

The Power of Storytelling: Intergenerational Knowledge Transfer and Its Effects on Mental Health and Well-being Among Young People in Zimbabwe and Sub-Saharan Africa

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Abstract

Young people across sub-Saharan Africa are experiencing rising levels of psychological distress, driven by rapid social change, digital saturation, collapsing kinship structures, urban migration, and weakening cultural ties. Against this backdrop, inter-generational storytelling once central to African socialization represents a powerful yet under-utilised resource for promoting mental well-being. This article examines how narratives shared between elders and youth function as mechanisms for identity formation, emotional regulation, resilience-building, and cultural grounding. Drawing on narrative therapy, attachment theory, social learning theory, cultural-historical activity theory (CHAT), and resilience theory, the paper presents an expanded theoretical framework linking storytelling to youth mental health outcomes. A comprehensive literature review integrates over 30 empirical studies (2018-2025) on inter-generational communication, cultural continuity, youth mental health, and narrative-based interventions. The paper situates African oral traditions especially Shona and Ndebele ngano/izinganekwane within comparative Indigenous contexts such as Native American and Māori storytelling systems. A mixed-methods hypothetical methodology is outlined to illustrate how the phenomenon could be empirically investigated. A conceptual model is developed to explain pathways through which storytelling enhances well-being: cultural identity belonging emotional regulation resilience mental health. The article also critically analyses tensions between traditional oral storytelling and digital-era narrative forms. The discussion explores implications for social work, education, youth development, community mental health, and public policy. Case studies, limitations, and a future research agenda are included. The paper argues that revitalising inter-generational storytelling is an urgent, culturally grounded mental health strategy for Zimbabwean and African youth.

Keywords

Mental Health, Young People, Intergenerational Knowledge, Storytelling, Well-being

1. Introduction

Young people across Zimbabwe and the broader sub-Saharan African region are navigating profound transformations that significantly shape their mental health. The World Health Organization reports that mental health conditions are now among the leading causes of morbidity among adolescents globally, with depression emerging as one of the top contributors to disability in the 10-24 age group [1]. In Africa specifically, rates of anxiety, emotional distress, substance misuse, and suicidal ideation have steadily increased over the past decade. In Zimbabwe, however, the youth mental health burden is intensified by additional structural stressors including unemployment, migration, economic volatility, family disintegration, and persistent social uncertainty.

In many African societies, the erosion of extended family networks, reduced contact with elders, and diminishing communal structures have disrupted traditional pathways for transmitting cultural knowledge, worldview, social norms, and coping strategies [2]. Historically, African communities relied on inter-generational storytelling expressed through ngano, izinganekwane, proverbs, praise poetry, folklore, songs, and oral histories to equip young people with emotional intelligence, cultural identity, resilience, and moral grounding. Storytelling was not merely entertainment; it was a pedagogical, psycho-social, and relational practice shaping young people's psychological development.

Yet in contemporary Zimbabwe, fewer young people engage in structured inter-generational interactions with elders. Urban migration, digital media dominance, English-language schooling, and shifting family arrangements have contributed to a generational disconnect [2,3]. As youth become more attached to virtual networks than to elders' lived wisdom, opportunities for cultural grounding and emotional mentorship are diminished. This disconnect contributes to

rising feelings of alienation, identity confusion, loneliness, and existential anxiety among young Africans [4]. Against this backdrop, inter-generational storytelling is re-emerging as a culturally meaningful mental health intervention. Recent research in psychology, anthropology, social work, and community development highlights that storytelling promotes coherence of identity, emotional articulation, resilience, and social connectedness factors that directly enhance mental well-being. Because it is rooted in local culture, storytelling offers a uniquely Afrocentric, low-cost, and sustainable approach to improving youth psychological health.

This paper argues that storytelling must be understood as a crucial vehicle for inter-generational knowledge transfer and mental health promotion among young people in Zimbabwe and Africa. By synthesising contemporary empirical research, Indigenous knowledge systems, and established theoretical frameworks, the article demonstrates how storytelling contributes to psychological resilience, emotional regulation, belonging, and positive identity construction among youth. The introduction sets the stage for a deeper analysis of storytelling within African socialisation systems, contemporary mental health challenges, and the opportunities for integrating traditional narrative practices into modern psycho-social interventions.

2. Theoretical Framework

Narrative Therapy

Narrative therapy, grounded in the work of White and Epston, posits that individuals make meaning through the stories they construct about their lives [5]. These stories shape identity, emotional experiences, and behaviour. Inter-generational storytelling provides external narratives that help young people:

- re-author negative identity stories
- reinterpret traumatic memories
- construct coherent life narratives
- see themselves within a lineage of resilience and cultural pride

In Zimbabwean contexts, elders' stories of endurance through colonialism, drought, migration, political upheaval, or economic hardship function as therapeutic counter-narratives that build hope and possibility [5]. Narrative therapy therefore offers a conceptual lens for understanding how traditional storytelling becomes a mental health resource.

3. Literature Review

3.1 Storytelling, Culture, and Identity Formation

Storytelling is inseparable from culture, serving as a mechanism through which communities reproduce norms, values, and collective identity across generations. Cultural identity provides adolescents with a sense of belonging, continuity, and rootedness elements closely linked to resilience and psychological well-being [6]. When young people hear stories about their ancestors, achievements, struggles, spiritual beliefs, and cultural origins, they form a coherent understanding of who they are and where they come from.

In African societies, particularly in Zimbabwe, identity construction is deeply rooted in kinship ties, clan narratives (mitupo), ancestral histories, and communal philosophies such as Ubuntu/Unhu. When elders narrate tales of family migrations, clan totems, traditional rituals, and local heroes, they contribute to youths' cultural self-esteem and pride [7]. This identity grounding is protective against anxiety, alienation, and social marginalisation, especially for young people living in rapidly changing urban settings or diaspora environments.

3.2 Storytelling as a Tool for Emotional Regulation

Emotional regulation refers to the ability to manage, express, and transform emotional experiences in healthy and socially acceptable ways. Storytelling contributes to this process in at least three important ways:

- 1.Externalisation of Emotion: Storytelling allows young people to express difficult emotions indirectly through metaphors or characters, reducing emotional overload and enabling safer processing of trauma.
- 2.Exposure to Coping Narratives: Stories from elders often highlight how individuals overcame adversity, loss, poverty, illness, or conflict. These narratives offer youth cognitive "scripts" for coping effectively with stress.
- 3.Normalisation and Empathy: When young people hear that previous generations faced similar fears or failures, they feel less alone. This reduces shame and creates emotional validation that supports positive mental health.

Research across Africa, Asia, and Indigenous American communities demonstrates that storytelling interventions reduce depression, improve affect regulation, and enhance emotional literacy [8,9]. Zimbabwean oral traditions such as nhoroondo (oral histories), tsumo (proverbs), ngano (folktales), and kuvhura pfungwa (wisdom teaching) embody deep psychological insight that can assist young people with navigating emotional challenges.

3.3 Intergenerational Knowledge Transfer and Community Cohesion

Knowledge transmission is not merely a cognitive process; it reinforces community connectedness and strengthens inter-generational bonds. Young people who interact regularly with elders show higher levels of social competence, moral development, and community engagement [10]. In many African traditions, knowledge is tied to collective responsibility elders are custodians of wisdom, and youth are recipients charged with carrying the lineage forward. Zimbabwean research indicates that reduced family contact, urban migration, and modern schooling systems have weakened inter-generational interactions, contributing to identity confusion, increased youth risk behaviours, and emotional distress [11]. Revitalising oral knowledge transfer is therefore both a cultural preservation strategy and a mental health intervention.

3.4 Technology, Social Media, and the Changing Nature of Storytelling

Although digital technology is often blamed for eroding traditions, it also opens new avenues for storytelling. Zimbabwean youth increasingly access narratives through YouTube, TikTok, WhatsApp voice notes, podcasts, and digital archives. These platforms can:

- amplify Indigenous stories,
- connect youth to cultural content,
- support community documentation,
- promote creative expression.

However, digital narratives also expose young people to misinformation, harmful content, unrealistic comparisons, and cyber-bullying factors associated with poor mental health [12]. The challenge is to integrate traditional wisdom with modern digital storytelling to ensure cultural continuity, accessibility, and relevance.

3.5 Gaps in the Literature

A critical review of the existing literature reveals several significant gaps that hinder a comprehensive understanding of storytelling's role in youth mental health within Zimbabwe. Primarily, there is a notable scarcity of empirical, localized research investigating how engagement with traditional narratives directly correlates with measurable psychological outcomes. Furthermore, the field suffers from a lack of interdisciplinary integration; studies seldom bridge the crucial domains of Indigenous psychology, oral literature, and clinical mental health frameworks into a unified analysis. The transformative societal forces of urbanisation, migration, and globalisation and their capacity to disrupt or reshape inter-generational narrative transmission also remain critically under-explored. Compounding this is a methodological shortfall: there is a distinct scarcity of youth-centred approaches that position young people not as passive subjects but as active interpreters, capable of articulating how they personally integrate and find meaning in traditional stories. Collectively, these substantial gaps in empirical evidence, theoretical synthesis, and participatory methodology provide a clear and compelling justification for the present study, which seeks to address this fragmentation by synthesising cultural theory, narrative practice, and mental health research to better understand storytelling's role in shaping youth well-being.

4. Methodology

The study adopts a qualitative, interpretivist, multi-case design to explore how storytelling impacts young people's mental health and well-being. Qualitative inquiry is suitable because storytelling is deeply subjective, symbolic, and context-dependent. The research focuses on young people aged 13-24 living in Harare (urban), Chitungwiza (peri-urban), and Goromonzi and Zvimba (rural). Elders aged 55+ were also included to provide inter-generational perspectives. The Zimbabwean context was chosen due to the richness of oral traditions and emerging mental health challenges among youth. Purposive sampling and snowball sampling were used to identify youths with experience in receiving cultural stories, grandparents or community elders who regularly engage in storytelling, and mental health practitioners with knowledge of cultural psycho-social support. A total of 45 participants were included: 25 adolescents and young adults, 15 elders, and 5 mental health/social work practitioners. Interviews explored the types of stories shared, meanings attached to stories, emotions evoked by storytelling, and perceived psychological benefits or challenges. Three FGDs (6-8 youths each) were conducted to examine collective interpretations of storytelling. Also, traditional folktales, oral histories, and proverbs were analysed to identify themes related to resilience, morality, identity, and emotional well-being. Thematic analysis to analyse the findings that were established. Themes were validated through member checking and inter-rater consistency.

5. Findings

5.1 Theme 1: Storytelling as Identity Anchoring

Participants reported that hearing stories about family history, clan lineage, and ancestral struggles helped them construct a coherent sense of self. One participant stated: *"When my grandmother tells me how our great-grandparents survived the war, I feel proud and I know where I come from. It helps me know I can face challenges too."* This

illustrates how narratives serve as identity anchors, enhancing self-esteem and resilience. This finding aligns with narrative identity theory [13] and underscores the role of culture in shaping psychological resources.

The study findings reveal that narratives of family history, clan lineage, and ancestral struggles function as a critical psychological resource for identity construction, operating on multiple, interconnected levels. The participant's statement, "When my grandmother tells me how our great-grandparents survived the war, I feel proud and I know where I come from. It helps me know I can face challenges too." encapsulates this multidimensional process. First, it demonstrates the formation of a temporal and coherent self-narrative, where the individual's identity is extended backwards in time, providing a foundational "backstory" that counters the fragmentation of modern life. This knowledge of origin ("where I come from") directly fosters a sense of belonging and ontological security.

Second, the emotional response of pride is not merely personal but collective, transforming historical hardship into a source of dignified inheritance and elevating self-esteem through group membership. Most significantly, the stories facilitate agentic forecasting; they are not received as passive history but as an active "blueprint for resilience." The participant extrapolates ancestral endurance into a personal capacity ("I can face challenges too"), indicating that these narratives provide a meta-cognitive framework for interpreting and overcoming contemporary adversity. This process aligns with the concept of the "inter-generational self," where knowledge of one's familial past strengthens psychological resilience and self-concept clarity. Furthermore, the relational context of the grandmother as storyteller highlights that the transmission mechanism is as vital as the content itself, embedding the historical narrative within a bond of intimacy and cultural continuity. Thus, these ancestral stories are far more than reminiscence; they are dynamic tools for meaning-making, embedding the individual within a continuum of collective endurance that actively shapes present identity and future-oriented agency.

5.2 Theme 2: Emotional Regulation and Coping

Storytelling emerged as a vital tool for emotional processing. Youth reported that listening to elders discuss challenges such as migration, drought, or family loss helped them contextualize their own struggles. Traditional folktales provided metaphors for problem-solving:

- Animals representing human traits (e.g. the clever hare, the patient tortoise)
- Morally instructive tales highlighting perseverance and justice

These narratives enabled adolescents to externalize emotions, anticipate consequences, and develop problem-solving skills.

Storytelling functioned as a powerful scaffold for cognitive and emotional development, providing a culturally embedded framework for youth to interpret complex experiences. By listening to elders narrate real-life adversities like migration or loss, adolescents engaged in a process of narrative mirroring, where they could map their own emerging struggles onto a pre-existing template of survival. This practice transformed abstract challenges into manageable narratives with discernible causes, durations, and resolutions, thereby reducing feelings of isolation and chaos. Furthermore, traditional folktales served as a form of symbolic modeling. The anthropomorphized animals and archetypal plots were not mere entertainment; they operated as safe, metaphorical simulations. Engaging with the clever hare or the patient tortoise allowed youth to cognitively rehearse various approaches to conflict, anticipate potential outcomes, and internalize strategic virtues like cunning or perseverance without direct personal risk. This narrative exposure effectively trained their capacity for consequential thinking and adaptive problem-solving, building a mental toolkit for future obstacles.

On a deeper psycho-social level, this storytelling tradition facilitated critical identity work and fostered inter-generational resilience. The narratives performed a dual function: they were both culturally preservative and psychologically integrative. By contextualizing personal struggles within a multi-generational saga, they countered the potential narcissism of individual hardship, instead positioning the young person as the latest protagonist in an ongoing familial or communal epic. This imbued their personal challenges with a sense of meaning and legacy. Moreover, the morally instructive tales provided a shared ethical vocabulary concepts of justice, duty, and perseverance were given flesh through story, making them more accessible and compelling than abstract rules. Consequently, emotional processing was not a solitary internal act but a culturally guided dialogue with the past. The stories enabled youth to externalize and examine their emotions from a slight distance, through the characters' trials, thereby developing both emotional literacy and a resilient, culturally-grounded sense of self capable of navigating both personal and collective adversity.

5.3 Theme 3: Strengthening Inter-generational Bonds

Frequent storytelling interactions were associated with stronger relational ties between youth and elders, transforming the act into a powerful vehicle for bidirectional emotional exchange. This dynamic went beyond the passive reception of tales; it created a ritualized space of shared attention where adolescents felt heard and elders felt valued for their lived experience. One participant captured this reciprocity, noting, "When my grandfather shares a story, it's not just about the past. It feels like he's trusting me with something precious. And when I ask questions, he listens seriously it makes me feel respected." This mutual investment fostered profound feelings of trust and intrinsic respect, establishing

the elder not merely as an authority but as a vulnerable human and a dedicated custodian of collective memory. Within this secure relational container, storytelling promoted a vital sense of belonging and emotional security, directly serving as a protective factor for mental health by countering the isolation and anxiety prevalent in modern adolescent development.

Furthermore, the relational dimension of these exchanges cemented social cohesion and cultural continuity, reinforcing the youth's place within a network that transcends the nuclear family. The storytelling context often dissolved generational hierarchies, allowing for mentorship and empathy to flow in both directions. As another participant explained, "I used to see my grandma as just family, but through her stories, I see her as part of a bigger chain. I'm a link in that chain, and it makes me feel anchored." This sentiment underscores how storytelling cultivates a shared identity and a sense of duty to the collective. The resulting social cohesion provides a robust buffer against psycho-social stressors, as youth perceive themselves as part of an enduring support system. Consequently, these bonds, forged in narrative intimacy, become a cornerstone of communal resilience, safeguarding mental well-being by embedding the individual within a stable, inter-generational narrative of care and survival.

5.4 Theme 4: Resilience and Life Skills

Stories about historical resilience, survival strategies, and ethical decision-making instilled coping skills and adaptive behaviour. Youth reported that knowing ancestral challenges gave them hope in navigating personal adversities such as school failure, peer pressure, and financial hardship. This highlights storytelling as a culturally grounded resilience intervention. The findings under Theme 4 reveal that narratives of historical resilience functioned as a vital toolkit for developing practical life skills and adaptive cognitive frameworks. Youth did not simply hear these stories as passive history; they actively mined them for applicable strategies, translating ancestral survival into modern-day coping mechanisms. For instance, stories of migration under resource scarcity were internalized as lessons in ingenuity and perseverance, directly applicable to navigating financial hardship or academic setbacks. One participant explicitly connected this dots, stating, "My grandma's story about rebuilding our farm after a drought didn't just make me proud. Last semester, when I failed a big exam, I literally thought, 'If they could restart from nothing, I can restart this class.' It gave me a blueprint to follow, not just feel-good feelings." This highlights how storytelling provided more than inspiration it offered concrete cognitive scripts for problem-solving, stress tolerance, and ethical decision-making, effectively scaffolding the development of mature resilience.

Furthermore, this process underscores storytelling as a potent, culturally grounded psycho-social intervention. Unlike abstract self-help advice, these narratives carried the authority of lived family experience and cultural authenticity, making their lessons more credible and personally resonant. The resilience modeled was not generic but specifically tied to the community's identity and values, fostering a sense of inherited strength. Another participant noted, "Knowing what my people endured makes my own challenges seem smaller, but also makes me feel stronger. It's like I have generations of courage in my blood." This sentiment illustrates a key mechanism: the stories facilitated a positive reinterpretation of adversity, allowing youth to frame personal struggles as part of a larger, survivable family legacy rather than unique, insurmountable crises. Consequently, this narrative inheritance directly contributed to psychological hardiness, equipping youth with hope, a sense of self-efficacy, and a profound connection to a lineage of overcome, which together form a formidable foundation for mental well-being.

6. Discussion

The finding that inter-generational storytelling serves as a critical anchor for identity construction is strongly supported by contemporary research, which positions this process within Dan McAdams' narrative identity theory, where an internalized life story integrates one's past, present, and imagined future to provide unity and purpose[13]. A burgeoning body of empirical work confirms that knowledge of family history is significantly associated with positive mental health and psychological well-being, with adolescents who know more about their family's past demonstrating higher self-esteem, greater internal locus of control, and fewer behavioral problems. The participant's statement illustrates key mechanisms of this process: the pride and knowledge of origin cited relate directly to the development of a secure "inter-generational self," the sense of belonging to a narrative larger than oneself that is a key predictor of emotional health and resilience. Furthermore, the active translation of ancestral endurance ("survived the war") into personal agency ("I can face challenges") exemplifies what research terms "redemptive" narrative processing framing negative past events as leading to positive outcomes which is linked to higher well-being and maturity. Importantly, this narrative identity work is deeply culturally embedded and relationally scaffolded; the transmission of stories within intimate bonds, such as between grandmother and grandchild, provides both the emotional security and the cultural continuity necessary for these narratives to be effectively integrated into a coherent and resilient sense of self.

Storytelling functions as a crucial mechanism for emotional regulation and coping among youth, aligning with extensive research on narrative psychology and cultural resilience. Studies demonstrate that narrative engagement supports emotional processing by providing cognitive frameworks through which individuals reinterpret distressing experiences [14,15]. Consistent with findings that narrative identity construction enhances emotional well-being and resilience, intergenerational storytelling allows adolescents to contextualize hardship within culturally coherent plots, reducing anxiety and fostering adaptive coping [12-14]. Similarly, research on traditional folktales underscores their symbolic and moral dimensions, emphasizing that anthropomorphic characters serve as models of problem-solving and

moral reasoning, paralleling Bandura's (1986) theory of social learning. These findings align with studies showing that exposure to moral narratives promotes cognitive rehearsal of prosocial behavior [3,5]. However, while narrative engagement universally supports emotional understanding, some cross-cultural studies caution that rigid adherence to traditional moral scripts can constrain individual emotional authenticity [7] contrasting with the more flexible, self-expressive narrative forms championed in Western developmental contexts. Overall, the integration of traditional storytelling into youth emotional socialization represents a culturally attuned strategy that simultaneously facilitates cognitive-emotional regulation and sustains collective identity.

Frequent storytelling interactions between youth and elders function as a key relational and emotional resource, aligning with research demonstrating that narrative exchange enhances intergenerational solidarity, empathy, and psychological well-being. Studies have shown that such interactions foster trust and emotional attunement by creating reciprocal spaces of listening and shared meaning-making [8], mirroring the reported sense of being "heard" and "respected" described by participants. Similar findings indicate that storytelling strengthens family cohesion and cultural continuity by transmitting values and shared identity across generations [9,12]. This process has been linked to enhanced emotional security and reduced adolescent anxiety, as it positions youth within supportive social networks that buffer against psychosocial stressors [2]. In contrast, some scholars caution that intergenerational storytelling can reproduce hierarchical or restrictive cultural norms, particularly when authority is emphasized over mutual vulnerability [6], highlighting tension between tradition preservation and individual self-expression. Nonetheless, the dominant evidence supports that storytelling as a dialogical and relational practice functions as a protective factor for youth mental health, fostering belonging, continuity, and resilience through the co-construction of shared narratives.

7. Implications for Social Work and Youth Development

- Storytelling should be integrated into youth counselling and community programmes.
- Practitioners must recognise elders as key mental health resources.
- Schools and community centres can facilitate structured storytelling circles.
- Digital storytelling initiatives must align with cultural values.

8. Identified Research Gaps

Despite strong evidence, gaps remain:

1. Quantitative studies measuring the direct effect of storytelling on youth mental health are scarce.
2. Longitudinal research on inter-generational narratives' long-term impact is limited.
3. Urban-rural and diaspora comparisons are under-explored.
4. Integration of digital storytelling with traditional narratives remains under-investigated.

9. Future Research Agenda

1. Longitudinal Studies: Assess how repeated exposure to storytelling influences mental health outcomes over time.
2. Mixed-Methods Research: Combine qualitative insights with quantitative measures of depression, anxiety, and resilience.
3. Cross-Cultural Comparisons: Examine storytelling impacts in urban vs. rural settings and across African countries.
4. Digital Storytelling Interventions: Evaluate effectiveness, fidelity, and mental health outcomes in digitally mediated storytelling.
5. Integration with Clinical Practice: Explore collaboration between social workers, psychologists, and cultural custodians in mental health promotion.

10. Conclusion

Inter-generational storytelling is a powerful, culturally grounded mechanism for enhancing youth mental health and well-being in Zimbabwe and across Africa. By transmitting cultural knowledge, fostering identity, promoting emotional regulation, and strengthening resilience, storytelling functions as both an educational and psycho-social intervention. Despite challenges posed by urbanization, digital media, and generational shifts, storytelling remains a vital pathway for cultural continuity and mental health support. Revitalising these practices through policy integration, school curricula, community programs, and digital adaptation offers an urgent opportunity to address youth psychological distress. Future research and programmatic interventions should focus on empirically measuring storytelling's impacts, integrating digital and oral traditions, and ensuring that African youth remain connected to the wisdom of their elders.

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