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Who Am I? Writing to Find Myself

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ABSTRACT

Developmental creative writing and the related areas of expressive writing and therapeutic writing have only recently arisen as significant areas of study; however, although recent research has determined that writing is good for your health, just expressing oneself on the page isn't enough to promote personal development. In this paper, I set out to answer the question –*how is personal development achieved in the context of therapeutic writing?* In order to answer this question, I consider many definitions of personal development and writing as outlined by experts in the associated fields of expressive writing, therapeutic writing and developmental creative writing, and I also review concepts of the self as I consider a related question – *who am I?* Through an in-depth analysis of my own personal writing about my sister's mental illness, I conclude that writing for the purposes of personal development requires a conscious self-reflexive effort, with the goal of developing a deeper understanding of self, so as to promote positive change in the way that one perceives one's own life.

Keywords: Self and Identity, Therapeutic Writing, Developmental Creative Writing, Auto ethnography, Expressive Writing

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1.0 Introduction

The study of developmental creative writing and the related areas of expressive writing and therapeutic writing have only recently arisen as significant areas of research; however, recent research has shown that writing is good for your health (Pennebaker, 1997:164; Baikie and Wilhelm 2005:338; Pennebaker and Chung 2011:417). Research studies involving students have found that “the writing exercise improved their physical health, resulted in better grades, and often changed their lives” (Pennebaker and Seagal 1999:1244). Research done with people who have learning disabilities, with the goal of “developing verbal, intellectual and imaginative skills,” has been shown to facilitate “self-expression in participants” (Sampson, 1998:69). Writing studies, including narrative therapy studies that incorporate writing, have noted a number of benefits, including improvements in self-image and mental health (Agas 2015:59), improvements in writing structure and spelling (Re, Caeran and Cornoldi 2008:542), a reduction in symptoms of ADHD and related disorders (Looyeh, Kamali and Shafieian 2012:404), and improvements in mood and behaviour (Kamali and Looyeh 2013:307).

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My interest in this field of study arose as a result of my interest in writing in general. I have written from the moment that I first learned to write. I'm a much better writer than I am a speaker, so writing is my chosen method of interacting with the world. However, before studying therapeutic writing, I was not consciously using writing as a means of personal development. In looking back at the writing that I did prior to undertaking this area of study, I can see that I have benefited personally from my past writing. It has been a way that I have articulated my feelings to myself. It is how I earn a living and support my family. It is also what I do for fun. I simply love to write. But, what I've come to realize, in studying the research that constitutes this field, is that just expressing myself on the page isn't enough to promote personal development. Thus, in this paper I have set out to answer the question –*how is personal development achieved in the context of therapeutic writing?* In order to answer this question, I consider many definitions of personal development and writing as outlined by experts in the associated fields of expressive writing, therapeutic writing and developmental creative writing, and I also review concepts of the self as I consider a related question –*who am I?*

I begin by considering the definition of personal development in the context of creative writing, as outlined by Celia Hunt and Fiona Sampson, both widely recognized as experts in the field. Through an analysis of my own personal writing, I then compare this definition to the writing I did in the past surrounding my sister's mental illness, prior to undertaking the study of writing for the purpose of personal development. I go on to identify the various interpretations and research that constitutes the field of writing and personal development, before analyzing the shift in my writing that occurred as my knowledge about this field increased. Primarily, I focus on the research that identifies a conscious effort towards self-reflective writing and the impact this has on personal development. I then review definitions of the self from a philosophical perspective with the goal of understanding how writing for personal development impacts self-identity and in particular, my identity.

2.0 Definition

Hunt and Sampson, in *Towards a Writing Therapy* define personal development as "...any process of beneficial self-reflexive change which an individual chooses to undertake" (1998:200). They use this definition of personal development in combination with their definition of writing, which is a creative definition that includes "imaginative or literary writing across the genres" (1998:199) to describe writing for therapeutic reasons and benefits. Hunt and Sampson outline three benefit types of writing and personal development. The first benefit type is defined as writing that results in a literary work where personal development is secondary; the second benefit type is writing that combines therapy and art; and the third is "therapeutic work that incorporates writing" (Hunt and Sampson 1998:201). In considering Hunt and Sampson's definition of writing for personal development and the benefit types they outline, I find that the writing I've done in the past could be said to fall within the first benefit type, as I've undertaken it through my own effort and any resulting personal development was secondary. However, in studying this field, I've realized that much of the personal writing I did previously, which I initially thought could at least be considered cathartic, didn't really help me develop personally at all. In fact, in some ways, I was harming myself, using writing as a way to ruminate on issues for years, without ever moving past them.

3.0 Analysis of Past Writing

My sister is mentally ill and in 2005 she experienced a psychotic break. About two years ago, I began to write about her in both narrative and poetic form. I wrote and wrote, covering hundreds of pages in my attempts to tell the story of her illness. When I look back on that writing, I see desperation and anger, expressed in lines like "I hope it's the illness that's talking, because otherwise she's just ignorant, misinformed, and filled with delusions of grandeur" and "she must still be sick because this person can't be who she really is, can it?" (McNichol 2). James Pennebaker, a prominent researcher in the field, outlines the downside of writing, noting that uncensored complaining, in any form, "may be harmful"

(1990:203). He writes that “many studies have demonstrated that blindly venting anger often makes us feel angrier” (Pennebaker1990:203). In looking back at my past attempts at writing personally, I find this to be true. I was stuck, ruminating on my sister’s illness, unable to get past it. This concept of rumination is presented in the “transformation through writing model” that Lengelle and Meijers outline, which shows how the conscious effort towards personal development through the use of reflective writing can take an individual from a “first story” where they are “stuck or suffering” to a “second story” which involves a “shift in perspective” to acceptance and meaning (Lengelle and Meijers, 2009:58-59). With this model in mind, I can see now that I was stuck in the first story of my sister’s illness. I kept rewriting it, in part because intuitively I knew something felt wrong about what I had written, but I didn’t know how to get past that first story. What I was missing was a conscious effort of self-reflection.

4.0 A Conscious Effort

In Lengelle and Meijers’ writing model, the conscious work happens during the “transformational space” during which the writer proceeds through a series of stages that “allow... us to develop new perspectives through writing” (Lengelle and Meijers, 2010:1). This idea of consciously using writing towards a goal of personal development is also referenced by Sampson and Hunt, who state that “any element of personal development in the writing practice must be overt” (1998:200). Over my course of study, I’ve found that there are many different interpretations of writing and personal development. As described in Frances Driscoll and *The Rape Poems*, the author of these poems finds healing by writing about the trauma she experienced and her readers find healing by reading about experiences similar to their own (Mitchell, 2001). In *Poetry and Prison Part 1 and Part 2*, creative writing and personal development take the form of self-expression through writing, and the gaining of meaning from that expression of self (Pommy Vega, 2001). “Like much human endeavor, writing poetry is about personal growth, having faith in yourself, setting a goal and realizing a sense of accomplishment in achieving that goal, whether it is to write one poem or publish dozens” (Otis, 2001:62). These examples, and ones of writing with dementia patients (Killick, 1998), as well as writing done by people who are seriously ill, both physically (Nix, 2012; Rickett, 2011) and mentally (Hartill, 1998), as well as writing done by people who have learning disabilities (Sampson, 1998), show many common elements: self-engagement and self-understanding; gaining a deeper understanding of thoughts and emotions; offering an outlet – a constructive activity that develops self-confidence and feelings of self-worth; an opportunity to “re-story” the past to gain new perspectives(Lengelle 2013:4); an opportunity for self-forgiveness; an opportunity for self-analysis; and finally, conscious, self-reflexive efforts towards personal growth(Hunt 2013:66; Nicholls 2009:174). Without a conscious focus on self-reflection and improving ones state of health and emotional well-being, rumination is all too possible. “The result is a ‘short circuit’ in which a vicious cycle of fear, complacency, anger, or hopelessness ensues and a person becomes trapped in his/her first story”(Lengelle and Meijers, 2009:59).There must be a goal of self-support, of gaining insights into ones emotional state-of-mind, before a first story can be reformulated.

Arthur Bochner expresses similar ideas around ‘restorying’ in his article *It’s about Time: Narrative and the Divided Self*, which is about an epiphany he had following the death of his father, which brought the division between his personal and his professional/academic life into sharp focus. He says “this is the work of self-narration: to make a life that seems to be falling apart come together again, by retelling and ‘restoring’ the events of one’s life” (Bochner 1997: 429). Reading Bochner’s article was both a revelation and an affirmation. I recognized the sense of division that he felt, although my own sense of division was between my past and my present, between who I was before my sister got sick, and who I was after it. Could writing help me find a way to let my past and present selves co-exist in harmony?

5.0 Self

In *Writing, the Self and the Social Process*, the definition of self is that of a construction, using building materials provided by society. Our idea of self comes from our interactions with others. We socially

manage ourselves in relation to our societal groups and the cues we perceive from those groups. This is the theory of ‘symbolic interactionism’ which is defined as “identities [that] are not fixed but are constantly being shaped and re-formed in a process of interaction with other individuals and groups” (Stuart 1998:144). Mead defines self as ‘I’ and ‘me’, the self we assume and the self we are, and the constant interaction between these selves means that we can never fully understand ourselves (2013: Part III Section 22). Goffman notes that we manage ourselves with the ultimate goal of avoiding embarrassment (1959:12), while Scheff sees self as a collection of social interactions that offer pride or shame (1988:398). Ultimately, the conclusion is that there is no perfectly defined self, that it is constantly changing and evolving based on our interactions and the pull of social forces that surround us, “creating a fragile and multi-faceted self which we represent to the world” (Stuart 1998:146).

This idea of self matches to my own concept of self as that of an integrated and constantly evolving identity that is difficult to grasp and analyze. I agree with the majority of views outlined above, even the contradictory ones, in that I believe that self is all or none of those definitions at any given point in time. Self changes. I strongly agree with the idea that “there is no one truth” (Stuart 1998:149), that one’s sense of self is constantly impacted by society and the groups that surround us, but I also believe that there can be something at our core that is wholly our own, and if what we feel and trust at that core does not match to the reality of our life, it creates internal conflict, a mismatching of self-identity, and a sense of separation from ourselves.

My sister’s sudden departure to mental illness hit me hard. Who was I, if she wasn’t her? I wrote pages and pages, trying to answer this question but feeling only confusion. And then I realized – my inability to define myself is ultimately what constitutes my definition of it – that it is undefinable. And somehow, this thought has eased my sense of loss surrounding my own self-identity in relation to my sister’s loss to mental illness. I am who I am. I am, and I will always be, the me that I was meant to be. Who I was when my sister got sick, and all my experiences since, define the me I am today. It is a simple thought, and not even an original one, as intellectually I knew this to be true before. The difference now is that *emotionally* I know this is true. Pennebaker says “remember that a prime value of writing is that it forces us to ask how and why we feel the ways we do. As a self-reflective exercise, writing is beneficial to acknowledge our deepest emotions and thoughts” (Pennebaker 1990:203). Through a conscious self-reflective writing effort, I have found insights and meanings I missed in my initial efforts. I rewrote the story of my sister into a piece that rings true for me in ways it didn’t before. I have also realized, as a result of a proprioceptive writing practice in which I repeatedly asked myself the question “what do I mean by...?” that I have grown in many ways since my sister got sick (Trichter Metcalf and Simon 2002:34). I am more sincere with people, more understanding about the difficulties they face. I am less judgmental and much more accepting than I was before, and I’ve realized that these qualities make me a better person.

6.0 Conclusion

This leads me back to the original question – *how is personal development achieved in the context of therapeutic writing?* As a result of the various references noted above, and my own experiences with writing, my assessment of therapeutic writing and personal development is that it is a conscious search for personal meaning with the goal of developing a deeper understanding of *self*. To state it another way, it is the conscious use of writing for personal self-reflection, resulting in a meaningful change in the way that you perceive your own life. Developmental creative writing has been shown to produce beneficial results however additional focus should be placed on enhancing the conscious effort so as to increase the benefits associated with writing for personal development. Through conscious self-reflective writing, I’ve definitely found meaning in the experience surrounding my sister’s mental illness, as well as acceptance of the reality of the situation itself, and finally, I’ve gained a deeper understanding of who I am. As Katie says in “The Work,” it’s time to move on, to accept what is (Katie 2002:2), and to go love the sister that exists now, for everything that makes her who she is today.

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