



# Narrative Practices as Situated Ethical and Political Processes: a Qualitative Study in South Africa

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## Abstract

Narrative practices are increasingly positioned as decolonial and feminist alternatives to individualizing and deficit-oriented psychological interventions. However, limited empirical research has examined how such practices are enacted within everyday community and organizational contexts shaped by structural inequality. This qualitative study explores how narrative practices are experienced, negotiated, and adapted by 16 women social workers and psychosocial practitioners working in marginalized communities in South Africa. Data were generated through individual semi-structured interviews and focus groups and analyzed using reflexive thematic analysis. Five interrelated themes were developed: creating the conditions for safe and meaningful participation; using stories for collective reflection and decision-making; fostering connection through shared narratives; re-authoring subjectivity within structural constraint; and holding pain and support in group storytelling. Findings suggest that narrative practices are not inherently emancipatory but become potentially liberatory when enacted within ethically attuned, reflexive, and context-sensitive conditions. The analysis highlights how power relations, safety, gendered norms, and institutional hierarchies shape participation and meaning-making. By foregrounding relationality, reflexivity, and structural awareness, this study contributes to qualitative psychology by offering an empirically grounded account of narrative praxis as a situated, political, and ethical process rather than a transferable technique.

**Keywords** Narrative practices · Reflexive thematic analysis · Decolonial psychology · Feminist qualitative research · Community psychology · Anti-oppressive praxis

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## Introduction

Qualitative research conducted in and with communities in the Global South is unavoidably shaped by the enduring legacies of colonialism that continue to structure knowledge production, methodological hierarchies, and epistemic authority (Wendt & Gone, 2012). Despite decades of critique, much psychological research still privileges Eurocentric theories, positivist assumptions, and expert-driven methodologies that abstract lived experience from its historical, political, and relational contexts (Chowa et al., 2024; Marongedze, 2025). These approaches often render invisible the structural violence, gendered oppression, and collective trauma that shape everyday life, while reproducing extractive relationships between researchers and communities (Sánchez-Flores, 2026). In response, decolonial, participatory, and liberatory approaches have emerged as critical interventions that seek not only to diversify methods, but to fundamentally transform how knowledge is produced, interpreted, and mobilized (Garcini et al., 2025).

From a decolonial perspective, research is never neutral. Knowledge is always situated, relational, and implicated in power. Decolonial scholars have therefore argued for a radical epistemic shift: away from universalising frameworks and towards plural, embodied, and locally grounded ways of knowing (Ali et al., 2025; Omodan, 2025). This shift entails recognising participants not as data sources but as meaning-makers whose narratives are shaped by histories of colonialism, patriarchy, racism, and resistance. In psychological research, this challenges individualising and pathologising models that locate distress within the person, instead foregrounding collective histories, social relations, and structural conditions as central to understanding subjectivity and wellbeing (Mahali & Tate, 2025).

Participatory and community-based approaches are central to this epistemic reorientation. Rather than treating participation as a procedural requirement, decolonial and feminist traditions conceptualise it as an ethical and political practice concerned with voice, agency, and relational accountability (Burke & Harrison, 2004). Participation, in this sense, is deeply entangled with questions of safety, power, and inclusion: who is able to speak, under what conditions, and with what consequences (Adolfsson et al., 2025). These questions are particularly salient in contexts marked by inequality, displacement, gender-based violence, and ongoing insecurity, where speaking itself can carry significant risks (Veronese & Kagee, 2025). Qualitative research in such settings must therefore attend not only to what is said, but to the conditions that enable or constrain meaning-making (Singh et al., 2025).

Within this landscape, narrative approaches have gained increasing attention as practices that resonate strongly with decolonial and feminist commitments (McLeod, 2024). Narrative practices centre stories as fundamental to how people make sense of their lives, relationships, and social worlds. Rather than extracting experiences from participants, narrative approaches create relational spaces in which meanings are co-constructed, contested, and re-authored (Denborough et al., 2024). Crucially, narrative work situates personal stories within broader socio-political contexts, making visible the forces that shape lived experience while resisting deficit-oriented representations of marginalised communities.

For feminist and anticolonial scholars, narrative practice is not simply a method but a form of praxis (Allen, 2023). Storytelling becomes a site where silenced experiences—particularly those of women and other marginalised groups—can be named, validated, and collectively held (Frenette, 2024). Narrative practices foreground embodied, emotional, and relational knowledge, challenging masculinist and positivist traditions that devalue these

forms of knowing (Fahs, 2024). At the same time, they enable the emergence of counter-narratives that contest colonial and patriarchal discourses, affirming survival, dignity, and agency in contexts of structural constraint.

Recent qualitative research has demonstrated the potential of narrative practices to foster connection, reflection, and transformation in group and community settings, including among displaced and refugee populations (Draper et al., 2022; Kubota et al., 2022; Rishi, 2026). These studies suggest that narrative work can support collective sense-making, strengthen relational bonds, and create spaces where pain and trauma can be acknowledged without being individualised or medicalised. However, much of this literature remains under-theorised in relation to power, context, and reflexivity, and often treats narrative practices as techniques rather than as relational processes shaped by social and political conditions (Rogers et al., 2024).

This gap points to the importance of analytic approaches that are explicitly reflexive and theoretically engaged. Reflective thematic analysis (RTA) offers a particularly generative framework for examining narrative practices within decolonial and feminist paradigms (Braun & Clarke, 2024). RTA rejects positivist assumptions of theme discovery as objective or neutral, instead conceptualising analysis as an active, interpretive, and theoretically informed process. Meaning is understood as produced through the interaction between participants' accounts, the research context, and the researcher's own positionality. This epistemological stance aligns closely with decolonial and feminist critiques of objectivity, foregrounding reflexivity, situated knowledge, and transparency in the analytic process (Braun et al., 2023).

Importantly, RTA allows for an analysis that attends simultaneously to experience, context, and power. Rather than fragmenting narratives into decontextualised codes, RTA supports the development of themes that capture patterned meanings across accounts while remaining sensitive to contradiction, complexity, and relational dynamics. This makes it particularly well suited to exploring how narrative practices are enacted and experienced in group and community contexts, where meaning emerges not only through individual stories but through interaction, collective reflection, and shared symbolic resources.

By adopting a reflective thematic analytic approach, this study seeks to move beyond instrumental accounts of narrative practice and instead examine how such practices function as relational, ethical, and political processes. The analysis foregrounds participants' experiences of narrative work, attending to the conditions that shape participation, the ways stories are used to reflect and act collectively, and the tensions involved in holding both pain and possibility within shared spaces. In doing so, the study contributes to qualitative psychology by demonstrating how narrative practices, analysed through an explicitly reflexive and decolonial lens, can illuminate the intersections of meaning-making, power, and care in contexts of inequality.

Situated within feminist, anticolonial, and participatory traditions, this research advances an understanding of narrative practice not as a neutral methodological tool, but as a liberatory practice of knowledge production. Through reflective thematic analysis, it offers an empirically grounded account of how stories operate as sites of connection, transformation, and resistance, contributing to ongoing debates within qualitative psychology about reflexivity, ethics, and the politics of meaning-making.

In this article, we use the terms *decolonial* and *anti-colonial* in a complementary but not interchangeable manner. While *decolonial* refers to epistemic and methodological shifts

that challenge the colonality of knowledge and being, *anti-colonial* foregrounds the active, political contestation of colonial power structures and their contemporary manifestations. Our analysis moves between these registers to capture both the epistemological reorientation and the political commitments that underpin narrative praxis. This distinction allows us to conceptualise narrative practices not only as alternatives to dominant paradigms, but as situated forms of resistance embedded within ongoing struggles against structural inequality.

## The Study

The present study examines how narrative practices are enacted, experienced, and negotiated in group and community settings shaped by structural inequality, displacement, and colonial legacies, with a specific focus on their implications for psychosocial and community-based practice. Drawing on participants' accounts of facilitating and engaging in narrative work, the study explores how issues of safety, power, participation, and relational context shape what narrative practices enable or constrain in practice. Rather than approaching narrative methods as transferable techniques, the study conceptualises them as situated forms of praxis that require ethical attunement, reflexivity, and responsiveness to local conditions. Through reflective thematic analysis, the study generates practice-relevant insights into how narrative approaches can support collective reflection, care, and agency, while also highlighting the limits, tensions, and responsibilities involved in their use within decolonial and feminist-oriented practice.

The study was guided by the following research question:

How are narrative practices enacted, experienced, and negotiated in group and community settings shaped by structural inequality, and what ethical, relational, and political conditions influence their possibilities and constraints?

## Positionality

This study was conducted in collaboration with a South African non-governmental organisation engaged in community mental health, gender justice, and social inclusion. Consistent with the decolonial and feminist orientation that informs the article, we approach positionality not as a procedural addendum, but as integral to the ethical and political infrastructure of the research. Knowledge production is therefore understood as situated and relational, shaped by power relations that influence access to the field, interactions with participants, interpretation, and analytic decisions.

The composition of the research team forms part of this relational context. The team comprised two Italian researchers (one woman and one man) and one South African researcher (man), occupying different professional and career positions. The Italian woman was a doctoral researcher, while the two men were senior academics (professors) at their respective universities. These differences in nationality, institutional location, gender, and professional status structured our access, responsibilities, and interpretive positions within the project.

A central element shaping the study was the long-standing relationship between the South African researcher and the partner NGO, established in 1995, initially as a volunteer and later as a trustee. This sustained engagement provided deep contextual knowledge, historical continuity, and a pre-existing foundation of trust between the NGO, the com-

munities, and the research process, significantly influencing both access to the field and the collaborative ethos of the project. The Italian researchers joined the study as long-term collaborators with expertise in narrative and participatory approaches within action-research and intervention-research contexts, and were introduced to the NGO network through this established relationship. Their involvement was thus embedded within an already existing relational infrastructure rather than initiated through external or extractive entry.

Our positioning within this collaboration is further shaped by a critical engagement with psychology as a discipline historically entangled with colonial projects and processes of depoliticising suffering. Rather than rejecting psychology outright, we engage with it as a contested field with transformative potential—provided that experiences of distress are situated within their historical and political conditions and that the structures producing them are explicitly named and interrogated. From this standpoint, the present study does not claim to offer definitive solutions; rather, it situates itself within ongoing reflections on which methodologies and praxes can ethically and responsibly sustain such commitments. In this sense, the study both contributes to and is shaped by a broader process of collective, critical inquiry into decolonial and feminist qualitative psychological practice.

## Methods

The study involved 16 women social workers and psychosocial practitioners (aged 26–50) from marginalised communities in South Africa. Participants included 12 South African nationals (75%) from communities shaped by racialised and socio-economic exclusion and 4 practitioners with refugee backgrounds (25%) living and working in the country. Their dual positioning—as both service providers and community members—was central to the study’s epistemological and ethical orientation, foregrounding insider knowledge, relational accountability, and situated experience, and enabling participants to speak from both professional expertise and lived experience of marginalisation.

Participants were recruited through an ongoing research–intervention collaboration focused on collective resistance and resilience across marginalised communities in South Africa. This broader initiative was conducted in partnership with the aforementioned South African non-governmental organisation working in the fields of community mental health, gender justice, and social inclusion.

Given that many participants occupied overlapping roles as practitioners and community members, distinctions between “facilitator” and “participant” were not always fixed in practice. Rather, narrative spaces were often characterised by fluid participation, where facilitators also engaged reflexively and relationally within the process. This fluidity is treated as a feature of the intervention rather than a limitation of design, consistent with participatory and decolonial approaches.

Importantly, participants in the present study were not recipients of the narrative intervention, but practitioners and community leaders who both facilitated and, at times, participated in narrative processes within their own communities. Their accounts therefore reflect a dual positionality: as facilitators of narrative practices and as community members embedded within the same social and structural conditions. This dual role is analytically significant and informs the interpretation of the findings.

The wider project unfolded in three interconnected phases. The first phase consisted of a training programme on collective narrative practices, designed to introduce NGO social workers and volunteers to narrative and community-based approaches aligned with feminist and decolonial principles. The second phase involved the implementation and adaptation of these practices within participants' own community and professional contexts. This phase included the facilitation of narrative group sessions within participants' communities (e.g., women's groups, youth groups, organisational settings), where practices such as the Tree of Life, collective storytelling, and visual narrative exercises were adapted to locally relevant issues including gender-based violence, displacement, and livelihood challenges. Participants acted as facilitators within their own contexts, drawing on both their professional roles and their embeddedness within the communities.

The third phase created structured spaces for collective reflection on the use, possibilities, and constraints of narrative practices in practice.

The present study draws on the experiences of a subset of practitioners who participated in this broader initiative. Inclusion criteria required participants to: (a) hold a collaborative relationship with the partner NGO (either as staff members or volunteers); (b) have completed the narrative practices training; and (c) have actively implemented these practices within their community or professional settings for at least six months. This ensured that participants were able to reflect not only on the training itself, but on the situated enactment of narrative practices within contexts marked by structural inequality, displacement, and ongoing social precarity.

## Instrument and Procedures

To critically examine the use, possibilities, and constraints of narrative practices in participants' work, each participant engaged in one individual semi-structured interview and took part in focus group discussions.

The individual interviews were designed to elicit in-depth accounts of participants' experiences of facilitating and engaging in narrative practices. Particular attention was given to questions of safety, power, relational dynamics, and ethical tensions encountered in practice. The interviews functioned as reflective spaces in which participants could explore how narrative approaches were adapted within specific community contexts, how they were received, and how participants' own positionalities—as practitioners and community members—shaped these processes. Interviews lasted approximately 45–60 min and were conducted in person at the offices of the partner NGO. The interview guide included open-ended questions such as:

Can you describe a specific moment in which you facilitated a narrative practice in your community?

What conditions helped participants feel safe—or prevented them from speaking openly?

How did power relations (e.g., roles, gender, leadership) influence what was shared?

Were there moments of ethical tension or difficulty, and how did you respond?

In what ways did your own position as both practitioner and community member shape the process?

Follow-up prompts encouraged participants to provide concrete examples and reflect on both enabling and constraining factors.

In addition, two focus groups (approximately 90 min each, with eight participants per group) were convened to explore the collective dimensions of meaning-making that emerged through the implementation of narrative practices. Whereas interviews centred individual reflection, focus groups were intended to capture the dialogical and relational processes through which stories were shared, negotiated, and interpreted in interaction. These discussions allowed participants to identify shared challenges, tensions, and possibilities, as well as differences shaped by displacement, community positioning, and structural inequality. The focus groups were held partly at the partner NGO and partly at the researchers' university in South Africa, following participants' request to engage directly with the university setting.

A detailed description of the narrative exercises referenced in this study (e.g., Tree of Life, collective storytelling formats, visual narrative practices) is provided as supplementary material to support methodological transparency and potential adaptation in other contexts.

## Data Analysis

All interviews and focus groups were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim, with transcription treated as an initial analytic step involving close attention to tone, pauses, and relational dynamics. Data were analysed using Reflective Thematic Analysis (RTA) following Braun and Clarke (2024). Consistent with the study's decolonial and feminist orientation, analysis was conceptualised as an interpretive and reflexive process rather than the identification of objective themes. The research team engaged in repeated readings of the dataset, generated inductive codes, and iteratively developed and refined themes through ongoing reflexive dialogue. Analytic differences were treated as generative rather than as issues to be resolved through consensus, and were examined in relation to researchers' positionalities and proximity to the field. Particular attention was paid to focus group data, attending to how meanings were co-constructed through interaction, including agreement, silence, and moments of contestation.

## Ethical Considerations

The study adhered to the Ethical Principles and Code of Conduct of the American Psychological Association (APA, 2010) and received approval from the Stellenbosch University Institutional Review Board (Protocol No. 32015). Participants were provided with clear and accessible information about the aims of the project and the nature of their involvement, and all gave written informed consent. Confidentiality, anonymity, and the right to withdraw at any stage were treated not merely as procedural requirements, but as ethical commitments that were continuously reiterated and upheld throughout the research process. At the same time, the study moved beyond a narrow focus on procedural compliance by approaching ethics as a relational and dialogical practice. Rather than being confined to a single moment of consent, ethical engagement unfolded as an ongoing process of communication, reflexivity, and negotiation, developed collaboratively with NGO practitioners throughout the project (Fiscione et al., 2026).

## Results

RTA identified five interrelated themes that together explain what shapes the experience, impact, and possibilities of narrative practices in group and community settings. These include Creating the Conditions for Safe and Meaningful Participation (Theme 1), Using Stories to Reflect, Decide, and Move Forward Together (Theme 2), Connecting Through Shared Narratives and Collective Wisdom (Theme 3), Seeing Ourselves Differently Through Story (Theme 4), and Holding Pain and Support in Group Storytelling (Theme 5). Together, these themes capture complementary dimensions of how narrative practices are enacted, experienced, and made meaningful in group and community contexts.

Unless otherwise specified, the accounts presented in this section reflect participants' perspectives as facilitators of narrative practices within their communities. While these accounts provide valuable insight into group dynamics and participant responses, they do not constitute direct reports from community members themselves. This distinction is important, as facilitators' interpretations of participation, safety, and engagement may not fully capture participants' own experiences.

### Theme 1: Creating the Conditions for Safe and Meaningful Participation

The findings show that narrative practices are strongly shaped by the conditions in which they take place, including contextual, structural, logistical, and relational factors. Participants, speaking from their roles as facilitators, reflected on how these conditions shaped group engagement and participation. These conditions influence whether participants feel safe, included, and confident enough to speak, listen, and engage meaningfully, ultimately affecting the depth and quality of participation.

A key condition concerns the difference between virtual and in-person participation. Participants consistently described online formats as limiting the richness and intimacy of storytelling, particularly when visual elements were absent. As one participant explained, *"online you can't really see people talk about their trees. The more personal aspects were missing because we couldn't see the pictures, and people were less willing to share"* (Nomsa, 34, F). Although facilitators could recreate elements of the activity afterwards, this did not fully compensate for the lack of shared visual presence: *"I could create the forest afterwards, but the main limitation was that you couldn't actually see the forest in the online space"* (Thandeka, 41, F). Compared to in-person settings, online sharing was experienced as more superficial, with one participant noting that *"people didn't share as deeply as they did in person... It felt like we lacked depth – there was no 'juice'. Everything stayed very general"* (Zanele, 29, F). In contrast, face-to-face contexts enabled more personal and unexpected disclosures, often prompted by visual materials, as illustrated by the example of a participant who shared a deeply personal belief after others noticed details in his picture (Ayanda, 38, F). For this reason, online formats were seen as potentially useful for training, but not for community-based work, where relational depth is essential: *"If you are working directly with community members, I wouldn't recommend using an online format"* (Lerato, 45, F).

At the same time, the data highlight attempts to create shared meaning within virtual spaces through more intentional facilitation. Participants described strategies aimed at compensating for the limitations of online environments, such as asking participants to photograph their trees and compiling them into shared visual formats. One participant reflected, *"I was thinking of being more proactive by asking people to take a picture of their tree and send it to me... so people could look at it and ask questions"* (Palesa, 33, F). Similarly, others suggested creating posters or PowerPoint presentations to support collective discussion (Kgomotso, 40, F). Digital tools, such as online whiteboards, also emerged as resources that could partially restore a sense of shared participation, allowing participants to upload images and contributions and see each other's input in real time (Naledi, 27, F).

Practical constraints, particularly time, further shaped participation. Limited timeframes restricted opportunities for sharing and reflection, with some participants unable to present their work at all: *"the time we had was very limited. Some people didn't even have the opportunity to present their own work"* (Busisiwe, 36, F). When sessions included multiple activities, this reduced the possibility of engaging deeply with narrative practices. Participants expressed that dedicating more time exclusively to the Tree of Life would have supported richer engagement, especially given the strong interest shown by participants (Refiloe, 31, F).

Group size also played a crucial role in balancing participation, safety, and inclusion. Smaller breakaway groups were experienced as more conducive to sharing, as participants felt safer and more willing to speak: *"they shared much more in those smaller groups"* (Sibongile, 44, F). However, this openness often diminished when groups reconvened in larger plenaries. Very large groups, particularly when combined with the presence of stakeholders, made meaningful participation difficult, as *"it becomes very difficult for everyone to speak"* (Mpho, 39, F).

The findings further show how power dynamics, roles, and group composition influence openness and voice. When colleagues, managers, or leaders were present, participants were often more hesitant to share personal experiences: *"people were sometimes reluctant to share very personal things"* (Nokuthula, 47, F). Fear, shame, and intimidation emerged as barriers to participation, with one participant observing that when leaders left the space, *"the group immediately became much more open"* (Karabo, 35, F). These dynamics highlight how perceived hierarchies can undermine the sense of safety required for narrative work.

Gender dynamics also shaped participation, particularly regarding men's difficulties in opening up. Groups composed only of men were described as struggling more with emotional and creative expression, especially in initial sessions. As one participant noted, *"they found it hard to open up and express themselves... many of them were afraid of being seen or judged"* (Boitumelo, 28, F). Although engagement improved over time, especially in subsequent sessions, the initial hesitation suggests that gendered expectations and norms can significantly affect narrative participation.

Finally, the theme underscores the importance of safety, context, and local knowledge when using specific narrative tools, such as schizocartography. Safety concerns and time constraints sometimes prevented the use of these practices altogether, particularly when participants would have needed to move through public spaces with phones. As one participant explained, *"it wasn't safe for participants to move around with their phones, so we realised*

*that proper preparation would be needed*” (Nthabiseng, 50, F). This highlights the need for careful contextual assessment and ethical consideration when designing narrative activities.

## **Theme 2: Using Stories to Reflect, Decide, and Move Forward Together**

Narrative practices were not experienced only as spaces for expression or sharing, but also as practical tools for collective reflection, decision-making, and future planning. Participants described how stories helped groups and organisations make sense of their past, clarify their present identity, and orient themselves toward future action.

In particular, narrative practices were used to support collective reflection and strategic planning at an organisational level. One participant described using the Tree of Life with a church community to explore its history, origins, and values, shifting the focus from individual storytelling to organisational sense-making. As she explained, *“we looked at the church’s history, its roots, where it comes from, and the values that have been learned over time... the practice was used at an organisational level rather than individually, and it worked extremely well”* (Nomsa, 34, F). This process not only facilitated reflection but also raised critical questions about how to translate narrative insights into action: *“how to move from reflection into planning, and how to build a bridge between what emerges in the narrative process and concrete actions for the future”* (Thandeka, 41, F).

Relatedly, narrative practices enabled groups to reflect together on organisational identity and values, creating a shared understanding of what should be preserved, changed, or developed. Through collective storytelling, participants were able to revisit core principles and priorities, asking, *“what we want to retain, what we need to discard, and how we can take this forward as an organisation”* (Sibongile, 44, F). This reflective process supported the development of a shared direction, culminating in the creation of *“a tentative plan for the future”* (Nokuthula, 47, F).

## **Theme 3: Connecting through Shared Narratives and Collective Wisdom**

Another crucial element is the role of narrative practices in fostering connection, trust, and a sense of belonging within group and community settings. Through shared storytelling, participants described how collective activities created relational spaces that supported collaboration, creativity, and mutual recognition, enabling people to connect not only through words but also through shared experiences and symbolic forms.

Narrative practices were described as particularly effective in bringing people together through moments of collective creativity and ritual. Participants reflected on how even short periods of shared activity could generate strong feelings of unity. One participant noted that *“even with only twenty or thirty minutes, groups are challenged creatively and come up with remarkable outcomes”*, adding that these moments *“foster a strong sense of unity and genuinely bring people together”* (Lerato, 45, F). Such experiences were described as memorable and emotionally resonant, especially when activities culminated in collective ceremonies or creative outputs. Similarly, moments of celebration—such as sharing food, music, or dance—were highlighted as powerful relational practices that strengthened connection beyond task-oriented work. As one participant reflected, *“we sometimes forget the*

*importance of celebration... those moments of music and celebration stay with everyone and help strengthen connection”* (Busisiwe, 36, F).

Beyond emotional connection, shared narratives also supported learning through practical wisdom. Storytelling enabled participants to reflect on how to navigate difficult life circumstances, including experiences of gender-based violence and discrimination. One participant explained that the process encouraged people *“to step back, think about their next move, and consider what in their current context can help sustain them”* (Marie, 39, F). Importantly, learning emerged not only through individual reflection but through listening to others’ stories. Participants described how hearing concrete examples from peers—such as stories about recycling or selling second-hand clothes—opened up new possibilities and strategies they had not previously considered. As one participant noted, *“through shared experiences, new ideas and strategies emerge”* (Chantal, 32, F).

The findings also highlight the importance of visual and non-verbal forms of storytelling in supporting expression and connection. Narrative practices such as the Tree of Life created opportunities for participants to communicate experiences that were difficult to articulate verbally. The Tree of Life is a collective narrative methodology developed within narrative therapy and community work (Denborough, 2008). It uses the metaphor of a tree to structure storytelling: roots represent history and origins; the trunk symbolises skills and values; branches reflect hopes and aspirations; leaves and fruits acknowledge significant relationships and contributions. The method externalises problems and foregrounds strengths, enabling individuals and groups to situate personal experiences within broader relational and social contexts. One participant described working with a client who *“did not want to use words”* and instead expressed himself through colours, using lighter tones to represent aspirations and darker colours in the roots to reflect more difficult aspects of his history (Ayanda, 38, F). These visual narratives not only enabled self-expression but also provided a shared reference point through which meaning could be communicated and understood by others.

#### **Theme 4: Seeing Ourselves Differently through Story**

Our accounts show that narrative practices support transformative processes through which individuals and groups come to see themselves, their experiences, and their possibilities in new ways. By engaging with stories that connect personal histories, present realities, and future aspirations, participants described increased awareness, agency, and a renewed sense of meaning.

A central aspect of this theme concerns how narrative practices generate meaning, connection, and change. Participants highlighted the symbolic power of metaphors such as roots and trees in helping people make sense of their lives. As one participant reflected, *“talking about the roots was very powerful. If you don’t know your roots, you don’t know where your fruits will grow”* (Marie, 39, F). These metaphors supported reflection on stability, continuity, and growth, enabling participants to recognise strengths and foundations that could support change. The process was widely described as enjoyable and engaging, with one participant noting that *“people really enjoyed the process, and overall it went very well”* (Nomasa, 34, F). When narrative activities were explicitly connected to lived experiences—such as the impact of gender-based violence—the process became even more meaningful and relevant to everyday life: *“participants really liked the way the process was facilitated... it became something meaningful that they could relate to in their everyday lives”* (Chantal, 32, F).

Narrative practices also supported a return to the self, encouraging reflection, recognition, and personal agency. Participants described how acknowledging difficult or life-threatening experiences prompted deeper self-reflection, raising questions such as *“how did you manage, and how did you survive?”* (Esther, 44, F). Through this reflective process, individuals were able to reconnect with themselves, recognise their own presence and worth, and appreciate their capacity to endure. As one participant expressed, *“it helps you recognise yourself and appreciate that you are here”* (Solange, 28, F). Reflection was also linked to forward movement, with participants describing how taking time to reflect enabled them to identify what they were capable of and to *“make peace with what you regret and find a way to move forward”* (Marie, 39, F).

In addition, narrative practices fostered awareness of and engagement with the broader context in which participants lived. Story-based reflection encouraged people not only to focus inward but also to consider their surrounding environment, resources, and opportunities. Participants described how the process helped them *“better understand the environment in which you are living”* and reflect on *“what is positive and helpful in the present context”* (Chantal, 32, F). Importantly, some participants realised that they had previously overlooked resources available to them. Through activities such as the Tree of Life, *“they realised that there were tools and opportunities they had never previously recognised”* (Esther, 44, F).

A further transformative dimension concerned the integration of past, present, and future. Participants contrasted different narrative tools, noting that while some approaches focused primarily on past experiences, the Tree of Life allowed them to see their lives more holistically. As one participant explained, *“the Tree of Life brings together past experiences with the present and the future”* (Ayanda, 38, F). This integration supported a more compassionate and coherent understanding of the self, with the tree symbolising a stable foundation in which *“everything you have experienced – whether good, bad, or difficult – is part of who you are”* (Ayanda, 38, F).

Finally, the findings highlight how collective narratives can cultivate empowerment and hope. Participants described how engaging in narrative practices strengthened confidence and agency, particularly in community contexts. One participant reflected that the project *“was very successful”* and *“helped empower the participants”* (Solange, 28, F). In concrete terms, this empowerment was linked to tangible changes in participants’ lives, such as women initiating small economic activities. As one participant described, in the Félicité group, *“the message that emerged through the process gave them hope”* (Marie, 39, F).

## **Theme 5: Holding Pain and Support in Group Storytelling**

Narrative practices often open spaces where painful memories, trauma, and difficult emotions can surface. At the same time, when appropriately held, these spaces can support recognition, meaning-making, and collective care, creating opportunities for recognising, revisiting, and making sense of trauma. Participants described how storytelling enabled individuals to acknowledge experiences that had previously remained unspoken or unprocessed. Through the process, *“participants were able to recognise past traumatic experiences”*, with one woman realising that what had happened to her *“was wrong”* and that, despite the pain, she felt she was now *“in a better place”* (Zanele, 42, F). For many, this recognition was a first step toward understanding their own emotional reality. As one partic-

ipant explained, “*the process helped each person acknowledge their trauma*”, particularly in contexts where people “*do not always recognise or accept that they are traumatised*” (Esther, 44, F). Simply naming and acknowledging lived experiences was described as a powerful moment of awareness, helping participants realise, “*this is what I am living every day*”, and reflect more deeply on their survival and resilience (Marie, 39, F).

In some cases, engaging in narrative activities brought back memories from earlier stages of life that had long been forgotten. Participants noted that “*the process reminded them of experiences they had not thought about for a long time*” (Lerato, 45, F). While emotionally challenging, this revisiting of the past also allowed individuals to reframe and contextualise their experiences within a supportive group environment.

The findings further highlight the role of connection and collective support in dealing with trauma. Sharing experiences within the group helped participants realise that they were not alone and that others faced similar struggles. As one participant described, “*sharing experiences within the group helped people learn from one another*” (Chantal, 32, F). Group discussions created space to explore how trauma can be held collectively and how pain might be released through different personal or creative strategies. Participants reflected together on “*what they can do when trauma surfaces*” and how collective reflection could support healing (Solange, 28, F).

Beyond group settings, participants also reflected on the therapeutic potential of narrative practices in both group and individual work. Some facilitators described intentions to use these approaches in more explicitly therapeutic contexts. One participant noted plans to apply the method with a GBV women’s support group, highlighting its potential to “*bring people together*”, create a shared sense of experience, and make similarities visible through the metaphor of a shared “*forest*” (Naledi, 37, F). In both group and individual settings, narrative practices supported ongoing therapeutic work by helping participants identify areas they wished to explore further. As one participant explained, “*the process helped participants identify areas they wanted to work on*”, with later sessions building on insights that emerged through drawing and reflection (Busisiwe, 36, F).

Finally, the findings underscore the importance of safety, context, and local knowledge when engaging in more exploratory narrative methods, such as schizocartography. In some contexts, safety concerns and time limitations prevented the use of these practices altogether. As one participant explained, “*it was not safe for participants to move around with their phones, so proper preparation would be needed*” (Thandeka, 41, F). At the same time, local knowledge was identified as a crucial resource in making sense of place-based narratives. Participants noted that people with strong connections to particular areas often already possess the contextual understanding needed to engage meaningfully with such practices. Visiting places together could help participants reconnect with “*the history of a place*” and, in some cases, with “*their family roots*” (Nthabiseng, 50, F).

## Discussion

This study set out to examine narrative practices not as neutral techniques, but as situated, relational, and political forms of praxis within group and community contexts shaped by colonial legacies, inequality, and precarity (Fiscone et al., 2026; Veronese et al., 2025; Veronese, 2013). Through reflective thematic analysis, five interrelated themes were devel-

oped that illuminate how narrative practices are enabled, constrained, and made meaningful in practice (Christensen, 2022; Ken, 2022). Importantly, these themes do not simply describe what happens when narrative approaches are used; they reveal how power, context, and relational conditions actively shape the possibilities of participation, meaning-making, and care (White, 2024). Read together, the themes articulate a methodological argument: narrative practices function as liberatory tools only insofar as they are enacted within anti-colonial and anti-oppressive conditions (Lilly, 2023).

### **Creating the Conditions for Safe and Meaningful Participation: Narrative Practice as Ethical Infrastructure**

The first theme foregrounds participation not as a given, but as a fragile and ethically produced condition (Fiscione et al., 2026). From an anticolonial perspective, this finding is critical. Colonial and extractive research traditions have long assumed that participation is automatically available once access is granted, ignoring how fear, hierarchy, gender norms, and structural violence shape who can speak and how (Guida et al., 2025). Participants' accounts demonstrate that narrative practices are deeply contingent on contextual factors such as group size, power relations, institutional roles, gendered expectations, time constraints, and physical or digital safety.

Methodologically, this theme challenges depoliticised accounts of narrative methods by showing that voice is never free-floating. The presence of managers, leaders, or institutional stakeholders constrained openness, reproducing colonial dynamics of surveillance and self-censorship. Similarly, gendered difficulties in men's emotional expression highlight how patriarchy shapes narrative participation, even within ostensibly supportive spaces (Rezak, 2020). From an anti-oppressive standpoint, this underscores the necessity of actively designing against hierarchy, rather than assuming that narrative formats alone can flatten power (Chaudhary, 2024; Gergen, 2000).

This theme also has significant implications for participatory praxis. Participation emerged as something that must be carefully scaffolded through small groups, trust-building, time, and facilitator reflexivity (Forestieri et al., 2024). The limitations of online settings further illustrate how technological formats can reproduce distance, abstraction, and disembodiment—conditions historically aligned with colonial knowledge extraction (Tiidenberg, 2018). Thus, narrative practice here emerges as an ethical infrastructure, requiring sustained attention to safety, context, and relational conditions before any emancipatory potential can be realised.

### **Using Stories to Reflect, Decide, and Move Forward Together: Narrative as Collective Praxis rather than Individual Expression**

The second theme shifts the focus from expression to collective sense-making and action, challenging individualistic and therapeutic framings of narrative work (Wheeler, 2018). Participants described using narrative practices to reflect on organisational identity, shared history, and future direction—processes that are inherently political in anticolonial contexts, where institutions and communities are often shaped by imposed structures and external agendas (Lykes et al., 2003).

From a liberatory praxis perspective, this theme demonstrates how narrative practices can function as collective epistemic tools, enabling groups to name their values, revisit their histories, and imagine alternative futures (Kaur & Haniff, 2022). Importantly, this was not a linear or instrumental process. Participants highlighted tensions around how to move from reflection to action, revealing a key methodological challenge: narrative practices open spaces of possibility, but do not automatically resolve structural constraints (Jandrić et al., 2023).

Analytically, this theme supports an understanding of narrative practice as praxis rather than method—a process that intertwines reflection and action, but remains contingent on context (Locke et al., 2022; Porter et al., 2022). Reflective thematic analysis allows these tensions to remain visible rather than smoothed over, resisting the temptation to present narrative work as universally empowering. In doing so, the analysis aligns with anti-oppressive scholarship that cautions against romanticising participation while ignoring material and institutional limits.

### **Connecting through Shared Narratives and Collective Wisdom: Relationality as Resistance**

The third theme highlights the centrality of connection, relationality, and collective wisdom in narrative practices. Participants' accounts emphasised moments of shared creativity, ritual, celebration, and storytelling as powerful mechanisms for building trust and belonging. From an anticolonial standpoint, these relational processes are not ancillary; they directly counter colonial logics that privilege individualism, competition, and expert authority.

Methodologically, this theme challenges dominant psychological models that prioritise verbal articulation and individual insight. Visual, symbolic, and non-verbal storytelling emerged as crucial resources, particularly for participants who struggled or resisted dominant linguistic forms (Nathan et al., 2023). This resonates strongly with feminist and decolonial critiques of whose knowledge counts and how it is expressed. By legitimising multiple modes of meaning-making, narrative practices disrupt epistemic hierarchies that marginalise embodied, emotional, and creative knowledge (Santos, 2013).

The emphasis on shared learning through others' stories further illustrates narrative practice as a horizontal knowledge process, where expertise circulates within the group rather than being delivered from outside. Reflective thematic analysis is particularly suited to capturing this relational epistemology, as it attends to patterned meanings across accounts without erasing their collective and dialogical nature (Clarke & Braun, 2019; Jankowski, 2017).

### **Seeing Ourselves Differently through Story: Re-authoring Subjectivity within Structural Constraint**

The fourth theme addresses transformation, but does so without resorting to individualised notions of change. Participants described shifts in self-understanding, agency, and awareness that emerged through metaphor, reflection, and the integration of past, present, and future. Crucially, these transformations were narrated as relational and contextual, rather than purely internal (Newman & Clare, 2016).

From a liberatory perspective, this theme illustrates how narrative practices support re-authoring without denying constraint. Participants did not describe becoming autonomous

subjects detached from their environments; instead, they reported recognising resources, survival strategies, and possibilities within difficult conditions. This aligns with anticolonial critiques of resilience discourse that place responsibility on individuals while obscuring structural violence (Amo-Agyemang, 2021).

Methodologically, the use of metaphor (e.g., roots, trees, forests) functioned as a non-colonising analytic resource, allowing participants to articulate continuity, rupture, and possibility without being forced into diagnostic or linear narratives. Reflective thematic analysis supports this complexity by allowing themes to hold ambivalence, contradiction, and layered meaning, rather than reducing transformation to outcomes (Sinha, 2025).

### **Holding Pain and Support in Group Storytelling: Collective Care as Anti-Oppressive Praxis**

The fifth theme foregrounds trauma, pain, and care as collective and relational processes, rather than individual pathologies. Participants described how narrative practices enabled the recognition of trauma, often for the first time, and how this recognition was held within group contexts that offered validation and support. From an anti-oppressive standpoint, this is particularly significant: naming trauma within collective spaces resists medicalised and depoliticised framings that isolate suffering from its social causes (Massaquoi & Taiwo-Hanna, 2025; Taylor & Turner, 2025).

At the same time, this theme highlights the ethical risks involved in narrative work. Bringing painful memories to the surface requires careful attention to safety, timing, and context, especially in settings marked by ongoing violence or insecurity. Participants' caution regarding place-based practices such as schizocartography underscores the importance of local knowledge and ethical reflexivity, core principles of anticolonial praxis (Pino Gavidia & Adu, 2022).

Rather than positioning narrative practices as inherently healing, the analysis shows them as potentially reparative but never neutral. Reflective thematic analysis allows this tension to remain visible, supporting an ethic of responsibility rather than interventionist certainty.

### **Methodological Reflections: Themes as Situated Knowledge**

Across themes, this study demonstrates the value of reflective thematic analysis for anticolonial and feminist qualitative research. The themes are not presented as universal truths or best practices, but as situated patterns of meaning that emerged through interpretive engagement with participants' accounts (Crupi & Godden, 2024). The analytic process foregrounds reflexivity, relationality, and power, aligning methodologically with the very values that narrative practices seek to enact.

Importantly, the analysis resists the instrumentalisation of narrative methods. Instead, it positions narrative practice as a relational technology of care, resistance, and meaning-making, whose emancipatory potential depends on ethical conditions, facilitator reflexivity, and structural awareness (Love & McDonnell, 2025). In doing so, the study contributes to qualitative psychology by offering a methodologically explicit account of how anticolonial, anti-oppressive, and liberatory praxes can be enacted—and constrained—within everyday narrative work.

In doing so, the study contributes to bridging the gap between theoretical claims regarding the decolonising potential of narrative practices and their situated enactment in everyday psychosocial work.

## Limitations

This study should be interpreted in light of several limitations. First, the data are based on facilitators' accounts rather than direct reports from community participants, which may privilege practitioner interpretations of narrative processes and outcomes. Second, the dual positioning of participants as both facilitators and community members, while epistemologically valuable, introduces ambiguity in distinguishing experiential perspectives. Third, the study is situated within a specific organisational and relational context, which may limit transferability to other settings. Finally, as a qualitative and interpretive inquiry grounded in reflexive thematic analysis, the findings represent situated constructions of meaning rather than generalisable claims. These limitations, however, are consistent with the study's epistemological commitments and underscore the importance of reflexivity in interpreting narrative praxis.

## Conclusion: Practice-Oriented Implications and Theoretical Contributions

This study contributes to qualitative psychology by demonstrating how narrative practices function as anticolonial, anti-oppressive, and liberatory praxes when understood and enacted as relational, contextual, and ethically situated processes (Fish & Gone, 2024). Rather than positioning narrative methods as universally empowering tools, the findings underscore that their transformative potential is contingent upon the conditions under which they are practiced, the power relations they negotiate, and the reflexivity of those who facilitate them (Kumar, 2025). The themes developed through reflective thematic analysis therefore carry important implications for practitioners, researchers, and organisations engaged in narrative, community-based, and psychosocial work in the Global South and other marginalised contexts (Ciofalo, 2022).

## Implications for Practice: from Technique to Praxis

A central implication of this study is the need to move decisively from a technical to a praxical understanding of narrative work. Across themes, narrative practices emerged not as interventions that can be standardised or scaled independently of context, but as relational processes that require ongoing ethical attunement. Practitioners are thus called to attend less to what narrative tool is used, and more to how, with whom, and under what conditions it is enacted (Porter et al., 2022).

First, the theme of creating the conditions for safe and meaningful participation highlights that safety, voice, and inclusion are not inherent features of narrative spaces. Drawing on anticolonial critiques of participation (e.g. Freire; Spivak), the findings caution against assuming that inviting stories is sufficient to democratise knowledge. Practitioners must actively design against hierarchy by attending to group composition, power asymmetries, gendered norms, and institutional roles. This includes making deliberate choices about group size, facilitation structure, time allocation, and whether particular stakeholders should

be present. From an anti-oppressive standpoint, ethical narrative practice begins not with storytelling, but with infrastructures of care, trust, and accountability (Dutta et al., 2022).

Second, the use of stories for collective reflection, decision-making, and future planning positions narrative practice as a form of collective praxis rather than individual expression. This aligns with feminist and liberation psychology traditions that understand reflection as inseparable from action (Crupi & Godden, 2024). Practitioners working in organisational or community settings can draw on narrative practices to support collective sense-making around identity, values, and direction, while remaining attentive to the structural constraints that limit what action is possible. The findings caution against instrumentalising narrative reflection as a quick pathway to solutions, instead framing it as a process that can clarify tensions, surface contradictions, and support ethically grounded decision-making.

Third, the theme of connecting through shared narratives and collective wisdom reinforces the importance of relationality as a core methodological and ethical principle. Feminist epistemologies have long argued that knowledge is produced through relationship rather than abstraction, and this study shows how shared storytelling, ritual, and creative practices foster forms of connection that resist individualism and expert dominance (de Nooijer & Sol Cueva, 2022). For practitioners, this suggests the value of privileging horizontal learning, peer knowledge, and non-verbal modes of expression—particularly in contexts where dominant linguistic or professional norms may silence certain voices. Narrative practices that legitimise embodied, visual, and symbolic forms of meaning-making can function as epistemic resistance to colonial hierarchies of knowledge.

Fourth, the theme of seeing ourselves differently through story offers a nuanced account of transformation that avoids neoliberal and individualised notions of change. Participants' accounts resonate with feminist and anticolonial critiques of resilience discourse, which caution against celebrating agency while ignoring constraint. In practice, narrative approaches should therefore support re-authoring that is contextually grounded, enabling participants to recognise survival, resources, and possibilities without placing responsibility for change solely on the individual. Metaphor-based practices, such as the Tree of Life, emerge here as particularly valuable because they allow for complexity, continuity, and ambivalence without imposing linear or diagnostic narratives (Dlamini, 2024; Mate et al., 2024).

Finally, the theme of holding pain and support in group storytelling foregrounds collective care as a central dimension of anti-oppressive praxis. In line with feminist trauma scholarship, the findings show that recognising pain within collective spaces can be both validating and risky. Practitioners are therefore ethically obliged to approach narrative work with trauma-informed caution, grounding their practice in local knowledge, contextual safety, and participants' own pacing. Narrative practices should not be assumed to be inherently healing; rather, their reparative potential depends on how pain is witnessed, contained, and shared (McNeil-Young et al., 2024). This reinforces the need for facilitators to adopt positions of humility, reflexivity, and responsibility, rather than expertise or control.

## Theoretical Contributions and Methodological Significance

Beyond practice implications, this study contributes theoretically by demonstrating the compatibility—and mutual reinforcement—between reflective thematic analysis and

anticolonial, feminist qualitative inquiry (Sonn & Bhatia, 2025). By treating themes as interpretive and situated constructions rather than objective findings, the analysis resists positivist and extractive tendencies that have historically characterised research in the Global South (Singh et al., 2025). The themes developed here function as methodological insights into how narrative practices operate within relations of power, rather than as prescriptive models of best practice.

In explicitly foregrounding reflexivity, context, and power, this study aligns with feminist standpoint epistemology and decolonial critiques of objectivity, while offering an empirically grounded account of narrative praxis in action. It thus responds to calls within Qualitative Research in Psychology for qualitative work that is theoretically engaged, methodologically transparent, and politically accountable (Sims & Naidu, 2024).

## Concluding Reflections

Taken together, the findings suggest that narrative practices hold significant potential as liberatory forms of engagement, but only when enacted within ethical, relational, and context-sensitive frameworks (Bunn, 2023). Their power lies not in the stories themselves, but in the conditions that allow stories to be spoken, heard, and held collectively. For practitioners, researchers, and institutions committed to anticolonial and feminist praxis, this study offers both affirmation and caution: narrative work can support connection, agency, and care, but it also demands sustained reflexivity, attentiveness to power, and a willingness to remain with uncertainty (Denborough, 2025).

In this sense, narrative practice is best understood not as a method to be applied, but as an ongoing ethical commitment to relational knowledge production, grounded in solidarity, accountability, and respect for lived experience.

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**Competing interests** The authors declare no competing interests.

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