

## ORIGINAL ARTICLE

# The couple's tree of life: Promoting and protecting relational identity

Carlos A. Chimpén-López<sup>1</sup>  | Meritxell Pacheco<sup>2</sup>  |  
Teresa Pretel-Luque<sup>2</sup>  | Rebeca Bastón<sup>2</sup>  | Daniel Chimpén-Sagrado<sup>2</sup> 

<sup>1</sup>Medical-Surgical Therapeutics Department, Nursing and Occupational Therapy College, University of Extremadura, Cáceres, Spain

<sup>2</sup>Universitat Ramon Llull, FPCEE Blanquerna, Psicologia, Barcelona, Spain

## Correspondence

Carlos A. Chimpén López, Facultad de Enfermería y Terapia Ocupacional, Avda. de la Universidad s/n, 10003 Cáceres, Spain.  
Email: cchimpén@unex.es

## Funding information

Spanish Federation of Family Therapy Associations

## Abstract

We present *The Couple's Tree of Life* (CTOL) as a new collective narrative methodology to strengthen couple relationships and prevent conflicts. The CTOL, based on the tree of life methodology (Ncube & Denborough, *Tree of Life, mainstreaming psychosocial care and support: a manual for facilitators*, REPSI, 2007), aims to reinforce the identity and strengths of the couple. We explain the CTOL implementation process and illustrate it step by step with a group of 14 adult heterosexual Caucasian couples who belonged to Protestant churches in Madrid (Spain). As a way to assess its usefulness before applying the CTOL to other groups of couples, we conducted a pre-post evaluation using the Dyadic Adjustment Scale of Spanier (1976). We found an improvement in dyadic adjustment, quality, understanding of, and satisfaction with, the relationship. The results, though not generalizable at this stage, suggest that the CTOL could reinforce the couple's identity while maintaining individual identities. We also discuss the possible applications of couples therapy.

## KEYWORDS

narrative therapy, couple identity, tree of life, psychosocial intervention

This is an open access article under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs License, which permits use and distribution in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited, the use is non-commercial and no modifications or adaptations are made.

© 2021 The Authors. *Family Process* published by Wiley Periodicals LLC on behalf of Family Process Institute

## INTRODUCTION

The procedures for working on identity in couple relationships have been developed mainly from standpoints based on the joint consideration of individual identities rather than on the relational construction of identity as a couple. Studies on couples' identity are relatively recent, and clearly insufficient as the concept is not well-defined and little researched to date. Sayre et al. (2006) first approached the construction of couple identity from a dialogical perspective that highlighted the question "What does it mean to be a couple?". They explored the perspective of the participants and, therefore, transcended the usual line of inquiry focused on individuals, not on relationships, thus departing from the constructs of researchers. An understanding of couple identity would then be the degree to which the individuals see themselves as a part of a couple and incorporate their relationship into their personal identities, thereby creating a new representation of a "you and me" aspect of their identities (Acitelli et al., 1999). The stronger the partnership identity, the greater is the perception of functioning as a team rather than trying to seek primarily individual benefits (Merrill & Afifi, 2017). Building on these ideas, we propose a definition of couple identity, based on a post-structuralist positioning, in which the socio-cultural and relational components of narrative construction are added to that meaning. We define couple identity as "the interwoven narrative co-construction between the members of the couple that comes from the continuous experience of mutual interchange and their socio-cultural environment, which in turn redefines the individual identity narrative" (Chimpén-López et al., 2019).

Although the relation between the individual experience of couple identity and the degree of satisfaction with the relationship may seem obvious, there is little evidence about it and regarding how to most effectively intervene to enhance couple identity (Acitelli et al., 1999; Cook & Jones, 2002). The enhancement of couple relationships is determined by the link between collaborative common coping and perceived relationship satisfaction (Falconier et al., 2015) and in this way a door is opened to further research and clinical applications in relational identity. Some studies report that one of the main factors to be considered is the assessment of relationship satisfaction, but few have focused on couple identity as a key element of relationship satisfaction (Gonzaga et al., 2007; Graham et al., 2011; Halford & Bodenmann, 2013). Monarch's (2004) research on the role of couple identity in marital satisfaction and stability highlighted the relevance of this construct and its relation to the emotional well-being of the couple. Monarch also developed an observation scale that could be used to assess it. Nevertheless, the same author qualifies the results as preliminary and discusses the need to conduct more research in this regard.

From a phenomenological and constructionist perspective, our main interest lies in working on the construction that couples themselves make about their relationship and the values, principles, dreams, and hopes which enrich it. From the perspective of identity as a dialogical process of narrative construction, we agree with Hermans (2002, p. 71) that the self "can be defined as a dynamic multiplicity of *I*-positions in an imaginary landscape". Consequently, couple identity can be conceptualized as one of those relational positions, relatively interdependent of the rest of the relational positions of the "*I*". At the same time, however, we must consider the narrative perspective on the polyphony of voices that creates the couple's identity. Like an individual identity, a couple identity can also be seen as a multiplicity, a polyphony, not of *I*-positions, but rather of *We*-positions.

Since White and Epston developed the narrative metaphor in the 1980s, this metaphor defends the meaning of one's own life built on the basis of the stories in which one's lived experience is organized; there is no history without experience (Campillo, 2009; García-Martínez, 2012). The narrative approach allows us to understand life, to experience it as a form of discourse that concatenates events through time, and reflects the temporal dimension of human existence (Chimpén-López & Dumitrascu, 2013). Identity would be multi-storied.

White (2000, 2011) defines *story* as a unit of meanings that influence who we are and what we do, so the self-narrative of each person's history is what allows us to give meaning to the lived story. Similarly, the narrative of each couple's history is what allows the couple to give meaning to their lived story. Campillo (2009) added that there is a selection of lived experiences in relation to culture and to those meanings which the person values. Thus, in narrative therapy, relationships, and conversations with others are endowed with a transformative character that influences the construction of the image and personal identity (Madigan, 2019; White & Epston, 1990) as well as the couple's identity. In this sense, Combs and Freedman (2016), treating identity as a relational project, perfectly describes the need for a relational view of identity, congruent with the family therapy position. Of course, this is also applicable to the experience of the couple as a whole and to the influence of one member on the other. Every couple has multiple stories that shape their relational identity. From this point of view, stories of who the couple have been and who they can be would not exist outside their relationships with other people. Their stories are shaped by the couple's experiences with others and their sense of how those others perceive the relationship and respond to it. As a person's identity is relationally constructed, so too is the identity of the couple.

In this paper, we offer The Couple's Tree of Life (CTOL) as an intervention to reinforce and strengthen couple relationships. With the CTOL, based on an interpersonal, relational, and community vision rather than an individual perspective, we intend to apply all the above concepts to the promotion and protection of the relational identity of couples.

## COLLECTIVE NARRATIVE PRACTICE: THE TREE OF LIFE

What is known as *collective narrative practices* (Chimpén-López & Dumitrascu, 2013; Denborough, 2008) have emerged recently. These focus primarily on working with communities and recovering the skills and knowledge of the people to face difficulties based on the conviction that people always do something to respond to these challenges. It is possible, therefore, to work with the resources of the communities themselves, allowing people to tell their life stories and strengthening all the members, as the experience of making a contribution to others maintains and generates hope (Wingard & Lester, 2001). Some of the best-known collective narrative practices are The Tree of Life, The Team of Life, The Timeline, The Story Map, The Kite of Life, The Kitchen of Life, The Recipe of Life, the use of music in communities, and the use of collective documents (Chimpén-López, 2012).

The Tree of Life emerged with the aim of working with the conflicts of those who are going through an experience of vulnerability (Ncube, 2006). It was initially developed by Ncube and Denborough (2007) for groups of children at risk of social exclusion in Southern Africa, to help them to respond to trauma without retraumatizing, motivating them to recognize and value their skills and knowledge (Ncube, 2006). Subsequently, this methodology has been used in all kinds of psychosocial interventions with refugees, sexually abused women, people who have survived natural disasters, families with children in some kind of difficulty, and adults who have suffered some kind of trauma or are diagnosed with a mental disorder (Denborough, 2008). The efficacy of the Tree of Life has been highlighted in different contexts such as refugee children and families (Hughes, 2013; Jacobs, 2018); anorexia nervosa (Ibrahim & Tchanturia, 2018); intervention in schools (Chimpén-López et al., 2014; German, 2013), among others. One pilot study even shows that the combination of Cognitive Behavioral Therapy and the Tree of Life has the potential to address a number of important factors that contribute to recovery and reduce relapse in bipolar disorder (Ibrahim, & Allen, 2018).

The Tree of Life is a practice based on the idea of using the tree as a metaphor to tell stories about one's life. Participants are invited to think of a tree and its parts, and to imagine that each part of the tree represents something about their life (Ncube, 2006). Following

Denborough (2008) The “Tree of Life” has four parts: The Tree of Life; The Forest of Life; The Storms of Life; Certificates and Songs. In Part 1, all participants draw a tree. On the roots, they write about where they come from (village, town, country), their family history (origins, family name, extended family), names of people who have taught them the most important things in life, their favorite place at home and a favorite song. On the ground, they write where they live now and activities they are engaged within their daily life. On the trunk, their skills, abilities, values, and principles of life are noted down, and on the branches their hopes, dreams, and wishes. The leaves of the tree represent significant people who may be alive or may have passed on, while the fruits represent gifts participants have been given, not necessarily material gifts, but rather gifts of being cared for, of being loved, acts of kindness, etc. In Part 2, the participants stick their trees on a wall and so create The Forest of Life. This is a way to reinforce the community's sense of the activity and to prepare part 3. In Part 3, the participants are invited to talk in a collective safe place about the difficulties they may be experiencing. The Forest of Life is taken as a reference and alternate questions are asked in relation to the forest and in relation to the life of the participants. Part 4 is a certificate-awarding ceremony. These certificates are a testimony of the values, skills, dreams, etc. that have helped each of the participants to face the difficulties.

In this paper, we propose using the Tree of Life methodology in couples, taking into account that with The Tree of Life we are working on identity processes aiming to advance toward confirmation of the usefulness of the concept of couple's identity. It should be noted that there are no previous studies in this area. Wakhungu (Denborough, 2009) began the application of The Tree of Life for couples, but did not develop it in-depth and, at the same time, maintained an individual structure of the construction of the tree. We present the CTOL with the aim of reinforcing the identity and strengths of the couple and thus, in doing so, to prevent conflicts.

## THE COUPLE'S TREE OF LIFE

Our adaptation of the Tree of Life to couples seeks to encourage the memory of the couple's initial interactions, to remember what they value about each other, and to make visible what has been important to them as a couple. Using the metaphor of the tree, the various components of the couple's identities are developed. During the construction of the tree, the conversation allows the couples to reconnect, through their local knowledge, to generate alternative relational stories in a safe territory for their identity where they can face the problems, re-examine them, and strengthen themselves using the resources they have. The innovation of our proposal is that social and cultural beliefs are deconstructed through the creation of a single tree for each couple, which then offers a means to reconstruct and strengthen the couple's collective identity and, in turn, the personal identity of each member.

Our proposal for CTOL is structured in five parts. The first part consists of each member of the couple drawing their individual tree (roots, land, trunk, branches, leaves, and fruits) and then sharing with their partner the stories that emerged during the making of their individual trees. In the second part, the couples were asked to draw a single tree representative of their couple and to write and talk about each of its parts. For the roots, the participants talked about the people who taught them something meaningful as a couple, and they chose their favorite place and their favorite song. On the ground of the CTOL, they were asked to talk about some of the common activities they do and where they live now. On reaching the trunk, they reflected on the values, principles, abilities, and skills that distinguish them as a couple and that are common to both of them. The same was done with the branches, but here they talked about their dreams, expectations, and desires as a couple. The leaves represented the people who are important to the couple. Finally, the fruits were the material or emotional gifts that other people offered them. Sometimes some couples drew bird's nests or flowers. In this case,

both elements represent the gifts that the couple have given to other people. In the third part, the aim was to create a space of collective security. To do so, *The Couple's Forest of Life* was built by putting all the trees together in one place in the room, to ensure a communal and non-hostile territory. From that place, each couple's drawing was shared with all the participants and a re-telling of each part of the collective tree was proposed after listening to each couple's stories. The fourth part described *The Storms of the Couple's Life*, i.e., the dangers or possible problems with which the couples may be/have been troubled. The examination of each couple's strengths focused on their capacities, recognized their skills and knowledge, how much they value their relationship, their experiences, and their collective identity. It was the group itself, rather than the therapist, that offered alternatives to problems, suggested new possibilities, and established connections between the participants that favored creating a sense of community.

We chose to add a fifth stage, a collective document that was elaborated and edited by the whole community of participants of the CTOL with a collective voice (see Chimpén-López & Dumitrascu, 2013; Denborough, 2008). This included the participants' own words to express their experience, and each response that couples were engaging with to deal with the difficult times. Collective narrative documentation methodology to assist practitioners to move from an individual to a collective approach was created by Denborough (2008) and consists of the following steps.

The first step is to generate material which will make up the document. In our case, the material is collected from the conversations that take place in the fourth stage: *The Storms of the Couple's Life*. These conversations are recorded; the facilitator can take notes of literal phrases, images, or expressions that couples have used so that when they read the collective document, they can recognize the words as their own. The document should contain the problems that couples are experiencing as well as the skills and knowledge they have to deal with them.

The second step is to draft the document with the following structure:

**Title:** This is usually composed at the end of the process and is made up of ideas suggested by the couples when editing the document. Therefore, they are the ones who give the title to the collective document.

**Introductory paragraph:** This is written in a collective voice and expresses the desire to contribute to the lives of other couples going through similar situations.

The main text of the document is written with a blend of individual and collective voices. At the same time, it is subdivided into themes with each of the skills that couples highlight as valuable for coping with difficulties. Each theme constitutes a heading. As Denborough (2008) states, the document is not a list or categorization of skills, but a richly storied document. Within almost every theme, there is a storyline, and these storylines provide sufficient information to spark the interest and imagination of the reader.

The third step consists in editing the content of the draft written by the facilitator with all the couples together. The couples always must have the opportunity to make any changes or additions they think are needed. The draft is revised as many times as necessary until the couples are entirely satisfied with the document produced.

The fourth and last step is to create a context in which a ceremonial reading of the collective document takes place. Of course, it does not have to be the therapist who reads the document: It can be someone significant for the couples or even several couples who can be read different paragraphs.

Although CTOL is intended for group intervention with couples, the possibility of applying it in the field of couple therapy is also being explored. In this case, neither the awarding of certificates nor the creation of a collective document would take place. The process would be as follows: First, each partner would be asked to make their individual tree as a homework assignment after the first interview in which the problem that harasses them will have been explored. In the second interview, they would share with each other the individual tree and

explore with them the history of the relationship and how everything they have put on the individual trees has helped them, in some way, to deal with the specific difficulty that brought them to the consultation. As a homework assignment, they would be asked to elaborate a joint relationship tree, the CTOL. Before the next interview, the therapist could write a letter to the relationship (as if it were a living entity) to emphasize the sense of relational identity. In the third interview, the experience of the joint realization of the tree would be discussed and the skills, values, principles, and hopes, which helped them to face other storms before, are highlighted with the metaphor of the storms in the couple's life. In this way, their own knowledge of how to cope with the problem is rescued and highlighted.

## **FAMILY UNITED NEVER DEFEATED: THE STORY OF THE MADRILENIAN GROUP**

Once the CTOL was designed, based on the needs detected in the literature and on the previous work with the tree of life, we decided to carry out a first implementation of the CTOL in order to obtain the impressions of the participants' experience and to assess its effect on our participants in constructs related to couple's identity.

### **Ethical considerations**

Our procedures were established in concordance with the Declaration of Helsinki and approved by the Ethics and Clinical Research Committee of Ramón Llull University (ref. 19200007C).

### **Members of the group**

The intervention and its exploratory assessment were carried out in a group format. The participants were initially selected through a non-probabilistic convenience sampling and were 28 adult heterosexual Caucasian couples attending the Center for Multiple Activities in Entrepeñas (Guadalajara, Spain), who belonged to several Protestant churches of the region of Madrid (Spain). The participants were recruited by the leaders of the churches, who hosted a CTOL workshop. They were given information about all the procedures and signed the informed consent form, although this was not binding for participation in the workshop. Participants were heterosexual couples in a stable affective relationship of at least one year's duration, regardless of whether they had children or not. A minimum of one year in the relationship was established for participation as this was considered necessary for a certain sense of interdependence and identity as a couple (Fincham et al., 2005; Guzmán & Contreras, 2012). All the couples had to be of legal age. All of them were informed that they would be asked to complete questionnaires about their experience in the group and about their relationship with their partner, and 26 (13 couples) of them gave their consent for the administration of the questionnaires. Participants were 50% women ( $n = 13$ ) and 50% men ( $n = 13$ ) within an age range of 32–69 years old, with a mean of 47.58 years ( $SD = 11.61$ ). The mean age of the women was 44.46 years ( $SD = 11.32$ ) and 50.69 ( $SD = 11.47$ ) years for the men.

### **Group drivers**

The group was conducted by two members of the research team specialized in the application of the Tree of Life methodology.

## The first story with the CTOL

The intervention was structured in four two-hour sessions over a period of two consecutive weeks. The CTOL was developed according to the steps described above.

1<sup>st</sup>. Each member of the couple drew their individual tree and shared the stories that emerged. The atmosphere in the group was relaxed and pleasant. Many of the participants had not drawn a tree for years. They commented that it made them feel like children and there was positive energy and anticipation for what was to come in the workshop. They were distributed, in couples, throughout the hall and in the surrounding gardens, so that they could share their own tree with each other. The two facilitators went around helping with any doubts that might arise and observing the atmosphere that was produced by sharing the individual tree of life.

2<sup>nd</sup>. The couples drew a single tree representative of their couple, and they wrote and talked about each of its parts. All the couples were brought together in the main room and the next step was to explain them how to make a single tree representative of the couple. They were shown an example and, again, asked to get together with their partner and develop the CTOL. The facilitators, again, went around the different places offering their help and answering questions, although this time it was less necessary.

3<sup>rd</sup>. The construction of The Couple's Forest of Life. The couples were asked to gather again in the main hall. Once there, the couples were asked to share their couple's tree with each other. While one couple shared their tree, the other couples listened attentively to the different stories that emerged from each part. After everyone had shared their couple's tree, they were asked to stick it on a board where all the couples' trees would be displayed together, like a picture exhibition. This was their own Couples' Forest.

4<sup>th</sup>. The Storms of the Couple's Life created the space for the conversation about the couple's resources and strengths to take place. Using the couples' forest as a reference, questions were asked about the storms that couples face in their lives. Topics as diverse as adultery, mistrust, monotony, or too much work, to give just a few examples, came up. Once the various difficulties of the couples were made explicit, the couples were asked what they did to cope with the difficulties. In this way, it was the group itself that offered possible solutions to the storms in the couples' lives, drawing on many of the skills and capacities that had emerged in the different trunks of their trees. They were also asked what the couples do when the storm has passed, in this way, creating awareness that storms are not always present.

5<sup>th</sup>. The construction of the Collective Document, following the steps described above, led to a written record of the values, principles, dreams, and capacities that the couples had already successfully employed to cope with the difficulties. At the same time, the document became a way of circulating the knowledge of these couples to other couples who might be experiencing similar problems. Below, we include the collective document elaborated by the group of couples describing their discoveries and emotions during the intervention.

## Family united never defeated. Practical community advice on how to be happy as a couple and make other couples happy

We, the participants of the couples' camp, want to share with everyone who needs it what we have discovered that we believe can be of help to couples facing difficult situations. We hope that this community document, breaking away from individuality, will serve as a witness to all those couples who encounter difficulties in their life together. We have seen that thinking about the relationship on the principle that we are both united in one tree will help us to give answers to situations of conflict linked to what we want to be as a couple and what God expects of us. Couples can choose and decide, according to their principles and values, the answers they give to the things that happen to them.

In times of difficulty, we as couples respond through:

## Subjugation of I

We have observed that at certain times the subjugation of self causes the tree to grow and not wither. It does not mean that we stop pursuing our individual dreams, but in times of conflict, letting go of selfishness helps the conflict to dissolve.

We have seen that when arguments are very strong or make reasoning difficult, it is advisable to take time to calm down to be able to return to the discussion in order to resolve it.

Not letting small conflicts accumulate is also helpful in preventing larger conflicts. Talking and talking before they become bigger helps us so that our tree does not wither.

## Sense of community

We believe that couples are under pressure from the culture of individualism. We have learned that it is possible to help from a sense of community. "When I came to Spain, I felt lonely, but the support people offered me helped me a lot." We believe that despite the cultural differences, there is a community and that when we go to other places we have this support, almost like a family. For this reason, "I would like to pass on all that we have learned about the importance of values, principles, and responses to storms in couples, to the rest of our community in whatever country."

The solution to couple problems does not occur individually but within a community. Our community can help couples who are going through a difficult time but in a cautious and non-intrusive way. Meetings like the one we have had allow couples to offer each other help.

## Spend time together and surprise each other

There are many times when work and everyday obligations take up the time we devote to caring for our partner's tree. "I have found that by surprising my partner in the kitchen I create a different atmosphere. We think that traveling, having more romantic moments, being made to feel special, and going for walks together are some of the things we can do to make our time together quality time." "For me, caresses are fundamental," "To take her from behind, to tell her how good you look" or "to have more frequent sexual relations," are also things that can help us to spend time together and prevent the wear and tear those years as a couple can produce.

Not doing the same thing all the time and making time for each other are antidotes to the culture of working too much. "Even if I arrive at 9 or 10 o'clock at night I call my wife and tell her to get ready to go for a walk because walking together is good for both of us to have time to talk.

## Acts of service and kindness

Helping, collaborating, talking, cooking, and caring for each other are things we should not forget as a couple.

He likes to write little notes to me because he is more poetic.



Also, this kind of thing helps to discover the way in which both I and my partner manifest and experience love. Tactile, acts of service, kindness, etc. are different kinds of the language of expressing our love and we are not all the same. We have to discover what our partner's language is and respond accordingly.

Being thoughtful, not forgetting important dates, and getting out of the routine are other types of acts of service that nourish the couple's tree.

## Remembering our story as a couple

We have learned that storms stalk couples, often in the form of infidelity, lies, jealousy, and mistrust. To prevent all these things, we have found that remembering our history as a couple and visiting places where we were together in the past and had happy times help clear the clouds from the couple. "For me, it helps to look at photos of when we were dating and when we were newlyweds. Going for a walk one evening, with soft music and reading letters and messages from when we were dating also help rescue our history as a couple".

## Learning to become stronger after the storm

We have seen that we can be like a parachutist, that is, "being able to recognize a storm in order to make decisions at that very moment that stops you from passing through it or even enables you to avoid it" (The Madrilenian Group).

## Materials to record the experiences of participants

In addition to a brief sociodemographic questionnaire, including information about the person and about their couple relationship, we also used two more instruments. A short, open-ended response questionnaire was designed specifically with the aim of gathering significant information on the perceived impact of the intervention on each partner. It included the following questions: (1) "In general, do you think that it has been useful to carry out your Tree of Life? In what sense?" (2) "In general, do you think that it has been useful to carry out the Tree of Life of your relationship? What has it contributed? Have there been any negative aspects in relation to the task?" (3) "Have you been able to better understand any specific aspects of your relationship with your partner? If so, what are they?" (4) "Do you think that you now know your partner better? In what sense?" (5) "Do you think that the fact that you have had these conversations will contribute something to your way of facing possible crises or difficulties that may arise in the future? In what sense?". Although other methods of qualitative data collection such as in-depth interviews or focus groups would have provided more information, the limits of time and context proposed by the organizers did not permit this.

The experience of each dyad was also quantitatively measured using the Spanish version of the Dyadic Adjustment Scale (DAS; Spanier, 1976, 2017). The DAS is a self-administered questionnaire of 32 items scored on a six-point Likert scale, which evaluates four areas of the couple's relationship: consensus, cohesion, marital satisfaction, and expression of affectivity. The global value of dyadic adjustment that each member of the couple perceives measures the perception that both members of the couple have about their relationship. Since there is currently no instrument for assessing couple identity, the DAS offered the best approach to this concept. To analyze the dyadic adjustment of the couples from the scores on the DAS, before and after the CTOL intervention, we used *SPSS* (v.26), to calculate the means comparison tests for

related samples (*Student t* or *Wilcoxon z*), which were analyzed after verification of compliance with the assumption of homogeneity of variances and tests of normality (*Shapiro–Wilk*).

The questionnaires were administered collectively. The sociodemographic questionnaire was administered before the intervention, the DAS (Spanier, 1976, 2017) before and after the intervention, and the open-response questionnaire after the intervention.

## First feedback about the CTOL

The first glimpses of subjective perception and satisfaction with the intervention are described below.

One theme highlighted by the participants was the enrichment from the experience with the rest of the participants, as stated in the collective document: “Our community can help couples who are going through a difficult time, but in a cautious and non-intrusive way.” At the same time, they referred to a greater understanding of one's own relationship, the needs of both partners, and shared values. The relational process stands out, both for increased mutual trust and communication and the fact of remembering together the moments each couple has lived; this increased the participants' understanding of their relationships: “Helping, collaborating, talking, cooking, and caring for each other are things we should not forget as a couple.” Relational processes also appeared in the social area.

When asked whether the intervention resulted in greater knowledge about their partner, most participants responded by referring to specific aspects of improvement in their relationship, and they did so by linking this knowledge to an improvement in the relationship. As they stated: “I think it has helped me to remember what he is like and not to forget that he is my better half and the good he brings to our lives”.

Regarding the resources for preventing and/or facing future storms, the importance of helping them to talk about the storms, to make the resources explicit, and to communicate in general stood out. Again, the influence of others in the relationship appeared as a resource. Also, the influence of socially available discourses and the relevance given to religion were identified, as seen in this excerpt from the collective document: “God will help us to become stronger after the storm and help us to repair the ravages of the storm even if it demands extra effort from us to do so.”

They also highlighted the perception of unity in the relationship as something important for them as a couple. The presence of aspects of the past and of the future stood out, as well as the relevance of sharing in the present. Consideration of the timeline in the couple's resources, thus, appears as relevant, as can be seen in: “We have found that remembering our history as a couple and visiting places where we have been in the past and had happy times helps to clear the clouds from the couple.”

It is noteworthy, furthermore, that although the group, in line with the socio-constructionist epistemology characterizing narrative practices, develops from an equal status, a non-hierarchical position, the participants emphasized the expert role of professionals: “(...) advice from professionals adds significant contributions to our lives, it is always valuable.”

In terms of aspects to be improved regarding the development of the intervention, only three responses were obtained; these came from two subjects and referred to (a) the need to have an environment that is more focused on the activities in order to avoid distractions, (b) the need to be able to have more time for the workshop, and (c) the questionnaires need to be written in larger font size.

With respect to the dyadic adjustment of the couple, there are statistically significant differences between the scores obtained before the intervention and after it, in these areas: the level of total dyadic adjustment,  $t(25) = -7.073, p < 0.05$ ; consensus,  $t(25) = -8.062, p < 0.05$ ; marital satisfaction,  $t(25) = -4.690, p < 0.05$ ; and expression of affection,  $Z = -3.196, p < 0.05$ . On

the contrary, no significant differences were found in the measure of cohesion,  $t(25) = -0.341$ ,  $p > 0.05$ . All the participants ( $N = 26$ ) showed an improvement in their scores, on all the scales, after the intervention.

## DISCUSSION

When the metaphor of the tree is used with couples, it encourages shared stories and memories of the interactions of the couple and with other significant people and situations, inviting relational thinking. This is congruent with the principles of narrative therapy, as is the case when applied individually (Denborough, 2008; Ncube, 2006) and it is valued positively by the participants. The CTOL makes visible what has been important as a couple, without ignoring the individuality of each partner. Moreover, and perhaps enhanced by being in a group context, it facilitates the perception of companionship and teamwork rather than primarily seeking individual benefits. These are elements previously identified by Merrill and Afifi (2017) as related to partnership identity and are also clearly emphasized by the components of the group of couples we worked with.

In accordance with the narrative perspective, our program includes the influence of socio-cultural context in the construction of the joint identity (see Botella et al., 2004, 2005; Gergen & Gergen, 2011; White, 2007). The program even ends with a collective voice, using the collective narrative documentation methodology (Denborough, 2008). The collective document not only speaks for the individuals whose stories are passed on, but in a way, it also speaks for all the couples who contributed to the document, and more broadly, for all couples who live through the hard times.

In relation to our first experience with the CTOL, we found relevance of the intervention for the participants, both in terms of the personal experience, it brings to the couple's relationship and in terms of a better dyadic adjustment. Meanwhile, what the couples expressed coincides with the relation Merrill and Afifi (2017) found between the similarity in the perception of the couple's relationship for each of its members, and mutual satisfaction, commitment, and understanding. It is likely that the strengthening of the couple's identity enhances satisfaction with the relationship as well as the perception of functioning as a team. However, to be able to state this with complete certainty, it would be necessary to have an instrument for the assessment of couple identity.

The presence of aspects of the past and the future, together with the relevance of sharing in the present, stand out in the words of the couples. Thus, the importance of considering the timeline in the construction of the couple's identity appears to be coherent, with the emphasis given to the time dimension from the narrative perspective (see Chimpén-López & Dumitrascu, 2013). In fact, if the timeline is a relevant factor for the construction of individual identity, as Erikson (1968) pointed out, and it is still accepted nowadays (see Grotevant et al., 2017), it makes sense that this would also be true for the couple's identity.

Other aspects emphasized by the participants are the need to spend more time together, the relevant values in the relationship, and the need to avoid storms by becoming aware of one's own resources to cope with them. Thus, couples perceive unity, communication, mutual understanding, and their religious beliefs as protective factors in the face of the possibility of new crises.

The CTOL favors reflection on diverse aspects of the couple's relationship, its strengths, and weaknesses, and this could contribute to the strengthening of the couple's identity. Additionally, it enhances relational aspects that promote increased trust, communication, and joint remembrance, as well as awareness of one's own resources in the couple's relationship to face possible future crises. Furthermore, the feeling of belonging to the community by contributing one's own experience and sharing external experiences about one's own relationship as proposed by

Denborough (2008) is also highlighted. This is in agreement with Wingard and Lester (2001), who affirm that working with the resources of the communities themselves allows people to tell their life stories, and in this way strengthens all the members, as the experience of making a contribution to others is one of the ways of maintaining and generating hope in themselves. This finding supports our relational conceptualization, as opposed to the usual individual intervention positioning, and points to the construction of the couple's relational identity as a construct, which generates new perspectives in terms of intervention and research in the field of identity.

In sum, the CTOL is a relevant contribution at the individual, family, social, and clinical levels, and we believe that it deserves to be further implemented and investigated in other contexts and communities.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This work has been supported by Spanish Federation of Family Therapy Associations (Federación Española de Asociaciones de Terapia Familiar) through the National Research Award 2019. We are grateful to Prof. James McCue for assistance in language editing.

## CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

We have no conflicts of interest to disclose.

## DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT


Data not available/The data that has been used is confidential. Due to the sensitive nature of the questions asked in this study, participants were assured raw data would remain confidential and would not be shared.

## ORCID

Carlos A. Chimpén-López  <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9384-3960>

Meritxell Pacheco  <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1665-1425>

Teresa Pretel-Luque  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6126-964X>

Rebeca Bastón  <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-2848-3799>

Daniel Chimpén-Sagrado  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2006-0911>

## REFERENCES

- Acitelli, L. K., Rogers, S., & Knee, C. R. (1999). The role of identity in the link between relationship thinking and relationship satisfaction. *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships, 16*(5), 591–618. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0265407599165003>
- Botella, L., Corbella, S., Gómez, A. M., Herrero, O., & Pacheco, M. (2005). A personal construct approach to narrative and postmodern therapies. In D. Winter & L. Viney (Eds.), *Personal construct psychotherapy: Advance in theory, practice and research* (pp. 69–80). Whurr.
- Botella, L., Herrero, O., Pacheco, M., & Corbella, S. (2004). Working with narrative in psychotherapy: A relational constructivist approach. In L. E. Angus & J. McLeod (Eds.), *The handbook of narrative and psychotherapy: Practice, theory, and research* (pp. 119–136). Sage Publications Inc.
- Campillo, M. (2009). *Terapia narrativa: Auto-aprendizaje y co-aprendizaje grupal*. Ollin.
- Chimpén-López, C. A. (2012). Lo que necesitas saber para entender la terapia narrativa. *Psyciencia*. [https://www.psyciencia.com/lo-que-necesitas-saber-para-entender-la-terapia-narrativa/?doing\\_wp\\_cron=1568720492.6061110496520996093750](https://www.psyciencia.com/lo-que-necesitas-saber-para-entender-la-terapia-narrativa/?doing_wp_cron=1568720492.6061110496520996093750)
- Chimpén-López, C. A., & Dumitrascu, A. (2013). De la Terapia Narrativa a las prácticas colectivas. *Psyciencia*. <https://www.psyciencia.com/de-la-terapia-narrativa-familiar-a-las-practicas-narrativas-colectivas/>
- Chimpén-López, C. A., Dumitrascu, A., & Montesano, A. (2014). Un enfoque narrativo en la prevención de la violencia escolar: El árbol de la vida y los documentos colectivos. *Revista De Psicoterapia, 25*(98), 41–59. <http://ojs.revistadepsicoterapia.com/index.php/rdp/article/view/90>
- Chimpén-López, C. A., Pacheco, M., Pretel, T., Bastón, R., & Chimpén-Sagrado, D. (May 30–31–June 1, 2019). *Análisis y consolidación de la identidad en la unidad de la pareja a través del árbol de la vida*. *Narrativa y Relaciones*:

- Visibilizando la colaboración.* [Ponencia] VII Encuentro de la Asociación Española de Terapia Narrativa, Palma de Mallorca, España.
- Combs, G., & Freedman, J. (2016). Narrative therapy's relational understanding of identity. *Family Process, 55*(2), 211–224. <https://doi.org/10.1111/famp.12216>
- Cook, J. L., & Jones, R. M. (2002). Congruency of identity style in married couples. *Journal of Family Issues, 23*(8), 912–926. <https://doi.org/10.1177/019251302237297>
- Denborough, D. (2008). *Collective narrative practice*. Dulwich Centre Foundation.
- Denborough, D. (2009). *Alzando nuestras cabezas por encima de las nubes: el uso de las prácticas narrativas para impulsar acción social y desarrollo económico*. Dulwich Centre Foundation.
- Erikson, E. H. (1968). *Identity, youth, and crisis*. W. W. Norton & Company.
- Falconier, M. K., Jackson, J. B., Hilpert, P., & Bodenmann, G. (2015). Dyadic coping and relationship satisfaction: A meta-analysis. *Clinical Psychology Review, 42*, 28–46. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cpr.2015.07.002>.
- Fincham, F. D., Jackson, H., & Beach, S. R. H. (2005). Transgression severity and forgiveness: Different moderators for objective and subjective severity. *Journal of Social and Clinical Psychology, 24*(6), 860–875. <https://doi.org/10.1521/jscp.2005.24.6.860>
- García-Martínez, J. (2012). *Técnicas narrativas en psicoterapia*. Síntesis.
- Gergen, K., & Gergen, M. (2011). *Reflexiones sobre la construcción social*. Paidós.
- German, M. (2013). Developing our cultural strengths: Using the “Tree of Life” strength-based, narrative therapy intervention in schools, to enhance self-esteem, cultural understanding and to challenge racism. *Educational & Child Psychology, 30*(4), 75–99.
- Gonzaga, G. C., Campos, B., & Bradbury, T. (2007). Similarity, convergence, and relationship satisfaction in dating and married couples. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 93*(1), 34–48. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-3514.93.1.34>
- Graham, J. M., Diebels, K. J., & Barnow, Z. B. (2011). The reliability of relationship satisfaction: A reliability generalization meta-analysis. *Journal of Family Psychology, 25*(1), 39–48. <https://doi.org/10.1037/a0022441>
- Grotevant, H. D., Lo, A. Y. H., Fiorenzo, L., & Dunbar, N. D. (2017). Adoptive identity and adjustment from adolescence to emerging adulthood: A person-centered approach. *Developmental Psychology, 53*(11), 2195–2204. <https://doi.org/10.1037/dev0000352>
- Guzmán, M., & Contreras, P. (2012). Estilos de apego en relaciones de pareja y su asociación con la satisfacción marital [Attachment styles in couples and their association with marital satisfaction]. *Psykhe, 21*(1), 69–82. <https://doi.org/10.4067/S0718-22282012000100005>
- Halford, W. K., & Bodenmann, G. (2013). Effects of relationship education on maintenance of couple relationship satisfaction. *Clinical Psychology Review, 33*(4), 512–525. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cpr.2013.02.001>
- Hermans, H. J. M. (2002). The dialogical self: One person, different stories. In Y. Kashima, M. Foddy, & M. J. Platou (Eds.), *Self and identity: Personal, social and symbolic* (pp. 71–100). Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Hughes, G. (2013). Finding a voice through ‘The Tree of Life’: A strength-based approach to mental health for refugee children and families in schools. *Clinical Child Psychology and Psychiatry, 19*(1), 139–153. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1359104513476719>
- Ibrahim, J., & Allen, J. (2018). The highs and lows through recovery: An integrative group combining cognitive behavioral therapy, narrative therapy, and the tree of life. *Group, 42*(1), 23–33. <https://doi.org/10.13186/group.42.1.0023>
- Ibrahim, J., & Tchanturia, K. (2018). Patients' experience of a narrative group therapy approach informed by the “Tree of Life” model for individuals with anorexia nervosa. *International Journal of Group Psychotherapy, 68*(1), 80–91. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00207284.2017.1315586>
- Jacobs, S. F. (2018). Collective narrative practice with unaccompanied refugee minors: “The Tree of Life” as a response to hardship. *Clinical Child Psychology and Psychiatry, 23*(2), 279–293. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1359104517744246>
- Madigan, S. (2019). *Narrative therapy*. American Psychological Association.
- Merrill, A. F., & Afifi, T. D. (2017). Couple identity gaps, the management of conflict, and biological and self-reported stress in romantic relationships. *Human Communication Research, 43*(3), 363–396. <https://doi.org/10.1111/hcre.12110>
- Monarch, N. D. (2004). The role of couple identity in marital satisfaction and stability. In *Dissertation Abstracts International: Section B: The Sciences and Engineering, 64*(7-B).
- Ncube, N. (2006). The tree of life project: Using narrative ideas in work with vulnerable children in Southern Africa. *The International Journal of Narrative Therapy & Community Work, 1*, 1-16. Retrieved March 19, 2019, from <https://narrativetherapycentre.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/Tree-of-Life-by-Ncazelo-Ncube-2006.pdf>
- Ncube, N., & Denborough, D. (2007). *Tree of Life, mainstreaming psychosocial care and support: A manual for facilitators*. REPSSI.
- Sayre, G., Lambo, D., & Navarre, H. (2006). On being a couple: A dialogical inquiry. *Journal of Phenomenological Psychology, 37*(2), 197–215. <https://doi.org/10.1163/156916206778876308>
- Spanier, G. B. (1976). Measuring dyadic adjustment: New scales for assessing the quality of marriage and similar dyads. *Journal of Marriage and the Family, 38*, 15–28. <https://doi.org/10.2307/350547>

- Spanier, G. B. (2017). *DAS. Escala de Ajuste Diádico* (R. Martín – Lanás, A. Cano-Prous, y M.I. Beunza-Nuin, adaptadores) TEA Ediciones.
- White, M. (2000). *Reflections on narrative practice: Interviews and essays*. Dulwich Centre Publications.
- White, M. (2007). *Maps of narrative practice*. W.W. Norton & Company.
- White, M. (2011). *Narrative practice: Continuing the conversations*. W.W. Norton & Company.
- White, M., & Epston, D. (1990). *Narrative means to therapeutic ends*. W.W. Norton & Company.
- Wingard, B., & Lester, J. (2001). *Telling our stories in ways that make us stronger*. Dulwich Centre Publications.

**How to cite this article:** Chimpén-López, C. A., Pacheco M., Pretel-Luque T., Bastón R., & Chimpén-Sagrado D. (2021). The couple's tree of life: Promoting and protecting relational identity. *Family Process*, 00, 1–14. <https://doi.org/10.1111/famp.12727>