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ABSTRACT

In this paper I outline a grounded theory of psychological wellbeing in creative writing. Building from this theory, I offer an interdisciplinary tool for facilitators and educators in the broad field of writing and wellbeing: The WRITE Model. In doing so, I address a paucity of psychological studies into the wellbeing-promoting processes inherent to creative writing, beyond the now well-trodden paradigm known as expressive writing. Following a number of inductive qualitative interviews with creative writers (n = 14), I defined four conceptual categories: creative writing as (1) Owning experience, (2) Valuing the self, (3) Sharing experience and (4) Transcending the self; the core category was Becoming more. My aim in the present article is to provide both a theoretical discussion of this data and to impart a practical framework for researchers, facilitators and educators. Therefore, the theoretical categories are rendered here as four applied processes, each contributing to a central core process. The four processes are: Working with and Regarding personal material, as well as Transmitting this material and Engaging beyond the self. Each of these processes, according to the theory, contributes to a core process of Identity constructing. Implications and limitations are discussed.

KEYWORDS

Expressive writing, creativity, creative writing, positive writing, positive humanities, positive psychology, well-being, grounded theory, qualitative research.

NOTES FROM THE AUTHOR

Although this is the first time this data has been presented in full, early conclusions from this study were shared in the following published chapter: Hayes, M. C. (2019) 'Worded Selves' in Çakırtaş, Ö (ed.) Literature and Psychology: Writing, Trauma and the Self. Cambridge Scholars Publishing.

A fuller explication of The WRITE Model—aimed at facilitators and educators—is available as a PDF guide at: www.positivejournal.org/write.

Why do we writers write? What does writing offer the individual—beyond the allure of prizes and accolades? What compels us to pen a novel or memoir or poetry collection, when the reality of producing such artefacts is often laborious and (at least materially) thankless? Might it be that storying our experience is to humans what flowering is to the rose bush: innate, inevitable when conditions are right, and part of becoming who—and what—we are? This article will attempt to make a compelling case for this, detailing the results of a qualitative research study with fourteen practising writers— challenging the paucity of scientific research into creative writing interventions compared to the prominent expressive writing paradigm. While my contention here is not strictly brand new—i.e. that the practice of creative writing can contribute to psychological wellbeing—I take an inductive approach and aim to translate this varied and complex process into a practical tool for researchers, facilitators and educators. Drawing upon qualitative data in the form of interviews with practising writers, I propose a nascent framework for future research and practice: The WRITE Model. In order to explicate the key processes of this model, I utilise an analogy: the moulding of clay. Creative writing involves Working with the material (clay) of self and experience. A further phase lies in stepping back to Regard (or value) the material thus shaped. Next is the important phase of Transmitting, or sharing, of this depiction of self in order to be of some use to another. Finally, in thus sharing what is so deeply felt within oneself, one may experience a transcendent Engaging beyond self—a sense of intimacy and belonging within a wider cultural narrative. I will argue that each of these important and symbiotic processes feed into a core process: a forging and fortifying of one's sense of Identity in the world. I hope that this model will therefore assist "writer-researcher-facilitators" (Hayes and Nicholls 2020) in the field of writing and wellbeing as we strive to understand, in ever more nuanced ways, the work we do in our facilitation with others, as well as what happens for us, ourselves, when we write.

I attempt here to cross borders of the humanities and social sciences, emphasising the interdisciplinary potential of the WRITE model. In the first section I provide some context for the present study by reviewing the body of research literature in psychology known as expressive writing (Pennebaker 1997; 2018) including a discussion of the limitations of this paradigm. In particular I will address the dearth of nuanced psychological studies into the wellbeing-promoting processes of creative writing within the field of psychology. While I challenge any strict distinction between these two modes of writing—expressive and creative—and while my personal view is that writing is a process that crosses binaries of fact and fiction, or catharsis and artistic merit, I nevertheless utilise both terms here to differentiate Pennebaker's specific paradigm from writing that is imaginative, closely crafted and artistic. Where I use the term "writing", I am indicating a process that includes both expressive and creative elements in varying degrees. Following a review of the current literature, I share the results of my own qualitative investigation into psychological wellbeing in creative writing, outlining the grounded theory I derived from these results. Finally, I set out a nascent conceptual framework that may be applied in education and community settings: The WRITE Model, including a discussion of appropriate ethical boundaries and safeguarding issues in applying such a model. Overall, I argue that writing—in its many creative and reflective iterations—is a process of identity construction, captured in my core category: Becoming more. Psychological science has shown that expressive writing contributes to specific measures of wellbeing (e.g. mood, physical health and behavior), as reviewed below. The present study indicates that the practice of writing creatively may offer something over and above this: a tool in the formation of our very identities—and thus our wellbeing.

EXPRESSIVE WRITING, CREATIVE WRITING AND THE PURSUIT OF WELLBEING

The theory and practice of writing and wellbeing interventions has benefitted from—and indeed become rather dominated by—the growing body of research known as expressive writing. This is a specific mode of writing, in which the candid facts of one's deepest thoughts and feelings are expressed, typically linked to a trauma or challenge, for twenty minutes per day over a number of days (usually three to four). Expressive writing has many demonstrable physical and emotional benefits (Baikie and Wilhelm 2005; for a review see Frattaroli 2006), as well as proving "successful in changing important real-world behaviors" (Pennebaker 2004: 140). Several classic studies have evidenced that expressive writing results in fewer visits to physicians due to illness, and can positively affect immune-system functioning (Pennebaker and Beall 1986; Pennebaker, Kiecolt-Glaser, and Glaser 1988). Researchers have also

demonstrated decreased depression scores in those diagnosed with Major Depressive Disorder (MDD) when writing in this way (Krpan et al. 2013). In another study, researchers linked writing expressively with faster reemployment for engineers following job loss (Spera, Buhrfeind, and Pennebaker 1994). Further studies demonstrate that expressive writing leads to increased grade-point averages amongst college students (Pennebaker and Francis 1996; Pennebaker, Colder, and Sharp 1990). Expressive writing has even been linked with increased stability of romantic relationships (Slatcher and Pennebaker 2006). Whilst these findings have proven quite remarkable, scientists have been conservative in exploring more diverse forms of writing—namely: creative writing. However, in recent years "positive writing" has emerged as a promising new avenue for writing research, including "resource-focussed" approaches (Reiter and Wilz 2016) alongside a growing body of literature demonstrating "a noteworthy general advantage of positive writing over expressive writing" (Toepfer et al. 2016: 124). Of interest here is that even these positively-focussed adaptations of expressive writing have largely adhered to the original format of writing feelings, thoughts, and emotions (Burton and King 2004), with little to no exploration of creative or imaginative renditions of one's experience. Nevertheless, these researchers have noted that the expressive writing paradigm has distinct limitations that may be addressed by continued adaptation and a broader investigation into other styles of writing. The present paper argues that this should include an investigation of the wellbeing-promoting effects of creative forms of writing, offering one such qualitative investigation to further this aim, and an extrapolated model for practice.

It is my proposal that the practice and processes inherent to creative writing may counter the known limitations of expressive writing. One limitation of the expressive writing paradigm is that many participants experience increase negative affect immediately following the intervention (Hockemeyer et al. 1999), as well as increased rumination (Yasinski, Hayes, and Laurenceau 2016). Researchers note that this "initial psychological angst resulting from writing may be too much for some people, especially those who are unsupported" (Mugerwa and Holden 2012: 662). These hazards are perhaps self-evident to any creative writing facilitator who has worked in community or education settings. Few of us in these settings would ask an emerging writer

to pen, from scratch, their deepest thoughts and feelings about a traumatic experience. This would clearly be "too much" to ask of many (if not most) participants, as well as of ourselves. Indeed, these same facilitators will know the benefit of indirect, imaginative and creative forms of writing, perhaps about an object or the view from the window, which may offer no-less profound reflections upon the writer's lived experience. As creative writers, we can work with personal material in many sophisticated and nuanced ways, few of which require us to confess all on the page. Moreover, Pennebaker and colleagues have observed that EW "is not a panacea" and that "not everyone benefits from writing" (Niederhoffer and Pennebaker 2009: 630), which begs the question: might some individuals who would not benefit from the expressive writing paradigm benefit from a creative writing intervention? With this in mind, and with research now amassing into more positive ways of engaging with writing, the present study challenges the continued absence in the scientific literature of investigations into the wellbeing-promoting processes of creative writing. It is my suggestion that broader quantitative and qualitative investigations into more creative forms of writing would open fresh lines of inquiry within the field of writing and wellbeing—and continue to inform practice in this area.

EXPRESSIVE WRITING VERSUS CREATIVE WRITING: DIFFERENCES AND PARALLELS

I have thus far used the terms expressive writing and creative writing as representative of distinct processes. In this section I further draw out some of the specific differences between these two modes, as well as discuss evident overlaps and parallels. I acknowledge that it may be useful—particularly in the classroom or community setting—to conflate these two categories by dispensing with the adjectives to simply speak about "writing." Yet, for the purposes of differentiating the current scientific approach to writing and wellbeing with a broader, more imaginative approach, I will continue to utilise the two terms as distinct. Cheryl Moskowitz (1998) has argued that, "inherent in the process" of creative writing "is the power to transform, and make positive use of, some of life's most perplexing and painful issues." It is perhaps this making positive use of which so differentiates creative writing from the established expressive writing paradigm. Sophie Nicholls (2009: 174) has argued that creative writing may offer something "beyond" expressive writing; she contends that

the writer might gain an "initial release" akin to expressive writing, but will then typically engage in a further step, "to shape her material, learning to craft and redraft it, ultimately developing a new relationship with aspects of her self-experience ...fictionalizing or retelling the initially expressed material". It is this "further step" that may be the most important distinction between the two forms to be made in future research, but there are of course additional differences. Creative writing is inventive and imaginative writing (Kaufman and Kaufman 2009), drawing upon a wide range of approaches and techniques such as figurative language and character development. Expressive writing, on the other hand, involves factual reflective writing about one's thoughts and feelings surrounding a trauma. It is important to note, though, that while so-called "positive writing" interventions have a factual focus, a more imaginative style of writing appears to be encouraged here at times, with instructions such as: "Assuming you were to make a film about today, what would the viewer see if everything had gone exactly as you wished?" (Toepfer et al. 2016: 127). It is clear, then, the line between what we call creative writing and what we call expressive writing already blurs in the current scientific literature—suggesting that scientists may indeed see the benefit of imaginative forms of writing, even if they are not overtly labelling this "creative writing" in their research.

Of course, there are many further links between expressive and creative writing; perhaps the two processes might be best understood as existing on a spectrum given that it seems self-evident that expressive writing is, to some extent, creative, and creative writing necessarily expressive. The process of wording one's deepest thoughts and feelings as in the expressive writing paradigm—although ostensibly a factual, reflective exercise—will involve some level of imagery or metaphor, given that this is characteristic of human language (Johnson and Lakoff 2003) as well as, perhaps more often than not, the inclusion of a narrative or "plot" (Pennebaker and Seagal 1999). Both metaphor and plot are features of creative writing. Equally, crafting a fictional narrative will so often involve drawing upon what we know—with the literary arts providing, as has been suggested, a simulation of real life (Mar and Oatley 2008; Oatley 1999). As celebrated author Zadie Smith (2007) has shared: "When I write I am trying to express my way of being in the world... what you are left with is something approximating the truth of your own conception." Creative writing draws upon, shapes and re-shapes our feelings about the world on the page, even if we express this imaginatively, i.e. we avoid a candid "tell all" of our direct experiences of the world (as we are tasked with in expressive writing).

The parallels continue. Positive psychotherapy (PPT) incorporates writing in its "positive introduction" exercise whereby participants construct a "one page real-life story which called for the best in them" (Rashid 2015: 28). Elsewhere, writing a "life review" as an older person has demonstrable benefits for psychological wellbeing (Arkoff, Meredith, and Dubanoski 2004). Within the humanities, the therapeutic dimensions of fictionalising from autobiographical experience is evidenced and discussed in the seminal work of Celia Hunt (2008). These examples provide some rationale for a hybrid, process-oriented approach to creative and expressive writing, in which scientists and humanities scholars alike might recognise the creative nature of expressive writing, and the expressive nature of more creative forms of writing. The model I propose here is drawn from research with practising creative writers, but might equally apply to expressive and reflective forms of writing if we recognise each of these modes as differing shades of a single process: writing.

My proposal of a new working model for the theory and practice of writing and wellbeing is predicated upon two observations: 1) that the reigning scientific model of expressive writing has many evidenced limitations, and 2) that scholars in the humanities— by virtue of our interpretive discipline—tend to shy away from models as perhaps too simplistic or naïve, which rather stunts the field and leaves writing facilitators to "muddle through" when it comes to the question of wellbeing. If clear safeguards are not in place, this latter issue may have disastrous ethical implications, as observed by the scholar Carolyn Jess-Cooke (2017). Writing facilitators know that issues around wellbeing abound in the creative writing workshop, regardless of whether we pitch our activities in this context, or not; this is because participants invariably bring emotional "raw material" with them, often unexamined. Several scholars have noted this and have been proactive in calling for rigorous-yet-nuanced research in this area. Nicholls (2009) has challenged the limits of the paradigm of expressive by advocating for a "developmental creative writing." She proposes a move to a more qualitative approach in writing

research, one which might offer "richer and more detailed models" and move the literature "toward a greater understanding of writing and well-being" (2009: 178). Moreover, Hunt and Sampson have posited that a "conceptual framework" for creative writing in relation to wellbeing is needed, that will "eventually be rich enough to interpret what goes on in the practice and why" (1998: 206). It was my endeavour in the current study to progress this line of enquiry.

My interdisciplinary approach here is aligned with the so-called "narrative turn" of the humanities (Herman, Jahn, and Ryan 2007) and human sciences (Riessman 2008) that in the last several decades has generated much research into "the various ways in which narrative and narration give meaning to what we usually call the self" (Kerby 1991: 1). This has established increasing common ground between psychology and the humanities, warranting further quantitative and qualitative exploration into how the forming of creative narratives may impact psychological wellbeing, and supporting the timeliness of the present study. Researchers within positive psychology have argued for story as a way to promote a range of positive interventions (Tomasulo and Pawelski 2012). This sits within a wider, emerging field of the positive humanities, which aims to recognise, research and promote the function of the arts, culture and philosophy in psychological wellbeing (Pawelski 2015). Finally, there has been a notable shift in the field of psychology in recent years towards a more nuanced, less dichotomous conception of what we can consider "positive" in terms of human experience, resulting in a more holistic conception of our "flourishing" (Ivtzan et al. 2015; Gruber, Mauss, and Tamir 2011). This shift makes it all the more timely to develop a research-based model of writing and wellbeing, which recognises writing as a nuanced, holistic process that may contribute to the flourishing of the individual on multiple levels—emotional, behavioural and beyond.

METHODOLOGY

My aim in this study was to establish an inductive theory of psychological wellbeing in creative writing, grounded in the lived experience of practising writers. I therefore utilised Constructivist Grounded Theory (CGT) in my approach, as per Charmaz (2014), in order to identify some of the ways in which creative forms of writing might impact wellbeing. It was my hope that developing this theory would provide a robust conceptual

framework for understanding creative writing and wellbeing to guide both practice and future empirical work in this area. The research question was: How does the practice of creative writing contribute to psychological wellbeing? While I drew from a number of sources in defining my terms, perhaps the most influential in my understanding of psychological wellbeing is the work of Carol Ryff (2014).

RESEARCH DESIGN

Data collection involved semi-structured interviews, which I transcribed to promote my immersion in the data. I conducted exploratory early interviews with four of the participants to help identify inductive lines of enquiry, resulting in a total of eighteen interviews with the participant sample (n = 14). After these first exploratory interviews, I requested that all fourteen participants keep a reflective journal over a ten-week period, observing their own creative writing practice. The reflective journals did not form part of the data corpus, but were rather employed as a private reflective tool and memory aid for participants to draw upon in their own way during the interviews that followed. The transcribed interviews formed the data corpus. Analysis resulted in a theory of psychological wellbeing in creative writing, comprised of four main categories and one core category. The CGT approach I employed is underscored by the assertion that these categories do not denote an extracted "truth" from the data but are, rather, informed interpretations of the data that have been co-constructed between myself as the researcher and each of these participants.

ETHICS

The Research Ethics Committee of Teesside University granted ethical approval for the study. Informed consent was obtained via distribution of consent forms to all participants, which were then completed and returned by email in place of written signatures so as to avoid participation in the study being limited by location. I complied with APA ethical standards in the treatment of participants. Participants and material have been disguised to assure anonymity.

PARTICIPANTS AND RECRUITMENT

The participant sample included published, unpublished and self-published creative writers of different genders, with a cross-cultural range of nationalities. Participant writing specialities

TABLE 1: *Participant demographics*

Name	Age	Gender	Nationality	Published/Unpublished/S-P
Sally	48	F	UK-Portugal	Unpublished
Kamil	23	M	US Virgin Islands	Unpublished
Allison	31	F	United States	Unpublished
Terri	48	F	United Kingdom	Unpublished
Ezenwa	30	M	Nigeria	Self-Published
Daniela	46	F	Australia	Published
Layla	48	F	United Kingdom	Published
Ben	39	M	UK-Canada	Published
Isabel	26	F	United Kingdom	Self-Published
Marco	26	M	Spain	Self-Published
Eliana	21	F	Brazil	Published
Jenny	39	F	UK-New Zealand	Unpublished
Lisa	66	F	Ireland	Self-Published
Esther	29	F	United Kingdom	Published

included—yet was not limited to—writing for children, literary fiction, fantasy fiction, flash fiction and creative nonfiction. I created a pseudonym for each participant and any identifiable information was excluded from the interview transcripts. Participant demographics are shown in Table 1.

Participants were self-selected and recruitment took place on Facebook. I posted to several international writing groups, however uptake was predominantly by those in the United Kingdom. Participation in the study was not limited by age, gender, or nationality, though in line with informed consent all participants were over the age of 18.

INTERVIEWS

The interviews were semi-structured. As far as possible, I used open-ended and non-biased questions as prompts to guide discussion. I asked participants to describe their creative practice in general terms, as well as in relation to specific life domains such as their relationships or sense of self, if relevant. I conducted the majority of interviews via Skype, recording the audio only, with the exception of two in-person interviews that I recorded for transcription using the Quick Voice application.

ANALYSIS

The analytical process involved initial line-by-line coding of each early interview transcript, with a focus upon gerunds as proposed by Glaser (1978) in order to "help detect processes and stick to the data" (Charmaz 2014: 120), though I also noted general topics and themes where I felt it to be appropriate. I kept written research memos throughout this process as I identified the "most useful initial

codes" (Charmaz 2014: 138), before employing CGT techniques of clustering and diagramming to form useful links that made sense of the data. I then completed a phase of focussed coding with subsequent interviews, and these focussed codes became early versions of the conceptual categories and sub-categories.

THEORETICAL SAMPLING

Charmaz notes that theoretical sampling should be used to "to elaborate and refine" categories (Charmaz 2014: 199). It is the stage at which the researcher, having so far remained in the background to allow for inductive categories, enters the foreground to substantiate these categories. In the present study, once early versions of the conceptual categories had been defined that were felt to be "as conceptual as possible—with abstract power, general reach, analytic direction and precise wording" (Charmaz 2014: 138)—I adapted the subsequent six interview schedules to address the emerging theory and gather experiences from the participants that might relate to these categories.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Analysis resulted in the development of four main categories, these were creative writing as (1) Owning experience, (2) Valuing the self, (3) Sharing experience and (4) Transcending the self. Each main category was formed of several constituent subcategories (as seen in Table 2).

The subcategories are intentionally broad in scope, in the hope of integrating a complex range of concepts that arose in the data. For example, the subcategory Completing covers a broad array of participant experiences, from completing an individual piece of creative writing such as a novel, to completing any writing at all on a given day, to completing a sentence with what were thought to be the "right" words. In short, completion was a feeling that took many forms for these participants. For this reason, examples of concepts are provided to demonstrate that even a given subcategory contains what we might call sub-subcategories, or clusters of concepts that further diversify the subcategory. Prevalence of the main categories, subcategories and concepts can be seen in Table 2. The categories and sub-categories were felt to give an accurate picture of the common processes

Table 2: Prevalence of grounded theory categories and subcategories

Category	Subcategory	Examples of concepts
1. (n = 14) Owning experience in creative writing	1.1. (n = 11) Capturing	(n = 5) Keeping and/or preserving for later use: "that emotion I could use later… say if I write a story" (Kamil)
		(n = 8) Getting it out or getting it down: "if you've got an idea… it's kind of really satisfying to get it down" (Esther)
		(n = 5) Being interested and/or opening mind: "[I] see the world with an open mind… if you want to be creative… you need an open mind, to see different perspectives" (Marco)
		(n = 5) Re-living and/or remembering: "it's amazing, you know? It's like I'm reliving life again" (Daniela)
	1.2. (n = 13) Constructing	(n = 11) Making and re-making: "I get excited because I'm taking these raw materials and sculpting them into something I can be proud of" (Allison)
		(n = 4) Self as character: "you see yourself in the characters" (Isabel)
		(n = 5) Can't stop writing: "[A writer] can't stop writing" (Lisa)
	1.3. (n = 10) Completing	(n = 6) Elation of getting it right and/or feeling of accomplishment: "That finishing, the completion, I think it's possible to become addicted to finishing books" (Ben)
		(n = 6) Frustration when not completing: "if I can't write then I've not achieved anything from that day, and it feels like a wasted day" (Isabel)
2. (n = 13) Valuing the self in creative writing	2.1. (n = 10) Validating self and experiences	(n = 8) Affirming existence: "you are affirming your right to be in the world" (Terri)
		(n = 4) Feeling hope: "I see hope that one day that thing I'm writing about is gonna be for real" (Ezenwa)
	2.2. (n = 13) Becoming more oneself	(n = 12) Defining self and/or being authentic self: "[If I didn't write] my life wouldn't be my life. It wouldn't feel like being myself… creative writing is some kind of freedom. It allows me to be myself" (Marco)
		(n = 9) Fulfilling purpose and/or being poorer but happier: "I quit the big scary job… back to being poorer but happier in order to free up time to write" (Esther)
		(n = 6) Gaining self-awareness: "as I was crafting my main character… I was just having epiphanies about my own character that I did not know before" (Allison)
		(n = 7) Gaining sense of self-efficacy: "to put stories down on paper and having control of your characters I think helps you to get your world back under control" (Lisa)
		(n = 6) Getting better and/or increasing resilience: "I'm growing in my writing" (Sally)
3. (n = 13) Sharing experience in creative writing	3.1. (n = 12) Communicating	(n = 5) Being known and/or being liked: "you want an end product, to be pleasing, you want someone to read it and maybe, you know, agree" (Esther)
		(n = 10) Expressing self eloquently and accurately: "getting to know new and better ways to say things… better ways to communicate" (Ezenwa)
	3.2. (n = 11) Contributing	(n = 6) Teaching others and/or transmitting emotions: "when you write about something and you transmit it to another person, this person can benefit from the knowledge that you are transmitting" (Marco)
		(n = 8) Getting it 'out there': "I wanted to share that information and get it out there in the world" (Lisa)
	3.3. (n = 10) Connecting	(n = 6) Connecting with reader: "when it works it's a – a lovely way of connecting with people" (Layla)
		(n = 2) Connecting with other writers: "we all have the same goal, to share words with children" (Daniela)
		(n = 3) Connecting with character: "the whole process of writing a novel is just getting to know your characters" (Jenny)
		(n = 5) Connecting with emotions: "every emotion you can experience as a human being in life, you can experience that same emotion, in a very acute way, as a writer" (Ben)
4. (n = 13) Transcending the self in creative writing	4.1. (n = 10) Exploring beyond	(n = 8) Getting into story: "I'm reading it on the screen as I'm writing it and I'll get swept up in the—in my own story." (Isabel)
		(n = 4) Being free and/or without boundaries: "[Writing] really is the whole world without boundaries" (Sally)
	4.2. (n = 9) Losing self	(n = 9) Feeling of absorption and/ or flow: "you're kind of oblivious to sort of everything else while you're… in the zone" (Esther)
		(n = 4) Danger of obsessing: "a lot of times I'm obsessively working on something" (Allison)
	4.3. (n = 10) Becoming more than oneself	(n = 5) Helping others: "I put something in the world that will help somebody else and it will live forever, even long after I'm gone" (Kamil)
		(n = 8) Sense of common humanity: "to identify with something, somebody else… just the idea that you are not alone" (Eliana)
		(n = 7) Understanding self in context: "sharing those ideas with other people is just one more step to me figuring out who it is I am in connection with the world around me" (Allison)

depicted within the data set. It should be noted that many of the participant responses were composites of one or more category or subcategory, and that these were often described as simultaneously occurring processes, i.e. Capturing might be simultaneous with Contributing and Connecting as in Marco's response: "when you write about something and you transmit it to another person, this person can benefit from the knowledge that you are transmitting."

CORE CATEGORY

Analysis of the data corpus culminated in the refinement of one core category, described as the "central point" of a grounded theory, which "integrates all of that theory's various aspects" (Mills, Bonner, and Francis 2008: 30). In this case, I drew my core category from a noteworthy in vivo code, Becoming more, based upon a poignant description by participant, Isabel, who noted:

> …because you're writing you are becoming more. It's not like splitting yourself so you are less, you are multiplying it, you're copying it so you are— however much you write, you are that much more than you were.

This core category was thought to encapsulate both creative writing as becoming more oneself (captured in the categories of Owning experience and Valuing the self, see below) and also becoming something more than oneself, or moving beyond the ego-of-one (captured by the categories of Sharing experience and Transcending the self). In this way, the core category captures the story of the data (see Figure 1 for a visual map of this story in full).
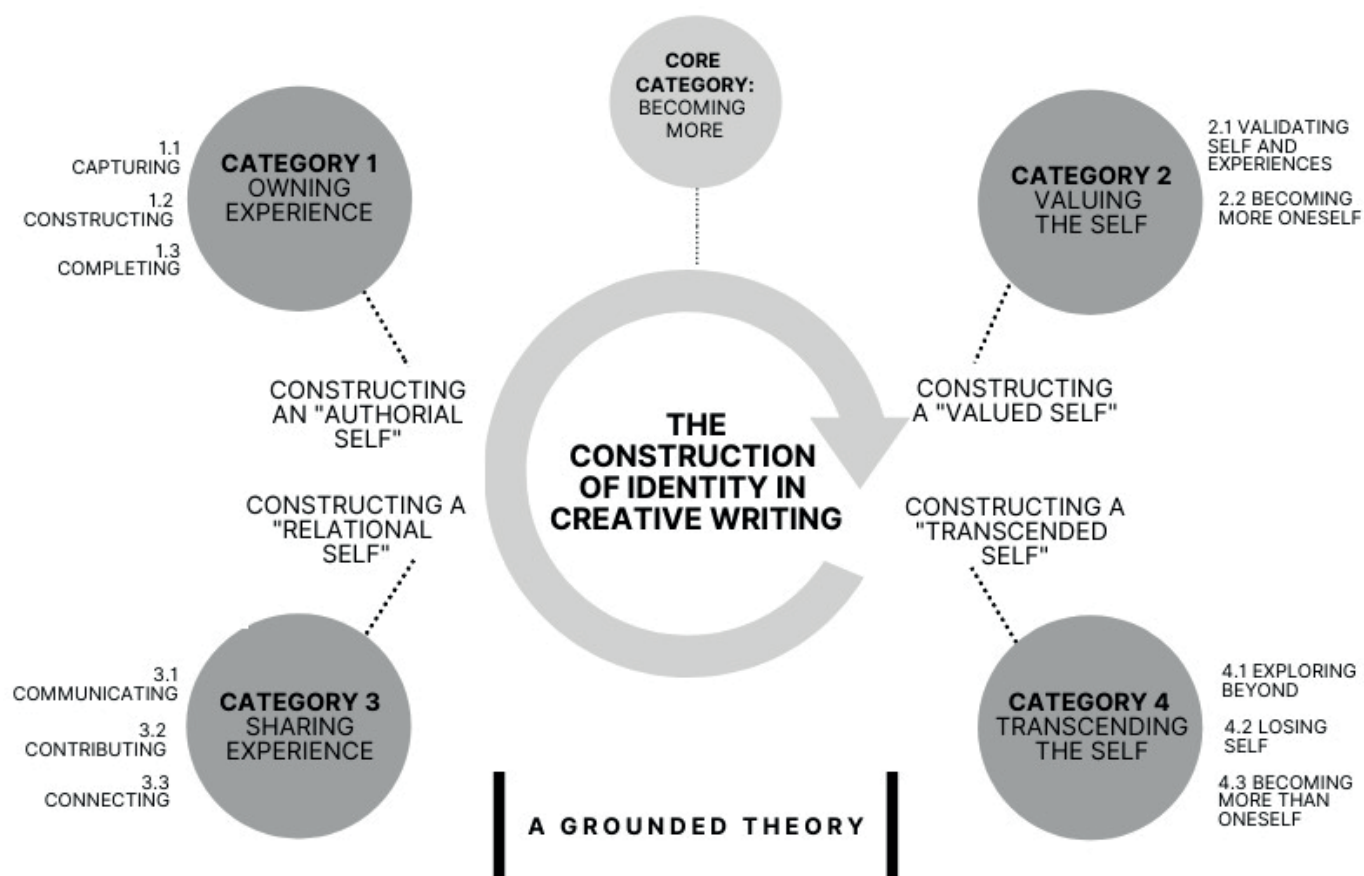

Figure 1: A Grounded Theory of Identity Construction in Creative Writing

CREATIVE WRITING AS OWNING EXPERIENCE (OR WORKING WITH)

In expressive writing, narrative has been shown to add coherence to otherwise bewildering life events (Danoff-Burg et al. 2010); however, the links between expressive writing and, more specifically, narrative identity theory (McAdams 2001; 2013) have been less well explicated. The results of the present study suggest a possible link between narrative identity theory and the practice of creative writing. It appears that creative writing may reinforce narrative continuity in one's experience—particularly those experiences that are troubling or disconcerting to the self—by reinforcing a sense of oneself as the author or at least editor of that experience. Indeed, Category 1. Owning experience can be understood as relating to McAdam's (2013) theory of the individual as autobiographical author, wherein writing creatively may be facilitative of narrative continuity. The "central problem" for the autobiographical author, McAdams argues, is self-continuity, or "how did the self of yesterday become the self of today, and how will that all lead to the anticipated self of tomorrow?" (2013: 274). Bamberg similarly describes "narrating as a navigation process" (2011: 18) and creative writing, if conceived of as narrating one's owned experience, appeared to assist participants in navigating the events of their lives. By keeping and remembering various experiences of self and world—giving them "solidity" (Ben) and significance in the act of writing them—these writers appeared to establish a sense of self-continuity perhaps because writing offers a keen sense of one's place in the temporality of life: creative writing is a way of "reliving life again" (Daniela) as well as offering a sense that one can "control what's going to happen next" (Kamil). Self-continuity was also evidenced in the way writers viewed themselves as "gatherers" (Eliana), collecting or Capturing experience as it happened to them: asserting the self as a kind of perpetual spectator or documentarian of lived experience. In the WRITE Model this process is described as Working with personal material (see Figure 2 below).

CREATIVE WRITING AS VALUING THE SELF (OR REGARDING)

Researchers have suggested self-affirmation as a feasible mechanism underlying the health benefits of expressive writing (Creswell et al. 2007). This supports the findings of the present study, and in particular my suggestion that an underlying function of creative writing in relation to psychological wellbeing is Valuing the self. Steele (1988: 289) describes self-affirmation as a way to "sustain a phenomenal experience of the self—that is self-concepts and images of the self, past, present and future—as having adaptive and moral adequacy, as being competent good, stable, integrated" and "capable of choice and control". Sherman (2013) argues that self-affirmation can "boost self-resources, broaden the perspective with which people view information and events in their lives, and lead to an uncoupling of the self and the threat" thereby "reducing the threat's impact in affecting the self" (2013: 834). Sherman attributes this to the writing process, arguing that "the small but potent act of writing about values can change diverse aspects of psychological experience over the long-term" (2013: 842). Bandura's theory of self-efficacy (1977), or the feeling of I can, which has been affiliated with positive psychology (Maddux 2009), also appeared evident in the present category of Valuing the self. Participants described writing as a way of "overcoming obstacles" (Marco) or difficult personal circumstances, thus increasing positive self-concept. One participant described how "wanting to put stories down on paper and having control of your characters... helps you to get your world back under control" (Lisa). Participants also described an impression that "you create yourself" (Marco) in creative writing, suggesting writing as a kind of proactive self-invention. Both self-affirmation and self-efficacy, therefore, appear to be allied processes in creative writing practice and worthy of further research. In the WRITE Model this process is rendered as Regarding one's own material.

CREATIVE WRITING AS SHARING EXPERIENCE (OR TRANSMITTING)

Writing, for the participants of the present study, appeared to offer a profound way of relating oneself to others, and thus of entering into a kind of "imaginal dialogue" (Hermans 2001: 255) with the world at large. Importantly, this was true even of writing they were yet to share, suggesting that having a reader in mind whilst writing may provoke a sense of dialogue, in keeping with research into the dialogic nature of human thought (Fernyhough 1996). Creative writing, therefore, may be understood alongside the psychological processes of relatedness (Ryan and Deci 1991), intimacy theory (Reis and Shaver 1988), and the human "need to belong" (Baumeister and Leary 1995). Ryan and Deci write that: "Human activity occurs within real or imagined social contexts... even

when others are not actually present, we may be aware of what they would like us to do or how they would like us to do it" (1991: 245). This is salient to the conceptual category of Sharing experience, where participants spoke of building an "emotional bridge with the reader" (Layla) or it being "gratifying to know ...somebody likes it" (Ben). Eliana spoke of her writing being "useful for somebody", Esther of making an "emotional connection with someone else through your writing" and Isabel said, "I can write and there are people out there reading that. I feel like I'm helping." Fulfilling the need to belong, which is "a fundamental human motivation" (Baumeister and Leary 1995: 497), may well be a further mechanism underlying psychological wellbeing in creative writing. In addition to offering a sense of relatedness and belonging, creative writing may also foster a sense of intimacy. Reis and Shaver highlight that the terms intimacy and intimate stem "from the Latin words intimus (innermost) and intimare (to make the innermost known)" (1988: 367)— the latter of these being, arguably, an appropriate definition for much creative writing, and particularly autobiography and memoir. Indeed, the category of creative writing as Sharing experience appears to be consistent with intimacy theory in that participants described writing as "something that really opens your self up" (Allison) that "someone else can read and it resonates with them" (Esther). As Cassidy (2001: 112) writes, intimacy "is to share the self: one's excitements, longings, fears and neediness." The participants in this study described writing as a sharing of the self, while also anticipating the needs of an imagined reader for whom their writing may have value. In the WRITE Model this complex process is rendered as Transmitting one's material.

CREATIVE WRITING AS TRANSCENDING THE SELF (OR ENGAGING BEYOND)

Writers in the present study described their creative writing as absorbing, consistent with characteristics of a "flow" state, as proposed by Nakamura and Csikszentmihalyi, which includes "intense and focussed concentration on the here and now" and "a loss of self-consciousness as action and awareness merge" (2003: 88–89). Lisa said: "I can just lose myself." In addition, creative writing appeared to afford the writers in the present study with, "a feeling of solidarity," locating them "within an evolving human project" which, Nakamura and Csikszentmihalyi argue, is central to flourishing (2003: 98). This is in line with vital engagement

theory, which is "defined as an absorbing and meaningful relationship to the world" (Nakamura 2001: 5), and was further evidenced in a response by Eliana. She said:

> ...maybe someone else is out there and being shy or is having difficulty …maybe that person is going to find [my writing], is going to read and is going to think, "hey, I identify with that person." And if—to identify with something, somebody else, even if that person doesn't live in the same country as you, you think, yeah... just the idea that you are not alone...

We might also term this kind of absorbing, positive relationship with the world self-transcendence. Koltko-Rivera, drawing upon Maslow (1961), writes that a person at the level of self-transcendence "seeks to further a cause beyond the self" in order to "to experience a communion beyond the boundaries of the self" (2006: 303). Something akin to self-transcendence was evidenced by the participants of the present study, who described creative writing as a way to "make [oneself] useful to people" (Eliana) and of "feeling part of society" (Marco). Thus this element of the present study opposes the classic view of creative writing as a solitary act of simple "phantasing'" or day-dreaming, as per Freud (1908). Conversely, creative writing appears to engender a deep sense of connection with others, in line with Vygotsky (1971). A Vygotskian approach to the creative arts implies that "underpinning creativity is the conscious awareness of the interaction of one's own and others' subjective, emotional experiences" (Moran and John-Steiner 2003: 73). Evidence for this abounded in the present study. In the WRITE Model this process is described as Engaging beyond one's own material.

THE WRITE MODEL

In order for the grounded theory of this data to be of practical use, a dynamic model for application of these findings has been extrapolated (see Figure 2). A PDF guide for facilitators and researchers is available at positivejournal.org/write and I welcome contact regarding any applications of the model.
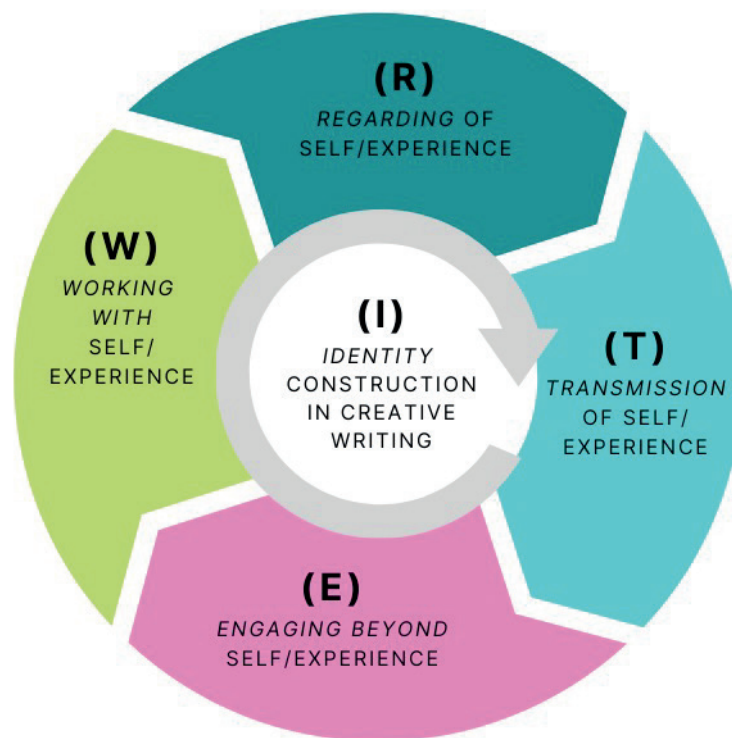
The purpose of this extrapolated model is to guide future research and practice in the area of writing and wellbeing, as well as stimulate wider public discourse around the benefits of creative writing. The model is best understood as an educational tool. It is foremost a guide for writing facilitators and participants to examine what may already be going on when they write. It is not offered as a prescribed therapeutic intervention, unless the facilitator is appropriately qualified and will apply the model within a pre-existing professional framework. Wherever this model is applied, safeguards and pedagogical strategies appropriate to age, context and learning stage should be in place. Where educators wish to utilise the model in the classroom, e.g. to design allied learning activities and exercises, every care should be taken to emphasise professional boundaries and signpost further support services should participants require them. Practical advice and guidance for safeguarding can be sought from professional bodies including NAWE (nawe.co.uk/membership/code-of-conduct) and The Culture, Health & Wellbeing Alliance (culturehealthandwellbeing.org.uk).

Writers in the NAWE community are invited to reflect upon the extent to which this model is representative their own experience of writing, and the personal benefits of their practice beyond the intellectual feat or potential accolades. Furthermore, facilitators and educators are invited to consider this tool in relation to their learning and teaching practice with others—to observe the extent to which it aligns with their practical knowledge of this field. Where this does align, I hope that the model may provide some new markers for the future design and evaluation of our writing programmes. Finally, I hope that this tool inspires researchers and facilitators alike in the formation of further interdisciplinary research projects, community projects and the development of practical tools that will continue to cross—with ethical rigor—the borders of the humanities and social sciences.

LIMITATIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

The limitations and implications of this theory and model are several-fold, and the import of continued research and reflective practice in this area is clear. We must continue to avoid taking for granted anecdotal experience of "what works"—as this may land writing facilitators and their participants alike in difficulty. For example, creative writing that transforms personal experience into the third person—"fictionalised autobiography" as Hunt (2008) conceptualised it—is often considered a useful way to approach personal material, yet this self-distancing process may at times be harmful for participants, as was suggested by a recent study (Giovanetti et al. 2019). Further research into these processes is called for—both quantitative and qualitative. Yet even the most robust and well-executed qualitative research studies have inherent limitations as data from which we can draw generalisations, given that they rely on subjective first-person accounts. Naturally, this study and

resultant model are preliminary and I hope that future research into psychological wellbeing in creative writing will draw upon a wide range of data to further test and validate the categories and subcategories proposed. In addition, one clear limitation of the present study is the intrinsic motivation of these writers; for most, writing was their vocation or an aspired to vocation. This implies that some of the feel-good factors of their writing might be partially attributed to a sense of furthering their career ambitions, or to goal-achievement. A suggestion for future research would be for further experimental testing to establish these boundaries with different populations, control for them, and to further explicate to what extent writing creatively may serve a general population as an intervention for enhancing wellbeing. It should also be noted that the writers in this study were all motivated to share their work. This is a significant difference compared to expressive writing and its recent adaptation, positive writing—both of which are often kept private, or seen by the researchers only. Given that this participant sample considered sharing writing as inherently positive, but that this may be a concern for those new to creative writing, further investigation is required into the unique wellbeing outcomes of sharing writing, and the boundary conditions of this. Inhibition, for example, may or may not be a factor when sharing writing, and person-activity fit (Lyubomirsky and Layous 2013), would thus be of paramount importance in the design of any generalised creative writing intervention drawing upon the research presented here.

CONCLUSIONS

In this article I have described the role of creative writing processes in promoting diverse aspects of psychological wellbeing in a specific population of practising creative writers. The study suggests that creative writing may be a way, not only of divulging our traumas as in the expressive writing paradigm, but of Becoming more by shaping and sharing that material. This claim is supported by the four main categories of this grounded theory: creative writing as (1) Owning experience, (2) Valuing the self, (3) Sharing experience and (4) Transcending the self. These findings have been interpreted alongside a range of theory within positive psychology and psychology more broadly. It appears that through Owning experience (or Working with) self and world in a personally meaningful way in creative writing, writers reinforce the narrative continuity of their identities. Valuing the self (or Regarding) as a process

of creative writing appears to correlate with theory of self-affirmation, and also suggests increased self-efficacy through writing creatively. Sharing experience (or Transmitting) through creative writing appears to satisfy a sense of relatedness, the need to belong, and intimacy. Finally, Transcending the self (or Engaging beyond) in creative writing corroborates previous theory of creativity as a form of flow, vital engagement and self-transcendence. These findings offer many novel avenues for research and practice—beyond the current body of knowledge centred around Pennebaker's expressive writing paradigm—towards an interdisciplinary understanding of the positive psychological aspects of more creative forms of writing. From this grounded theory, I have extrapolated a conceptual framework for future research and practice called The WRITE Model. I hope this framework will prove useful for writer-researcher-facilitators as we strive to champion the many benefits of creative writing from within an evidence-based, rigorous and ethical professional framework.

AVAILABILITY OF DATA AND MATERIALS

Data in the form of interview transcripts can be made available on request. Please contact the corresponding author.

DISCLOSURE STATEMENT

The author declares that there are no competing interests, financial or non-financial, in the publication of this paper.

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