# *Reconstructing Adolescents' Depression: A Praxis-Oriented Approach*

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The Asian Conference on the Social Sciences 2024
Official Conference Proceedings

**Abstract**
Adolescent suicide is a significant societal issue, with depression being a crucial indicator of suicide risk. Current research in Taiwan often perceives adolescent depression as a disease when discussing suicide prevention. However, there is limited exploration using a non-labeling and non-definitional approach to understand "depression" as a normal state (Newman, 1991). This study employs a practice-oriented research method, conducting image narrative for depressed adolescents. By having teenagers capture images depicting their depressive experiences in the realms of family, school, and community, a reconstruction of diverse depressive expressions takes place. Through curating new visual stories and engaging in dialogues with society, a new narrative experience is generated, aiming to eliminate internalized stigma and challenge dominant depression narratives. Findings reveal that teenagers, in reconstructing their stories of depression, undergo the following process: 1. Adolescent depression as an undifferentiated negative emotion, mixed with a chaotic state of unidentifiable life experiences and emotions. 2. Naming the experience allows adolescents to break free from the chaotic state. 3. Linking emotions and life experiences enables autonomy and liberation from a sense of helplessness. 4. Core life experiences often carry social stigma, hindering them in layers of vocabulary and peripheral events. 5. When teenagers collectively present their new depressive stories through curation, they are empowered with narrative energy. Surprisingly, the deepest impact on parents is not from their own kids but from other teenagers. This study affirms the effectiveness of a practice-oriented approach in adolescent depression research and its outcomes, suggesting the need for its wider promotion.

Keywords: Adolescent Depression, Image-Based Narrative, Praxis-Orientation Research

## Introduction

For adolescents, the primary developmental task at this stage is to establish self-identity (Erikson, 2000). As adolescents shift their focus from family to school and society, they may encounter more complex and multi-layered relationship issues. These issues, stemming from family, school, society, and culture, accumulate in the adolescents' future life imagery, often presenting as depression.

This study conducts an image-based narrative group for adolescents at high risk of suicide due to depression. By having the adolescents capture images of their depression in the contexts of family, school, and community, the study aims to reconstruct different aspects of their depression and form new understandings of their depressive experiences. We curated exhibitions to present these new image stories and facilitated dialogue with society (including parents, teachers, and friends). This generated new narrative experiences, thereby eliminating internalized self-stigma and the dominance of mainstream depression narratives.

## Method

Fred Newman (1991) proposed a non-labeling approach and a non-definitional approach to discuss "depression," suggesting that being depressed is almost an essential part of being human. However, unlike general sadness or negative emotions such as frustration, depression is linked to a profound sense of loss. This loss generates a deep sense of emptiness (some of pointlessness) and a lack of meaning in social and cultural contexts. Seeking answers solely from the path of social adaptation, we will be overly determined by socially emotional cognitive self-understandings (p.101) to adapt to the present and will be unable to resist the next wave of social maladaptation.

To treat loss and depression with "history," from Fred Newman's perspective (Newman, 1991), personal experiences of depression have historical roots and are shaped through historical development, including ideas, practices, and values. Hsia (2010) believes that a practice-oriented social learning process involves action research that promotes social change within social relationships and phenomena. This process (by the actors) also creates a social learning space for communication and dialogue between individuals and groups. Restructuring social life is a prerequisite for transforming consciousness, and establishing a narrative field can be seen as a form of social practice that constructs social life.

This study views participants' "Image-based Narrative" as social exploration actions, negotiating the distinction between personal experiences of depression in the public and private domains. Discussing one's life and depression in the public domain challenges the social structure's individual experiences. Furthermore, if the depressive experience involves family privacy or social stigma, it becomes a taboo. Lai (2004) pointed out that under appropriately planned conditions, in the intentional probing of the narrator, distorted emotions under moral judgment or cultural oppression can be used as a trial balloon, aiming to find a path to a better society that can embrace oneself, giving society another chance to respond to those previously distorted emotions.

This study uses "images" as a "narrative" medium. Images are more intuitive than text and less subject to cognitive control. In exploring memory, visualization and metaphor (Kopp & Eckstein, 2004; Lingg & Kottman, 1991) are crucial techniques. They enable the

"experiencing self" (Lai, 2004) to gradually form in the transitional space and potential space between the internal and external, capturing the scene.

**The Image-Based Narrative Group**

The steps for conducting the image-based narrative group for depressed adolescents in this study are as follows:

- Recruitment of Members: Collaborate with counseling offices in local junior high and high schools to recruit depressed adolescents. The recruitment process ensures the physical and mental health and well-being of the adolescents and obtains consent from their parents or guardians. This study has passed the IRB review.
- Formation of the Group: Six members aged 16-18 (referred to as A, B, C, D, E, F) were recruited to form the group. The process of their activities is as follows:

| Week | Theme | Summary of content |
|---|---|---|
| Preparation | Self-introduction and Icebreaker Activities | 1. The facilitator introduces themselves through images to foster mutual understanding.<br>2. Members create a collage journal to document their narrative process. |
| Week 1 | "The flavor of home" Image-based Narrative | Members using the theme " The flavor of home ", take photos within a family setting, including its members, that can convey the sense of "home atmosphere." Practice using photography to communicate feelings, depict experiences, and engage in dialogue. |
| Week 2 | "Tree Hollow" Image-based Narrative | 1. Check-in Collage Activity<br>2.Members capture scenes from their daily lives that represent the concept of "tree hollow/sanctuary/rest stop," which include their home, school, or community. Through dialogue, members explore the complex meanings of these scenes. |
| Week 3 | "Depression" Image-based Narrative | 1. Check-in Collage Activity<br>2. Members share their "depression" imagery (home, school, or community scenes) and engage in questions, feedback, and dialogue. |
| Week 4 | "Four-Frame Photo Collage" and Hashtag Story | 1. Check-in Collage Activity<br>2.Members create a four-photo sequence (two collages and two photos), using movie storyboard and timeline concepts. Through group discussion, members identify the main themes of their depressive or life experiences, naming them with hashtags. Subsequent group imagery is based on these discussions. |

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| Week 5 | "Four-Frame Photo Collage" and Hashtag Story | 1. Check-in Collage Activity<br>2.Members create a four-photo sequence (two collages and two photos) by movie storyboard and timeline concepts. Through group discussion, members identify the main themes of their depressive or life experiences, naming them with hashtags. Subsequent group imagery is based on these discussions. |
| Week 6 | Image Reconstruction (1) | Members add more meaningful images to their stories and share them for group discussion. |
| Week 7 | Image Reconstruction (2) | Continuation of adding meaningful images to their stories and group discussion. |
| Week 8 | Reconstructing Depression Stories | Members reinterpret and retell their stories. |
| Week 9 | Reflection and Summary | A comprehensive review of group dynamics and mutual feedback. |
| Week 10 | Artwork Preparation | Discussions and preparations for the exhibition. |
| Week 11 | Artwork Preparation | Continued discussions and preparations for the exhibition. |
| Week 12 | Exhibition of Image Stories | 1. Attendees are those invited by the adolescents with no objections from the group.<br>2. Visitors must sign a confidentiality agreement. |

**Conclusion and Discussion**

Findings reveal that teenagers, in reconstructing their stories of depression, undergo the following process:

1. Adolescent depression as an undifferentiated negative emotion, mixed with a chaotic state of unidentifiable life experiences and emotions. Example of member C:

Member C is a second-year high school student (repeating a year) and a teenage girl whose parents are divorced. Her mother suffers from bipolar disorder. During her ninth-grade year, she lived with her mother and her half-sister from the same mother but different father. At that time, her mother's mental state was extremely unstable, and she made a statement about "taking the whole family to die," which prompted a report to the social safety net by neighbors. As a result, Member C was forcibly placed in an institution for four months. Her sister also moved out and began living alone after this incident.

Despite facing such drastic changes in her life, member C prepared herself emotionally to focus on studying for the high school entrance exam, resisting the restlessness triggered by antidepressant medication. She managed to study hard and got into her ideal high school. However, her mother's emotional state did not stabilize due to member C's admission to high

school. With her sister's absence, member C had to bear her mother's emotional burden and clean up the furniture shattered by her mother's outbursts alone.

Member C's emotions and life were profoundly affected, and she didn't attend school for an entire year. During sleepless nights, she would gaze through the iron bars at the dawn sky around three or four in the morning, feeling like she was trapped at home behind iron bars (see Figure 1). When sharing this photo, she said:

> "Now that I may finally calm down, I seem to realize… I was so, so, so sad. And then… I separated the sky and the building in the middle, as if torn in half, and I felt a bit like… I felt like the world outside was wonderful, but I couldn't get out. And then I felt like because I didn't know what was separating us, I knew it was sadness, but I still don't know what the most fundamental reason is, what is it for?"

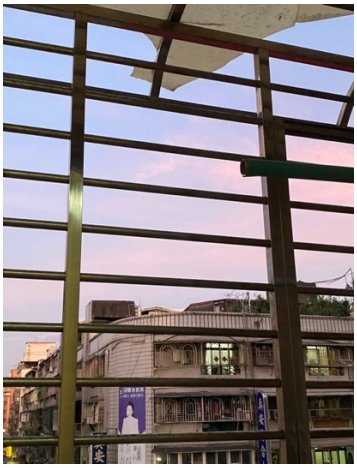

Figure 1: The Dawn Sky Outside the Iron Bars

Behind the sadness lies a complex story of depression. She doesn't know how to express it, she doesn't understand it herself, so others couldn't possibly understand it either. As she described, she was very grateful that during the days when she couldn't go to school, she had a group of friends who cared for her and would actively buy some of her favorite foods to accompany her for dinner and chat overnight. Nevertheless, she still didn't know how to express the oppression she felt. When sharing that experience, she said:

> "I don't even know the reason why I cannot go to school, and the people around me couldn't possibly know why I just want to stay at home all day… And when I'm with them, sometimes I act very normal, I don't express my negative emotions in front of them."

2. Naming the experience allows adolescents to break free from the chaotic state. Example of member B:

Member B is a first-year high school girl. During group activities, she shows little interest in the stories shared by other members and remains very quiet. When it is her turn to share her photos, she speaks very little, and you can sense her strong self-defense mechanism within the group.

Her interactions with others at school are somewhat like her behavior in the group. She doesn't talk much to others and has no friends. Consequently, the high school counselor

suspects that Member B might have autism and believes her main issues are related to interpersonal relationships and communication. However, Member B feels she doesn't have any interpersonal issues, and the descriptions she shares in the group are all related to academic pressure.

During the week when the theme was Tree Hollow, she shared a picture she found very captivating while browsing a market before the high school entrance exam. The picture (like Figure 2) depicts a girl walking on a transparent staircase leading to an unknown planet. Every step seems cautious, lonely, and mysterious. She said this perfectly reflected her state of mind at that time. This image gave her strength and accompanied her as she faced the unknown "battle" ahead.

Even though she currently cannot analyze or even describe the oppressive feeling that envelops her, having this image as an anchor allows her to temporarily attribute her depressive emotions to academic pressure. This is why, on the group's achievement sharing day, she wants to display three heavily crumpled exam papers.

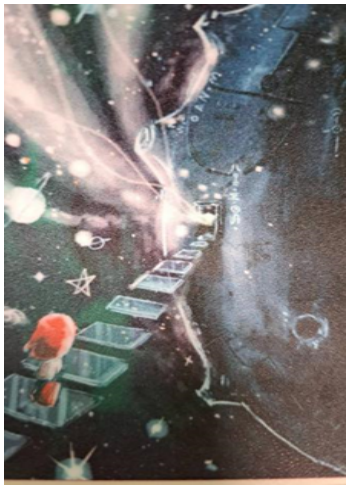

Figure 2: A girl walking on a transparent staircase leading to an unknown planet

3. Linking emotions and life experiences enables autonomy and liberation from a sense of helplessness. Example of member A:

Member A is a 17-year-old teenager, a second-year student at an experimental high school, living alone in a rented apartment. He rarely goes out and seldom attends school because he suffers from insomnia and has a reversed sleep schedule. When he couldn't sleep, he would stare at the ceiling (Figure 3), feeling an indescribable mix of emotions. He didn't know what was wrong with him.

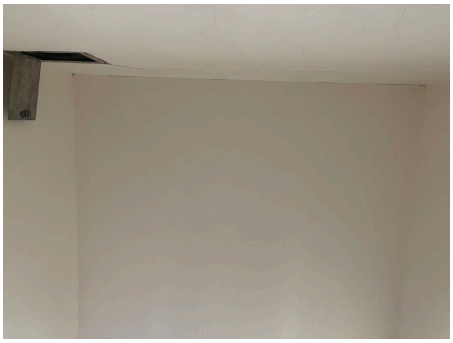

Figure 3: the ceiling when couldn't sleep

He is highly engaged in the group, eager to share, ask questions, and provide feedback. He is accustomed to thinking in a rational and abstract manner, using analytical language to link philosophical terms he has read when responding to or understanding life experiences. He described himself in the group as follows:

> "My previous way of thinking was more rational. I would say this rationality is more structured, where things are clear, precise, and can be articulated. They have a more concrete object that can be grasped and expressed."

At this stage, his emotional life does not seem to be immersed in a state of depression. He is very active when interacting with others, but living or interacting with this way of thinking makes him very distant from his own emotional experiences. In fact, there are moments in his life experience when he feels depressed, like the photo of the ceiling he took in the middle of the night. However, he doesn't know what it is and cannot describe it. During the third week of the Check-in Collage Activity, he created an image named "Incomprehensible" (Figure 4). While sharing, he said:

> "I seem to have to accept some things that language cannot catch up with, or that my thoughts cannot, that my consciousness cannot clarify. What are those things? I would say, that is precisely its interesting state, that I can't express it, and then I can't analyze it well. What are the images of these two pictures or this kind of thinking in the real world? I can't think of it now. I would say that basically, it seems like my life didn't have too dramatic changes at that time, but mentally I suddenly fell into a state where I can't, some things I suddenly find that I can't explain clearly."

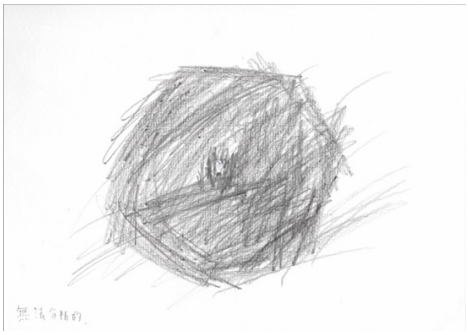

Figure 4: Incomprehensible

This complex and indescribable feeling of depression slowly emerged in his consciousness in the form of images (pictures), allowing him to identify and articulate its existence. Even so, how should we continue to advance his life experience after this emotional imagery emerges? How is this feeling of depression related to his life experience?

The emotional connection of this image with his family experience was unexpectedly blurted out in the group, which he called a feeling of "disgust." He said:

> "The state between love and hate that I mentioned last time made me feel disgusted. I thought for a moment that this statement might be misleading. What I wanted to explain is that being in such a state is disgusting, not the existence of such emotions being disgusting. Maybe for me, hating someone is very simple, but being in this situation where love and hate coexist is unbearable and disgusting."

This feeling of “disgust” refined through group interactions relates to a childhood scene at his old home in Hualien. This family scene, described by him as boring, portrays a child waiting for his mother to come home. This moment of “waiting” needs to be understood within the context of an actual mother-son relationship. In his real life, his depression and refusal to go to school were due to the conflicts and tensions between his mother and grandmother.

Throughout the entire group process, we collaboratively helped member A use language and words to transform his “incomprehensible” images into real-life scenes, then verbalize them, raising them to a conscious level, allowing him to escape from the indescribable depressive emotions and begin to understand them.

4. Core life experiences often carry social stigma, hindering them in layers of vocabulary and peripheral events. Example of member C:

In the photo which member C brought at the beginning of the group, filled with letters and sticky notes (as shown in Figure 5), she had already pointed to the core experience and key scene of her depressive emotions. However, she did not mention her mother’s bipolar disorder or the incident of forced placement. Instead, she talked about how she overcame difficulties and the story of having a group of friends who cared for and accompanied her. It is challenging for us to touch upon the nature of her depressive emotions and feel the weight of those emotions through such a narrative.

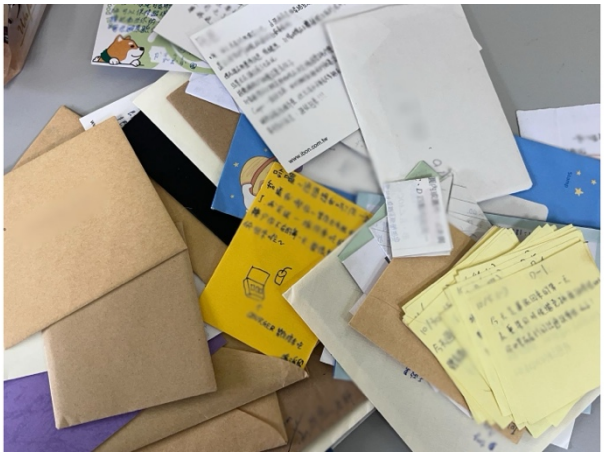

Figure 5: letters and sticky notes

Her mother’s bipolar disorder and the subsequent placement experience not only involve complex mother-daughter emotions but also carry a high level of social stigma. Even though such a mother made her wonder, “Why do these things happen to me? Why do I have to bear all this?” she also wants to protect her mother from societal judgment. This is evident in her response to her grandmother’s criticism of her mother:

> “…I told her, ‘But she is still my mom.’ Although her emotional issues are indeed emotional issues, I always remember the normal side of her. If she didn’t have these problems, she would be a great mom because she really understands me and my sister. She knows what we like to eat and cooks especially for us …”

Throughout the process of the imagery storytelling group, all participants moved through the scenes together, responding to and interacting with each other's life stories, akin to walking down a spiral staircase leading deeper into core emotions. Through tentative questions and

responses, they slowly peeled away the linguistic barriers surrounded by social stigma. In a social context of compassionate life storytelling, they encountered their core emotions in front of others and themselves (Cheng-Pin. L, 2004).

5. When teenagers collectively present their new depressive stories through curation, they are empowered with narrative energy. Surprisingly, the deepest impact on parents is not from their own kids but from other teenagers.

At the exhibit, member D placed a stack of prescription bags on the table, using a tangible method to present the temporal depth of her battle with depression since elementary school, and named it "Life with Reduced Medication."

Member E displayed a variety of different cosmetics on her table to show how she used to rely on makeup and external packaging to protect herself. She repeatedly shared her story with the visitors, reflecting on her emotional experience of being overly concerned with others' opinions of her.

Member F even engaged the audience by having them write responses on sticky notes. Her father left a message saying, "Your text file is too hard to understand. Others use images. I wanted to understand what you do here. It seems you've become happier and more expressive. Unfortunately, I can't understand your story. Can anyone understand it?" This message sparked a series of interactive responses.

On the day of the exhibition, member C's work drew the most attention and discussion. One visitor, after seeing member C's work and hearing her introduction, said:

> "Listening to her story reminded me of my own. It made me think about my journey from being able to attend university to not being able to, then working at home, then leaving home to work on my own, and now being alone in Taiwan. Honestly, I feel I'm not as good as she is. Really, hearing her talk made me reflect on my own journey, but I still think she's amazing."

Another visitor commented: "It reminded me of my own time studying away from home. My family wasn't well-off, so I had to save money, which meant eating frugally during my studies. I would hesitate to go out with friends because it would add to my family's financial burden."

After participating in the imagery storytelling group, the participants showed significant changes in their real lives.

Member A, following the discussion of the "unanalyzable" image connected to childhood scenes in his hometown, began to interact more with classmates. He started going out for fun, staying overnight at friends' houses, and actively participating in classroom activities.

Member B, after discussing with her parents, successfully applied for independent study. She now has a clear goal for her future: she wants to explore herself and study psychology in university.

Member C had deeper life conversations with her high school counselor.

Member D faced a recurrence of emotional difficulties when pressured by university entrance exams, but this time she actively faced the challenges and began learning self-help techniques.

Member E wanted to invite her middle school teacher to view her imagery storytelling project, hoping to show how much she has changed.

Member F, identified as having special needs, used to rely heavily on her parents for daily tasks. The storytelling group helped her develop the ability to participate independently. Listening and speaking in the group sparked her desire for self-expression, and she started to articulate her emotional states.

This study affirms the positive impact of a practice-oriented approach in researching adolescent depression and suggests its promotion.

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