what life means and can mean beyond violent loss.

This approach to addressing bereavement due to homicide is particularly useful for participants who are living within communities of violence, where the sense of control and safety in one's daily functioning can be limited. Reflections from the primary author who was the facilitator for the first four Tree of Life groups for survivors of community gun violence in Chicago are shared below. Community members' need and willingness to break out of isolation, and reach beyond the trauma reactive features associated with those who grieve the horrific losses they have faced, is demonstrated in their engagement in the initial groups and ongoing requests to run more groups, which is a testament to Tree of Life as a good fit for responding to community gun violence in the United States.

Reflections From the First Four Groups

Responding to the survivor community's needs for gathering and seeking alternatives to cope with the pain of violent loss, four groups were organized to introduce the Tree of Life intervention in Chicago. Two groups were set up for families enrolled in the Community of Survivors program, Chicago Survivors' peer-to-peer support group for families looking to connect with fellow survivors of violent loss. Length of time since the homicide ranged from 30 days to five years. Enrollment was voluntary. Community of Survivor participants were sent a flyer that outlined the group's purpose and included an invitation to participate. Both groups filled quickly and were diverse. The age span included children as young as three years old through a grandmother in her seventies. There were families as small as one and as large as six who came together each week to participate in the structured series of sessions to discuss their experience, their identities, and stories of their heritage.

Two additional groups were set up in Chicago Public High Schools for youth who had direct exposure to homicide loss. Length of time since the loss ranged from 30 days to one junior whose parent was killed when she was three years old. Students were recommended by the school social workers and both parents and students consented to student participation. All four Tree of Life groups were facilitated between March and June of 2022.

Preparing for Triggers

Recognizing the different timelines of loss and different trajectories of grieving for those who signed up, additional clinical staff from Chicago Survivors were present during group sessions to ensure the emotional support needed would be readily available to members. In the event that a member experienced amplified triggers through the group work either due to the fresh wounds surrounding parts of their story or because they were reliving events they had not yet processed, clinical staff were prepared to offer additional support. Chicago Survivors emphasized providing survivors safety in the group space so that the acknowledgement of sensory activation could be felt and not re-traumatize the participants. Fortunately, no one in any of the groups required additional interventions while the groups ran.

Community of Survivors Group

As the lead author reflects on what she witnessed in the two groups run for Community of Survivors members, what stands out above the rest is the impact of having multiple generations in the same group processing trauma and loss together. Multiple generations within one family had the opportunity to share how they were impacted by the violent loss from an age-appropriate perspective and as congruous for the generation they were born within. This cross generational approach appeared to be particularly powerful for families who were mired in the ruthless effects of multiple gun violence homicides across generations.

Generational divides were bridged as mothers and grandmothers told stories of opportunity, prosperity, and community in their decision to move to Chicago in the fifties and sixties. Their younger daughters and granddaughters who wondered why they lived in communities plagued with violence were gifted tales of their community that began to re-story the narrative of their neighborhood as more than the present-day violence.

Providing a safe space for curiosity and exploration in this intergenerational space, the primary author witnessed family members owning their stories individually and collectively through the design and definition of each segment of their tree. For example, in his branches, a son began to describe his hopes and dreams, and because he had lost his dad to gun violence that past spring, those hopes and dreams began to speak to how he would make his father proud. He was the fifth of his name and honoring that, the dreams of his father became his dreams, and the legacy of his name took on new meaning. His mother, who lost her brother when she was a teenager to gun violence, heard his narrative filled with hope and began to believe in her son's ability to heal and experience what she called "the good life" after such a tragedy. She saw healing for him that she never had for herself. As these examples show, one generation influenced and impacted another generation and it went back and forth in this way as the commonalities of unburdening their grief and loss experiences, while simultaneously exploring and gaining from their skills, gifts, and creative mindsets gave a pathway to counternarratives.

High School Group

The two high school groups were distinct from the Community of Survivors groups in part because there were no intergenerational exchanges. When discussions of the roots of the trees were presented, many of the youth expressed limited access to historical experiences and initially were not sure why it mattered. Some felt vulnerable requesting the information from their elders and wondered if it would be seen as dishonoring or disrespecting the family. Others were not in the care of biological family and did not know who to ask. This was a learning curve for the session series, which the primary author responded to by exploring with the youth the value of ancestry. Once they were interested, they discussed how to approach their elders in a respectful way. They practiced through mock conversations and many of the youth were able to find joy in discovering and sharing the narrative of who they were connected to and how these connections came to be.

Without the intergenerational component, the homogeneity of the high school group seemed to lead to powerful cohesion and support among participants. Perhaps most impactful in these groups was bearing witness as the youth navigated the presence of ongoing community violence while trying to heal from past gun violence. Exposure to homicide was a requirement for enrollment and as our groups ran, participants were beset with sudden shootings and school lockdowns due to violence both at school and in the surrounding neighborhood. Recognizing that the likelihood of being shot and killed before their high school graduation is statistically more likely than dying in a car crash can drain the ability to hope and aspire for positive beliefs (National Safety Council, 2023). The students were not deterred and while they pushed back against being called resilient, they are survivors. The primary author saw relationships formed through the years that involved checking in on each other's safety at home, supporting each other through additional losses, and providing accountability to graduate or go to a new school setting.

As they moved into their presentation segment, the pride and joy expressed was sacred. The sharing of hopes and dreams, gifts and talents, history and family may seem like ordinary messages to be explored. However, in the lives of those facing the negative impact, bias, and stereotypes that go along with living in communities of violence, these are rare occurrences that deviate from the dominant narrative. The youth were able to present their completed projects and relate to each other's losses as well as the nature of the pain due to community violence as they constructed their forest of trees. Hearing them affirm and express gratitude for the art of expression through the visual aids of a tree was momentous. In this stage of the group's cohesion, the primary author felt more like a witness than a facilitator. She could see them open themselves to experiences they had so often avoided sharing and the group responded with support helping each other reauthor their own and collective narratives. The completion of the program was met with requests for Chicago Survivors' return next year, and requests to support the youth in improving their ability to share their stories in more meaningful ways.

Social Work Practice Implications

Social workers are encouraged to incorporate Tree of Life into their practice and are reminded that it is just the beginning of addressing the complex trauma caused by witnessing gun violence and loss due to homicide. It opens the door as an entry point (Dickson, 2009) for continued therapeutic work as survivors build their narrative and re-story their experiences. Therefore, Tree of Life fits best within a series of trauma-conscious narrative-focused interventions. With this approach, the social worker can build rapport with clients through person centered dynamics and designate safe spaces of exploration as it relates to their lifelong experiences that are inclusive of their trauma narrative. The pressure to take deep dives into the tragedy that brought the survivors together is not presented as paramount for their healing, but it is positioned as a potential next step if the survivor seeks to develop that part of their story in ways that matter and make sense to them. Tree of Life work acknowledges where and how traumatic experiences have impacted a survivor and their community and supports the self determination of the survivor in moving forward. We cannot emphasize enough; Tree of Life work is not a panacea and is not expected to resolve all grief and trauma symptoms for participants. It is,

however, a powerful starting point that is particularly well suited in communities that may be reluctant to engage or find traditional Western psychotherapy approaches inadequate.

Recognizing Tree of Life as an entry point, social workers can craft a series of trauma conscious narrative practices for survivors of community gun violence. For example, for work within school systems, Chicago Survivors will be piloting a continuum of support that will include a social worker on site for weekly treatment planning and therapy. After completing the Tree of Life group, youth will begin an eight- to twelve-week series entitled the Power of Storytelling, which was developed by the primary author. The Power of Storytelling uses a narrative based framework that supports participants as they continue to explore pathways of possibilities connected with post-traumatic growth.

Walking with the bereaved in the wake of violent loss requires bearing witness to their grief. Listening to and supporting individuals who have experienced trauma can be both rewarding and challenging and can take a toll on the emotional and psychological wellbeing of the social worker. The concept of trauma stewardship, as introduced by van Dernoot Lipsky and Burk (2009), offers a framework for engaging in the self-care necessary to remain in this line of work. Trauma stewardship brings self-care into the how and why we do our work. As social workers, we have the honor of providing a safe and supportive space for individuals to share their stories and to work towards healing. We also have a responsibility to ensure that we are not contributing to the re-traumatization of individuals with approaches that are not only ineffective but also harmful (Garo & Lawson, 2019). By attending to our own needs and framing our work as trauma stewards, we are better able to support and bear witness to the trauma of others, while also protecting ourselves from burnout and compassion fatigue. In this way, trauma stewardship and self-care are essential components of the healing process, not only for those who have experienced trauma, but also for social workers who are committed to supporting them.

For social workers interested in being trained in narrative practices broadly and the Tree of Life specifically, Chicago Survivors group facilitators were trained by and offer connections to The Narrative Therapy Centre (n.d.) in Ontario, Canada. For more intensive courses and certification programs social workers can explore partnerships with the founding narrative practices organization, the Dulwich Centre in Adelaide, Australia, which offers both virtual and in person training opportunities (Dulwich Centre Publications Pty Ltd & Dulwich Centre Foundation Inc., n.d.). Lastly, we have collaborated with Jill Friedman of Evanston Family Therapy Center (n.d.) to receive Grief Specific Narrative Practice Tools.

Social Work Research Implications

Opportunities for research around Tree of Life abound. In Stiles et al.'s (2021) review of the existing literature, they found no scientifically rigorous studies on Tree of Life, noting that all prior studies had insufficient sample sizes. Similarly, Stubbs (2022) in her exploration of facilitators' experiences of Tree of Life found only 10 empirical articles, with similarly small sample sizes except for one thematic analysis with 93 participants. Stiles et al. (2021) developed the Roots and Wings Questionnaire for Children and Youth in concert with a proposal to study the effectiveness of Tree of Life in work with refugee

youth across the United States, Canada, the United Kingdom, and South Africa. No empirical studies of Tree of Life work specifically with survivors of gun violence in the United States were found. To begin to build the research base of Tree of Life for survivors of community gun violence, the authors propose a university or research center collaboration with Chicago Survivors to examine the participant experience of the Tree of Life approach and develop a research agenda built off themes from clinical feedback collected from the first four cohorts. Social workers who are using or begin to use the Tree of Life approach are encouraged to engage in practice-based research examining the impact of the intervention.

Conclusion

In weaving the primary author's narrative around her work at Chicago Survivors with research on gun violence, homicide bereavement, and the Tree of Life approach, we have attempted to write a counternarrative that honors the unimaginable work of surviving the murder of one's peers and loved ones amid community violence and shows social workers ways to engage in this work. Initial Tree of Life groups hosted within the survivor community, have shown us that though it is an entry into the work of addressing the trauma narrative, especially around difficult experiences such as community violence, it may be an ideal methodology for accessing challenging sectors of their story in a trauma informed way. Providing a safe space, compassionate communication, and a culturally conscious response through the Tree of Life framework gave community members a look into the benefits of a therapeutic experience and left them ready for more. It extended a bridge into more ways to belong and envision themselves outside of the single story of community violence.

The youth and families served through the initial four groups found relevance in seeing the whole tree, even while noticing the parts that brought sadness, separation, or discomfort. The power of shared experiences, demonstrated in the forest of the trees, no matter how difficult, brought people together through their pain, grief, and willingness to heal. It was transformative, relational, and therapeutic. Join us in embracing the potential of the Tree of Life narrative groupwork approach to enrich our social work practice and empower individuals and communities towards healing and collective growth.

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Author note: Address correspondence to Andrya Soprych, Social Work Department, Northeastern Illinois University, Chicago, IL 60625. Email: asoprych@neiu.edu