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MICHELLE MCCARTNEY BSc Hons PGDip MSc

“When normal words just aren’t enough”:
The experience and significance of creative writing at times of personal difficulty

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Section B: Empirical paper
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Section C: Critical Appraisal
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Doctor of Clinical Psychology

SEPTEMBER 2011

SALOMONS
CANTERBURY CHRIST CHURCH UNIVERSITY

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

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STATEMENT 2

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Most of all thank you to J, my mum, my brothers and aunties, for...everything really.

Summary of the MRP portfolio

Section A consists of a review of the literature relating the therapeutic use of creative writing. It highlights gaps in the literature and suggesting potential avenues of further research.

Section B presents the findings of a phenomenological study which aimed to explore the experience and significance of creative writing at times of personal difficulty through the analysis of written accounts.

Section C involves a critical appraisal of the study presented in Section B. Reflections on the process of the study, as well as further implications and clinical applications are discussed.

Section D provides an appendix of supporting material.

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Saying “what words cannot say”: A review of the
therapeutic uses of creative writing

Section A: Review of the literature
5448 words

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Section A: Review of the Literature

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Abstract

Aim. This review aimed to determine what is currently known about the therapeutic use of creative writing, with a view to highlighting gaps in the literature and suggesting potential avenues of further research.

Method. The Cochrane Library, PsycINFO (1806-2011), MEDLINE (1948-2011), CINAHL, and the Web of Knowledge were searched for relevant peer-reviewed publications. Further searches were conducted using Google Scholar. The resulting articles were screened on the basis of abstracts.

Results. The evidence suggests that creative writing may offer a range of benefits, particularly as a means of emotional processing and generating meaning from experience. However the quality of the evidence base is poor and therapist-led accounts based on extant theories predominate.

Conclusion. There is a need for more rigorous qualitative studies to be undertaken in this area to address significant gaps in the evidence base. Several potential areas for further research have been identified through this review.

“Poetry led me by the hand out of madness”- Anne Sexton

“Writing is a form of therapy; sometimes I wonder how all those, who do not write, compose, or paint can manage to escape the madness, the melancholia, the panic and fear, which is inherent in the human condition” – Graham Greene

“When I’m not writing, I feel like shit” – Ernest Hemingway

Introduction

Authors and poets throughout the years have acknowledged the potential of writing as a means to insight and healing. Indeed, many people appear to turn to creative writing at times of difficulty or distress. However, despite the fast growth of creative writing courses and widespread use of writing interventions in community and healthcare settings, writing has tended to lag behind other arts therapies in its development, and seems to suffer from the lack of a sound theoretical or empirical basis for its use. The aim of this review is to determine what is currently known about the therapeutic use of creative writing, with a view to highlighting gaps in the literature and suggesting potential avenues of further research.

Definitions

Previous reviews have highlighted the lack of clarity and consistency surrounding the terminology used in this area (Mazza, 1993; Jensen & Blair, 1997; McArdle & Byrt, 2001): “Terms...were, at times, used interchangeably, yet were also used specifically in regard to

groups, actions and processes that were decidedly different” (Jensen & Blair, 1997, p525).

For the sake of clarity, the following definitions will be used:

- **Creative writing** will refer to a form of artistic expression that “draws on the imagination to convey meaning through the use of imagery, narrative and drama” (Writing Studio, Duke University, n.d.). This includes poetry, fiction (novels, short-stories, scripts, screenplays) and creative non-fiction; and is distinct from pragmatic or reflective forms of writing.
- **Therapeutic writing** is a more global term used to describe any writing exercise that is undertaken to support therapeutic work (Kerner & Fitzpatrick, 2007), whether self-generated or suggested by a therapist (Wright & Chung, 2001).
- **Expressive writing**, though often used interchangeably with therapeutic writing, is strongly associated with a research paradigm originated by James Pennebaker and colleagues. This focuses on investigating the physical and psychological benefits of writing about one’s thoughts and feelings about a stressful or traumatic experience. To avoid confusion, it will be used in this latter sense.
- Finally, **poetry therapy** refers to a particular therapy modality that “employs poetry and other forms of evocative literature to achieve therapeutic goals and personal growth” (Golden, 2000, p. 125). It is regarded as a form of **bibliotherapy** (the therapeutic use of literature). While poetry therapy may involve some writing, this tends to be rather limited, with much of the exploration occurring through discussions within the group (Maltby, 2008).

Scope of the review

Due to the inconsistent use of terminology noted above, the practical rather than empirical focus of much of the literature to date and the broad, interdisciplinary nature of the topic, this review is not intended to be comprehensive. Instead, it represents a systematic sampling of the theoretical and empirical literature focusing on the formal or informal therapeutic use of creative writing by adults (aged 18 or older). A full account of the search strategy may be found in Appendix I.

Why write? The value of expressive writing

“Two strong conclusions can be made with regard to the benefits of writing.

First, expressive writing has health benefits.

Second, no one really knows why.”

- King (2002) p119

A significant amount of the empirical evidence for the benefits of writing for health and well-being derives from the expressive writing research paradigm pioneered by James Pennebaker and colleagues. In the original study (Pennebaker & Beall, 1986), which aimed to explore the effects of disclosure on trauma, US college students were invited to write for 15 minutes on 4 consecutive days about “the most traumatic or upsetting experiences” of their entire lives, while those in the control group wrote about a relatively superficial topic (e.g. time-management). At 5-month follow-up, those who had written about their thoughts and feelings had made significantly fewer visits to the health centre than control participants, indicating improved immune functioning following

exposure which was found to be detectable at a cellular level (Pennebaker, Kiecolt-Glaser & Glaser, 1988).

Further replications of the paradigm demonstrated a striking range of not just physical but psychological benefits, including improved coping ability (Lumley & Provenzano, 2003) and decreases in anxiety and depressive symptoms (Kerner & Fitzpatrick, 2007). The effects remained even after varying the content, timing, and frequency of writing, with one study finding effects from as little as two 2-minute exposures (Burton & King, 2007). The effectiveness and versatility of the intervention led to its receiving media attention, with headlines such as “the pen is mightier than the pill” (Bower, 1999). There have now been hundreds of studies and several meta-analyses published on expressive writing research (e.g. Smyth, 1998; Meads, Lyons & Carroll, 2003; Frisina, Borod & Lepore, 2004). The first (Smyth, 1998), based on 13 studies, found a moderate effect size ($d=0.47$), similar in size to other (usually longer or more expensive) psychological interventions. Indeed, studies directly comparing psychotherapy sessions with sessions of expressive writing have found comparable improvements in cognitions, self-esteem and behaviour (e.g. Donnelly & Murray, 1991). However, not all results have been positive. Some studies suggest that disclosure may be harmful for certain people, for example men with posttraumatic stress disorder (Gidron, Peri, Connolly, & Shalev, 1996), while a few studies have found no effect (Earnhardt, Martz, Ballard, & Curtin, 2002; Kovac & Range, 2002). A more recent meta-analysis of 146 published and unpublished randomised studies found a smaller yet still positive and significant overall effect size ($d=.075$) (Frattaroli, 2006).

There remains the question, what is it about expressive writing that works? Initial explanations linked participants’ reduced stress levels with the disclosure of previously

inhibited material, or catharsis, but further studies revealed that it was more complex. Repeated exposure to anxiety-provoking thoughts and feelings may decrease the perceived intensity of emotions, as can labelling them (Schwarz, 1990). Feldman Barrett, Gross, Conner Christensen and Benvenuto (2001) found that the more participants could differentiate their negative emotions, the more they reported engaging in adaptive emotion-regulation strategies. This is consistent with Pascual-Leone and Greenberg's (2007) findings that successful psychotherapy involves a progression from global labels for emotional states to the articulation of more specific feelings and meanings. The development of a coherent narrative in expressive writing may help people to reorganise and structure traumatic memories, enabling cognitive processing and assimilation or reframing of the experience to occur, or what might be explained in narrative therapy in terms of externalisation or the "re-authoring" of problem-saturated narratives (Keeling & Bermudez, 2006).

Expressive writing exercises have been found to increase reflective rather than ruminative thought patterns (Gortner, Rude & Pennebaker, 2006; Sloan, Marx, Epstein & Dobbs, 2008). While rumination involves abstract, evaluative judgments regarding one's experience, which foster anxiety and depressed mood, and impair problem-solving, a reflective style tends to be a more concrete, present-focused way of relating to experience which promotes emotional processing and helps to regulate mood. This is akin to the type of self-focused attention entrained by meditative practices such as mindfulness (Maltby, 2008). The result of such attention may be the creation of opportunities for "life course correction" or the implementation of changes that might not otherwise have been made (Chung & Pennebaker, 2007).

No one model is likely to explain the effectiveness of the paradigm (Smyth and Pennebaker, 2008). Many cognitive, emotional, biological and social processes are probably involved, which continue to interact with each other over time. Given this uncertainty, Pennebaker acknowledges that it may be premature to advocate the adoption of expressive writing interventions for use in clinical practice. Nevertheless, his research has demonstrated, in an empirical and rigorous fashion, what a very brief, simple and relatively non-relational form of writing could do.

Creative writing: Saying “what words cannot say”

From the research reviewed above, we can see that writing invested with personal thoughts and feelings can potentially facilitate shifts in emotion and understanding. While creative writing may begin in a similar way to expressive writing, the writer continues to filter the raw material through a point of view and to shape it by form and language (Viorst, 1980). This may enable him or her to move beyond what was explored in the expressive writing, achieving significant changes in insight and self-experience as a result (Nicholls, 2009).

In addition to the processes implicated in expressive writing, creative writing is likely to operate in other unique ways. Coming from the broader field of creativity research, a concept that has been found to be central to the work of many published writers (Perry, 1998) is “flow”. Flow is the state of being absorbed in an activity and is accompanied with the sense of fulfilment and self-actualisation, a perceived dissolution of the boundaries of self, and an increased sense of contact with a “deeper, more universal” self (Nelson & Rawlings, 2007): “...when we are involved in it, we feel that we are living more fully than during the rest of life...[Creative activity] comes close to the ideal

fulfilment we all hope to get from life, and so rarely do” (Csikszentmihalyi, 1996, p2). Such experiences may be particularly elusive, and therefore all the more valuable, when one is experiencing negative emotions or life stress.

Although there are efforts to integrate expressive arts therapies based on a model of the creative process (e.g. Warren, 2008), practitioners in the field of writing in healthcare tend to draw on either psychoanalytic theories, with influences from linguistics, symbolic interactionism and philosophy (e.g. Hunt, 2000; Philips 2000; Ogden 2001) or adopt a humanistic frame of reference (e.g. Bolton, 1999) (Wright & Chung, 2001). While an in-depth discussion of these perspectives is beyond the scope of this review, some elements thought to underlie the therapeutic effects of creative forms of writing are presented below.

Since Freud’s exploration of the psychology of creative writing, *Creative Writers and Day Dreaming* (1908), the role of the unconscious in psychodynamic conceptualisations of creative writing has been key. To Freud’s mind the content of the writing amounted to a sublimation of the writer’s repressed desires, which the formal or aesthetic qualities of the work served to conceal. The work of psychoanalysts such as Sharpe (1949), Ehrenzweig (1967) and particularly Matte Blanco (1975), contributed to a more complex and subtle formulation of the relationship between the nonlinear, creative, “primary-process” thinking traditionally associated with the unconscious and the linear, rational, “secondary-process” mode associated with the ego. The unconscious is thus seen as communicating through a sophisticated language and logic of its own. Eisner (1992) asserted that the dominance of “secondary-process” thinking within western civilisations has led us to overlook the more complex meanings that can be accessed through more

condensed, creative uses of language: We draw on metaphor and other artistic uses of language “to say, paradoxically, what words cannot say” (Eisner, 1993, p6).

Lowe (2006) suggests that this ability to reorganise non-linguistically encoded preconscious or unconscious thoughts underlies the therapeutic power of poetry. While fiction shares with poetry an imaginative and figurative use of language, it is characterised by what Doyle (1998) terms “narrative improvisation”, a mode of thought that typically involves imaginative stances from viewpoints different from one’s own. From a psychodynamic perspective, this shifting boundary between self and other enables the writer to simultaneously project and identify with those aspects of his self and objects, and to experience the relationships between them (Sandler & Sandler, 1995).

The completion of any piece of creative writing may give rise to a sense of accomplishment and facilitate the formation of adaptive identifications with the self as “writer” (Viorst, 1980). Writing by its language-based nature is an inherently social act and through it the “private meanings of an activity are integrated into a product of social value” (Kanzer, 1957, p522). Some authors stress the importance of the presence of a facilitator or writing group to provide what Winnicott (1971) termed a “holding space” (Nicholls, 2009); but even if undertaken in a solitary way, the writing itself may constitute a transitional space or object, one which exists “neither of the psychic inner reality nor of the objective outer reality but in a third space which allows the individual to negotiate between the other two” (Robinson, 2000, p80).

Is there a dark side to creativity?

An underlying of assumption both of practitioners in the field and creativity researchers in general is that creativity or creative writing can only be of benefit (Nelson, 2005). Bolton in particular has been criticised for seeming to imply there are no risks involved (Wright & Chung, 2001). In contrast, popular images depict writers as neurotic and prone to mental illness, the suicides of prominent writers (for example, Anne Sexton, Sylvia Plath, Ernest Hemingway) seeming to bolster this stereotype. How do we understand this relationship: are people prone to distress drawn to writing? Does writing increase or maintain distress? Or is it a support for those who might be worse off without it?

Several influential studies have purported to show that rates of mental illness, particularly mood disorders, are higher amongst professional writers (Goodwin & Jamison, 2007; Jamison, 1993; Andreasen, 1987; Ludwig, 1995), with poets seeming particularly negatively affected (Kaufman & Sexton, 2006). However such studies tend to suffer from serious methodological flaws, including the over-reliance on biographical data, poor controls and selection biases.

Runco and Charles (1997) suggest that creativity may have a negative effect on writers as a result of the frustration and ambiguity it entails, while Rothenberg's (1990) case study of the writer John Cheever indicates he may have used alcohol to mitigate anxiety aroused by the resurfacing of unconscious material (Nelson, 2005). The potential for creative writing and particularly poetry to obviate "repressive mechanisms" (Olson-McBride, 1999) has been regarded as cause for concern by some researchers examining the links between poetry and mental health. Kaufman and Kaufman (2009) and Smyth, True and Souto (2001) have even suggested that writers seeking health benefits stick to a

narrative rather than a poetic style. However such conclusions seem premature, based on potentially spurious correlations rather than systematic research. Indeed the precision of word use in poetry, the choosing of concrete images to express complex emotions or ideas, may buffer against the overgeneralised, repetitive thinking characterising depressive rumination, as the literature on expressive writing suggests. The shaping and crafting of language in creative writing rather than creating distress may instead offer protection and emotional containment, as one psychoanalyst studying Sylvia Plath's poetry suggested (Silverman & Will, 1986).

Before we can advocate, or caution against, the use of creative writing for therapeutic purposes therefore, it is clear that much remains to be understood. The aim of the next section is to draw together the existing research evidence.

The therapeutic uses of creative writing: the research evidence

“Skilled or unskilled, we all scribble poems” – Horace (65BC) Epistles

Several authors have drawn attention to the perceived tension between writing for therapeutic purposes and writing as an art form (Jensen & Blair, 1997; Robinson, 2000; Hunt, 2000). While these aims need not be mutually exclusive, it is useful to conceptualise them as lying on opposite ends of a continuum, with a range of writing contexts falling in between (Maltby, 2008; see table below). In the review of the research evidence to follow, I will refer to each of these areas.

Table 1.1 The arts-therapy continuum and creative writing.

<i>Arts practice/quality emphasis</i> ←		→ <i>Therapeutic practice/change emphasis</i>		
<u>Art as art-form</u>	<u>Art as art-making</u>	<u>Arts in health</u>	<u>Art as therapy</u>	<u>Art in therapy</u>
Focus on the art world and critical or cultural value.	Focus on art and the process of making art.	Focus on improving well-being via the arts.	Focus on art as a therapeutic activity.	Focus on personal therapy.
The aesthetic quality, critical appreciation and cultural value of the literary <i>product</i> is paramount rather than the personal experience of the writer.	Creative activity is seen to be affected by personal and social factors and may have transformative effects. The literary <i>product</i> is important but the <i>process</i> of writing is also significant.	The arts are recognised to contribute to human welfare and creative activity is seen as promoting well-being. Active <i>participation</i> in writing and literary activity is encouraged.	The arts as creative therapies with writing used for personal expression, exploration and reflection. Can employ professional <i>facilitation</i> but also be a means of <i>self-help</i> .	Art as a vehicle for exploration and change in psychotherapy. Creative writing as a potential tool of therapeutic work. The content and process of writing utilized as an <i>aspect</i> of therapy.
Professional creative writing.	Professional or personal creative writing.	Creative writing as an activity and discipline with life-enhancing benefits.	Creative writing as a form of therapy.	Creative writing in the context of a broader psychotherapeutic approach.

Creative writing as art-form

Ascribing a value to the finished work “already frozen with traces of the process already completed” (Camoin, 1994) tends to be the domain of literary theorists and critics, and seems distant from the open-ended, dynamic processes through which creative writers produce their work (Green, 2001). But the resulting piece of writing is more than an aesthetic product, and the therapeutic dimensions of such creations are increasingly being recognised. In bibliotherapy, imaginative literature can be used to facilitate “emotional catharsis, active problem solving and personal insight” (Lanza, 1996) while poetry therapists may choose published poems that evoke or resonate with the client’s mood to promote therapeutic dialogue (Harrower, 1978). Though little empirical research has been published in this area, a recent grounded theory study found that reading fiction can improve and maintain psychological well-being (Sullivan, 2007).

Creative writing as art-making

Robinson (2000) makes a useful distinction between the therapeutic *use* of writing (which is conscious and intentional) and the therapeutic *function* which writing may serve “almost in spite of” the writer’s conscious literary aims (p82). Research relating to professional or student writers, then, may reveal something of the effects of creative writing and its therapeutic, or less than therapeutic “by-products”.

Three quantitative studies have examined the subjective experience of writing creatively using an experience sampling method. This involved participants filling out specially designed mood inventories at specific times, to enable mood variability to be estimated. In Brand and Powell’s (1986) study, students on writing and literature courses recorded their mood before and after completing writing assignments (which would not be viewed by their course instructors) while Brand and Leckie (1988) asked professional writers to complete mood inventories when writing for work. Regardless of the type of writing task, participants reported more intense and frequent positive emotions when writing, particularly those students who considered themselves to be skilled. While the studies point to possible mood-enhancing benefits from creative writing, the data sets on which they drew were incomplete and it is not possible to tell what about the process might have led to the changes.

Kohanyi (2009) using a similar methodology examined the mood variability experienced by 20 creative writers, nonfiction writers and non-writers. Writers were in fact found to have lower mood variability than non-writers. Qualitative comments pointed to differences between creative writers and nonfiction writers. While creative writers found writing made them feel imaginative, in flow, and able to understand their thoughts and

emotions, journalists noticed an improved ability to organise and develop their thoughts and ideas, but they did not report therapeutic or cathartic effects.

Creative writing in health

The influence of writing in health has increased over the past two decades both within the UK and internationally (Sampson & Visser, 2005). Lapidus, the national organisation to promote the use of the literary arts in personal development and therapy was set up in 1996, and initiatives like Survivors Poetry (aiming to support people who have experienced mental health services to express themselves through poetry), as well as many writers-in-residence and facilitated creative writing programmes have flourished. The role of creative writing in this context may be thought of as a complement to service provision rather than a therapeutic intervention in itself (Sampson & Visser, 2005). Though anecdotal accounts suggest positive outcomes, there tends to be a lack of formal evaluation of the impact of such programmes (Jensen & Blair, 1997). Below is a summary of 5 studies of creative writing groups.

Jensen and Blair (1997) explored the relationship between creative writing and mental wellbeing among 14 former service users involved in a community creative writing group. Several positive aspects of the group were identified, including: the process of writing, having an identity/voice, the experience of friendship and understanding and the expression of emotion. More negative aspects were linked to the stigma of being mental health service users, interpersonal issues within the group and performing the written pieces in public. While the themes seem potentially rich, the authors acknowledge that the methodology chosen “did not lend itself to deep exploration of experience and attitudes” (p527).

McDowell (1998) examined the therapeutic value of creative writing in working with adults with learning disabilities. Five individuals who participated in a weekly writing group were asked to express their views by means of a semi-structured questionnaire. While the authors reported benefits gained from being in a group, the topics of the sessions seem aimed at expository rather than creative writing (e.g. Write about your views on violence in society) and the questionnaire, which seemed overly complex given the participants level of language ability, eliciting mainly “don’t know” answers.

Though intended as a survey rather than an evaluation, Robinson’s (2000) study comparing the views of mental health service users involved in writing groups (16 people) and poets contacted through online mailing lists, found that 84% of the total sample felt that writing had a therapeutic use for them. Many had used writing to explore difficult life events such as bereavement or during stressful periods in life and there was a general sense in both groups that the best writing had some connection with difficult emotional experiences. In the words of one participant: “It is true that the majority of ‘therapeutic writing’ is, to put it bluntly, crap, but then a lot of nontherapeutic writing is crap too and it’s possible the most worthwhile poetry stems from therapeutic beginnings.”

Hilse, Griffiths and Corr (2007) used a mixed-method approach to explore the effect of a poetry writing workshop in a community college on people who had past experience of mental health difficulties. They interviewed two group members and observed 4 sessions of the poetry writing group, in which feedback was given on poems that were written outside the sessions. The analysis suggested that poetry facilitated both an internal connection with the self and an external connection with others, enabling the creation

and communication of meaning. While participants' experiences were largely positive, one person shared a negative experience of feeling misunderstood or misinterpreted by others in the group and at times of acute distress, recalled not being able to write at all.

Cooper (2010) compared a standard creative writing with another model having a specific therapeutic focus (the "Using Writing As Therapy" group) across acute inpatient and community mental health settings. Participants in the standard creative writing group were found to feel less safe in the group environment and tended to avoid discussing the emotional content of their writing, while participants in the writing-as-therapy group reported increased insight, the loosening of a sense of "stuckness" and an improved ability to plan for the future, suggesting that different goals may be accomplished depending on the focus of the writing. The next section will explore further the use of creative writing as therapy.

Creative writing as therapy

Studies with a focus on creative writing as a therapeutic activity may be divided in those involving professional facilitation or writing as self-help.

Facilitated writing interventions

Most of the evidence for facilitation interventions comes from poetry therapy, though the quality of the evidence base is noted to be poor. Mazza's (1993) review of poetry therapy research studies between 1967 and 1990 identified just four case studies. Since then, although successful interventions have been reported with a range of client groups (including people with dementia (Hagens, Beaman & Ryan, 2003), cancer patients (Koppman, 2001) and individuals recovering from substance misuse (Alschuler, 1999)), Heimes (2011) review of 203 published studies found that 80.8% involved expert

opinions of practitioners, while a further 9.9% consisted almost entirely of narrative case reports without any formal study design.

Two quantitative studies were identified. Mohammadian and colleagues (2011) assessed a group 7 session poetry intervention in a sample of 29 female undergraduate students in Iran. While this involved nonclinical samples, levels of depression, anxiety and stress significantly decreased in the poetry therapy group as compared with the waiting list control. Tegnér, Fox, Philipp & Thorne (2009) evaluated the use of 6 weekly group poetry therapy sessions for 12 cancer patients attending a support centre. The results showed a significant decrease in the suppression of emotions and anxiety in those who experienced the poetry intervention. There were no changes on any of the measures in the control group.

Hunt's (1998) development of the therapeutic use of autobiography has had a considerable influence in the field. She gives case studies of 4 women who took part in her 'Autobiography and the Imagination' creative writing course, which are interpreted in terms of Horneyan literary and psychoanalytic theory. However this approach does not seem to have been explored in a larger scale study.

Bolton (2008) reports on a therapeutic creative writing project undertaken with people with cancer in a palliative care context. Though the methodology description was vague and the results not linked to any psychological theory, the study indicated that writing gave participants an opportunity to discover and sort through their thoughts, feelings and memories and enhanced their ability to express important issues. Although the writing process itself was often painful it offered a sense of fulfilment and the production of writings which could then be shared and explored with those close to them.

Writing as self-help

Though there is a range of self-help literature available recommending various kinds of creative writing for personal growth and healing (e.g. Bolton, 1999; Hunt, 2000), many people come to writing independently. Sandy Jeffs, a poet diagnosed with schizophrenia, has written about how she drew on poetry to understand her experiences of psychosis and to recreate her identity (Jeffs & Pepper 2005), while an anonymous author in the *Psychiatric Bulletin* (2003) described the use of “insight poetry” in the form of easily-memorised rhyming couplets “as a first line of defence if any delusive thoughts or misconceived ideas come into my mind”.

References to creative writing are scattered throughout studies on resilience and meaning-making. In Kia-Keating, Grossman, Sorsoli and Epstein’s (2005) qualitative investigation of 16 male survivors of abuse, one reported spontaneously using writing to cope with his experiences. He reported that he would write to “go inside” and “be characters. Create characters. Fantasize. That was the safe space.” (p43). Similarly, in Inckle’s (2010) study of creative and holistic approaches to self-injury, 2 out of 4 participants identified writing as a source of healing.

Not all reports are positive though, with Jason Thompson’s (2010) account of writing about his childhood leading him to caution others against the use of writing for therapeutic purposes. His initial sense of validation and empowerment from writing about the past quickly became “addictive” and obsessive, culminating in suicidal depression. Though it is not known how common such experiences are, it is possible that for some people, without the influence of an empathic other, writing may “inadvertently become a mechanism to perpetuate a self-defeating traumatic narrative, rather than a means of rescripting that narrative.”

Only one study was identified that looked specifically at the independent use of writing. Gilzean (2011) interviewed 17 adults (14 women and 3 men) via email to explore the links between self-injury (specifically, cutting) and creative writing. Though it was not clear what participants' use of writing entailed and the focus of the paper seemed to be on understanding the meaning of self-harm, some interesting links were made. Writing shared parallels with cutting in that both helped to control a sense of inner chaos and served as a communication to oneself and to others. However writing also enabled shifts in understanding and the building of relationships to occur.

Creative writing in therapy

While many authors agree that creative writing may be a useful adjunct to therapy, no formal evaluations seem to have been carried out, and most accounts are anecdotal. In an early paper, Lauer and Goldfield (1970) explored the use of creative writing in group therapy in both inpatient and outpatient psychiatric settings. They concluded that creative writing facilitated self-understanding, self-esteem, and group interaction, more successful when used in conjunction with therapy than as a sole treatment. One group member whose individual therapy was at an impasse showed "striking progress" upon starting creative writing.

Other examples of the use of creative writing in individual therapy include Jones (1997), Wright (2005), Furman (2003) and Meekums (2005). Jones (1997) gave an account of the use poetry in conjunction with psychotherapy with a client, "Kate" who had an inoperable carcinoma. He felt that poetry gave Kate and those around her, "a meaningful language through which it became possible to conceive what, under ordinary

circumstances could not be conceived” (p243). Wright (2005) described a brief workplace counselling intervention with a client “Denise” who used expressive and creative writing between sessions. Denise valued the space and control writing gave her over the therapeutic process: “I think the real advantage of the writing was that my emotions, grief, misery – call it what you want – seeped out of me while I was by myself and I could think about what I had learned on my own before our meetings, rather than being confused when we met” (p115). Furman (2003) explored the use of poetry within an existential therapy, and includes case material about a client with long-term mental health issues (“Jeff”) who found poetry to be a useful way of coping with difficult emotional states, one which helped him to recreate his identity from that of being a “mental patient” to being a writer. Meekums (2005) advocates the use of creative writing as an assessment tool, citing a case example in which creative writing provided her client “Susan” with a coping strategy, while enabling her to generate insights regarding Susan’s internal world and be sensitive to possible dilemmas that might emerge in future therapeutic work.

Some authors suggest situations in which the use of creative writing may not be appropriate, for example: when the client’s experience is preverbal (in which case other expressive therapies may be preferable); when writing is associated with negative experiences e.g. being criticised at school; or when the writer lacks enough support to deal with the distress that may initially be generated by the writing process (Wright & Chung, 2001). However, these contraindications do not seem to be linked with research evidence. Clearly, there is much scope for developing new ways of integrating creative writing into psychotherapy.

The state of the literature

From this review, we can see that writing may have a range of psychological and health benefits. In particular, creative writing seems to offer a means of emotional processing and generating meaning from our experiences. A range of evidence is accumulating in support of its therapeutic potential, drawn from both clinical and nonclinical samples, whether self-directed or facilitated by a professional, individually or in a group. However the diversity of the evidence base comes with significant drawbacks. The research on expressive writing has been described as lacking reflexivity (Wright & Chung, 2001) and the research methods used deemed limited in their ability to capture the complexity. Humanistic approaches, though attempting to privilege the experience of the participant/writer, have resulted in an abundance of therapist-led accounts, rooted in pre-existing theories, and lack clarity and transparency in respect of methodology. Thus there remain significant gaps in our understanding, with Hunt and Sampson (1998) calling for a conceptual framework for writing therapy, one that will “eventually be rich enough to interpret what goes on in the practice and why” (p206).

There is much scope for further research in this area. Accounts of the spontaneous use of creative writing at times of distress are intriguing and worthy of further study. Bohart (2000) stresses the need to recognise and value clients’ implicit knowledge and ability to effect change as “active self-healers”. There is a need to take a closer look at the experience of writing at times of distress in its entirety, with a focus also on how these processes may unfold over time. The role of others, within personal or professional relationships, or wider society, needs to be explored to inform how best to support the therapeutic writing process. Closer attention could also be given to how the form of the writing (whether poetic or fictional, expressive or formal) might shape or alter experience. Finally, the relative neglect of negative experiences of writing should be

addressed as it may shed light on the boundary conditions of creative writing and alert us to situations in which it may be less helpful or even inappropriate.

Previous reviewers have indicated a need from more rigorous qualitative studies to be undertaken in this area (e.g. Heimes, 2011; Stuckey, 2010). Such approaches have proven especially helpful in exploring areas characterised by complexity and ambiguity. Nelson (2005) has argued for a combination of phenomenological and interpretative perspectives to address some of the shortcomings in the evidence base, and to enable dialogue amongst the many areas on which creative writing borders.

Conclusion

If better understood, creative writing has the potential to be a cost-effective, strength-based and therapeutic tool for both therapists and for individuals in search of self-directed understanding and well-being. Several potential areas for further research have been identified through this review. Qualitative and particularly phenomenological methodologies might be used to begin to guide future theory, research and clinical practice and so move the field from “speculation to specification” (Mayer, 1999, p459).

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MICHELLE MCCARTNEY BSc Hons PGDip MSc

“When normal words just aren’t enough”:
The experience and significance of creative writing at times of
personal difficulty

Section B: Empirical Paper
7943 (plus 256 additional words)

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Section B: Empirical Paper

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Abstract

Aim. The aim of this phenomenological study was to explore the experience and significance of creative writing at times of personal difficulty.

Method. Twenty one people who had personal experience of creative writing in the context of difficult life experiences submitted written accounts. These were analysed using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) (Smith, Larkin & Flowers, 2009).

Results. Four main themes were identified: 1) Struggle with a difficult experience, 2) Turning to creative writing, 3) Dealing with it 'as a matter of words' and 4) Rejoining the world. A conceptual model illustrating how these master themes are related is presented.

Conclusion. Creative writing was deemed to have played an important and meaningful role in helping participants to integrate and move beyond difficult life experiences. Limitations and clinical implications of the study are discussed and suggestions are made for future research.

Introduction

Creative writing is a form of imaginative, artistic expression that uses imagery, narrative and drama to convey meaning (Writing Studio Duke University, n.d.). Many authors and poets have acknowledged the potential of writing as a means of healing and self-development and its influence has strengthened over the past two decades both within the UK and internationally (Sampson & Visser, 2005). Lapidus, the national organisation to promote the use of the literary arts in personal development and therapy was set up in 1996, and initiatives like Survivors Poetry (aiming to support people who have experienced mental health services to express themselves through poetry), as well as many writers-in-residence and facilitated creative writing programmes have flourished. Despite this, many approaches (for example, Bolton 1999) seem to suffer from the lack of a sound theoretical or empirical basis for their use.

The potential benefits of writing in general have been well-established empirically owing to the expressive writing research paradigm pioneered by James Pennebaker and colleagues (Pennebaker & Beall, 1986). In a typical study, participants are invited to write continuously for as few as three 20 minute sessions regarding a significant or traumatic experience in their lives. The paradigm has demonstrated a striking range of physiological and psychological benefits (Kerner & Fitzpatrick, 2007), of a magnitude comparable those associated with psychotherapy (e.g. Donnelly & Murray, 1991). The explanation for these benefits is thought to be complex and may relate to: anxiety-reduction through repeated exposure to traumatic material; the release of suppressed material (catharsis); increases in working memory; the transformation of experience into a more coherent and understandable form; the reframing of highly emotional content; and self-directed

attention akin to that of mindfulness. Many cognitive, emotional, biological and social processes are probably involved, which may interact with each other and continue over time.

In addition to the processes implicated in expressive writing, creative writing is likely to operate in other unique ways. Though it may begin in a similar way to expressive writing, the writer continues to filter the raw material through a point of view and to shape it by form and language (Viorst, 1980). This may enable him or her to move beyond what was explored in the expressive writing to achieve significant changes in insight and self-experience as a result (Nicholls, 2009). Many practitioners in the field of writing in healthcare have drawn on psychoanalytic theories, with influences from linguistics, symbolic interactionism and philosophy (e.g. Hunt, 2000; Philips 2000; Ogden 2001) to account for these changes (Wright & Chung, 2001). Eisner (1993) asserts that condensed, creative uses of language enable us to access more complex meanings than would otherwise be the case: we draw on metaphor and other artistic uses of language “to say, paradoxically, what words cannot say” (p6). Flow (the state of being absorbed in an activity), a concept drawn from the broader field of creativity research (Csikszentmihalyi, 1996) has also been linked with the effects of writing as a therapeutic activity. Three quantitative studies using experience sampling methods (Brand & Leckie, 1988; Brand & Powell, 1986; Kohanyi, 2009) found writers experienced increased and more intense positive moods while writing. Participants reported experiencing themselves as imaginative, in flow, and able to understand their thoughts and emotions while writing creatively, something that was not found to occur when engaged in nonfictional forms of writing.

While many authors agree that creative writing may be a useful adjunct to therapy, no formal evaluations seem to have been carried out, and most accounts are anecdotal in nature. Examples of the use of creative writing in individual therapy include Jones (1997), Wright (2005), Furman (2003) and Meekums (2005). Several qualitative studies have looked at the benefits of participating in creative writing groups (Jensen & Blair, 1997; Hilse, Griffiths & Corr, 2007; Robinson, 2000; Bolton, 2005; Cooper, 2010). Jensen and Blair's study of former service users in a community creative writing group identified some positive and negative aspects associated with participation, however the methodology chosen was not conducive to an in-depth exploration of those experiences. In a study intended as a survey of mental health service users involved in writing groups (16 people) and poets, Robinson (2000) found that many had used writing to explore difficult life events such as bereavement or during stressful periods in life, with both groups indicating that good quality writing had some connection with difficult emotional experiences. Hilse, Griffiths and Corr's (2007) mixed-method study explored the effects of a community poetry writing workshop on people with past mental health difficulties. The analysis, based on interviews with two group members and observations of the workshop, suggested that poetry facilitated connection both with oneself and with others, enabling meaning to be created and communicated. Bolton (2005), adopting an eclectic or atheoretical perspective, reported on a therapeutic creative writing project undertaken with people with cancer in a palliative care context. Participants indicated that writing gave them an opportunity to discover, explore and express thoughts and feelings around important issues. Recently, Cooper (2010) compared a standard creative writing group with another model having a specific therapeutic focus (the "Using Writing As Therapy" group) across acute inpatient and community mental health settings. The results suggested that different goals may be accomplished depending on the focus of the writing, adding further impetus to the need to develop a formal writing therapy.

Before this can happen, there remain significant gaps in the evidence base however. The empirical literature based on Pennebaker's paradigm has been criticised as lacking reflexivity (Wright & Chung, 2001) and limited in its ability to capture the complexity of the processes involved in creative writing. Humanistic approaches, though attempting to privilege the experience of the participant/writer, have resulted in an abundance of therapist-led accounts, rooted in pre-existing theories, and methodologically lacking in clarity and transparency.

Only one study was identified that looked specifically at the independent use of writing. Gilzean (2011) explored the links between self-injury and creative writing through email interviews. It was not clear what participants' use of writing entailed as the paper focused on understanding the meaning of self-harm. However, some interesting parallels were drawn, with both activities seeming to help to control a sense of inner chaos and to facilitate communication between oneself and others. There is a need for further studies of this nature to create client- rather than therapist-centred models which recognise and value clients' implicit knowledge and ability to effect change as "active self-healers" (Bohart, 2000).

If better understood, creative writing has the potential to be a cost-effective, strength-based and therapeutic tool both for therapists and for individuals in search of self-understanding and development. The aim of this phenomenological study therefore is to explore the experiences of people who have been drawn to use creative writing at a difficult or distressing time, paying attention to the meaning they have drawn from it and how they believe it has influenced them. Secondary questions or areas of interest relate to: the effects of creative writing, both immediately and over time; the role of the form

and content of the writing; and the role of other people in facilitating therapeutic outcomes. It is hoped that the ensuing accounts, being grounded in the knowledge inherent in people's experiences (Lilliengren & Werbart, 2005), might then be used to guide future theory, research and clinical practice.

Methodology

2.1 Ethical Issues

Before conducting the study, approval was sought from the Salomons Ethics Committee (see Appendix II). The design of the research was informed by the British Psychological Society's (BPS) ethical guidelines (2006). To ensure consent was informed, prior to taking part in the study, participants were provided with information regarding: the aims and nature of the project, potential risks and benefits of participation, their unreserved right to withdraw at any time prior to submission of the report, and how the data would be used (Appendix IV). The researcher was available by email to respond to any questions or queries. If negative effects were experienced, participants were encouraged to contact their GP should they need further support or a referral. All information obtained from participants was stored confidentially under the Data Protection Act (1988), and care was taken to remove any potentially identifying information from the finished report.

2.2 Study design

The research design was qualitative and made use of interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA). IPA aims to capture the lived experience of the participant and the

meanings they attach to their experiences. It involves a ‘double hermeneutic’ (Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2009), in that the researcher is making sense of the participant, who is making sense of the experience.

IPA emphasises “allowing participants to tell their own story, in their own words” (Smith, Flowers & Osborn, 1997; p68). The medium of written accounts was chosen, as: 1) the literature suggested this could be beneficial to participants; 2) participants self-selected on the basis of having experience with writing; 3) to afford participants the opportunity to express views privately and anonymously, perhaps encouraging those who might not be willing to take part in a face-to-face interview (Gilzean, 2010); 4) relative to oral accounts, written accounts may be freer from demand characteristics and the constraints of speech and short-term memory, allowing for a more considered, focused and reflective response (Handy & Ross, 2005).

2.3 *Written Accounts*

The written accounts were semi-structured based on 7 open questions which were constructed using guidance from Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2009) (Appendix V). In order to encourage rather than limit the expression of participants’ understandings and concerns, the questions were deliberately broad and not structured around *a priori* issues or researcher-led assumptions. Some prompts were offered to guide participants to provide personal and detailed descriptions rather than impersonal or vague accounts. The sequence of questions began with a general opening question (“How did you start to write creatively?”), before introducing more sensitive topics (“What led you to use creative writing at a time of distress?”) and requesting more specific information (“Please tell me about your own writing process...”).

The questions themselves were discussed in supervision and piloted with a member of Salomons Advisory Group of Experts (SAGE). This person was chosen on account of meeting the inclusion criteria for the study and gave feedback about the clarity, relevance and ease of responding to the questions included.

2.4 Sampling

Data collection and sampling in IPA is usually purposive and homogeneous. Participants are selected on the basis of having expertise on the phenomenon under study, in the sense that it has been an integral part of their life experiences (Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2009). Participants were included if they were over 18, fluent in English and had used creative writing at a time of distress within the previous 5 years. Ideally, participants who had come to do so spontaneously rather than under the instruction of a therapist were preferred, as it was felt that they would be less influenced by others' ideas and expectations about the therapeutic effects of creative writing. Participants were asked to consider whether they felt ready to reflect on and write about their experiences without becoming unduly distressed. As a corollary, participants were *not* deemed eligible for the study if they were currently experiencing severe mental health difficulties which required treatment. Finally, as IPA requires "rich" data (Smith, 2009), if responses lacked sufficient detail or clarity to be analysed (in other words, descriptions that were too "thin"), they would be excluded from the analysis.

2.5 Procedure

Relevant organisations and initiatives (Lapidus, National Association of Writers in Education, The Poetry School, Survivors Poetry, and Spread the Word) were contacted

and permission was requested to place a notification on their website or newsletter (Appendix III). The notification invited potential participants to seek further information either by contacting the researcher by telephone or accessing a website created for the study (Appendix IV). Prior to filling in the written accounts, participants provided some brief demographic information (gender, age range, education level) and details of their experience with writing (length in years, frequency, forms and context of writing undertaken) (Appendix V). Once completed, the accounts could be returned by either by post or email.

2.6 Participants

Twenty four people provided written accounts for this study. Three were excluded (one as the author focused on reporting their own theoretical, abstract model of writing rather than providing a personal, experiential account; another related to expressive rather than creative writing; and a third, containing very brief responses, was deemed too “thin” to analyse using IPA). The remaining sample comprised 16 women and 5 men. Participants came from a range of educational backgrounds, with 17 having some form of university experience (undergraduate or above). Sixteen participants had attended writing courses and 13 had published pieces of their work. The most common forms of creative writing used were poetry (18 participants), short-stories (14) and creative non-fiction (8). The length of their experience with creative writing varied from 0-5 years (3 people) to over 20 years (8 people). Most wrote regularly, i.e. at least once a week. For a full description of participant characteristics, please see Appendix VI.

2.7 Data Analysis

The written accounts received by post were transcribed while the text of those sent via email was imported to a word processing document. Data were analysed using the method outlined by Smith, Flowers and Larkin (2009) for use with larger sample sizes. Each individual transcript was examined in turn, noting initial ideas, thoughts and potential codes. Broad themes, as they emerged, were noted in a separate column. These were represented graphically using diagrams and reviewed to see if they could meaningfully be grouped together, to create overarching, superordinate themes. Codes were assigned to each of the resulting superordinate themes and sub-themes. Superordinate themes were present in all interviews, however sub-themes were included if present in a third or more of participant accounts. The aim was to provide a broad range of themes that were still applicable to a significant proportion of the accounts. A summary of the themes and their recurrence is presented in Table 2 (see also Appendix VII). When using IPA with larger samples, the idiographic focus is retained by illustrating group level themes with particular examples given by individuals. The final stage was thus to translate the themes into a narrative account based on individual participants' experiences (see Results section).

2.8 Quality Assurance Checks

Qualitative research aims to develop a deeper understanding of phenomena of interest, so validity or trustworthiness rather than generalisability or replicability, is of greater concern. Yardley (2000) presented four principles for assessing the quality of qualitative research: sensitivity to context; commitment and rigour; transparency and coherence; and impact and importance. Details of how these were addressed in the current study are shown below:

- 1) **Sensitivity to context:** *the extent to which the analysis and interpretation is sensitive to the literature, data, the social context from which it emerged.*

This was shown in the study design, in choosing a mode of communication familiar to participants; in piloting the written accounts with a person who met the criteria for the study; and in the use of IPA which focuses closely on participants' perspectives.

- 2) **Commitment and rigour:** *thoroughness in data collection and analysis.*

The sample was selected quite carefully to match the research questions and was reasonably homogenous. The analysis was conducted thoroughly and systematically and care was taken to balance the level of description and interpretation.

- 3) **Transparency and coherence:** *the clarity and power of the description/argument; transparent methods and data presentation; fit between theory and method; reflexivity.*

Transparency is achieved by presenting excerpts of the data and an example transcript (Appendix VIII) through which the readers can assess the emergent themes and interpretations made. The researcher demonstrated reflexivity in reflecting on how her assumptions, intentions and actions or external constraints influenced the research process, through a research diary (Appendix IX).

- 4) **Impact and importance:** *whether the study has practical or theoretical utility.*

This study met its aims of enriching understanding of the experiences of creative writing which may inform future and intervention in the area.

Results

The aim of this section is to offer a descriptive, phenomenological account of the experience and significance of creative writing at times of distress, based on the personal accounts providing by participants. Four super-ordinate themes present in each of the

written accounts will be outlined in turn: (1) Struggle with a difficult experience, (2) Turning to creative writing, (3) Dealing with it ‘as a matter of words’, and (4) Rejoining the world. Common sub-themes (present in a third of more of participants’ accounts) are shown in Table 2.1. A conceptual map illustrates how the themes are related (figure 2.1).

Table 2.1 Master table of themes for the group

Theme 1: Struggle with a difficult experience	Code	Number of participants
Life-altering & challenging circumstance	1.1	21
Evokes intense feelings and thoughts	1.2	21
Lost or lacking support	1.3	15
Need for an outlet	1.4	21
Theme 2: Turning to creative writing		
Had encountered it before	2.1	15
Fits with personal values	2.2	19
Inspired or encouraged by another	2.3	13
Started spontaneously	2.4	10
Being available to the process	2.5	11
Theme 3: Dealing with it ‘as a matter of words’		
<i>Phases of engagement</i>		
Writing: engaging and articulating	3.1	21
Reviewing: reading and interpreting	3.2	16
Exploring: generating and linking	3.3	21
Shaping: ‘finding the right words’	3.4	11
<i>Emergent processes</i>		
Connecting to and releasing emotions	3.5	16
Immersion, freedom and enjoyment	3.6	21
Sense of safety and containment	3.7	21
Transforming or detoxifying experience	3.8	16
Discovering meaning	3.9	19
Coming to terms	3.10	18
Shift in mood	3.11	19
Speeds working through	3.12	11
Theme 4: Rejoining the world		
Discovery of a healing inner resource	4.1	15
Changes in identity/self-experience	4.2	19
Alters relationships with others	4.3	19
Widening horizons & opportunities	4.4	14

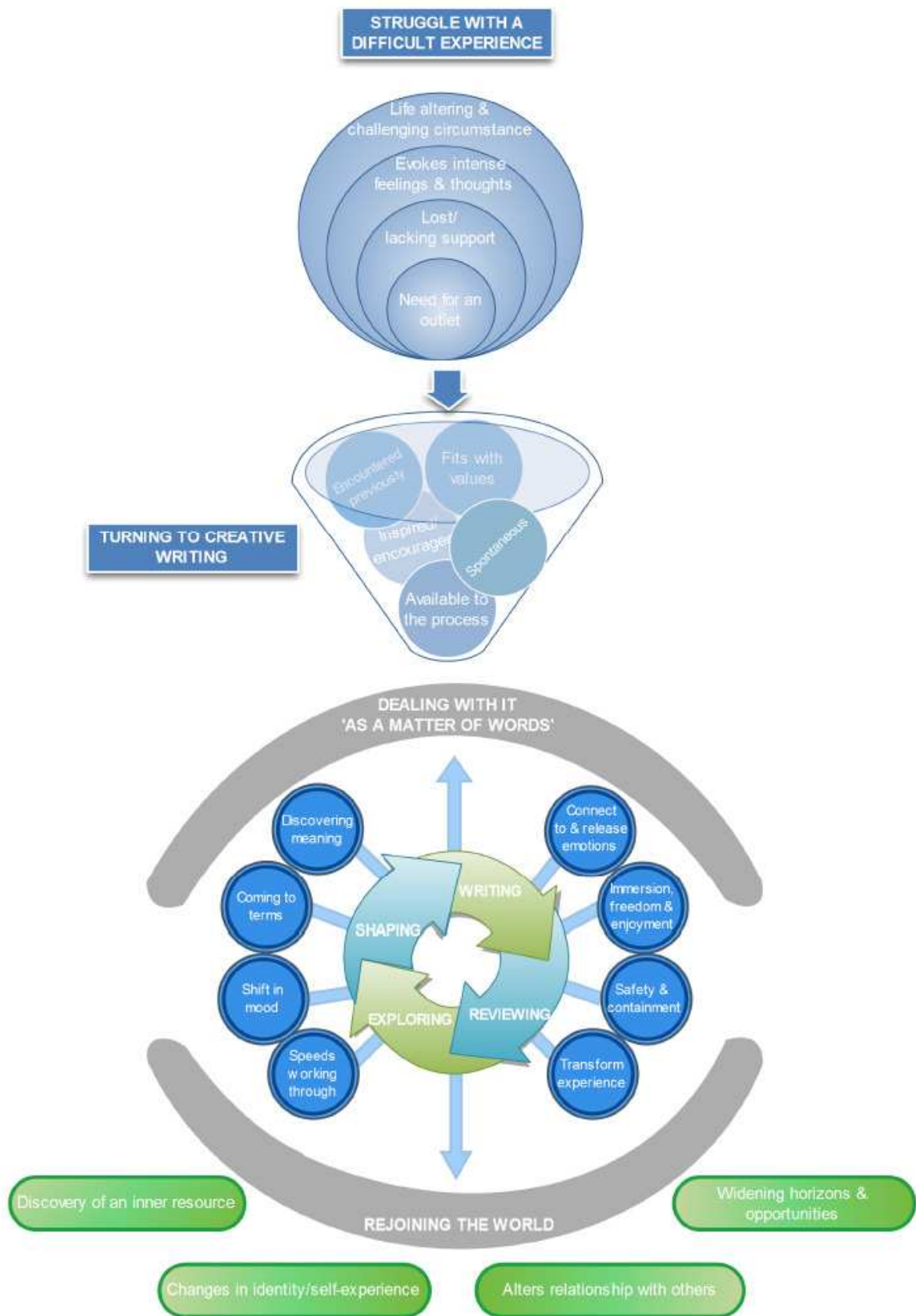


Figure 2.1: Conceptual map of master themes

1.1 Life-altering & challenging circumstance

The participants described being in the midst of life-altering processes or events which were deeply challenging. These encompassed a range of experiences including illness, divorce, emotional breakdown, abuse, bereavement, job loss and injury (a full list can be found in Appendix VI). A few participants had been using creative writing to cope with difficulties since childhood. For some people there was not one event, but several. For example, Rory following a serious motorcycle accident found himself in a downward spiral of depression and addiction, while Maureen faced a series of significant losses.

1.2 Evokes intense feelings and thoughts

The effect of these events on the respondents was considerable. They described strong and painful feelings and thoughts. Nicola, in the wake of an affair which led to her experiencing “some kind of breakdown”, wrote: “I felt dejected and cast out; some days I literally felt as though I were clinging to the table with my knuckles.” Barbara described feelings of helplessness and desperation caused by an extremely painful eye condition.

1.3 Lost or lacking support

Many people mentioned feeling lost or lacking support in facing their difficulties. They felt alone and isolated: “I don’t know what to do, I have no answers and seeking support from the NHS has been fruitless” (Alison). Sam recalled “an overwhelming sense that my life was changing out of my control, I felt...alien, lost, so alone and in the dark.”

1.4 Need for an outlet

The need for some outlet to express or even escape their painful realities was voiced by almost all participants: “I was struggling with pain so wanted an outlet to rant – that’s all my poetry tend to be!” (Louise); “I was very frustrated and miserable and felt like I was spilling over with sadness and had to get it out in some meaningful way” (Deborah).

Theme 2: Turning to creative writing

2.1 Had encountered it before

A large number of participants had encountered creative writing at some point prior to the difficult experience. For several this had been a positive experience, involving a recognition of talent; being praised by a school teacher, or winning a prize. Some continued with it throughout their lives (“I...kept on writing even when I wasn’t successful at it, using it to get through life” - Kathy) while for others, “university and work and family came along, and it became lost in the recesses of my mind” (David).

2.2 Fits with personal values

Their interest in writing aside, most participants seemed to place value on expression or creativity. This was evidenced by the way they spoke about writing, their choice of careers, or how they imagined they would do if writing was no longer available to them:

“I believe that creativity is something in me and would find a way to express itself somehow...”

(Monique)

“If I could not write I'd have to be an actor or singer or something similar. I would HAVE to find a way to get what's inside my weird and turbulent head out somehow...” (Deborah)

2.3 Inspired or encouraged by another

More than half of the participants noted they had received some encouragement to write from others, or were inspired by the writing of others. While in hospital, David was encouraged to revisit an activity he used to enjoy. He chose poetry, easily engaging in it again, “embedding” a process that had begun earlier in his life. Sam, who had never considered himself as any kind of writer, quickly lost his self-consciousness and “felt the power of transformation” in his first session of a therapeutic writing group. A few people were advised to write by their GPs, or self-help books. This was the case for Alison, who commented, “to be honest though, I'd already started to do it before they recommended it. It just seemed naturally to be the only thing to do.”

2.4 Started spontaneously

For just under half of the people who responded, engaging in creative writing happened spontaneously, even out of the blue. For example, Bill began writing a reflective journal but found it “developed a life of its own” and grew into a novel. Helen, exasperated and at a loss as to how to communicate to an ex-partner ended up expressing her conflicting feelings about him in a poem. Maureen had this experience of while completing a word-processing module as part of a computer course:

I had been asked to write a block of text, save it, then recall the file, make changes, and save it again. I couldn't think what on earth to write about, and these poems started coming as if from nowhere.

2.5 Being available to the process

Amongst the accounts there was a sense that for the writing to take place, one had to make oneself available to it, to acknowledge the build up of uncomfortable feelings and take the time to turn them into words.

Unfortunately when I feel really bad I feel too fed up to write fiction. The worse I feel, the more I need to write, and the less likely I am to actually do it. I need a push to write at those times.

(Rachel)

Sometimes the conditions were not right:

When I left school, I started an engineering degree which left me little time for creativity...I felt trapped in an awful cycle of work and lectures where I didn't speak to anyone for days.

(Kathy)

My creativity was squashed during my first, long, marriage, and whilst I was working I didn't have the headspace to create imaginative work. (Maureen)

Sometimes, the feelings were so raw, or so intense, that the person was not ready to attempt to articulate them.

When my mother died...I stopped writing for a short while because it was just too sad and painful to put into words. (Monique)

Theme 3: Dealing with it 'as a matter of words'

Participants described their use of creative writing in the midst of difficult experiences. Several overlapping, nonlinear phases of the writing process were identified as

participants moved in and out of periods of close engagement and more detached reflection and crafting of the work. In parallel with this activity, several processes were noted to emerge, contributing to changes in the writer's emotional, mental and physical state of being.

Phases of engagement

3.1 Writing

The experience of writing was not uniform; one might produce much material or a little, a finished piece (“in fifteen mins I had written four pages of tight script, all verses in metre and all to a rhyme” - David) or something more rough, but for most participants this process was described as fluid and spontaneous: words *flowed*, thoughts *bubbled up*, ideas *poured forth*. This happened almost too quickly for the writer to keep up: “poems started coming as if from nowhere” (Maureen); “I don't second guess what I'm writing... I could not write quick enough” (Alison). Several participants described writing as an addiction or compulsion rather than a conscious choice; the direction the writing is taking often feels just beyond the writer's awareness. Bill's novel “developed a life of its own”; Alison's draft “demand(ed) expression, however inept, however incomplete”; while Simone vividly described the “absolute need to catch something, the fear of not knowing what you are doing, the exhilaration...”

3.2 Reviewing

Once on the page, the words have a visible form and can be re-viewed and reflected on by the writer. For Alison, this made the words, and the emotions and events they

represented, more real: “my partner never admitted the abuse – he made me feel crazy. Writing the words down and seeing them/re-reading them helps it all seem real. It helps me accept what happened.” For Bill this freed him up to see things in a new way, and suggesting new ways to go forward: “I learnt I could literally write my pain down, look at it and decide what to do.” The existence of the written text can serve as a touchstone, a record of where one has come from, which for many was a source of comfort and support: “whenever I felt that I was going backwards, losing any progress I had previously made, this poem always helped me focus, even though it was still a number of years before I got myself sorted” (Rory). Returning to the text could also evoke a sense of potential (“a few days later, I got it out again, realising this could be part of something more” -Kathy) and a desire to work on it further to bring out what the writer wanted to say.

3.3 Exploring

Before or in-between periods when the piece is being written, the writer may spend time exploring or combining ideas, images, points of view, patterns of words and poetic rhythms. “I look forward to writing and often plan stories/poems in my head in traffic jams, queues, on plane journeys, in the middle of the night when insomnia strikes” (Joanne). Several people spoke about using their imagination to create new worlds to escape from the reality of everyday life: “to flee the nightmare that your life is, to immerse yourself in fantasy is liberating and makes me happy” (Lisa). And yet, somewhat paradoxically, the blending of fiction and reality often led to deeper exploration: “The feelings are always acutely personal. I am there in it. Even if someone else is the hero or the heroine, it is my experience, my sorrow, it is me” (David). Deborah described how creating a “completely different, fictional situation in a fairytale world” helped her to

explore and make sense of complex feelings arising from a relationship dilemma. The time she spent trying to work out a satisfactory ending for the story at another level mirrored a search for a resolution to the situation she found herself in.

3.4 Shaping

Just over half of the participants mentioned spending time shaping, crafting or editing the piece of writing. Those who did often found it an important and necessary part of the process: “When I wrote the line about the prince never having loved her, and it only being important that she had loved him, I started crying, but only a bit. It was partly because I was accepting the sadness of my own situation and partly because I'd found the right way to say it, for me: I felt that it was true, and that, moreover, I had expressed that truth in the best way I could” (Deborah). The distance afforded by this process enabled Monique to process a topic that she had avoided addressing directly: “I had been reluctant to focus on my absent father despite the ‘loss’ of him dealt with in the poem. I was able to deal with this issue with a degree of distance since I was expressing my creative writing and it felt more of an artistic experience than emotive.” The shaping and crafting of the piece could also mark a transition between the writing as personal expression of the author to something that could speak to a wider audience:

“To then form it into a “written piece” of creative writing, to communicate to someone else, it has to be worked on a lot.” (Kathy)

“Yet writing is also an invitation to others to come in...I suppose at some stage the writer must detach themselves from their work and ask, not just do I understand it, but will others.” (David)

Emergent processes

A number of potentially therapeutic processes emerged from the process above, including: connecting to and releasing emotions; a state of immersion or enjoyment in the process; a sense of safety and containment; the transformation or detoxification of negative experiences; the discovery of meaning; coming to terms with experience; and shifts in mood.

3.5 Connecting to and releasing emotions

For many participants, writing enabled them to connect to their emotions and voice things they might otherwise suppress. Joanne, who felt much better able to communicate on the page than in real life, commented “it helps to take something that’s really emotional and start dealing with it as a matter of words”. This catharsis could be intense (“gruelling”, “violent”, like “vomiting on the page”), but without it one could easily get “clogged up with emotion”, stuck in anger and bitterness or as Nicola put it “it would be like screaming but no sound comes out”.

3.6 Immersion, freedom and enjoyment

While at times difficult and painful, everyone who responded associated positive mood states with their experiences of writing:

“I felt a buzz from writing this...I’ve found new joy” (Louise)

“The only time I feel truly alive is when I write!” (Lisa)

Many people recalled becoming immersed or absorbed in the task for hours on end: “If being happy is being absorbed in one thing entirely, to the exclusion of all else, being completely caught up in it, writing has made me very happy” (Deborah). For some writing offered the opportunity to experience a freedom missing from “real life”. To Louise, who suffered painful arthritis, it offered a liberation from constant pain “on the paper I could do anything – my body was not stiff restricted or in pain!” Enjoyment of the process could sometimes feel at odds with the topic being written about: “It’s surreal to be finding satisfaction writing on the subject of sudden death but it’s somehow working well for my writing expression – maybe it’s something that has to be written” (Monique).

3.7 Sense of safety and containment

Part of what enabled the freedom and letting go described above, was the sense of security and containment afforded by the writing process: “The creative writing process worked for me because it allowed me to enter my internal world where time could stand still and I could just be” (Bill). For some people this sometimes felt like having two lives, one that was subject to the pressures of the outside world, and one that existed, when needed, within the writing space: “I found a safe place for me to be...It was something that was mine, and mine alone” (Lisa). Within this refuge, the writing itself became viewed as a companion, therapist or friend.

3.8 Transforming or detoxifying experience

Several people found creative writing could lead them “deep down to black waters” (Simone) to dark places within oneself; but this was balanced by an ability to transform those negative feelings and experiences into something good. David, who struggled to rid

himself of the “hate and venom” he experienced as being inside him, regarded as a “blessing” that “really positive, even bright, poems also come alongside, and several of my short stories have what several creative writing teachers have called a poignancy.” This was felt to be unique to the creative writing process, and not experienced through other forms of writing such as journaling: “Diaries can work but don't feel, to me as though I am creating something good or worthwhile out of something bad – merely recording and documenting the shit, rather than transmuting it into gold (well, gilt, maybe)” (Deborah). For Simone, allowing “the double, the ill self, the demented self” to be present on the page was what produced “the good stuff.”

3.9 Discovering meaning

Creative writing was a source of unexpected, often profound, insights and awareness. Lara relied on poetry to make sense of things “when normal words just aren't enough” while Rachel contrasted the discoveries made through creative writing from more everyday forms of thought: “I can think about myself and why I do and say things but when I write, that's how I really gain insight about myself and experience personal growth.” Such realisations could both emerge from writing or inspire further pieces of writing: “I need to write...when I've been thinking about my problems and feel to have had a bit of understanding/a breakthrough. Or when I feel ‘stuck’ over a particular problem or feeling” (Alison). While valued, the insights could sometimes be painful: “Exposure of the self can either be to yourself, or it can be to others. Both of which are essentially painful. Writing is like a process of denudation, peeling off layers and learning to be critical about yourself, your feelings, your relationships” (David).

3.10 Coming to terms

The emotional changes and shifts in understanding often led to a sense of acceptance or coming to terms with the experiences. Grace found the magical happening of fairytales helped to deal with inexplicable emotions or events while Rachel, through writing a story about someone with another life she could have chosen, came to feel much more reconciled to her life now. Nicola's poetry writing helped her to let go of a painful attachment to a former lover "I don't think aching inside me is anything to do with him anymore" while Louise, whose initial forays into creative writing sprang from a need to "rant" and "rebel against" her physical illness, was gradually able "to give my body a break and pace myself...I've learnt that through writing I'm acceptable."

3.11 Shift in mood

The creative writing process generally left people feeling different from when they started: feeling calmer, happier, and much more like "themselves": "Releasing, often humour returning, relief, is mainly what I experience. A deeper connection with own reality" (Grace). After writing pages and pages, Kathy acknowledged "the [initial] negativity appears absurd. I find myself laughing after about an hour of it."

3.12 Speeds working through

For many people these changes seemed to occur at a more rapid rate than they would have otherwise, and to reduce the need for avoidance and denial:

"I don't think I would have come to terms with illness as quickly." (Louise)

“It has freed me of much repression. Past memories that may have taken so long to work through I managed to work through some of the mental processing by myself.” (Helen)

For David it was essential: “Creative writing has been a lifeline to me and has helped haul me through some of life’s quagmires, faster and more smoothly.”

Theme 4: Rejoining the world

The fourth super-ordinate theme relates to the broader influence creative writing had on participants’ lives and the significance which it came to hold for them. For most, the meaning of creative writing went beyond that of a tool or coping strategy, permeating many aspects of their lives and infusing their identities. It offered a means of reconnecting not just with themselves but with others and ultimately with the world around them.

4.1 Discovery of a healing inner resource

Several participants realised the discovery of an inner resource through writing, which became a source of strength and healing: “I feel very lucky to have found that resource inside myself, to write out of difficulty. Also very powerful that I can contain pain and name it. To know that from turmoil comes creation” (Nicola). Lisa found it better than any therapist in coming to terms with severe abuse: “writing has healed from the inside. I feel much stronger, when I write, my feelings of anger and hurt subside.”

Being able to draw on creative writing provided several people with an alternative to self-destructive behaviours, including drug abuse, self-harm, and suicidality. In some cases it was felt to have been a life-saver. Rory who had turned to using drugs following a serious

accident, reflected: “I am not even sure that I would have been able to beat my depression or addiction without having that creative outlet available to me. It is quite possible I would have succumbed to my suicidal feelings...I do honestly believe that my poetry has saved my life.” For Simone, a life without writing was unthinkable: “I wouldn’t be around. Writing is me, or has been me. It was the only way as a child to make sense of the mess. So I wouldn’t have a different life, I just wouldn’t be.”

4.2 Changes in identity/self-experience

Most participants linked their engagement in creative writing with positive changes in terms of the way they saw and experienced themselves. They noticed increased self-awareness, self-acceptance, self-confidence, and a sense of empowerment. For Bill, this involved a reframing of his personal qualities: “I have a very rich internal world, which used to bother me. Now I see it as a resource to draw on.” For Louise, creative writing enabled her to experience growth in the face of increasing physical pain and limitation: “This has given me confidence in myself when my body is letting me down my wit/intelligence is making up for it”. David experienced a radical transformation: “Writing is cathartic, painful, self exposing, communicative in fact all the antitheses which I had become before my breakdown, namely turgid, incapable of emotion, hidden and silent.”

4.3 Alters relationships with others

Relationships with others were often changed following engagement in creative writing. Being able to address sensitive and difficult issues in writing sometimes made it easier to seek support from others or address conflicts. However, this could also lead one not to seek others out: “In the past, I’ve written things down when a conversation would have

been better. I've learned that just because I deal better with words, doesn't mean everyone does" (Lara). Tracy acknowledged a danger of increasing isolation: "writing instead of speaking about problems could lead to isolating yourself, locking people out of your emotional life at times when perhaps you should be turning to them more openly with your distress or fears."

The decision to share the writing with others provided an opportunity to be heard and understood:

"I love it when it speaks to somebody other than me – that flash of communication is joyful. If people tell me they like something I've written, or they get it, or they felt that way too, or even that they remembered it – or it makes them laugh or cry – I feel like I've done something worthwhile. I love that." (Deborah)

"When you see the bitterness of my poem "Mummy" I hope you would, as others have, feel as though you were me the uncared for unprotected son. So my writing, though intensely personal, is, I hope, always fully communicative and accessible." (David)

Creative writing groups could also be a reparative environment:

"It was the camaraderie as much as the writing, being with people that understood this drive to write" (Maureen)

"It has made me trust people again, or some people anyway!" (Lisa)

This potential for communication and understanding went in both directions, with writers themselves experiencing a greater sense of empathy for others around them:

“It has given me a voice and enabled me to connect with other people who are perhaps still trapped within their own traumas and feeling isolated.” (Matthew)

“Through sharing others work, I can see the commonality of human suffering.” (Nicola)

However, not all reactions were positive:

“Some sites, including Survivor’s Poetry, have, in the past allowed almost little Hitler poet critics to tear apart someone’s very being.” (David)

The decision to publish was also fraught with risk:

“When I wrote the piece for [national newspaper], I was aware that I was consciously crossing a line, piercing an unseen barrier that lies between the inner world of emotions and ideas, and the outer world that engages with other people and their reflections on what you have written... In terms of potentially negative impacts, your thoughts and flaws and emotions are there for the reader to see. So you risk judgement, ridicule or re-opening old wounds.” (Matthew)

On the other hand, reaching a wider audience could also be validating and a marker of significant progress:

“having written at home for a few years (3 or 4, not entirely sure) I made, for me, a supreme effort and went along to a poetry group. As a result from the feedback I got there I entered a couple of competitions, both of which led to two poems being published in anthologies. From there on I found an inner confidence that I had never had before, not even as a child.” (Rory)

4.4 Widening horizons & opportunities

Creative writing gave many participants new opportunities and hope for the future. This took many forms including: broadening social circles through meeting like-minded people, branching out into other creative pursuits, finding ways to develop and share their writing skills, through courses, publishing and teaching, and even starting new writing-based careers.

“It was like rejoining the world, being with other people again, and I was so hungry for the learning experience and to improve my writing...It has become my new life, my ‘job’ and purpose in life.” (Maureen)

Discussion

The current study is the first to carry out an in-depth, participant-centred analysis of the subjective experience and understandings of individuals who had engaged in creative writing at times of personal difficulty, using first-hand, written accounts. It seems that creative writing in the context of adverse life experiences enabled people to regulate distress, gain insight and acceptance, and to connect in a more meaningful way themselves, others and the world around them. The account sheds light on some of the processes which may underlie the therapeutic benefits that have long been associated with creative writing, and suggests links with existing theories.

The changes experienced by the people who took part in this study map onto the domains associated with what has been termed post-traumatic growth (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004). Post-traumatic growth has “a quality of transformation, or a qualitative

change in functioning” and stems from the intense struggle to create meaning from events that are experienced as overwhelming and challenging and affect the individual on a deep personal level. It refers to “a change in people that goes beyond an ability to resist and not be damaged by highly stressful circumstances; it involves a movement beyond pretrauma levels of adaptation” (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004). This is different from concepts such as resilience and hardiness which imply that a person may go through life being relatively unaffected by negative events but not necessarily engage in any significant attempts to make meaning from them (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1995). Post-traumatic growth therefore arises out of some of the same paradoxes and complexities with which people who use creative writing at times of distress grapple: that strength may emerge from vulnerability, understanding be drawn from chaos, and growth follow from limitation and loss.

Post-traumatic growth can be obstructed by experiential avoidance, or the tendency to avoid engaging with internal thoughts, feelings and images (Kashdan & Kane, 2011). While this may occur as an attempt to protect the self from pain following a distressing experience, it can hinder the integration of experience and renegotiation of identity that is needed for emotional and psychological recovery. The formulation of the experience of creative writing shown here suggests that in enabling the processing of painful experiences through the lens of artistic form and structure, creative writing may obviate the need to fall back on experiential avoidance and so facilitate growth. The influence of creative writing over time reported by participants is supported by the five domains described in the literature on post-traumatic growth. They are: greater appreciation of life and a changed sense of priorities; a greater sense of personal strength; more meaningful relationships with others; recognition of new possibilities or path’s for one’s life; and spiritual development (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1996).

Clinical implications

The current study offers a phenomenological formulation of the participants' experiences as conveyed through their written accounts and does not constitute a theory nor provide a framework for how creative writing may best be used in therapy. Nevertheless, it suggests some implications for clinical practice. Du Plock (2005), in relation to bibliotherapy, cautioned against adopting a manualised or prescriptive approach, stating that emphasis should be placed on the way that clients themselves use books. In a similar fashion, given the variety of each participant's experiences of creative writing, this would seem good advice to bear in mind for any future "creative writing therapy". The results here do not suggest that creative writing is in anyway a panacea or appropriate for everyone; however, it does seem that for people who feel driven or willing to undertake a search for meaning in their experiences, it may offer a creative and fulfilling means of doing this. Even if emotional distress at times exceeds one's ability to engage in writing, pieces of writing from earlier times can be drawn on as a source of comfort and guidance, creating a connection with the self over time.

The results suggest that skill in creative writing, rather than being separate from therapeutic benefits, may actually promote them, by enabling the writer to create the meaning they are striving to communicate. In this sense referral to creative writing groups may be helpful for clients to gain facility in expressing themselves in this manner. With appropriate development and support, creative writing might usefully be offered as a waiting-list intervention, provided this did not negatively affect clients' eligibility for treatment and was not regarded merely as a cost-cutting tool. While the current study focused on coming to terms with life-changing events, participants' accounts suggest it

could be used as a preventative or salutogenic intervention. The very significant gains experienced by these participants in the absence of a therapist may point to the potential for creative writing to benefit people who might be less likely or able to gain access to traditional therapeutic services. Though further research is needed to clarify how it might be used within a therapeutic relationship, the conceptualisation provided brings us a step closer to evidence-based practice in this area and suggests several options for further research.

Limitations and directions for future research

The participants in this study were a self-selected sample of people who found benefit in creative writing. Most were female, had high levels of educational attainment, and the recruitment strategy may have made the selection of people with a professional interest more likely. Though there was some diversity in respect to nationality, future research could strive to include participants from a range of cultural, socio-economic, and educational backgrounds. Relying solely on the written accounts, while resulting in the gathering of many poignant and eloquent descriptions, also came with some limitations, including an inability to clarify ambiguous meanings or seek further detail. More flexible open-ended approaches like email interviewing might help to overcome these difficulties. The retrospective nature of the study may have meant that information relating to the process of writing was quickly lost over time, or subject to bias. Future studies could follow participants through the creation of a particular piece (or series of pieces) of writing, re-visiting it after a period of time to see how their perceptions of the piece or the life circumstance that inspired it had changed. The links between creative writing and post-traumatic growth also needs further exploration. To develop a more comprehensive theory of the therapeutic benefit of creative writing, future research might look at the

experiences of people who have not connected meaningfully with creative writing when in emotional distress, or who perhaps attempted to use it but found it not to be helpful. This would enrich our understanding of the barriers or difficulties associated with creative writing as a therapeutic activity and yield valuable information regarding the boundary conditions of its use.

Conclusion

The current study looked at the experiences of people who used creative writing at times of personal difficulty. Creative writing was deemed to have played an important and meaningful role in helping participants to integrate and move beyond difficult life experiences. Both the context and outcomes associated with participants' engagement in creative writing were strikingly similar to those described in the literature on post-traumatic growth. The processes through which these changes occurred warrant further study, and may represent a unique and transformative path through suffering in comparison with other more ordinary means of cognitive and emotional processing. As Rohman (1965) wrote paraphrasing the late novelist Dorothy Sayers:

“A writer is a man who not only suffers the impact of external events, but experiences them. He puts the experience into words in his own mind, and in so doing recognizes the experience for what it is. To the extent that we can do that, we are all writers. A writer is simply a man like ourselves with an exceptional power of revealing his experience by expressing it, first to himself, and then to others ...When an "event" is so recognized, it is converted from something happening to us into something happening in us...”

In turning to creative writing in times of adversity, we may knowingly or unknowingly set this transformation in motion, enabling us to emerge from the experience of difficulty, isolation and distress, towards integration, connection and growth.

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MICHELLE MCCARTNEY BSc Hons PGDip MSc

“When normal words just aren’t enough”:
The experience and significance of creative writing at times of
personal difficulty

Section C: Critical Appraisal

Word Count: 2000 (plus 209 additional words)

SALOMONS
CANTERBURY CHRIST CHURCH UNIVERSITY

Section C: Critical Appraisal

- 1. 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 was my first experience of using a phenomenological approach as a researcher. Using IPA with a larger sample is classified by Smith, Flowers and Larkin (2009) as a “bolder” design, and in conjunction with using written accounts, presented some challenges and learning opportunities. In contrast to my previous experience of using quantitative approaches, I was aware of a need to preserve rather than average out differences in the results, which I think gave me a greater sense of accountability to the individual participants and a need to produce an account that would reflect both individual voices and be relevant to the group as a whole. This created an iterative and dialectical flavour to the analysis (“To understand any given part, you look to the whole; to understand the whole, you look to the parts” - Smith, Flowers and Larkin (2009), p28) that felt appropriate and different from more linear, quantitative analysis. The analytic process was quite time-consuming though and didn’t seem to have a definite “end-point”. I had to trust my judgement that the account I had produced contained enough of the material the participants had entrusted to me. To become confident in the use of IPA, I would like to gain experience of a less “bold” more traditional, small-*n* design, to hone my ability to engage with the data at the depth that such an approach can afford.

During this project, I developed an awareness of my own subjectivity in relation to the research process. While I regard reflectiveness as an integral part of my clinical work, I had not formally acknowledged it as an ongoing part of psychological research. The use of creative writing at times of difficulty or distress was something of which I had

personal experience, so I needed to make some attempt to 'bracket' or make explicit my own assumptions and responses to the study questions before beginning the analysis. I found it helpful to refer to them later to tease out which areas might be more or less salient to me because of my own experience rather than their presence or absence in the data. For example, I would not have anticipated the role of social support to be so important as I couldn't recall having shared my own writing much, or been involved in creative writing groups, however seeing this was important for many of the participants, I was able to reflect on how I had grown from the support some significant people in my life had shown towards my use of creative writing.

I also needed to grapple with the concepts of the trustworthiness or validity in a different way than I might have in the context of a quantitative study. I drew on Yardley's (2000) quality assurance criteria as these were explored in relation to IPA by Smith, Flowers and Larkin (2009). While providing some good over-arching principles, they tended to lack concreteness and specificity. As a novice qualitative researcher, I might have benefited from the structure of the guidelines suggested by Elliott, Fischer and Rennie (1999), i.e.: owning one's perspective; situating the sample; grounding in examples; providing credibility checks; coherence; accomplishing general vs. specific research tasks; and resonating with readers. In respect of these, I could have situated the sample further by collecting information as to how people had come to hear about the study, as the high number of people who had used writing in their careers may have been an artefact of the recruitment strategy rather than a natural outgrowth of engaging with writing in this way. In terms of additional credibility checks, I could have conducted an audit of the study. Inviting a researcher who was not involved in the project to consider how my final report reflected the data that were collected and the analysis undertaken would have added to the credibility and plausibility of the account I offered.

2. If you were able to do this project again, what would you do differently and why?

At the outset I intended to use both written accounts (to be analysed thematically) followed by some interviews (to be analysed using IPA), the latter aiming to explore in depth any themes that emerged from the broader initial analysis of the written accounts. On the advice of the review panel, the two stages proposed were conflated resulting in a study that used IPA with a larger number of participants. While this was an interesting way to approach the data, it did present some drawbacks. Relying solely on the written accounts meant that I did not have the opportunity to clarify meaning or ask for further detail. If I were to use written accounts again, I would possibly employ an email interview approach as was used by Gilzean (2011). However, this would entail a more flexible, open-ended approach to data collection, which might not have been possible in the context of clinical training. In designing the study, I realise I made an assumption that people who engaged in creative writing would produce rich and extensive written accounts and this is something I would temper somewhat if doing the study again. While all participants expressed many aspects of their experience very poignantly and eloquently, nevertheless no one account gave a “complete” description of the process of writing, and it was a struggle to produce an overall formulation that was representative for the group. I was left wondering whether this was 1) due to the context of the experiences (e.g. being in a state of distress could reduce one’s awareness of the process, or being absorbed in writing might divert self-focussed attention); 2) the information sought reflected processes occurring outside consciousness and therefore were to some extent inaccessible, or 3) the information might have been in awareness immediately following the experience but faded over time; or a combination of all of the above. Or, given the importance of communication and being heard that emerged in the analysis,

perhaps the mode of producing a written account for an unknown researcher, rather than providing the reassurance of privacy and anonymity, might have lacked sufficient incentive or encouragement to produce a very lengthy or detailed account.

If I were doing the study again, I would offer to meet with participants in person; or, alter the time span for the research such that it was closer to the difficult experience; or, ask more focused questions rather than hoping that certain aspects would be mentioned spontaneously. Also, a large number of participants included samples of their work, in the form of poems, or links to websites where they had published stories or other pieces of writing. Not being able to open a dialogue with the author, I didn't feel able to incorporate or make assumptions about these in the analysis. I feel that this may have been a missed opportunity, as many of the samples were rich and very moving to read. If I were to do this project again, I would probably attempt to meet with the writers to discuss the work with them and following that, to include or make references to these pieces in some way.

3. *Clinically, as a consequence of doing this study, would you do anything differently and why?*

Individual therapy

If it were appropriate to the therapeutic work about to be undertaken, I would aim to pay closer attention in the assessment stage to the client's previous experience of creative activities and particularly their experience of writing, past and present. As some therapists do in relation to dreamwork, I might at this point extend the invitation to some clients to bring writing into the therapeutic relationship if they wished to. I would inform clients of the possible risks involved in creative writing, in the sense that difficult feelings may

be stirred up and the insights that arise may be unexpected or uncomfortable at times. I also would discuss with them beforehand how they would like me to receive the work, what kind of feedback they would like, whether they would like to focus on the content of the material or the process of creating it, etc. I would certainly consider suggesting it if: the therapeutic work seemed to have reached a “stuck” point; there were issues that the client felt unable or unwilling to talk about directly (for example, issues that evinced a sense of shame); or to explore feared or avoided ways of being or relating.

Organisational applications

The large demands on psychological services in the NHS at the moment mean that after people are referred, they may be seen relatively quickly for a screening assessment and then spend up to (or even over) a year languishing on waiting lists with no definite date for beginning therapy. A few participants cited this in relation to their decision to turn to creative writing. Whilst this provided them with a coping strategy, it also left them feeling unsupported in terms of services. With some further investigation or piloting, I would design a creative writing intervention that could be used by people on such waiting-lists, on an opt-in basis, though *only if it seemed appropriate based on the initial screening assessment*. Some therapeutic support could be offered if needed throughout this process, with clear boundaries in place for it to be effective. This could help some people begin to resolve their difficulties sooner, such that they might not need therapy, or if they did, it would at least provide a rich formulation for the therapist who may ultimately see them, which could inform and enrich the ensuing work.

Group interventions

With clients who show an interest in creative writing I would encourage them to consider joining creative writing groups but would also emphasise the importance of finding a

group of people whom they feel they can trust and to be aware there may be a risk of receiving unhelpful feedback. With research and training, I would like to facilitate a creative writing group with a therapeutic emphasis, or work with another professional, for example an occupational therapist, offering individual therapy to run alongside the group to maximise the therapeutic effects of both interventions.

Professional development

In terms of my own reflective practice, I would use creative writing to help me to deepen my understanding of clients and particularly to gain more insight into the therapeutic process once it has begun. In terms of self-care, I am hoping to reintroduce it into my life. In the future when I am more experienced in drawing on writing as a tool for reflective practice, I might also consider introducing it to supervisees.

4. *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?*

I would like to use the conceptual model I developed as a starting point to build a theory of the therapeutic benefits of creative writing. To do so I would probably use grounded theory and employ a mixed-method approach, potentially drawing on both quantitative and qualitative methods of data collection and analysis, and triangulating verbal and written data. Given the difficulties with retrospective accounts highlighted above, I would aim to get a picture of how the process of writing is experienced not in hindsight but as near as possible to the time it actually happens. Perhaps the study could follow participants through the creation of a particular piece of writing, re-visiting it after a period of time to see how their perceptions of the piece or the life circumstance that inspired it had changed. Or, ideally, I would like to follow participants through the

creation of several pieces, to gain a more in-depth understanding of the dynamics that might shape the creation of a poem for example versus a story, and a sense of how time spent in different phases of the process influenced their experience of this. In the studies Alice Brand carried out on the experience of creative writing amongst student and professional writers using an experience sampling methodology (Brand, 1986, 1988), a specific questionnaire was designed with writers' experiences in mind. It might be possible to design a similar questionnaire based on the aspects of experiences highlighted in this study (with an additional focus group). Alternatively as a questionnaire might intrude too much on their writing process, perhaps asking participants to keep a reflective diary alongside their work might yield richer and more useful data.

Given the suggestion from the current study that creative writing may facilitate post-traumatic growth, which may be moderated by experiential avoidance, I would also aim to gather some information about participants' coping styles, to strengthen or guide inferences that might be drawn about whom creative writing may benefit. In terms of diversity, I would be more systematic in striving to include participants from a range of cultural, socio-economic, and educational backgrounds. As few negative effects of creative writing were reported in the current study, I would deliberately seek out participants who had perhaps tried and decided not to persevere with creative writing, or who perhaps would not consider writing at all, in order both to extend or gather disconfirming evidence for the emergent theory, and to enrich our understanding of the barriers or difficulties associated with creative writing as a therapeutic activity. Particular thought would need to be given from an ethical point of view if distressed individuals writing independently were the focus, for example ensuring participants have access to therapeutic support if needed. Alternatively, people participating in existing creative writing groups with established contacts for support could be approached to participate.

This might be easier to set up from a practical point of view but would also carry the “confound” of group support.

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Section D: Supporting Materials

APPENDIX I – LITERATURE SEARCH STRATEGY

APPENDIX II – LETTER OF ETHICAL APPROVAL

APPENDIX III – ADVERTISEMENT FOR THE STUDY

APPENDIX IV – INFORMATION FOR PARTICIPANTS
(WEBSITE SCREENSHOTS)

APPENDIX V – WRITTEN ACCOUNT INSTRUCTIONS

APPENDIX VI – PARTICIPANT INFORMATION SUMMARY

APPENDIX VII – MASTER TABLE OF RECURRENT THEMES FOR THE GROUP

APPENDIX VIII – EXAMPLE TRANSCRIPT

APPENDIX IX – EXCERPTS FROM RESEARCH DIARY

APPENDIX X – STUDY COMPLETION LETTER

APPENDIX XI – GUIDELINES FOR PUBLICATION

Appendix I: Literature search strategy

A search of electronic databases using keyword terms was carried out to identify relevant publications within the Cochrane Library; Medline; PsycINFO; CINAHL; and the Web of Knowledge (all databases). Further searches were conducted using Google Scholar. The resulting articles were screened on the basis of abstracts. Studies were included if they focused specifically on the formal or informal therapeutic use of creative writing by adults (aged 18 or older). Studies that focused solely on expressive writing, writing for professional development or as a research method were excluded. Reference lists of all publications found meeting these criteria were hand-searched to identify other relevant studies. Some unpublished theses were also consulted (Nelson, 2005; Maltby, 2008). Searches in 5 databases were re-run until Week 2 June 2011 using the following terms:

1. The Cochrane Library

Creative writing
Poetry
Therapeutic writing
Writing therapy
Writing

2. CINAHL (1981-2011) and 3. Web of Knowledge (1981-2011)

Creative writing
Poetry
Therapeutic writing
Writing therapy

Results limited to English-language and “all adult (19 plus years)”

3. PsycINFO (1806-2011) and 5. MEDLINE (1948-2011)

Primary keywords:	Combined with:	Or:
<i>Creative writing</i>	<i>Therapy</i>	<i>Adversity</i>
<i>Creative writ\$</i>	<i>Therapeutic</i>	<i>Adaptation</i>
<i>Poetry</i>	<i>Intervention</i>	<i>Life events</i>
<i>Poe\$</i>	<i>Health</i>	<i>Trauma</i>
<i>Writing</i>	<i>Healing</i>	<i>Stress</i>
<i>Writ\$</i>	<i>Well-being</i>	<i>Distress</i>
	<i>Self-healing</i>	<i>Mental health</i>
	<i>Self-help</i>	<i>Mental disorder</i>
	<i>Coping</i>	
	<i>Recovery</i>	
	<i>Resilience</i>	
	<i>Meaning-making</i>	

To identify relevant research studies, results were narrowed using the following terms:

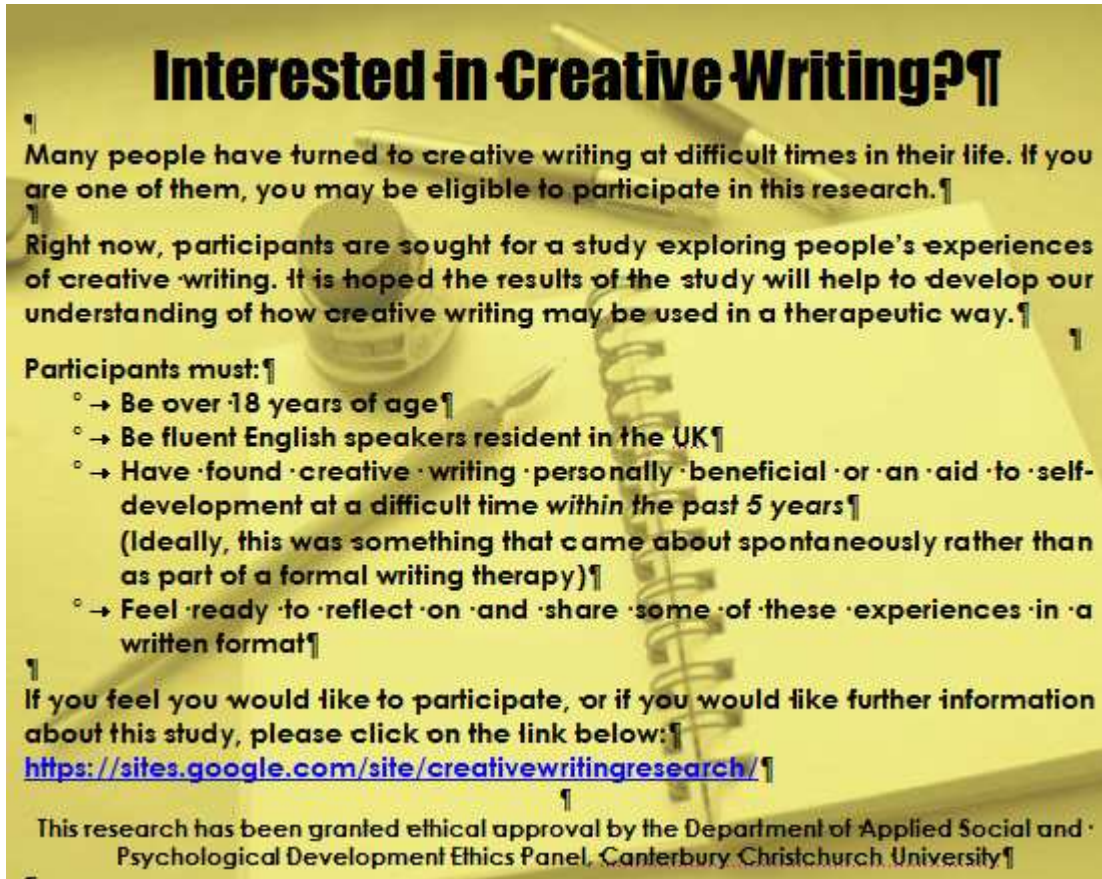
Qualitative research	Quantitative research
<i>((Patient/ Client/ Service user/ Personal/ Subjective) and (Accounts/ Perspectives/ Meaning/ Impact/ Experiences)) Phenomenology Phenomenolog\$ Qualitative Experiential</i>	<i>Outcome evaluation Effectiveness Quantitative Meta-analysis Systematic review</i>

Results were limited to English-language, peer-reviewed publications.

Appendix II: Letter of ethical approval

This has been removed from the electronic copy.

Appendix III: Advertisement for the study



Interested in Creative Writing?

Many people have turned to creative writing at difficult times in their life. If you are one of them, you may be eligible to participate in this research.

Right now, participants are sought for a study exploring people's experiences of creative writing. It is hoped the results of the study will help to develop our understanding of how creative writing may be used in a therapeutic way.

Participants must:

- Be over 18 years of age
- Be fluent English speakers resident in the UK
- Have found creative writing personally beneficial or an aid to self-development at a difficult time *within the past 5 years* (Ideally, this was something that came about spontaneously rather than as part of a formal writing therapy)
- Feel ready to reflect on and share some of these experiences in a written format

If you feel you would like to participate, or if you would like further information about this study, please click on the link below:

<https://sites.google.com/site/creativewritingresearch/>

This research has been granted ethical approval by the Department of Applied Social and Psychological Development Ethics Panel, Canterbury Christchurch University

Appendix IV: Participant information (Website screenshots)



About the Study

Project title: **The Experience and Significance of Creative Writing at Times of Difficulty or Distress**

This study will be looking at the experiences of people who have used creative writing at a significant or difficult time in their lives. I am interested to hear how people have come to use creative writing, whether it has been helpful or unhelpful to them, and in what ways. I hope that the findings from this study will contribute to developing a better understanding of how creative writing can be used for therapeutic or self-help purposes.

Why have I been invited to take part?

If you have used creative writing for personal benefit or development *within the past 5 years* and are willing to reflect on and share some of your experiences, I feel that you would be able to make an important contribution to this study. Ideally, you would have engaged in this writing spontaneously rather than as part of a structured writing therapy. To participate, you must also be over the age of 18, a fluent English speaker and be resident within the UK.

What happens if I decide to take part?

If you decide to take part in the study, I will ask you to write your responses to some questions about your experiences of creative writing. I will ask for some background information (e.g. gender, level of writing experience) so that I can accurately describe the general characteristics of the group of people who participate in the study. I will also ask if you would be prepared to be interviewed to further discuss these experiences. If you would, I or a colleague may contact you at a later date to arrange a meeting.

What are the possible advantages of taking part?

Taking the opportunity to reflect on your use of creative writing could be a beneficial and interesting experience. As it involves self-reflection, it may be therapeutic in some way. If you would like, when the study is completed I will let you know of the results. You may find it interesting to see how you and others like you have found creative writing to be helpful in your life. In the broader sense, your participation will help to develop our understanding of how creative writing may be used in a therapeutic way.

What are the possible disadvantages of taking part?

Writing or talking about your experience of creative writing at a significant or difficult time in your life might put you into contact with some previously difficult experiences and thus could be upsetting. Please note that you are free to withdraw from the study at any time if you do not wish it to continue. If you do experience distress while taking part in this study, and feel in need of further support, please contact your GP who may be able to arrange a referral. I will be available throughout the study to discuss about any questions you might have. You can email me at: creativewritingirp@googlemail.com.

If I want to take part, what will happen next?

If you decide you want to take part in this study, please download the word document on the [next page](#). There you will find details about how to email or post your responses. If you would be willing to be interviewed, please include an email address or mobile telephone number at which I can contact you. Your name or any contact details will not be stored with your written account or on any interview transcript.

Thank you for reading this information, and if possible, participating in the study. Please do not hesitate to contact me if you need any further information.

Yours sincerely,

Michelle McCartney (Trainee Clinical Psychologist)

Canterbury Christchurch University, UK

- ▼ [Home](#)
- [About the Study](#)
- [Taking Part](#)** →
- [The Next Steps](#)
- [Sitemap](#)

[Home](#) >


Taking Part

If you are interested in taking part, please download and save the document below. When you have completed your responses, please return them by email to: creativewritingirp@gmail.com

Alternatively, if you prefer to use longhand, please print the document below and return your responses to:

Michelle McCartney
c/o Salomons Clinical Psychology Training Programme
Broomhill Road
Tunbridge Wells
Kent
TN3 0TG

Attachments (1)

 [Creative Writing Research Questions.doc](#) - on 13 Feb 2010 05:27 by Michelle McCartney (version 1)
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The Next Steps

Thank you for your interest in this study. I will post the results on this webpage once they are available. In the meantime if you have any questions, please feel free to contact me at the following email address: creativewritingirp@googlemail.com. I look forward to hearing from you.

Appendix V: Written account instructions

PLEASE NOTE: *By beginning your written account, you acknowledge that you have read this information and agree to participate in this research, with the knowledge that you are free to withdraw your participation at any time before the final report is submitted.*

Background information

GENDER :	Female Male	<input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/>	EDUCATION LEVEL <i>(please tick all that apply)</i> : Primary school education GCSE Level education (eg GCSE, O-Levels or Standards) A-Level education (eg A, AS, S-Levels, Highers) Vocational education (eg NVQ, HNC, HND) Some undergraduate education Degree or graduate education (eg BSc, BA) Post-graduate education (eg PhD, MSc, MA) Other (please specify) : _____	<input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/>
AGE:	18-25 26-35 36-45 46-55 56-65 65+	<input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/>		
<i>What experience do you have with creative writing? (please tick all that apply)</i>			<i>What kinds of pieces do you write? (please tick all that apply)</i>	
I do it as an occasional activity It's a hobby I did it in school I have attended courses/workshops I have published pieces of my writing I participate in writing forums online I'm a member of a writing group Other (please specify): _____			Poems Short-stories Novels Plays Screenplays Creative non-fiction Other (please specify): _____	
<i>For how long have you engaged in creative writing?</i>			<i>How often do you write creatively?</i> _____	
0-5 Years 6-10 Years 11-15 Years 16-20 Years 20+ Years			<input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/>	

Instructions

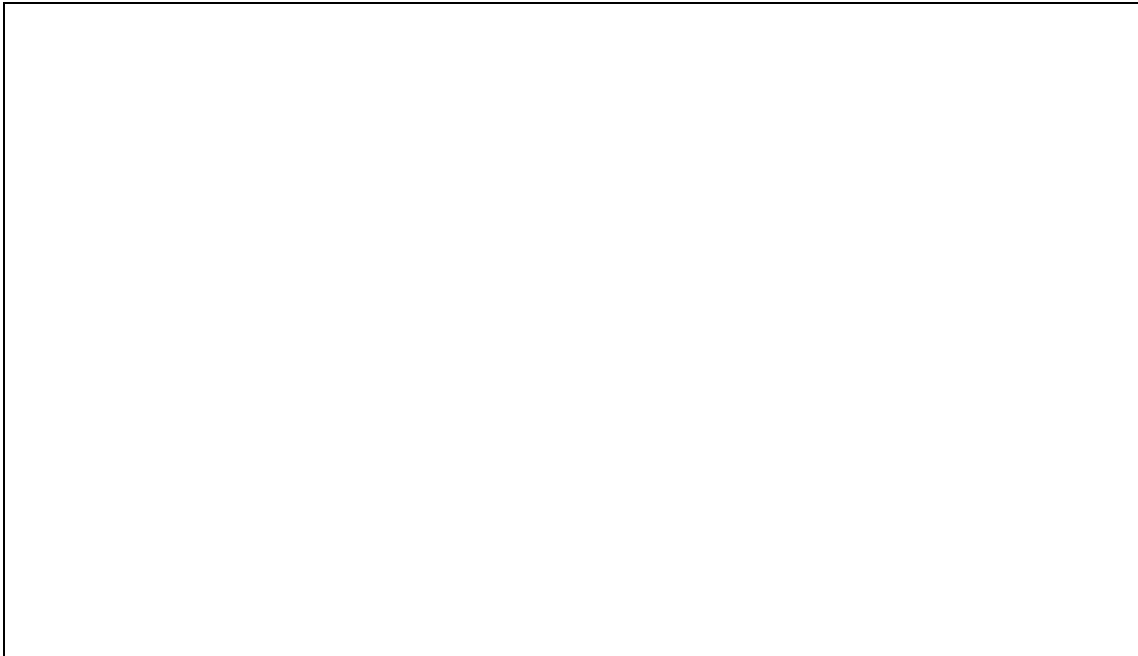
Please write, in as much detail as you feel able to, your responses to the questions below. Remember there are no right or wrong responses – what I would like to know about is your own experiences of writing. Write as openly and freely as you feel comfortable with, and try to give examples from your experience wherever possible. The spaces below are intended only as a guide; please continue on additional pages if you feel you would like to do so.

1. How did you come to start writing creatively?

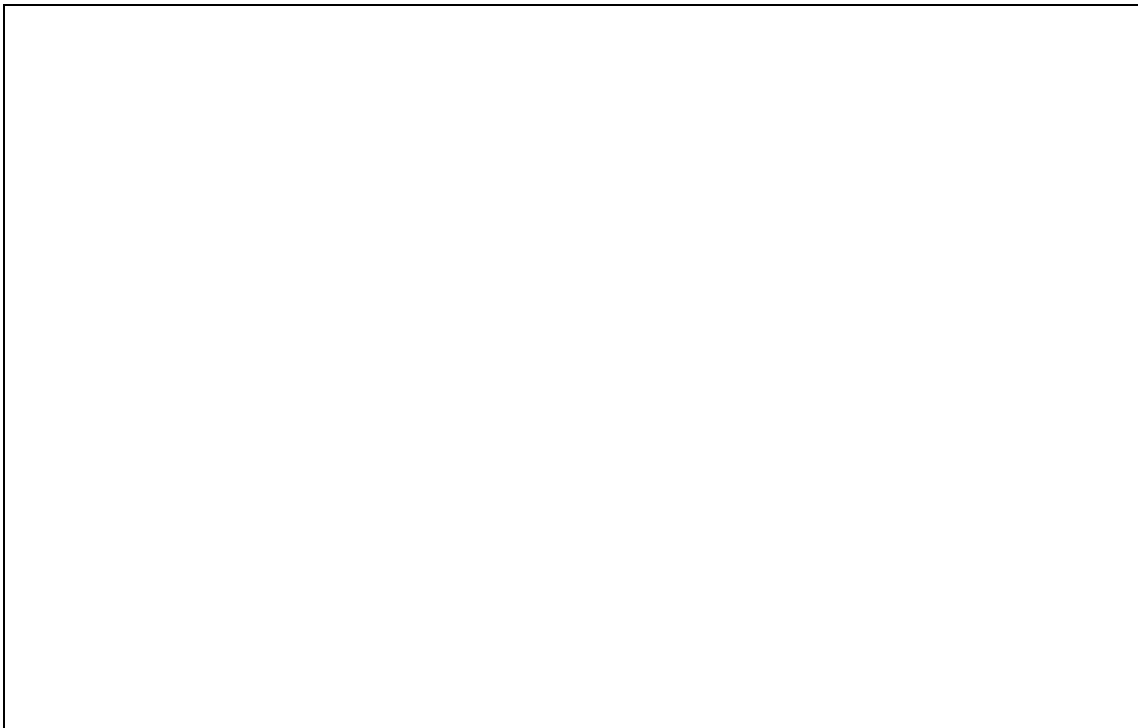
2. What first led you to use creative writing at a difficult time in your life? *(in your response please say what the life experience was that prompted you to write at that time)*

3. Please tell me a bit about a piece you wrote that had particular personal significance for you. *If you would like, feel free to include an example of your writing with your response.*

4. In the context of a difficult time in your life, try to recall some of your experiences of the writing process itself. With a particular occasion (or occasions) in mind, can you describe for me in as much detail as possible: *what happened from before you started writing until you were finished? What kinds of feelings or thoughts did you have?*



5. Reflecting on your experiences as a whole, what has being able to use creative writing at a difficult time in your life meant to you? *(feel free to bring in any aspects of your experiences, whether positive or negative, that have been significant)*



6. Imagine for a moment that you had never written creatively. In what ways would your life be different do you think? In what ways would you yourself be different? Would it alter the way you experience times of difficulty or distress?

7. Are there any other aspects of your experience you would like to describe?

✂ ✂ ✂ ✂ ✂ ✂ ✂ ✂ ✂ ✂ ✂ ✂

Finally, would you be willing to be interviewed further about your experience of creative writing?

Yes No

If yes, please leave your contact details below:

THANK YOU FOR PARTICIPATING

Appendix VI: Participant information summary

Respondent #	Name*	Sex	Education	Exposure to creative writing								Forms of writing used							Length of experience					Frequency	Difficult Experiences	
				Occasional activity	Hobby	School	Courses/workshops	Published pieces	Online forums	Writing group	Other	Poetry	Short-stories	Novel(s)	Plays	Screenplay	Creative non-fiction	Other	0-5 years	6-10 years	11-15 years	16-20 years	20+ years			
P1	Nicola	F	Undergrad				•					•	•										•	Every day	Affair; 'some kind of breakdown'	
P2	Louise	F	Vocational				•	•	•	•			•										•	Every other day	Illness	
P3	Lisa	F	Primary	•	•			•				•	•										•	Every week	Sexual abuse	
P4	Grace	F	Postgrad	•		•	•					•											•	x2-3 journalling	Difficult relationship with parent; subsequently, r/s break-ups	
P5	Joanne	F	Postgrad	•	•	•	•					•	•										•	At least weekly	Divorce & depression	
P6	David	M	Undergrad		•	•	•	•	•			•	•										•	Depends	Breakdown ~ childhood abuse; manic depression	
P7	Monique	F	Postgrad			•		•				•										•	Weekly	Started at positive time; used to address difficult issues		
P8	Bill	M	Postgrad				•	•	•	•			•										•	Weekly	Moving; difficult marriage	
P9	Barbara	F	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	•	•										--	--	--	Illness
P10	Deborah	F	Postgrad	•	•		•	•				•	•	•	•	•						•	At least weekly	Relationship break-up; unhappiness at work & home		
P11	Tracy	F	Undergrad	•			•					•	•										•	Every 3mths	Injury – off work; bereavement	
P12	Rory	M	A-level		•		•		•			•	•										•	Daily	Addiction & depression following accident	
P13	Lara	F	Graduate		•	•	•	•	•			•											•	Daily	Always; recent; family illness; f/s diffs	
P14	Helen	F	Postgrad	•	•		•	•	•	•		•											•	Monthly	Childhood abuse & neglect; abusive r/s	
P15	Kathy	F	Postgrad			•	•	•				•	•	•	•								•	>x3/week	'Stifling environment'; illness; later, partner's mental health; no job	
P16	Maureen	F	Postgrad				•	•				•	•	•	•								•	x3-4/week	Illness; mood diffs; r/s end; family diffs; bereavement; job loss	
P17	Matthew	M	Undergrad				•	•				•	•										•	Every week	Isolated, depression, bereavement	
P18	Alison	F	Postgrad		•	•	•					•											•	Daily	Break-up of abusive r/s	
P19	Rachel	F	Undergrad	•	•	•	•	•				•	•										•	Daily-fortnight	Depression ~ r/s end; transitions	
P20	Simone	F	Postgrad		•	•	•							•	•	•							•	Monthly	Family difficulties; later, accident	
P21	Sam	M	Graduate	•								•	•										•	Weekly	Mental health issues	

Participants per age range	26-35 years	2	36-45 years	7	46-55 years	7	56-65 years	3	65+	1	DK	1
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Appendix VII: Master table of recurrent themes for the group

1. Struggle with a difficult experience	Code	P1	P2	P3	P4	P5	P6	P7	P8	P9	P10	P11	P12	P13	P14	P15	P16	P17	P18	P19	P20	P21	Tot
Life-altering & challenging circumstance	1.1	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	21
Evokes intense feelings & thoughts	1.2	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	21
Lost or lacking support	1.3	•			•	•	•		•		•	•			•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	15
Need for an outlet	1.4	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	21
2. Turning to creative writing																							
Had encountered it before	2.1		•		•	•	•	•	•		•	•		•	•	•		•	•	•	•		15
Fits with personal values	2.2		•		•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	19
Inspired or encouraged by another	2.3				•	•	•			•	•		•			•	•	•	•	•	•	•	13
Started spontaneously	2.4	•	•						•	•			•	•	•		•	•	•				10
Being available to the process	2.5	•				•	•		•				•		•	•	•		•	•	•		11
3. Dealing with it 'as a matter of words'																							
<i>Phases of engagement</i>																							
Writing: engaging and articulating	3.1	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	21
Reviewing: reading and interpreting	3.2	•			•	•	•	•	•	•	•		•	•		•	•		•	•	•	•	16
Exploring: generating and linking	3.3	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	21
Shaping: 'finding the right words'	3.4	•	•		•		•	•			•		•	•		•	•				•		11
<i>Emergent processes</i>																							
Connecting to and releasing emotions	3.5	•	•	•		•	•	•	•	•	•		•	•		•	•		•		•	•	16
Immersion and enjoyment	3.6	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	21
Sense of safety and containment	3.7	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	21
Transforming or detoxifying experience	3.8	•	•		•	•	•		•		•		•	•	•	•	•	•	•		•	•	16
Discovering meaning	3.9	•	•		•	•	•	•	•		•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	19
Coming to terms	3.10	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•		•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•			18
Shift in mood	3.11	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•		•	•	•	•	•		•	•	•	•	19
Speeds working through	3.12		•		•	•	•			•		•	•	•	•					•		•	11
4. Rejoining the world																							
Discovery of an inner resource	4.1	•	•	•	•	•		•		•	•		•		•		•		•	•	•	•	15
Changes in identity/self-experience	4.2	•	•	•		•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•		•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	19
Alters relationships with others	4.3	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•		•	•	•	•		•	•	19
Widening horizons & opportunities	4.4	•	•			•		•	•	•	•		•		•		•	•		•	•	•	14

Appendix VIII: Example transcript

This has been removed from the electronic copy.

Appendix IX: Excerpts from research diary

Oct 2009

Just passed the review panel and have been given approval to conduct the study (pending ethics). Feel quite a bit clearer in my thinking now about the project, about why I'm taking a phenomenological approach over grounded theory, for example, and more aware of what I can (or can't) realistically achieve in a study of this size. One of the recommendations was to drop the interviews and just stick to written accounts as I can't predict in advance what I might want to explore further, which might delay getting through ethics. I'm a bit disappointed about this and feeling somewhat unsure about the idea of relying solely on written accounts. As I haven't used IPA before, I'm also not sure about using it with a large sample, but I'm intrigued by the idea of being able to get closer to or "dwell in" the data more than one might if using thematic analysis. I've found a reference for a study published by Smith 1997 where he used IPA with a larger sample so I am going to draw on that. It involves identifying one or two key themes and using that as a reference point to reflect on the experiences of the whole group. Hopefully this will make navigating many accounts easier.

Nov 2009

I've consulted with the members of SAGE who expressed an interest in the study and some of the feedback they provided was very helpful. Three out of four of them had written poems when they were going through difficult times and found it helped them. It was really interesting to hear about other people's experiences of this and encouraging that they felt it was a worthwhile area to research. One person did express the view that using solely written accounts might exclude people who for example could write poems but who otherwise mightn't feel confident expressing themselves through writing. I think it is a valid point, and something I will acknowledge as a limitation of the study. I guess because it is qualitative though I am not aiming (nor claiming) to represent everyone's experience. Maybe it highlights a difficulty associated with taking a phenomenological approach to this topic, as it requires a lot of self-awareness as well the ability to articulate it in quite a detailed way; on top of that this is to be done through the written word. Thought about this way, I realise I am asking quite a lot of my participants.

December 2009

Had a helpful discussion in supervision and am thinking it's important I bracket my own assumptions at this point about what might emerge in the data by writing a written account of my own. Filling in the questionnaire, I found that the main significance creative writing had for me at a difficult time in my life related to: being able to discharge or express emotions; to free/give myself space from a problem by relating to it as a metaphor; restoring a sense of control from being able to craft words or the plot of a story; and a feeling afterwards of being "human" again, if previously overwhelmed. I found it difficult to remember how I felt while actually writing, though I suppose that is to be expected given that it's been a good 10-15 years since I used writing in this way. I'm hoping that the time frame in this study, e.g. up to 5 years, will provide participants with enough distance from the distressing experience to feel able to reflect on it, yet not so much that the memory of their experience of writing is lost.

May 2010

The recruitment process has gone pretty smoothly. I was worried that advertising through websites/newsletters and not offering any incentive might mean no one would respond, but in fact the accounts have come in steadily. I've also had some people ask if they can mention the study to their friends, writing group or post something about it on their blog, etc. This is quite validating, in that the study seems to have relevance for the people it is aimed at and they are keen to share their experiences...

Dec 2010

Noticing that many participants have included pieces of their writing – mostly poems – I feel very privileged to be able to read them but I'm not sure whether to incorporate them in the analysis or not. I don't know after all whether any of these pieces may be published elsewhere – if so to quote them might compromise confidentiality. I also don't want to get into an analytic/'literary criticism' type reading of the work. I'm regretting not having done interviews as I might be more able to explore on a one-to-one the personal meaning of a piece or how it might be understood from the point of view of the rest of the account. As it stands though I think I will stick to analysing the narrative of the written accounts, but perhaps this is something I can return to later.

Dec 2010

Just reading the accounts and am struck by the number of people mentioning involvement in writing groups etc – I think I'm surprised because for me creative writing has been quite a private activity, and I don't know how I would feel about writing more 'publicly'...yet it has got me thinking about different teachers I had and the course I went on as a teenager, and how important it was to have that support. I guess it is fundamentally a very relational, communicative act. There is something about how it helps to bring us back to other people...

Jan 2011

Coding the data. There are many different stories, many recurring themes, yet I'm not sure what unifies them. In background reading I've come across several models of creativity or creative writing in general, stage theories and the like, but they don't seem to capture much about the lived experience. I need to think more about what is special/distinctive about writing through difficulties that is different from creative writing as a hobby/creativity in general...

Have 20+ accounts now. The suggestion of subdividing them by specific life experiences seems artificial as the significance of the writing seems to transcend discrete events – it's about selfhood, being, existence, identity, life, living... so I am going to proceed with analysing them as a whole group. The extent to which people answer different questions varies. Perhaps I need to take a closer look at what people are not saying/what's missing?

Jan 2011

Trying to do the analysis as Smith et al 1997 recommend – ie to pick out one or two major themes across the group and present the analysis around those. If I'm trying to pin it down to one or two key themes, they need to be very broad, high level categories...Something about movement between states/worlds or a sort of doorway

image comes to mind. Writing enables people to move between the internal world and the outer world, between closeness and distance, between “reality” and imagination...the accounts seem full of potential dialecticals, and yet it seems that there is a temporal process or narrative in there as well, a way through, that unfolds in the midst of these dualities. Sort of like an archetypal plot or a kind of journey, in which a barrier or a limit is imposed and overcome, through turning away from the world one knows and, having changed, being able to reconnect to it...

Jan 2011

Am thinking of having “Connection” as a main theme, as a lot of the material seems to relate to states of disconnection or reconnection, the connection to the self, or others, etc. but I’m not sure that it captures enough of the material.

Feb 2011

Still struggling with the analysis. If I stay at the group level, there is a danger of being too abstract/conceptual and the results reading like a thematic analysis, but when delve into individual stories it becomes difficult to hold in mind all the other accounts...I’ve referred to Smith 2009 and actually the way he describes using IPA to analyse larger samples is different from how he originally suggested in an earlier IPA textbook and the 1997 study. In fact I don’t need to focus on one theme but can extract themes in the same way as one would with smaller samples, but having clear criteria as to how they salient they are for the group. He recommends looking at and representing the data in different ways e.g. using diagrams or tables, to help make the information more manageable.

I’ve done mini-maps of the keywords coming up in each participant’s account and put them on a sheet of A2 in order to see them altogether. It helps as having it externalised; being able to see it in front of me makes it easier for me to take it in again and reconfigure it. I’ve highlighted words that crop up in several accounts, and from that I’ve made a list of similar themes. This feels like a way forward and enables me to encapsulate much more of the data. Have four general areas now: 1. something happens in the outside world that threatens or limits the self/triggers retreat; 2. need or pressure to express; 3. forging a connection with the self, a number of things happen; 4. new opportunities created by reconnecting with the outside world.

March 2011

I have ended up moving backwards and forwards between 2 foci (group v individual levels) in order to retain the individuality of the respondents but also to try to capture something of an experience that also holds true for the group. Re-reading the introduction to the Smith book and came across the idea of the hermeneutic circle – ie one understands the whole in reference to the individual parts and understands the individual parts by reference to the whole. Seems to seem to fit with / crystallise something I had been doing intuitively. Maybe there is a parallel process here with the process of understanding generated in creative writing itself.

Have put the themes I’ve got into table form and used simple counts to determine which ones to include and which to either exclude or subsume into other categories.

May 2011

I'm reviewing the accounts/transcripts and noticing something of a lack of direct answers to Q3, even though the writing process is mentioned throughout the accounts. I can't work out if this represents a "thinness" in the accounts themselves or perhaps reflects something of the ineffability of the writing process... Perhaps it is enough for a process to have occurred at an unconscious level rather than the level of consciousness, and that this is the essential and important difference between expressive and creative writing, this is the difference between "mystery" and "mastery" (Wright)...?

June 2011

Reading about links between negative affectivity and creativity – reflective rumination seems to be the key – so the neurotic/tortured artist of stereotype may be creative but not because of being distressed but because of self-scrutiny/introspection it evokes which if it's too negative will lead to depression but depression doesn't 'cause' creativity – again this idea of the quality of attention to one's experience that affects whether one can express oneself creatively or write reflectively! Link with MMs lecture on attention and thesis and of course mindfulness. So, not a prerequisite for creativity – which also links nicely with expressive writing literature as may help reflection but not necessarily – some people may use it to ruminate – should probably map this out in some way – could this also link with the internal critic – is this self-focused attention gone wrong – ways that the various interventions try to get around this e.g. expressive writing, write continuously etc and creative writing leave editing til afterwards etc... Also links with participants comments re sense of humour returning – antithetical to depressed state.

I've also included a new theme – 'turning to creative writing' – as I feel that I had left out how people came to writing – a large proportion had prior experience of it and I think this is an important thing to note. There is something potentially very comforting about returning to something associated with a less troubled time. Does this mean that people who don't have good experiences of writing may not be able to draw on it at times of distress? I think this is an interesting question but probably not going to be answered by my study. Maybe in a grounded theory piece of research?

June 2011

Again looking at the analysis. Re theme 3 - I'm a bit confused as to whether what I've captured makes sense as a description of the experience. It still feels a little muddled, as though I'm trying to make the subthemes line up in a linear way when there is more than one centre of gravity in this area of the data.

It seems some of the subthemes relate to things the writer does versus the effects that this has on the person. I've tried to map it out using some diagrams. But that's not quite right either. I've also tried drawing out stages of the writing process to try and give a clue as to what might be happening when. Two things seem really key – when writing, one has very limited ability to think about anything except the words one is writing, so it is inherently absorbing and focuses one's concentration or attention. On the other hand, there is also something very important about being able to re-view the material on the page; here there seems to be a kind of apprehension/comprehension going on...in fact there seem to be several kinds of thinking happening in the creative writing process as a whole – the engaged oneness of writing, the imaginative

exploring, reading the externalised text, and shaping the text to a more literary or aesthetic style. If I take those processes, overlapping and non linear as they may be, and then think about the effects of writing, as emergent properties or by-products, theme 3 starts to make a lot more sense.

Appendix X: Study completion letter

Dr Margie Callanan
Consultant Clinical Psychologist
Chair, Ethics Panel
Director of Practice Consultancy and Development Programmes
Salomons

Dear Dr Callanan,

Original study title: The experience and significance of creative writing at times of difficulty and distress

I am writing to inform you that this study has now been completed and the dissertation is in the process of being submitted. I am including a brief summary of the findings below. Please do not hesitate to contact me if you would like any further information.

Kind regards,

Michelle McCartney.

Title. “When normal words just aren’t enough”: The experience and significance of creative writing at times of personal difficulty.

Aim. The aim of this phenomenological study was to explore the experience and significance of creative writing at times of personal difficulty.

Method. Twenty one people who had personal experience of creative writing in the context of difficult life experiences submitted written accounts. These were analysed using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) (Smith, Larkin & Flowers, 2009).

Results. Four main themes were identified: 1) Struggle with a difficult experience, 2) Turning to creative writing, 3) Dealing with it ‘as a matter of words’ and 4) Rejoining the world. A conceptual model illustrating how these master themes are related was presented. The findings were discussed in relation to the model of post-traumatic growth proposed by Tedeschi and Calhoun (2004).

Conclusion. Creative writing was deemed to have played an important and meaningful role in helping participants to integrate and move beyond difficult life experiences. Limitations and clinical implications of the study were discussed and suggestions were made for future research.

Appendix XI: Guidelines for publication



THE ARTS IN PSYCHOTHERAPY

AUTHOR INFORMATION PACK

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The Arts in Psychotherapy publishes 5 issues per annum, and is an international journal for professionals in the fields of mental health and education. The journal publishes peer-reviewed articles (including illustrations) by art, dance/movement, drama, music, and poetry psychotherapists, as well as psychiatrists, psychologists and creative arts therapists, that reflect the theory and practice of these disciplines. There are no restrictions on philosophical orientation or application.

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