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THE EXPERIENCE AND SIGNIFICANCE OF SHARING CREATIVE WRITING ASSOCIATED WITH TIMES OF PERSONAL DIFFICULTY

Section A: How does extant literature contribute to understanding the significance of sharing creative writing?

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Section B: The experience and significance of sharing creative writing associated with times of distress

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Acknowledgements

I had this project in mind, or something like it, before applying to study at Salomons, having enjoyed conducting previous research in the area. Would there be a clinical doctorate course, I wondered, that would welcome this somewhat left-field research? I had preconceived notions that I would need to squeeze into a box that I wouldn't fit. When I discovered that there was somebody with a research interest in creative writing at Salomons (Dr Michael Maltby) my growing leaning towards Salomons as my first choice progressed into a topple, and I landed happily at the entrance of the Mansion building (which is now of course, sadly, no longer part of the Salomons 'patch') around a year later. Whilst I had some doubts in the early stages as to whether I should 'try something new' I am very pleased with my intuitive decision to stick with it, and to now have completed the project. So, firstly, I would like to thank Michael, who came to be my lead supervisor. I feel fortunate that our paths crossed, especially given his upcoming departure to new territories; I have found our conversations both stimulating and containing in equal measure. I would also like to thank my external supervisor, Dr Michelle McCartney, for helping me with access to participants; this was much appreciated! I also owe many thanks to my mum for her great efforts in helping me with transcribing and to both of my parents for always being reliably there. My thanks also go to the people dear to me who have patiently tolerated my neglect of them at times over the past three years – you'll have me back soon! Finally, I want to thank each of my participants wholeheartedly for their generous contributions to this project, for they are the ones who really made it all possible. I hope I have done them justice.

DECLARATION FOR MAJOR RESEARCH PROJECT

Candidate name ..... (PRINTED)

DECLARATION

This work has not previously been accepted in substance for any degree and is not being concurrently submitted in candidature for any degree.

Signed ..... (candidate)

Date .....

STATEMENT 1

This thesis is the result of my own investigations, except where otherwise stated. Other sources are acknowledged by footnotes giving explicit references. A bibliography is appended.

Signed ..... (candidate)

Date .....

Signed ..... (supervisor)

Date .....

STATEMENT 2

I hereby give consent for my thesis, if accepted, to be made available to external internet users through the CCCU institutional repository and the British Library EThOS service, and for the title and abstract to be made available to outside organisations.

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Summary of portfolio

Section A provides a systematic review of reported findings associated with the significance of sharing creative writing. The 18 articles reviewed, comprised of 6 qualitative studies 10 practice reports, 1 pilot-study and 1 first-person account are synthesized and discussed. Findings are contextualized within the field of clinical psychology through drawing on existing theory from fields such as phenomenology, psychoanalysis and psychotherapy. The implications for clinical practice and future research are discussed.

Section B presents an interpretative phenomenological analysis of the experience and significance of eight participants who had shared creative writing associated with times of personal difficulty**.** Data was gathered from individual semi-structured interviews. Four superordinate themes were interpreted from the data: 'Putting the self into the world'; 'Taking ownership of the process'; 'Making connections with others'; and 'Moving beyond surviving to thriving.' Findings are discussed with a focus on the significance of interpersonal factors in relation to theories from fields including psychoanalysis, phenomenology and humanism. The overall findings are conceptualized through models of well-being. Implications for clinical practice, limitations of the findings, and suggestions for future research are discussed.

Section C provides a reflective account that critically appraises the project as a whole. The implications for clinical practice and future research highlighted in Section B are further discussed.

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SECTION A: LITERATURE REVIEW

Jennifer Maris

How does extant literature contribute to understanding the significance of sharing creative writing?

Word count = 5450 (plus 307 additional words)

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Abstract

The therapeutic potential of writing has long been considered and its uses within current practice are varied. It has been suggested that the benefits of sharing creative writing may go beyond those associated with unshared forms of writing such as Expressive Writing or independent creative writing. Given the lack of previous literature reviews in this area gaining a greater understanding of the significance of this process was indicated. A systematic literature search using several electronic databases yielded 18 articles for review, including: 6 qualitative studies, 10 practice reports, 1 pilot-study and 1 first-person account. The articles were synthesized and evaluated, identifying many potential benefits associated with sharing creative writing but also some emotional risks. Interpersonal factors seemed to be integral to both positive and negative experiences. The extant literature is largely comprised of practice reports lacking in methodological rigour, with individuals' experience of the process having not so far been directly investigated. There have not been any studies focusing on the sharing of self-directed creative writing associated with times of personal difficulty. Further research could usefully investigate the experience and significance of this process, with a particular focus on interpersonal factors.

Key words: Creative writing, Therapeutic writing,

Introduction

The therapeutic power of the written word has been argued or alluded to by many eminent writers and thinkers such as Aristotle (see Lerner, 1997); Heidegger (1962) and Freud (1959). The use of therapeutic writing within current practice is varied. A literature review by McCartney (2011; unpublished doctoral thesis), examined the therapeutic value of writing across different settings and identified: the use of writing *in* therapy (e.g. Furman, 2003); creative writing *as* therapy, both as self-help (e.g. Jeffs and Pepper, 2005) and within therapy as a facilitated intervention (e.g. Bolton, 2008); creative writing in the wider field of health (e.g. Hilse, Griffiths and Corr, 2007); and therapeutic byproducts from creative writing used primarily as a form of art-making (e.g. Kohanyi, 2009).

Wright and Chung (2001) have suggested an emerging continuum within the literature on therapeutic writing between a 'scientific' paradigm and a 'humanities' paradigm. Falling within a scientific paradigm is the 'Expressive Writing' (EW) tradition pioneered by Pennebaker in the United States (US), (e.g. Pennebaker, 1997) which involves continuous writing about personal experiences under experimental conditions, with writing topics, frequency, duration and client group varying by study. A range of both physiological and psychological changes have been demonstrated (Kerner & Fitzpatrick, 2007). For example, Pennebaker and Beall (1986) examined the effects of disclosure on trauma (with regards to its inhibition of immunity) in a group of college students in the US. The effects of EW about an upsetting or traumatic event were compared with writing about a more superficial topic such as time-management. In both conditions, participants wrote for 15 minute periods over four consecutive days. Participants in the experimental condition made significantly fewer visits to the health centre than the control group, with differences in immune functioning reportedly detected at a cellular level (Pennebaker, Kiecolt-Glaser & Glaser, 1988). With regards to psychological benefits, Smyth's (1998) meta-analysis on EW studies indicated that, overall,

writing about emotional topics was associated with significant reductions in distress. An interesting finding from Frattaroli's (2006) meta-analysis was that the most positive psychological health outcomes were related to emotions (such as depression and positive functioning) more so than to cognitions (such as cognitive schemas and body image disorder) suggesting the limits of EW with regards to more significant psychological change. Frattaroli (2006) concluded that EW was worthwhile, although was not effective for all people under all conditions. A positive and average overall effect size of 0.075 was identified.

A form of facilitated writing intervention that falls largely within the humanities paradigm, is the Poetry Therapy tradition, which involves both existing poetry and clients' own poetry for the means of healing and personal growth, in individual as well as group settings (Mazza, 1999). Benefits from interventions have been reported in a range of contexts, including addiction (Park, 2001), somatic medicine (Cysarz et al, 2004) and social work (Asner-Self & Feylissa, 2002). Although the field has gained in momentum and influence (Sampson & Visser, 2005) a systematic review by Heimes (2010) examining the 'state of poetry therapy research' highlighted the need for both rigorous quantitative and qualitative studies to take the field forward.

Also falling within the humanities paradigm is the increasingly expanding use of creative writing in health, well-being and personal development within the United Kingdom (e.g. Bolton, 1999, Hunt 2000), which has been termed by Nicholls (2009) as 'developmental creative writing' (DCW). Nicholls (2009) discusses the limitations of the EW tradition and the ways in which DCW goes beyond EW, in terms of the benefits that can arise as a result of environmental and social factors including the "provision of a 'holding space'" (Winnicott, 1971), "opportunities to engage in an ongoing process", facilitation of "a felt, bodily

approach to the writing" and the enablement of people "to be read and to become readers of their own and others' work" (p.174).

A clear distinction in many of the studies identified in McCartney's (2011) review from those in the EW research base, which is also reflected in the factors highlighted by Nicholls (2009), above, is that DCW, whether self-directed or suggested by a therapist/facilitator/researcher often involves *other people* in some way, at some stage of the process. Pennebaker himself has acknowledged that the 'social dynamics of disclosure' had been overlooked in earlier EW studies and has considered not only why sharing stories with others may be helpful, but also highlights the possible cost of keeping difficult personal experiences to ourselves (Pennebaker, 2000). Indeed Thompson (2010a) found that engaging in (unshared) autobiographical writing exacerbated his experience of isolation and rumination related to childhood trauma. Reflecting on the seven commentaries published in response to his original article (e.g. Adshead, 2010; Lewis, 2010), Thompson, (2010b) wrote: "Reading the commentaries on my paper has itself proven to be an intersubjective, growth-catalyzing process for me" suggesting the potential for others' feedback to allow self-understanding to develop beyond that which is possible through "solipsistic self-enclosure" (p. 276). Literature documenting the significance of the therapeutic relationship in the process of change (e.g. Tronick et al, 1998; Lambert & Barley, 2001) would also support the notion that sharing writing could facilitate additional benefits to those found in the initial expressive stage of writing and highlights the relevance of this field to the discipline of clinical psychology.

The creation of poetry and other art forms has been likened to Winnicott's (1965) concept of the 'transitional object', an object that creates a feeling of security, autonomy and safety for the subject, and which is neither entirely 'self' nor 'other'. Further, Ogden (1998) suggests that when poetry is used in a therapeutic process "the voice heard/made is a voice

that is neither exclusively of the poet or that of the reader; it is a new and unique voice, a third voice that is generated in the creative conjunction of reader and writer" (p. 443). Another key concept within theories of infant development that informs the arts therapies is that of 'joint attention' (see Moore & Dunham, 1995), a process that involves the sharing of attentional focus and affect around a common object (Scaife & Brunner, 1975). This is a form of 'secondary intersubjectivity' (Trevarthen, 1998) requiring the flexibility to be able to see something from another's point of view, the development of which is dependent on the capacity of the primary care-giver for sensitive attunement with the infant. These relational perspectives support the notion that the process of sharing creative writing, which inevitably involves others in some way, may help to facilitate additional benefits to EW, or unshared, creative writing. A greater understanding of the process is important if the potential benefits are to be optimized and the risks minimised.

Review Question

In light of the notion that sharing creative writing may provide additional therapeutic benefits to the process of EW or unshared creative writing the following question is posed:

How does extant literature contribute to understanding the significance of sharing creative writing?

Creative writing shared within any setting will be considered, including both facilitated interventions and self-directed writing (writing that has been engaged in independently) that has been subsequently shared. Creative writing is a broad and subjective term for which there is no one agreed definition. For the purpose of this review, creative writing is taken to mean: any crafted form of written self-expression, either fiction or non-fiction, and including poetry or prose.

Methodology

A systematic search was conducted using relevant search terms within several electronic databases. Details regarding databases, the search strategy employed and inclusion and exclusion criteria can be viewed in appendix A. The search yielded 18 relevant articles: 6 qualitative research studies (QRS); 10 practice reports (PRs); 1 pilot study (PS); and 1 first-person account (FPA). No quantitative studies were identified.

Structure of the Review

This review will focus aspects of the articles that attend to the significance of sharing creative writing as it relates to perceived benefits (or otherwise), beyond that which might be expected from independent writing. Findings associated with other aspects of the creative writing process are not the focus of this review.

Three broad categories in which sharing took place were identified and the articles for review will be presented according to those categories:

- **Creative writing groups in inpatient/residential settings**
- **Creative writing groups in health or community settings**
- **Self-directed writing subsequently shared in various settings**

A comparison between categories is not intended and is beyond the scope of this review.

Some critique is offered throughout, however a more in-depth critique of the qualitative research studies according to Yardley's (2000) four principles is offered in appendix B. Throughout the review relevant theory will be discussed in order to contextualise the findings

within the field of clinical psychology. The synthesised findings will then be discussed and implications for clinical practice and further research will be considered.

Review

Creative Writing Groups in Inpatient or Residential settings (six PRs)

Lauer and Goldfield (1970; PR) reported on the use of creative writing within therapy groups that they had facilitated at a psychiatric hospital. The number of people who attended the groups was not specified. The authors presented three key observations from their work; that creative writing: facilitated self-understanding; facilitated interaction and discussion between group members; and helped to increase self-esteem through the sense of mastery and achievement it produced. They also reported that a spontaneous interaction style on the part of the staff as opposed to consciously 'therapeutic' comments "gave the staff members more credibility as thinking and feeling human beings" (p.312), highlighting the value of authenticity over 'expertise' or interpretation. Supporting the importance of authenticity within therapeutic processes is Teyber's (2000) assertion that: "when offered sincerely, simple human responses of validation and care mean much to clients and help to restore their dignity" (p.137).

Lauer (1972) documented observations from therapeutic creative writing groups across a variety of settings within a Neuropsychiatric Institute. Groups were held over several months for between 1-2 hours a week and were attended by between 3-40 patients each session. The author refers to having modelled an interaction style that was empathic and non-judgemental. The group members are reported to have learnt through discussion of their writing to "deal innovatively with personal problems" (p.56) and further that over time "group members developed a new understanding of themselves and their lives" (p.55). The hermeneutic philosopher, Gadamer (1998), posited that conversation was integral to gaining a

mutual understanding of the world. He argued that self-understanding is limited by our own particular 'horizon', which we all inevitably speak from depending on our history and culture. Through conversation with others there occurs a 'fusion of horizons', which leads to mutual understanding.

Wittman and Leeman (1979) presented their observations from activity therapy groups that made use of creative writing over an 18-month period at a psychiatric inpatient unit. The authors report an example of a patient sharing a poem, who benefitted from the understanding and compliments of the group, and that the group was able to help her think through how she might otherwise be able to approach her problems. The authors considered group to have functioned best when they were composed of people with similar problems, suggesting that connecting through common experience might be of key significance in the process of sharing writing. A key concept in self psychology, the 'selfobject' (Kohut, 1959), seems useful in understanding the significance of this finding. The 'Selfobject' is "an object felt subjectively" involving a "specific bond (between people) required for maintaining, restoring, or consolidating the organization of self-experience" (Stolorow, Brandchaft & Atwood, 1987, p.16). Kohut (1959) identifies three major 'selfobject' needs, one of which is 'twinship', referring to the need for "people with whom we can identify as like ourselves, to reaffirm that we are a human among humans and welcome to be so." (Jacobs, 1992, p. 3)

Houlding and Holland's (1988) observations from poetry groups with 'severely disturbed' psychiatric inpatients at a Veterans Administration Medical Centre' in the US suggested that the sharing of creative writing reduced the emotional isolation and alienation experienced by many inpatients through the community interaction it facilitated. Poetry readings in community meetings and public displays of writing within the hospital contributed to identites of 'poet' and 'writer', which allowed for new experiences of 'self'. A

de-emphasis on emotional expression, with considerable focus instead on writing techniques, was thought to attract a variety of participants, as well as contributing to feelings of pride and mastery.

Similar findings were reported by Schneckenburger (1995), who ran an ongoing poetry group for people with chronic experiences of mental health problems within a residential unit. Positive changes in participants' beliefs about themselves as well as in their social interactions were noted. The group members presented their work publicly in a collection of art and writing by people with mental illness and are said to have benefitted from their new public identity as 'poets'. The Personal Recovery approach to 'mental illness' (see Anthony, 1993) highlights the relevance of regaining (or developing) a positive identity through involvement in meaningful activity. The sharing of creative writing may be one way to facilitate this process.

Alschuler (2000) detailed her work in a monthly poetry therapy group in a residential unit for adults with addiction problems, attendance at which was required within the treatment programme, however participants were given clear choice about whether to share their writing. The predominant model of working was with expressive/creative writing rather than the use of existing poems as is often the case in poetry therapy. The author describes a common response amongst participants as surprise at their creativity and suggest that self-esteem may have been developed through feeling a sense of achievement. Reflecting the significance of writing amongst others is the 'self-in-relation' construct of self-esteem (Jordan, Kaplan, Miller, Stiver, & Surrey, 1991), which stresses the importance of connection and relationships and contends that one's sense of capability and identity is developed in relation to others. It would have been interesting for the author to have offered reflections on if and how compulsory attendance may have influenced the process.

Creative Writing Groups in Health or Community Settings (five QRSs; three PRs; one PS)

Jensen and Blair (1997; QRS) conducted a qualitative study exploring the relationship between creative writing and well-being. The study comprised of fourteen adults (six women and six men) from an established writing group for people with histories of mental health problems. Use of the 'Nominal Group Technique' (NGT), which uses a structured process to reach a group consensus following the amalgamation of individual ideas, elicited various themes with regards to interactions within the group. Positive aspects included 'Friendship/ understanding', 'Involvement' and 'Build(ing) bridges' (seeming to suggest the value of connection with others), whereas negative aspects identified included feelings of being stigmatized as well as struggling with interpersonal issues. These mixed responses suggest that the group environment was not always a safe one in which to share writing, which highlights the importance of the skill of the facilitator.

In a collection of practice examples by Springer (2006; PR), the use of poetry in a two-session 'biopsychosocial' assessment with a man with a heroin addiction is presented. Springer describes feeling moved by the man's poem, which led to "insights into the client's state of mind" (p.73), and suggested that the use of poetry in therapy was "a way to more deeply understand clients" (p.80). Waddell (2003) suggests that poetry, with its "rhythm, volume, and intonation" is comparable to a "pre-verbal stage… [wherein meaning] "is embedded in the quality of the links of relatedness between self and other" (p. 20), which provides one possible explanation for the experience of feeling quickly attuned, through poetry, to the experience of another. A number of other writers positioned within psychoanalytic traditions (e.g. Holmes, 2003; Ogden, 2002) have also suggested parallels between poetic and psychoanalytic processes.

Hilse, Griffiths and Corr's (2007; QRS) grounded theory study aimed to explore the impact of participating in a poetry workshop for people who had experience of mental health problems. Two male participants were interviewed following theoretical sampling within a poetry workshop that was open to the public and welcomed people with experience of mental health problems. The emerging theory suggested that the role of others was a key aspect in the development of new personal meanings. Further, the participants experienced "a feeling of connection with the self and environment, society or greater world" (p.435). The authors usefully highlighted the potential negative aspects and risks of sharing poetry through seeking disconfirmatory evidence in their interviews. The two participants reported feeling a 'sense of failure' (p.437) if receiving negative feedback and one stated: "if it is a very personal thing…and it has been misinterpreted…then it becomes very hurtful, very sad and very painful" (p.435). The authors gave good consideration to the rigour of their analysis in number of ways but did not acknowledge that two participants is not generally considered sufficient for saturation in a grounded theory study, with its aim of generating explanatory theory from the data.

Sagan (2007; QRS) depicted the case of "Bertie, a 65 year old Yorkshireman", with a history of depression and acute anxiety and a low level of education. He had attended a basic literacy/creative writing course in a community centre for adults with enduring mental health problems, the aim of which was "to help mentally ill adults write creatively" (p.314). A critical ethnographic methodology (Tambouku & Ball, 2003) was employed. Data was gathered from individual narrative interviews as well as observation from the group sessions and process notes from interviews over a two-year period.

The author noted the process as having required "a high level of containment (Bion, 1967) on the part of the facilitators, the group and the setting itself; it also demanded the

sense of at least the potential for secure attachments (Bowlby, 1969)" (p.314). The author describes Bertie's engagement with the interviews as having deepened over time, and that the containment provided enabled "new subject positions (to) be taken up . . . [and led to] strengthening of a new narrative as week after week Bertie saw stories of himself build up in the concrete form of writing on paper" (p.317). The author also refers to the "shared sense of weakness in writing" as having facilitated empathy between the group members. Sagan (2007) suggests that the creation of a sufficient 'holding space' (Winnicott, 1971), which Robinson, (2000) describes as "neither of the psychic inner reality nor of the objective outer reality but in a third space that allows the individual to negotiate between the other two", (p.80) was crucial in enabling Bertie to take risks with his writing over time. The author's reflexivity throughout was a notable strength.

Bolton (2008; QRS) used narrative methods to analyse qualitative data from her work with cancer patients in palliative care settings, some of which was within workshops, and some from one-to-one discussion of writing that patients had undertaken alone. The benefit for participants of talking *about* their writing was raised, suggesting that the sharing of the *process* as well as the *content* may be useful, consistent with Thompson's (2010b) account. One patient is reported to have shared writing on his blog and subsequently felt "great relief" that "some of the pressure, the need to spill more of the beans has gone" (p.44) implying a cathartic quality to sharing writing.

Gilzean (2011; QRS) conducted a grounded theory study (see Glaser & Strauss, 2009) with 17 adults (14 women and 3 men) from the UK, USA and Canada through online peer support groups, for people whom self-harmed. Qualitative interviews were conducted on-line via email. One of the four themes was 'communication to others' and referred to the sharing of their writing with 'trusted others' in order that others would better understand their self-

harm. Participants felt that this enabled greater openness than talking might allow and that it also gave the reader time to reflect on what was being communicated so that the reader was more able to support them. Reference was also made to the validation of their experiences by both on-line peers and professionals. However, one participant felt nothing would be gained through sharing her writing with professionals fearing they would not understand her experiences. One participant stated the importance of sharing "in a manner that I am comfortable with" (p.39), suggesting the need for an individual to have control in the process of sharing.

Evans and Glover (2011; PR) outlined a series of creative writing workshops that they ran for women with chronic pelvic pain. They reported participants' verbal feedback of having experienced enjoyment and relaxation, which brings to mind hedonic notions of well-being (Kahneman, Diener, & Schwartz, 1999). The importance of creative pursuits as an aspect of well-being is noted in the governmental document 'New Horizons: a shared vision for mental health' (Department of Health, 2010).

Meunier (2011; PR) facilitated a creative writing programme for adults with mental illness in Canada, as part of their vocational therapy. The aim of the program, which ran for eight sessions, was to address individuals' psychosocial needs. Improvements in verbal as well as written forms of expression were reported, which the author suggests could have many positive implications for re-integration into the community. Meunier positioned herself as a 'writing peer' in her role as facilitator rather than as 'staff' with 'clients' and suggested that this enabled the group to share ideas more freely. This could be understood in terms of the development of 'positive identities' (Anthony, 1993) as writers, as discussed by Scheckenberger (1995), and the confidence this can allow. Perhaps related to this was the sense of accomplishment reported by 86% of participants following the publication of their

writing in a newsletter. This data was collected from an 'Evaluation Progress Checklist' at the final session. In critique, the 'value criteria' were pre-determined and were therefore based on practitioner rather than participant concerns. It was unclear whether there was a forum through which less positive experiences could have been shared.

King, Neilsen and White (2012; PS) conducted a pilot study with people in recovery from severe mental illness. A thematic analysis of interview transcripts identified yielded nine themes about what participants had found helpful, most of which were dependent upon the writing having been shared, including: the value of 'working with a real writer rather than a mental health professional'; 'it was useful focusing on technique and this helped improve writing'; 'The writer [facilitator] was respectful and encouraging'; and 'It was good getting personal feedback on writing'. In common with Houlding and Holland (1988) and Schneckenberger (1995), the value of nurturing identities that are beyond that of 'mental illness' is suggested by the value of working with a 'real writer' and being able to develop skills.

Self-directed Writing Subsequently Shared in Various Settings (one FPA; one QRS; one PR)

In her first-person account Mosely (1997) explained how creative writing was central to a spiritual healing process in the face of complex physical health problems and physical disability. A significant aspect of this process was the sharing of her writing: "When I shared my work with other patients they would give me a heartfelt 'Yes! I know what you're feeling and I feel it too'" (p.453), through the process of which she realised that: "all people who experience life-threatening or irreversible changes in their lives go through the same process of grief, fear, anxiety and a myriad of other emotions" (p.453). Finding reassurance in

commonalities between one's own and others' suffering is suggested as is the medium of writing allowing for the depths of personal experiences to be conveyed.

Williams' (2000; QRS) presented a case study of 'Ann', an inmate serving a life sentence at a 'correctional institution' in the US. One of the themes that arose out of seven conversations, lasting between 30-90 minutes, was related to Ann's self-directed use of art and poetry. Williams describes a process of evolving understanding and dialogue between the pair, at the centre of which often lay Ann's writing. This experience could be understood by the dialogical process proposed by Gadamer (1998), based on Heidegger's (1962) notion of the hermeneutic circle, wherein "the constant process of new projection constitutes the movement of understanding and interpretation" (Gadamer, p. 267). The reflexivity in the author's account brought to life the process of evolving understanding that occurred between the women.

Lawver (2008; PR) has documented how his engagement with a patient much improved after viewing her creative writing, which she had given him permission to access on a website. A preliminary small-scale survey was conducted on the website, composed of three likert-scale questions, eliciting 44 responses. One of the questions asked: '*How much does feedback on your writing alleviate or improve a negative mood?'* on a scale with 1 indicating 'no effect' and 5 indicating 'great effect', had a mean response of 4.7 across 34 respondents. Despite the survey's small size and its positively biased questions, the potential significance of feedback in relation to impact on mood is suggested.

Discussion

The themes that arose across the 18 articles reviewed related to the significance of sharing creative writing included: Connecting through common experience (e.g. Sagan, 2011); Increased self-esteem (e.g. Alschuler, 2000); Development of skill (King, Neilsen &

White, 2012); Finding personal meaning (Hilse, Griffiths & Corr, 2007); Developing self-understanding (e.g. Wittman & Leeman, 1979); Enjoyment and relaxation (Evans & Glover, 2011); reduction in social isolation (Meunier, 1999); feelings of validation (Gilzean, 2011) and developing more positive self-identities (Schneckenberger, 1995). Aside from the many positive aspects of sharing reported, negative experiences were also noted including the potential for feeling stigmatised and hurt (Jensen & Blair, 1997) or misunderstood (Gilzean, 2011). A summary of findings and themes is presented in appendix C.

Helpful aspects of facilitation were discussed by several of the authors, for example giving choice about sharing one's writing (Alschuler, 2000); modeling an empathic interaction style (Lauer, 1972); and the value of the spontaneity and authenticity on the part of the facilitator (Lauer and Goldfield, 1970). Some authors (e.g. Evans, 2009) have suggested the importance of a clear therapeutic aim within writing groups in order for therapeutic benefits to arise. However, Sagan's (2000) account of 'Bertie' shows that the provision of a 'holding space' and 'containment' within a 'non-therapeutic' (at least not officially so) setting can lead to significant personal development, perhaps suggesting that the skills and experience of the facilitator are as important as the explicit aim of the group. This supports the notion that interpersonal factors are significant in the process of sharing creative writing and such factors seem likely to be integral to how beneficial (or otherwise) sharing writing may be.

That experiences are not uniformly positive is unsurprising given the variety of fora in which individuals share their writing, not least because the reasons for sharing writing and the understanding and expectations of the reader/ listener could vary greatly. Bolton (2008) draws an important distinction when she suggests that: "the reader of published literature is primarily interested not in the writer, but in what the writer has to say. A reader of therapeutic

writing, on the other hand, is principally interested in the writers, their confidential private expression and their personal development" (p.41). Or as Lerner (1997) similarly puts it: "In poetry therapy the accent is on the person. In a poetry workshop the accent is on the poem" (p.81). It follows that feedback may vary considerably significantly across settings and that if expectations are mismatched between two parties the potential for hurt or misunderstanding could be significant.

Clinical Implications

The title of Hunt and Sampson's (1998) book 'The Self on the page' is demonstrative of how personal and deeply felt creative writing can be. It follows that an emotional risk is taken when one puts one's self out to "the meeting point of the self and the world" (Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2009, p.18) in sharing one's creative writing. For some, the risk of sharing creative writing may feel too great. Wright (2009) suggests that there are arguments for not sharing one's writing stating that by "being my own therapist . . . [I am] not shamed by the words I write, in the way that I might be if I were to sit in relationship with 'a therapist'" (p.628). Hunt (2004) draws a parallel between the therapist who (one hopes) acts as the 'ideal listener' within a consulting room, and the metaphorical 'ideal reader' by whom one is 'held' and supported during solitary writing. Developing Iser's (1980) notion of the 'implied reader' (whom Iser argues we create in the process of writing and subsequently imagine as the audience of our work), Hunt has introduced the notion of the 'implicit reader' in order to suggest the continuous presence of the implied reader alongside the writer throughout the writing process. However, given the suggestion that there can be negative consequences of *not* sharing, or at least discussing independent creative writing (Thompson, 2010a) as well as identified emotional risks, it is important that professionals are open to clients who want to share their writing, whilst bearing in mind the sensitivity of the process.

Bolton (2011) refers to the dilemma of whether and how to share writing and suggests that whilst "risk is essential to personal growth…the process should always be 'safe enough'" (p.14). Winnicott's (1965) concept of 'Good enough mothering' seems useful in thinking about the need for a 'good enough reader/ listener', with the implication that just as a mother (or other primary care-giver) doesn't need to be perfect, neither does a reader/listener. In addition, Teyber's (2000) reference to the importance of "simple human responses of validation and care" (p.137) within the therapeutic relationship suggests that the intention to attend with care and sincerity to the words of another goes a long way.

However, the risks associated with "workers not trained in this area" undertaking "naïve interpretation" have been highlighted (Sainsbury & Pritchard, 2004, p.15). This raises the need for appropriately skilled workers to facilitate the sharing of writing within groups in mental health services. In a climate where clinical psychologists are required to work with increasing complexity, it is unlikely that the profession will take a lead in running creative writing groups but they could usefully provide training for other staff in order to raise awareness of the importance of the sensitivity of the process and useful ways of engaging, both in group and one-to-one settings.

State of the Literature and Suggestions for Further Research

There have been several research studies published since Jensen and Blair's (1997) reference to the "unsubstantiated, non-research base made up of conjecture, plausible but not scientifically founded" (p.526), however, further studies with rigorous methodologies are needed if the field is to develop. Ten of the reviewed articles were PRs and did not employ systematic research methodologies. Whilst it is felt that they do contribute somewhat to understanding the significance of sharing creative writing, they do not possess the same level of rigour or validity as the QRSs presented, and may be more prone to authors' biases. It is

noteworthy that the research studies (which should be less prone to bias) drew out the negative experiences that can arise from the sharing of writing, in contrast with the predominant focus on the positive experiences and effects of sharing writing shown in most of the PRs. The QRSs themselves were largely of reasonable quality, but had some limitations such as findings not being sufficiently linked with theory (Williams, 2000) or there being limited discussion of clinical implications (Bolton, 2008). Given that all of the articles reviewed had small samples, the findings cannot be generalised to other populations.

The PRs also largely relied on clinicians' impressions rather than accounts of participants' reported experiences regarding the sharing of creative writing. Phenomenological methodologies such as Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA; Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2009) privilege first-person accounts of lived experience and would be of use in further exploring the experience and significance of sharing creative writing from the individual perspective. McCartney's (2011) study explored the significance and experiences of engaging in self-directed creative writing associated with times of personal difficulty but did not directly focus on the sharing of that writing. In addition, there has been little investigation into the sharing of writing that has initially been self-directed in response to times of personal difficulty. Whilst Gilzean (2011) explored the sharing of self-directed writing in response to self-harm, the main focus was on understanding the meaning of self-harm rather than on the over-arching significance of sharing creative writing. It would therefore be useful to gain further understanding of the experience and significance of *sharing* creative writing for individuals who have first engaged in independent (self-directed) creative writing at times of personal difficulty. A particular focus on the significance of interpersonal factors is indicated based on the findings of this review.

Limitations of the Review

This review has highlighted significant aspects of the process of sharing creative writing but due to the wide variety of settings and capacities in which writing was shared within the reviewed articles the findings are limited in their specificity.

Additionally, this discussion has drawn predominantly upon humanistic and psychodynamic perspectives. Given the limited scope of this review it has not been possible to give consideration to all models that could contribute to the theoretical understanding of the process of sharing creative writing. For example, the narrative therapy model (White & Epston, 1990), would also seem to have strong relevance to the findings discussed in this review. Of particular relevance are the concepts of: 're-authoring' or 're-storying', the process of developing of preferred stories and identities (White, 2007; White & Epston, 1990); and 'witnessing' (Dean, 1998; Laube, 1998), an aspect of the therapeutic process that acknowledges the importance of others in acknowledging and helping to strengthen those preferred stories and identities.

Conclusion

This systematic literature review examined the reported significance of sharing creative writing across 18 articles. The findings support the suggestion from authors such as Nicholls (2009) that the sharing process may have considerable therapeutic benefits beyond the initial stages of EW or unshared creative writing. However, emotional risks were also identified. The findings also support the notion that interpersonal factors are of great significance, with many of the findings in some way relating to the involvement of others. A number of theoretical perspectives have been drawn upon in order to contextualise these findings within the field of clinical psychology, including Winnicott's (1971) notion of a 'holding space', Selfobject processes (Kohut, 1959) and understandings from phenomenological psychology

(Gadamer, 1998). Implications for clinical practice have been discussed and it has been suggested that further research could investigate individuals' experience of sharing self-directed creative writing associated with times of personal difficulty.

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SECTION B: EMPIRICAL PAPER

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The experience and significance of sharing creative writing associated with times of personal difficulty

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Abstract

There is limited research concerning the sharing of writing associated with times of personal difficulty. This study aimed to explore the experience and significance of this process with a focus on the interpersonal factors involved and how the potential benefits could be conceptualised. Eight participants were recruited through purposive sampling and interviewed regarding their experiences. Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis was used to analyse the transcripts. Four superordinate themes of 'Putting the self into the world'; 'Taking ownership of the process'; 'Making connections with others'; and 'Moving beyond surviving to thriving' were interpreted from the data. Interpersonal factors were of great significance and were discussed in connection with a range of theorists including those from fields of psychoanalysis, phenomenology and humanism. The overall findings were conceptualised through identified links with Ryff's (1989) multidimensional model of well-being. The findings suggest that the sharing of creative writing associated with times of personal difficulty may be a valuable activity in promoting well-being in both clinical and non-clinical populations. It may be particularly helpful for people who have experienced, or are at risk of social isolation given the experiences that first led the participants to creative writing, and the centrality of 'connection within others' within their accounts.

Key Words: Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), Well-being, Creative writing, Therapeutic writing

Introduction

Within current research and practice the uses and nature of therapeutic writing are varied. The 'Expressive Writing' (EW) tradition pioneered by Pennebaker (e.g. Pennebaker, 1997) involves continuous writing about personal experiences, alone and under experimental conditions, without sharing the output with others. The Poetry Therapy tradition involves both existing poetry and clients' own poetry for the means of healing and personal growth, in individual as well as group settings (Mazza, 1999).

In an examination of the literature McCartney (2011, unpublished doctoral thesis) indicated that the forms of 'therapeutic writing' in use across different settings included: the use of writing *in* therapy (e.g. Furman, 2003); creative writing *as* therapy, both as self-help (e.g. Jeffs and Pepper, 2005) and within therapy as a facilitated intervention (e.g. Bolton, 2008); creative writing in the wider field of health (e.g. Hilse, Griffiths and Corr, 2007); as well as therapeutic benefits arising as a by-product of the use of creative writing primarily as a form of art-making (e.g. Kohanyi, 2009).

The use of creative writing in health, well-being and personal development is expanding within the United Kingdom (e.g. Bolton, 1999; Hunt, 2000), with an umbrella term of 'developmental creative writing' (DCW) having been offered by Nicholls (2009). A clear distinction in both poetry therapy and DCW from those in the EW research base is that the process involves *other people* in some way. A distinction between poetry therapy and DCW is that poetry within poetry therapy is often (but not always) 'prescribed' by a professional (i.e. an individual does not necessarily engage in their own creative writing, but explores their own experiences through existing writing), while DCW's focus is predominantly on individuals' own writing.

Nicholls (2009) discusses the limitations of the EW tradition and the ways in which DCW goes beyond EW, in terms of the benefits that can arise as a result of environmental and social factors associated with the involvement of others including: the provision of a 'holding space' (Winnicott, 1971); "opportunities to engage in an ongoing process"; facilitation of "a felt, bodily approach to the writing"; and the enablement of people "to be read and to become readers of their own and others' work" (p.174). Pennebaker (2000) has acknowledged that the 'social dynamics of disclosure' had not been addressed in earlier EW studies and has considered not only why sharing difficult personal stories with others may be helpful, but also highlights the possible costs of not doing so. Indeed Thompson (2010) found that engaging in unshared autobiographical writing reinforced destructive personal narratives from his childhood. Literature documenting the significance of the therapeutic relationship in the process of change (e.g. Tronick et al, 1998; Lambert & Barley, 2001) supports the notion that sharing creative writing could facilitate additional benefits to those found in the initial expressive stage of writing, or in unshared creative writing.

A variety of benefits have been reported in research studies and practice reports with regards to the sharing of creative writing. Positive changes in participants' beliefs about themselves and the development of a newly found 'social self' have been reported (Schneckenburger, 1995), as have increases in self-esteem, suggested to be linked to a sense of achievement through writing (Alschuler, 2000; Lauer and Goldfield, 1970). Feelings of validation through sharing writing with both on-line peers and professionals have been reported (Gilzean, 2011) and relief or catharsis through sharing experiences through writing on internet blogs (Bolton, 2008). The development of self-understanding (Lauer, 1972; Lauer & Goldfield, 1970) has also been noted as well as the facilitation of empathy between group members through sharing common experience (Sagan, 2007). Additionally the development of personal meaning has been reported, which others played a key role in

facilitating (Hilse, Griffiths & Corr, 2007). The same authors found that participants experienced "a feeling of connection with the self and environment, society or greater world" (p.435). Similarly, Moseley (1997) experienced reassurance through discovering commonalities between her own and others' suffering. Indeed, Wittman and Leeman (1979) believed creative writing groups on inpatient units functioned best when composed of people with similar problems. However, negative experiences have also been observed. For example, participants feeling stigmatised or misunderstood has been reported (Jensen & Blair, 1997) as have feelings of failure following negative feedback (Hilse, Griffiths & Corr, 2007).

It seems that the sharing of writing can be a very sensitive process and that the nature of others' involvement or responses is an important determinant in the experience of sharing writing. Sagan (2007) suggests that the sharing of writing required an environment with high levels of 'containment' (see Bion, 1967). Further, Lauer and Goldfield (1970) referred to a need for "an atmosphere of 'psychological safety'" (p.248), a term coined by Rogers (1965). Moreover, Gilzean (2011) reported that some participants only shared their writing with trusted others. These findings are congruent with Winnicott's (1971) emphasis on the importance of a safe and emotionally facilitative environment through which an infant's (or indeed an adult's) own experiences can be related to the outside world.

The need to further explore the role of others in the process of sharing creative writing associated with times of personal difficulty was identified by McCartney (2011). Indeed, the research base surrounding the sharing of creative writing associated with times of personal difficulty is limited to date and there is a need for rigorous research if the process is to be better understood. A greater understanding of individuals' experiences could lead to raised awareness and understanding as to the potential significance of this process, which seems to

have both potential benefits and risks attached. In consequence, the clinical psychology profession and, through dissemination of findings and joint working, allied professions, may gain greater insight into how it might be most helpful to support clients who want to share their writing in clinical settings, such that potential benefits can be maximized and potential risks can be minimised. Additionally, there could be a development in the theoretical or conceptual understanding of the process.

Research Aim and Questions

The overall aim of this study was to explore the experience and significance of sharing creative writing associated with times of personal difficulty, with a focus on the following questions:

- What significance do interpersonal factors have in participants' experiences of sharing creative writing associated with times of personal difficulty?
- How can the potential benefits of sharing creative writing associated with times of personal difficulty be conceptualised?

Method

Research Approach and Assumptions

Interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) is a qualitative methodology founded on both existential and hermeneutic philosophical thinking. One of its fundamental theoretical assumptions is explained by Heidegger's view that people will always be 'in context'. His term *Dasein* (1962), translated as 'there-being', implies that our intrinsic nature is to be *there,* to be involved with some form of meaningful context. This is further explained by the phenomenological principle of 'intersubjectivity', which describes our relatedness to the world (Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2009). The hermeneutic aspect of IPA

concerns the researcher's aim to *interpret* people in their particular context. The epistemological assumption held is that peoples' experiences go beyond that which language can express but that the experience of 'being-in the-world' is manifested in language, particularly in poetic discourse as argued by Heidegger (1962), and can be at least partially understood.

In light of the intersubjective nature of sharing writing and the researcher's aim to develop understanding as to the experiences and significance of sharing creative writing, the idiographic and phenomenological approach of IPA was fitting.

Participants

Eight participants, required to be over the age of 18, fluent in English and with experience of sharing (in any forum) at least one piece of creative writing that was associated with times of personal difficulty, were recruited using purposive sampling (see Willig, 2001). The term 'creative writing' was left open to participant interpretation. Of the 8 participants, 5 had previously taken part in McCartney's (2011) IPA study based on written accounts via an on-line survey regarding the experience and significance of engaging in creative writing at times of personal difficulty. The participants had originally self-selected to take part in the research following an advertisement having been placed on the websites of relevant organisations and initiatives (Lapidus, National Association of Writers in Education, The Poetry School, Survivors Poetry, and Spread the Word), and had consented to being contacted in the event that related research projects arose. A summary of demographic information is presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Participant Demographics

Participant name*	Sex	Age (at time of interview)	Ethnicity (as defined by participant)
Alan	M	48	British (White)
Sarah	F	47	White British
Nikki	F	59	Mixed parentage (British/Guyanese)
Louise	F	46	White British
Edith	F	26	White British
Lakota-Wolf	M	48	British Asian
Simon	M	Not disclosed	Not disclosed
Didge	F	61	White British

*Gender appropriate pseudonyms have been used, with five of the participants having chosen their own pseudonym.

The participants had shared their writing in a variety of contexts, with the most common being sharing with friends or relatives, in writing groups without therapeutic aims, or through published writing (summarized in appendix D).

Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval to conduct this study was granted by Canterbury Christ Church University Salomons Ethics Panel (appendix E). Participants were given clear information regarding the study and data was anonymised and securely stored in line with the Data Protection Act (1998). Particular consideration was given to the fact that participants were being asked to discuss the sharing of writing that was associated with times of personal difficulty and that as a result they might encounter difficult feelings in doing so. Participants were alerted to this possibility and encouraged to consider their readiness to do so prior to

consenting to take part. A summary report was submitted to participants and the ethics panel (appendix F).

Procedure

Firstly, 21 participants who had consented to be contacted through their previous involvement with McCartney's (2011) study were emailed with an information sheet concerning the purpose of the study, what participation would entail and ethical considerations including informed consent and the right to withdraw (appendix G). Thirteen replies were received and following further discussion, 5 met the sampling criteria and consented to participate. A further 3 participants were recruited via snowball sampling, for which an amendment to the ethics agreement was first obtained (appendix H). Interview arrangements were confirmed by email and the researcher met the participants at a place of convenience in public venues including libraries and community centres across England. Participants were told that they would be welcome, but under no obligation, to share some of their creative writing with me, (either in advance of the interview or at the interview itself) if it might aid discussion.

Prior to starting the interviews, participants were asked to give consent (appendix I) having been reminded of the ethical information. Interviews were audio recorded and lasted between 45-119 minutes. Following the interview participants were asked how the process had been and were given the opportunity to add anything that may have been missed in the interview. An option was also offered of contacting the researcher in the weeks following the interview with any further comments; four participants did so and consented to the content contributing to the data.

Interview

Prior to developing the semi-structured interview I met with a service-user member of the Salomons Advisory Group of Experts (SAGE) who had personal experience relevant to the study in order to start generating relevant areas for exploration. Once I had developed the interview schedule (appendix J) I sought feedback from an additional SAGE member with relevant personal experience to check that it was suitably clear and sensitive and also to establish whether the questions would provide a sufficient framework for capturing her experiences.

Analysis

An IPA was conducted based on the method outlined by Smith, Flowers and Larkin (2009). Interviews were transcribed verbatim and then checked for accuracy. Each transcript was then read again whilst listening to the interviews simultaneously in order to hear the participants speak their own words and so to arrive as closely as possible to their intended meanings. Whilst doing so, initial impressions regarding the nature and meaning of the participants' experiences were noted beside the text, including observations regarding the language and metaphors used and significant concepts that emerged (see sample transcript in appendix K). Subsequently, the preliminary notes and themes from each participant were copied into a table (sample in appendix L) whereupon the exploration of commonalities in themes within and across participants began. An immersive and creative process of clustering emerging themes into sub-themes and overarching superordinate themes followed, using various diagrams and conceptual representations (see appendix M for photographed examples). Once this process was provisionally complete the transcripts were revisited to ensure that the themes reflected the participants' words. Sample quotes representing each theme were gathered from the transcripts and compiled into one document (appendix N).

Quality Assurance checks

In recognition of the importance of assuring the quality and rigour of qualitative research, the four principles identified by Yardley (2000) guided the research process.

Sensitivity to context.

The consultation with two members of SAGE helped to develop an interview schedule that was sensitive to the context of the study.

Commitment and rigour.

The analysis was conducted systematically at each stage, guided by the established guidelines for IPA (Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2009) and a data trail was kept. Discussions with a fellow trainee clinical psychologist familiar with IPA at various stages throughout the analysis aimed to ensure the plausibility of the interpreted themes in so far as they related to the data.

Transparency and coherence.

I reflected on my own context and prior experiences and the way they would inevitably influence the way I viewed the data, given the limitations in my own 'horizon' (Gadamer, 1998) as a researcher and person. As Larkin, Watts and Clifton (2006) state, "any discoveries that we make must necessarily be a function of the relationship that pertains between researcher and subject-matter" (p.107). I have personal experience of sharing creative writing, some associated with times of personal difficulty, and in order to consider my preconceptions more fully I discussed my experience with an individual independent to the project and made a note of what had arisen. To maintain a reflexive stance I kept a research diary (sample in appendix O) and had reflective discussions with my lead supervisor following interviews. In addition a data trail allows transparency into the process of data analysis so that its validity can be assessed.

Impact and importance.

The study's aims were relevant to identified gaps in the literature and outcomes were relevant to further understanding the clinical utility of sharing personal creative writing.

Results

Whilst it was beyond the scope of analysis in the present study, the participants reported a variety of experiences of personal distress or difficult circumstances, a summary of which is reported in appendix P. These experiences had often resulted in a sense of isolation and accompanying need for self-expression, which along with a need to process and make sense of those experiences had led the participants to engage in creative writing. At some subsequent stage the participants had begun sharing their writing in a variety of fora (appendix D).

Four superordinate themes of 'Putting the self into the world'; 'Taking ownership of the process'; 'Making connections with others'; 'Moving beyond surviving to thriving' and associated subordinate themes were interpreted from the data (see Table 2, overleaf).

Table 2. Summary of interpreted themes

Superordinate themes and associated sub-themes	**Number of participants**
1.[1] Putting the self into the world	
1.1. Writing as an extension of the self	6
1.2. Risks of being seen	8
1.3. Rewards of being seen	8
2. Taking ownership of the experience	
2.1. Choosing an audience or reader	7
2.2. Certain writing is not for sharing	7
2.3. Reflections on feedback	8
3. Making connections with others	
3.1. Importance of a safe sharing environment	7
3.2. Use of humour	7
3.3. Not being the only one	6
3.4. A spiritual aspect to connection	4
4. Moving beyond surviving to thriving	
4.1. Negotiating identity	6
4.2. Sense of achievement	7
4.3. Evolving understanding	7
4.4. Sense of purpose	8

[1] These numbers will be used in references to themes within the discussion.

Superordinate Theme 1: Putting the Self into the World

The decision to share creative writing with others often held great significance for the participants, especially when the writing shared was characterized by some of the aforementioned personally difficult experiences.

Writing as an extension of the self

The sharing of writing was felt to reflect an aspect of the participants' selves being made visible to the outside world. As Lakota-Wolf suggested: "It's an extension of yourself, and it's not just the physical…it's spiritual…it's physical, it's emotional." Edith's words suggested a sense that her internal self could become external and concretely visible to others through writing: "You've actually put *you* onto the page somehow."

Risks of being seen

There was a perceived potential for negative consequences, which at times had been realized. Fears both of being misunderstood and of being judged were reported. Louise felt that people had sometimes viewed her differently when they had been given insight into her most private experiences: "There's a moment where, when people read what's really going in your head sometimes that, they look at you different, they don't really understand". For Lakota-Wolf, the risk of personal meaning in his poetry being misunderstood was of greater concern than possible literary criticism. "That to me is worse because it makes a nonsense, well of your soul really, that's your soul there...and I feel it needs a fair hearing". The word 'hearing' evokes a sense of perceived judgment. It was also Lakota-Wolf's experience that the exposure he felt after publishing his first poetry anthology had actually increased the sense of isolation he had experienced previously: "When the first book came out it made me feel intensely vulnerable…because I'd opened my soul to the public so I sort of found myself hiding, a lot more".

Rewards of being seen

As well as risks there were rewards. Even in the absence of verbal feedback, simply being 'heard' or 'seen' was felt to be valuable, as suggested by one participant with regards to having shared writing with a friend:

> Your writing is one thing and reading it out is another thing…and sharing it with, with one other person…you know did make a difference…and she sort of said she felt very supported as well...by me just hearing it…and then obviously...we...you know she...she could ask for feedback or not. (Sarah)

Suggestions of an affirmation of existence were expressed by Louise: "The very act of someone reading it is actually enough to acknowledge that it is out there and it exists on its own". Additionally, the value of being able to communicate something that was difficult to express was suggested by Edith: "Sometimes, especially with my BPD [Borderline Personality Disorder], I can't actually put my feelings into words and this actually says, 'that's me, that's how I feel', and that's an amazing way of getting it out there".

Superordinate Theme 2: Taking Ownership of the Experience

Due to the potential for negative experiences, the setting for sharing writing, and the type of writing, was often given careful consideration in order to guard against the risks outlined above.

Choosing an audience or reader

One way in which people looked after themselves was to find a reader/listener whom they felt would be sympathetic, although clearly the case differed when it came to published writing. Sharing with a close friend allowed Sarah to go to a deeper level than she imagined would have been possible with people with whom she was unfamiliar: "We were friends….and… could explore more deeply somehow….those kind of things than you would in a creative writing class

where you don't know people". However, as Simon explained it seemed to depend very much of the nature of the other person and the relationship:

> I've got one friend who's creative and I'm happy to share anything with him, but I've got another friend who isn't creative and by nature he's a critic so I don't bother sharing anything with him because I know he'll just rip it to pieces. (Simon)

Certain writing is not for sharing

Participants also gave thought to what they would not share with others. Factors included a sense of not wanting to expose the 'unacceptable' parts of the self or not wanting to show something that wasn't 'fit' for an audience in terms of its quality, as suggested by Didge: "Somehow this was…this was…the emotional mess…and that…I was capable of much better, tidier, more edited, more polished…writing…and…. this feeling that somebody else shouldn't be looking at something quite so horrid." Most participants, such as Alan, also considered the potential impact of their writing on others, in terms of not wanting to cause upset or offence: "I would like to write about it but in a way that feels disloyal because that's…in a way that's nothing to do with me… it feels almost like I'm intruding upon something where I perhaps shouldn't go."

Reflections on feedback

Despite the risks for hurt and misunderstanding, the participants largely acknowledged that others may feel or think differently to themselves regarding their writing, which seemed to temper the disappointment or hurt that might be felt if feedback was not as it had been hoped for. In reference to the autobiography he hoped to publish Simon stated: "I can't write stuff that everybody's going to like so I'm bound to get some criticism of it". Edith suggested that others may even gain something from 'misinterpreting' her writing if it was something they 'needed' for themselves, implying that this could justify the misinterpretation:

> Sometimes it is quite hard when people say “it made me think this” and it’s like “ohh ok, that’s definitely not what I was trying to get across” but then you think “ok well actually if that’s what it made you think then it must be something going round in your head that wants you to get that out and it’s just needed that one way of doing that”. (Edith)

The participants felt that what ‘appropriate’ feedback might consist of varied greatly depended on the setting in which writing was shared. Of her experience of attending a poetry school Didge reflected that: “It’s…possibly it’s more..critical in the…in the broad sense of the word...that people will look at poems and they will...make much stronger….suggestions”. Of sharing in a therapeutic capacity, Lakota-Wolf expressed that: “You have to be, I feel, very sensitive on how you comment or react even to those forms of writing because the last thing you want, I feel, is to alter the energy, or put your own energy onto it.” Sarah highlighted the value of negotiating boundaries regarding the type of feedback that is wanted when it came to very personal writing:

> We’d agreed to do that….to get, to gi- to ask for the feedback we wanted….yeah...so that was quite helpful actually...it gave boundaries as well…of…especially when you’re dealing with quite painful stuff you don’t necessarily want someone…commenting on your...ideas and your life. (Sarah)

Superordinate Theme 3: Making Connections with Others

The sense of connection with others ran strongly through the majority of participants’ accounts. This was dependent on the perceived safety of the sharing environment and was also facilitated by the use of humour and shared experience. For some, the sense of shared experience was profound and was expressed in spiritual terms.

Importance of a safe sharing environment

The need for trust, lack of judgment and emotional safety was seen to be very important for the majority of participants in enabling sharing. Didge suggested that: "If there isn't that…that trust…and ..mutual respect., nobody will actually ..say anything." Further, Sarah considered that: "He's not a judgmental person…I mean, he's not going to kind of worry about whatever's said in there."

One factor that could foster safety in sharing was a commonality of experience, as exemplified by Simon:

> A lot of people there have had mental health problems or have experience of somebody else having mental health problems…people are happier to talk about their feelings because they know that other people can often relate to it and have experienced similar sorts of things. (Simon)

Whilst 'safety' could never be fully guaranteed due to the very personal nature of some writing, Edith highlighted the need for a 'safe enough' environment: "I find the fact that he doesn't judge…I don't trust him 100% because I have massive issues with trust, but I trust him *enough"* (italics represent Edith's emphasis in speech).

Use of humour

Despite the participants having reported some very difficult experiences, a sense of fun and humour in sharing writing was frequently reported. Didge took great pleasure from making others laugh and suggests a sense of relief at having shed the feelings that had weighed her down in the past: "On occasions where they've been absolutely doubled up with laughter….and that is just, is just fabulous to realise that...all those years of sort of...covering up…of shame…of sadness…all that just is...gone." Humour was also a way of realising common humanity, which Louise discussed in relation to her experiences of depression:

> So there's something people can laugh at, like "aren't humans silly" rather than "life is awful"…there's a human nature aspect to it, and laughing at human nature is much better than wallowing in the dark bits of human nature which is so horrible, you know you're wanting to…move forward. (Louise)

Humour also helped make sense of experience and served as a vehicle for communicating with others, as Alan explained: "humour I think was again… 'how do I make sense of this?…how can I express to people what I might not express otherwise…and…how…is there a way to reach others?'"

Not being the only one

The significance of realising shared experiences was reported, which was perhaps particularly pertinent given the sense of isolation experienced by the majority of participants at some time prior to sharing their writing. Didge felt emotionally supported by the realisation that she and her fellow writers were 'in it together'*:* "I think they'd all experienced something similar so there was a feeling that we're all in this together…and it just happened to be my turn that week…that…something...was a bit painful." Feelings of validation were also implied by Louise: "where I've had personal comments on a personal piece, it does feel good because it's affirming the fact that I have a right to feel like this, that this is worth something, that I'm not alone in feeling like this." Additionally, realising others had encountered similar experiences related to being from a minority ethnic group had helped Nikki: "I thought I was hard done by growing up in XXXX [name of town omitted]…you know, but…we all had our…cross to bear…and...but I wasn't the only one….it did help."

A spiritual aspect to connection

There were some, more or less explicit, references to a spiritual quality to the sense of connection that could occur through sharing writing. Louise described a sense of shared

consciousness, powerful energetic experiences, feelings of love, an altered sense of existence and a renewal of her faith in the 'goodness' of the world:

> Human spirit is about communicating with other human souls, there is energy to it (sharing writing), there is a shared consciousness to it…when it works you get back a lot of energy, there's a much more energetic flow and it's outward looking, and actually there is…an element of love to it…it does reset your faith in human nature, whereas the darkness (reference to depression)… there is nothing good about human beings at all, including yourself, whereas when you reach out with a story what you get is very loving and very warm, and your existence is reset…and you realise that there is something good in the world. (Louise)

Alan's experience hinted at the power of poetry to move people at a deep level, and a drive to be connected as 'souls': "Poetry at its best kind of stirs the soul…you want to feel that what you write is important. I think it serves you as a soul because you want to feel that we are all connected". Lakota-Wolf's account implied the profundity of the sharing experience through its allowance of access to an aspect of the self that is usually intangible:

> Someone has kind of honoured you by allowing you, a peek at, you're having a peek at their soul, at the innermost depth of that person's existence, or, er presence, so I think it needs to be respected as such. (Lakota-Wolf)

Superordinate Theme 4: Moving Beyond Surviving to Thriving

There was an overall sense that the sharing of writing went beyond the experiences of engaging in personal writing, which seemed, at least in the first instance, to be about the participants 'surviving' or 'coping' with the challenging circumstances they had experienced. Sharing writing on the other hand seemed to take participants' towards personal growth, or as Louise put it "building above ground". This included negotiating more positive identities, finding

a sense of achievement through creative output, gaining new and evolving perspectives on themselves and their lives, and being driven by a sense of purpose, often through wanting to raise awareness of issues that held strong personal significance.

Negotiating identity

The prior experiences of personal difficulty expressed by the participants had evidently led to identification with negative self-concepts in some cases. Louise found that sharing her writing enabled her to move away from those less positive aspects of her self-experience: "you're not there to wallow in mental health issues, you're there for something completely different…it's quite refreshing, it's quite energising, and they want to meet your positive identity…they are meeting me as a writer." She also reflected that the act of fictionalizing in writing could help to: "re-establish your character, who you are, who you want to be."

The positive feedback Edith had received about her writing had enabled her to positively renegotiate her relationship to having mental health problems:

> It's like wow, actually sometimes a mentally ill mind can be the most beautiful mind and it's quite nice to know that actually my mind is in that space sometimes and it's not just me saying that it's other people saying it's in that other section sometimes. (Edith)

Didge's previous marriage to a man with severe alcohol problems had had a huge impact on her self-esteem. Through writing with others she was able to realise that she was of much greater value than she had been led to believe and to find 'her voice':

> My ex-husband's behaviour included dismissing me as 'the most boring person he had ever met', 'unsociable', 'loner' . . . I began to believe these things…As I began to share my writing and people enjoyed my efforts, I began to realise that I was none of these things and found 'my voice'." (Didge, Email)

More broadly, writing had facilitated Didge's understanding of herself in the context of the world around her:

> It reinforces…your sense of …yourself…and it's also helped me to….to have a broader understanding of where I am in…in history…there's one particular session where we had to write about the 50's….and so I wrote about something that happened in my…childhood….and that was…tremendous because I realised…how much, sort of the 50's and 60's had defined me. (Didge)

Sense of achievement

Linked to the negotiation of a more positive identity was a sense of achievement. For Louise, the sense of accomplishment at meeting a target of producing writing to submit to a magazine also had knock-on effects on her mood and overall mental health:

> You do get a wonderful feeling of 'I've done that, what's next?' …and you get your sense of humour back and you get yourself back, you recover yourself in a way that is much more productive than being depressed and shut down. (Louise)

The tangible sense of achievement for Edith of seeing her work in print (a group anthology was being produced) was also valued and inspired self-confidence: "It was a proper, shiny book and it was just nice, like, to get your name accredited and stuff, and helps me as well because I've got it out there and we'll see where it goes." Informal feedback was also valued: "I've showed it to a couple of other people and they're like 'wow, that's amazing', so that's really nice." (Edith)

Evolving understanding

For some participants, particularly those who shared their writing in person, discussion of their writing with others brought new insights about their writing and themselves. Sarah

highlighted how one can be limited by one's own frame of reference and also implies an interdependent and cyclical relationship between one's self-understanding and one's writing:

> I suppose you get a bit stuck in your own…sort of…particular habits when you're on your own…you know…so its actually the other person's perception…bringing out what you can't see…it's an ongoing process as well…it's not ever…you know…as you transform…the writing transforms really, you can write it again. (Sarah)

Edith suggested the value in others offering alternative perspectives on her writing that she hadn't noticed herself: "Sometimes it brought more things out that I haven't noticed…and actually 'you can go that route' but I hadn't thought of that and so that's quite useful."

Sense of purpose

A sense of purpose was derived from, or channeled into, by participants through sharing their writing. Louise had struggled with the loss of roles that came with motherhood:

> I was working a lot and then I had my first child and we moved down here and I suddenly wasn't working and I found that even though I liked being a mother, not having any intellectual pursuit at all was a big shock to the system…suddenly they take all the thought away from it and you're an instinctive mum at home. (Louise)

The sharing of her writing, both on-line and within groups had challenged Louise positively so that she once again felt she was utilizing some of her former skills: "It's not really a job of employment, but you've got a role, Even if it's terrifying, it makes you do stuff."

For those whose writing was shared in the public domain, there was often a drive to raise awareness, particularly related to the issues that had previously led to the isolation or difficulties they had faced. Simon had been involved with one writing group that had a primary aim of promoting social inclusion and another writing group for people with experience of mental health

problems that aimed to challenge stigma. Additionally, he had previously spent time in a Young Offenders Institute (YOI) and hoped to publish an autobiography through which he hoped for: "People to see what life is like in a YOI and how the system works and how people are treated and how small things can make big differences."

Nikki had grown up as the only person of mixed racial parentage in her family and had felt the need to explore her racial identity outside of her family. She had become involved with leading groups for black and mixed-heritage women writers as well as editing an anthology of writers from that racial community: "I felt that I was empowering black women…and, and obviously they were getting published…and that was one of my…really…that was my ambition...to empower them…and to get them…get them out there."

Summary

The act of sharing writing held profound personal significance for the participants whom as a result made careful choices about what to share and with whom. The need for a safe environment, and the value of humour and shared experiences were reported. Some participants understood their experiences in spiritual terms. Overall, the sharing of writing in its various guises seemed to contribute to participants being able to move beyond their personal challenges through a combination of negotiating more positive identities, finding a sense of achievement, developing new understandings through interactions with others, and through creating or providing a vehicle for a sense of purpose.

Discussion

The results will now be considered in terms of the research questions through making links with extant literature and relevant theory. Implications for clinical practice, limitations of the findings, and suggestions for future research will then be discussed.

What is the Significance of Interpersonal Factors in Participants' Experiences of Sharing Creative Writing Associated with Times of Personal Difficulty?

The eight participants interviewed discussed their initial engagement in personal writing and subsequent sharing of creative writing in the context of prior or current personally challenging circumstances, which had often been accompanied by experiences of isolation of some kind. The experience of isolation leading to the connection with others is consistent with Harry Stack Sullivan's assertion that loneliness is an important motivation in interpersonal development (Barton Evans III, 1996), as well as Winnicott's (1965) suggestion that "the healthy individual does not become isolated, but becomes related to the environment in such a way that the individual and the environment can be said to be interdependent" (p.84).

The finding that being heard or seen by others was an important part of the process (sub-theme 1.3.) is consistent both with Gilzean's (2011) findings that participants reported feelings of validation through sharing their writing and with Bolton's (2008) findings that some participants felt a sense of relief following sharing their writing. There may be a 'confessional' aspect to sharing that may lead to some relief from emotions such as shame, as referred to by Didge (p.58). Given the relational nature of shame, which as Erikson (1995) suggests "supposes that one is completely exposed and conscious of being looked at" (p. 227), it follows that a positive relational experience may help to provide another experience of being 'looked at' by others but that negative experiences have the potential to be

distressing. The participants' experience of sharing writing being a very personal thing (sub-theme 1.1) with potential for hurt and misunderstanding (sub-theme 1.2.) is consistent with Jensen and Blair's (1997) and Hilse, Griffiths and Corr's (2007) findings. Feeling misunderstood or criticised perhaps has the potential to reinforce experiences of shame and lead to greater isolation.

The participants' accounts clearly indicate that how others respond is an important determinant in the experience of sharing creative writing (sub-theme 3.1) with a need for trust and lack of judgment, consistent with previous findings (e.g. Gilzean, 2011). This is unsurprising given that (as referred to in the introduction), the quality of relationship within therapy is known to be an essential factor within the process of change (Lambert & Barley, 2001; Tronick et al, 1998). Further, the need for an emotionally facilitative environment in order for an individual to be able to play, create and otherwise relate his/her internal experiences to the external world (Winnicott, 1971) is widely acknowledged. The participants gave consideration to what writing to share and with whom as a result of the emotional risks entailed (superordinate theme 3.2) and in doing so took ownership of the experience in order to minimise the risks for hurt and misunderstanding, as in Gilzean's (2011) study.

The significance of participants finding reassurance in realising common experience (sub-theme 3.3.3) is consistent with reports from Sagan (2007) and Moseley (1997) and Wittman and Leeman's (1979) observations that creative writing groups functioned best when comprised of people with shared experiences. Kohut (1959) identifies 'twinship', the need *for* "people with whom we can identify as like ourselves, to reaffirm that we are a human among humans and welcome to be so" (Jacobs, 1992, p. 3) as one of three major 'self-object' needs. The 'Selfobject' is "an object felt subjectively" involving a "specific bond [between people] required for maintaining, restoring, or consolidating the organization of

self-experience" (Stolorow, Brandchaft & Atwood, 1987, p.16). Moving beyond the initial expressive stage in writing to sharing creative writing could be seen as seeking and meeting this need for 'twinship'.

The significance of connection with others, which for some was understood in spiritual terms (sub-theme 3.4.) and also sense of purpose (sub-theme 4.4) is mirrored by Frankl's (1978) assertion that:

> Being human is being always directed, and pointing, to something or someone other than oneself: to a meaning to fulfill or another human being to encounter, a cause to serve, or a person to love…by forgetting himself and giving himself, overlooking himself and focusing outward (p.35).

This again suggests the value (and perhaps intrinsic motivation) of moving beyond the initial expressive stage writing.

The value of enjoyment and humour through sharing (sub-theme 3.2) is consistent with Evans and Glover's (2011) observations and also links with the idea of 'thriving' represented by superordinate theme 4. The negotiation of more positive identities (sub-theme 4.1.) and sense of achievement (sub-theme 4.2.) arising through the sharing of creative writing is consistent with Alschuler's (2000) observations and supports the 'self-in-relation' construct of self-esteem (Jordan, Kaplan, Miller, Stiver, & Surrey, 1991), which highlights that one's sense of capability and identity is developed through relationships with others.

Participants' experiences that sharing writing with others led to evolving understanding (subtheme 4.4) is in line with Lauer (1972), Lauer and Goldfield, (1970) and Hilse, Griffiths and Corr's (2007) findings. Gadamer (1998) suggested that self-understanding is limited by an individual's particular 'horizon', which is dependent on the individuals' social and

historical context. He posited that dialogue is necessary for a 'fusion of horizons' to occur and for a mutual understanding of the world to be negotiated. There are also parallels with Heidegger's (1962) 'hermeneutic circle', wherein understanding is developed through a constant dialogical process.

This discussion draws predominantly upon humanistic and psychodynamic perspectives, however, other models could also be usefully drawn upon in order to theorise the process of sharing creative writing. For example, some of the key aspects of narrative therapy work (White & Epston, 1990), which is based on social constructionist epistemology and considers that the concept of identity is continually reconstructed through the use of language in interactions with others (Jenkins, 1996), also have clear parallels with the findings of this research. Of particular relevance is the concept of 're-authoring' or 're-storying', which refers to the development of preferred stories and identities (White, 2007; White & Epston, 1990); and the concept of 'witnessing' (Dean, 1998; Laube, 1998), which acknowledges the importance of others in acknowledging and helping to strengthen those preferred stories and identities.

How Can the Potential Benefits of Sharing Creative Writing be Conceptualised?

The experiences of sharing writing with others seem to have links with well-being, as the word 'thriving' in the superordinate theme 4 ('Moving beyond surviving to thriving') perhaps reflects. Promoting population well-being was a guiding vision in the New Horizons consultation document (Department of Health, 2010) and fittingly, the development of creativity was one of the suggested contributors. Well-being is also an integral component of the government's current strategy for mental health (Department of Health, 2011) and enhancing well-being is one of the overall aims of the clinical psychology profession.

Within psychological literature, well-being is distinguished between two types, 'hedonic', which concerns the experience of positive affect and pleasure (Kahneman, Diener, & Schwartz, 1999), and 'eudaimonic', which concerns the extent of fulfillment of one's potential (Waterman, 1993) and encompasses ideas of self-development, personal growth and purposeful engagement. The latter concept incorporates theorists from positive psychology (e.g. Csikszentmihalyi, 1990) and the work of existential and humanistic psychotherapists and psychologists such as Maslow (1968) and Frankl (1984).

One of the contemporary theories of eudaimonic well-being is the multicomponent model of well-being (Ryff, 1989; Ryff & Singer, 2008), which comprises six dimensions: 'Self-acceptance'; 'Positive relations with others'; 'Autonomy'; 'Environmental mastery'; 'Purpose in life'; and 'Personal growth' (see appendix Q for definitions). The model has many parallels with the findings from the current study, for example:

- The superordinate theme of 'Taking ownership of one's experience' relates to 'Environmental mastery' with regards to "choos(ing) or creat(ing) contexts suitable to personal needs or values." (Ryff, 1989, p.1072).
- The superordinate theme of 'Making connections with others' relates to 'Positive relations with others' with its shared focus on "warm, satisfying, trusting relationships with others" (p.1072).
- The superordinate theme of 'Moving beyond surviving to thriving' relates both to the 'Personal growth' and 'Purpose in life' dimensions.
- The dimension of 'Autonomy' has connections with the continued engagement with self-directed writing (which was true of all participants but not analysed due to the limited scope of the present study)

- The subtheme of 'Negotiating identity' (sub-theme 4.1) is reflected in the 'Self-acceptance' dimension, which refers to possessing a "positive attitude toward the self" (p.1072).

The use of humour and enjoyment associated with sharing creative writing for many of the participants also has links with hedonic notions of well-being.

Implications for Clinical Practice

The parallels with models of well-being discussed above suggest that the sharing of writing may be a valuable activity for promoting well-being in both clinical and non-clinical settings. In particular, it may be of benefit for individuals that have experienced isolation (consistent with Houlding & Holland's, 1988, findings), whether through mental health problems, bereavement, substance misuse or any other human issue that may be faced throughout life. Creative writing requires few resources and could therefore serve as a cost-effective tool for promoting well-being alongside other interventions that individuals may be engaged in for mental health problems. Additionally, the sharing of creative writing could serve as a preventative tool within community settings for socially marginalized groups. However, given the importance of interpersonal factors suggested by the findings, the potential for the sharing of creative writing to enhance well-being is likely to be heavily dependent upon such factors.

The importance of interpersonal factors within sharing writing needs to be considered in clinical settings, both to minimize harm and to maximize benefits. For example, the potential for hurt and misunderstanding identified in this and other studies, means that professionals need to retain an awareness of the sensitivity required if clients wish to share their writing and to foster emotionally facilitative environments (including the setting of appropriate boundaries regarding feedback) so that individuals feel safe enough to share their

writing. In terms of maximizing benefits, groups might be most effective if comprised of individuals who share some common experiences.

Given the identified parallels with narrative therapy work, it would useful to give further consideration to how the use of creative writing may be of value and relevance to the aims of this therapeutic model. There could be particular scope for rich contributions within group narrative therapy work (see Dean, 1998).

Limitations of Findings

This study provided an in-depth account of the experiences of sharing creative writing and doing so required a small sample size. As with all small samples, caution must be exercised when considering applicability to other populations. Creative writing, as with all interventions, will not suit everyone. Six of the eight participants in this study had published their writing in some capacity, which as a proportion is unlikely to be reflected in most other settings (clinical or otherwise). Additionally, the participants were generally very articulate and not all individuals will share the same level of verbal or written ability. That said, creative writing interventions have been conducted with people who have significant limitations in verbal, written or even cognitive ability, for example with older people experiencing dementia (e.g. Gregory, 2011) and so it is possible for interventions to be adapted to the needs of individuals.

Despite the participants not being drawn from a clinical population, and the characteristics that may differ in some respects as a result, they had faced a variety of personally challenging experiences such as bereavement, PTSD, anxiety and depression that have parallels with some of the issues faced by many individuals in clinical populations (and indeed many people outside of clinical populations) and the findings can therefore be said to have some potential relevance to others facing similar issues.

Further Research

All of the participants had initially engaged in self-directed writing and whether the sharing of creative writing could be of benefit to people who have not done so needs to be investigated. Further research could also investigate the context-dependent opportunities and limitations associated with sharing writing within different fora (including some with, and some without, therapeutic aims), since comparison of these factors was beyond the scope of this study. Additionally, further investigation into the potential links with well-being could be investigated through quantitative methodologies. Through use of a randomized controlled trial creative writing groups with and without therapeutic aims could be compared in terms of their impact on well-being

Conclusion

Given the limited research concerning the sharing of writing associated with times of personal difficulty, this study aimed to explore the significance of the process and the experiences involved. The research questions focused on the significance of interpersonal factors and the conceptualization of potential benefits. The sharing of writing was perceived to hold strong personal significance and experiences seemed to be largely influenced by interpersonal factors, consistent with literature in the field. The themes interpreted from the data had parallels with both hedonic and eudaimonic models of well-being, suggesting that the sharing of writing may be a valuable activity for promoting well-being, especially for those who may have become isolated as a result of their life experiences. The small sample size enabled an in-depth exploration of participant experience but limits the assumptions that can be made about applicability to others. Future research could seek to further understand the benefits and risks associated with sharing writing across different fora and the use of

quantitative methodologies could help to further investigate the identified links with well-being.

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SECTION C: CRITICAL APPRAISAL

Jennifer Maris

The experience and significance of sharing creative writing associated with times of personal difficulty

Word count = 1969 (plus 64 additional words)

Salomons

Canterbury Christ Church University

Critical Appraisal

What Research Skills Have You Learned and What Research Abilities Have You Developed from Undertaking This project and What Do You Think You Need to Learn Further?

This research project was the second in which I have used Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). However, my previous experience of IPA was within a humanities department (as part of a Masters in Creative Writing and Personal Development) and whilst the process of analysis I used was broadly the same, the way in which I was required to approach many aspects of the research process differed. For example, the process of applying for project and ethical approval was far more rigorous for the current project, which whilst requiring a high degree of effort at the time helped to clarify my thinking from much earlier on in the process about the theoretical underpinnings of the project, its aims and clinical relevance. There has also been more emphasis on methodological rigour (Yardley, 2000), which has developed my ability to conduct my research in line with quality standards and to assess the validity of my own and others' qualitative research.

My thinking around ethical issues also developed throughout this project due to having to consider certain ethical issues along the way. For example, around half of my participants said they were happy for me to use their real names when I asked them if they had a preference for a pseudonym. One participant in particular was keen for certain aspects of his account to be reported despite some information being potentially personally identifiable by simply putting certain key words into an internet search engine. As a human, the 'right' thing to do felt to act according to my participants' requests, however, as a psychologist and

researcher I was aware of the ethical agreements I had signed up to in terms of ensuring confidentiality and anonymity, and I also felt a sense of protection in this regard. Ultimately, I decided not to include information that could possibly lead to identification and explained my decision to the participant in question in terms of my ethical responsibilities, which he understood. Additionally, I decided to use pseudonyms but I asked all the participants if they had a preferred pseudonym (four suggested their own pseudonym), allowing some personal choice and yet still anonymity.

When it came to interpreting the data, I also reflected on the power and authority afforded to academic researchers and the need: "to be constantly be aware of our power to define the right, the good, the best, the ideal; to become accountable to the power of naming, and thus try not to violate, unwittingly, the humanity of those whose lives we hope to understand" (Tolman & Brydon-Miller, 2001, p.54). I felt a lot of personal responsibility to 'do justice' to my participants when it came to interpreting the data and writing up the journal paper, given their considerable personal investment in creative writing. I felt a sense of gratitude for their generosity in meeting with me and sharing their very personal experiences. Whilst I did not seek participant validation (Reid & Gough, 2000) I kept my participants in mind as 'imagined readers' (Iser, 1980), which acted as a guide in the process of interpretation, e.g. "What would X think about this statement? Would it ring true?"

One of the challenges I encountered was in making decisions about which theoretical perspectives/conceptual frameworks to draw upon when discussing my findings, given that I had read around the area fairly extensively and encountered various theories of relevance. I negotiated these choices through considering their specificity to my findings. For example, Winnicott's concept of 'transitional space' (1971) is an important relational concept often drawn upon in making theoretical sense of the role of arts within therapies. However, it is a

concept that is more directly relevant to therapeutic relationships and given that only two of my participants had shared writing with a therapist the concept didn't seem as fitting as discussion of more overarching relational concepts such as selfobject needs (Kohut, 1959) and existential/humanistic concepts from Frankl (1978), which seemed to better convey more fundamental human-to-human experiences.

I noticed that my interview skills improved over the course of the interviews taking place. In becoming more familiar with the interview questions I felt more able to let them act as a guide and to be more present with my participants as a result. The conversation seemed to flow more (which was confirmed on listening to the interviews at a later date) and the participants appeared more relaxed as a result. I had to resist an impulse at times to move towards a more therapeutic role, especially when participants recounted personally difficult times. Being mindful of the tension between roles of researcher and therapist was part of my development in this project and is something I will continue to develop in future research.

I have enjoyed using IPA again and feel a resonance with its epistemological and ontological positioning. In future research I would be interested to develop my skills in other phenomenological approaches. I was inspired to read Todres and Galvin's (2008) discussion of 'aesthetic phenomenology', which encourages a more evocative and poetic writing style. The approach feels fitting with the subject matter of creative writing, which it seems likely I will further research at some time in my career. Further, Schulz (2006) has discussed the use of researcher creative writing as a method for interpreting data, situated within perspectives on conversation and understanding from Gadamer (1998) and Heidegger (1962), which also have theoretical links with the results of this project and could be an interesting technique to explore.

If You Were Able to Do This Project Again, Would You Do Anything Differently and Why?

One of the initial hopes I had for the project, which ultimately didn't come to fruition, was to in some way include participants' creative writing within the research. I did offer participants the opportunity to share their writing with me, and a number of them did offer me copies, about which I had some discussion, but I hadn't given much advance thought to how I might incorporate the actual writing with regards to the research questions. In light of how sensitive a process sharing writing seems to be, I was reluctant to open up a process of discussing the content of their writing without sufficient consideration as to my rationale (as opposed to curiosity), especially if there was not enough time to reflect meaningfully on the process with participants. I also was reluctant to 'read too much' into participants' writing without sufficient dialogue. If I conducted the project again I would be clearer about whether, and if so, how and why, I would incorporate participants' writing.

I also considered the possibility of using more innovative ways of presenting my results, having been interested to see authors such as Bone (2008) use poetry to summarise research themes, since on an intuitive level it had felt consistent with the subject matter. I did experiment with this through the process of analysis but ultimately decided to stick with a method with which I was familiar since I was unsure, firstly, if the former would be considered plausible within the clinical psychology discipline, and secondly, whether it would have enriched the findings or just have been 'tokenistic'. I think it would feel safer to take a path 'less trodden' outside of the bounds and time constraints of the doctorate.

One of the limitations to this study was that there were considerable differences between the participants in terms of the fora in which they had shared writing, which reduced the homogeneity of the sample. If I were to conduct the study again I might use more specific

inclusion criteria in that regard, for example focusing on sharing writing within groups or sharing writing within therapy, which would have increased the specificity of the findings. I didn't use such specific criteria initially, since I was not sure how easy it would be to recruit to the project.

With regards to increasing the plausability of my findings, in addition to the steps I took as outlined in section B (method section) I could also have sought an independent researcher, upon completion of the project, to assess the coherence of my findings in relation to the original data and the various stages of analysis I undertook. This would have further added to the 'commitment and rigour', one of Yardley's (2000) principles for assessing the quality of qualitative research (Yardley, 2000).

Clinically, As a Consequence of Doing This Study, What Would You Do Differently and Why?

The results of this study have given me some useful insights into how it might be most helpful to approach the sharing of writing. If a client expressed an interest in sharing their writing with me within individual work, rather than rushing to reading, or discussing, the content of the writing I would first encourage conversation *about* the writing in order to understand something of its meaning to the individual. I would also clarify what sort of feedback they were hoping for in order to minimise the risk of hurt and misunderstanding.

Further, I would likely explain that sometimes people can feel vulnerable after sharing their writing, to raise awareness of this possibility, enabling clients to 'take ownership' of the experience. I would also encourage discussion of the process of sharing after the fact, partly since it may have additional benefits (Bolton, 2008) and also to give space in which clients can feed back on their experience, encouraging transparency in the relationship.

If using creative writing as an activity within group work, I would give careful consideration to bringing together people that have some form of shared experience. I would introduce the same ideas around negotiating types of feedback and the potential for feelings of vulnerability etc. as a form of 'health warning'. If other staff were facilitating such groups, there could be a role for offering training, consultancy, or supervision.

One of the findings that I had not anticipated to be so strong in the findings was the value of humour through the sharing of writing, and so something I will bear in mind if I am involved with this sort of work in the future is that writing about difficult experiences does not always have to be serious! However, use of humour would need to be tentative and client-led due to the sensitivity of the process. I have also wondered about how the perceived value of developing writing skill in terms of confidence and role-identity might interact with or be in tension with, the concomitant risk that feedback can be hurtful. There would need to be sensitive consideration and assessment of where individuals are at in their therapeutic process in order for interventions to be most helpful and least harmful.

If You Were To Undertake Further Research in This Area What Would That Research Project Seek To Answer and How Would You Go About Doing it?

There is a current lack of rigorous quantitative studies concerning the therapeutic use of writing outside of the Expressive Writing paradigm. Quantitative studies could help to strengthen the potential links with well-being suggested by the findings of the current study, as well as drawing out some of the differences between different sorts of writing group. A qualitative study that has already attempted to investigate the differences between models of writing is that by Cooper (2013) in which two models of writing were compared in the context of healthcare for depression. A randomized controlled trial, with a between-groups design could be employed to investigate differences between two models of sharing creative

writing. Findings have differed as to the importance (or not) of having an explicit therapeutic aim with regards to therapeutic outcome, and this could be investigated with a focus on well-being. Standardised measures (e.g. Waterman et al, 2010; eudaimonic well-being) could be used to collect data before the start of the intervention (to allow for baseline comparison), at various time points throughout the intervention, at the end of the intervention, and at longer-term follow-up. Group characteristics would need to be matched as closely as possible in order to minimize the impact of confounding variables.

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SECTION D: APPENDIX OF SUPPORTING MATERIALS

Appendix A: Search strategy

Databases searched:

- OvidSP (which includes: EBM Reviews - Cochrane Database of Systematic Reviews, 2005 to April 2013; EBM Reviews - ACP Journal Club, 1991 to April 2013; EBM Reviews - Database of Abstracts of Reviews of Effects, 1st Quarter 2013; EBM Reviews - Cochrane Central Register of Controlled Trials, April 2013; EBM Reviews - Cochrane Methodology Register, 3rd Quarter 2012; EBM Reviews - Health Technology Assessment 1st Quarter 2013, EBM Reviews - NHS Economic Evaluation, April 2013; PsycINFO, Books@Ovid, March 2013, CCCU Journals@Ovid Full Text; PsycARTICLES Full Text; Social Policy and Practice)
- Cumulative Index to nursing and allied health (Cinahl)
- Applied Social Sciences Abstracts (ASSIA)
- Additional searches were also conducted within google scholar
- The references of articles relevant to the topic area were checked for additional articles.

The latest searches were conducted in March 2013 and databases were searched from the earliest dates available within each database.

Search terms used

Initial search terms:

Creative writing OR
Creative writ* (to include related terms) OR
Poe* (to include related terms poem/poet/poetry) OR
Therapeutic writing

The results of the initial search were used in conjunction with the following terms to increase their clinical relevance:

Therap* (to include related terms) OR
Well-being OR
Health OR
Healing OR
Personal development OR
Coping OR
Resilience

OR the initial search terms in conjunction with the following terms (also to increase clinical relevance)

Mental illness OR
Mental disorder OR
Adversity OR
Life events OR
Distress OR
Stress OR
Trauma

To narrow the search further, the following terms were used to identify relevant research articles:

Impact OR
Experience OR
Phenomenological OR
Qualitative OR
Effect* (to include related terms) OR
Outcome OR
Quantitative.

Inclusion criteria

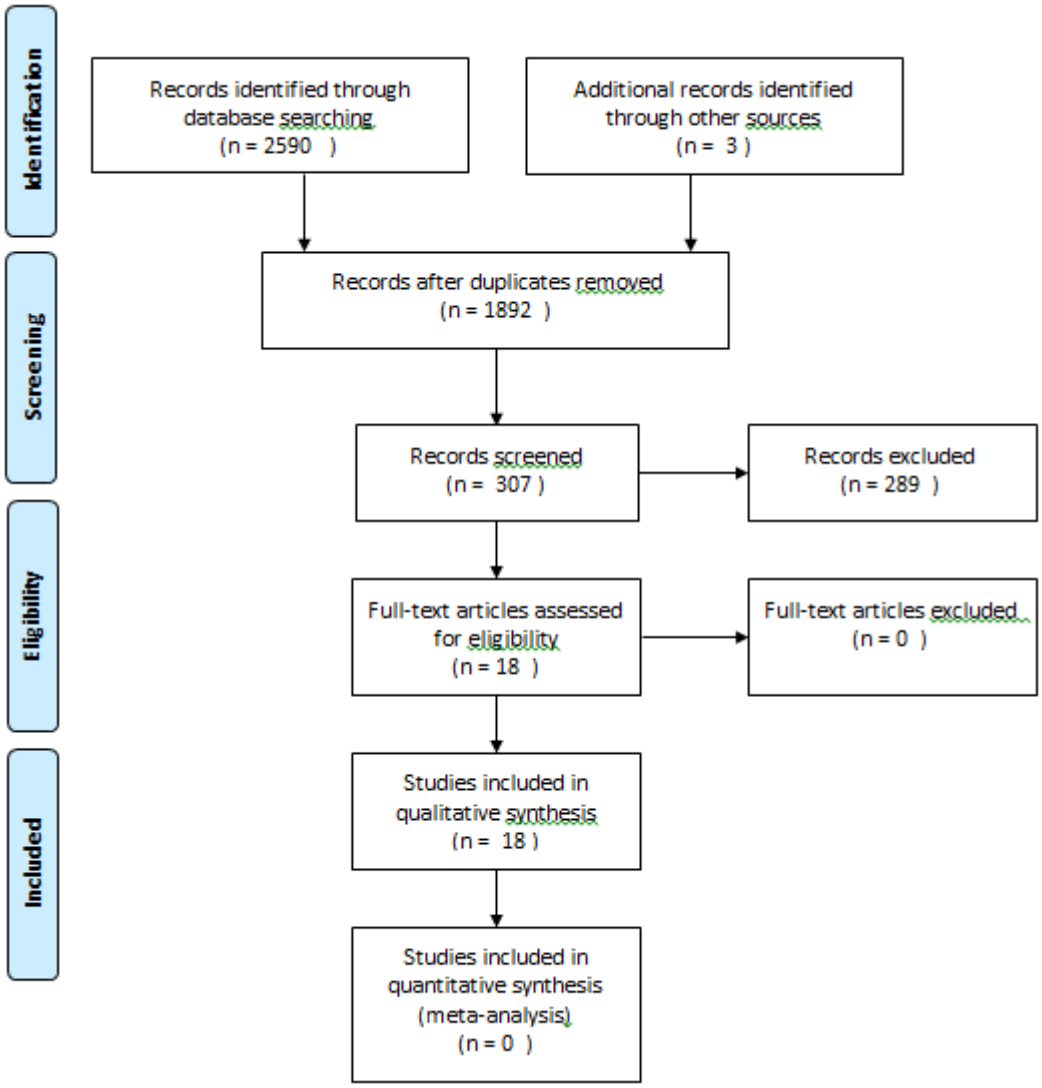
- Articles featuring the *sharing* of creative writing, undertaken by an individual in any setting.
- Creative writing could have either been initially self-directed (and then shared) or employed as an intervention
- Articles needed to explicitly refer to the benefits (or otherwise) associated with the process of sharing creative writing (i.e. beyond findings that could be expected from independent creative writing alone). This required reading through potentially relevant articles to see if they met criteria.
- Only peer-reviewed and English-language articles
- Adults aged 19 and over
- Practice reports without formal measures or research methodologies were included due to the limited number of directly relevant research studies identified

Exclusion criteria

- The inclusion criteria of writing being shared automatically excluded Expressive writing interventions
- Studies featuring collaborative creative writing were not included since it was felt this might hold different significance to independent writing in the process of sharing writing
- Poetry therapy studies were excluded unless participants engaged in writing their own poetry

The results were de-duplicated and the remaining articles were scanned for relevance. Articles that were of potential relevance were then screened to determine whether they met the inclusion criteria. This led to 18 identified articles for review. For an outline of the process see flow diagram in Figure 1, overleaf.

Figure 1. Stages of search strategy employed using a PRISMA flow diagram (Moher, Liberati, Tetzlaff & Altman, 2009).



Reference: Moher, D., Liberati, A., Tetzlaff, J., Altman, D.G. (2009). Preferred reporting items for systematic reviews and meta-analyses: the PRISMA statement. *British medical Journal, 229,* 332-336

Appendix B. Critique of qualitative research studies using Yardley's (2000) four key principles for assessing quality standards.

Authors and methodology	Sensitivity to context	Commitment and rigour	Transparency and coherence	Impact and Importance
Jensen and Blair (1997) Naturalistic research comprising of three methods: • Semi-structured interview with group facilitator • Observation of groups • 'Nominal Group Technique', a group discussion method	✓Ethical issues addressed ✓Relevant background literature provided ✓Relevant empirical research provided ✓Situated within theoretical framework ✓Sensitivity to participants' sociocultural perspective	✓ Sample size appropriate ✓Thoroughness and commitment demonstrated in data collection and analysis ✓ Clarity around methodology	✓ Sufficient reflexivity ✓ Results and study as a whole presented coherently ✓ Transparency in procedure and analysis × Interview schedule not sufficiently transparent ✓ Group questions sufficiently transparent	✓ Qualitative findings situated within a theoretical framework ✓ Links with other relevant theory ✓ Discusses clinical implications for the uses of creative writing
Williams (2000) (Narrative interpretation of ethnographic data)	× Background literature not provided × Relevant empirical research not provided × Not situated within theoretical framework × Ethical issues insufficiently addressed ✓Sensitivity to participants' sociocultural perspective	✓Sample size appropriate ✓ Some explanation of data analysis × Lack of clarity around data analysis	✓Sufficient reflexivity (a strength of the study) ✓Themes coherently presented ✓ Information about topics of conversation provided × Insufficient transparency in analysis	✓ Themes linked with some relevant theory × Little elaboration on importance of qualitative findings provided
Sagan (2007) (Critical ethnographic methodology)	✓Relevant background literature provided ✓Relevant empirical research provided ✓Ethical issues addressed ✓Excellent sensitivity to participants' sociocultural	✓Sample size appropriate ✓ Clarity around methodology ✓Thoroughness and commitment demonstrated in data collection and analysis	✓Sufficient reflexivity (a strength of the study) ✓ Transparency in procedure and analysis ✓ Results and study as a whole presented coherently	✓ Qualitative findings situated within a theoretical framework ✓ Importance of qualitative findings discussed

	perspective × Ethical issues insufficiently addressed ✓Situated within theoretical framework			
Hilse, Griffiths and Corr (2007) (Grounded Theory)	✓Relevant background literature provided ✓Relevant empirical research provided ✓Ethical issues addressed ✓Situated within theoretical framework × Limited sensitivity to participants' sociocultural setting	× Insufficient sample size for methodological approach ✓Clarity around methodology ✓Thoroughness and commitment demonstrated in data collection and analysis	✓ Sufficient reflexivity ✓Transparency in procedure and analysis ✓ Results and study as a whole presented coherently ✓ Interview schedule sufficiently transparent	✓ Develops original theory on the process of sharing creative writing ✓ Links with other relevant theory ✓ Discusses clinical implications for the uses of creative writing, including limitations
Bolton (2008) Narrative	✓Ethical issues addressed ✓Relevant background literature provided ✓Relevant empirical research provided × Not situated within theoretical framework ✓Sensitivity to participants' sociocultural perspective.	✓Sample size appropriate ✓Clarity around methodology ✓Thoroughness and commitment demonstrated in data collection and analysis	✓ Sufficient reflexivity ✓Transparency in procedure and analysis × Interview schedule not sufficiently transparent	✓ Offers useful reflection about the role of writing for people in palliative care settings × Qualitative findings not situated within a theoretical framework × Minimal discussion of implications for clinical practice
Gilzean (2011) Grounded Theory	✓Relevant background literature provided ✓Relevant empirical research provided ✓Ethical issues addressed ✓Sensitivity to participants'	✓Sample size appropriate ✓Clarity around methodology ✓Thoroughness and commitment demonstrated in data collection and analysis	✓ Sufficient reflexivity ✓Transparency in procedure and analysis × Could have usefully provided some examples of questions participants were	✓ Develops original theory on the uses of creative writing for people whom self-injure ✓ Links with other relevant theory

	sociocultural perspective	asked ✓ Results and study as a whole presented coherently	✓ Discusses clinical implications for people who self-injure, for the uses of creative writing

Appendix C: Summary of key findings and themes within the reviewed articles

Authors	Findings/ themes
Creative writing groups in inpatient/residential settings	
Lauer (1972)	Discussion of creative writing led to: • Participants finding new ways of dealing with personal problems • Participants developing a new understanding of themselves and their lives Additionally: • Facilitators with spontaneous interaction style, being "thinking and feeling human beings" (p.312). • Importance of 'psychological safety' is noted, gained through atmosphere of warmth and lack of judgment **Main themes: Increased self-understanding; authentic facilitation style; Need for safety**
Wittman and Leeman (1979)	Participant(s) benefitted from: • Feeling understood by others • Receiving compliments about their writing • Being able to find new solutions to problems • Suggestion that groups have functioned best when composed of people with similar problems, suggesting the value of shared experience **Main themes: Feeling understood; problem solving; value of shared experiences**
Lauer and Goldfield (1979)	Sharing of creative writing led to: • Facilitation of self-understanding; • Facilitated interaction and discussion between group members • Helped to increase self-esteem through the sense of mastery and achievement it produced. Additionally: • The importance of authenticity over 'expertise' or interpretation was also suggested **Main themes: Increased self-understanding, communication and self-esteem; authentic facilitation style**
Houlding and Holland (1988)	• Reduction in the emotional isolation and alienation of patients • Poetry readings in community meetings and public displays of writing within the hospital contributed to

	identities of 'poet' and 'writer', which allowed for new experiences of 'self' • Predominant focus on writing techniques was thought to attract a variety of participants, as well as contributing to feelings of pride and mastery. **Main themes: Development of skill (link with self-efficacy); development of positive self-identities**
Schneckenburger (1995)	• Positive changes in participants' beliefs about themselves as well as in their social interactions • Public display of creative writing led to participants viewing their writing differently and benefitting from a public identity of being 'poets'. **Main themes: development of positive self-identities, improved social interactions**
Alschuler (2000)	• Suggestion that self-esteem may have been developed through feeling a sense of achievement. • Importance of given participants choice about whether or not to share their writing and giving reassurance that spelling, grammar, structure etc were unimportant. • Importance of being non-judgemental and accepting when working with 'addicts' (although clearly this is important in any setting). • All these comments point to the importance of the need for safety within a group. **Main themes: Potential to increase self-esteem (linked to skill); Need for safety**

(Continued overleaf)

Creative writing groups in health or community settings	
Jensen and Blair (1997)	• Themes of 'Friendship/ understanding', 'Involvement' and 'Build(ing) bridges' suggesting importance of connection with others • However, feelings of being stigmatized, struggling with interpersonal issues and the risk of feeling a 'failure' following negative feedback were also reported • Importance of sensitive facilitation (linked to negative experiences) • A tension between aims of emotional expression and production of quality writing is noted **Main themes: Connection with others; Risk of negative experiences; Need for sensitive facilitation**
Meunier (1999)	• Improvements in verbal as well as written forms of expression were reported (implications for re-integration into the community • Facilitation style of 'a writer amongst as peers' (implications for role-identity development) **Main themes: Allows self-expression; improves social communication, development of positive identities**
Springer (2006)	• Sharing poetry enabled a patient to feel quickly understood • Therapist felt reading client poetry was a way to more deeply understand them **Main themes: Allows deeper understanding of/by others**
Hilse, Griffiths and Corr (2007)	• Role of others was a key aspect in the development of new personal meanings • However, risk of feeling a 'sense of failure' (p.437) if receiving negative feedback **Main themes: Developing personal meaning; Risk for negative experiences**
Sagan (2007)	• Development of more positive self-narratives • Connection with others through shared aspects of identity (in this case weakness in writing ability) • The need to create a sufficient 'holding space' and importance of 'containment' **Main themes: Development of more positive narratives; Connection with others; Need for safety**
Bolton (2008)	• Sharing writing can be cathartic, leading to feelings of relief • Talking about writing may be beneficial as well as directly sharing it
Gilzean (2011)	• Sharing of writing enabled greater openness, which led to feeling more supported • Feelings of validation by others • Importance of trust in sharing process • Importance of having some control in the process of sharing (e.g. with whom, how, when) • Writing might not be shared if there is a fear of not being understood **Main themes: Understanding and validation; Need for trust; Need for control in the process**

Evans and Glover (2011)	• The experience of enjoyment and pleasure is noted
King, Neilsen and White (2012)	Relevant themes identified by author: • *Value of 'working with a real writer rather than a mental health professional';* • *'It was useful focusing on technique and this helped improve writing';* • *'The writer* (facilitator) *was respectful and encouraging'*; • *'It was good getting personal feedback on writing'.* **Main themes: Development of skill; encouragement of the facilitator; value of feedback**
Self-directed writing subsequently shared in various settings	
Moseley (1997)	• Realising commonalities between one's own and others' suffering can be reassuring • Sharing with others through writing as a medium can allow for the depths of personal experiences to be conveyed. **Main themes: Value in shared experiences**
Williams (2000)	• Shared writing contributed to a process of evolving understanding and dialogue between the participant and researcher **Main themes: Evolving understanding**
Lawyer (2008)	• Reading the writing of a 'hard to engage' patient improved engagement • Preliminary survey suggesting that receiving feedback on creative writing on-line may improve mood **Main themes: Improving engagement; value of feedback**

Appendix D: Forums in which creative writing had been shared (as discussed at interview)

Participant	With a friend or relative	On-line forums or blogs	Writing groups *with* therapeutic aim	Writing groups *without* therapeutic aim	With a mental health professional	Published writing	Live performance
Alan	✓	✓		✓		✓	
Sarah	✓		✓	✓			
Nikki	✓	✓		✓		✓	✓
Louise	✓	✓		✓		✓	✓
Edith	✓		✓		✓	✓	✓
Lakota-Wolf					✓	✓	
Simon	✓		✓	✓		✓	
Didge				✓			
Frequency	*6*	*3*	*3*	*6*	*2*	*6*	*3*

Appendix E: Letter of ethical approval

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Appendix F: Summary report for participants and Salomons ethics panel

Dear study participants,

You kindly allowed me to interview you about your experiences of sharing creative writing associated with times of personal difficulty as part of my major research project for my Doctorate in Clinical Psychology. I am very grateful to you all for your time and generosity in sharing your experiences so openly with me. It was a real privilege for me to meet with you all. As promised, I am writing with a summary of the study. I hope to publish the full report once the assessment process is complete; however in the meantime, here is a brief summary of the study.

Study title: The experience and significance of sharing creative writing associated with times of personal difficulty

Rationale for the study: The potential therapeutic value of creative writing has been acknowledged by a variety of authors and this area of practice is increasing within the UK. Individuals sometimes decide to share their creative writing with others in a variety of contexts, which findings suggest may be associated with a variety of potential benefits (as well as risks) beyond that associated with engaging in independent writing. However, there has been little research into the significance and experience of the process of sharing creative writing. Given the potential relevance of this process for clinicians, this study aimed to gain an understanding of the significance and experience of creative writing associated with times of personal difficulty, in order to gain insight into how benefits may be maximised and risks may be minimised.

The study's procedure: Ethical consent was obtained from the Salomons Ethics Panel once the initial research proposal had been approved. Individual semi-structured interviews were conducted with eight participants between August 2012 and January 2013 in various community settings. The interviews were then transcribed and an Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis of the data was undertaken, leading to the emergence of various themes regarding the significance and experience of sharing creative writing.

Overview of results: The sharing of creative writing associated with times of personal difficulty was a sensitive process for the majority of participants and was associated with largely positive, but also some negative, experiences. This meant that participants gave consideration as to what to share and with whom. The importance of connection with others ran strongly through the majority of participants' accounts. This was dependent on the perceived safety of the sharing environment and was also facilitated by the use of humour and shared experience. For some, the sense of shared experience was profound and was expressed in spiritual terms. There was an overall sense that the sharing of writing went beyond the experiences of engaging in personal writing, which seemed, at least in the first instance, to be about the participants 'surviving' or 'coping' with challenging circumstances they had experienced. Sharing writing seemed to take participants towards personal growth, including; negotiating more positive identities; finding a sense of achievement through creative output; gaining new and evolving perspectives on themselves and their lives; and being driven by a sense of purpose, often through wanting to raise awareness of issues that held strong personal significance. The findings were discussed theoretically in terms of the significance of interpersonal factors and links with models of well-being.

Potential impact of the study: The findings provide, for the first time, an in-depth exploration of the significance and experience of sharing creative writing. The importance of interpersonal factors should be considered when designing group interventions and in considering how it may be most helpful to respond to clients who wish to share their writing. Additionally, links with well-being suggest that the sharing of creative writing could be of benefit, both as an adjunct to other therapies, and also as a preventative tool within community settings.

Please do not hesitate to contact me if you would like any further information about the study. I am happy to send you a copy of the full report once the assessment process is complete, at which time the report can be finalised.

Many thanks again for your much-valued participation,

Yours sincerely,

Jennifer Maris
Trainee Clinical Psychologist
Salomons at Canterbury Christ Church University

C.c. Salomons Ethics panel

Appendix G: Information sheet for participants

(Email)

Subject: A new research project - Experiences of sharing creative writing

Dear Creative Writer,

My name is Jennifer Maris and I am a Trainee Clinical Psychologist at Canterbury Christchurch University with an interest in the therapeutic value of creative writing.

I am contacting you because you previously took part in a study about creative writing by Dr. Michelle McCartney, Clinical Psychologist, who was then a Trainee Clinical Psychologist studying at Canterbury Christchurch University. At the time of filling in your questionnaire you indicated that you would be willing to be interviewed about your experiences with creative writing.

I understand that you confirmed that you would still be interested to take part in another study when Michelle contacted you recently and so I am getting in touch to tell you more about the research project that I will be undertaking.

'What is the research about?'

I am conducting a research project that will explore peoples' experiences of sharing creative writing with others, whether that be with friends, family, with a writing group, or with a professional of some kind (e.g. GP, therapist, counsellor, life-coach, psychologist, psychiatric nurse, psychiatrist).

The aim of the project is to better understand peoples' experiences of sharing creative writing with others in order that as professionals we can develop the use of creative writing in a therapeutic capacity.

In particular I am interested in writing that you might have shared that has felt very personal to you and that has arisen, as in Michelle's study, from a time or experience that was distressing somehow.

'Am I eligible for this research project?'

If you have experience of sharing at least one piece of personal creative writing with one or more other people then you are likely to be eligible for this research and I would be very interested to hear more about your experiences.

However, because I would ideally like to meet people face-to-face location needs to be considered. Since you responded to an on-line questionnaire for the last study, I don't know whereabouts you are based. My University campus is located near Tunbridge Wells in Kent and as such, it would be preferable to meet people who live in the south-east of England so that neither of us would have to travel very far.

However, if you wonder whether you might live too far away but you're keen to take part, it might be possible to conduct a phone or Skype interview, or perhaps I could travel further afield.

'What will be required of me?'

For the current study I would like to meet around eight people, one-to-one, to hear about their experiences. I would anticipate that the interviews, which will be audio-recorded, will last for up to one hour. I would be asking you about your experience of sharing creative writing with others and also be asking you to tell me a bit about the writing itself. It is totally up to you whether you wish to share the actual piece of writing. I am interested to hear about any experiences you have encountered.

I would ideally like to conduct the interviews in July-August of this year, but if this is not possible then it would be okay to meet people in later months (by December 2012 at the latest). The interviews will most likely take place in a private space within a local community centre.

'To take part or not to take part?'

Given that I would be asking you about experiences of sharing writing that has had personal significance to you and which arose out of a difficult time, it is possible that by talking about those experiences you encounter difficult feelings again. It would be a good idea to think about how talking about these topics might make you feel and whether you feel ready to talk about them. In the event that you did become upset through talking about your experiences, you would be completely free to ask to stop the interview at any time.

Participation in this project is entirely voluntary and you would have full right to withdraw from the study at any time, whether that is once you've signed up, mid-way through the interview, or up until the time when the results are analysed.

If after consideration you do decide you would like to take part and share your experiences then you would once again be adding to a valuable, exciting and little-researched area!

I am unfortunately limited to offering £10 travel expenses per participant. I will also be entering everyone that takes part into a prize draw to win a £20 book voucher.

You are very welcome to contact me with any questions or concerns by emailing me on the address at the bottom of the page.

'Has this project had ethical approval?'

Yes, this research project has been fully approved by the ethics committee at Canterbury Christchurch University. I am also being supervised by two Clinical Psychologists with an interest in this area; Dr. Michael Maltby and Dr. Michelle McCartney.

'What will happen to the findings?'

I will be writing up this research for my doctoral thesis and it is also intended that the research will be published. All of the data will be stored securely and confidentially and text extracts from interviews that are included in the write-up will be presented anonymously so that you are not identifiable in any publication or presentations resulting from the research.

Once the write-up is completed in July 2013, I will send everyone that takes part a summary of my findings.

'What next?'

If you are still interested in taking part in this study (or have any questions/concerns), please email me (including your geographical location) and I will be in contact as soon as I can.

I look forward to hearing from you!

Best wishes,

Jennifer

Jennifer Maris
Trainee Clinical Psychologist
Canterbury Christchurch University

J.h.maris8@canterbury.ac.uk

Appendix H: Letter of approval for amendment to ethics proposal

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Appendix I – Consent form

Creative Writing Research project
Consent Form

Please read the information below and then sign and print your name if you consent to participate in this research project.

"I have previously been briefed about this research project and I consent to taking part in an interview that will explore my experiences of sharing one or more pieces of personal creative writing that has/have arisen from a time of distress.

I am under no obligation to share any of my creative writing but would be welcome to do so. If I do read out excerpts or provide copies, I consent to excerpts possibly being presented in the write-up of this research project and any publications or presentations that arise, unless I indicate otherwise.

I am aware that all information that I share will remain confidential within the direct research team and that I will remain unidentifiable in the write-up and any publications or presentations that arise.

Data will be password protected and will remain in the researcher's possession and in a secure cabinet in the clinical psychology office of Canterbury Christchurch University for 10 years. After this, all data will be destroyed.

I understand that my interview will last for approximately one hour and that it will be audio-recorded and later transcribed.

I am aware that it is okay to stop the interview at any time and that I have the right to withdraw from the study up until the time of data analysis.

At the end of the interview there will be an opportunity to offer reflections, feedback or to ask questions. I also have the possibility to send an email to the researcher with further thoughts or ideas that may arise with regard to the content of the interview, within one month of the date of the interview."

I agree to take part in this creative writing research project and understand the above information.

Participant	**Researcher**
Name (please print):	Name (please print):
Signature:	Signature:
Date:	Date:

Appendix J: Interview schedule

Proposed interview schedule

(n.b. follow-up questions are possible prompts and won't necessarily be asked depending on what the participant has already said)

1. **a) Can you think of a time when it has been *helpful* to share a piece of your writing with one or more people?**

- Why did you decide to share it?
- What made it helpful?
- Did sharing your writing help you to understand yourself better or view yourself in a different way?
- How did you feel when you were sharing your writing?
- How did you feel afterwards?
- How do you feel looking back on the experience?

1. **b) Using only as much detail as you feel comfortable with, could you tell me more about that piece of writing?**

- When did you write it?
- What led you to write it?
- What did the writing mean to you?

2. a) Can you think of a time when it has been *unhelpful* to share a piece of your writing with one or more people?

- Why did you decide to share it?
- What made it unhelpful?
- Did sharing your writing help you to understand yourself better or view yourself in a different way?
- How did you feel when you were sharing your writing?
- How did you feel afterwards?
- Was there any subsequent impact for you?
- How do you feel looking back on the experience?

2. **b) Using only as much detail as you feel comfortable with, could you tell me more about that piece of writing?**

- When did you write it?
- What led you to write it?
- What did the writing mean to you?

3. *(If both helpful and unhelpful experiences have been reported)* **Do you know why those experiences of sharing your writing were so different for you?**

4. **a) Do you have any thoughts on how you would ideally like someone to respond to your writing?**

   b) Do you have any thoughts on whether different sorts of writing call for different sorts of responses from others?

   c) Have others' reactions to your writing surprised you in any way?

5. **Without feeling any need to tell me about the writing itself, I was wondering if there are any pieces, or types, of writing that you wouldn't consider sharing with anybody and could you say a bit about why that would be?**

6. **Is there anything else that we haven't covered that you think is relevant to share?**

Appendix K: Sample transcript

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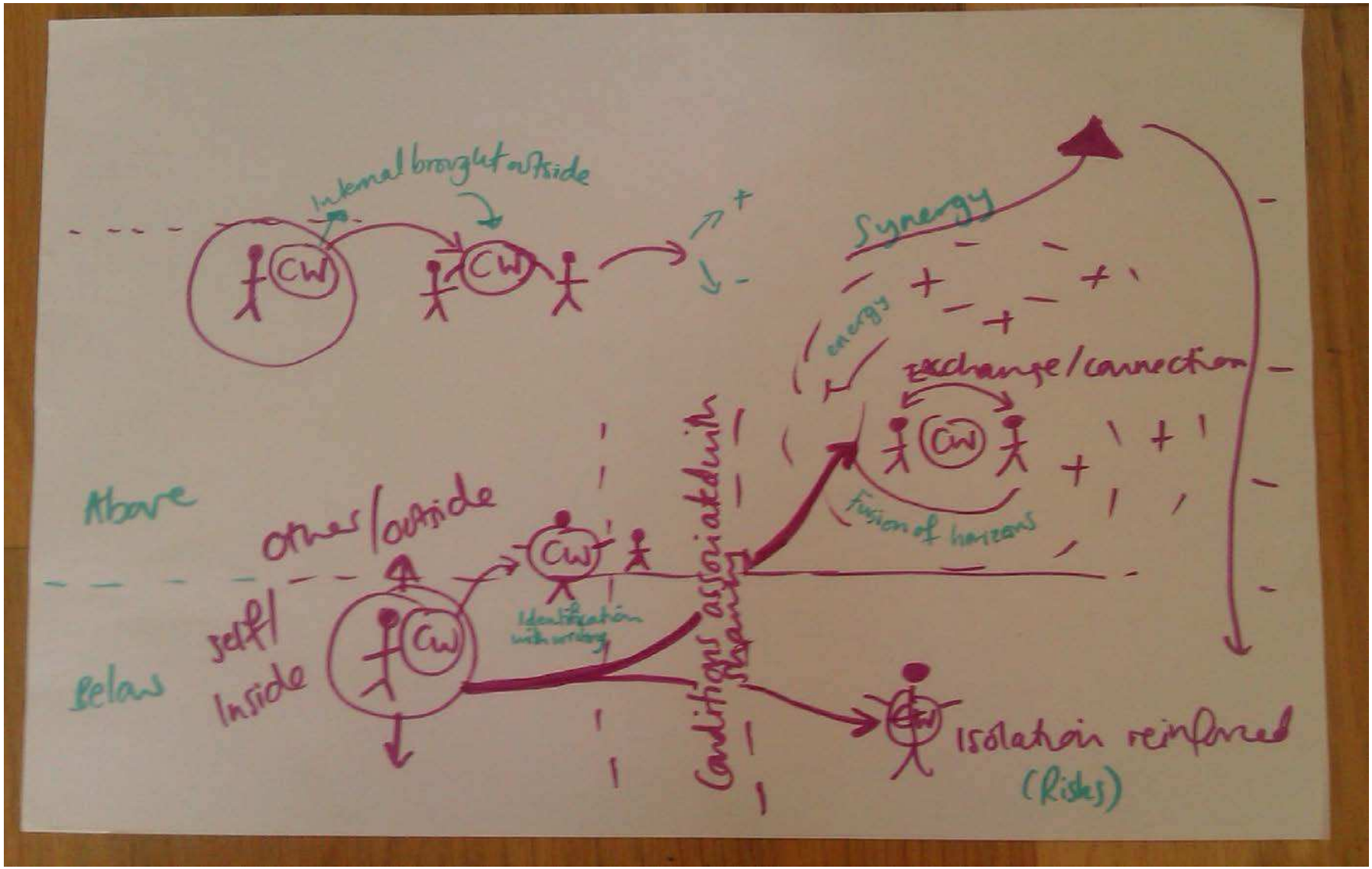
Appendix L: Sample from table of compiled notes and themes

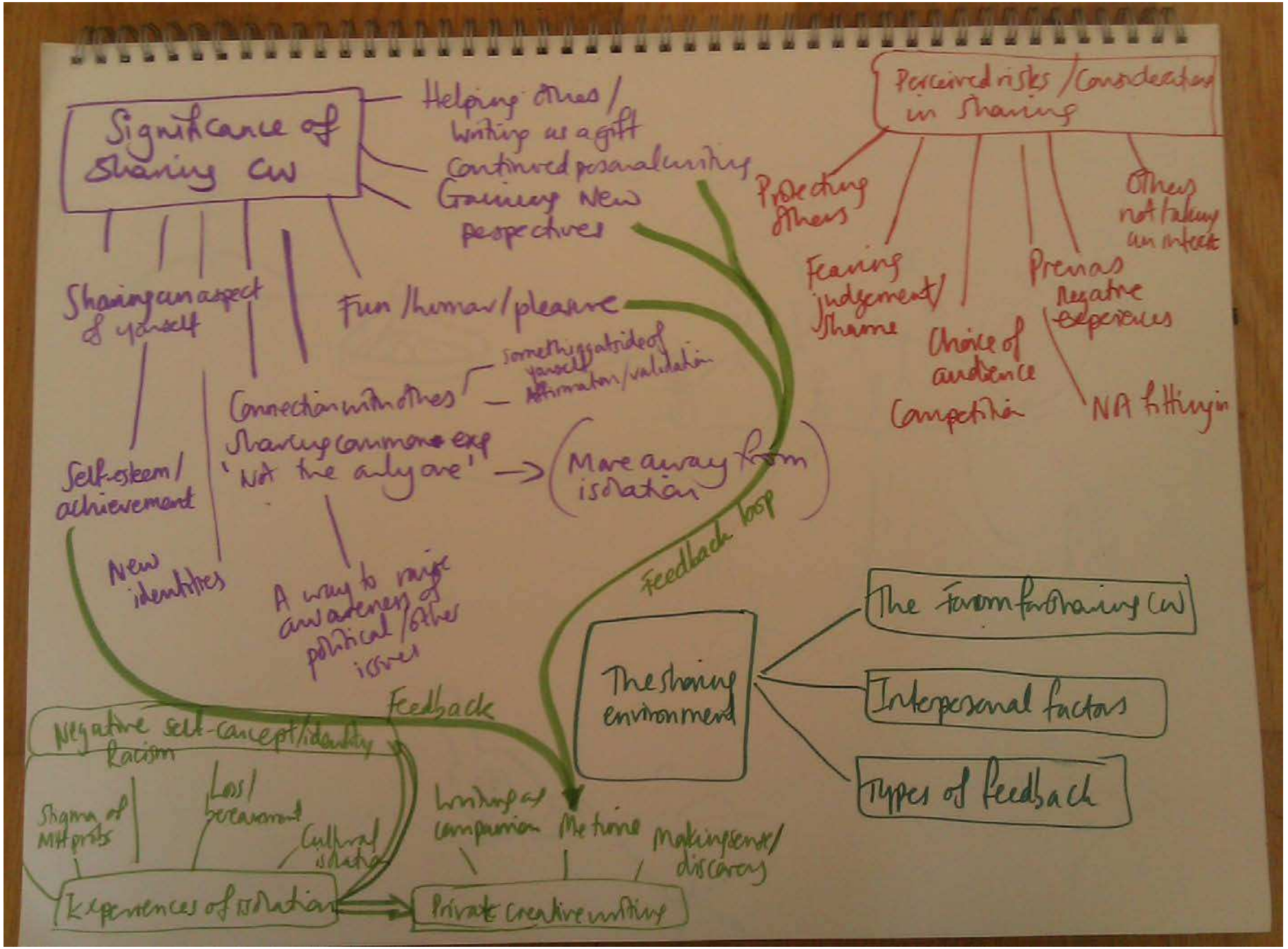
XXXX	XXXX	XXXX	XXXX
• Academic achievement • Early experience of public sharing • Therapeutic use of writing when young • Instinctive process to write • Diary writing to work through grief • Diary writing to negotiate sense of self/ identity • Writing to a significant other in writing – imagined reader • Issues of dislocation from one's culture, not feeling clear about place in the world. • Writing as a companion • Use of humour to talk about difficult times • Experimenting/ fun with reading old diary entries • Writing as a 'part of you' • A very personal thing • Importance of trust • Existing close friendship made sharing personal writing possible • Importance of lack of judgement • Writing process with a close friend • Organic rather than organized process. • Talking about personal issues • Previous experience of creative writing course inspired idea to write	• What is not shared • entertaining others • Achievement in writing • Isolation as new mother • Partner with mental health problems • Positive feedback • Writing as an outlet • Value in having communication • Affirmation of existence • Connection between writing and well-being • Sharing writing gives confidence • Development of positive identity • being taken outside of yourself • Link between darkness and creativity • what isn't shared • stigma about mental health problems • not to share - effect on others matters – protection • Fear of what others would think • Experience of therapy • Finding a way to communicate so others understand • Not to share - Sharing negative writing would enhance negative identity • Worry about privacy • Writing to lift out of depression • Producing/ sharing writing as an incentive to carry on • Writing as a ladder	• What is not shared – journal, unless relevant • Journal writing was recommended • entertaining others • race/power issues - who gets published, whose voice is heard? • inspired by the writers/ role models • encouraging others to find their voice • mother encouraged her • achievement • empowering black women • taking on new roles and identities • sharing gets easier over time • terrified but encouraged at first • other women and men could relate • sharing through common experience • exposure – "it's quite personal, poetry" • community of writers - feels good to participate • response of family members – 'oooh, poetry, get you!' – class issues- cultural dislocation • choosing an audience • Writing as a gift, legacy 'leave it in my will' • need distance from experience before sharing difficult things • conditions for sharing – no	• What is not shared • entertaining others • what words cannot say – helping others to understand • Support worker recommended CW • Positive feedback encouraged her to continue – felt able to accept since it helped others too • Asked someone else to read it out initially • People feel they're not alone - reduces isolation • normalise the experience of human distress • Writing makes things easier to say (through 3rd person • Stigma re MH • sharing of common experiences • connection with nature • considers how others would feel • lack of judgement, mutual respect • encouraged to share in group • facilitating communication in relationships • others being able to understand an extreme mental state • Risk: Unintended sharing/ privacy • can learn from what others share - mutual exchange • Making time for herself

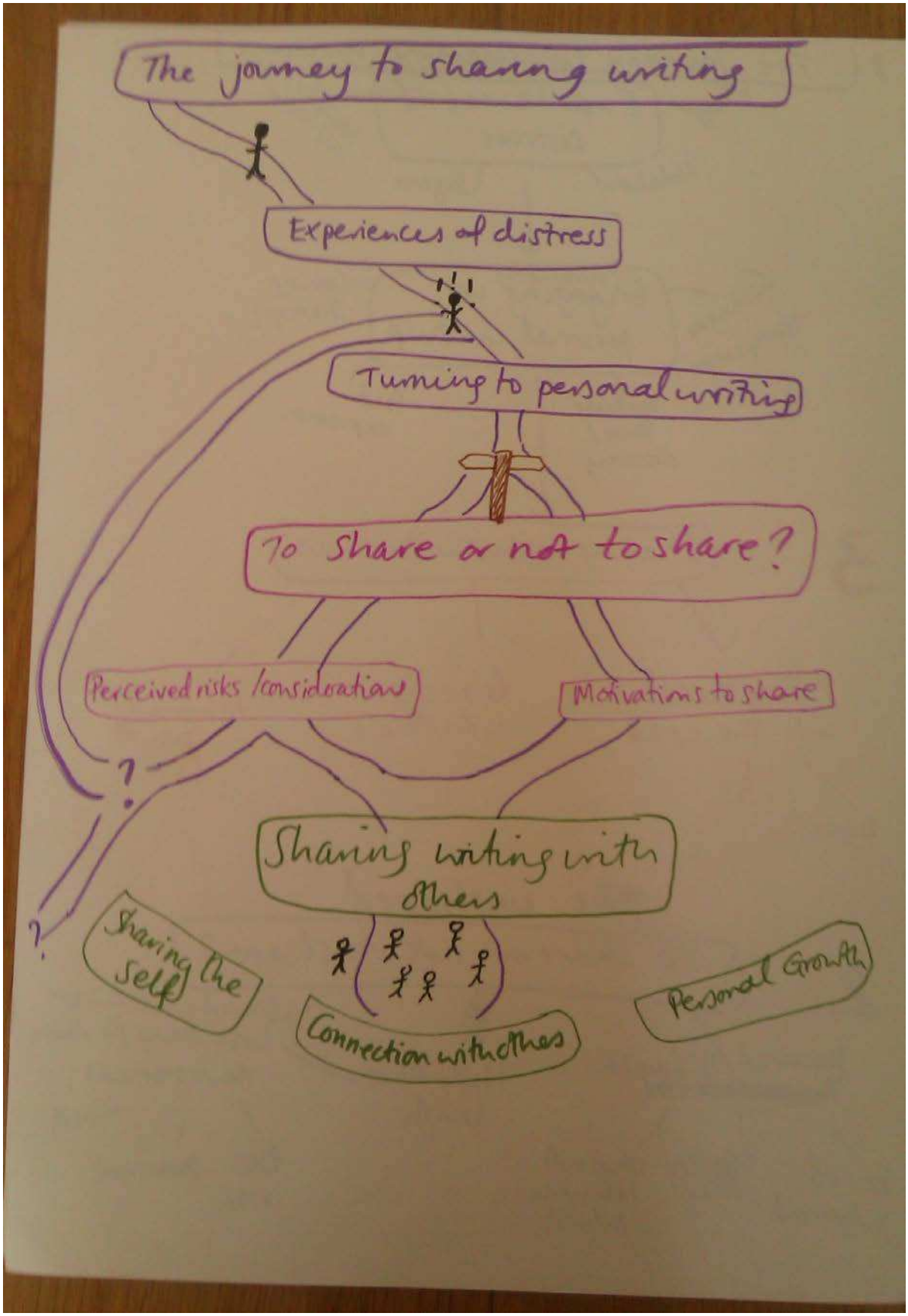
)

Appendix M – Photographs depicting process of analysis



THE SIGNIFICANCE OF SHARING CREATIVE WRITING




The journey to sharing writing
Experiences of distress
Turning to personal writing
To share or not to share?
Perceived risks /consideration
Motivations to share
?
?
Sharing writing with others
Sharing the self
Connection with others
Personal Growth

Appendix N - Summary of themes and associated quotes

Putting the Self into the World

Writing as an extension of the self

- Particularly with poetry...it is much more emotional, it is much more concentrated…you're exposing a lot more of…yourself…….than you perhaps are with prose…..not always, but for me personally…..poetry is always much more emotional than prose. (Didge)
- It's quite personal, poetry…its not like I'm just reading from someone else..you know I can read anything and do any…I mean I do all..I've done all these talks and run all these activities…and done stuff....hosted stuff…you know…to expose your personal…self…you're vulnerable….you go to a vulnerable place…. (Nikki)
- Somehow it's a very… kind of part of you…..you know …very personal…a very personal thing to do actually..…..it was sort of nice really…to do that….because ..you know ..it was again…it's about trust really (Sarah)
- It's an extension of yourself, and it's not just the physical…it's spiritual…it's physical, it's emotional… (Lakota-Wolf)
- You have to be, I feel, very sensitive on how you comment or react even to those forms of writing because the last ting you want, I feel is to alter the energy, or put your own energy onto something that someone has kind of honoured you by allowing you, a peek at, you're having a peek at their soul, at the innermost depth of that person's existence, or, er presence, so I think it needs to be respected as such. (Lakota-Wolf)
- You've actually put you onto the page somehow' (Edith)

Risks of being seen

- There's a moment where, when people read what's really going in your head sometimes that, they look at you different, they don't really understand. (Louise)
- When you get something really disappointing it can knock you sideways, it can make you feel a bit worthless. (Louise)
- It doesn't matter how well they applaud you…you just think…well did you..did it…? (Nikki)
- That [being misunderstood] to me is worse [than a critique of the poetry itself] because it makes a nonsense, well of your soul really, that's your soul there...and I feel it needs a fair hearing. (Lakota-Wolf)
- I've had one experience where I wrote something….and ……I was fine writing it……but actually having to share it with the group….was very….very upsetting…..and in the end somebody else read….what I'd written…..because I couldn't actually get the words out. (Didge)
- When the first book came out it made me feel intensely vulnerable…because I'd opened my soul to the public so I sort of found myself hiding, a lot more. (Lakota-Wolf)

Rewards of being seen

- Your writing is one thing and reading it out is another thing…and sharing it with ..with one other person…you know did make a difference…and she sort of said she felt very supported….as well..by me just hearing it…and then obviously ..we ..you know she..she could ask for feedback or not. (Sarah)
- I did read it a few times [poem about abandonment] …when I was at….you know …I did readings……I'd always read it….it felt like…I must say this thing and as I said…just empowering me…..in letting people know about it. (Nikki)
- Sometimes they just want to read it…and ..one of them is a great poet…she's written some very interesting..dialect poetry in Caribbean..dialect….fantastic..I mean it's….hilarious stuff…and…she likes….it's the first time she's ever had an outlet…to read it (Nikki
- The very act of someone reading it is actually enough to acknowledge that it is out there and it exists on its own (Louise)
- Sometimes, especially with my BPD, I can't actually put my feelings into words and this actually says, 'that's me, that's how I feel', and that's an amazing way of getting it out there. (Edith)
- It is still a piece of yourself that is being acknowledged or being admired…it is something that you have produced and is part of your psyche and is out there…it's a little part of yourself that you're sharing. (Louise)

Taking Ownership of the Experience

Choice of audience

- I'd known him for 20 years…..and he's....well he's my best friend really…....that I ...you know I did allow that…I mean…I can't imagine doing that with many people (Sarah letting friend read diary extracts)
- Although blogs can be very public I think there is a certain anonymity to it because you're not seeing someone face to face and you have complete control over what you say so it's almost a one-sided conversation (Alan)
- I go where I'm celebrated, you know…I…I go…not where I'm just tolerated. (Nikki)
- I sometimes go to courses at the poetry school up in (name of town)….and that is...possibly it's ..it's…possibly its more..critical in the..in the broad sense of the word…….that people will look at poems and they will ..make much stronger….suggestions. (Didge)
- He asked to see it…I trust him, the first guy I saw, there is no way I'd even be seeing him. (Lakota-Wolf)
- It's only really my Dad that's paid that much attention to it, well I suppose my great aunt has too, but she is by nature a very critical person and so I don't show that much to her (Simon)
- I was doing it sort of different as we were friend...and…could explore more deeply somehow….those kind of things than you would in a creative writing class where you don't know people .(Sarah)
- I've got one friend who's creative and I'm happy to share anything with him, but I've got another friend who isn't creative and by nature he's a critic so I don't bother sharing anything with him because I know he'll just rip it to pieces. (Simon)
- I wasn't really in the mood for talking and was quite monosyllabic you know, and he asked 'what do you do with your time?', something like that, and I said I wrote, but he didn't ask me what I wrote , but if he'd actually asked me about that and asked to see some of poems then he would have understood me a lot better, yeah' (Simon)

- I had some leaflets about...the first or the second time, you know, and I gave them one and they all went..they all….and their reaction was all quite 'Ooh! Ooh! Poetry…get you!...'…it was a bit…..it was a bit off putting actually. (Nikki)
- Although I wished (Cousin's name) would appreciate my work, she somehow spoils that by competing with me. (Nikki)

Certain writing is not for sharing

- When it's deep and really emotional, really spewing up my guts on the page, I'm thinking I don't want anyone to read that…probably stigmatising myself about what they would think. (Edith)
- To be honest some of that dark depression, you, you…that isn't to be communicated to an audience…it's not, it's er, it's not quite creative writing, it's a psychological output…but creative writing is the reworking of that into something about the human spirit, or human interest. (Louise)
- I don't.. think I've ever written… (for the writing group) about drunkenness…I've written…I'm conscious about writing about difficulties in …in ..relationships,…and obviously you..you write about yourself …. because ..in your writing about what…what you know….your own experiences…however imaginative you are…you can…its ….all sort of hooked…to your own personal experiences. (Didge)
- It's perhaps things that are quite difficult to share in general that I wouldn't want to share in writing…but..its ..you know..the fact that I haven't had children….and…you sort of notice…such a huge thing in our culture….you know whether you have or you haven't. (Sarah)
- I would like to write about it but in a way that feels disloyal because that's …in a way that's nothing to do with me… it feels almost like I'm intruding upon something where I perhaps shouldn't go. (Alan)
- I'm not sure I would have written about any of them while, say my brother was still alive because I know that would have offended him. (Alan)

Reflections on feedback

- We'd agreed to do that….to get..to gi..to ask for the feedback we wanted….yeah..so that was quite helpful actually..it gave boundaries as well…of…especially when you're dealing with quite painful stuff you don't necessarily want someone ..you know you might maybe feel that someone's commenting on your..ideas and your life. (Sarah)
- Don't read your own bad reviews, ignore them if you can, if it isn't constructive critique. (Louise)
- People are gonna read stuff in their own ways and get their own connotations**…**the way that you read and see and interpret something is coloured by your own frame of reference and your experience and what it says to you' (Lakota-Wolf)
- I can't write stuff that everybody's going to like so I'm bound to get some criticism of it. (Simon)
- Somebody else might interpret it completely differently…that's fine. (Nikki)
- Sometimes it is quite hard when people say 'it made me think this' and it's like 'ohh ok, that's definitely not what I was trying to get across' but then you think 'ok well actually if that's what it made you think then it must be something going round in your head that wants you to get that out and it's just needed that one way of doing that.' (Edith)

- I really have to come to terms with the fact that people aren't always the way we would like them to be and well that's life! (Nikki)
- You have to be, I feel, very sensitive on how you comment or react even to those forms of writing because the last ting you want, I feel is to alter the energy, or put your own energy onto it. (Lakota-Wolf)
- It's kind of a bit..it can be a bit invasive…people's comments…so you need to be quite delicate with it.(Sarah)

Making Connections with Others

Importance of trust and safety

- The classes feel.. safe…because ..other...other people are ..sharing …some quite painful things …and …I wouldn't dream of… repeating those things…I wouldn't dream of….commenting in a negative ..way…about.. those things….or disrespecting...the things that …that people have shared….because the atmosphere in the class is one…of… sharing and safety.. (Didge)
- If there isn't that…that trust…and ..mutual respect., nobody will actually ..say anything…. (Didge)
- He's not a judgmental person…he's a very….quite transgressive person in the sense…I mean. he's not going to kind of worry about whatever's said in there…. (Sarah)
- It's about trust really….and that whatever I'd written in there….didn't really matter….you know….cos he knows me very well…and we've talked about lots of different things…..so quite ..deep things anyway…so ..maybe that was a precursor to being able to share writing…you know the fact that he…I knew things about him and he knew things about me. (Sarah)
- I was doing it sort of different as we were friends….and… could explore more deeply somehow….those kind of things than you would in a creative writing class where you don't know people….(Sarah)
- A lot of people there have had mental health problems or have experience of somebody else having mental health problems and so it's something they can relate to…it's much more sort of relaxed and people are happier to talk about their feelings because they know that other people can often relate to it and have experienced similar sorts of things. (Simon)
- I know who my audience are,,,they're black women..mixed race women…not necessarily are they just black..and mixed…but the majority of them are
- I find the fact that he doesn't judge…I don't trust him 100% because I have massive issues with trust, but I trust him enough. (Edith)

Use of humour

- What I've really enjoyed….and …been quite surprised by…is ..how other people have laughed…at what I've written. (Didge)
- I did find it helpful….this.. going to creative writing classes…and …having a little group…...there was a little group of 3 or 4 of us …who just wrote… just for fun…so …I suppose I put...what… what I consider to be creative writing …I put in..very much in that category of …enjoying myself…it's something you do that's.. left over…after you've done things that you should be doing. (Didge)

- I mean on occasions where they've been absolutely doubled up…with laughter….and that is just …is just fabulous….to realise that ..all those years of sort of ….covering up…of shame…of sadness….all that…just is...gone (Didge)
- I surprise myself…that there's a lot of anger….sometimes… in the things that I send up…..(Didge)
- There's two stages to it, where you're just wanting to express the depression, and often there's just therapies of writing things down and they are very good therapies, but that's not what you actually want an audience to read, you want to entertain or to inform. (Louise)
- Creative writing.. there may be sorrow in it…but…it's… its not the…the… initial …impetus to do it.. is fun…enjoying yourself (Didge)
- I understand that writing through painful things is very therapeutic and..I, if somebody said to me…..do you think that's a good thing to do….I would say yes…yes….do it..try it……..but also…..try the other stuff as well…because that…that's also therapeutic. (Didge)

- Even if ..your problems don't go away…or that you are only buzzing and happy for an hour…..you know the realization that hey, yeah.... I just had a happy hour……it is possible to do it……despite…and that it helps when you …are dealing with …mire…and nasty things…the rest of the time…… (Didge)
- So there's something people can laugh at, like "aren't humans silly" rather than "life is awful"…there's a human nature aspect to it, and laughing at human nature is much better than wallowing in the dark bits of human nature which is so horrible, you know you're wanting to move forward. (Louise)
- And they want…they can't wait for the next episode…and you think ooh…so I've hooked them in then. (Nikki)
- 'I find it pleasurable to make people laugh…to show that even in the black bits of life there is some sort of humour. (Simon)
- in some ways it's a coping… maybe it's a British thing….it's a coping mechanism. (Alan)
- I wasn't a happy teen, so humour I think was again…how do I make sense of this….how can I express to people what I might not express otherwise…and…how..is there a way to reach others. (Alan)
- I think that as I began to feel happier I was able to move away from 'misery memoirs' and discover an interest in other things, especially when these other topics found favour with my audience. It became a sort of upward spiral. (Didge, email)
- It's not dark but it's quite emotional but you get to the end of it and it's absolute humour. (Edith)

Not being the only one

- I think they'd all experienced something similar so there was a feeling that we're all in this together….and it just happened to be my turn that week…that… something ..was a bit painful.. (Didge)
- It was a hair poem actually…I'd written ages ago…and a few people came up and said, I can really relate to what you said. (Nikki)
- I was actually making a connection….then…people were you know…relating to what I was doing…..and you know….and that's what I like about poetry….it does…..not all poetry is like..you know..that….some you can't access it at all…you know…I tend to write about personal stuff…that is quite universal in a way. (Nikki)
- Where I've had personal comments on a personal piece, it does feel good because it's affirming the fact that I have a right to feel like this (validation) , that this is worth something, that I'm not alone in feeling like this, someone else recognises this, knows what it feels like. (Louise)

- There is the human spirit element of knowing that you are not the only one who is feeling like this. (Louise)
- I thought I was hard done by growing up in (name of town)…you know..but…we all had our.. cross to bear..and..but I wasn't the only one….it did help. (Nikki)
- I get a lot of support in hearing about people who've been through unpleasant experiences and come out the other side. (Simon)
- A couple of people that have read it that don't have any diagnoses or anything have all gone 'oh wow, yeah when we get on a train that's actually how I feel', but you just assume that it's only you so it's quite nice to know that the general population, a large portion of the general population, feel that way as well…it's not just a small group, it's a large group but people don't say it and so it's just hidden. (Edith)
- His mum and dad had divorced and his dad was a way in the navy a lot too (Simon)
- I've been without a support worker since October and I've been dealing with my mental health on my own, which has not been great...it's given me something to focus on when I've not had my support worker to help me work through things and its given me that little voice that's nice to sort of share it with others and for them to go 'yeah we understand that' (Edith)

A spiritual aspect to connection

- Human spirit is about communicating with other human souls, there is energy to it, there is a shared consciousness to it, when it works you get back a lot of energy, there's a much more energetic flow and it's outward looking and . . . it does reset your faith in human nature, whereas the darkness… there is nothing good about human being's at all, including yourself, whereas when you reach out with a story what you get is very loving and very warm, and your existence is reset and you have much more faith in yourself and in other people too and you realise that there is something good in the world. (Louise)
- There's a lovely feeling in the room, and it's very nice, it is a cycle and there isn't negativity there at all, it's like instead of spiralling downwards it's spiralling up…the act of creation does get the energy shifting upwards rather than the other way' (Louise)
- I think that.. poetry at its best kind of stirs the soul (Alan)
- I tend to write about personal stuff…that is quite universal in a way (Nikki)
- You're having a peek at their soul, at the innermost depth of that person's existence, or, er presence, so I think it needs to be respected as such. (Lakota-Wolf)

Moving Beyond Surviving to Thriving

Negotiating identity

- You're not there to wallow in mental health issues, you're there for something completely different…it's quite refreshing, it's quite energising, and they want to meet your positive identity. (Louise)
- They are meeting me as a writer rather than sad case partner to a man who is having a nervous breakdown. (Louise)
- Re-establish your character, who you are, who you want to be. (Louise)
- It gets you communicating on another level than I'm here because I've got problems..I'm here because I have something to talk about. (Louise)

- I think also that people thankfully are much more open about emotional well-being and mental health now…and I think in some ways its their way of coming to terms with it and also kind of embracing the other aspects of self and saying this is who I am. (Alan)
- I .don't think I've ever actually written about...about drunkenness, I ..don't know why…whether it's… the classes haven't …the subject hasn't ..arisen..or whether I just blank it… and refuse anymore to be defined by it. (Didge)
- It's a survival ….technique isn't it……I sort of…you never really expunge an- anything..but ..I did get to a point where I …. wanted to …move on…and ..felt I'd sort of 'done' …done that…and wanted ….to finish it and ….to enjoy life…a new chapter…..and to… enjoy what ..I had…what I had left. (Didge)
- My ex-husband's behaviour included dismissing me as 'the most boring person he had ever met', 'unsociable', 'loner'. I began to believe these things, not realising that they were being said because I was challenging his drinking and I began to avoid social occasions because they meant having to deal with his drunkenness. As I began to share my writing and people enjoyed my efforts, I began to realise that I was none of these things and found 'my voice'. Sharing creative writing has allowed me to recover a sense of identity beyond that of victim. (Didge, Email)
- 'Having some existence outside of yourself…having an identity that isn't just this…the housewife having to go through the troubles of living her life..having a piece of you that is worth reading it and even critiquing it. (Louise)
- 'it gets you communicating on another level than "I'm here because I need help"...I'm here because I have something to talk about' (Louise)
- It's like 'wow', actually sometimes a mentally ill mind can be the most beautiful mind and it's quite nice to know that actually my mind in that space sometimes and it's not just me saying that it's other people saying it's in that other section sometimes. (Edith)
- One day I won't have to wear the mask and it will all be different. (Edith, in a piece of writing)
- Now I'm sort of learning to focus more on, to fit it with the general public and actually it could be -it doesn't have to be mental health it could be anyone, so therefore it challenges the stigma more because I'm normal and you think I'm not normal because of one label that you don't know ab- because of a label you find out about afterwards. (Edith)
- It is quite nice for people to realise that I can do things that aren't academic
- I think it's helped me discover, helped me work out who I am. (Edith)

Sense of achievement

- I ..like it if they…suggest ways in which to improve the writing….or…ways in which it could be expanded (Didge)
- I mean the work is done when the book is done…that's...you feel like the work's done..and then you can…really enjoy the launch….and it's a bit like a party…you know..a celebration. (Nikki)
- 'you do get a wonderful feeling of 'I've done that, what's next?' …and you get your sense of humour back and you get yourself back, you recover yourself in a way that is much more productive than being depressed and shutdown (Louise)
- They [national paper] invited four poets to say which they thought were the best poetry releases of (year) and I was one of them, I was gobsmacked… it has been good. (Lakota-Wolf)
- I've showed it to a couple of other people and they're like 'wow, that's amazing', so that's really nice. It's quite positive, like, because I don't usually like praise, I find it really odd, but I quite like it with this writing, it had encouraged me (Edith)
- He can be critical but in a good way, like, maybe we should rearrange this bit if you're thinking about putting it in [the group's collaborative book of creative writing], and I quite like that. (Edith)

- It was a proper, shiny book and it was just nice, like, to get your name accredited and stuff, and helps me as well because I've got it out there and we'll see where it goes. (Edith)

Evolving understanding

- When.. you're sort of living through it…you don't necessarily….again have the time and the space in which to…reflect on it….writing and…..reading out loud…….my thoughts that I didn't really know I had…..about the 50's…..was…quite a revelation. (Didge)
- I suppose you get a bit stuck in your own…sort of….particular habits when you're on your own……..you know…so its actually the other person's perception….bringing out what you can't see…. (Sarah)
- it's an ongoing process…as well…its not ever…you know…as you transform..the writing transforms….really, you can write it again (Sarah)
- It was lovely to be able to chat with you, as it made me think more about my writing and why I do it and what I gain from it etc and it opened my eyes. Thank you for this. It is not often I get to talk about why I do things and I found it very useful. (Edith, email)
- I think the outcome reveals more about my cousin and that's fine, but I did consider class as I have middle class values since getting a uni education, etc, which I'd not really focused on since we're both from working class backgrounds. So a slight shift for me thanks to you for somehow being a catalyst. (Nikki)
- I just wanted to say a bit belatedly that it was nice meeting you, and to feed back that thinking and talking about shared writing has perhaps contributed in part to my reconnecting with the main friend I shared writing with - she's coming up this weekend and as part of it, we're going to do some writing. Somehow the time has come around again...and I'm sure sharing with you what we did somehow led to us both moving towards it, so thanks :). (Sarah, Email)
- sometimes it brought more things out that I haven't noticed…and actually you can go that route but I hadn't thought of that. (Edith)

Sense of purpose

- It's not really a job of employment, but you've got a role, Even if it's terrifying, it makes you do stuff. (Louise)
- Explaining how people suffer when they have things like PTSD…to raise awareness. (Lakota-Wolf)
- The whole focus of my business is to try and help other creatives who have got mental health problems or whatever …er, to kind of to find ways of helping themselves, cope with their own conditions. (Lakota-Wolf)
- With the ocean and nature…that's the other part of the mission I guess as well which was to try and wake people up, er we need to..we're on the road to destruction in a big way. (Lakota-Wolf)
- I mean the books have helped people so I kind of love that, that someone's got something out of them that's helped them with their own life, their own situation… it makes you feel honoured that you've been able to help someone else (Lakota-Wolf)
- Writing is one of the biggest things in my life at the moment (Simon)
- Also I write things because I know that certain people in the group would appreciate the feelings. (Simon)

- But I think it's a worthwhile thing to do, both for myself and for other people who have mental health problems as well.
- I want people to see what life is like in a YOI and how the system works and how people are treated and how small things can make big differences (Simon)
- A couple of people were saying that they felt their lives would be a bit empty without the opportunity to do some writing. (Simon)
- It had encouraged me to do it for a reason because others are getting enjoyment and can use it as well and find it helps them and stuff so I quite like that. (Edith)
- [Referring to creative writing and theatre project aimed at reducing stigma about mental health problems:] It's made them cry but it's had a positive impact of actually maybe they might think about something, even if they only ever do it once again in their life, just think about it before they judge, they might, it's one positive step. (Edith)
- I'm hoping that if one child reads the book and it kind of touches them and liberates them a bit, that will be brilliant, to know that your work is sort of making an impact. (Alan)
- If you don't feel that what you're expressing is going to be either understood or gonna make any difference…then why bother ....because communication hopefully has some sort of impact. (Alan)
- What it does make me do is want to explore ways in which it can be beneficial to other people and…you know be of some use…..be like a tool or some sort of currency…so that it becomes transpersonal….cos I think otherwise...there's a danger of…you kind of either lock yourself in or you forget and I think both of those are tragic. (Alan)
- I think it's what I like about the foundation of my work - engaging with the community as it makes you feel alive and that the work is worthwhile. (Nikki)

Appendix O: Excerpts from research diary

February 2nd 2011:

I feel really pleased to be able do more research into creative writing…it feels good to be developing some sort of 'expertise' (relatively speaking) in an area that feels relevant both personally and professionally. I have felt torn between using IPA again or developing skills in a new methodology…I feel aligned to IPA, and it would be good to consolidate (or at least develop) my skills there but would it make more sense to broaden my skills? I need to get clearer on the research question and go from there…

Dec 11th 2011:

As I get stuck into Husserl and Heidegger (the 'H's' as Dad fondly referred to them in recently recollecting undergraduate philosophy seminars!), I am reminded why I was drawn to phenomenology. So much depth, mystery, glimpses at 'truth' that might actually go some way to dignifying human experience in all its richness. Going back to the beginnings, the foundations of phenomenology, has re-excited me and reminds me how much more there is to it. It feels like I am merely circumnavigating a huge mountain at the moment, but I am reassured that treasure does lie within, even though it is inaccessible to me at these early stages. Need to get stuck in.

July 3rd 2012

I talked to XXXX [friend's name] today about my experiences of writing as related to this project…what does it mean to me etc? I thought about both personal and shared writing. For personal writing there is definitely an element of 'have to' about it sometimes, like maybe I'm ruminating about something that is very upsetting and I'm trying to get a handle on by but getting nowhere, and just spinning further away from any sense of coherence; writing really helps at those times. I have turned to writing to take an edge off the emotional intensity I suppose and through doing so have found that the thoughts slow down, allowing others to come in. It's been a while since I've written that way, but I know it's there as a 'tool' should I need it. There have been other times when I have felt exultant about something and just needed the experience to be noted, not to be lost sight of, as if to say: *'Treasure was here!'* My experiences of sharing writing were mainly the writing I did for the MA [MA in Creative Writing and personal development]. I remember how therapeutic it had been to write the poetry collection (for the module where the creative writing was actually assessed) and how crushing it was when the tutor offered her opinion that certain lines were 'clichéd'. I resisted changing them for the submission, knowing I was refusing feedback that might get me a better mark; I did that because to me the words were true, and I realised that in that particular instance my truth was more important than 'achievement', and that being a human was more important than being a proficient 'writer.' I'd taken the comments personally, and felt that my feelings were under scrutiny rather than just my choice of words. In contrast when [a non-writer friend] looked at the poetry he said how moving they found them - I have realised that making people feel something is most important to me with creative writing. And when I read poetry, I want to feel something, not to spend hours dissecting the technique. In terms of this project then, I clearly have preconceptions about writing as being capable of carrying experiential 'truth' somehow and that feedback has the potential to feel hurtful, but also very rewarding. Some of the literature I've come across makes similar suggestions too. It's been

useful to reflect on this. When it comes to the analysis I'll need to try and 'bracket' these preconceptions as much as possible and just see what emerges from the data.

August 3rd: 2012

First interview coming up soon! And another planned later this month Feeling a little nervous but excited to get going with what all this work has really been about: the people, their experiences…finally all the background work is coming to life ☺

March 12th 2013

Starting to make more and more links with theory – it's getting exciting! Kaufman and Sexton's article about suicidal poets using more 'I' terminology seems to link to what XXXX said about "it's not all about me then, it's about the world, others" in explaining the link between her 'dark' journal writing and the writing she shares with others. But it seems difficult to pick apart...it is thinking of the audience that brings her out of herself, which forces her to consider what other people would want to read? In other words to empathise with others, which by XXXX's admission is nigh on impossible when depressed, a state which is inherently 'selfish'… Also, there's this interesting idea of writing taking you beyond the self, and the body....compared to depression in which XXXX felt imprisoned in her body...change of relationship with the body...it becomes something that enables rather than something that entraps...how might this be linked to ideas about embodiment?

April 5th

Some thoughts: Sharing, whether through writing or dialogue with others has the potential to bring out of the shadows that which feels unacceptable, either to ourselves or imagined others, to bring us out of separateness and into commonality, enabling us to feel validated and worthwhile (makes me think of the idea of confession). Where our vulnerability is not met with sufficient warmth and awareness, the risk is that those parts of ourselves become further submerged, having learnt that, as we feared, those parts are at best, not of interest, and at worst, not acceptable to others…Brene Brown and her vulnerability/shame stuff comes to mind… This has important implications for how writing is responded to by others, particularly writing that feels very personal…

1st June 2013

It was very helpful to meet up with [fellow trainee] today, to talk through the stumbling blocks of analysis and get a bit of clarity, and reassurance that my ideas sound plausible to another IPA-er. The process of analysis is all encompassing…I remember this now from my MA project that the words, the stories don't leave you alone, they beg to be thought about! At times the ideas swim around and get all tangled up such that it is hard to keep track of them. Just when I think I have some coherence they slip through my fingers, nebulous, elusive. Yet I suppose if I am honest I take a not-so-secret pleasure from realising the limitations of making tangible a process/experience that can be so profound. If I could write a piece of work that I felt *entirely* captured my participants' experience, how very limited would that would mean the 'life-world' was…

4th June 2013

As I'm collecting evidence of themes across the participants, it strikes me how something is lost about the individual experience, and my resistance to that. Where there is breadth there is

inevitably less depth. The accounts that were so richly portrayed are spliced up, mixed around with others and along with such a limited word count I worry that the participants' uniqueness is lost. Whilst they all add something rich, there is the same sacrifice that the individual is lost in the process. I worry about doing them a disservice. And that it doesn't feel true to the epistemological roots of the methodology somehow...This analysis is a lonely process at times…even those also using IPA who can sympathise with the process don't know my data and vice versa and it feels like a world that only I am in. Longing for the light at the end of the tunnel!

12th June 2013

After a hard couple of weeks clarity is finally dawning! There have been so many reworkings of the data by this point…so many weird and wonderful diagrams…I can certainly see what is meant by an 'iterative' process…no straight lines in sight! It has felt like such a puzzle at times, and to see things gradually having come together is rewarding. It's definitely a process that takes some faith…

June 20th 2013

I met with XXXX [a therapist friend unrelated to the doctorate] and talked him through the findings of my research and he was interested to hear about it because he is working with a woman who uses creative writing. It helped me to articulate it in a nutshell because I could see where links were clear and where I was less articulate (which showed me where I needed to clarify my thinking). I am fairly sure about changing the name of the final superordinate theme 'Personal growth' to something like 'Beyond surviving to thriving' because it incorporates the context of the isolation/dislocation/loss etc that people experienced and needed to turn to writing for. It creates a bridge to something that was beyond the scope of analysing but that was a very important context. Just added verbs to each of the superordinate themes and that highlights that the participants are active agents in their worlds, feels better that way and reflective of the process.

Appendix P - Summary of difficult circumstances or experiences reported by participants

Alan	• Previous cultural isolation when living abroad • Several significant bereavements
Sarah	• Endings of relationships/ negotiating difficulties with significant others
Nikki	• Negotiating a minority ethnic identity • Negotiating educational/ class differences in her family • Difficulties in one of her parental relationships • Significant bereavement
Louise	• Isolation as a new mother • Experience of depression • Living with a partner with depression
Edith	• Experience of mental health problems (Diagnosis of Borderline personality disorder) • A difficulty with expressing her feelings
Lakota-Wolf	• Combat-related PTSD • Experience of betrayal by the services he worked for • Experience of institutional racism • Social isolation as a result of mental health problems • Issues of racial identity – feeling he was not accepted/ did not belong anywhere
Simon	• Losing his mother at 5 years old • Growing up in an environment with a 'stiff upper lip' making expression of feelings difficult • Experience of mental health problems • Previous custodial sentence in a Youth Offenders Institute • Experience of social exclusion and isolation as a result of his difficulties
Didge	• Previous marriage to a man with severe and chronic alcohol problems, followed by a divorce and his subsequent alcohol-related death • Experience of low self-esteem and isolation, and depression and anxiety linked to her marriage and its subsequent breakdown

Appendix Q: Definitions of Theory-Guided Dimensions of Well-Being

Self-acceptance

High scorer: Possesses a positive attitude toward the self; acknowledges and accepts multiple aspects of self, including good and bad qualities; feels positive about past life.

Low scorer: Feels dissatisfied with self; is disappointed with what has occurred with past life; is troubled about certain personal qualities; wishes to be different than what he or she is.

Positive relations with others

High scorer: Has warm, satisfying, trusting relationships with others; is concerned about the welfare of others; capable of strong empathy, affection, and intimacy; understands give and take of human relationships.

Low scorer: Has few close, trusting relationships with others; finds it difficult to be warm, open, and concerned about others; is isolated and frustrated in interpersonal relationships; not willing to make compromises to sustain important ties with others.

Autonomy

High scorer: Is self-determining and independent; able to resist social pressures to think and act in certain ways; regulates behavior from within; evaluates self by personal standards.

Low scorer: Is concerned about the expectations and evaluations of others; relies on judgments of others to make important decisions; conforms to social pressures to think and act in certain ways.

Environmental mastery

High scorer: Has a sense of mastery and competence in managing the environment; controls complex array of external activities; makes effective use of surrounding opportunities; able to choose or create contexts suitable to personal needs and values.

Low scorer: Has difficulty managing everyday affairs; feels unable to change or improve surrounding context; is unaware of surrounding opportunities; lacks sense of control over external world.

Purpose in life

High scorer: Has goals in life and a sense of directedness; feels there is meaning to present and past life; holds beliefs that give life purpose; has aims and objectives for living.

Low scorer: Lacks a sense of meaning in life; has few goals or aims, lacks sense of direction; does not see purpose of past life; has no outlook or beliefs that give life meaning.

Personal growth

High scorer: Has a feeling of continued development; sees self as growing and expanding; is open to new experiences; has sense of realizing his or her potential; sees improvement in self and behavior over time; is changing in ways that reflect more self-knowledge and effectiveness.

Low scorer: Has a sense of personal stagnation; lacks sense of improvement or expansion over time; feels bored and uninterested with life; feels unable to develop new attitudes or behaviors.

This information was taken from Ryff and Keyes (1995, p.1072)

THE ARTS IN PSYCHOTHERAPY

AUTHOR INFORMATION PACK

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