PERSONAL DEVELOPMENT IN STRUCTURED WRITING GROUPS

A longitudinal mixed method study

Channa van Gelderen – Cune

PhD

University of York

English and Related Literature

September 2014

Abstract

Can structured writing in a group context be a pathway for personal development?

The aim of the thesis was to explore and substantiate developmental processes associated with pervasive factors in structured group writing, in a non-clinical, adult population. Do participants' sense of a coherent self and flexibility, when stimulated by structured exercises and interactions, change in a beneficial and enduring way? Are new cognitive and emotional perspectives activated, which enrich embodied behavioural options?

In exploring these questions the study used a constructivist ontology, informed by symbolic interactionism (SI) and humanistic system oriented concepts. Learning was assumed to be a result of behavioural integration of personal interpretations of experience. Life-long learning is, therefore, possible. The ability to (re)view options is as central to the likelihood of a person seeking out a writing group for development of individual life goals.

A mixed-method longitudinal design was used to assess participants of four short-term structured writing groups (N=20). Self-perceived personal development was defined, operationalised and compared to baseline and followed up after nine months with one verbal, one pictorial, one quantitative instrument. Qualitative assessments included thematic and content analysis. Sense of Coherence scores were quantitatively compared. A majority of participants reported beneficial and sustained changes after short-term group writing activity. Group exercises and group dynamics figure as strong mediating factors for personal development. The mean Sense of Coherence scores increased (p=0.04) when baseline scores were compared to follow-up scores by T-tests. Weighted analysis of the combined assessment instruments for each individual showed varying detailed developmental trajectories.

The study proposes a theoretical construct and methods to assess beneficial personal development through structured writing in a group context. The applicability of the findings to group writing activities are considered in a variety of domains, such as education, well-being, and professional development.

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Preface

Slowly an idea was ripening in my mind. What if I combined my love of reading and writing with my clinical work as a family and group therapist? Then, in 1995 in Tel Aviv, Michal, an elderly acquaintance, said to me: Why don't you get some people together and create a group for those of us who like to write about the past, but find they cannot do it alone – This was the trigger to reinventing a wheel that already existed: writing groups. The first five small groups I formed in Israel were open-ended, meeting monthly for an indefinite period; some even ran for seven years. While each group had a different character, some common themes started to emerge and intrigue me, and these had nothing to do with the specifics of the experiences people wrote about. People with similar backgrounds did not all want to write. Which people are attracted to writing groups? What leads many of them to conclude that the group-experiences cause their lives, and not just their writing, to change for the better?

Gregory Bateson wrote in *Mind and Nature* that it is impossible to predict the course of individual instances of development and change but that our professional competency may grow with wider knowledge collected in a systematic way. The questions that arose from the writing-group work led me to study recurring patterns that are particular to the medium of writing in a group context. I wanted to find out if some effects mentioned by participants could be universal. What are the effects of time: duration and interval of sessions, frequency? Do group size and composition, such as ages, backgrounds, common issues, make a difference? We do not have much support from research to use in debating the issues of suitable location, hours, open or closed groups and other decisions we would like to make before they are being dictated by 'circumstances'.

Wanting to spend time with my grandkids in England brought me to the MA in Creative Writing and Personal Development at Sussex, where I was encouraged to use my practitioner experience to contribute to the academically scanty field of writing groups. Then my questions led me to undertake this study at the University of York, to further my understanding of processes in writing groups and express it in academically accepted concepts. Too little has been researched about group activities and interventions generating sustained beneficial effects in adults, and even less where writing is the medium for their development.

I hope to play a part in the formation of a systematic conceptual base, starting with my own experience with groups over time.

Many facilitators work alone 'out there', like I did. Much of the expertise we collect could be discussed and compared with those of other facilitators of writing groups for health

and wellbeing. A body of clearly defined concepts may ease such a discussion. However, the current literature about writing groups tends to be on the anecdotal side, with which those of us in the field resonate intuitively. Resonance is a kind of embodied recognition, which stands in for clearly understanding the meaning of the concepts the authors use. When I read others' descriptions of their groups, I tend to know 'in my bones' as it were, 'exactly' what they write about. There is an experiential truth to their telling that I recognise and that is a nice feeling, like the relief felt by many participants: "I realise that I am not alone, not the only one who...".

To insiders it is obvious, but to outsiders it is utterly elusive what a structured writing group is if they have not taken part in one. It is not a creative writing course, although people are being creative. It is not a 'support group', although support is central to it. Until now little is known, or at least published in a scholarly way, about the uses of writing as a medium for development in adults.

It may be easier to comprehend the purpose of clinical groups, where people share a common issue, such as sufferers or survivors of a particular illness. Evaluation of the effectiveness of such groups can be done by assessing the extent of coping with the affliction. I have a wider aim. It seems to me that if personal development can be convincingly shown to occur in adults that do not share a particular clinical feature, it would be a strong argument in favour of using structured writing in adult groups of any kind. Here the challenges of assessment are harder and more difficult to operationalise because they deal with generative learning (Bateson "Learning and Communication"; Soosalu and Oka), attaining a more flexible way of coping with life in general while retaining or gaining a stable, coherent sense of self.

The beginnings of this study lay almost twenty years in the past. The end in the form of a thesis lays before me now. But of course there is no end. My questions continue.

Acknowledgements

There were times in my life that I knowingly set out to undertake a task and fulfilled it. This time of researching and writing the thesis has not been one of those. I now look back astonished at how I found myself four years ago starting a project I had never envisioned. At that time I had no idea what it would entail to complete in terms of time and writing in an academic genre largely alien to me.

I am motivated by the wish to prod a long overdue interdisciplinary, international discourse about the use of writing groups. What has enabled me to deliver this work apart from some personal stubbornness are the strength and support given by my family, friends, colleagues, teachers and the participants in my writing groups. My social network has kept me whole. It is this extensive group that kept reminding me of the connection between everyone and everything in the world, while I tried to describe a slice of it, busy compartmentalising elements, which resist their being set apart from the whole.

I am grateful to the teachers and co-students at the 2009 final year of the Sussex University MA of Creative Writing and Personal Development. At Sussex I learned ways to organise and analyse combinations of writing and development in many new, illuminating ways. Enjoying this course led me to answer the challenge voiced by its convener Celia Hunt and form the research question explored in the thesis. My former classmates, mature students with busy lives, rooted for me all along. Sophie Nicholls, who took a similar road from Sussex to York shortly before me, helped me in many ways.

When Geoffrey Wall and Karl Atkin, from English and Related Literature and Health Sciences respectively, expressed a willingness to supervise me, the University of York allowed me to research a topic that fitted no department. Geoff's and Karl's trust, patience and gentle guidance, against the heavy odds of my naïveté, piloted me to the point of submitting the thesis. Thanks are also due to Karen Spilsbury and John Issit, members of the Thesis Advisory Panel, who made me painfully aware of my cluelessness, thereby allowing me to overcome it sufficiently to reform my thinking and writing to the required mold. The Researcher Development Team of Human Resources at the University of York gave me much appreciated interest and support.

My brother Amos van Gelderen guided me through the perils of statistics and reminded me at every step of the philosophical gap that divides a positivist point of view from the subjectivist-constructivist route I have followed in my life's work as expressed in this study. By discussing our disparate views of the world we have come closer as whole

persons than we were before through our filial connection. I call this one of the unintended beneficial consequences of the study.

I was fortunate to receive the freely given and highly professional assistance of Julie Williamson. She conducted all follow-up interviews and added her insights and reflections to mine. I am happy that we have become friends during our cooperation. Thanking Julie brings me to the fine group of colleagues among whom I met her: the members of the Leeds-Bradford Lapidus Writing for Health and Wellbeing group. This group gave me acceptance and grounding I sorely needed while being away for so long from my home base in Israel. As an extension I am very grateful to Lapidus on the national level. Their workshops, interest in my research and the opportunity for meeting practitioners in my field helped me to feel connected and to broaden my understanding of the variety of the work being done.

Friends and colleagues in Israel and the Netherlands deserving thanks are Elisheva van der Hal, who suggested the use of Antonovsky's Sense of Coherence questionnaire at the beginning phase of my study; Shai Schellekes, who always functions as a psychoanalytic beacon for my thoughts and who reminded me of 'ego-strength'; Daniel Weishut, for the long years of collaboration while we conceived group work methods with non-clinical participants and for sharing references with me during his study of intercultural friendship; Roberto Mitelpunkt for supervising my clinical work with a love of poetry and narrative; Reinekke Lengelle and Frans Mijers for introducing me to Dialogical Self Theory and reading a painfully raw early chapter, as did Val Cox, when I was frantically searching for guidance as to how to write a thesis. Too many to name are the co-workers and supervisees at the Elah Centre for Psycho-Social support in Israel who were important in reaching my present stage of development.

I thank those that performed computer tasks beyond my skill: Nelly de Vink for making data graphs visually presentable, Kahn Priestley for final proofreading and formatting.

Thanks are also due for two kind permissions. The first for using the Sense of Coherence questionnaire given by Monica Eriksson, PhD, Associate Professor Department of Nursing, Health & Culture University West, Center on Salutogenesis Trollhättan, Sweden on behalf of Avishai Antonovsky, Ph.D.Estate of Aaron Antonovsky Department of Education and Psychology The Open University Israel, and the second for using the image on the showcase poster granted by the Yorkshire Sculpture Park, where the sculpture "Heart of Trees" by Jaume Plensa was exhibited.

Author's declaration

The study and its report are my own work. This work has not been previously presented for an award at this, or any other, University. Some concepts and their definitions herein employed are based on work written up in my unpublished MA dissertation for the University of Sussex (Cune 2009), which is cited like all other sources. All unreferenced text is original.

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2010–2014

PART I

CHAPTER 1 – GENERAL INTRODUCTION

Prelude – planting the seed of the story

> Do you have to think before you write something?
>
> If you do, is 'Think before you write' like 'Think before you act'?
>
> Do you think 'more, or differently' before writing than before speaking?
>
> Can your pen or keystrokes run away with you as your mouth can when it runs off?

> Let's say we do think before and while we write. Let's say there is a connection between our thinking, and between what and how we write. Is it a big leap then, to be curious about what writing does to our thinking? And leap again: what else, besides writing, may be influenced by thinking before or while writing? Could it influence other experiences that accompany what we write about, like feelings, emotions, achievements, questions, actions?

> If it is possible to shape thinking by means of writing exercises that are being shared and discussed in a group, then it is also possible that this effect extends from thinking, onwards to other areas of our dealings with life. Then the writing in the group is one tool, among others, to enhance the ways we deal with whatever situations confront us. If we acquire more ways of coping with situations, we will have more flexibility, in other words: we will be less 'stuck' in our ways with fixed habits of mind that at present rule our behaviour.

1.1 Introduction

This chapter introduces the purpose and structure of the thesis and sketches the theoretical scene and its key concepts, which are elaborated in later chapters.

This study investigates whether 'structured writing' in a group context – a creative social activity – enables personal development in adult participants from a general population. It wants to find out whether participants' sense of a coherent self and flexibility in dealing with life, when stimulated by the group work, change in a beneficial and

enduring way. Do the writing of structured exercises and interactions about that writing with other group members – the essence of structured writing groups – activate new cognitive and emotional perspectives that enrich behavioural options? In other words, do structured writing groups influence thinking, feeling and behaving over time, and, if so, can we also see how this occurs? The two questions – *if* and *how* – connect to the basics of several psychological and educational theories; among others the cognitive behavioural model, which, as Judith Beck wrote in 2011, "uses a variety of techniques to change thinking, mood, and behavior" (*Cognitive Behavior Therapy: Basics and Beyond* 10). The 'if' question dominates the research, with only some exploration into the 'how'.

Many years of facilitating writing groups for participants living with chronic post trauma led me to believe that there are basic similarities to be found in the writing of trauma survivors coping with their experiences, beyond the particular details of the trauma. It became apparent how a look beyond, or below, the surface of individual experiences reveals general underlying developmental processes at work in adults, some well over 65 years of age at the time of joining a writing group. When one doesn't look below the surface it seems important to make distinctions between times, circumstances and locations of atrocities such as genocides and chronic abuse. Many survivors make such distinctions, but not those who have been able to integrate their experiences beneficially into their life story, however horrific. The writings I have gathered over time in and with groups show overwhelmingly, that survivors – of anything – develop through their reflections gradually towards a humanistic view of the world. They become capable of a measure of understanding towards 'victims' and even 'perpetrators' and see the commonalities between themselves and others.

This could be an outcome of writing groups, or it could be a sign of the self-selection of those who join and stay in such a group. It is probably a combination of both. But in my professional therapeutic work with individuals, families and groups I cannot recall any single traumatised client who developed individually beyond a stuck or vindictive victim stance. Yet quite a few, who didn't otherwise benefit from therapeutic modalities, did evolve in a writing group towards a stronger sense of connection with others and gained hope for themselves.

From this experience I decided to explore the effects of structured writing in a group on a sample of non-clinical[1] adults. Could writing groups enhance development in any adult, from the 'point' they themselves had already reached?

The questions this study asks stem from the assumption that successful adult development, enabling a person to live a fulfilling life, is characterised by evolution

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[1] Non-clinical is used in the thesis to indicate persons from the general public, who are not medically, psychologically or socially selected for participation in a group by suffering from a particular shared condition like a disease, homelessness, addiction etc.

towards the flexibility of a more encompassing world view and a sense of interconnectedness with others, compared to a personal baseline.

My thesis is unconventional in several respects. I have come to it as a mature practitioner, unversed in academic writing, and my subject matter has to date been researched very little. The style, structure and content of my text should therefore be read as a report of my expedition into territory waiting to be discovered. On the way I have had to overcome unforeseen obstacles connected with guiding my thoughts and experiences into channels suitable to the genre of thesis writing. My attempts to comply with an academic writing style have, on one hand, honed the expression of my thinking, for which I am thankful, but, on the other hand, have cramped my own style forcing me into a steep learning curve.

This text needs to speak to scholars from different backgrounds, as the study touches on many disciplines. Therefore I have not opted for a style of writing that is strictly impersonal, which would be totally alien to me and to colleagues in my narrow field. Likewise I have not wanted to write a purely creative text, which may appeal only to a part of the scholarly readership. In the process of coming to a workable compromise between two extreme genres of writing, I am guided by the views on writing styles of respected scholars. One of them is Cochrane, who stated in 1971 that the style which "passes for scientific English ... is accurate, meticulous, and almost bias-proof. Personal prejudice is concealed, … but I find it almost unreadable" ("Effectiveness and Efficiency", 4). He concluded that it was simplest to admit his biases in advance to warn his readers, as I intend to do. Two other views are those of Chase and Richardson, each one the author of a chapter in the 2005 (3rd) edition of the SAGE Handbook of Qualitative Research (Denzin and Lincoln (eds), chapters 25 and 38). Susan Chase lists the "interactive voice", showing intersubjectivity and reflexivity, as one of several styles of voice for a researcher. Using an interactive voice rests on the need of researchers to understand themselves in order to understand their interpretations of participants' stories. This is seen as a prerequisite to enable readers to understand the researcher's work. The style shatters the "myth of the invisible omniscient author (Tierney, 2002; Tierney and Lincoln, 1997)" (citations in original, op. cit. chapter 25, 666). Furthermore Chase emphasised the need to attend to the relationship between narrative work and other areas of social sciences, which, according to her, need the concepts and analyses produced by "the biographical leg of Mills's trilogy", the other two legs being history and society (op. cit. 671).

Writing from 'inside' qualitative research, Laurel Richardson has further strengthened Cochrane's and Chase's arguments in favour of writing as a dynamic creative process with the potential to increase readers' interest in the text, in contrast to the constraints of writing "in the homogenized voice of science" and the resulting boredom of readers. In addition she emphasised that the skills of qualitative researchers, rather than particular

assessment tools (like the questionnaire or survey), are central and that therefore the researcher is the "instrument" (Richardson and St Pierre, op. cit. 960). Richardson describes how postmodern researchers can forgo "the metanarrative of scientific objectivity" and can write as situated, embodied, subjective persons, who know and tell about the world as perceived by them (ibid. 962). Like me, Richardson asks: "What is this struggle I have with the academy, being in it and against it at the same time?" (966) and "How can I make my writing matter?" (967). The answers lie in a belief that becoming is more important than being someone, like an academic, a researcher, a theorist (967). Creative and analytical practices are not contradictory modes of writing, rather they adapt to our "world of uncertainty". "There is no such thing as 'getting it right', only 'getting it' differently contoured and nuanced" (ibid. 962).

When texts are written out of creative and analytical practices they go way beyond the traditional triangulation method of validating research; they approach the world from more than three sides. Such texts 'crystallise' and what we are shown depends on our perspective. "Crystallisation provides us with a deepened, complex and thoroughly partial understanding of the topic" (ibid. 963). This postmodern 'liberation' of writing style comes, however, with added responsibility to establish convincing authority and rigour: novelty is not enough. Richardson also sets the criteria of aesthetic merit and reflexivity for qualitative writing to be worthy (964): "The blurring of humanities and social sciences would be welcomed not because it is trendy but rather because the blurring coheres more truly with the life sense and learning style of so many. This new qualitative community could, through its theory, analytical practice and diverse membership, reach beyond academia…" (965).

I am coming from a constructivist paradigm with a wish to communicate with (post-)positivist researchers. To this end I have modified the language of this thesis, trying to express the arguments in a way that may be understood and accepted by other paradigms (Lincoln, Lynham and Guba, 98–99).

The preludes preceding each chapter are part of the mix of the creative with the analytical.

1.2 Aims and background

The study is an attempt to substantiate developmental processes associated with pervasive factors in a structured group writing, one not restricted to particular populations, in a sample from a general, non-clinical, adult population. I stated my research question as: Can structured writing groups be a pathway for personal development in adults from a general population and, how does this occur?

I defined and operationalised the concept of personal development in adults. To investigate my research question I used a short-term format of small writing groups and a longitudinal design of mixed qualitative and quantitative methods.

Structured writing groups are small, facilitated groups where people meet at set times to write and discuss their writings prompted by exercises.

In the area of personal development in adults much is subject to debate. Various approaches are discussed in education, psychology, sociology, communication, narrative and neurosciences. Pulkkinen and Caspi's 2002 *Paths to Successful Development* outlines three main approaches. The first approach consists of 'growth and stage models', including diverse traditions (e.g. humanism; cognitive development; psychodynamic theories). Growth and stage approaches hold that the human life cycle consists of a progression of psychosocial, and/or physical, stages of development (e.g. Erik Erikson; Daniel Levinson, in their works between 1963 to the late 1980s). The second approach, dubbed 'life-span models', distinguishes between normative age influences like education, historical influences like war and non-normative influences like accidents. While the life-span models still employ a framework of stages of life ordered by age, the complementary third group of 'life-course models' emphasises demands of social roles and social trajectories influenced by personal choices, timing of events in life, relations with others and historical changes (1–6).

Early studies of development are criticised for being value-laden and biased by culture, era and gender. For example in their 1992 *Developing Minds: Challenge and Continuity Across the Life Span* Rutter and Rutter dismiss an orderly staged view as being too general and mechanical; and Courtenay's 1994 critique argues that development models should be abandoned since individual differences dominate any hypothesised regularity in the life course. At best models should be regarded as alternative ways of how adults can develop (149). In 2009 Becca Levy developed the 'stereotype embodiment theory' from her psychosocial approach to ageing. Her research shows how stereotypes of ageing accepted by individuals can determine outcomes in later life, such as memory, cardiac reactivity to stress, and longevity.

Heckhausen suggests that adults can regulate their personal development by choosing a life-defining course of action from several options (*Control Theory* 276–277). The idea of control, a manifestation of personal agency, has relevance to the likelihood of a person seeking out activities (e.g. a writing group) to purposefully continue her development. Therefore the approach I chose for my study is derived from control theory, as part of a life-span model that I continue to discuss in the next section and in Chapter 2.

Doidge and Chudler, prominent neuroscientists, represent findings from the past two decades showing that our ageing brains maintain the plasticity that makes adult development possible; for example in the 2007 book by Doidge, *The Brain That Changes Itself* and the 2013 web explanation *Brain Plasticity: What is it? Learning and Memory* by Chudler. The brain's networks never stop changing and adjusting, a capacity which can be used for continuing development throughout the life span. With the world posing challenges at an increasing pace and lifespans becoming longer, adults keep coping as

best they can with the need to learn new knowledge and skills. The amount of socialisation and education that society provides during the formative years does not prepare a person enough to deal with the rapid changes encountered in later – and longer – stages of life. Socialisation needs to continue and keep pace with life experiences. Pathways exist and are also still being developed to pave ways for adult learners, and my study can be seen as exploring one way among them.

The importance of continuing development is shown by studies linking the development of adults with their improved health and wellbeing (Bowling and Illiffe 2011; Gowan, Kirk and Sloan 2014; Hallam, Creech et al. 2013). The theories behind this connection point to the key factor of building 'resilience resources' able to cope with sudden, disturbing experiences. The concepts denoting resilience are known by at least thirty different names such as 'self efficacy' (Bandura 1977), 'hardiness' (Kobasa 1979), 'learned resourcefulness' (Antonovsky 1990 (31–63) in Rosenbaum (ed.)) and the one chosen in my study: the 'sense of coherence' (Antonovsky 1987). Although these names are not interchangeable, what they have in common is their focus on people's capacity to deal with difficulties. In a 2000 article Lisa Berkman has presented a clear model of 'cascading social processes' showing how social networks impact health (850). Her model, based on ideas developed by Durkheim (social integration) and Bowlby (attachment and social networks), resonate with the theoretical concepts underlying my study. When considering at which level writing groups fit into society as a possible intervention or activity, Berkman's model would place them at the micro level of psycho-structural mechanisms, shown in Figure 1.1.
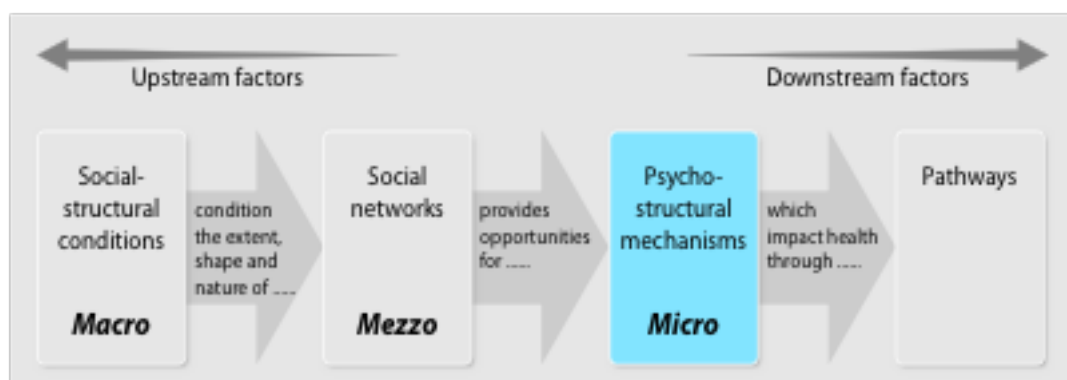
Figure 1.1 Location for writing groups in Berkman's model of cascading social processes (847)

'Upstream factors' are increasingly larger social structures, and 'downstream factors' are increasingly smaller, more specific structures and implementations.

David Gauntlett, in his 2011 *Making is Connecting*, starts out from the field of communications and creativity and likewise emphasises the importance of human networks in self-motivated learning.

Until now writing as a social group activity appears not to have been widely considered among the possible pathways to salutary development, health and wellbeing. While not

completely ignored, consideration is mainly to be found in the literature about therapeutic interventions for special patient groups (e.g. Bolton, "Things I Can't Say"). Systematic reviews of writing in a group context have not, to my knowledge, been carried out yet. A proposal has been published in 2014 by Meads, Nyssen, Wong and Steed, titled "Protocol for an HTA Report: Does Therapeutic Writing Help People With Long-Term Conditions? Systematic Review, Realist Synthesis and Economic Modelling." Systematic reviews, mainly by Smyth and Pennebaker between 1998 and 2008, have only studied individual writing for particular afflictions. Writing group facilitators seem to be so convinced of the effectiveness of their practice, that they have not, with rare exceptions such as Bolton, Hunt and Sampson's 1986 *Writing, Self and Reflexivity* and Mazza's 1999 *Poetry Therapy*, engaged in academic study of the field to demonstrate this effectiveness. As yet no studies have been conducted on the effectiveness of writing groups for non-clinical adults as a general path for personal development. As McLeod wrote in 2001, "There is a core of therapeutic practice which research does not directly touch" (5), and I deplore that this is the case with writing groups. My study hopes to take part in dressing that all but invisible core in academically appropriate garments.

I explore whether structured writing in a group context enhances the ability to consider options, to be flexible and to adapt one's coping skills to rapidly changing circumstances. This can be seen as an 'evolutionary' advantage in an individual's life course. I use the term evolutionary, because individual benefits appear often to be transmitted to younger generations by means of personal stories. *Sapiens, a Brief History of Humankind* by Harari, published in the UK in 2012, backs such a wide evolutionary view of a cultural pathway of human development through the eons.

Enhancing flexibility is a form of personal development in the language of my study. The relationships between development, flexibility and coping are explored and considered as important elements, e.g. the 2004 Bonanno, Papa et al. "The Importance of Being Flexible: The Ability to Both Enhance and Suppress Emotional Expression Predicts Long-Term Adjustment." and in 2014 "The Psychological Flexibility Questionnaire " by Ben-Itzhak, Bluvstein and Maor. Carol Dweck's decades-long research, published in the 2006 book *Mindset: How You Can Fulfil Your Potential* leads to understanding the differences between a "fixed" versus a "growth" mindset (Dweck 7–10). Everyday terms like 'flexibility' and 'development' in this thesis carry operational definitions that may differ from their often unspecified common meanings. For the rationale of these definitions and other key concepts see Chapters 2 and 3.

Personal development as defined for this study is a perceivable change towards lasting flexibility in behaviour, cognition, emotion, coping, and (inter)personal communication occurring in a person with a coherent sense of self.

1.2.1 Adult development

> It's odd when I think of the arc of my life, from child to young woman to ageing
> adult. First I was who I was. Then I didn't know who I was. Then I invented
> someone and became her. Then I began to like what I'd invented. And finally I
> was what I was again.
>
> It turned out I wasn't alone in that particular progression.

Anna Quindlen

Generally speaking, early adulthood and midlife are seen as periods of attaining and
maintaining an appropriate level of functioning to fulfil one's life's tasks and ageing is
thought of as a process of inevitable physical and often mental decline (Levy 332;
Heckhausen, *Developmental Regulation* 197–80; Röcke and Lachman 845).

A search for ways to counter stereotypes of inescapable decline and to enhance beneficial
development was one of my reasons for studying the effects of structured writing
groups. When we say, as I have above, that people deal with life's challenges 'as best they
can', what determines their ability to do so? In the 1979 book *Health, Stress and Coping*
Antonovsky introduced the salutogenic view, as opposed to the pathogenic view, as a
way to discover what keeps people healthy or improves their 'general resistance
resources' (GRRs, 99). This work led him to develop his concept of the sense of coherence,
which is key in my study.

Salutary development is to be understood as the increasing capability of individuals to
deal with life's vicissitudes (Tak-Ying Shiu; Eriksson and Lindström, "Relation With
Health"). It may even be like 'attaining wisdom', with wisdom including all capacities of
a person: intellect, emotion and body (Soosalu and Oka 10–13, 65). It is a vague concept,
one that encompasses too many aspects of life to pin down. Still, people can attest to
having developed through the years, to having learned useful life-skills, to looking at
their world differently from before and to feeling better with themselves in the present
compared to the past. What sorts of experiences in adult life have a strong enough power
to enhance coping with ever-present stressors of any kind?

Adults sometimes change their views and behaviour, but not as often as children and
adolescents. Life changing crises do occur, but what about less extreme, gradual learning
by choice rather than by force? Can this have a lasting salutary impact? Structured
writing groups, when conducted well, are a gentle and enjoyable way to engender
personal development in those adults who like writing and sharing with others.

My study hopes to confirm the possibility of such personal development in adults in
short-term groups. My work with long-term structured writing groups has taught me
that these groups create experiences that can influence salutary development in adults by
strengthening their capabilities for coping with stress, by opening up more perspectives
and by encouraging them to become more aware of their connections with themselves

and with a social network. However no longitudinal and rigorously accumulated data exist to substantiate my experience. As a first step I have designed the study discussed in this thesis to discover whether and how short-term writing groups achieve a beneficial outcome by engendering this kind of personal development in the participants, as perceived by them. My present thesis deals mainly with the first question: whether such personal development can be shown to be an outcome of participating in short-term structured writing groups, and to a lesser extent with the question of how such development is achieved.

1.2.2 What is new in this study and why is it important?

Against the background sketched above and given that writing groups as a developmental pathway for adults are virtually unresearched, I attempt to explore the extent to which structured writing in a group can engender salutary developments in participants.

It is a fairly undisputed claim today that modest changes in health and wellbeing may result from individual writing tasks under controlled conditions, as documented in the literature on over twenty years of expressive writing (EW) research reviewed by Smyth and Pennebaker in 2008. The expressive writing studies focused on specific physical or mental conditions (e.g. migraines, post-traumatic stress disorder) and measured improvements in those conditions. In all EW studies participants write in isolation, strictly solitary, and receive no interactive feedback on the content of their writing.

My current investigation has a wider focus. It is designed to discover effects on overall development when writing is conducted in a group rather than individually. Compared with studies of solitary writing, writing groups broaden the field in several ways. Groups entail interpersonal interactions, including the sharing of personal writing. In the EW research the only sharing (called 'disclosure') involves handing a text written in isolation to a researcher, without feedback or discussion of its contents. In 2007 a series of studies investigated if such writing done with a reader in mind has different effects than pure solitary writing that is kept completely private by the writer. One of the goals of these studies was to discover whether the theorised mechanism for the effects of disclosure has to take the social component into account (Radcliffe, Lumley et al. 366). The studies, conducted with 253 undergraduate students who reported having moderately serious unresolved stressful experiences, included an experimental group in which participants kept their writing undisclosed. Undisclosed writing appeared to alleviate some distress, while disclosed writing had beneficial influence on distress and on psychological and physical symptoms. The researchers thought it "possible that the more common process of choosing whether to write privately and retaining the option of sharing it with

someone in the future has effects that are as or more powerful than found in this study" (ibid, 380).

It is illuminating to find support for the sharing of writing from scholars dealing with solitary writing, not least because they discuss factors of personal choice involved in participating in a writing study. Self-selection for writing groups limits the population of studies like mine to people inclined to writing and disclosing.

I have not yet found a study in the existing literature that can function as a comparable, precursory reference to my study. Writing groups have not, to my knowledge, been studied longitudinally. The literature on writing groups to date appears to be of the cross-sectional anecdotal kind, without baseline and outcome measures beyond the self-reports of participants. The gap in academically accepted knowledge about the possible worth of writing groups as a developmental pathway intrigued me enough to want to start narrowing it. To what extent, if at all, could the belief of facilitators like me about the value of writing in a group, based on years of practice, be confirmed? How can practice be improved by research findings? Findings of longitudinal studies could inform decisions about the use of writing groups in many settings by adaptation to specific needs and requirements of the population. Potential participants could make informed choices about the benefits and risks of joining a group. Writing groups cost little to conduct. If they enhance adult development for a non-clinical population they deserve to be included in the range of educational and community choices on offer today.

1.3 Theoretical framework

In this introductory section I will outline my theoretical framework and mention key thinkers on change and personal development, in individuals as well as groups, whose concepts and contributions to the multidisciplinary perspective I have put to use. Key topics are further elaborated in Chapter 2.

The study was conducted from a constructivist point of view and used the methodological framework of Mead's symbolic interactionism, described in Chapter 5.

Constructivism is a view of the world that sees what is called 'reality' as being construed by interpretations of people, resulting in different 'realities' existing simultaneously and often competing. While constructivism does not question the existence of phenomena, it holds that we need a theory of knowledge to understand them and that each theory may construe the meaning of phenomena differently. Constructivism does not recognise an inherent order of things, an independent reality that research is able to discover. Social reality is 'mind-dependent' and is being generated when studied by theorists and researchers who impose a structure on their perceptions. This synopsis is based on an overview of contrasting ontologies by Peters et al. (338–339). Because researchers are seen as actors by being interpreters of phenomena, theory and practice cannot meaningfully be separated. The purpose of researchers should be "to understand people's stories (and

their meaning), and why some people's stories have priority over other people's stories" (Harré quoted in Peters 338). Neimeyer reiterated in 2009 the basic constructivist belief that that all understanding is arrived at through interactions with other people and situations (Neimeyer R.A. 61). This perspective gives precedence to each person's subjective understandings of his/her life over an objective reality presumed to exist independent of a personal point of view.

My familiarity with the application of constructivism to professional practice goes back almost half a century to Kelly's 1955 Personal Construct Psychology. Combining constructivism with the complementary epistemology of symbolic interactionism, which rests on the interpretivist perspective that people's own stories guide their actions in the world, led me to employ methods that give priority to people's stories in various forms of self-report and behavioural assessments (e.g. McAdams in *The Stories We Live By*; Lincoln, Lynham and Guba. Paradigmatic Controversies, Contradictions, and Emerging Confluences, Revisited 97–128).

Writing "The Relationship Between Symbolic Interactionism and Interpretive Description" in 2012 Oliver points to the similarities of the two methodologies in "sharing a common heritage in pragmatism, interpretivist lens, and focus on contextualized action" (409). She captures Mead's views as constructivist in essence. Behaviour is a response to interpretations of the world, not to the world itself, and people engage continuously in meaning-making which "intercedes between external stimuli and human behaviour. Although our behavioural choices are constrained by context, history, and social structures, they are not determined by them ... SI reflects clinical thinking and emphasizes practical solutions" (410; 414). Blumer's description of SI appeals to my practice orientation: "a down-to-earth approach to the scientific study of human group life and human conduct" (1969 ed. 47).

The philosophical foundations outlined above determine my general scepticism about scientific enquiry, while still engaging in it. At times my doubts and reservations shine through the thesis and may appear to undermine it. Distrust of views which take phenomena for facts representing 'reality', serves to remind me of the necessarily subjective nature of a study of human behaviour, befitting my view of the world.

Planning and carrying out this study posed considerable theoretical and methodological challenges. The story being told here is complex in that it draws, however imperfectly, on many disciplines while not conforming to any one of these. I have attempted to lay connections between theories and studies done in a wide variety of fields. My own unpublished pilot study, a retrospective of long-term writing groups, conducted in 2009 at the University of Sussex has also contributed to the concepts employed in this thesis.

Symbolic Interactionism as inspired by Mead serves as the overarching methodology, outlined in Section 1.3.1 and expanded in Chapter 5. Mead's theories provide a broad philosophical frame, leaving room for refinements in specific contexts and methods. For

adaptation to the context of my study I have chosen five additional theories and key concepts summarised in Sections 3.2 to 3.6.

- A system view of human experience observable in group work (Nicholas; Heron).

- Generative learning theory as a blueprint for personal development (Bateson).

- Sociometry and 'telic' communication to explore the nature of affective relationships between people in groups (Moreno).

- Attachment theory to show how early life experiences determine the capacity to feel safe when creating and playing with options as adults (Bowlby; Winnicott).

- The salutogenic view, developed to discover the developmental, formative elements that keep people healthy and improve their general coping skills (Antonovsky).

The relevance of the theoretical framework to the context of writing groups will become easy to understand after an explanation of the workings of such groups. These are small facilitated groups where people meet at set times to write and discuss their writings prompted by exercises. Chapter 4 is dedicated to a fuller description of structured writing groups.

To recap the relevance of the theoretical framework in the language of this study, I propose that in a structured writing group personal development may be enhanced by the interpersonal interactions around the sharing and discussing of personal writings. Such a group can be considered a playing field for the practice of Symbolic Interaction or, in other words, for meaning-making through perpetual communication. Through their interactions with the writing exercises (i.e. with themselves), with the other group members, and with the facilitator, participants are continually being challenged to consider perspectives other than their own and possibly to learn and use new options and behaviours in writing and later in living.

Such a process needs to be facilitated and structured in a manner that enables free engagement by the whole person; otherwise it can be too risky, provoking anxiety and uncertainty. Creating the necessary 'holding environment' in a writing group is a prerequisite for participant's readiness to take the risk of changing their habitual views and, arguably, of learning anything at all (e.g. Mazza, "Poetry Therapy and Group" 209). To foreshadow one of the key concepts of the study described in section 3.6, I add that the amount of security needed by participants varies with the strength of their sense of coherence, as can be understood from studies done since Antonovsky introduced the

construct in 1987 (e.g. Eriksson and Lindström, "Relation With Health: a Systematic Review"; and van der Hal).

The concepts introduced here in brief appear in operationalised forms in my assessment methods in Chapter 6. Each of the theories and key concepts is sketched in Section 1.3, following the short introduction to symbolic interactionism. Theories are then expanded on in Chapters 2 to 5. Methods are presented in Chapter 6.

1.3.1 Symbolic interactionism

The symbolic interactionist viewpoint I use, based on George Herbert Mead's (1863–1931) philosophical principles, posits that people attribute meanings to experiences in their lives, that those subjective meanings direct their thoughts, feelings and behaviour and are in their turn moulded by those thoughts, feeling and behaviour in a continuous feedback loop. According to this viewpoint, participation in a structured writing group may lead people to change aspects of their meaning-making, possibly resulting in changing some of their behaviour over time.

The personal outcomes of the interactions in a structured writing group are identified and analysed in this thesis. Are group interactions by means of structured writing a pathway for personal development? Do they lead to perceivable changes towards lasting flexibility in behaviour, cognition, emotion, coping, (inter)personal communication, occurring in a person, which together provide evidence that a person has developed during and after participating in a structured writing group?

Through the theoretical lens of Mead's symbolic interactionism awareness can be fostered of what happens between all participants involved in a structured writing group, including the facilitator – here the practitioner-researcher – who also structures the situation and whose observations are different from, but equally valid as, those of the other participants.

1.3.2 The affective dimension of groups

As mentioned, most of the literature deals with writing in individual settings. In group settings one creates a system much more complex in terms of human resources (interactions, behaviours, choices), where writing could conceivably enhance individual development. Before any level of learning can take place, the social atmosphere of the group must be favourable to learning. Group process can be painful and risky, and therefore needs to be contained or 'held' in some way. This point is made by Anzieu in *The Group and the Unconscious* in 1984 (110) and Nicholls in 2009 in her article "Beyond Expressive Writing, Evolving Models of Developmental Creative Writing" (174). As a prerequisite for learning the need to be and to feel safe and supported, to be protected by a holding environment, cannot be stressed enough. The feelings of safety and support emanate in large part from a group's atmosphere. A measure of social atmosphere in groups has been developed by Moreno. Jacob Moreno, often considered the father of

group psychotherapy, used poetry in therapy long before it received formal recognition. In his 1951 book *Sociometry, Experimental Method and the Science of Society* Moreno established sociometry as a tool to map human relationships in groups of all kinds and of varying sizes. Sociometry has informed the one non-verbal assessment tool in this study, 'My World and I Today', to which I will return in Chapter 6.

I use another one of Moreno's concepts, 'telic communication', as a key category pertaining to affective interaction in analysing my data (Moreno, *Psychodrama*; Hare and Hare, 36). 'Tele' was first defined by Moreno as a mutual flow of feeling from one person to another. Tele has qualities of attraction, drawing people closer together; rejection, that is moving away from the other; or neutral, where there is no movement. The concept of 'tele', a tool in sociometry, enables us to explore the nature of relationships between people in groups. Beneficial group development occurs when positive connections are created between people. Moreno proposed that the more mutual positive connections there are between people, the more creativity, flexibility and shared approaches to problem solving occur. People feel valued, involved and included and find it easy to make their best contribution. Where there are positive mutual connections, one finds greater vitality and spontaneity (Hare and Hare, 80–81). I have not found a better description of the process that enables a well-working writing group.

Expressions of tele appear in the written, spoken and pictorial data of my study and as well as reflecting the evolving group atmosphere, they also reflect affective connections outside the group as they develop over time. Incidence of telic communication is an indication of otherwise elusive affective experiences, which nevertheless greatly influence the feelings of security and support necessary for experimenting in a writing group. The concept of telic communication is akin to the theories about attachment and creativity in Section 1.3.5, but rather than taking their developmental view, tele shows an affective snapshot and lends itself to operationalisation both in text and in behavioural assessment.

1.3.3 Group dynamics and change

Mead wrote about group processes in 1934 in *Mind, Self and Society.* Later study in the field of group work has yielded many valuable insights into group dynamics and feedback loops at work in those systems of interpersonal communication, for example Counselman's 2010 "Therapy in the Round", Goffman's 1959 *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life,* Oliver's 2012 "The Relationship Between Symbolic Interactionism and Interpretive Description", Plummer's 2000 *Symbolic Interactionism in the Twentieth Century* and J.H. Turner's 2011 "Extending the Symbolic Interactionist Theory of Interaction Processes: A Conceptual Outline", to name but a few.

The context of interaction in writing groups is informed by insights gained from studies revolving around the apparently contrasting ideas of a passive and active formation of self-perception by individuals in a group. As described by Yeung and Marting 'Passive

process' is captured in Cooley's 1902 concept of 'looking glass self' *(Human Nature and the Social Order,* reprinted 1992) and active process is represented by Mead (e.g. *Mind, Self and Society* 178) when he distinguishes between a social self dubbed 'me' and an 'I', which is an active response to it. In 2003 Yeung and Martin (*The Looking Glass Self: An Empirical Test And Elaboration* 1–40) confirmed Mead's original theory about active ways that adults in natural groups are able to structure their self-concept if they are determined to do so. This in addition to the existence of strong 'passive' forces of internalisation shaping individuals' views of themselves according to the views of other group members. Yeung and Martin's results from a data set of 56 different such groups "are consistent with the agentic understanding of self-construction as a dialectic between impressibility and activity" (21). The empirical evidence for the existence of active personal agency in overcoming the passive looking-glass phenomenon, albeit of small magnitude, shows up most convincingly in longitudinal designs of natural groups. This smallness brings their results in line with the relative constancy of the sense of self in adults. Both Mead's and later Antonovsky's theories (Section 1.3.6), confirmed by the research done on them, attest that the sense of self is pretty solid by the onset of adulthood and that active energy over time is necessary to cause it to change. Accordingly, personal development in adults can be achieved by motivated individuals in social interaction over time.

From a wide social viewpoint one could ask whether human beings develop and change on their own and alone, or if interpersonal connections function as a pathway, maybe a highway, to individual development. Mary Nicholas's 1984 book *Change in the Context of Group Therapy* gives a profound exposition of related concepts by applying humanistic system theory to psychodynamic therapeutic groups. Although the groups in my study are not labelled 'therapeutic', Nicholas's treatment of group processes is applicable to them, as it is to other types of group work.

> Group work is concerned with change on both the micro (individual) level and the macro (group) levels. It works with: 1) all parts of the individual; 2) the relationships among the individuals and subgroups within the group; 3) the relationships of the individual to the people in his various social systems outside of the group; and 4) the group as a whole. (Nicholas, 7–8).

These four levels of change are identical to the ones addressed in 'regular' structured writing groups. This thesis, however, emphasises observable sustained change in the individual, while changes in relationships inside the group are seen as possible mediators to the development of the individual. Changes in relationships outside the short-term groups of the study are considered a possible outcome of individual change, with the exception of life-crises such as bereavements and accidents. The group as a whole is a short-lived entity in the study.

Nicholas provides a philosophical practice-based understanding for generative learning, showing how a change in the frame of reference, a shift to higher-order thinking, creates

ever more changes. She refers to Prigogine's theories about change, pointing to "irreversible processes" (quoted by Nicholas, 9) in nature moving towards increasing complexity. "As a system develops more complexity it calibrates itself to become even more sensitive to internal and external changes" (quoted by Nicholas, 9). This is a self-perpetuating development, another way to explain the inevitable ripple effect of personal and group development that may be observed in well-functioning groups of many kinds. John Heron in his 1999 *Complete Facilitator Handbook* adds a clarification to Nicholas's systemic approach to the relationship between the personal and the group elements in development, based on general systems theory applied to the psychology of learning. In the same way that a single person is a system whose nature arises from the interaction of its parts, this can also be said of the nature of a group, and the unity, the wholeness, of the system should always be kept in mind while facilitating, teaching and training. The work of Heron strengthens the foundations for (w)holistic group facilitators and their ability to be sensitised to group processes and holistic learning. Heron also draws a distinction between teaching/learning a skill and learning to become a whole person (op.cit. 37 ff), presents a structure for whole person learning cycles (289–296) and ends with a working definition of a whole person (312–313). Heron's holistic view and Nicholas's systemic insights are highly relevant to the study of personal development in structured writing groups, since these groups do not aim to teach the skill of writing. The writing is a tool to open a pathway to further development of the whole person participating in the group. Similarly, the group's processes inevitably invite individual participants to consider options different from their habitual ones, possibly leading to an adjustment in their frames of reference and to a shift to higher-order thinking, influencing their behaviour from then onwards.

1.3.4 Generative learning

The potential for developmental change in a context of group dynamics is directly related to Bateson's 'Generative Learning Levels', which are part of the theoretical background of both Nicholas's and Heron's work.

'Adult education' as a term assumes that a link exists between learning and personal development according to Tennant and Pogson in 1995 (chapters 1 and 6). Theoretical concepts in the area of adult education have come into and gone out of fashion. I have tried to ally myself with operational models of the theories currently in fashion, especially of Mezirow's Transformative Learning from 1997 onwards (Mezirow 5–12). However, the many attempts to define differences between concepts and practices that look almost identical to each other led me to conclude that transformative learning can be seen as either synonymous with, or as a special case of personal development, the latter being a wider concept. I base this opinion on a view of human development that transcends the verbal, the cognitive, the emotional, and the neurological, but from which we may be able to gain partial observations into each of these areas.

By using the term personal development, I want to convey my intention to refer to the widest possible sphere of salutary processes affecting human beings, as presented by Heron (op. cit.).

None of the newer approaches so far have given me a better understanding for the practice of my subject matter, thus I returned to systemic roots by means of Gregory Bateson's 1964 model that antedates all others I know of. His model has elements in common with Mead's earlier interactionism. Bateson created a structure for evolving communication on all levels, from the micro to the macro of human functioning, and he coined the concept 'generative learning' (Bateson, "The Logical Categories" 279–308).

Generative learning is described in the literature as a change in the frame of reference, a shift to higher-order thinking, which creates ever more changes that give access to behavioural options. (Bateson, *Steps*; Nicholas; Watzlawick et al., *Pragmatics*, *Change*; and Woodsmall, "So Called Logical Levels"). An important aspect of my research question is, whether any behavioural changes are sustained over time after participation in the writing group. Sometimes people change an unhelpful behaviour for a short period of time, only to have it return later, because the change may not have been supported by other 'parts' (thoughts, feelings, attitudes, beliefs) of themselves. Other approaches to this phenomenon will be addressed in subsequent chapters.

Bateson's levels of learning model posits that a personal goal at any level can only be attained and become a sustainable part of a person's repertoire if those levels above the level of the goal support it. This theoretical construct helps me to track the extent to which a person has learned to change her perspective of situations, to 'step out of the box' and consider an ever widening range of options not only of behaviours, but also of beliefs, emotions and motivations pertaining to situations (Watzlawick, Weakland and Fisch, *Change*). Thus, it gives insight into long-term as opposed to short-term change.

1.3.5 Attachment and creativity

Donald Winnicott highlighted the importance of attachment in early life for the capacity to feel safe when creating and playing with options as adults. I present this developmental connection through Winnicott's work, as a prominent representative of extensive schools of thought like attachment theory in child development (e.g. Stern; Siegel, *The Mindful Brain*) and psychoanalysis (e.g. Anna Freud and Burlingham; Christopher Bollas, Karen Horney).

Attachment is a specific and circumscribed aspect of the relationship between a child and caregiver that is involved with making the child safe and protected (Bowlby), where the child uses the primary caregiver as a *secure base* from which to explore and, when necessary, as a haven of safety and a source of comfort (Waters and Cummings). The

2012 *Encyclopedia of Early Childhood Development* (van IJzendoorn ed.) reports that attachment has been shown to be a powerful predictor of a child's later social and emotional outcome.

Coming from a particular interest in creativity, Winnicott's role is central in showing developmental links between early life experiences and the confidence to be oneself as an adult, in contrast to creating "false-self adaptations" (McDougall 149, 167) in attempts to conform to expectations or rules of others. Winnicott saw creativity as the ability to play, which is something that can inform everyday life. This way of being creative through playing gives the person a sense of meaning and authenticity. His work, from a psychodynamic angle, ties in with Mead's psychosocial and pragmatic basis for Symbolic Interactionism.

Winnicott's creative play can only take place in a 'transitional or potential space'. Transitional space is a condensation of Winnicott's ideas of potential space and transitional phenomena. Potential space is the overlapping space between two individuals, neither subject nor object but some of both. In this space we find transitional objects and transitional phenomena (psyche.com/psyche/mt/archives/000037.html) (Creme and Hunt).

 "Transitional space is a metaphorical domain that a person inhabits when he or she is engrossed in an activity that has a peculiar status with regard to the external 'real' world" (Creme and Hunt op. cit., 156–57). With enough safety (a secure attachment), the infant, later the adult, feels free to be engrossed in play. Insecure attachment leads to anxiety and vigilance, precluding this state.

Potential/transitional space also came to be applied by Winnicott to adult cultural activities and expression such as writing (Creme and Hunt, 146–147). This is how it relates to the arena of writing groups, when they are structured to be a safe space for play available beyond infancy.

1.3.6 Salutogenesis and the Sense of Coherence

As a contrast with the widespread pathogenic view sprouting investigations into the nature, cure and prevention of illness, the medical sociologist Aaron Antonovsky developed the salutogenic view to focus on the developmental and formative elements that keep people healthy and improve their general coping skills. The cross-culturally validated concept Sense of Coherence provides me with yet another angle from which to evaluate the degree of personal development over time. From this angle it becomes visible if people's overall view of their world is at all connected to their continuing personal development and the basic security needed for embarking on it, as described in the previous section. The sense of coherence (SOC) is defined as:

A global orientation that expresses the extent to which one has a pervasive, enduring though dynamic feeling of confidence that (1) the stimuli deriving from one's internal and external environments in the course of living are structured, predictable, and explicable; (2) the resources are available to one to meet the demands posed by these stimuli; and (3) these demands are challenges, worthy of investment and engagement. These three components are called: comprehensibility, manageability and meaningfulness.

(Antonovsky, *Unravelling the Mystery of Health*)

Meaningfulness is the most important of the three components. If a person believes there is no reason to persist and survive and confront challenges, if she has no sense of meaning, then she will have no motivation to comprehend and manage events. Antonovsky's essential argument is that 'salutogenesis' (*Mystery of Health* 12–13) depends on experiencing a strong sense of coherence and his research demonstrated that sense of coherence, measured by the SOC scale, predicts positive health outcomes (Eriksson and Lindström, *Validity* 460). But SOC is not something that can be acquired at will. It develops slowly during one's formative years and has been shown to solidify at a personal level by early adulthood (ibid. 463). Those with a strong SOC tend to maintain their coping strength with age, those with a weak SOC are bound to experience a further decrease (Antonovsky, *Mystery of Health*, 120–22). A sustained increase in the SOC beyond early childhood is rare, and finding active pathways to achieve even a minor increase, will be a contribution to the health and wellbeing of adults, tying in with the objectives of my study.

The concept of sense of coherence connects seamlessly with the study's symbolic interactionist methodology of interpreting the world to make sense of it, with its developmental approach, the generative learning levels, the importance of attachment and the affective barometer of telic communication.

1.3.7 Summary of the theoretical framework

My theoretical framework is based on a constructivist ontology. Mead's symbolic interactionism forms its overarching methodology, enhanced by theoretical concepts developed at later dates.

Constructivism posits that humans (have to) make meaning of phenomena, leading to their various views of the world. For the study of personal development in structured writing groups I draw upon symbolic interactionism to focus on the process of meaning-making in the perpetual communication of verbal and written interpersonal interactions.

A system-view of human experience guides a group's facilitator towards the development of the whole person within the group while being aware of the levels on which the group operates. It also gives a practice-based understanding for generative learning, showing how a change in the frame of reference, a shift to higher-order thinking, creates ever more changes. This is the essence of generative learning theory, in effect a blueprint for personal development.

Affective relationships in groups are essential as the base for a secure environment, which is a prerequisite for learning and risking personal change. The nature of affective relationships between people in groups can be observed through their expressions of telic communication.

Developmental attachment theory shows how early life experiences determine the capacity to feel safe as adults when creating and playing with options.

The sense of coherence, based on a salutogenic view, functions as a measure of the extent to which persons' views of their world support their skills in coping with the vicissitudes of life.

Operationalisations of these key concepts to analyse written and spoken texts form the basis of my assessment methods as detailed in later chapters.

1.4. Outline of chapters

The thesis is organised in four parts.

Part I is devoted to the social and theoretical background from which the study has grown. Three chapters, including this introduction, present this background, the aims and objectives of the study, definitions of terms, and the key concepts chosen from the literature.

Part II connects the subject matter of writing groups to the methodology chosen for this study. Chapter 4 give a detailed description of the nature of structured writing groups. Chapter 5 presents the methodological framework. In my approach to symbolic interactionism I emphasise the interrelations between its basic tenets and other interpretive approaches that share underlying philosophies. The role of pragmatism and of freedom in the choice of research methods in the symbolic interactionist tradition is addressed and emphasis is put on the importance of arriving at a rich understanding of situations in life, by shifting between and combining different perspectives. The chapter concludes with a summary of the ways in which SI frames my study.

The empirical Part III offers, in two chapters, the practical application of my methodology. Chapter 6 explains rationale, forms and contents of the three assessment

instruments and lays out the procedures for the data collection. Chapter 7 presents the findings and explores comparisons between findings from the three instruments in a single frame, yielding a multi-faceted picture of the structured writing group experiences.

Part IV, consisting of Chapter 8, contains a discussion of applicability, suggestions for future research, and further reflections.

Appendices A, B and C contain materials presented to the participants before and at the start of the study.

Appendix D shows the standardised Orientation to Life (SOC) questionnaire used in assessments.

Appendices E and F present one full analysis and fourteen summary analyses of findings.

Appendix G shows the study's poster: a visual metaphor attempting to convey the gist of writing groups to anybody who has never taken part in one.

CHAPTER 2 – KEY CONCEPTS FROM THEORETICAL ROOTS

Prelude

Old voice: And Theory One met Theory Two and then they begat Theory Three; Three was attracted to Four and they begat Five, and so on through the generations of thought...

Young voice: Stop this boring story! Where is the romance? Where is the love that led to all this begetting? I've heard that at the beginning there was a Word, but that word must have been Love to beget anything at all.

Old voice: So sorry I'll do my best to keep you interested here. You have to understand, though, that I feel constrained by conflicting interests in telling you the story of how I've come to embrace the ideas of my study. (You see, I do embrace.) The telling needs to be serious, and romance has a rather frivolous reputation. Hidden between the next lines lies a lot of passion, felt over many years, and still here.

2.1 Introduction to theoretical sources

The next two chapters expound the theoretical connections between the literature and the concepts of the study. Chapter 2 describes my search for a definition of personal development in adults by expanding my review of theoretical sources of the key concepts in the literature (listed in chapter 1) that are relevant to structured writing groups. In Chapter 3, I construct an operational definition of it, in order to observe and measure change in the level of personal development of participants in structured writing groups.

In the search strategy of the literature I have cast a wide, interdisciplinary dragnet, to discover relevant theory and study from past and present. This was necessary because the study of writing groups is not a separate, or even recognised, discipline. The field spans psychology, psychotherapy, psychiatry, narrative studies, learning and education, literacy, mental health, physical health, social work, adult development and all their many derivatives. I have made use of sources in several languages in addition to English, namely Dutch, Hebrew, German, and translations of Spanish, Italian, Swedish and Finnish studies available in scholarly publications. In addition, I have been electronically alerted to new publications by search terms for key words: writing, writing and groups, writing and health, writing and brain (neurobiology), art therapy, narrative therapy, adult development, longitudinal research, mixed-method research, salutogenesis, resilience, flexibility, coping, awareness, sense of self, generative learning. The alerts are active in the following databases: Assia (Proquest), BMJ learning, Bibsys, Conference Proceedings Citation Index: Social Science & Humanities (Web of Science), ERIC, Google Scholar, PubMed (Medline), Scopus, ProQuest Dissertations & Theses: UK & Ireland,

PsycInfo, Science Direct, JStore, AMED (Ovid SP), Cochrane Library (Wiley). In addition I set up alerts on the journal content platform for the Taylor & Francis Group, which publishes specialised journals, among them the most pertinent Journal of Poetry Therapy, which annually lists dissertation abstracts. On all journals I searched historically as far back as electronic resources are available. From each source I mined the reference lists, finding older sources. When possible I used personal communication with authors and colleagues who are active writing group facilitators. I have not found books on writing groups as a means for development. Most books cited in the thesis deal with general theories of learning, development, psychology / psychotherapy, philosophy and methodologies.

In the field of writing interventions the study of writing groups, although growing, forms a minority. The majority consist of laboratory studies of individual expressive writing in the areas of psychological and physical health, i.e. trauma and burn-out (around the millennium 1999–2001 for example, Esterling et al.; Lange et al., Interapy), survivor support groups and chronic pain in search of writing cures (like Smyth et al., Symptom Reduction), professional development, i.e. reflective writing to enhance clinical and academic creativity (Bolton Therapeutic Potential, Reflective Enquiry, Reflective Practice; Crème and Hunt; Hunt, Adult Learning, Transformative Learning; Lengelle and Meijers, Mystery to Mastery, Narratives At Work).

Some of the recent studies of individual writing have limited themselves to 'young' samples of college students (e.g. Layous et.al 635), others researched subject populations with very specific characteristics and contexts, like a long-distance writing project for prisoners (Reiter 215). Although Reiter studied 'personal growth', she did not define and operationalise it, but left its evaluation to the individual respondents (ibid 222). Prison context greatly hampered the conditions of this study and although some of Reiter's results show evidence of enhanced emotional balance, the number of questionnaires completed is too low for scientific validity (ibid 223). Exercises used in these studies with individuals have however been inspirational and some are used in my group work, like in adapting Layous's theme of writing about one's best possible future self (Layous et al. 635–636). Reiter's declaration that the sessions were not therapeutic but educational in nature is in line with the structured writing groups for a general population in my study (Reiter 217).

The few studies of group writing I found can be divided between periods: those from the 1990's, and those from 2006 to the present. The older literature on writing groups appears to be of the cross-sectional anecdotal kind, without baseline and outcome measures beyond the self-reports of participants and the observations of the authors.

A notable example from the early period is Buck and Kramer's report on a seven-week program combining a group of university student-mentors from a course of poetry and interpersonal communication with a group of revalidating hospital patients reading,

writing and discussing poetry (56). They concluded that the group which started in an atmosphere of distrust became more cohesive and members grew more capable of direct expression (69). The observations of the seven group sessions described confirm the authors' predominantly theoretical conclusions (69-70), in contrast to my attempt to operationalise and analyse data gathered during the group sessions.

Since 2008 more studies of writing groups of several kinds have been published, hinting at a revival of academic interest in the field. The authors known to me of these studies are Hunt, Lengelle and Meijers, Nicholls, Scott-Reid and Wright & Bolton. Important, mainly conceptual, influences on the current study come from the 2009 Lengelle and Meijers "Mystery to Mastery: an Exploration of What Happens in the Black Box of Writing and Healing", where the authors explored the increased connection between internal and external dialogue resulting from writing (2 and 15). In 2014 Lengelle continued her work in a doctoral thesis, where she applied creative, expressive and reflective writing to identity learning processes relating to career development (Lengelle, R. "Career Writing: Creative, Expressive, and Reflective Approaches to Narrative and Dialogical Career Guidance"). Though her work approximates my study, it differs in that she did not define personal development and in my view looked at isolated aspects of human behaviour.

Nicholls has influenced my work by studying the importance of embodied language, and development as a goal of writing. She also advocates going further than expressive writing in methods of study and intervention (Nicholls, "Developing a theoretical framework for the use of creative writing as a developmental tool"; "Beyond Expressive Writing, Evolving Models of Developmental Creative Writing"; "Writing the Body"). Her influence lies in supporting ideas I had developed separately over the years, which have been strengthened by seeing them clad and organised in academic shape. Progressing from personal to group experiences of writing, adapting approach and exercises to needs of different groups and individuals in groups, Nicholls and I follow similar paths in the quest for personal development. We share the cautions about professional facilitation of groups to ensure safety and the view that writing is not to be seen as a panacea or even as suitable for everyone. Many examples of these themes can be found in "Writing the body" (12, 120, 185). In this both Nicholls and I are influenced by the work of our tutor Celia Hunt, whose latest book Transformative Learning through Creative Life Writing is discussed and compared with my current study in 5.5.

Like the authors cited above, I chose to focus on adults in this study because I found a gap in the knowledge about pathways to continued development after what are often called 'the formative years' (Yigael, Evolving Psyche). This gap, in combination with my experience of facilitating long-term writing groups with special populations, like holocaust survivors and other sufferers of chronic posttraumatic stress, made me want to

discover if short structured writing groups can reliably serve as one of such pathways offered to adults in non-clinical populations.

I have briefly pointed to the current debates about adult development in the 'background' section of Chapter 1. I revisit these debates here to focus on some of the approaches that were mentioned and shine more light on those that paved the path I have chosen to follow in my thesis.

Defining personal development is complex. Since there is no consensus in the literature about what adult personal development consists of, any attempt to define it cannot but lean towards a particular view of human learning and growth. "The best way to arrive at relatively unbiased outcomes is to acknowledge and define the personal bias of the researcher as a feature of the study" (McNiff 53)[2].

Reviewing the debates in the literature has made me aware that any choice of operational definition will govern the methods of work on every level, starting from how the groups are facilitated and ending with how the data are analysed and interpreted. My choice embodies the philosophy and methodology of the study, as will become apparent in this and later chapters. Other choices are likely to produce other outcomes or other perspectives on the processes taking place in writing groups. Celia Hunt's 2013 book Transformative Learning through Creative Life Writing, shows personal development occurring in an academic educational context, viewed from a critical-realist philosophy, in contrast to my constructivist outlook. Yet it is interesting that Hunt found significant developmental effects in individuals in a 'select' (academic) population with the use of a different methodology.

2.1.1 Personal development literature: grand views

This chapter is organised from the large to the small. First I engage with general overviews of adult development from contrasting perspectives, then I zoom in on the views underlying my thesis.

Bergen divides the literature on development in different ways in her 2008 book Human Development: Traditional and Contemporary Theories. When we look at the history roughly from the twentieth century onwards, theories of human development evolved from a nature-nurture debate to an interactionist perspective, recognising more than one dominant mode of explanation. Theories focusing on historical and sociocultural factors

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[2] For McNiff, objectivity is perhaps 'an illusory goal in reference to any research associated with the personal psyche and the creative process' (op.cit. 52). Since it is impossible to observe the world independently of our predispositions and judgements, and since these judgements are inherent in any framework or paradigm irrespective of its apparent claims to objectivity, then it seems a point of responsibility to acknowledge, question and define the judgements themselves. (With thanks to Sophie Nicholls for this reference.)

acknowledge that these contexts interact with biology and genetics. Bergen arrives at a distinction between linear and nonlinear theories by creating a meta-conceptual order from various systems of categorisation.

Linear theories, which include empiricist and rationalist viewpoints, have "a perspective focused on predicting developmental directional progress towards higher levels" (op. cit. 10). Nonlinear in Bergen's view are sociohistorical, bio-ecological, and dynamical system theories. They have "multiple perspectives focused on examining probabilities resulting from the interaction of many levels of factors" (ibid).

Bergen writes that the linear-type theory has tended to explain developmental processes universally, across cultures, while the nonlinear focuses on culturally specific, situated, developmental changes (ibid. 13). From among the nonlinear theories Bergen characterises work on dynamical systems as 'proto-theory', work in progress, that closely follows discoveries of neurobiology and brain science. Concepts like complexity, plasticity, self-organisation and recursive nested features are central in dynamical systems theories.

> Dynamic Systems Models are especially well suited to dealing with complex systems with many interdependent variables. Such systems have self-organising properties, resulting in discontinuous, non-linear shifts in organisation that are largely unpredictable. These shifts lead to the unanticipated emergence of properties that did not exist before.
>
> (Boston Change Process Study Group, 97)

According to Bergen a small input in a system could yield disparate results and can explain developmental change (Bergen 17). My argument also proceeds on the reasoning that although experiences in a structured writing group are a small input in relation to a person's lifespan, they can yield frequently unanticipated developmental results. The unanticipated disappearance of a case of chronic headache can serve as an example of this. The person in question had been in prolonged individual therapy, including personal writing, without improvement in her physical and emotional wellbeing. After participating in a writing group however, she reported the headache almost gone and a new ability to cope with her complicated family circumstances. The only difference in her life was that she joined a writing group (Cune, "The Nature of Personal Development Processes in My Writing Groups", 32).

The linear/nonlinear division, as defined by Bergen, may, however, be misleading. Why should an approach that predicts developmental progress towards higher levels necessarily favour cross-cultural explanations of developmental processes? Can it not combine its ideas of progress with culturally specific, situated, developmental changes that Bergen attributes to nonlinear theories? Can it not also follow discoveries of neurobiology and brain science– Bergen's division appealed to me initially as a neat way

of creating order in a confusing terrain, but on closer scrutiny it failed to situate the approaches that have the greatest relevance to development in writing groups as I have come to see it, leading me to look for another perspective on the field as a whole.

Perceived from a content point of view, two broad strands can be distinguished in the literature on human development. There are studies around theories of 'consolidation' and limitations with age as summarised in the 2013 Ballesteros et al. (18–19), and studies that find evidence of continuing mental and emotional growth throughout the lifespan. The second strand, represented for instance by Bronfenbrenner from 1979, reaches beyond dualistic 'either-or' frameworks. Current theories can be seen as encompassing the 'lifelong growth thinking' in a wider and more refined framework than past theories. Levy writes in 2009 that ageing is widely viewed as sufficiently explained by an unavoidable process of physiological decline. This gives us no explanation for "the considerable cultural variability found in older individuals' health", therefore a psychosocial approach to aging is needed (Levy, 332).

My study, by its very nature, does not fit in with the assumptions that aging inexorably leads to decline and diminution of functioning potential. The assumption that development throughout the lifespan is possible is central to my study. I was glad to learn that some of the more recent studies based on ideas of inevitable decline already differentiate greatly as to which functions specifically tend to decline (apart from the more visible physical ones) and acknowledge that some, especially cognitive and affective functions, may even advance with age. Park's 2007 research for one brings the 'decline with age idea' closer to the 'lifelong growth thinking' by contributing valuable findings and suggesting interventions to enable development with age.

Popular belief among lay people, as shown in Heckhausen's 2002 study, appears to lag behind this trend (quoted in Pulkinnen and Caspi 261), by generally giving more weight to decline than to development with age. The feeling of external constraints on development is more pronounced in those who suffer from a chronic illness (Sherman and Cotter 2).

Recent studies of life trajectory expectancies in clinical and non-clinical samples alike are focusing on the interrelations between several variables, grouped under the heading of

control beliefs [3] that were formerly studied separately. Jutta Heckhausen suggests that individuals exercise control over their personal development. She attempts to conceptualize "the control processes involved in engagement with and disengagement from developmental goals" in a model that particularly emphasises "the role of developmental deadline, which marks the radical transition from favourable to unfavourable conditions for reaching certain developmental goals" (Pulkkinen and Caspi 276).

At which time in their life do people decide it is too early, about time, or too late, to marry, to have a child, or, say, to learn skydiving? This is based on domains of functioning like partnership, childbearing and health, but in conjunction with findings from her earlier research (op. cit. 260) also pertains to people's views of how likely they are to grow and develop in general as they age. Heckhausen's research showed that "higher age groups were increasingly associated with risks for decline" in their own eyes (op. cit. 261). Interestingly Röcke and Lachman, in their 2008 study of "Perceived Trajectories of Life Satisfaction Across Past, Present, and Future: Profiles and Correlates of Subjective Change in Young, Middle-aged, and Older Adults", found that perceiving a decline from present to future was stronger in persons with very low baseline functioning and longitudinal losses in bio-psychosocial functioning (845). This finding tallies with the theory and subsequent 2013 findings about changes in the sense of coherence in old age (Lövheim et al.).

Control beliefs are defined as "expectancies about personal mastery and environmental contingencies that influence outcomes and performance" (Sherman and Cotter, 2). They bear a clear relationship to the ingredients of the sense of coherence, explained below (2.2.6). In the present study of writing groups, spontaneous written and spoken expressions of control beliefs by participants are followed longitudinally, to record changes and possible development.

The theoretical background overview to my work, summed up, consists of grand comprehensive world-views (all things are connected to each other), including system dynamics adapted to human conditions and characterised by a basic belief in human

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3 Internal and external locus of control (Rotter, 1966); health locus of control (Wallston, Stein, & Smith, 1994), primary and secondary control (Heckhausen, Wrosch, & Schulz, 2010), self-efficacy (Bandura, 1997), and personal control (Lachman et al., 2011). Lachman and Weaver (1998) conceptualise control beliefs as including two elements: mastery: an internal sense of efficacy and effectiveness at meeting goals, and constraint: beliefs about obstacles and factors beyond one's control that interfere with attaining goals. These conceptualizations are similar, but not identical to, internal and external control beliefs, respectively, all as quoted in Sherman and Cotter, 2013, p.2.

potential for development. The term 'belief' is here used intentionally: each theoretical strand can produce some convincing evidence of its basic assumptions, depending on which research methods it uses and which unit of analysis (detail of the world) it studies. Ultimately however, it appears to come down to the underlying world-views of those devising the theories and undertaking the studies. Investigating whether personal development in adults is possible through structured writing groups belongs with the postmodern metamorphosis of the human potential movement, concurring with my view of the world, no more and no less.

2.1.2 A guide for the perplexed[4] : making meaning out of complexity

In pursuing this study, a vast literature with its multitude of viewpoints left me utterly perplexed and in need of a guide. I was impelled to question my longstanding assumptions about working with adult groups. I had to trace back how I had come by these assumptions and interrogate myself about whether they still hold true, after all I read. Somewhat to my surprise I discovered that some early theories that underlie my assumptions have been strengthened by research done since.

It has been an interesting journey to learn from sources previously unknown to me but which turned out to be the philosophical foundations of my practice. This was the case with Mead's symbolic interactionism which has become the study's theoretical frame, the topic of Chapter 5. Since Mead's frame is broad and dates back to around 1934, it needs refinements and methods adapted to my specific context.

To fill this need I selected ideas and concepts from additional theories that are in harmony with symbolic interactionism, such as a systems-view of human experience in groups (Nicholas; Heron); generative learning theory as a blueprint for personal development (Bateson); sociometry and telic communication to explore the nature of affective relationships between people in groups (Moreno); attachment theory (Bowlby; Winnicott); recent (2010) psychodynamic concepts of non-verbal knowing (Boston Study Group); and the salutogenic view, with its measurement of the sense of coherence (Antonovsky).

I've listed only the largest stepping-stones on the path I have chosen. From time to time I will mention additional approaches that need to be acknowledged to make better sense

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[4] After the title of a 12th-century book by Maimonides (Rabbi Moshe Ben Maimon)

of the study's complexity.[5] All these approaches are in harmony with one another by sharing constructivist assumptions about how people make sense of their world and their experiences and how the sense they've made directs their actions. Thus the ontological perspective of all theories that inform my methodology and methods is constructivist, from Kelly's 1955 Personal Construct Psychology to Neimeyer's 2009 Constructivist Psychotherapy, presupposing, albeit in various degrees, that the world humans experience and have to cope with is construed by their subjective understanding of it. Such understanding is arrived at through interactions with other people and situations.

This perspective gives precedence to each person's subjective understandings of his/her life over an 'objective' reality presumed to exist independent of a personal point of view. And lest the last sentence may give cause to misunderstanding of my 'politics', I re-emphasise the word precedence. I do not believe that external circumstances, socio-economic and political, are unimportant. My study is done in a privileged society, with participants privileged by this society to be literate, to be sheltered, to be adequately fed and so forth. Therefore I have allowed myself the luxury to take these circumstances 'as given', as part of participants' baseline situation.

2.2 Approaches to personal development: dealing with details

Inside every adult there's still a child that lingers.
Guy Laliberté[6]

Life is a dynamic process characterised by developments of one kind or another. Humans are not static by nature. Rather than using the medieval notion of regarding children as small versions of adults (Cunningham 37), I entertain the image of adults as larger versions of children, especially in their ability to develop themselves.

Moving now from the grand to more detailed views, I briefly address the relationship between early (as from birth) developmental processes and the later ones my study is looking at. The following sections lead up to establishing a distinction between the concepts of change and development culminating in Section 2.2.5. The roles of affect, learning, communication and attachment in personal development are given their place.

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[5] The first of these is the 1981 seminal work on metaphorical language by Lakoff and Johnson. In the wording of the current paragraph, as in many other places, it is apparent that I conceive of my work as a journey through life. It is charted and has ways, roads and paths. *Metaphors we live by* is an ever-present, mostly invisible, companion at the background of this study. The second, relatively invisible, source is 1981 Bakhtinian dialogism (Bakhtin and Bundgaard) as developed into the 2012 'bridging theory' of Dialogical Self (Hermans).

[6] Founder of Cirque du Soleil and the 'One drop Foundation' promoting access to water.

These topics could be addressed in any order, since they are neither hierarchical nor sequential facets of the 'whole' of development, being a complex system with many interdependent variables.

At this point it bears reminding that the study of writing groups deals with development of a non-material nature, which means not pertaining to the physical body, in as much as this is visible with the naked eye. We are dealing with aspects of human communication, emotion, belief systems and their expression in wellbeing and behaviour. These aspects may have physical correlates on the neurological and endocrine levels that fall outside the current study. I am unequipped to study processes like cortisol responses, neural brain patterns and genes that switch on or off in response to environmental contingencies.[7] A modern concept may however bridge the world of neurosciences and the realm of mundane human communications.

In The Selfish Gene (ch.11) Richard Dawkins coined the term 'meme' for a vehicle of cultural transmission envisioned on the model of genes. Like genes transmit genetic information from body to body, so memes can "leap from brain to brain" through something like imitation (ibid.). True to Dawkins's intended meaning the use of the word 'meme' itself has spread through modern culture like wildfire. The term has 'gone viral', in the popular lingo of our time. Even without elaborating this intriguing idea further, it is relevant to the ways of learning and developing of persons and in societies. Following from this, personal development can be considered as evolution taking place in a single lifespan, while the child is inside the adult still, or speaking with the pre-feministic Wordsworth: The Child is father of the Man.[8] That child is capable of learning throughout its lifespan, though its body may have aged.

The next theoretical edifice presented here, a very recent one, tries to trace a progression from childhood to maturity, building on early structures of the (wo)man towards ever more complex structures.

The conceptual unifying framework of human development, proposed in 2011 by the clinical psychologist Yigael, shows the child being literally the father of the (wo)man. Yigael's evolutionary view purports to delineate how, in infancy, mental structures

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[7] Siegel (*Interpersonal Neurobiology*, 68) postulates that traumatic memories remain unresolved because of a blockage in the pathway towards a consolidation of these memories into a coherent narrative of the self. Unresolved trauma or grief is thus regarded as a lack of cortical consolidation of a traumatic period in a person's life story; it remains isolated from normal integrative functioning and interferes with the development of a coherent sense of self.

[8] My heart leaps up when I behold / A rainbow in the sky: / So was it when my life began; / So is it now I am a man; / So be it when I shall grow old, / Or let me die / The Child is father of the Man." Poems referring to the Period of Childhood, published 1807.

develop from physical structures. Mental structures grow and differentiate, analogous to growth of physical structures from stem cells. Developmental sequences from preverbal to verbal, from infant to adult functions, are literally (that is, not by use of metaphors) mapped in detail by Yigael.

According to Yigael, initial, structured human development takes about eighteen years and likely continues after that, but in an unmapped and individually differentiated manner. In this he concurs with Courtenay who concludes his critique of adult development models with the recommendation of abandoning those models, since individual differences dominate any hypothesised regularity in the life course. At best they should be regarded as alternative ways of how adults can develop. Courtenay gives special attention to the bias towards growth evident in the earlier models and warns against labelling a lack of growth as a psychological deficit (Courtenay, 151). Likewise, a tenet of holistic education, set down in 2000 by Ron Miller in the encyclopaedia of informal education is that "each person should strive to be all that they can be in life. There are no deficits in learners, just differences" (web, "A Brief Introduction to Holistic Education").

Yigael adds that only very general things can be said about late puberty and on to maturity, namely that the personal process of differentiated development will define the person's behaviour more than his potential. The 'evolutionary program', characterised by a finite number of human motives, ends with maturity and we have to find our own improvements (Yigael, Evolving Psyche 179ff). The study of personal development in writing groups is about one way to find our own improvements, our own 'updates' in the culture in which the idea of memes prevails. Is it possible that in a group, structured around tasks such as writing, people check out ideas expressed by others and choose whether to adopt them or not? Is it possible that if they try out, by doing, new ideas, some of those ideas may be permanently included in their behavioural repertoire, leading to sustained changes, which amount to personal development?

The child from whom the adult grows stays an integral part of the person. It does not necessarily 'disappear' from a person's self-awareness as suggested by words like 'forget' or 'repress', which may happen when circumstances have been threatening and overwhelming for the child. If it does disappear, which means dropping below the threshold of awareness or consciousness (e.g. Yigael, "Life: Definition" 103), many resources accessible during childhood become unavailable to the adult, creativity not the least. Inaccessible thoughts and ideas have been labelled as 'repressed', and affects of which one is not conscious were deemed 'suppressed' in psychodynamic terms. Both are metaphors for mechanisms of psychic defense coined by Freud (McDougall 151–52). Recent developments in the psychodynamic school of thought that incorporate child attachment studies recognise pathways additional to defensive repression by which the 'inner child' comes to live below the radar of a person's awareness. Such other

explanations make room for a variety of interventions, unlike the use of classical interpretations, with relevance to developmental processes in writing groups.[9] More on this below, where salient points from the Boston Change Process Study Group (BSG) assist me in differentiating between affective non-verbal and cognitive verbal knowing, and between change and development and their interrelations.

2.2.1 How the detailed views fit in my large conceptual frame

I have attempted to learn from, and transcend, earlier research in the field of development that is now understood to have been biased by culture, gender etc. To this end I base myself on those theories that have been shown to apply widely across cultures (e.g. Moreno; Antonovsky; Kelly; Bateson) and by adopting a constructivist systems model (Neimeyer R.A 23–25), which regards "human meaning and action as the emergent outcome of a series of hierarchically embedded systems and subsystems" (op.cit., 23). This approach overcomes the nature-nurture debate, by viewing both the biological, physical level and the level of internal and external behaviour to be shaped through continuous interactions of "… multi-levelled organism-environment systems". These include as their 'nature part' biological-genetic levels. On the 'nurture' side they differentiate between personal agency, dyadic relations, and cultural-linguistic communication (ibid.).

Like many constructivist and postmodern approaches, the study presented here focuses on the level of personal agency, where the unit of analysis is the "situated interpretive activity of individuals and groups" (Mascolo et al. 3).

In such a model all early levels of development can be active throughout the life span. The child is in the adult still … Moreover, repair for what may have gone wrong is always possible, a typically optimistic assumption for postmodern therapists, according to Neimeyer (31). Common to such therapists is a respectful stance adopted towards their clients. They recognise that each person's life experiences are unique, having been filtered and given personal meaning in particular social contexts. Therefore labelling clients with diagnostic categories in therapeutic and educational settings is something to refrain from. I have enacted such respect in working with the groups of my study.

In the following subsections I differentiate and lay connections between key concepts to weave together the strands in my working definition of personal development.

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[9] Writing as a reflective activity has been shown to enable 'unconscious' material to surface, without interpretation, by way of awakening a 'felt, bodily self'. (Nicholls, Developmental tool, Evolving Models).

2.2.2 Affective communication and development

> ... our appreciation of our existential communication partner and our relationship
> has been enriched, as we have touched upon an awareness of irreplaceability and
> unrepeatability. At such times we have experienced 'eternity by way of the
> moment'.
>
> Karl Jaspers (828)

The BSG proposed the term 'moments of meeting' for the moments in a relationship in which change occurs by a rearrangement of the intersubjective field between those present. Although they refer to situations in psychotherapy there is no reason to limit the power of such moments to a therapeutic relationship. A participant in such a moment specifically recognises the other's subjective reality. Each partner grasps and ratifies a similar version of 'what is happening now, between us'. This is a "transactional event (in contrast to the semantic event of interpretation) that rearranges the patient's implicit relational 'knowing'. New potential is not only enacted but also represented as a future possibility" (BSG 33–34, emphasis in the original).

Implicit relational knowing, as conceived and studied by the BSG, is knowing how to be with others. Every infant is exposed to some ways of being with others from the moment of birth, long before thinking in terms of language. Knowing how to be with others is in the affective domain, and as described above, for a large part outside of awareness.

In most of the studies done to date about the effects of writing there was no need to investigate how subjects affectively relate to others in 'live' interaction. Studies were done in individual settings, where each person writes in isolation, e.g. all studies of expressive writing in the Pennebaker tradition (Smyth and Pennebaker, "Right Recipe"). Group settings however, create a system filled with interactions. Before any development or learning can take place, the social atmosphere of the group – the way people feel with each other – must be favourable to learning. It needs to be safe and supportive.

Telic communication is used to measure affective interactions in groups. In 1946 Moreno derived tele, denoting a process of mutual appreciation and understanding, originally from the Greek word denoting 'far off' (Hollander 7) later explained by the modern 'telephone' as an instrument that facilitates two-way communication (Hare and Hare 36, 98–100). Tele bridges between qualitative and quantitative enquiry, by also using numerical values for types and frequencies of interactions. Moreno's tele, as it is operationalised in my study (Chapter 6 coding agenda in Table 6.2), can be directly linked to how the experience of 'moments of meeting' is communicated. Moments at which two people specifically recognise each other's subjective reality, where a mutual comprehension and confirmation of 'what is happening now, between us' occurs, are of immense affective significance to the parties involved. The intensity of the ensuing

feeling compels them more often than not to give it expression in spoken and/or written words. Intensity of the affect is key. The expression can be of attraction or rejection, but not of neutrality, which lacks intensity. Marking out expressions of tele is a way to map a trajectory of affect for each person in the writing group; one of the ways to observe whether changes occur at all and also if they endure over time.

2.2.3 Learning as development

> Most learning is not the result of instruction. It is rather the result of
> unhampered participation in a meaningful setting. Most people learn best by
> being 'with it', yet school makes them identify their personal, cognitive growth
> with elaborate planning and manipulation.
>
> Ivan Illich (Deschooling Society)

Learning and personal development are connected, possibly in a way analogous to the relationship between change and development as discussed here and in the following sections. For example, single skills can be learned and cognitive knowledge can be acquired without the learner labelling this achievement as personal development. To recognise and acknowledge that such development has taken place something more is needed. This recognition is considered to be one of the numerous components of the – rather vaguely – labelled 'metacognition', illuminated by the 2009 "Conceptual Analysis of a Metacognitive Component of Zohar and Ben Adi", who concur that it is a concept that lacks coherence (191) and even denied existence by some scholars (184). According to Moseley et al. in 2005, metacognition involves an awareness of one's cognitive functioning together with the application of one's cognitive resources for continuing learning and problem solving (14). Especially relevant to learning through writing in groups is the contribution written in 2014 by Kieran and Christoff in their contribution to The Cognitive Neuroscience of Metacognition. They subtitled their chapter "When Metacognition Helps the Wandering Mind Find Its Way" (293), arguing how a focused cognition and unfocused, spontaneous thought can facilitate each other through an

> …intricate balance whereby spontaneous thought is allowed to arise naturally while at the same time accompanied by metacognitive monitoring of one's mental content and state of awareness. In ideal cases, this symbiotic relationship results in metacognition facilitating or optimizing spontaneous thought processes, so that they become more creative, less intrusive, and more likely to lead to novel conclusion and realizations (op. cit. 293–319).

This process may be at work in writing groups, where participants are free on the one hand to let their creative minds wander through words, while on the other hand they

cognitively check their writings through interactive feedback. The importance of behavioural mastery of new learning also needs to be emphasised, following up on Bandura's 1977 concept of 'self-efficacy' (Bandura, 194). It is not enough to have the expectation of knowing how to do something; only the actual doing may lead to a feeling of competency that contributes to the Sense of Coherence (2.2.6).

Among these integrative thinkers John Heron in his 1999 Complete Facilitator Handbook holds that learning is holistic in that it involves the whole person: a being that is physical, perceptual, affective, cognitive, intellectual, imaginative, intuitive, conative (exercising the will), social and political, psychic and spiritual. He also spells out the possible damage of learning: it may involve the whole person negatively by the denial of these aspects and their exclusion from learning. In this case we get alienation, such as intellectual learning alienated from affective and imaginal learning, with the result that the repression of what is excluded distorts the learning of what is included (op. cit. 23). Learning, and its frequent concomitant teaching, are thus not without risk, which points to the responsibility of teachers and, in our case, facilitators of writing groups, to provide for the learners' needs and capabilities.

How is learning a skill different from learning to become a whole person, or in other words, learning to develop? Are not fundamental life skills, like walking and talking, possibly writing too, necessary parts in becoming a whole person? Maybe not, if we go with Heron. It is after all possible to be a person who cannot walk and this is certainly true for 'smaller', more specific skills. On the other hand, it is possible to learn a distinct skill, calligraphy for example, and feel a change that reverberates in many aspects of one's being [10]. The difference lies in the extent to which many experiential domains of a person are being engaged in the learning. Extensive involvement during the learning process of the facets on Heron's long list (see above) creates lasting effects in people, which carry over to other areas of their life. Becoming a whole person, as defined by Heron (312–313) may be considered personal development. His work applies general systems theory in a thoroughly humanistic way to the psychology of learning, thereby connecting with the other comprehensive and constructivist strands of theory that underlie my study.

Although I found many early theories too compartmentalised, one of them is integrative. The choice to look at the data through Gregory Bateson's 1964 model, rather than

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[10] To reverberate is a manifestation of an embodied 'felt sense' (Gendlin, Focusing). Merleau-Ponty made the case for the embodied mind as follows: "The meaning is not on the phrase like the butter on the bread, like a second layer of 'psychic reality' spread over the sound; it is the totality of what is said, the integral of all the differentiations of the verbal chain; it is given with the words for those who have ears to hear. And conversely the whole landscape is overrun with words." (quoted in BSG op.cit.,181).

adopting one of a multitude of recent integrative tools to assess learning and human development, reflects my intention to transcend the particular and the content bound. So I returned to systemic roots by means of Bateson's model of generative learning. This label covers, to the best of my understanding, the same concepts as the presently better-known label of 'transformative learning', coined by Mezirow in 1997. From here on I will use the terms generative learning and personal development interchangeably.

2.2.4 Generative learning model: logical categories of learning

Bateson's 1964 essay "The Logical Categories of Learning and Communicating", published in 1972, is an application of logical types, borrowed from Russell and Whitehead (quoted by Woodsmall 2), expanded and adapted to the context of human and other animal learning. The logical relationship in Bateson's model is recursive – each level contains all instances of the next level down. The image of nested Chinese boxes is often used to represent it. Bateson used the idea of logical types as a way of charting the classification inherent in all perceiving, thinking, learning, and communicating. Each class is a different logical type, a higher level of abstraction, than the members it classifies.

Later learning literature has analysed and adapted Bateson's framework, for example Bale in 1995, Bloom in 2004, Watzlawick et al. in 1974 (Change) and Argyris and Schön's 'single and double loop learning' of 1983 has been influenced by it (quoted in Tosey, 2–4).

Bateson's theoretical frame describes five orders of learning, starting with zero.

> Zero learning is characterised by specificity of response, which, right or wrong, is not subject to correction.

> Learning I is change in specificity of response by correction of errors of choice within a set of alternatives.

> Learning II is change in the process of Learning I, for example, a corrective change in the set of alternatives from which choice is made, or it is a change in how the sequence of experiences is punctuated.

> Learning III is change in the process of Learning II, for example, a corrective change in the system of sets of alternatives from which choice is made.

> Learning IV would be change in Learning III, but probably does not occur in any adult living organism on this earth (Bateson, 283–306).

2.2.5 Use of the levels of learning in my writing groups

Bateson's framework has served to shape and track development in educational, therapeutic and organisational settings, while undergoing analysis aided by studies done since its conception of almost fifty years ago, such as that presented by Tosey in an overview entitled "Bateson's Levels Of Learning: a Framework For Transformative

Learning"– in 2006. For the purposes of my own study I rely on Bateson's basic formulation.

Levels of learning allow me, among other things, to identify at which level a person sets his goal(s). Any goal at any level can only be attained and become a sustainable part of a person's repertoire if the levels above the level of the goal support it. Thus, the levels may give insight into short-term as opposed to long-term change: Sometimes people change an unwanted behaviour for a short period of time, only to have it return later. If the new behaviour was not supported by the person's ability to encompass the process of having 'learned' how to 'do' it appropriately and consistently, the change will not be sustained. Heron would say that the new behaviour has not been learned holistically. For change at the level of Learning I to become long-term, to be considered as development, at least Learning II is necessary.

An example of change in a group at the level of Learning I would be complying with the group culture of not interrupting someone in mid-sentence – in contrast to the dominant culture outside the group. This example is taken from Israel, where interrupting is the norm. If this were to become a participant's new habit, a behaviour that carries over to contexts outside of the group, Learning II has occurred. It will only carry over when the person can 'save' this new choice in her behavioural repertoire, so she recognises circumstances where not interrupting may be useful to her. This requires attention, awareness, reflection, or in short metacognition.

A change at Learning II and III will have a distinct impact on the levels below it, as the person has learned to change her perspective of situations, to 'step out of the box' and consider an ever-widening range of options not only of behaviours, but also of beliefs, emotions and motivations pertaining to situations (Watzlawick, Weakland & Fisch, Change).

Whereas all of the levels are valid ways of learning, each higher level is more generative or encompassing than the previous levels. But there is a danger in confusing activity and productivity: we can spend a lot of activity at level zero and level I and learn very little in terms of choices of response (Woodsmall 14). And like Heron, Bateson makes no secret of risks inherent in learning: not all possible development is necessarily salutary. While "contradictions in experience" can be triggers for Learning III, "even the attempt at L III can be dangerous" (Bateson, 277), leading to psychosis instead of enlightenment.[11]

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[11] Renos Papadopulos (301–312) has developed the salutary option for learning from contradictions in experience in his model of 'adversity-activated development' in 2007. The concept of Posttraumatic Growth (PTG) has become in vogue at the end of the 20th century, as introduced in the 2012 primer by Werdel et al.

I conclude the section on generative learning with two examples from the context of this thesis. A goal set at level zero by all participants in this study was to take part in a supportive writing group. Such a goal points to the external circumstances participants choose to place themselves in and this only requires of a person to be aware of the possibility of joining such a group and taking the step to join. The facilitator more or less ensures attainment of the remaining portion of the goal by the set-up of the groups.

The stated goal of some participants to produce a written memoir could arguably be attained at Learning I or even zero, if the person already possessed the necessary writing and communication skills upon entering the group. Lacking those, Learning II would be needed to develop these skills. But if the person keeps seeing herself as unworthy, boring, unimportant, which are beliefs on a higher (some say deeper) level of identity, she will still not attain her goal. It bears repeating that personal development can only be assessed in relation to a learner's baseline, the repertoire of behaviours in place before joining the group. Participants' own evaluations about the attainment of any goals they started out with, and the effect it continues to have on their life (or not), will determine if they are aware of any development connected with the writing group. Even the 'becoming aware' of their goals and self-tracking their course may be an attainment for some.

To become aware of one's path of learning, to acknowledge – even silently – that one moves in a process of change, requires a feeling of safety in oneself and in the environment. I will not elaborate on this premise here, already so convincingly summed up by Rogers in his 1989 "The Interpersonal Relationship in the Facilitation of Learning" (304), but only use it as an introduction to the next theoretical links towards a definition of personal development.

2.2.6 The role of attachment and coherence in development

First the terms in this heading are explained, and at the end of this section the connection between them is laid out.

Attachment is defined in the literature as:

> The emotional bond of infant to parent or caregiver; a pattern of emotional and behavioural interaction that develops over time, especially in contexts where infants express a need for attention, comfort, support or security.
>
> (Van IJzendoorn, Attachment, i)

Van IJzendoorn continues by saying that parents' ability to perceive, interpret and react to the needs of their babies influences the quality of their attachment relationships. The relationship developed with primary caregivers is the most influential in people's lives. A secure relationship fosters not only positive developmental outcomes over time, but also influences the quality of future relationships with peers and partners. The field of attachment studies is based on Bowlby's 1988 attachment theory.

Coherence in general is the quality of forming a unified whole. Concerning how people express themselves verbally and in writing I follow Linde's view (121–2) that coherence can be seen as the narrated socially acceptable packaging of the essentially much more chaotic self.

Sense of Coherence (SOC) is the construct coined, defined and researched by Aaron Antonovsky (1923–1994) in his book Health, Stress and Coping, to explain "the movement towards the health pole of the ease/disease continuum", a process he named salutogenesis to contrast with pathogenesis. To Antonovsky, Sense of Coherence is:

> ... a global orientation that expresses the extent to which one has a pervasive, enduring though dynamic feeling of confidence that one's internal and external environments in the course of living are (1) structured, predictable and explicable; (2) the resources are available to one to meet the demands posed by these stimuli; and (3) these demands are challenges, worthy of investment and engagement. (Mystery of Health 19)

2.2.6.1 Relevance of the sense of coherence to structured writing

Sense of Coherence is, like any construct, an intellectual concept, which cannot be observed or measured directly, but is inferred to exist because it gives rise to measurable phenomena (Rosenthal & Rosnow, 155).

Antonovsky's research and the research that continued it demonstrated that the sense of coherence predicts positive health outcomes across cultures, countries, languages and populations (e.g. Erikson and Lindström, "Validity"; "Scale"; Feld et al.; Van Schalwyk and Rothmann; Tak-Ying, Shiu). Specifically, Erikson and Lindström concluded in their 2005 overview of twenty years of research that "The SOC scale seems to be a reliable, valid, and cross culturally applicable instrument measuring how people manage stressful situations and stay well" (460). Over thirty years various studies have shown that, on a population base, the mean SOC increases naturally over a person's lifetime. Thus the oldest population groups exhibit the highest means.[12] Most of these studies have, however, been cross-sectional and studied SOC as the independent baseline variable. There is still much need for longitudinal work to discover to what extent and by which means SOC can be enhanced in adults with relatively low baselines. This is what I concluded after reading Lindström's 2010 "Salutogenesis – an Introduction".

The broad way of conceptualising of the SOC, which transcends earlier, arguably partial or cultural-dependent terms used in studying coping and resilience, appeals to researchers in search of health-promoting tools. In his introduction Lindström (4) explains that health promotion activities aim to facilitate prerequisites for a good life, and

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[12] Since the duration of the writing group study, including follow-up, was limited to nine months, ageing as a natural strengthener of SOC in participants can be ruled out.

that perceived good health is one determinant for quality of life. Lindström further reports that people who develop a strong SOC live longer and have a tendency to choose positive life behaviours (less tobacco and alcohol, more physical activity and better food habits), they manage stress and negative life events better, they manage better if struck by acute or chronic disease (such as diabetes, cardiovascular disease, chronic lung disease, cancer and mental illness). A strong SOC correlates strongly with good mental health, perceived health and quality of life (11).

SOC is continuously being 'attacked' by the vicissitudes of life, but the earlier body of research has consistently shown that the stronger a person's SOC is around early adulthood, the better prepared they are to cope with any of life's unpleasant and pleasant surprises.

Could structured writing be a means to enhance SOC? The study of writing groups deals with the world views of the participants as they may stay the same or develop through their writing. This involves people's basic beliefs, personal and interpersonal affect and the capacity and conditions for learning, not the least of which are order and structure. All of these facets link up with the other theories that have come to underlie my definition of personal development.

Looking at people from the point of view of an activity to improve or sustain their overall 'health' or 'vitality' fits my investigation of writing groups for non-clinical adults.

Elements of the Sense of Coherence play an essential part in participants' evaluations of the process of structured writing groups. Therefore I present a more detailed description of the three components of Antonovsky's definition of the SOC.

1. Comprehensibility denotes a belief that things happen in an orderly and predictable fashion and a sense that you can understand events in your life and reasonably predict what will happen in the future.
2. Manageability is a belief that you have the skills or ability, the support, the help, or the resources necessary to take care of things, and that things are manageable and within your control.
3. Meaningfulness is the belief that things in life are interesting and a source of satisfaction, that things are really worth it and that there is good reason or purpose to care about what happens.

According to Antonovsky, meaningfulness is the most important element. If persons believe there is no reason to persist and survive and confront challenges, if they have no sense of meaning, then they will have no motivation to comprehend and manage events.

Korotkov's "Assessment of the SOC Personality Measure" of 1993, regarded manageability and comprehensibility as comprising cognitive and perceptual ingredients, and meaningfulness as mainly emotional. He argued that the SOC scale is unduly biased towards emotionality, among other things because of the wording of the

questions (582). Korotkov's early critique has not withstood the test of subsequent research findings in the 21 years since publication (Eriksson and Lindström, "SOC and the relation with health, a Systematic Review" 379). Feelings are indeed emphasised in the choice of words of the questions (see fig. III.3 in Chapter 6), but I understand this to be necessary to 'reach out' to the inner places where responses are to be found for all elements of the construct. Antonovsky's essential argument is that salutogenesis depends on experiencing a strong sense of coherence, including all three components which cannot be neatly divided between cognition, perception and emotion.

2.2.6.2 Can sense of coherence be reinforced in adulthood?

>...the glue that holds a man together and teaches him to live in the present.

>Howard Jacobson, The Finkler Question

Whether or not adults' SOC can be strengthened is a major question relevant to my study.[13]

I think it fitting here to dwell a while longer on Antonovsky's original thinking, since his salutogenic approach influences my study on so many levels. Antonovsky wrote in 1987 that people in their thirties have usually:

> committed themselves (or been committed) to an identity, a social role set, a career in the broadest sense. They made their choices, or had them made for them, and have construed an image of their world as more or less comprehensible, manageable and meaningful. The lability and exploration of the adolescent are behind them.   (Mystery of Health, 118)

At this point he asks himself how it is possible that he reluctantly, being fully aware of the extensive literature dealing with adult development, maintained that the SOC stays stable with advancing age after the third decade of life. It became clear to him that his stability hypothesis of 1987 was based on persons with a strong SOC and his discussion of this bias made clear to me how deeply systemic his theory is.

A strong SOC, put in terms of energy balance, maintains a low level of disorder (entropy). While life events inescapably attack our SOC with developmental tasks to master (Levinson, "Adult Development" 289) and psychosocial transitions (Parkes 103), the person with a strong SOC sees these attacks as challenges, however difficult they may be. The level of disorder temporarily rises until the person deals with those challenges, thereby restoring the disorder to a lower level. I use this idea when distinguishing between tension (short term) and stress (persistent) in Section 3.4 on 'coping'. Using an image from Schrödinger, Antonovsky pictures a strong SOC as capable of absorbing orderliness from the environment, thus counterbalancing pressures towards chaos from

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[13] Indeed strengthening SOC is the major task of my profession as I understand it.

both inside and outside environments (Mystery of Health, 119–120). He concludes that, due to the incessant onslaught of life's stressors, it is unlikely that a person's SOC continues to increase. To maintain an "ever-challenged equilibrium" (122) is the best one can expect, however fortunate one may be. Accordingly, moderate to low baseline levels of adult SOC would be susceptible to a lowering over time.

The problem is that cross-sectional research can never shed light on this part of the hypothesis. Such studies have found a slight strengthening, population-wise, of the mean SOC with age, but the significance of these findings is unclear. It may be that older populations had a stronger SOC throughout life to begin with, and that a strong SOC may lead to longer life. Antonovsky predicted statistically that those who have a weak SOC in early adulthood would experience increasing difficulties in life, as each stressor will make their life more chaotic, unmanageable and meaningless.

Has the claim that SOC does not change significantly after early adulthood been amended over the years of studies? On the clinical, individual level, transformations affecting SOC can occasionally occur, but are rare. They do not happen by chance.

"They occur only because these initiate *a new pattern of life experiences*. If this pattern is maintained over a period of years, gradual change can occur" (Mystery of Health 122–123 my italics). This new pattern of experiences comes close to Bandura's concept of 'self-efficacy', which requires behavioural experiences over time to engender sustained change. It calls to mind the Boston Change Process Study Group's moments of meeting that have enduring effects by making room for new interpersonal behaviours (2.2.2). Bateson's levels of learning above the zero also entail new patterns of experience (2.2.4).

For me the challenge is whether short-term structured writing groups can be a trigger for initiating such transformations that strengthen adults' SOC. Could such transformations become more likely than Antonovsky predicted?

Antonovsky discussed the options for achieving intentional change by the helping professions. Temporary fluctuations around a person's mean SOC score, are to be expected in the course of one's life, prompted by life events. These events can be handled better or worse by professional helpers. For example, a doctor who insensitively hands out a devastating diagnosis creates a deeply disturbing process in the patient, which, as a best-case scenario, will be temporary, and in the worst case permanent. By contrast, sensitive handling of the same information may temporarily even strengthen the SOC of the patient, by providing comprehensibility, manageability and meaning to the diagnosis.

'Stress inoculation' (Meichenbaum and Cameron as quoted in Antonovsky Mystery of Health, 126) and 'Learned Resourcefulness' (Rosenbaum quoted ibid.), like any therapeutic process facilitating consistent and sustained change, are seen by Antonovsky as approaches that teach people to seek out "SOC enhancing experiences" (126) within

the scope of their lives. Their limitation is that they cannot change the life situations that shape(d) people's experiences. In this they resemble the limited scope of writing groups in relation to the totality of people's lives in their society.

2.2.6.3 The connection between the sense of coherence and attachment

> Current concepts from development studies suggest that what the infant internalises is the *process* of mutual regulation, not the object itself or part-objects. (BSG 9, my italics).

Why is it important to internalise a process instead of an object? Because of an inherent tension between persons' coherent sense of self, more or less stabilised by early adulthood, and their need to change, to develop, to adapt to circumstances external and internal. Internalising the process of relationship regulation keeps the sense of coherence intact, while internalising objects (also called 'introjection'), fragments the self on an often-unconscious level (e.g. Wolf 8–9).

Fragmentation of the sense of self is an undesirable outcome in terms of mental health and wellbeing. Salutary personal development requires a healthy level of coherence with sufficient openness (enabling flexibility, defined in the following chapter) to allow for learning and changes. The courage to be open develops out of secure attachment relationships during childhood (Van IJzendoorn), but if basic security is weak[14] what is an adult to do? The Boston Study Group discovered that opening up for new experience occurs after moments of meeting (BSG 22, 45). Creating a setting safe enough for adults to enable moments of meeting may create openness to new learning and development.

Openness in this context relates to 'inside' and 'outside'. The Boston group concluded that 'implicit relational knowing' absorbs the earlier concept of 'object relations'. Where the older term suggests taking something in from the outside, the new concept implies co-construction of a "mutually constructed regulatory pattern". Where the earlier term tends to be identified with pathological patterns of relating, especially as they appear in the transference with a therapist, the new concept can also be used to describe general representational models, constantly being accessed and updated in daily encounters independent from therapy (BSG 32). Co-construction is a term that fits well with my methodological framework of symbolic interactionism, by engaging each participant's interpretation of experience with those of others members of the group, possibly leading to something new.

Questions about inside and outside, about external and internal environments in relation to a human being, are not easily answered. It can be said that at any given moment a person's ability to take something 'in' from the 'outside' – physically, cognitively and

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[14] 'Weakness' in basic security can be pervasive (from unfavourable attachment in infancy), or momentary, appearing in threatening situations and contexts.

emotionally – is related to the permeability of the boundaries that apply for each of these domains.

The skin is physiologically considered the boundary between the body and the rest of the world and it would lead me too far astray to engage here in the arguments about that. Similarly a person's capacity to express 'internal' experience is dependent on the degree of permeability, since the pathways of communication go both in and out.

What drives the traffic along on these in-out pathways? What moves people to take in and express information of different kinds? Or in plainer words: why would people learn new behaviours and ideas throughout their lives? Why would they talk with others, dance, sing, draw and write about themselves? There must be something inherently worthwhile in these exchanges of information between persons and their environment for them to take place, and not simply at the purely physical level of nourishment and regulation of, for example, temperature.

In the 2011 Mapping the Evolving Psyche Yigael explains this apparently inherent attraction to communicating and learning by redefining the less than clear concept of 'passion'. To him passion is the engine for the organisation of the psyche: "to identify what is missing at a given time and context of the process ... and to take the next step to its implementation" (op. cit. 159, my translation). Passion is therefore a general aspect of life: identifying a lack and moving to fill it. Its many faces include existential passion, the passion for better organisation ('structure' in this study), and the passion for knowledge and creativity. These exist in their own right and are not, says Yigael, sublimations of sexuality as in Freudian theory.

And why would this be important? Because it relates to the strength of people's motivation to develop themselves throughout life and to find their preferred ways to this end. Structured writing groups may be the preferred way for some, but such groups are by no means attractive to everybody. I will return to this issue in the concluding discussion of the thesis.

For now I will argue, that wherever someone's boundaries lie and whatever the reasons for those boundaries, this is the baseline at which an individual starts upon joining a writing group. The ethical frameworks within which structured writing groups, as distinguished from therapy groups, work mean that they have no permission to question the extent or causes of a person's baseline. Nevertheless the writing group experience may affect the person, as I hope my study will demonstrate.

2.3 Criteria for a definition of personal development in adults

The operational definition of personal development laid out by the end of this second chapter aspires to be general enough to allow for many different characteristics of participants while also being capable of giving a significant outcome to the study.

It should be noted that the study follows the individual developmental trajectories of group participants. The criteria of the study's definition of personal development serve to record and interpret any differences or sameness between each person's own views of their world at baseline and their views at follow-up. No comparisons are made between groups, or between individual outcomes and standardised measures (which arguably are not comparable or standardised anyway). The focus is strictly on each person's development seen through the lens of its definition as outlined below. Therefore my use of the Sense of Coherence (SOC) scale may seem to be an exception in need of explanation. The relationship of such a normative scale to my criteria of personal development and the reason for using it, a quantitative tool in my predominantly qualitative study, is intended as a relatively objective comparison measure. More about this in Chapter 6 on methods and in Chapter 7 on findings where the qualitative data are compared with the SOC's quantitative outcomes.

Refraining from comparisons between persons and populations is a self-imposed limitation with the positive consequence of greatly diminishing the risk of bias of the kinds mentioned earlier (e.g. gender, culture). Participants 'represent' only themselves as they develop (or not) during a writing group. Their gender, age, class, country of origin, education, health and other 'circumstances' do of course play a role in their development, which is not examined in this study. As already said, the study only tracks signs of individual development from whichever point a participant started the group. The group provides the dynamic interpersonal context for each person's experiences. I argue that the group, like the writing, is a medium, facilitated to inspire individuals' development.

However it needs to be recognised that such a writing group is like a playground, like Winnicott's 'potential space' temporarily set apart from daily life in society. This is both the strength and the weakness of the group context. The strength lies in providing the necessary safety that encourages one to play and experiment with self-expression and self-discovery with others (Winnicott, Playing and Reality; Creme and Hunt 159). The weakness appears to be that one returns to society after each session, back to the situation where one is 'labelled' and may feel constrained by long-standing habits, culture, class, politics, economics etc. However, returning to the world outside the group serves as a gauge: does the 'development' a person builds up in a relatively short structured writing group possess enough strength to last outside the group over time? Can it, in people's own view, have an enduring salutary influence on participants? We are back at the question the study seeks to answer.

2.4 Summing up

For my study changes need to be not only perceivable at one moment in time, they have to endure over time to be considered developmental. The types of personal change for adults that emerge as important from the literature, independent of local or cultural specifics, include internal (cognitive and emotional) and external (coping, communicating) behaviours.

The common denominator for change to occur at all appears to be a measure of openness to a two-way flow of information – enabling comprehensive, integrated, holistic learning. Such openness, or suitable permeability of boundaries, allows for reflection and for choosing additional options to one's habitual repertoire. This I will call 'flexibility'. I argue that the activity of writing in groups can serve as a medium to this process.

Italics in the repeated definition below indicate the terms that I develop in more detail in the next Chapters 3 and 4:

> Personal development as defined for this study is a perceivable change towards lasting flexibility in behaviour, cognition, emotion, coping, (inter)personal communication, occurring in a person with a coherent sense of self.

> Structured writing in groups appears to engender such development in the form of generative learning, which is a change in the frame of reference, a shift to higher-order thinking, creating ever more changes that give access to behavioural options.

CHAPTER 3 – DEFINING PERSONAL DEVELOPMENT

Prelude, the making of representatives to an outside world

Disembodied voice: Listen up. You are completely the wrong size for this here world. You've got to change.

Body: I can see that, but I cannot see you. What and where are you–

Disembodied voice: Never mind about seeing me, if you'd only listen...

Body: It's uncomfortable to hear without seeing, I don't trust what my eyes don't see.

Second Body: Girls, guys, whatever, stop arguing and mind what you feel inside. The truth will come from inner wisdom that you didn't even know you had.

Disembodied Voice: Now, now, people, be reasonable, we are not getting anywhere by speaking gobbledygook to each other. How do you expect to ever become the right size for this world– You will have to learn my language, or it's going to be off with your head.

3.1 Introduction to the operational definition of personal development

So far I have been building a case for personal development being a process of change, sustained over time. Furthermore, I have gathered support from human oriented systemic-dynamic literature and from neurobiological findings on the developmental properties of the brain (Chudler, "Brain Plasticity: What is it– Learning and Memory." *faculty.washington.edu/chudler/plast.html*) to the belief that the process of development is ongoing throughout life. What enables development to take place at all appears to depend on the ease with which information can be exchanged between a person's the 'internal' and 'external' environment. 'Internal' and 'external' are entirely relative terms, depending on the context under consideration (Bateson, *Mind and Nature* 144), as mentioned fleetingly in Chapter 2 in the sections on 'intrinsic relational knowing' and the definition of the sense of coherence. Bredo explained that for Bateson "a context is the particular whole which a given part helps compose, not something separate from or abstracted from that part" (28–29).

The ease of information exchange, in its turn, depends on the way in which several domains of personal and interpersonal experience of cognitive and affective natures operate together. Comparing the boundaries between them to a sieve-like organic membrane is one way of picturing metaphorically how those domains, inside and outside, can adapt their permeability by changing their apertures in number and size, to fit different circumstances. In my operational definition of personal development I have come to call this ability to appropriately adapt one's boundaries to one's circumstances from moment to moment 'flexibility'.

This chapter will expound the concept of flexibility that 'governs' those other domains: behaviour, cognition, emotion, coping and communication. It will then describe each of those domains and the way they manifest in this study, and will illuminate them along the way by examples from writing groups. At the end of the chapter I hope that the meaning of my operational definition will have been clarified by showing how its theoretical concepts converge to be used in practice.

3.2 Flexibility

In Chapter 1 I have said that, in the language of my study, enhancing flexibility is a form of personal development. Let's investigate and qualify that statement.

Once upon a time, not so long ago, I naively thought that 'more' flexibility would always be preferable to 'less' of it. Of course this cannot be so. Rereading Bateson's *Mind and Nature* reminded me that any experience or object in nature has its optimum value, between being too low, or lacking, and too high, or toxic (54). Too much flexibility would necessarily lead to a fragmentation of the sense of self, and, in the quantitative measure of my study, most likely to a lowering of the Sense of Coherence (Antonovsky, *Health, Stress and Coping* 162). An example could be someone who attempts, or is forced, only to satisfy demands of external agents and so becomes unable to form a core sense of identity (a young child) or will lose most of it (an adult subject to torture or brainwashing). Such a development cannot be seen as beneficial. Beneficial personal development depends on achieving a state of balanced permeability of boundaries, enabling a two-way flow of information between all parts experienced as internal (self) and those external at any given moment. More about the flow of information, which consists of communication, will be said below in Section 3.5.

Flexibility, according to Dilts (F22, "Encyclopedia of Systemic NLP"), relates to the range of choice and diversity available to a person or system, in mental and physical processes. This principle of flexibility has been derived from Ashby's 1956 cybernetic *Law of Requisite Variety*, which states that a certain amount of variability is necessary in a system for it to reach and maintain desired states, and to adapt to changes in the environment surrounding it. According to this law, it is important to have a degree of variation in your ability to respond, which is proportional to the possible change or uncertainty in the system around you. Bateson 'personalised' the cybernetic structure of this law in his extensive studies of animal and human behaviour over decades (*Mind and Nature*). He concluded that it is an evolutionary advantage for a species, and desirable for individuals in the service of coping with changing environments, to have several alternative paths available before acting. When confronted with new situations, having options is more adaptive than having a fixed automatic response to everything, or than reacting chaotically. This is true for beings living in a world of many and frequent changes in the environment, something that has also been discussed by Bruner from an educational

angle (*Cognitive Growth* 4), as we shall soon see in connection with cognition. Changeability can be seen as a characteristic of our present world.

Bateson stipulated that it is useful to have at least two choices to fall back on before you start taking action or implementing a particular operation.[15] Later scholars and practitioners proposed having at least available three choices as being an indicator of an 'efficient communicator', which means anyone who successfully works with people, for example in education, therapy, medicine, and also sales and advertising (DeLozier 4). Studying the principle of flexibility in relation to communication and change led to an assumption that 'resistance' on the part of another (a student, a client, a patient, but also a potential buyer or consumer) is probably a message about a point of inflexibility in oneself: one has not found the option to elicit the desired behavioural response in the other person. According to this line of thinking, the places where we confront resistance in others are the places where we need to expand our own flexibility. This may sound like plain common sense, but many people get themselves stuck trying to cope with changing circumstances by using one or two habitual responses over and over again just because they worked once before. It may also sound like a big dose of arrogance to suppose that when one has such flexibility, more options than someone else, one can elicit any response one wishes. And just as practical experience appears to be on the side of arrogance, this is the point where one has lost the system-dynamic's view of continuous mutual interrelations between all parties to communication. This is also the point at which ethics need to come in to define the moral framework of communication. I will not enter this particular philosophical debate here apart from recognising its necessity. However, where one's degree of flexibility is adequate to one's needs, branching out as it were from a fairly secure core self, it will include a sense of personal agency, that is of possible choices to decline and resist the attempts by others to manipulate.

3.3 Behaviour

Behaviour, as defined for this study, refers to the ways in which people interact with their environment, in other words it refers to the activities of a person. Overall greater flexibility of behaviour means that one has more ways of interacting with parts of the external world, like other people or written texts in a writing group, as well as with the inner parts of the self, like thoughts, feelings, and voices. As mentioned in the summary to the previous chapter (2.4), the types of personal change for adults that emerge from the literature as important, independent of local or cultural specifics, include internal (cognitive and emotional) and external (coping, communicating) behaviours. The

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[15] Bateson's 'two choices' stipulation is connected to the 'double-description' he required as the necessary minimum to gathering information about a situation; in effect it means using at least two different perspectives.

following sections will focus on external and internal aspects of behaviour and their operationalisation.

3.3.1 External Behaviour

External behaviour is observable in speech, in writing process and product, and in physical/physiological acts like breathing, moving, and blanching. Being 'external' implies that such acts are also observable to the senses of people other than the actors. Sometime they are even more noticeable to others than to the actors, especially those acts that are outside the awareness of the person doing them because they are 'habitual' (say rubbing one's nose), or originate in autonomic physiological systems, like blanching.

External behaviour is like the tip of an iceberg; far larger and more numerous than what is revealed are the hidden parts (internal behaviour). Although my systemic view is averse to artificially sectioning off parts from a whole, this is unrealistic when attempting to observe phenomena and describe them in a linear medium like thesis writing. Therefore external and internal behaviours will each in turn be analysed with separate operational tools, to then be 're-united' into a fuller image of the developmental paths of participants through the writing group at the conclusion of the thesis.

The current study used audio recording but did not use video recording, therefore raw data of the physical – literally embodied – elements of participants' behaviour (other than voice and audible breathing) have not been saved. The only way such observations may have been preserved is where mentioned in recorded speech or in writing, thus 'filtered' through someone's interpretation. Two verbatim examples from former group evaluations may illustrate such mentions (Cune, *Nature of Personal Development Processes*, unpublished data, coded 'Nikita 664' and 'Liesbeth 545'; translated from Dutch).

> "In the course of time we all became familiar with each participant's personal style, and could notice the changes and strides that were made in each other's speaking and writing abilities."

> "I remember how intensely I enjoyed noticing the show of emotion in others."

Aspects of external and internal behaviour are captured in the diverse assessment tools, summarily described below and expanded in the empirical Chapters 6 and 7 of Part Three.

3.3.2 Internal Behaviour

The body of the iceberg, internal behaviour in the language of the study, includes cognitive and emotional areas. Again, I repeat that these areas are treated by me as separated from each other for descriptive and analytic purposes only.

The realm of internal behaviour is not directly observable from the outside by others. It is only through a person's expression by external behaviour that another can infer, construe and interpret what may have led to a particular expression.

Those internal behavioural processes here labelled as 'cognition' are generally defined as the mental acquisition of knowledge through thought, experience, and the perception by the senses (OED). Such cognition is thereby distinguished from the 'affective/emotional' behavioural processes occurring simultaneously, which are likewise only observable via their expression in external behaviour.

3.3.2.1 Cognition

Cognition is an abstraction used to describe 'rational' processes of the human 'mind' and more recent the 'embodied mind' (e.g. Damasio, *What Happens*; Gendlin, *Focusing*; Varela et al., *The Embodied Mind*). When some 'western' thinkers realised that a separation between mind and body did not allow for deeper scientific understanding of such processes, theories rooted in Kant and Merleau-Ponty emerged, in opposition to cognitivism, computationalism and Cartesian dualism (Varela et al.) In his 2011 book *Thinking Fast and Slow* the cognitive research psychologist Daniel Kahneman simply states that thinking is done with the body, not just with the brain (51).

The vehicle conveying many of the cognitive processes to others and to the self is language, as exhibited in its various forms of thinking, writing and speech, categorised by Clark, following Vygotski, as public/external and private/internal (Clark, 2ff). One of the influential bodies of thought about the increasing need for language as societies develop, and which provides a backdrop for my assumption that writing in a group can function as a medium for personal development in our developed western society, is that of Jerome Bruner.

Bruner, a pioneer of developmental scholarship, introduced and summarised the state of knowledge about cognitive growth as it was in 1966. He helped shape the idea that "the physical requirements of adaptive action 'force' us to conceive of the world in a particular way, a way that is constrained by the nature of our own muscular system" (*Cognitive Growth* 319). He posed that we represent or 'model' reality by the three techniques of action, imagery and symbolism. As societies become more technical and complex, and thereby more remote from direct action, they increasingly rely on linguistic (i.e. symbolic) forms of communication.

I would emphasise that it is at this stage where societies are in danger of becoming so remote from direct action, that they lose the connection with bodily experience. As a consequence their language becomes abstract and meaningless. In the words of George Steiner (10–11): "Figures of daily discourse, totally devoid of concrete truth – 'sunrise', for example – will persist like domestic ghosts." The so-called developed world, writes Bruner, is "robbed of contextual and ostensive reference as a mode of carrying meaning", as can be seen in western school education. Bruner concluded from studies conducted in several cultures that cultures differ in the ways children learn to use language as "an implement of thought." There is also a prior stage, when children "learn to organise their

way of viewing and imagining things, in order to use language to describe what they know" (Bruner *Cognitive Growth* 323).

Cultures and subcultures differ too in the extent "to which ranges of alternatives are fitted together into superordinate or hierarchical structures, so that a given precept is created as one of only a few alternatives or one of many", a clear link to Bateson's logical categories of learning explained in Section 2.2.4. Bruner proposed that complex technical cultures exert a greater push towards hierarchical connections than less technical 'folk' societies, where perception may stay at the level of particular objects or events. In simpler societies there appears to be much less need to organise thought in abstracted domains of alternatives that might take place.

> ...we are increasingly struck by what occurs in a highly evolved technical society. It is not that one sees 'better' or represents what one has learned in habit patterns 'better', or even talks or thinks in language 'better'. Rather, what seems to be the case is that there is an insistence on mapping each of these systems into one another, with a resulting increase of the translatability between each of them
>
> (Bruner *Cognitive Growth* 325).

The cognitive use of language in my writing groups has to be seen as an expression of people socialised and educated in an evolved technical society, with its demands on their day to day coping in such a world. To be able to communicate and 'translate' between different systems is a valuable resource for coping. The extent to which coping is satisfactory to participants of writing groups varies between these individuals and is longitudinally assessed in this study by their linguistic behaviour. ('Coping' and 'Communication' will be specified below in the sections 3.4 and 3.5.)

Bruner's foundational work may serve to show how language functions as a means to represent perception. In recent years the philosopher Andy Clark has proposed a 'reversed' function of language, which he coined 'the Mangrove effect'. Words do not always express pre-existing thoughts. Like mangrove roots that attract floating soil and eventually may accumulate an island around them, so words are able to attract the thoughts that will be expressed. Words can, he says, be seen to complement natural, biologically based cognition (*Magic Words* 14).

> By writing down our ideas we generate a trace in a format which opens up a range of new possibilities. We can then inspect and re-inspect the same ideas, coming at them from many different angles and in many different frames of mind. We can hold the original ideas steady so that we may judge them, and safely experiment with subtle alterations (Clark *Magic Words* 11).

His ideas bring to mind Doris Lessing's autobiographical telling how, from young girlhood on, she wrote to know what she was thinking. This feature of writing probably accounts for the surprise people can feel when they re-read what they have written. I

concur with Nicholls' understanding of Clark that language should not be dismissed "as a shallow reflection of our 'real' knowledge, but can be viewed as combining an array of biologically basic pattern-recognition skills with the special 'cognitive fixatives of word and text', creating, like the mangroves, 'new landscapes, new fixed points in the sea of thought'" (Nicholls, *Writing the Body*, 99). Now we can start to play in Winnicott's potential space (*Playing and Reality*) with words as assembling toys and create a surprising inner landscape.

In short: cognitive internal behaviour, consisting of sensory perceptions and thought, is in our world predominantly expressed to others, and to a lesser extent to the self, by means of language. To be meaningful this language has to be anchored in the body, embodied. Even if an individual primarily thinks in images, sensations or non-verbal sounds (visual, kinesthetic and analogue-auditory representations), these modes need to be translated to words in 'regular' communication with others. Exploring possible sustained changes in the way people express themselves can give us some insight into their cognitive development, especially in adults, after they have attained the basic language skills in their culture.

3.3.2.2 Emotion

Emotion, affect and feelings, behaviours that share internal states with cognition, are likewise observable only through their external expressions. I will use these terms loosely and interchangeably, precisely because observable data are only expressions of processes (and are not the processes themselves) occurring beneath the surface. The online definition of 'emotion' in Encyclopedia Britannica 2009 is "a complex experience of consciousness, bodily sensation, and behaviour that reflects the personal significance of a thing, an event, or a state of affairs".

Although four influential theories of emotion exist, with partly differing explanations, contemporary scientific opinion largely agrees with a modification of the James–Lange theory that bodily feedback modulates the experience of emotion (Dalgliesh 583). In other words, physiological change precedes emotion and emotion consists in the recognition of some kind of interaction between physiological and cognitive processes.

In the first half of the twentieth century the physiologist W.B. Cannon (e.g. 1932) showed how the body in its attempt to rebalance itself around a dynamic equilibrium (homeostasis), varies for instance its heart rate, blood pressure, muscle tension and visceral movements. He revealed an intricate, dynamic feedback system exhibiting incessant communication between physical and mental aspects of our being: physical sensations may be interpreted as 'feelings' and in turn may lead to more physical adjustments. Depending on the context we may label increased heart rate as 'fear' or call it a sign of 'falling in love'; peristaltic fluctuations can be 'a sinking feeling in the stomach', or 'hunger'. Meta-feelings about sensations are often associated with

assumptions, beliefs and values, which can determine the meaning of a situation for us. Where 'itching' and 'cramp' are examples of direct physical sensations, 'insult' and 'anger' are emotions defined by the meaning we give to situations that hurt us. Feelings and meta-feelings appear in many turns of speech and common sayings, which people may use without awareness of their origin in the body (see Lakoff and Johnson *Metaphors* 1981; *Philosophy in the flesh* 1999; and *Afterword* 2003). Reviving such dead phrases can result in reviving persons' awareness to what they sense(d) in their body at the moment about which they speak or write. Did their knees shake, their hearts sing, their faces fall? When something was afoot, did they keep an eye out?

Meta-feelings usually arise out of a difference between what is actually experienced compared to an internally desired or expected state. If a person arrives at a writing group expecting to enter a competitive arena of critical people and instead finds empathy and cooperation, that person may experience a happy and surprised emotion; whereas returning to the place where one has parked one's car and finding it gone will result in a rather unhappy surprise. In both cases an internal expectation exists prior to entering the situation and is then not fulfilled, informing the body–mind of the person of a difference, a tension, that necessitates unexpected coping behaviour.

The 'metacognition' of emotion (the process of talking and thinking about our feelings) and its relation to psychological and physical well-being has been central in the research into the beneficial effects of individual 'expressive writing' in managing stress and depression (Nicholls, *Writing the Body* 176). In writing groups interpersonal dynamics provide external emotional feedback to individual participants in addition to their own internal signals. The domain of interpersonal communication in groups augments the intrapersonal domain of the individual writer (Section 3.5).

Considerable fuzziness exists in the literature as to which aspects of feeling, emotion and affect are internal and which are outward expressions. Disagreement also exists as to which aspects are in or out of awareness of the individual (Damasio, *What Happens*; Davidson, *Seven Sins*). None of these controversies, however, are relevant to the handling of data in my study, because participants are the sole decision makers as to the labelling of their experience. If someone writes that she 'felt apprehension', or 'was anxious' or was 'touched deeply', these will all be coded as expressions of emotion, since they all name internal processes in the words of the beholder. Neither as a facilitator nor as a researcher do I engage in interpreting the emotions of participants.

3.4 Coping

Coping is intimately connected with emotions, via the process during which our organism becomes aware of a difference between some desired state and the state actually being experienced. It does not matter whether the stimulus to noticing the discrepancy is internal or external, pleasant or unpleasant, because in any case the person

experiences tension. Tension signals that something needs to be done to solve a problem or to regulate an emotional state (Antonovsky, *Health, Stress and Coping* 130). Coping ultimately means to succeed in preventing tension from accumulating into lasting stress. This is one of the concise formulations distilled from Antonovsky's *Health, Stress and Coping* (169). "Conflict and stressors are ubiquitous throughout life and hence tension is at least as characteristic of human beings as homeostasis...", wrote Antonovsky in the course of birthing his theoretical construct the sense of coherence (195). Throughout my thesis I report only on observable coping, thereby setting aside its numerous neurological and endocrine aspects, which are outside my expertise and unobservable with the tools employed here.

Following Antonovsky I emphasise a developmental perspective in the use of the terms 'tension' and 'stress'. 'Tension' indicates the transitory experience when the organism senses itself to be out of its dynamic equilibrium, demanding rebalancing actions. 'Stress' is an enduring outcome of accumulated tension. Tension and stress are in this way distinguished in a manner analogous to 'change' and 'development', as I set out in Chapter 2. To make these distinctions is useful in longitudinal studies, especially regarding health-related expressions. "My head started to hurt from trying to figure out this exercise, but when I had done it I could relax", tells about coping with momentary tension. "Every afternoon, towards the end of work, my head starts hurting and it goes on until I go to sleep", is an expression of enduring stress.

By differentiating tension from stress I hope to avoid the lack of clarity from which 'coping', as a concept, suffers in the literature. Coping is often taken to signify anything from attempts to overcome a specific difficulty to success in actually having solved a problematic situation. The distinction I make is, however, theoretical: an interpretation of the raw data consisting of 'common usage words'. If a person uses words like 'I coped with', these will be coded at face value, as an expression of the meaning that person gives to what she did. This can be coping with a single instance of 'tension' or with an enduring stress, depending on the context of her words. Only in summarising each participant's developmental trajectory through the writing group – at the final stage where I combine my findings from all assessment tools – I will look for any signs of 'improved' coping (compared to baseline), where tensions are felt to be resolved with confidence and ease as soon as they are noticed and long standing stress is diminished or gone.

A dramatic example taken from my study of long-term writing groups is given by a woman who suffered from daily headaches for most of her adult life (mentioned in Section 2.1.1). Her suffering was unalleviated by pain medication, a course of individual psychotherapy, several family therapy sessions, and by writing a private journal. Her headaches all but disappeared shortly after she joined a writing group, started to share her written thoughts and feelings with others and to cope differently inspired by these

interactions (Cune 29; 35). None of the external stressful circumstances of her life had diminished during this period, indeed they appeared to have increased over time. She stated that she could find no other explanation for the relief other than having benefitted from the writing group. In his 1987 *Unravelling the Mystery of Health* Antonovsky summarised a great many strands of research on coping, and showed the increasing system-dynamic understanding of so called 'mediators' in people's resources for handling stressors. Like Lazarus[16] he pointed to "the transactional relationship between stressors and coping styles, patterns, resources and so on" (55).

It is hard to over-emphasise the decades-long influence Lazarus's views on coping has had on my facilitation style for (writing) groups, as represented in very short form in his 1989 article "Multimodal Therapy: A Primer" (*zurinstitute.com/multimodaltherapy*)

In my study, participants' ways of coping, often categorised as coping 'styles', are left to reveal themselves through their own expressions, in words and in the images used by the non-verbal assessment tool. Naturally, the focus is on changes in ways of coping. A recurrent verbal example is when participants tell how they used to keep their thoughts to themselves in situations of conflict, letting tension build up until they exploded in anger. After taking part in a writing group they may still not speak their mind aloud, but they may write a letter, or just a story to 'get the anger off my chest'. Non-verbal variations in coping over time can, for instance, be seen in changes in the size of drawn people and objects, their distance from the 'self', or the connection symbols between 'self' and other parts of the depicted world.[17] To me it appears self-evident that the quality of coping belongs in any appraisal of personal development as a measure of in actuality becoming 'wiser' to the ways of one's world, and not just older.

3.5 Communication

> Information is information, not matter or energy.
>
> Norbert Wiener

How do all the domains dealt with in the previous sections connect with each other? It is a tautology to state that all connections are forms of communication, the sharing or exchanging of information. In 1979 Bateson compacted his accumulated research into a definition of information as "news of difference" (Bateson, *Mind and Nature* 74–75). When

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[16] Arnold Lazarus (1932–2013) was a South African psychologist known as the developer of Multimodal Therapy, an integrative system-dynamical expansion of cognitive behaviour therapy.

[17] My treatment of personal pictorial world views is mainly based on Moreno's Sociometry (1951).

objects and circumstances stay constant in relation to an observer they may be impossible to perceive. "What we perceive is difference and change – and difference is a relationship" (Ruesch and Bateson 173). Bruner points out that in our society we are required to develop a correspondence between what we do, what we see, and what we say, "most strikingly in reading and writing, in 'school learning' and in other abstract pursuits. The confrontation between the three modes of knowing may not always work its way to correspondence" (*Cognitive Growth*, 321–322). Bateson and other researchers of human communication (e.g. Watzlawick et al., *Pragmatics*; Satir, *Peoplemaking*) told us of the many ways in which communication can miss its goal of establishing correspondence between people and even inside individuals. Bateson generalises the problem by showing that verbal discourse operates "at many contrasting levels of abstraction" (Bateson, 177–178), which often are not made explicit. This can easily lead to misunderstandings, as for example Durrell's well-known book title *My family and other animals*. Depending on the context in which it is read or heard, this sentence can be understood as funny, denigratory or complimentary to the family, or just weird. Is it a case of factual denotation, purely of content: 'my family members belong to the class of animals', in which language is central? Or should we take it as a more abstract metacommunication which gives us cues on how to interpret the message: 'this is a book in which I compare my family with animals to create a playful effect'? Here the relationship between the writer and his audience is central. Most metacommunicative messages remain implicit (Bateson quoted in Arpaia, 207–222). Virginia Satir's[18] work in family therapy showed how the differing dominant sensory modes of perceiving and thinking can impede the reaching of understanding between people. The prelude to this chapter may give an inkling of miscommunication of this kind. Importantly Satir also taught how to bridge such differences to improve communication. The iceberg metaphor looms into view again, when we realise how the external manifestations of 'interpersonal' communication are only the visible tip of a vast internal area of 'intrapersonal' communication. The next brief subsections are devoted to these inter- and intra-personal modes.

3.5.1 Interpersonal communication

The actions of sharing and exchanging information or ideas between persons involves the transmission of meaning by means of a variety of behaviours (e.g. speaking, writing, gesturing, listening, watching), processes (such as symbols, analogies) and technologies (voice and other media). Silence is also a medium of communication and it may even be said that it is impossible not to communicate 'something'.

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[18] Virginia Satir (1916-1988), nicknamed the Mother of Family Therapy, was an extraordinarily inspiring teacher to a generation of 'communicators' of which I am one.

The purpose of communication is to create a 'correspondence' in Bruner's term, or 'understanding' between the communicating parties. When this purpose is achieved, a tension, the feeling of dissonance, is relaxed and the communicators experience an emotion associated for them with that relaxation. In this sense successful interpersonal communication can be seen as inherently salutary, while communication that does not lead to mutual understanding may cause an unpleasant sense of failure and 'disconnection' in people, a tension which needs to be coped with in the terms of Section 3.4 above.

How do we know whether our intended message has been received and understood, and what to do next? In 1948, Norbert Wiener, who coined the term 'cybernetics', also introduced the notion of 'feedback' that is said to describe chains of information processing. Visual or auditory cues like a nod of the head, a frown or a question are customary forms of feedback in human communication. Organisms of all kinds have been observed to modify parts of their own behaviour to correct for adverse reactions to other aspects of their behaviour, based on feedback. Humans are no different in their ongoing adjustments in the course of communicating with others. And many adjustments are necessary, due to the frustrating phenomenon that people do not respond to a universally agreed 'reality', but to their own map of reality. They will understand messages from what they know to exist in their own map only. It follows that the more one knows about someone's map of the world, the more one will be able to communicate effectively with that person. And also: the 'richer' one's map of the world is, the more choices one has in communicating with others (Dilts F22, *Encyclopedia of Systemic NLP*).

Writing groups are meetings of as many maps of the world as there are participants, plus the facilitator. Sharing writings and discussing them intensifies the process of getting acquainted with multiple maps of the world. People are being invited to enrich their own maps and to practice their skills of 'exchanging meaning' with others.

3.5.2 Intra-personal communication

Hidden below the tip of the iceberg similar communicative processes are at work internally between a person and her or himself. Internal dialogue, monologue or inner speech, are probably the best known of these, but many other, nonverbal, forms of communication operate mostly outside of our awareness. My study does not deal with these other forms, again except where a person expresses them verbally as for example in the sentence: "Twice a day when I go to walk my dog, I remember to use the muscles exercised in my Pilates lessons".

Many people still feel uncomfortable with the idea that in thinking and feeling we are in effect communicating with parts of ourselves. One likes to imagine oneself to be 'a single coherent self'. This image is kept intact during the challenge of consciously opening up to

intra-personal communication, while acknowledging our varied internal opinions, feelings, values and bodily demands.

Without entering a psychological minefield it is 'socially' safe to point out in a group that each of us makes decisions, weighing pros and cons, thinks what and what not to write, has doubts, and translates certain internal sensations into a need to eat or sleep. Most people also recognise internal conflicts in relation to dieting, exercising, spending money, etc. It is a small step from here to come to see that different aspects, or parts of ourselves can hold conflicting opinions, ideas, even values.

Earlier in this chapter, on the topic of coping, I said that dissonance of any kind causes a form of tension that demands to be resolved, and that unresolved tensions accumulate over time and turn into stress. Internal dissonances of parts wanting different things from the single body that is the Self can only be resolved by communication between those parts. There is no escape from the embodied self, no (sound) option 'to leave the field' that may exist when communicating with other people. Feeling comfortable with intrapersonal communication can thus be seen as an asset in the human repertoire of coping skills.

The title of one of Paul John Eakin's books, *How Our Lives Become Stories: Making selves*,[19] exemplifies a little of what takes place during writing groups. The process of thinking how and what to write prompts people, not to 'make more selves', but to become aware of the different internal parts that participate in the communication. Polyphonic voices, images and sensations begin to be perceived and to be communicated with. According to Hermans et al. who established the theory of *Dialogical Self* based on the work of Michail Bakhtin, the self is a combination of various voices embodied as one person.

> Although written by one person, the polyphonic novel is spoken by many 'sub-personalities' (i.e. inner authors of the story), characters or I-positions. Different voices of these characters exchange information about their respective me's and their world, resulting in a complex, narratively structured self.
>
> (Hermans, Kempen and van Loon 28)

Lengelle (*Mystery to Mastery* 66) emphasises that the dialogical self is not static but rather continuously transformed by exchanges amongst I-positions via intrapersonal, or with other individuals via interpersonal communication. Yigael is more concise in posing: "The Self is an indication of the level of integration of the psychic structure at any given moment in time" (*Evolving Psyche* 42), which would imply that if differing internal 'opinions' are not being communicated to each other, the self will show less integration than when such communication is ongoing. This idea forms the base for the operationalisation of internal communication (InC) as a category in my content analysis.

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[19] Eakin is a contemporary professor emeritus of English and an authority on autobiographical writing.

In this light I will amend my statement in the last paragraph of the section above that *writing groups are meetings of as many maps of the world as there are participants*. In writing groups many more maps of the world may meet, if we also count the maps of 'sub-personalities', or I-positions, active inside each participant.

I assume that the connection with the sense of coherence has by now become apparent.

3.6 Is generative learning a mediator for personal development?

Communication is short-term learning.

Learning is long-term communicating.

Robert Dilts

The process of developmental change in the domains of behaviour, cognition, emotion, coping and communication towards lasting flexibility, bound by salutary parameters, is a process of learning, which is a central topic in the fields of education, development and neuroscience among others. How does such learning come about?

Again without entering the specialist fray on this vast terrain, staying only with what is observable with the naked eye in the behaviours of participants, I venture to say that structured writing in groups appears to engender personal development in the form of generative learning. Generative learning is defined as a change in the frame of reference, a shift to higher-order thinking that creates more changes, which in turn give access to more behavioural options (Nicholas). These are the types of changes in cognition, emotion and behaviour that participants of writing groups have tended to report. Compared with what people expected to find by joining the group 'something extra' occurs, and these extras stay in awareness at least long enough to report on six months afterwards.

The groups in this study have been structured to promote generative learning by means of writing exercises in a safe interpersonal environment, the importance of which has been set out in Chapter 2 and will continue to be emphasised in other chapters. This does not, however, ensure that generative learning will occur in any individual. The dynamics of the system are complex, in perpetual movement, and can be different with each group and each person. For this reason I am still fascinated and curious about the outcomes of this first systematic, longitudinal investigation in the field.

Generative learning serves me as a comprehensive concept covering the complex interplay of developmental processes as set out in this chapter. It may be thought of as a theoretical abstraction of enriching and enduring development observable in the processes, which I have attempted to operationalise. Development will only be possible,

however, with communication between all parts of the process.[20] Writing groups are one of the less studied ways to set in motion or enhance such communication. Part II, the Chapters 4 and 5, treat these topics in greater detail.

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[20] This view is supported by the 2012 book *Mbraining: Using Your Multiple Brains* a very detailed metastudy distilled from over 600 research papers by Soosalu and Oka.

PART II

STRUCTURED WRITING GROUPS AND THE USE OF SYMBOLIC INTERACTIONISM IN ANAYLSING THEIR PROCESSES

General introduction to Part II

In the three chapters of Part I, I have described the aims, objectives and rationale of my study, the key concepts chosen from the literature and the operational definition of personal development in adults. Furthermore I have pointed to a gap in knowledge about writing in a group context as a pathway to continuing development in adults.

Here in Part II, I connect the specific pathway of my study, structured writing groups, with the methodology I have chosen, symbolic interactionism (SI). Another way to explain the grouping together of these two subjects is that writing groups provide the 'physical objects' of the study, to which SI is used as the lens for making sense of their processes.

Part II comprises the Chapters 4 and 5.

Chapter 4 describes the nature of structured writing groups in general, and those specific to this study, to explain how they may be linked to personal development.

Chapter 5 presents symbolic interactionism and its relevance to the research questions, with an emphasis on the interrelations between the basic tenets of SI and other interpretive approaches that share underlying philosophies. The chapter concludes with a summary of the ways in which SI frames my study.

CHAPTER 4 – STRUCTURED WRITING GROUPS

Prelude

> Wife: Right then, I'm off.
>
> Husband: Where to now?
>
> Wife: You keep forgetting; Wednesdays is my writing group. How long have I been going?
>
> Husband: Oh that girlie stuff … can't keep it in mind, too airy-fairy.
>
> Wife: There you go again. You can't remember, because you never write it down. Waste of energy really, to have to think everything all over again as if it's new. While you men stay where you are, thinking the same things over again, us girlies like to move on.
>
> Husband: I bet there's no blokes at this writing thingy then.
>
> Wife: You'd be surprised. Some actually have the guts to do new stuff.

This chapter starts with the origins and the nature of structured writing groups in general, and goes on to explain how they may be linked to personal development. The history of the field will show a sparsity of academic studies, a gap in knowledge, which the current study hopes to narrow. Attention is given to the ways in which structure and process are combined to support personal development, followed by reflections of the practitioner-researcher on the effects the empirical design can have on the study's outcomes, compared with writing groups outside such a research setting. The chapter attempts also to provide the reader with a closer personal grasp of what a writing group is. An interim summary then leads to the choice of methodology, the topic of Chapter 5.

4.1 The origins of writing groups

As stated, my study aims to find out if (and a bit of how) personal development is engendered in adults who take part in structured writing groups. As a background, a short history of writing in groups in this context is in order. The idea that personal development occurs at all in writing groups is grounded in practice. It may be seen as a concomitant of healing effects reported in groups conducted with patients (e.g. Bolton, *Way of Saying* 40–46).

> Books are not absolutely dead things, but doe contain a potencie of life in them to be as active as that soule was whose progeny they are; nay they do preserve as in a violl the purest efficacie and extraction of that living intellect that bred them.   "Areopagitica", John Milton (*The Milton Reading Room, n.p.*)

A writing group is simply a group of people, usually quite small (between 4 and 12 persons), who come together to write, share and discuss their writings.

Writing groups have also been called 'interactive bibliotherapy' or poetry therapy groups, and have been used with various populations in western countries for several decades (Buck and Kramer; Chase K.; Golden, *Effect,* and *Use of Collaborative Writing*; Griefer). They evolved from bibliotherapeutic reading groups using literary texts for therapeutic purposes. Samuel Crothers named 'bibliotherapy' in 1916, which also evolved into interactive bibliotherapy, almost synonymous in practice with 'poetry therapy' (Hynes and Hynes-Berry "poetrytherapy.org/history"). The latter form gained popularity in parallel with group psychotherapy since the 1960s in the USA. Mental health professionals explored the therapeutic value of – mainly poetic – literary materials. They contributed to the emerging discipline by emphasising the evocative value of literature and by recognising the beneficial potential to clients who wrote in response to existing poems or wrote original material, using their own experiences and emotions (Hynes and Hynes-Berry). Since the early days reading and writing groups have diversified into several forms, some of which are moving away from therapy towards non-clinical populations, like the adult groups in my study. Recent uses of the writing group format have sometimes been aimed at other special populations like those searching for a career (Meijers and Lengelle) and for healing, self-development and building confidence in professional hockey players (Scott-Reid), to name just two out of many special interest groups, where writing is employed specifically for support in personal or team development.

Many non-therapeutic writing groups, however, call themselves 'creative', their stated purpose being to hone participants' writing skills with hopes of reaching a publishable level.

For the groups considered in the thesis the product of writing is a means rather than a goal. Structured writing groups focus on the process in which writing may serve as a medium for personal development, however diversely that outcome might be defined. For example, in 2012 Wright and Bolton see personal and professional development as almost equivalent, especially from a humanistic point of view (4–5).

Groups that focus on process rather than on product can be found under headings like 'writing for health and wellbeing'. According to facilitators of such groups, this appears to be a growing field in the UK, Europe, the USA and Israel (of which I have personal

knowledge), but I have been unable to find reliable numbers about this. The founding dates of some professional organisations may give an indication.[21]

Biblio-/poetry therapeutic practice has expanded into education, rehabilitation, counselling, social / community work, and personal professional development across the whole life span (Bolton and Ihanus, *Conversation*).

The Jewish Social Work agency of the Netherlands has been offering its clients short-term 'writing-courses' in a group format for many years, based on the model of Franssen with notable preventative and integrative effects on the participants, many of whom continue to take part in follow-up courses. Although 'notable' for participants and practitioners, the effects have not been systematically assessed and published. These Dutch writing courses stimulated me to create my structured groups for personal development in adults in Israel from 1995 onwards.

A growing area of online writing forums, online courses and even online therapy falls outside the scope of the thesis, as I am only investigating inter/personal communication processes in groups that meet, not virtually, but in the flesh.

Poetic techniques have been found suitable in an eclectic, brief psychotherapy model (Mazza, "Poetic Approaches") and several studies attempted to show positive health effects from structured writing assignments for, not groups but individuals in experimental-laboratory conditions (for example Smyth et al. "Effects of Writing About Stressful Experiences"). There are numerous descriptions and testimonies by facilitators and participants of the process and its outcomes (for example Lauer and Goldfield), but few academic studies have been published. The majority of participants in reported groups testify to beneficial effects gained in the group, like increased self-esteem and mastery (Lauer, op. cit., 251), greater ease in expressing emotions and the development of coping skills (Bolton, *Therapeutic Potential*, 23). These effects are reported even from single group sessions, but much stronger from a series of sessions with a stable group. By lacking a baseline and follow-up assessment procedure, most reports bear an anecdotal character and have little or no impact outside of the small field of writing group facilitators in the world.

As a base for contributing to the field I formulated my definition of personal development (elaborated in Chapter 3) to delineate clearly my understanding of those

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[21] The American National Organization for Poetry Therapy has existed since 1969. The first European association in the field was the Finnish Association for Bibliotherapy founded in 1981. In the UK, Lapidus (Lapidus.org.uk, founded 1996), promotes creative writing and reading for health and well-being. The National Association for Writers in Education (NAWE.co.uk, founded 1987) is active in teaching and learning of creative writing in schools and higher education, and among freelance writers in schools and community (Bolton & Ihanus, 2011).

aspects of human experience that are being assessed. The definition is my attempt to clarify what personal development may mean. It is also a start to devising practical ways to assess the extent of its occurrence in structured writing groups, as set out in the next section. I repeat it here to show how the thesis innovates the field, compared to earlier work.

> Personal development is a perceivable change towards lasting flexibility in behaviour, cognition, emotion, coping, (inter)personal communication, occurring in a person with a coherent sense of self.

> Structured writing in groups appears to engender such development in the form of generative learning, which is a change in the frame of reference, a shift to higher-order thinking, creating ever more changes that give access to behavioural options. (Bateson, *Steps*; Nicholas; Watzlawick et al.; Woodsmall)

Two questions asked of the participants may serve as an example of the direct link between the components of the definition and the assessments. Coping and behaviour are targeted directly in the question:

> Has your behaviour, how you actually deal with life, changed? Is what you do or how you do things since the group different?

Intra- and inter-personal communication are addressed by the following questions:

> Do you think that how you speak to yourself (in your head, or aloud when nobody listens) has changed? In which way(s)?

> Has anything changed in how you communicate with others who were not in this group? In which way(s)?

Operationalisation methods are further explained in the empirical Chapter 6. The importance given to participants' personal interpretation of experience forms part of the methodological framework set out in Chapter 5.

4.2 A general overview of structured writing groups

A description and working definition of structured writing groups is needed before we can explore how personal development occurs during writing in such a group context. Writing groups often do not carry the epithet 'structured', although most of those known to me certainly are structured.

Fourteen years ago I started using 'structured' as a description for my version of writing groups, based on Adams' 1998 journaling workbook. Structure is offered in the form of exercises and the 'holding environment' of a group, to provide boundaries to the writing. These boundaries are useful when people are anxious or overwhelmed by the idea of starting to write. Structured guidelines start from physical ones, like leaving margins on the page you write on, dating each piece and setting a time limit to write. Step by step, as participants become more at ease, different forms of writing are introduced for the

expression of any personal content (Adams, *Way of the Journal*). While structure is especially advised for vulnerable populations in mental health, I have found it useful for the general population joining writing groups. Giving structure to such groups activates a personal and group process within a relatively safe framework (Bowlby; Rogers – see Section 2.2; Winnicott) that can be guided by the facilitator.

4.2.1 Structuring features of writing groups

Time, interest and purpose are the first three features of structure. Let's take time... Structured writing groups are deliberately created social entities that exist during a defined period of time, ranging from a single-session meeting of a couple of hours to an ongoing group that meets for a set number of sessions. The number in this study, for example, was limited to twelve sessions, a total of 24 hours of face-to-face interaction. Both the 'life-period' of the group and the duration of each session are defined from the start. Between sessions, participants spend time alone away from the group, writing the assignments for each meeting. During this 'alone' time, which cannot accurately be measured, the group exists in each person's awareness. During the sessions these alone-time writings are produced, shared and discussed.

Interest and purpose are structuring elements, because writing groups are not naturally occurring social phenomena like family groups or incidental gatherings at mealtimes. Writing groups come together as a result of the initiative of at least one person and are joined voluntarily by people with an interest to write and to share their writing with others in a small group. Who might those people be?

Writing groups appeal to those who like to write and those who would like to write, but find it hard to do alone (e.g. Harper; Hirsch).

Those who like to write typically include people who write diaries and personal journals, people who love(d) to write letters (out of fashion in the age of e-mail), people who write poetry and prose in times of emotional stress and people who have autobiographical pieces sitting in their drawers.

In my experience those who would like to write include (grand)parents who are being asked by their offspring to tell about their life, but who don't feel capable of doing so in spoken words; people who have tried traditional psychotherapy, but who did not benefit from it; people who feel an obligation to give testimony to what they have experienced, but who have not found another medium that suited them. Each of these characteristics deserves elaboration, but to do so would lead me too far astray, as would a discussion of the many psychosocial reasons motivating human beings to join groups at all.

In addition to an interest in writing, people who join a writing group share an expectation that a group context can assist them in connecting with 'likeminded' others and in advancing their purpose, whatever that may be. Likeminded is an assumption held by many at the beginning of a group and is likely to be adjusted in the course of

time. Based on the typical gender division found in writing and other not strictly work-related groups, the wish to connect with others through sharing appears to be much stronger in women than in men. A mixed gender group will have about three times the number of women compared to men, while many small groups sport women only.

Interest and purpose are connected but different. Interest in writing is a necessary but not sufficient condition for having a purpose or a goal to pursue in a writing group.

Interested participants who lack purpose are often happy with whatever is done in the group, structured or not. Purpose is a structuring feature, while interest by itself is not. Formulating a personal goal or intention related to writing is one of the first prompts presented to participants in my groups. It guides them to contemplate a possibility of changes in their writing, sends them 'inwards' to ask themselves "What do I want/hope to achieve in this group–" It may be the first awareness-focussing, reflective experience of many that are to follow, and also activates an intra-personal communication channel. At the same time it sets up a personal method for assessing any developments that may occur.

Setting a goal involves being aware of where we are now, compared to where we want to be at a future point in time. Inherent in describing our goal is the difference between that future and this present time. The two points of reference serve as personal benchmarks along the time-line of the group's life. Journal writing may be used to keep track of those experiences in each session that a person wants to remember. At the end of the group's life, participants can re-read their journal entries to discover to what extent they have reached their initial (or other, unplanned) goals.

Although the basic set-up of a writing group resembles that of reading groups and creative-activity groups (Gauntlett ch.3), a difference between structured writing groups and some leisure activity groups lies in their specific purpose to trigger 'new' thinking and feeling in the participants, in the hope that these will carry over to benefit them in daily life. Following on from the three features discussed above, other features that make a writing group structured are:

Facilitation – either by a designated professional or by turn-taking of the group members.

Predetermined location, time and duration of the group sessions.

Premeditated, well thought-out, writing exercises, built to make for intriguing personal and group experiences.

Predesigned basic structure[22] of the group activities during each and all sessions.

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[22] Structure simply denotes an organisation according to a pattern that shows the relation of its parts to the whole. Its potential 'political' or 'power' aspect is acknowledged and set aside, because participation in writing groups is voluntary and not subject to any social pressure.

Notwithstanding the 'predetermination' language used, structured writing groups do not follow a set protocol, but are led by means of a honed attunement to the developing needs of the group and its members as they are being expressed from moment to moment. The facilitator has to uphold the feelings of safety, security and confidentiality of the participants to allow the shared creative activity to occur. A structured writing group is a snug gathering, in which, at its best, participants dare to write, speak and listen beyond their level of everyday communication. The intimacy of the atmosphere is a common denominator found in all writing groups described in the literature. (e.g. Bolton, "Things I Can't Say"; Golden, "Use of Collaborative Writing"). In "Creative Writing in Group Therapy" Lauer and Goldfield wrote in 1970:

> In all the groups we strove for an atmosphere of informality, warmth and spontaneity. This is similar to what Carl Rogers (1959) called an atmosphere of 'safety' and 'psychological freedom'… To prevent intellectualising we avoided psychiatric jargon and psychologic criticism. To preserve an unjudgmental tone, we discouraged explicit praise or condemnation and instead pointed out the diversity and variety of the writing (248–249).

Initially it is not an easy task to give feedback to writing without praise or condemnation, modes which are so ingrained in how we respond to 'products'. And writing will evoke feelings in readers and listeners. But because writing groups focus on the processes in and between people, and their products are seen as work in progress, participants quickly learn how to give feedback that supports further learning. Since all are in a similar situation of sharing their writings with the group, it is in everyone's interest to treat others with the respect they also hope to be treated with.

The facilitator sets the example, literally 'modelling' feedback, like: "When I listened to your story at first it thought it funny, but towards the end I felt as if the humour was covering something really sad. Was that your intention when you wrote it, or am I hearing something that's not there?" In a reaction of this type the listeners can express any emotion they feel, without imposing their meaning on the writer. They allow for the possibility of being 'wrong' compared with the writer's intentions. The questioning form of the feedback directs the writer to do a reflective 'internal search' (e.g. Gordon 15): "Did I intend to write what came through to this listener? If not, what did I mean to convey, or how can I write it so I make myself clearer?"

The effect of respectful personal feedback is strengthened when other group members add their responses, which may or may not resemble the first, giving writers a richer impression of the effect of their works in progress on a benevolent audience.

Nicholas Mazza, a leading scholar and practitioner in the field of writing groups, has proposed a comprehensive framework for poetry therapy practice that accounts for the differential use of poetic techniques with a wide range of clients (*Poetry Therapy* 17–22). From this framework poetry therapy can be described in practical units and subjected to

further clinical research. His widely accepted model includes three components:

- The receptive/prescriptive component, in which an existing piece of literature is presented as a prompt to start a process. (derived from bibliotherapy, which exclusively uses existing literature.)
- The expressive/creative component of the group members' own writing.
- The symbolic/ceremonial component, where 'rituals' are repeated at each session, like a 'warm-up' at the start and a summing-up activity at the end.

Each component has its own repertoire of techniques and has the potential to address the cognitive, emotional and behavioral domains of human experience, wherein lies the link between writing groups and personal development.

4.2.2 A combination of structure and process in support of personal development

> A structure constrains a process, a process entails a structure. Structure is the relation among processes. Process is the ongoing dynamics over a structured manifold. Process leads to the alteration of structure, which in turn modifies the ongoing dynamics. Creativity happens when the processes can intermix and intermingle in novel ways via the given structure; in ways not determined by the structure, but constrained and loosely organized by it. So far as I can tell, one does not reduce to the other – they come as a pair.
>
> Emergent Worlds, anonymous

Structure of the group-experience as a whole and of each activity conducted during the sessions provides a measure of safety, of relative predictability, so participants will not be completely bewildered by an unknown setting and overwhelming thoughts, emotions, stories.

Overarching structure is provided by the time boundaries of sessions and the understanding participants share that the available time is limited and that it has to be divided fairly between participants for writing, reading and discussing the work. Structure is further given by ritual components like Mazza described: warm-up exercises, reliable sequencing of writing and sharing, and a closing 'ceremony' in preparation for returning to the outside world.

The facilitator provides structure in guided activities that are presented in a step-by-step fashion.

Process encompasses all interactions that take place in the group, including those that take place internally within participants, for example during writing. Interactional processes in the group, written, spoken and non-verbal, are seen as the means to any enduring outcomes in personal development, as defined above, after the conclusion of the group. From the start participants are introduced to forms of communication that may differ from everyday interactions governed by people's 'implicit relational knowing'

or knowing how to be with others, as learned in preverbal infancy (explained in Section 2.2.2). The group's form of communication respects all persons, including oneself. As part of this respect, it seeks ways to understand the intended 'meanings' of which the writings are an expression.

Nurturing a group norm of respectfully communicating with self and others appears to awaken a need and an opportunity to discover new behavioural options, the 'seeds' for personal development. This challenging (maybe even frightening) process is held in a safe environment by the structural boundaries described above, which depend on the skill of the facilitator.[23]

Process is more important than product, unlike in creative writing groups (Bolton "Things I Can't Say", 41). Writings are seen as exercises to an end (clarity, understanding of self and others), which does not necessarily involve aspirations for publication.

4.3 Reflections on the significance of special features of the groups in this study

When Narcissus died the pool of his pleasure changed from a cup of sweet waters into a cup of salt tears, and the Oreads came weeping through the woodland that they might sing to the pool and give it comfort. And when they saw that the pool had changed from a cup of sweet waters into a cup of salt tears, they loosened the green tresses of their hair and cried to the pool and said, "We do not wonder that you should mourn in this manner for Narcissus, so beautiful was he." "But was Narcissus beautiful–" said the pool. "Who should know that better than you–" answered the Oreads. "Us did he ever pass by, but you he sought for, and would lie on your banks and look down at you, and in the mirror of your waters he would mirror his own beauty." And the pool answered, "But I loved Narcissus because, as he lay on my banks and looked down at me, in the mirror of his eyes I saw ever my own beauty mirrored."

Oscar Wilde, *The Disciple*

It is important here, already, before the concluding discussion of the thesis, to point out how the groups in this study differ from those mentioned in most of the literature. A general adult population, time constraints, renunciation of Mazza's receptive and prescriptive component (justified below), a lone facilitator-researcher and pressure of commitment to the facilitator's academic goals are distinguishing features, which may limit the applicability of the findings to other formats of writing groups. I hope, however,

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[23] Skills of writing group facilitators are not discussed in the thesis, they can only be inferred. A future study involving more than one facilitator will provide a platform for it.

that the outcomes of my study will be valuable to others despite this limitation.

The four writing groups studied here were set up to fit an empirical design. Their make-up and the rationale for their composition is fully set out in in Chapters 6 and 7. They were recruited from a general adult population, with participants joining voluntarily and out of personal interest only. In this they differ from many writing groups that target specific 'clients', who share a medical or social concerns. These groups operated under a tight time constraint – a major structural feature, as explained above. They had to be short term, with the frequency of sessions adapted to the overall time frame of the study, allowing for follow-up interviews six months after completion of each group. These constraints led to the very intensive set-up of 12 weekly sessions and to the awareness for all persons involved that there was a task to be accomplished in a set period of time. To those who wanted to participate in the study the group was offered on condition of the commitment to attend the assessments and sessions and write the assignments.

I used with the groups in this study only two of the three structural components from Mazza's categories, mentioned earlier, namely the expressive/creative and the symbolic/ceremonial. The receptive/prescriptive component, where existing literature functions as prompts to writing, has been deliberately left out. All writings were created by the participants in group-time or in home assignments, to focus exclusively on in-group process, uninfluenced by external 'powers', such as famous writers. An assumption, stated at the beginning of the groups, proclaims that each person can create writing of some kind. Introducing writings from known authors could give people the idea that they should write like that, or can never write like that: unhelpful comparisons for giving writing your best shot.

There is another reason for leaving the use of existing literary prompts out of the study design, which stems from a known pitfall in choosing texts appropriate to a group's needs. Mazza calls making this selection "one of the most difficult challenges faced by clinicians using poetry therapy" (*Poetry Therapy*, 19). Making a good choice may be (a little) easier in groups sharing a specific concern, like homelessness or bereavement. I decided not to take the risk of mis-choosing, which would lend me undue influence on the atmosphere of a generic groups. Therefore the expressive-creative component is predominant in the studied groups, framed by the symbolic/ceremonial structure.

To demonstrate how this is applied, while still connecting participants to existing texts, one of the very first exercises given will serve as an example. The surface purpose of this exercise is to remind the new participants that they already know rhymes and songs from childhood and so to reconnect them through this memory to the rhythm of texts. It brings out the sing-song, melodic, physically catchy repetitive preverbal qualities of language. Two interacting elements are being called upon, in the words of Nicholls ("A developmental tool") "the neurophysiological evidence for a bodily, 'core' self which pre-exists language (Damasio, *What Happens*); and the idea that the subject is continually 'en

procés' between body and language – the semiotic and the symbolic – in a dialogue of meaning-making (Kristeva 22-24)." It would be very easy to present the group with a few well-known examples. But by encouraging each group member to delve into their own memories and from there choose a childhood song or rhyme to write the exercise from, much more is gained: wonderment, satisfaction, connection to a pleasant or funny, intensely personal, memory. Just in case someone's memory does not produce such a song, an alternative way is suggested, but seldom chosen, as in this example for both options:[24]

> Exercise – 'I got rhythm' (2 ways)
>
> Way 1) Think of a children's rhyme or a lullaby or a counting song, hopscotch, anything of that kind. Something you used to sing or recite and play to when you were a kid. Bring it vividly to mind and then write your own words to the rhythm of that song.
>
> Way 2) Alternatively, you can connect to a pleasant physical activity you do a lot of in the present. Some examples are walking, swimming, dancing, cycling. Take some time to get well into the rhythm of your chosen activity. Then write a short text to the rhythm of this activity.

Research conditions distinguish the groups being analysed here from writing groups outside of academic scrutiny also in another way. A common trait of structured writing groups is the atmosphere of freedom, of 'there are no oughts and shoulds about your writing'. The research conditions spoil that atmosphere to a certain extent, because in my mind as the facilitator it is a factor: I compare the compressed research format to the more relaxed non-research groups in my experience. This is true also for those participants who have experienced writing groups before. The pressure of commitment to attend twelve weekly sessions and write assignments on time each week is unusual by creating a great intensity to the process. Some participants were energised by it, others stressed, some expressed their enjoyment of the group and yet others regretted the group's ending.

Another divergent feature is that the groups in the current study were facilitated solely by me, the researcher. Besides requiring rigorous reflexive engagement from me as a practitioner-researcher (Alvesson and Sköldberg; Bolton, *Reflective Practice*), it has also made the groups uniform in facilitation style and statement of purpose. Unresearched structured writing groups are being led in many settings by a variety of facilitators, each with their own style. Will findings about the processes in my groups be at all relevant to

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[24] The exercise combines ideas from several sources, one of which is the Sussex MA (see acknowledgements).

processes of groups conducted differently? Will my study contribute to the distillation of key processes, independent of facilitator styles? Could some effects be 'universal', independent of facilitator style and method? I will return to these questions when discussing suggestions for future research.

Unusually not only the participants, but the facilitator too has a goal for herself beyond running a successful group, namely the writing of a thesis to achieve an academic degree. One might argue that this is simply the nature of any practitioner-research condition. However it will be naive to suppose that it makes no difference to the process. A facilitator of 'regular' writing groups would not pursue such a goal, but would define her role solely as guiding and supporting the participants in their writing to the best of their ability.

And speaking of goals, I am referring here to stated goals only, those explicitly known to the participants. This is in contrast to the issues of unstated goals, conscious and unconscious, that may exist for anyone involved.

Both stated and unstated goals play their part in the group's interactions. All goals are subject to various interpretations, and thus feelings, emotions and behaviours, by different people. If we take the 'meaning' attributed to the facilitator's goal of gathering data for her thesis, we see how some participants attributed great weight to it, even to the point of expressing an obligation to write assignments to assist the facilitator in her goal, while others never mention it at all. Some are aware that they participate in a collaboration with the facilitator and are positively invested in a 'favourable' outcome, whatever that is taken to mean. Some share the facilitator's curiosity about what the 'active ingredients' of the group will turn out to have been.

The meaning-making about the facilitator's goal is an example of symbolic interactionism at work. Its effects in attitude and behaviour are observable in the participants' evaluations that form part of the data of the study.

Before getting to SI in the next chapter I would like to draw a group being studied in yet another way, because it is almost impossible to explain to those who have never been in such a group. To insiders it is obvious, to outsiders utterly elusive.

4.3.1 Behold a writing group (almost)

What does remembering ourselves mean?

It essentially means coming back to life: re-membering.

Gerald Epstein (15)

I will attempt to bring a structured writing group alive for you, who are only reading about it. The means to do this are the same as those used in writing groups of all kinds to reconnect disembodied words on paper to lived experience. This is done by literally re-

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membering words to the bodily felt experiences that evoked them in their writer (Gendlin, *Focusing*; Nicholls, "Writing the Body").

This is what you would see if you were allowed to soundlessly watch such a group:

A room where, let's say, seven persons are seated around a table. Six persons are participants and one is the group's facilitator. Everyone has some writing paper and a pen in front of them. Sometimes they write, and in between you can see them reading aloud what they have written and then talking to each other. People's postures and facial expressions suggest they are strongly focussed on the group's members and activities. They turn not just their heads, but their upper bodies to face whoever is speaking. But from time to time someone's attention moves away from its outward direction towards the group, and turns visibly inwards. You can see how a person's posture and visual focus change at the moment of switching between external and internal awareness. Many emotions appear to pass across people's faces, like seriousness, smiles, surprise, anxiousness, puzzlement. You may notice a deep sigh or two by the movements of someone's shoulders or chest. Quite often you will see them laughing with wide-open mouths.

And this is what you would hear on a sound-only recording:

Voices taking turns at speaking. The facilitator's voice leading the structure of activities, keeping the time-frame, introducing exercises, giving feedback, making opening and closing remarks. The participants' voices, reading out their writings, asking questions, giving feedback, responding. You will hear stories and poems read aloud. The tones of the voices are nuanced in timbre, rhythm, speed and volume. These nuances are not just between people, but also in each person's voice. Further there is a scratching of pens during writing, and background noises from outside the group (depending on the location, some louder than others). Intermittent breathing, sometimes a sigh, sometimes the silence of held breath. Frequently, the sounds of laughter.

Naturally I cannot describe what you would sense and feel when witnessing a writing group. Your own physical and affective reaction will be entirely yours and cannot be deduced from the known sights and sounds above. Sensing and feeling are however part of how writers re-member their words with the experiences that formed them. They are continuously alive in the internal, therefore private, domain of group participants alongside the external visual and auditory aspects observable by others. As mentioned before, internal experiences can be shared only by expressing them in words and other deeds. Only then they can become 'data'. Data of this kind are always subjective, coming from the point of view of the beholder. As such they reflect the meaning, the interpretation of experience according to that person's view of the world at a particular moment in time and place. The methodology of Symbolic Interactionism gives me a language by which to structure my observations of such data and analyse them.

4.4. Interim summary

> There's a lot of joy in it. I find myself very buoyed by the work I do. I call it the work that re-connects. ... I think it's very hard for people to do that alone, so this work thrives and requires groups ... so we can hear it from each other. Then you realize that it gives a lie to the isolation we have been conditioned to experience in recent centuries, and especially by this hyper-individualist consumer society. People can graduate from their sense of isolation, into a realization of their inter-existence with all.
>
> Joanna Macy (about *her* work).

What I set out to discover was whether people develop sustained new ways of thinking, feeling and dealing with life through the processes of structured writing in a short term group context. In other words, if they conform to my definition of personal development, how (if at all) do people change towards lasting flexibility in behaviour, cognition, emotion, coping, and (inter)personal communication.

The content of such change will be specific for each person, possibly, but not necessarily connected to the variety of goals each participant will have set for him or herself. The possibility that the group might not enrich people exists of course, and will be addressed further in the discussion of the findings (7.2.7), while also reviewing earlier research findings.

'Developing new ways' implies an assumption, albeit based on long practice, that adults continue to learn throughout their lifespan (see Section 1.2). As in many theoretical discussions, whether an assumption is true or not, it is not simply a matter of either/or, and Courtenay's argument (15), presented at Section 2.2, that models of personal development may not be useful reads quite convincingly. Not all adults wish to develop themselves after reaching a certain point, but for those who do, the assumption that continued learning is possible at any age underlies my work.

My analysis focuses on the ways in which writing group processes may engender sustained and beneficial outcomes in individual participants. The investigation of this type of learning requires a methodology and methods suitable to record outcomes from the point of view of the learners: the understanding of what they got out of the group and which they have included in their behaviour over time.

In order not to digress too much from the main thread of my argument I reduce a wealth of research on outcome and student-centred learning to the summary review of many studies published as "Beyond Integration: The Triumph of Outcome Over Process in Clinical Practice" by Scott Miller, Barry Duncan and Mark Hubble in 2004. Their conclusion is that psychotherapy has mistakenly tried to innovate and improve methods, while under the illusion of being in the business of therapy rather than being about change. And consumers just want change, without caring too much about how it is

accomplished. Enduring beneficial change in education and therapy comes about through sharing and communicating between clients and service providers, otherwise psychotherapy will continue to lose interest from its potential users (5). In "Using Formal Client Feedback to Improve Retention and Outcome: Making Ongoing, Real-Time Assessment Feasible." Miller and his co-researchers propose in 2006 that therapeutic services to clients be fitted according to "practice-based evidence instead of evidence-based practice" (17).

Findings of the occurrence of 'developmental' outcomes may later be subjected to the question of ascribed (thus subjective) causality: to which experiences during the group does a person connect outcomes, if at all. Participants will then be asked not just to give meaning and expression to their experience of development, but also to point to those stimuli from the group process with which they associate their development. This can be an inroad to find out more about what Lengelle and Meijers have called 'the black box of writing and healing' (58). The black box refers to the as yet unknown learning processes taking place in the 'transformational space' (ibid.), a concept that strongly reminds me of Winnicott's transitional space (Winnicott, *Playing and Reality*), where creativity can flourish, as mentioned earlier. In *Mind and Nature* (30) Bateson held that it is impossible to predict the course of individual instances of development and change: "As a method of perception – and that is all science can claim to be – science ... is limited in its ability to collect the outward and visible signs of whatever may be truth." However our professional competency may grow with wider knowledge collected in a systematic way.

4.5 Choosing a methodology

Investigative approaches common in qualitative research focus on the interaction of variables occurring in the setting being studied. They seek to understand people's interpretations in a subjective reality that changes with their perceptions. They want to discover a comprehensive picture with rich data grounded in the observation of actual occurrences and the interpretations thereof (Calhoun, Gerteis, et al.; O'Donoghue).

Let's reconnect for another moment to your (almost) beholding a structured writing group above. Re-member what you saw in your mind's eye and heard in your mind's ear while observing it.

If we want to learn what occurs during processes of learning, developing, changing, between the observer (facilitator, researcher) and the 'experiencer' (participant, study-subject), we find that communication between them is necessary. You witnessed in imagination the extensive and intensive communication processes going on in a writing group. Keep in mind that the observers and the experiencers have access to information of different kinds from each other, which they can share and maybe combine, but there is no guarantee that they will agree or even match each other.

One reason for this, it bears repeating, lies in the fundamental difference between their

physical perspectives: what is observable from one's own internal experience is unlike observation of the external behaviour of another. From the outside it is not possible to know the thoughts, feelings and physical sensations a person is aware of, if they are not being expressed somehow in a visible or audible manner; one can only guess. Our guesses may be more or less accurate. Brüne's 2006 review of the 'Theory of Mind' suggests the aptitude for 'reading minds' is hardwired into the human brain and can be more or less developed and trained (Brüne, 437–455). Be that as it may, one can never be certain of understanding another's meaning without communicating and reaching a mutual 'correspondence' in Bruner's terms (*Cognitive Growth,* 321–322; see Section 3.5 of the thesis).

Another reason is that – even if the inner and outer observations are communicated between the parties – the words (signs) they use to do so do not carry the same meanings to speakers and listeners, thus necessitating an elaborate ongoing conversation to clarify (translate) what, specifically, people mean. This connects directly to the importance of semiotics and symbolic interactionism.

Other levels of the internal perspective, inaccessible to outside observation unless expressed, hold memories, beliefs and values shaping and imbuing all experience (and words) with specific meaning. Respect for each other and a profound openness to listen without judging are preconditions for a conversation between the 'inner' and the 'outer' parties to bear the fruit of mutual understanding.

The study is conducted in accordance with the caution to entertain "An awareness of the ambiguity of language and its limited capacity to convey knowledge of a purely empirical reality..." which, in 2000, Alvesson and Sköldberg (276) considered to be one of the main features of good qualitative research. This caution ties in with the methodology of symbolic interactionism.

I forgo any presumption to know better than the participants' own evaluations. Even if my perception of a participant's experience differs from her own, her version will be the definitive one, because those are the understandings she will take with her into her life after the group. Live interactive group processes are the physical vehicle in creating the meaning that ultimately stays with each person over time. My professional assessments maybe of interest as theoretical data for future study, but will have no practical value to participants unless shared and taken on board as part of their own conclusions.

This leads us to Chapter 5 and to the realm of symbolic interactionism as a theoretical, methodological background. This framework poses that people make sense of their reality through interactions with it, and act upon their subjective understandings as if they were 'facts'.

CHAPTER 5

SYMBOLIC INTERACTIONISM AS A METHODOLOGICAL FRAME

Prelude

> Frank Downtoearth, Art Love and Star Hope travel together on a long train journey. Says Frank: I'm tired of misunderstandings and explanations. When will we finally all call a spade a spade and be done with it? It works in playing cards. Art shudders: But that would be the end of variety, beauty and comedy of errors. No room for new Shakespeares, Molières, Goldonis or Marx brothers … no, that would be unbearable. Star muses dreamily: Will we then finally become a telepathic species?

Introduction

How to look at my data? With every pair of theoretical 'glasses' what happens in and between people looks, sounds and feels different. "All data involve presuppositions" writes Hammersley (*Ethnography* 8). Psychoanalytic lenses show up processes other than behaviouristic or cognitive ones. Applying psychological interpretation, out of any approach, to the form and content of people's actions, reduces and thereby distorts what happens in order to conform to theoretical molds. My experience in wearing such glasses leads me to conclude that none of them do justice to people's own experience. Theoretical glasses may make sense of my own experience of life, but I might be missing the point of my profession as a therapist and educator by not fully respecting my clients' own understandings.

> … you must have a pattern to interpret things by.
>
> You can't really get your mind to work without it.
>
> Ford Madox Ford, *Parade's End* 189.

A theoretical framework is essential for endowing methods and findings with meaning. I have chosen symbolic interactionism (SI), as a broad frame to come close to what participants in writing groups are themselves aware of in theirs and others' actions and words. SI is about awareness of interactions between all involved, including me as facilitator – a participant observer, who also structures the situation – and whose observations are different from, but equally valid to all others.

In the preceding theoretical chapters I set out the constructivist and human system-

dynamic paradigms which I embrace. In this chapter I state my understanding of symbolic interactionism, which I see as a theoretical vehicle commensurate with these paradigms. The chapter sets out the relevance of symbolic interactionism to my research methodology and questions.

Symbolic interactionism forms part of my philosophical world-view, to which I will refer again below. I do not believe it possible to function in the world without any conceptual structure to make some sense of it. Part of my view of the world, informed by the philosophical traditions mentioned, is that making sense is not definitive and static, but rather an evolving process.

By no means am I giving an exhaustive presentation of SI, which would lie outside the scope of this thesis. A selection of key points of the approach is used to show how these can illuminate the analysis of personal development in structured writing groups.

After singling out the central role of communication, and situating SI's philosophical roots in the work of George Herbert Mead, I emphasise the interrelations between the basic tenets of SI and other interpretive approaches that broadly share underlying philosophies. The role of pragmatism and of freedom in the choice of research methods in the SI tradition is addressed, with an example of the usefulness (to writing groups) of a method stemming from another interpretive approach. I describe how the requirements of qualitative-interpretive research to situationalise, contextualise and embody the study are met. I propose that we can arrive at a rich understanding of situations, by shifting between and combining different perspectives. The chapter concludes with a summary of the ways in which symbolic interactionism frames my study, contrasted and compared with the divergent ontological view from Hunt's study reported in her book *Transformative Learning Through Creative Life Writing.*

> I keep getting more clarity that my perception plays a huge part in how I experience any given situation … and I have the power to shift my perception and release any perception that is not life-serving. I understand that my Dad is only an 'old man' if I insist in boxing him into that label.
>
> Joan Ortmann (personal communication)

5.1 Everything centres on communication

I have described that the outcomes I search for through the analysis of the processes in a writing group are personal development, as exhibited by generative learning and increased flexibility in thought, emotion and behaviour.

Participants and facilitators of writing groups are engaged in the processes of writing, reading, talking and listening to understand each other and themselves. During these group interactions it becomes clear that the words of each person are interpreted by others in ways differing from the originator's. People's attempts to make sense of the differences between them acquaint them with multiple perspectives, representing a wider world than the one they had experienced until they joined the group.

The study of structured writing groups involves continuous communication between the participants, and between them and the facilitator. The spoken and written parts of their communication form an analysable record of the interactive attempt at meaning-making between them all.

People interact by means of symbols which can carry different meanings. Often the symbols are verbal – words – but symbols are also exchanged in nonverbal expressions and acts. Interpretation is needed for understanding, complicated by the fact that interpretation uses the same basic means as the interaction it tries to clarify.

5.1.1 Aspects of semiotics and dialogue

Dialogue is verbal communication that is not only 'sent out', but also 'received', read or listened and responded to by another person. Bakhtin (1895–1975), a key thinker of 'dialogism', was of the opinion that "A dialogue, at least two speeches in interaction, is the basic unit of language" (Morioka 396). Dialogical processes take place between actual persons, or between characters in a text. A dialogue also exists between writers and readers, through texts (e.g. Hunt and Sampson, 73–89). They may occur internally between different aspects of an actual or fictional person, as self-talk, which is a form of thought used in the regulation of affect in situations perceived by the brain as – even slight – conflict, uncertainty or stress (Schore; Lewis). Regulatory self-talk plays a role in managing tensions of the kind of being 'in two minds' about an issue, or when external 'reality' and internal expectations don't match up: "I'm sure this is where I put my keys, but they are not here. Where else can they be?" It is one of the so-called 'coping strategies', mentioned in Chapter 3, that people can employ.

Motivation to engage in both external and internal dialogues stems from a human need to attain a ''sense of autonomy and control'' (via internal dialogue) and to ''being part of a wider community'' by external dialogue (Griffin & Tyrrell 9; Lengelle, "Mystery to Mastery" 67). Because communication is carried out by symbols it needs to be interpreted to make sense to the parties involved.

Semiotic theories deal with this field of communicative symbols or signs. Charles Sanders

Peirce (1839–1914), the founder of the philosophical doctrine known as pragmatism to which I will return later, defined semiosis as "... action, or influence, which is, or involves, a cooperation of three subjects, such as a sign, its object, and its interpretant... A sign", he wrote, "is something which stands to somebody for something ... It addresses somebody, that is, creates in the mind of that person an equivalent sign, or perhaps a more developed sign," in an unending chain or succession of interpretations (Peirce, *Philosophical Writings* 99). Peirce includes dialogic interaction in his definition, unlike De Saussure (1857–1913), the 'father' of modern linguistics, who employed a fairly static dualistic model of 'the signifier' as the form of the word or phrase uttered, and 'the signified' as the mental concept which the words try to communicate.

According to De Saussure's 1916 *Course in General Linguistics*, there is no necessary connection between the sign and its meaning, so that no word is inherently meaningful. If words have no inherent meaning, their interpretation is not only imperative, but also equivocal. If a word is only a signifier, that is the representation of something, then it must be combined in the brain with the signified, or the thing itself, to form a meaningful sign. According to this view, only those signs or words that correspond to a consensual 'archive' of a group of people that speak the same language can be meaningful to those people. In constructivist terms I would say, that only concepts that those persons' internal maps of the world have in common will be readily understood. In talk about inanimate, generalised, daily objects like tables and keys people quite easily reach understanding. The more detail is implied (e.g. "a Queen Anne chair, you know."), the more explanation and interpretation is needed if someone else is to have an internal picture of what the chair actually looks like. When abstract concepts are in play mutual understanding is hard to reach. (e.g. "He was quite ambitious." "What do you mean by ambitious–")

Mead, whose pervasive impact on SI will be addressed in the next section, taught that the communicational process is a social act. It requires that at least two individuals interact with one another, and then meaning arises within their interaction. Mead held that the act of communication has a triadic structure, but a triad different from Peirce's mentioned above. Mead's triad consists of (1) an initiating gesture on the part of an individual; (2) a response to that gesture by a second individual; and (3) the result of the action initiated by the first gesture (*Mind, Self and Society* (*MSS*) 76, 81). There is no meaning independent of the interactive participation of two or more individuals in the act of communication, writes Cronk in the *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, a view corresponding with that of intersubjectivity in its various applications. Zahavi for instance, in "*Beyond Empathy. Phenomenological Approaches to Intersubjectivity*", reviews intersubjective approaches in 2001, and poses that they "involve much more than a 'solution' to the 'traditional' problem of other minds". In addition to the relevance of these approaches to lived encounters between individuals, he points out how

intersubjectivity is active in "perception, in tool-use, in emotions, drives and different types of self-awareness". According to this an intersubjective view dialogue, and indeed any form of communication, is a system-dynamic view of "the relationship between subjectivity and world. The three regions 'self', 'others', and 'world' belong together; they reciprocally illuminate one another, and can only be understood in their interconnection" (op. cit., 151).

Mead's interactive view of communication leads to the pragmatic attitude that the meaning of a communication comes down to the response to it (*MSC,* 77–78), or in other words, its outcome is what counts, not its intention, if they happen to be different.

'Outcome thinking' informs this study in its entirety, by giving to the participants the decisive word on evaluation: 'What have I learned– What have I taken on board in my life from writing in this group–' (Scott Miller et al. "Beyond integration"; Using formal client feedback")

The outcome view is actively taught in structured writing groups, by stressing the possibility of attaining personal goals and the need to respect and seriously consider the unexpected responses one receives, especially to written pieces as one of the means towards attaining a goal. Often people find such receptivity in conflict with a tendency to argue "But that's not what I mean" And "I did not intend it like that at all". It is disappointing if one's intended meaning does not get across to others and to learn that it does not have the wished for effect on the external world. The writing exercises, however, encourage self-expression in more ways than one and so test the effect on an audience of readers.

Beyond the psychological and the linguistic, neuroscience supports the study of how people make meaning in social interactions, potentially bridging body and mind. What happens when a person sees, reads, or hears a sign made by another– What is the path followed by the sign, gesture or word, when it enters into the awareness of a person– What does it evoke, in the body (brain) of the receiver, leading him (mind) to respond somehow– A possible explanation of the physiological pathways by which an action or an utterance evokes a 'picture' that resembles its intended meaning in the brain of both the speaker / writer and the listener / reader of that utterance, is given by the neurobiological postulation of the existence of 'mirror neurons' in the brain. Schermer discussed their implications for group psychotherapy in 2010. Rizzolatti's team (Umilta et al.), who discovered them in primates, defined in 2001 that "mirror neurons are neurons that fire both when an animal acts and when the animal only observes the same action performed by another". The existence of distinct mirror neurons in humans is still disputed, but Damasio (*What Happens*; *Self Comes to Mind*) and other neuroscientists like Dan Siegel have delineated neural pathways that perform the same function without resorting to the popular idea of one specific type of neuron. Neurobiology is not a part of my thesis, but it reassures me that some of the more recent findings in such a physical

area of scientific enquiry also relate to how meaning-making and learning may be accomplished.

5.1.2 Interim summary of communication

Summing up the central role of communication, if we want to know how people understand their own and each other's words, we need to investigate the specific ways of interaction through verbal symbols. This, in its broadest sense, is the research focus of SI. And these interactions are the matter that is being analysed in this thesis. Group interactions pertain directly to the search for the pathways to a perceivable change towards lasting flexibility in behaviour, cognition, emotion, coping, (inter)personal communication, occurring in a person, which together may give evidence that a person has developed during and after participating in a structured writing group. The participant starts the group at a certain level, a personal baseline, and the analysis hopes to show specifically through which processes of interaction in spoken and written dialogues with herself and the others in the group, she may have developed to another level.

5.2 Roots and basic tenets of symbolic interactionism

Symbolic interactionsim developed out of the philosophical, sociological and psychological teachings of George Herbert Mead (1863–1931). The new centre of American Pragmatism, which had earlier originated with Charles Sanders Peirce (1839–1914) and William James (1842–1910) at the University of Chicago, was led by Tufts, Dewey, and Mead. The latter is regarded as one of the founders of social psychology and of the American sociological tradition in general. During his 37 years of teaching in Chicago Mead made substantial contributions in both social psychology and philosophy. In social psychology his major work, *Mind, Self and Society* (*MSS*), the one most relevant to my study here, was to show how the human self arises in the process of social interaction, especially by way of linguistic communication: symbolic interaction (Cronk). Symbolic Interactionsim is seen as one of the most prominent approaches to micro-sociological analysis, which studies persons and their interrelations. Calhoun et al. (26–27) first single out the older Phenomenology and then Goffman's Dramaturgical approach as two other distinct influential methodologies, but then describe how these three lines of thinking have many elements in common and influence each other. From this I concluded that they are not all that distinct, certainly not mutually exclusive, and that each might be relevant to the arena of my own enquiry. I discuss the blurring of theses boundaries in Section 5.2.2 of this chapter. I will not however portray 'the pragmatists' as an undivided group of philosophers, nor present anything like a comprehensive description of their thought. I focus on Mead, because he is widely considered to be the most direct philosophical influence on SI.

Herbert Blumer (1900–1987), a student of Mead, founded SI on Mead's teachings. In disputes during the 1920s and 1930s, Blumer advocated 'naturalistic' case study as opposed to the statistical methods of quantitative approaches to social research. The question whether naturalistic methods share the same logic as natural science was unresolved in his work. Since then a discussion has been ongoing about the presuppositions and procedures that qualitative researchers employ (Hammersley, *Dilemma*), a fierce debate that I encounter when presenting my methodological choices to quantitative researchers with a realist philosophy. Because Blumer focussed on studying naturally occurring groups, while writing groups are artificially formed, the sociological work that Blumer has undertaken fits my field of enquiry less than Mead's original ideas, which lend themselves to a wider application on both the group and individual levels (Blumer).

I rephrase four central conceptions of SI, based on the early sources of Mead (*MSS*) and Blumer's 1969 foundational text (op. cit. 69) as follows:

- People act according to what they understand situations to mean;
- In groups people need to communicate about the meaning of a situation through verbal and non-verbal 'indications' to make sense of each other's intentions and understandings;
- Individuals and groups in society construe their actions by first becoming aware of situations, then interpreting and assessing them to confront them to the best of their ability;
- The complex web of communications between all parts of society that depend on one another moves perpetually.

5.2.1 Reflection, reflexivity and play

When seen through these four tenets, I consider structured writing groups to be training grounds for meaning-making through perpetual communication. Mead held that in the linguistic act the individual takes the role of the other, which, within the process of symbolic interaction is the primal form of self-objectification and is essential to self-realisation (Mead, *MSS* 160–161). In current literature these may be encountered as 'reflection and reflexivity'. I will say a little more about these terms, because of their direct relevance to the mental processes I attempt to assess, both in the participants of the groups and in myself as the practitioner-researcher.

Gillie Bolton attempts to demystify the difference between reflection and reflexivity in her 2010 book *Reflective Practice, Writing and Professional Development*. I put her distinction between reflection and reflexivity as follows:

> *Reflection* is learning and developing through examining what we think happened on any occasion, and how we think others perceived the event and us, opening our practice to scrutiny by others ... it involves reliving and re-rendering: who said and

did what, how, when, where and why. It might lead to insight not noticed at the time of the experience.

Reflexivity is finding strategies to question our own attitudes, thought processes, values, assumptions, prejudices and habitual actions, to strive to understand our complex roles in relation to others ... it involves thinking from within experiences ... a questioning process that goes further than the practical reflection of what happened and how can I do better next time (13–15).

Hunt and Sampson, based on Giddens (36, 99), defined reflection in 1986 as "the cognitive ability to move fluidly back and forth between an inside and an outside perspective on oneself, giving oneself up to the experience of 'self as other' whilst also retaining a grounding in one's familiar sense of self" (Hunt and Sampson 4). This calls to mind the relationship between flexibility and stability of a sense of coherence in my definition of personal development.

In the literature reflection and reflexivity are regarded as major factors in learning and development, alongside the role of experiential work.[25] Regardless of the nuances of definition, reflective and reflexive processes require internal comparisons, active mental movements between states felt now and those remembered from earlier times (for example, Gordon 15; Cameron-Bandler et al.). Reflection and reflexivity lead a person to discover whether their experience has changed. Without such comparisons life flows on unexamined, something the ancient Greek philosophers already warned against. More recently and in the context of writing groups, Hunt and Sampson explained that "practising reflexivity in the text" can also be a method for generating reciprocity between the brain's hemispheres, undoubtedly helpful to consolidation of learning (Hunt, *Transformative Learning* 116; Siegel 309).

A maxim of modern brain science is that 'neurons that fire together wire together', which ultimately means that momentary 'states' can, with practice, become 'traits', or, in the language of my study, sustained changes, which is to say personal development. The transformation of states to traits can however work both ways, beneficial and detrimental, say experts on neuroplasticity like Norman Doidge in *The Brain That Changes Itself.* Any habitual behaviour may become 'wired together' in the brain, a process that can be self-examined through conscious reflection allowing the choice to depart from habits. Siegel recommends adding Reflection to be taught as a fourth R to the three R's of education (Siegel 2013 video online) Accordingly, learning to access a state of reflection at will, the resource also called focussing (Gendlin, *Focusing*) or mindfulness (Kabat-Zinn), may be the core skill for any beneficial human development.

Reflexive processes are naturally evoked during group interactions, when members have

[25] For a fuller treatment of the factors of 'transformative' change see Hunt, Transformative Learning, 140–145.

to adjust their behaviour to changing circumstances resulting from others' words and actions. Adjustments require evaluating, thinking, choosing and implementing. All of these can happen during daily life, yet can also be tested in writing first. The difference being that in such testing writing *is* the external behaviour, while all its prior cognitive and emotional processes are identical to live implementation. Outcomes of the written choices are thus tested by the feedback of the group without the risks of acted-out behaviour.

Mead developed the notion of role-playing as a formative activity in the development of a self in society, through play and games, thereby philosophically approximating Moreno's creation of sociodrama and psychodrama from 1921 onwards in Vienna, as retold by Hare and Rabson-Hare (13).

The structure of a writing group sets the stage for learning through playing with writing. Adding Mead's ideas, retold below, about the human mind and its development, further explains how the processes of writing group communication may engender personal development as defined in my study. Mead explicitly assumed a possibility of adult development. Like the other theorists underlying my study Mead argued the necessity of bridging the dualisms of mind–body and individual–society.

Personal development can be seen, in line with Mead's terminology, as 'development of the self'. Cronk (op. cit. 5) sums up Mead's ideas of the ongoing complex interrelations among persons and between them and the social world, highlighting the roles of 'Me' and 'I', determination and choice, habit and flexibility, the dialectic between social structure and individual autonomy. All of these lofty concepts are the bread and butter of writing groups. Because of their importance to the processes in writing groups, certain of those concepts that lend Mead's philosophical foundation to SI deserve to be spelled out here in more detail. To this end I continue to base myself on the source texts used by the Mead-scholar Cronk, while also pointing out similarities with other theories supporting my approach to studying personal development. All following citations of Mead's texts are from Cronk.

Mead dubbed the social self 'Me' to which the 'I' is a response (*MSS* 178). He defines the Me as 'a conventional, habitual individual,' and the 'I' as the 'novel reply' of the individual to that 'generalised other' (*MSS* 197). The relationship between individuals and their society is dialectic and is being enacted intra-psychically between two parts 'playing Me and I'. In Hermans' and Gieser's *Handbook of Dialogical Self Theory* they are called 'self-positions'. When these internal interlocutors are externalised in writing, for example by becoming two different characters, the dialogue between them becomes an object of awareness to the writer, and enables playing with more than one version (Ho 406) to examine optional outcomes. Interaction and dialectics are terms that Valsiner and Cabell explain as being closely connected when they extend dialogical self-theory:

    The dynamics of the dialogical processes – a general term for interacting

positions – within a particular field of catalytic conditions are best viewed as *dialectical* in their nature – with a focus on different forms of *tensions* between the opposite positions and their overcoming (synthesis) (83; italics in original).

Mead's 'I' is the part that might give the creative response to the conventionalised 'Me ', also called 'the generalised other'. Although an individual must choose a course of action and act accordingly in a given situation, that course of action is not fully dictated by the situation. "It is this indeterminacy of response that gives the sense of freedom, of initiative" (*MSS*, 177). Like a phrase attributed to Bateson: "The generic we can know, but the specific eludes us", Mead poses that specific prediction of the action of the 'I' is not possible, although situations condition personal responses to a certain extent (*MSS*, 210–211).

Human freedom – the 'I' of individual agency – and community – the 'Me' structured by intersubjective socialisation (language, play and other symbolic processes) form persons' identity together. Cronk states and then quotes: "The 'I' is process breaking through structure. The 'Me' is a necessary symbolic structure which renders the action of the 'I' possible, and "without this structure of things, the life of the self would become impossible" (*MSS* 214). Many of the processes observable in structured writing groups are recognisable in Mead's teachings, culminating in the 'I' of participants breaking through the structure of the group by responding to it with actions new to them.

5.2.2 Interim summary of the relevance of Mead to this study

The main seeds of importance to the study of writing groups in Mead's teachings are:

The observation that interaction between people occurs via communication by symbols.

The intention to understand how the capacity for communication by symbols developed among humans, and how it develops in the maturation of each human individual.

The denial of a dualism of mind and body and of the idea that the mind is a purely individual phenomenon; the human mind – which Mead called the Self – develops in and through the process of symbolic interaction, enabling an individual to acquire a sense of himself or herself as an individual. (Cuff et al., 123)

5.2.3 Symbolic Interactionism: a member of a 'philosophical family'

As mentioned above, SI is confusingly treated in sociological literature as a distinct approach and at the same time as being philosophically connected to other venerable approaches, like phenomenology, ethnomethodology and Goffman's dramaturgy, like in Calhoun's 2007 *Contemporary Sociological Theory*. Being pragmatic, I tend to ask whether making distinctions is more or less useful for the purpose of my study. In my view it is less useful in the case at hand to stress how SI differs from other interpretive approaches, and more useful to be aware of similarities, for reasons I will set out.

Symbolic Interactionism is a framework in the interpretive view of the nature of

knowledge. Interpretivism holds that meaning is key in understanding human life (Plummer, *Sociology* 128). Among the many branches of interpretivism it is not so obvious what makes SI distinct from the other interpretive methodologies.

Anselm Strauss, who together with Glaser created Grounded Theory, a 'branching out' from SI, told a fellow sociologist at the Chicago School back in 1990: "We didn't think Symbolic Interactionism was a perspective in sociology; we thought it was sociology." (Fine ed. 6) Seventeen years later Calhoun et al. state that "symbolic interactionism is often used misleadingly as a term for almost all micro- sociological analysis" (29).

I tend to relate to Symbolic Interactionism in this 'misleading' way when I encounter concepts from phenomenology and from Goffman's dramaturgical approach, which clearly relate to the interactional processes observable in writing groups. Calhoun 'allows' this leeway (30) when stating that in contemporary sociology the different approaches are sometimes combined in the development of respected micro and macro social theories. 'Contemporary' obviously shifts with the times. Guba and Lincoln's *"Paradigmatic Controversies, Contradictions and Emerging Confuences."* strongly suggested back in 2005 and again in 2011 that some methodological paradigms may be commensurable. "Elements of the interpretivist / postmodern paradigms: critical theory, constructivism and participative enquiry fit comfortably together" (191–215). Based on this, the 2006 fifth edition of *Perspectives in Sociology* (Cuff et al. 234) regards Goffman's approach, often considered distinct, as part of SI. According to Guba and Lincoln the only axioms that are mutually exclusive are those of positivist and interpretive models (Guba and Lincoln 2005, 191). In their revision of the chapter in 2011 this view has only been strengthened and expanded with more examples, as indicated below.

Fine wrote in 1995 that in 'the early years' overlapping and mutual reinforcing of "SI, Ethnomethodology, German critical theory, phenomenology, French focus on cultural mentalités – all these, as well as major currents of thought in linguistics, anthropology and literary theory, were at work" (Fine ed., xiv). This suited the cultural–historical atmosphere of the sixties and seventies, with which I identify philosophically. Despite my interest in change and development, I have not had any cause to change my views on the need to bridge dualisms, to keep 'the whole' in sight when studying only parts. After all "We are studying ourselves, studying ourselves and others" (Preissle 2006, 691). When in doubt I prefer to focus on being aware of a whole, even if ungraspable, rather than on increasing distinctions between categories of social study, which sometimes resemble 'turf wars' during the pursuit of refining understanding. Keeping a comprehensive unit(y) in mind functions as an antidote against the extreme fragmentation produced by postmodern social theories. It assumes there is a whole on a larger plane in which all fragments (including all theories) play their parts.

If, as Lincoln, Lynham and Guba put it (ibid.), the aim of constructivist inquiry is "understanding and reconstruction" while the aim of (post)positivism is "explanation:

prediction and control", then my study will be scrutinised by positivists for adding to their inquiry criteria. However, there may be no contradiction between the diverging goals: better understanding of the processes of personal development in writing groups could very likely add to prediction and control.

Lincoln and her co-writers show the development of scientific paradigms, where constructivism / interpretivism are seen to accommodate and be commensurable with other modern paradigms and types of inquiry, with the exception of those that only attempt to understand a problem, without wanting to effect a change (op. cit. 112).

In the same vein that findings from different philosophical starting points appear to show similar beneficial personal development through writing groups, the only difference is on the level of beliefs about reality and 'truth': Is there a single reality to be studied that we cannot fully understand (postpositivism) or does knowledge consist of "individual or collective reconstructions, sometimes coalescing around consensus" (op. cit 102). If researchers construct knowledge as locally constructed and co-constructed realities through experiences and interactions with other members of society, the research process needs to ensure we are producing knowledge that is reflective of our subjects' reality (ibid 103; Angen 378–395; Preissle 636).

Constructivism (and paradigms close to it in Lincoln et. al.'s 2011 classification, like forms of critical theory) "seeks recognition and input; offering challenges to predecessor paradigms..." (ibid. 111). This is another way of stating what my study has tried to do, as critiques from positivist friends and colleagues proved.

The practice of facilitation of the structured writing groups for personal development is, however, the same regardless of paradigm, except (post)positivism.

I explain my choice of SI without giving up useful aspects from other interpretive approaches, as follows:

My position in choosing SI is delimited to the micro level specific to writing groups, which is a context of voluntary group activity, independent of social, economic and political institutions, as described in Chapter 4. It is an activity structured in an egalitarian spirit, with a low threshold (literacy) in western culture. Writing groups can be seen, in Goffman's terms, as a frame-game with rules. The 'rules of play' in writing groups demand mutual respect of all and a sincere interest in making sense of self and others through language. Without denying that this microsphere exists inside larger contexts, my analysis bypasses the power aspects connected with them.

I see choosing SI as a suitable framework also in O'Donoghue's discussion of the types of studies that fit the approach in his 2007 *An Introduction to Interpretivist Research in Education. Qualitative Methods: An Alternative View.* He identifies two main types of studies embodying the central principles of the symbolic interactionist theoretical approach within the interpretivist paradigm, namely, studies where the aim is

formulated in terms of participants' perspective on 'things' and studies where the aim is formulated in terms of how participants 'deal with' 'things'. To pursue such questions is to engage in research which was defined ... as 'big theory' research. ... along with the 'big theory' questions ... we can also engage in research based upon 'concept driven' ideas and 'problem focused' ideas. [What these] have in common is that while they are concept driven, they can also be ultimately mapped back to an interpretivist foundation, with Symbolic Interactionism as the underpinning theoretical position (119–120).

The study of Personal Development in writing groups fits all parts of O'Donoghue's list. It looks longitudinally at participants' perspectives on things and at their ways of dealing with things. It is also concept driven, by assuming personal development is possible in adults and defining concepts to assess it. On top of that it is 'problem focused' to the extent that it looks for practices to move adults out of the relative developmental 'stuckness' that so often comes with age.

As an example of the 'stuckness problem' that writing groups hope to address, I refer to Erik Erikson (1902–1994), who structured human life through developmental tasks following psychological stages. Erikson called the favourable outcome of his seventh life-stage 'Generativity' and the negative outcome 'Stagnation' as set out in the 1998 formulation of *The Life Cycle Completed*. At this phase, questions about the meaning of one's life come to the fore. Meaningfulness is a central component of the Sense of Coherence (Antonovsky, *HSC*), a key concept in my study, and meaning-making is central to symbolic interactionism. How a person interprets the meaning of her own life in the past, present and future, is crucial to how she lives it and to the quality of life she experiences. To be distinguished from Bateson's generative learning, Erikson's 'generativity' refers to anything a person has generated that can outlive the self and contribute to society's continuity and improvement: children, ideas, products, and works of art. Writings therefore also belong here. Erikson considered generative actions to be motivated by the conviction that life is good and worthwhile, even in the face of human destructiveness and deprivation. All-embracing generativity manifests through parenthood, when the older generation prepares the next generation towards the future.

Stagnation, the negative outcome of this stage, was seen by Erikson in people becoming self-centred and self-indulgent after having attained certain life goals, such as marriage, children, and career success. I add the possibility that people did not attain, or do not value, these life goals. This may make it even more of a challenge for them to find that their life has had meaning until the present and could still be meaningful into the future.

Writing group activity directs itself expressly to the awakening and enhancement of generative motivation and action. It does this by all the means set out in Chapters 2 to 4: by creating a safe and pleasurable structure, which promotes open communication, and by writing exercises geared to bring out 'meaningful writing' to the writers and their 'audience' in the group. The writings they produce thus become discussable and

changeable objects with a potential of allowing writers more options in life than they were aware of before.

A concrete example of personal development out of 'stuckness' is expressed in the words of a participant several years after the end of his group, showing his awareness of change in his life as a direct outcome of the group. The text is part of the participant's written evaluation for my 2009 retrospective[26] study of long-term writing groups (translated from Dutch). Piet Hein is a 75-year-old, married, child survivor of the Holocaust living in Israel, who struggled with the narration of his life to his offspring (Cune 12; 35).

> I had two handicaps.
>
> I was wont to elaborate and wander off in associative fashion on to side paths, many times losing my audience and even myself.
>
> My most important change during the years of the writing group has been learning to be succinct. […]
>
> The writing exercises challenged me to express myself briefly, in the here and now, without procrastination or exaggeration, and without beating around the bush, thus avoiding the often emotional content of the scene I was describing. Many exercises 'put me on the spot' and enabled me to get my story out.
>
> Also, later on, I realized that I tell about happenings, and not about my inner experiences, my feelings.
>
> I learned to recognize my emotions in those situations in my stories, where, until recently, I had only related facts. I began to recognize my fears of failure, of not living up to my self-imposed standards of perfection. I learned to recognize humor and wit, sarcasm and joy, trusting my guts, to go with the flow. I unlearned being defensive all the time. I commenced to laugh, even about myself. [Piet Hein Q.16 file 776][27]

5.2.4 Pragmatism and 'freedom' of methods

The study of writing groups is a study of 'live' human activity in order to understand how it may benefit them and improve its effects. As such it is a pragmatic endeavour.

"The whole originality of pragmatism, the whole point of it, is its concrete way of seeing. It begins with concreteness, and returns and ends with it" (William James, quoted in Emirbayer and Maynard 6).

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[26] To explain the apparent contradiction in terms: the study was cross-sectional in that the data were gathered at one point in time only, and retrospective in that participants were asked to look back to their past experiences.

[27] Citations in square brackets refer to location of data. All names are pseudonyms.

From the start of symbolic interactionsim Blumer wrote about concreteness and his view that methods of enquiry only have value when they are suited to their particular task:

> Reality exists in the empirical world and not in the methods used to study that world; it is to be discovered in the examination of that world ... Methods are mere instruments designed to identify and analyze the obdurate character of the empirical world, and as such their value exists only in their suitability in enabling this task to be done. In this fundamental sense the procedures employed in each part of the act of scientific enquiry should and must be assessed in terms of whether they respect the nature of the empirical world under study – whether what they signify or imply to be the nature of the empirical world is actually the case. (Blumer 27–28)

I will disregard for the moment that in this quote reality is supposed to exist, as opposed to in effect being continually construed by 'actors' through their interactions. The reason for quoting Blumer's words here is to underscore what the role of pragmatism was from the birth of symbolic interactionism onwards. According to Blumer, social action is sociology's most significant general problem and social science's "primary subject matter" (55), because "human groups or society exist in action" and "action must be the starting point (and the point of return) for any scheme that purports to treat and analyse human society empirically" (6).

Philosophical pragmatism somehow underlies symbolic interactionism and the other approaches mentioned above, but what 'pragmatism' means is unclear. Does it mean only that theory should 'identify and analyse the character of the empirical world', or also that theory should be useful for practice? Symbolic interactionism is pragmatic, in Blumer's sense, because it builds knowledge out of the direct physical observable actions of people interacting. However, others like Mead and Dewey specifically regarded research as worthwhile only if something could be done with it to improve conditions of the field being studied. Emirbayer and Maynard credit the early pragmatists in 2011 for their insistence that research leads to improvement, and criticise Blumer's SI, which they call "a subjectivistic abridgement of pragmatist thought" (23). In the field of action which is the world there are tasks to be done. To accomplish tasks people must interact with each other, 'self with not-self' and thereby they develop themselves. Action underlies everything. As Mead put it:

> (The world) is organized only in so far as one acts in it. Its meaning lies in the conduct of the individual; and when one has built up his world as such a field of action, then he realizes himself as the individual who carried out that action. That is the only way in which he can achieve a self. One does not get at himself simply by turning upon himself the eye of introspection. One realizes himself in what he does, in the ends which he sets up, and in the means he

takes to accomplish those ends" (quoted by Cronk n.p.).

Pragmatism is not only espoused by SI but also by other members of 'the theoretical family', reinforcing the working connections between different approaches. Alfred Schutz (1899–1959), a social philosopher from the phenomenology branch and a main influence on ethnomethodology according to Emirbayer and Maynard (4), wrote in relation to pragmatism that "The dominant element of the natural attitude is its concern with getting things done, its practical character" ("Phenomenology", in Cuff et al. 148). Thus he explains the common sense (Schutz's *natural attitude*) motivation to 'learn and develop' by needing to get things done. Any task-oriented activity may serve this end, and writing groups form a context where more than one task needs to get done, so potentially different kinds of development take place in them.

5.2.5 The importance of being specific

Symbolic interactionism opposes abstract generalisations. The study of actions must be as close to experience as possible: contextualised, situationalised, and embodied.

I make a distinction between the first two terms, which are sometimes used interchangeably. Literally the word 'context' refers to a text, to the information contained in a text, to the thing that the information is about, or to the possible uses of the text, the information, or the thing itself. Which of these aspects happens to be the central focus may lead to ambiguity about the meaning of context as a term (Sowa n/p). In my study broad context means the derived, non-textual sense that the work as a whole is located in its social sphere, namely a voluntary group of creative activity open to any literate person in a developed country. Context appears also in its narrow sense, when applied to the analysis of texts written in the group. When quoting texts in the thesis, care is taken to retain their context, and so to minimise distortion of meaning.

By 'situationalised' I mean locating the work specifically in place and time, for example at the S-community centre in the A-neighbourhood of North Leeds, at 3 pm Wednesday afternoons, in a quiet, but cluttered, room. The amount of detail in describing the situation may vary considerably and can be open to debate.

'Embodied' derives from "The emerging viewpoint that cognitive processes are deeply rooted in the body's interactions with the world" (Wilson 625). Mind and body are working together cognitively, affectively and behaviourally. More to the point of language and writing, the seminal book *Metaphors We Live By* (Lakoff and Johnson) explicates some of the body-based metaphors upon which world-views stand. Thinking, speaking and writing in metaphors appears to be unavoidable, because they use analogies to bridge abstract domains and more concrete ones. Figures of speech and choice of words, even the cliché, are still "grounded in everyday experience" (Lakoff and Johnson *Afterword* 272), even if that experience has sunk out of conscious awareness of the speaker.

One of the exercises in the writing groups brings the body-source of language back into awareness. Each group member is asked to choose two colloquial expressions out of a large collection and to write a short piece with them. The expressions are 'bodily metaphors', like:

> with sinking heart; make a clean breast of something; heart of stone; rule of thumb; lazybones; wet behind the ears; keep an eye out; feast your eyes; pulling your leg; caught red-handed.

Interestingly, people do not readily recognise these expressions as having to do with the body at all. They refer to the exercise later as an eye-opener (sic), vitalising their next writing.

5.2.6 Choosing methods

By this point I hope to have shown that the philosophical roots of all interpretive approaches to human society are intertwined and have grown out from each other for many decades (Colapietro 1). From these tangled roots it is necessary to continually fashion practical tools and methods for use in research. However pragmatic its roots, SI as a methodology has not put forth methods that are clearly differentiated from other interpretive branches. Instead it has used and created methods to fit the needs of each study and has, according to Emirbayer and Maynard (8), sprouted other approaches that did develop specific empirical tools, like ethnomethodology, interpretive phenomenology and conversational analysis.

Symbolic interactionism and phenomenology share many views about social life, loosely expressed by the central tenets and the pragmatism of SI discussed above. The work I present intends to live up to these tenets. I draw justification for my own way of working in a relaxed stance as expressed by Fine: "...the Chicago school was open to a more artistic, improvised, and situated mode of sociology than implied in the tenets of research design" (xiii).

Following from the necessity to communicate with others in the world, doing research is just another context of activity. To yield the convincing understandings aspired to, more – and different – methods are needed than reusing the readily available. A difficulty in creating new methods, or recombining old ones in new ways like I have done, is their exploratory nature: they have yet to prove their usefulness, validity and reliability. They are unknown and may even be regarded as too far removed from the theoretical position they are derived from. In this respect my study explores new and revised methods as much as its primary question about personal development in writing groups.

So I ventured to take the freedom granted by SI as a broad theoretical methodology and have adopted, sometimes adapted, methods from various interpretive sources that share SI's view of the social world, a point taken up again in the general introduction to Part III.

5.2.6.1 Example of choosing a method

My choice of method for a pilot study to this thesis may serve as an example of critical reflection about the 'fitness for purpose' question (Blumer 27–8) mentioned earlier. Are writing groups seen and analysed in any way differently from a phenomenological perspective–

In 2009 I conducted a retrospective study of long-term writing groups from an interpretive phenomenological analysis standpoint (IPA) based on Smith and Osborn (51–80). IPA is a specific method of work developed from phenomenological theory. This method suited the content analysis of written recollections by the participants in a semi-structured questionnaire, some time after their groups. Analysis of the themes that emerged showed the outcomes participants thought and felt that had endured from their writing experiences in the group. In that study there were no data showing direct verbal interactions that could be compared over time like in the current project. In my conclusions I could only refer in theory to a comparison between the data from the questionnaires and my memory of the group interactions of the past, recorded in my session notes, but not analysed in that study (Cune, 38).

The retrospective was a cross-sectional pilot study of a one-sided nature, harvesting expressions of personal experiences after the fact. To explain the apparent contradiction in terms: the study was cross-sectional in that the data were gathered at one point in time only, and retrospective in that participants were asked to look back to their past experiences. Contemplating the use of IPA again, I felt the need to use a methodology with a broader social canvas to work on, bringing to light complex interactive meaning-making over time, and SI answers that need. While IPA supplied me with the personal meanings participants had formed during the group, SI may show how those meanings were construed over time in group interactions, fitting into the longitudinal design of the current study.

As a method interpretive phenomenological analysis is still useful in the content analysis of individual texts. The themes that thus come to light will fuel comparisons between different kinds of data of an interactional nature. The IPA method can complement SI by making for 'thicker' description (Geertz). The use of IPA supplies the perspectives of the various 'selves', the individual participants of the writing group, and also of the various self-positions identified in Dialogical Self Theory (see above in 5.1.2). In a given situation these can be 'stacked', contrasted and compared with perspectives of 'others' and 'observers' (possibly other parts of the Self), obtained by other methods, as set out in the empirical Chapters 6 and 7, thereby enriching the description and its interpretation.

Because the richness of descriptions is closely connected to the ability to adopt multiple perspectives, a major aspect of the writing group experience, I elaborate on it next.

5.3 Enriching the view: shifting and combining perspectives

Enriching the description of what we study entails the active use of different perspectives on our topic, namely how persons develop through writing in a group.

Writing produces storytelling of one kind or another. Narration consists in asking "what happens if I tell things this way, and not that way–" and semiotic analysis of texts asks what is the meaning effect of telling things this and not that way (Bakhtin and Bundgaard). 'This or that way' is a matter of perspective, of points of view.

Through *Phenomenology* and *Studies in Social Theory,* the works of Schutz, phenomenological theory has strongly influenced the way perspective-taking is regarded in interpretive research. In the wide sense of cultural contexts he made explicit how a stranger to a culture, an immigrant, or let's say a researcher,[28] will notice features and presuppositions that the members of that culture simply take for granted, as a reflection of 'how the world is.' Being a stranger entails a perspective different from the members of a culture on the same 'reality'. Similarly such varying perspectives exist between members of subcultures and other more or less distinct social divisions, when they move between diverse groups, as is common in multi-cultural industrial societies. Hammersley (5) mentions this as one of the rationales for the research of the Chicago School sociologists.

In the context of intersubjective communication Schutz addresses whether it is at all possible to understand another person by attempting to see things like the other does. The researcher might fall into "the error of the well-known 'projective' theory of empathy", in which "we are reading our own lived experiences into the other person's mind and are therefore only discovering our own experiences" (Schutz, *Phenomenology* 33). Here again theory points out a way and its pitfalls, but does not propose a clear empirical method to prevent the falls.

Perspective-taking has since been operationalised by using the concept of 'triple description', built on Bateson's dual description (Dilts and de Lozier, 1480–81). It spells out how a rich description can be created by 'stacking' the viewpoints of people acting together in a situation. Looking at a situation from as many perspectives as possible, but at least three, provides enriched understanding of an experience. When the perspectives of 'self', 'the other' and 'an observer' are added together a fuller, multi-dimensional picture appears of any situation. When this is done with awareness of all the senses, the effect is enhanced and may lead to a vivid, embodied understanding. A person 'doing' this, feels not only that he learns new information about his particular situation, but also that he is gaining a tool useful in examining other situations. This is an example of Bateson's generative learning.

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[28] I occupy both positions in this study: a stranger and a researcher.

The three perceptual positions may seem to 'belong' to three different actors in the situation: 'self', 'other' and 'observer'. In fact each individual can be in any of those positions at different moments. Even more interesting is the ability of a single person to quickly 'shift' between the three positions. This shifting occurs naturally and mostly unconsciously, passing unnoticed. Schutz's warning about only reading our own lived experiences into the other person's mind is apposite here. Unconscious shifting of perspectives does not allow the person to be aware whose point of view influences her understanding at any given moment. Conscious shifts allow for informed choice and comparison between different points of views and where (in place or time), or from whom (others, the self, parts of the self), they originate. In writing one can try out points of view and practice moving between perspectives, by employing different characters, or placing oneself in different locations.

Perceptual positions are among the topics investigated in my study. In the following concrete example I intentionally use different pronouns, which may ease identification for readers of different genders. Also, variation in pronoun use is indicative of the point of view taken by writers and speakers when they refer to themselves (Pennebaker, *Secret Life*).

To illustrate how perceptual positions can be detected and used, I present an example exercise given to the study groups. To appreciate the effect of this exercise I recommend not only reading but doing it, even if only in your mind.

Points of View Exercise

1. Think of something that you do repeatedly, like walking to the shops, getting dressed, eating a meal. These are just examples, it can be any activity you choose.

2. Write a few sentences about how you do this activity. Use the first person: I am walking, and as I turn the first corner towards Commercial Street, I ....

3. Now write about this same activity from the point of view of another person, who describes you doing it. Use the third person: S/he is walking, and as s/he turns the first corner ..., s/he ...

4. The next description will be in the second person, as if you are telling yourself from the outside how you are doing the activity: You are walking, and as you turn...

5. Read your three stories from the different points of view of the same scene.

6. Which version was easier to write?

7. Which version do you like best?

8. Did you discover something about the scene when using different perspectives, that you had not noticed about it in the first person?

9. Do the different versions carry a different feeling for you? If so, what are the differences between them?

In the 'self' or 'first position' a person sees out of her own eyes, perceives from her own body and uses pronouns like 'I' and 'Myself' when talking about what she thinks and does. She does not see herself, because all her senses are physically located inside her body, she is 'associated', at one with herself, looking out.

In the 'other' or 'second position' a person temporarily shifts to the position of another in the situation, to gather information about what it is like to be in the other's place, to experience (in the imagination) what the other goes through. It means looking at the world from the physical location of the other person with whom you are communicating. The person in second position will be able to see himself, to see the room maybe from the other side of the desk, to hear his own tone of voice as if from the other's ears and so on. His senses will be 'dissociated' from his body and he refers to himself when speaking as 'You' instead of 'I'. If we manage to avoid the aforementioned "error of reading our own lived experiences into the other person's mind and therefore only discovering our own experiences", then we will be rewarded by a view of the situation that is different from our own in some respects.

To adopt the 'third perceptual position', the observer's or 'meta' point of view, we temporarily step outside the situation, imagining we are not part of it, and thus gain an overview of all actors, ourselves and any others present. It can be compared to watching a film in which we take part. This is done to gather information of yet another kind, through the eyes of a fair witness who has no stake in the goings on. From this position we will use "He, She and They" when describing the actors, including the one who looks like ourselves. Our senses will again be dissociated from our bodies and enable us to describe non-judgmentally what happens. When we shift back to our 'associated' self-position this information can then be added to what was learned from the other perspectives in the service of evaluating and adjusting our own behaviour.

Shifting between perspectives like this is a behavioural skill that can be learned (Bateson, *Introduction*, xi; Pateros, "Perceptual Positions" n.p.). It can be taught to writers in a group by its facilitator. It is an almost indispensable skill for reflexive researchers in analysing their data.

Writing is an exercise in shifting and stacking perspectives. When shared through reading in the group, points of view may be even further diversified and compared. People find great interest in clarifying their own perspectives and being introduced to those of others, especially when it is safe to do so through stories, protected from potential unpleasant consequences in the world outside the group.

5.4 In summary: how does symbolic interactionism frame my study?

In each of my assessment instruments (set out in the Chapter 6) central principles of SI are addressed and analysed.

Pragmatism underlies all work

1. The group-process and the individual assignments are activities. Writing about interpretive studies in a health context, McWilliam notes what also happens in writing groups: "the research process, in and of itself also contributes to health care. Participants invariably find themselves enlightened by their engagement in reflexive critical reflection and co- creation of understanding..." (237) Assessments also function as interventions in my study (explained in Section 6.3.7).

2. The participants and I as facilitator and researcher hunt together for enduring changes in thought and behaviour, that are enacted in writing and other forms of communicating.

3. As researcher I gathered data geared to show up how, by which processes, such enduring changes are engendered, if at all.

4. The ultimate goal of the study is to refine and improve the practice of writing groups, as an effective way to further adult personal development.

Symbolic interactionism opposes abstract generalisations, thus the methods must be as close to experience as possible: situationalised, contextualised and embodied.

1. The studied groups are situation specific and analysis of the data stays as close as possible to the situations in which they originated.

2. The studied groups are contextualised and analysis of the data stays as close as possible to the contexts in which they originated. This is not a repetition of the first point. Contexts can be found over time, for example when a topic is discussed more than once during the 12 sessions. Situations are time-specific, for example a change in meeting-room, or if someone arrives late.

3. The studied groups are embodied. People meet in the flesh, not virtually, online. Data analysis identifies mentions and significance to the actors of the physical encounter and signs of changes in a person's use of the body, like breathing, posture, use of the senses.

Interaction, communication and making sense of the symbols used for it are necessary in social life.

1. The studied groups are obvious active fields of interaction and communication between people.

2. Less obvious, internal interaction and communication between each participant and herself are activated and analysed. (The concept and use of 'internal dialogue' has been addressed in Chapters 2–3).

3. The interaction between people and inside of people is emphasised as a major 'vehicle' of change and development.

4. The quest for mutual understanding is activated in the group process by the facilitator, by promoting (including teaching) the adoption of multiple perspectives.

5. All three modes of interaction are analysed for signs of 'sense making' that may lead to enduring changes, based upon the assumption that writing groups can supply an awareness-changing life-experience, one that can be planned and structured rather precisely.

5.5 Debate and conclusion

In 2013, during the writing of this thesis, a rare book, *Transformative Learning Through Creative Life Writing* by Celia Hunt was published. It is one of the very few academic studies I encountered that in any way resembles my own. The book tells the story of Hunt's study in the use of creative writing as a developmental and therapeutic tool, practised and taught first at diploma and later at postgraduate level at Sussex University from 1991 to 2009. I completed my MA in this framework under Hunt's tutelage during the final year that the course ran.

The main similarities between our frameworks are:

- We study adult development.
- We emphasise embodiment.
- We assume that writing can be a medium for development under certain conditions on which we agree.

The main differences between Hunt's and my framework are:

- She defines personal development in more general, less operational, terms, namely: "Any process of beneficial self-reflective change an individual undergoes as a result of life experience or of a specific activity such as education, therapy or the arts" (cf. Hunt and Sampson 20).

- She engages in psychological interpretation of people's subjective expressions of their experiences, which I refrain from on ethical and methodological grounds.

I am thankful for Hunt's clear account of her philosophical starting point. She thereby offers me an opportunity to debate our different ontological positions, enabling me to buttress mine by contrast.

Hunt states that she carried out her research in "an embodied critical realist paradigm, drawing both on the social theory of critical realism and on the cognitive theory of embodied realism (Lakoff and Johnson, *Metaphors*)" (Hunt xii). Realism holds the assumption that a real world exists, "independent of our understanding of it, of which we can have stable knowledge" (ibid. 10). Hunt does not justify her realism by denying

that our knowledge is constructed. She chooses realism out of an aversion to being left "adrift in a world of constructs that we cannot evaluate with any objectivity" (op. cit. 10). She makes a case for thinking outside of the dominant constructivist paradigm, by the aid of a dynamic-system approach and embodied cognition in transformative learning. Dynamic systems also feature in the theoretical constructivist base of my thesis as a support for the ongoing construction of meaning in interaction. Hunt engages a source which labels Jung's theory (which is key in Transformative Learning), as "embodied critical realist" (ibid.); "a theory that posits innate structures in the psyche, such as the archetypes and the collective unconscious, and the ability to access them indirectly via images and symbols". I contest such a view of Jung, which according to Hunt is incompatible with a constructivist ontology. In my view Jung's elegant and very useful posited structures are metaphorical constructs, far from knowable embodied 'reality'.

I sympathise with Hunt's wish to "salvage some notion of the self in a poststructuralist and postmodern world, when considering processes of learning, teaching and, fundamentally, what it means to be human" (Hunt, "Adult Learning" 68–82). We each attempt to do this salvaging with similar, sometimes identical methods, even if we hold diverging views of the world. For instance we both use interpretative phenomenological analysis to interpret texts and encourage participants to write personal journal entries at each session. Starting out from seemingly opposite philosophies appears to make not too much difference to the actual work we do with people's selves

Hunt's map of the world is built on 'real' foundations, while mine consists of constructs, equally embodied, originating in interactions. For both of us the body is the touchstone of experience. Whether the body and the self are 'real', independent of our knowledge of them, or they are socially and personally construed (Damasio, *What Happens* 319; Kelly) is a matter of belief. Hunt's choice of realism is on my 'map of the world' an artificial border, drawn to state that the world comes no further than there. The body can serve as such an end to the knowable world, or in the apt words Angen wrote in 2000: "for the interpretivist, the midpoint between solipsistic relativism and hard-nosed realism lies in the lifeworld" (Angen 384) My own map extends beyond the body, or even the lifeworld, to a greater whole of which we may know little or nothing at all, to the extent that I will not call it 'real' even if I presuppose its existence.

In conclusion of this chapter, I restate that my study is framed by the idea that the social world is being construed through humans interacting with each other and their environment. Not only can it be 'construed' and modified by the participants in it, but it is inevitably being construed on an ongoing basis, with or without their awareness. Symbolic Interactionism investigates the nature of such interactional processes and allows for a creative fashioning of methods to study specific situations.

I focus on the micro-sociological context of small writing groups. This focus intentionally isolates the processes occurring in such groups from the influences of larger social

structures, without dealing with the inevitable impact the large spheres have on the participants and on the (pre)conditions of the study as a whole. The isolated processes, the actions and interactions in and between participants, are studied by following the basic tenets of SI as described above.

The empirical Part III introduces my mixed-method assessment tools and their rationale. Chapters 6 and 7 of Part III will show the data analysis for each one of them, culminating in a comparison between the findings from each data source. Conclusions, discussion and questions for future study will end the thesis.

PART III

METHODS AND FINDINGS

General introduction

In the empirical Part III, I endeavour to show in practice how my seemingly disparate methods correspond with the overarching methodology of Symbolic Interactionism (SI). Beyond the linkages of each method to SI, my argument builds on a basic premise of SI, namely that a rigorously executed and documented protocol may perhaps convince and be replicable, but will still be completely hinged on numerous conscious and unconscious assumptions of the researcher. However explicit I may have made my methods of analysis, results are still based on the verbal and non-verbal expressions of participants. These expressions are in their turn based on people's individual world views at the moment of reporting, which I cannot but view somehow through my own world view, try as I may (Lincoln, Lynham and Guba, "Paradigmatic Controversies" 104).

One's view of the world, never identical to the view of another, reflects the extent to which one experiences the world as comprehensible, manageable and meaningful, in short one's Sense of Coherence (SOC) as explained in previous chapters. To recap, SOC is Antonovsky's construct (Mystery of Health) of the understandings people have come to from their personal experiences over time, clearly congruent with SI. Sense of coherence features in the content analysis of text and in the pictorial assessment method of My World and I Today (MWT), another way of uncloaking personal world views, based on Moreno's sociometric work (*Sociometry*), introduced in Chapter 2. I assume that views of the world may change during and after participation in a structured writing group and that such changes will be visible in MWT pictures drawn at three sequential points in time.

The group and writing processes bring individual expressions together to be discussed, compared, contrasted and possibly adjusted as a consequence. The group experience is a potential mediator for further development of participants' views of the world, leading to personal development shown in greater behavioural flexibility than before the group. Assessing any changes based on these presuppositions is done against individuals' baseline 'levels' of not only SOC, but also skills and competences, indeed the scope of internal and external behavioural options available to them before the group. What is new learning and development for one, may be 'old hat' for another.

Figure III.6.1 gives a view of my assessment methods, and their essence, centred around Symbolic Interactionism.
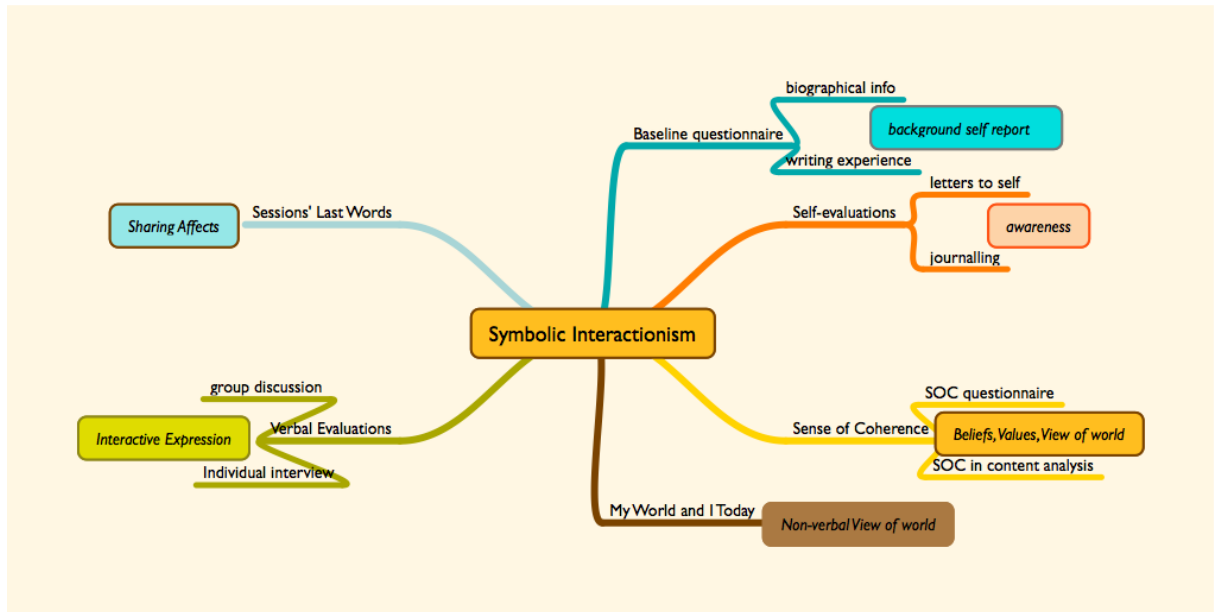
Fig.III.6.1 Assessment methods linked to Symbolic Interactionism

The road through Part III now goes from a description of the participants to two chapters, which present the empirical structure of the study and the practical application of my methodology by explaining the assessment instruments. The procedures and longitudinal process of collecting and analysing the data of the group work are laid out.

Data analysis is sorted by type in Chapter 6 with a section presenting the analysis of each of the assessment instruments used and details of the analysis method for each of those instruments.

In Chapter 7 the findings for each instrument are presented and the separate analyses demonstrated by examples. One full audit trail and summaries are provided in Appendices E and F. The final Section 7.5 assembles the different kinds of data in a single frame, in a summary of mixed methods findings, where I explore the comparisons between the outcomes of the assessment methods, yielding a multi-faceted picture of the structured writing group experiences.

This is a mixed-method study that uses mainly qualitative and some quantitative methods. In this type of research viewpoints, data, analysis and inferences stemming from qualitative and quantitative research approaches are used, to widen both "breadth and depth of understanding and corroboration" (Johnson et al., 123).

The literature regards mixed-method studies as a field that is only beginning to be charted. In a 2013 editorial to the *Journal of Mixed Method Research (MMR)*, Dawn Freshwater urges:

> to make the implied explicit — including the messiness, the inconsistencies, and contradictions between espoused research aims and practices and research aims in practice. Taking time and trouble over MMR, which is both representing and presenting something much bigger than itself is like

reducing your experience to something of a map. Reducing the unanswerable
to the answerable to a certain extent. (300).

Like others before me, I have grappled with a bewildering experience of trial and error, returning over and over to check the relevance of each method of analysis to the research questions, discarding, revising, refining and finally presenting what turned out to have been feasible, intends to be coherent, and will certainly amount to a modest early step in the studied field. As a result of the attempt to compress the findings into a digestible shape, the findings chapter is short relative to the complexity and richness of the material of the thesis as a whole. I have made an uneasy compromise in the service of readability and the pragmatic constraints of the methods employed, fully aware of the choices needed to do it this way. Much more can be told about the findings than appears in the thesis.

The study has a 'double design': in addition to the per person pre–post comparisons, which are in effect a multiple case study, I am also looking for trends across the participant population, which could yield transferable knowledge to the field of adult development through the medium of structured writing in groups.

Analysis is thus first done in a multiple case-study fashion, whereby a 'development trajectory' for each participant is drawn, based on before-group, end-of-group and follow-up comparisons.

Then I consider 'outstanding' themes in the case studies, which appear to represent group effects on the combined, small, population. The attempt is connected to earlier research in comparable domains (e.g. Hunt's *Transformative Learning Through Creative Life Writing*) and may serve future studies of the effect of structured writing groups on personal development in non-clinical populations of adults.

Participants

My groups include only adult participants who are not gathered according to symptoms of any kind. As long as people are physically capable of coming to the group, of communicating and writing, they are welcome. Exceptions to this are mental conditions that interfere with the ability to take part in a group, as set out in 1995 by Yalom in *The Theory and Practice of Group Psychotherapy* (219–242).

Twenty adults took part in four facilitated small groups. The number of groups came to be determined by circumstances and time constraints. Their recruiting was convenience-driven in the geographical area in which I live. Small posters in libraries, supermarket, charity shops and some community centres caught the interest of people, who then came to taster sessions. Group meetings were held free of charge in public venues including a library and community centres.

From 31 persons from a general population in and around the city of Leeds who took part in taster sessions 21 persons self-selected to join a group for this study.

One man dropped out after one session because of a health problem. One woman missed the end group-evaluation session and her six-month follow up interview.

Women formed the majority by 17:3. Ages ranged between 37 and 78. The average number of years of formal education was 14: minimum 10 and maximum 22.

The groups happened to include some diversity of culture, education, age, gender and family status, as well as some differences in country of origin and mother tongue (see Table 7.a). Such diversity, though not fully representative, befits the study's question whether structured writing in a group context enables personal development in adult participants from a 'general' and non-clinical population.

Participation in the study was not a condition for being part of a group, ensuring freedom of choice. Prospective participants were informed the group would be part of a doctoral study about personal development by means of writing in a group context. Pre-, post- and follow-up assessments were required as part of the commitment to participate in 12 sessions, in exchange for written feedback from the facilitator on personal writing during the group. Participation in the study depended on signing a letter of consent (Appendix C). Ethical approval has been granted by the Arts and Humanities Ethics Committee of the University of York.

These research-conditions distinguish the groups being analysed here from writing groups outside of academic scrutiny, where participants undertake no commitment to hand in any of their work, nor to participate in a set number of sessions. Their participation would be solely for themselves, without answering to requirements of a practitioner-researcher. One person joined a group but initially did not want to join the study. After three sessions he changed his mind and signed the letter of consent. He explained that he wanted to enjoy the benefit of written feedback on his writing like I gave the other participants.

To sum up: the study's population consisted of a total of twenty participants in four groups. All participants completed the study's commitments, apart from one person being absent at the end of group evaluation and the follow up interview. This is the only missing chunk of data.

CHAPTER 6 – METHODS OF ASSESSMENT

Prelude

> A prince who wanted to become a wise king asked three wise people how
> he should go about this and duly received their answers.
>
> The prince was silent to let the three answers sink in and when they had
> sunk, he noticed they had barely left a trace on his surface. He was not
> impressed and had already forgotten them. But he hadn't forgotten his
> question.

6.1 Introduction to assessment instruments and ethical considerations

The assessment tools chosen for my study incorporate operationalisations of the
theoretical concepts described in Chapter 2: a systemic view of group work and change,
affective dimensions and creativity, and Antonovsky's generalised measure of confidence
in one's ability to understand and cope with one's life. Qualitative and quantitative tools
are bound by the overarching methodological framework of Symbolic Interactionism in
providing participants' interpretations of their experiences.

The purpose of my assessment instruments is to identify whether any traces of the 12-
session writing group experience have stayed in conscious awareness of the participants
six months after the group, and are accessible in a way that is beneficial to their life, in
their own opinion.

Like in the fairy tale of the prelude above, either there are ripples, or there aren't. If a
stone quickly sinks to the bottom of the unconscious sea it will no longer have an
observable effect on the surface. Momentary change occurred when the stone hit the
water, but there was no radiating out. A person may enjoy exercises and discussions in a
writing group but soon forget all about it. This experience will then not lead to sustained
personal development of the kind one is aware of. The person will not be consciously
'impressed' in the long run. No new Batesonian levels of learning will be accessed (see
Section 2.2.4) and no reflective processes of the kind described in Section 5.2.1 are set in
motion.

In line with the methodology of Symbolic Interactionism, the assessments 'follow' the
personal meanings participants ascribe to their experiences before, during and six
months after the group. Personal meaning is taken to determine behaviour, including
thoughts and feelings, in a continuous feedback loop fed by ongoing life experiences. My
double role as the facilitator of the groups and their researcher places this work in the
category of practitioner-researcher. It means that I conducted an academic study on my

own work, as a professional in the field of writing groups, based on decades of clinical social work and psychotherapy experience. Thus, regarding the participants, in the context of the studied groups, I have been in a professional relationship with each participant during the research. I recruited and led the groups, gave and responded to assignments, assessed, evaluated and analysed the results. This 'one-woman show' entails being ethically responsible for maintaining a balance between the various required positions vis-à-vis participants and a stance of academic rigour (e.g. Dadds; Drake and Heath; Mason; Schön).

Maybe the ethical complexities have been slightly mitigated by researching in a country other than my own. Because of this the participants and I were not acquainted in any way before the groups and will not be in a professional relationship after the end of the thesis.

Coming from abroad also endowed me with a status of cultural outsider, lessening the danger of taking 'things' for granted from either culture, creating a distance to be bridged by being more explicit about what people mean. The possible complications of investigating one's own work are innumerable, as described in the literature cited above, and even more poignant in postmodernist approaches (e.g. Brown and Jones) that question the very notion of aiming to 'perfect' practice. Systematic researching leads to the deconstruction of elements of practice taken for granted by the practitioner. Reflective writing by the practitioner-researcher might build towards an assertion of professional identity through which professional demands are mediated. This may be all that can be attained.

In playing the double role of practitioner and researcher my allegiance is first and foremost to the ethical guidelines of my clinical profession, encapsulated in the dictum *first do no harm*. It means giving precedence to upholding and if possible strengthening the mental, physical and social integrity of persons while I work with them. Here I have studied a non-clinical adult population recruited for groups, which were not labelled as being therapeutic. Therefore I felt it imperative to heed participants' needs of safety and agency without question or challenges that might have a place in the context of a therapeutic alliance. Likewise I have given no psychological interpretations during the group and have set firm boundaries on group discourse when I felt that it was tending towards threatening someone's feeling of intactness.

Based on above premises, the assessments in this study are designed to elicit personal meanings within ethical boundaries, respecting the choice of what information to divulge to whom and when. Therefore private self-evaluation means were also available, in the form of journaling during the whole process of the writing group (See Sections 6.3.4 and 6.3.6). Self-evaluation, albeit not fully available for analysis by me, served as an 'intervention' in the study, because it (re)-triggered conscious awareness of the process in each person. It thereby fulfilled an integral function in the structure of the group experience (Hunt *Transformative Learning* 132).

The dual role of the practitioner-researcher belongs to an 'inquirer posture', which according to Guba and Lincoln, entails the co-construction of knowledge, "of understanding and interpretation of the meaning of the lived experiences" ("Paradigmatic Controversies", 2005, 196; 2011, 111).

Ethical considerations also shaped the gathering of baseline and follow up information. Even though, at the first session, the participants in each of the four groups had been informed about the nature of the research and had signed letters of consent, I deemed it inappropriate to require answers to intrusive questions not clearly connected with the research topic, when I was still virtually unknown to them. Thus the baseline questionnaire was designed to ask easily acceptable biographical information of the most basic kind. Open questions left room for more or less voluntary disclosure, which, as expected, was often given sparingly at that time. At the time of follow-up, when trust had been established, participants willingly elaborated on their experiences during the study. So ethics have come at a price: while the baseline information is sparse, the follow up data are extensive. This makes for a rather unbalanced comparison format between the 'before' and 'after' instruments. I hope the diversity of the data gathered with my additional assessment instruments makes up for the imbalance by the end of this empirical report.

The follow up interview, six month after completion of the group, was an extensive review of the group experience. It seemed more appropriate, and useful, for a person other than me to conduct these interviews. This would free a space to voice any criticism that might be inhibited by talking with me. It also necessitated the explanation of personal reflections based on the group experience to the interviewer, who had not taken part in the group.

The follow-up interview, like self-evaluation, proved an intervention in its own right, by sparking sometimes new reflective processes in interviewees, and also in me collaborating with the interviewer, an experienced health professional. Her input was invaluable on many levels.

Table 6.1 Shows the sequential use of my different assessment instruments over the nine months study period and their purposes, both as study material ('tools') and as interventions, which form part of the structure of such writing groups also when not in a research setting. Further explanation of the terms 'tools and interventions' is given below Table 6.1.

Table 6.1 Sequential use of assessment instruments

Phase of study	Assessment	Purpose of assessment
Start / baseline	Biographical and writing experience questionnaire	As study tool: relevant background information As intervention: focus on self and choice of disclosure, orientation to past
Start / baseline	Sense of Coherence questionnaire (1st)	As study tool: baseline SOC level As intervention: focus on present self awareness
Start / baseline	My World and I Today (MWT) (1st)	As study tool: baseline snapshot of self in the world As intervention: awareness on present place of self in world
Start / baseline	First letter to Self	As study intervention: baseline statement of goals and expectation related to the writing group. focus on present and future self, process orientation.
End / last session	Second letter to Self	As study intervention: renewed awareness of present self
End / last session	My World and I Today (2nd)	As study tool: snapshot of self in the world at end of group. As intervention: renewed awareness on present place of self in world, evoking self-comparisons with the first drawing.
End / last session	of 1st and 2nd letters and MWT drawings	As study tool: comparing of baseline letter and MWT with those at end of group, leading to self-evaluation of process. As intervention: compare past and present self, process (outcome) orientation.

Table 6.1 Sequential use of assessment instruments (cont.)

Phase of study	Assessment	Purpose of assessment
End / last session	Verbal Group evaluation session	As study tool: collecting transcribed personal evaluations from group interaction. As intervention: interaction of own and other's evaluations.
Follow-up 6 month after	Third letter to Self	As study intervention: renewed awareness of present self, evoking comparison with previous two letters.
Follow up 6 month after	My World and I Today (3rd)	As study tool: snapshot of self in the world at follow-up. As intervention: renewed awareness on present place of self in world, evoking self -comparisons with the two earlier drawings.
Follow up 6 month after	Sense of Coherence questionnaire (3rd)	As study tool: follow-up SOC level. As intervention: focus on present self awareness.
Follow up 6 month after	Individual follow up interview	As study tool: collecting transcribed personal responses to semi-structured questions. As intervention: explaining evaluation of personal experience with writing group to an outsider, evoking self-reflection.
At close of each session	Sessions' Last Words	As study tool: identifying affective themes. As intervention: tuning into emotion and feeling, to round off each session.

Explanation of terms and process:

Study tools denote the purpose of the assessments for collecting specific, analysable data.

Interventions denote the purpose of the assessments in evoking or encouraging internal processes in the participants.

The material 'products' of **study interventions** (i.e. Letters to Self) have not been collected for analysis, yet have been shared verbally in the group and certainly influenced the self-comparisons that have been collected and analysed. They are also often referred to in the evaluation texts at End and Follow-up, which form the main body of data for content analysis.

6.2 Analysis method: general introduction

Textual responses to questions directly relating to the writing group experience and their possible influence on other aspects of life were analysed by content analysis. The SOC questionnaire and the MWT drawings were directed more widely at participants' orientation to their life in general, unrelated to the writing group.

The sequence of repeated and unique assessments resulted in a build-up of self-awareness of a lived process during, contemporaneous with, and after the writing group.

6.2.1 Cleaning and selecting the text

Cleaning the text meant weeding out the wordings of questions and prompts given in the assessments, be it questionnaires, interviews or topic guides, to leave only people's own words in their responses.

Thereafter the text was divided into units of analysis. These are basic units of relevant, coherent utterances, to be classified during content analysis (Zhang and Wildemuth 3). They can be one or more sentences, or parts of sentences, depending on the context. Krippendorff stressed the need for "ways of analysing textual units of variable size, units that are natural to an intelligent reader and informative to the research question being pursued". "Textual units of analysis are contiguous and can be assigned to more than one category. They can also overlap in case they are assigned to different categories" ("Qualitative Text Analysis" 3–5).

In the baseline questionnaire the division into units of analysis is relatively simple, as the text is in a pre-structured format and answers are mostly short and to the point. It is not so simple, however, in the transcriptions of verbal utterances of group evaluations and the follow up interviews. Speech sometimes digresses from the topic and includes 'interpersonal' courtesies and 'fillers' as part of the discourse, cultural habits (e.g. "you know", "isn't it", "See what I mean?"). These kinds of utterances are excluded from my analysis when it is clear that they are unrelated to the topic of the discourse. The total number of units of analysis is obviously different for each text and, as stated before, significantly lower for baseline than for follow-up texts. This

discrepancy appears, however, to be less important than one may think. Indications of people's trajectories from start to follow-up stand out in their written and spoken expressions, both in long and in short texts.

6.2.2 Written and spoken texts

Comparing content data between written and spoken text is uneven. It may be considered by some to be a particular weakness in my study. These are forms of content that don't carry equal weight, and each of them has a unique value. Written utterances serve as snapshots of the personal thinking-feeling-experiencing process culminating in the moment of writing. Speech as part of a discourse is the expression of an ongoing thinking-feeling-experiencing process, being fed by the interaction with one or more others.

In *The Written Language Bias in Linguistics* of 2005 Linell has argued in favour of including the analysis of spoken language to compensate for the bias he perceived to exist. Speech includes disturbing 'noise', as speakers often do not form complete sentences, switch and digress in mid-sentence, trail off or become inaudible.

> There is no complete linguistic meaning nor any fully developed intended interpretation in the mind of the speaker before the utterance has been compiled and its outer form has been determined; many aspects of meaning are the result of the verbalization process itself, and some interpretations are clearly discovered only after the verbalization (op. cit. 9:1).

The 'raw' version of transcribed speech in my study includes many indications of prosody like emphases, changes in tone and tempo, duration of pauses, sounds (e.g. laughter, chuckles, the drawing in of breath). However these have all been removed for the content analysis phase. This resulted in 'dry-cleaned', silent units of text. Their impoverishment is only superficial, since the wealth of non-verbal material was still active in my mind as I coded and could be consulted at any time from the original audio recordings. The meaning assigned to utterances, as condensed in categories or themes, has been influenced by this prosodic information.

Linell (6:2) reminds his readers that "the communicative functions of prosody are emotive, evocative and social rather than cognitive and referential". Such functions have much to add to a text to enhance its understanding. One cannot simply assume that what a person means to say can be gained by applying a linguistically correct analysis to written products (ibid 9:1), a view only ostensibly different from Pennebaker's body of work, summarised in his 2011 book *The Secret Life of Pronouns, What Our Words Say About Us*.

The group evaluation discussion and individual follow-up interviews provided the spoken data analysed for the thesis. As much as I hoped to find indications of personal development in the written texts done in response to exercises, this large body of

collected written data awaits a future study because of time constraints.[29]

Since my study is longitudinal, endeavouring to overcome the limitations of momentary measures, I chose to allow a comparison between unequal bodies of data. I am aware of the exploratory nature of my investigation and of testing out methods that may be improved upon. In future studies I hope to refine them and to have the time to analyse many more of the written texts that have come out of the groups of the current study.

6.2.3 Developing categories and themes

Through repeated readings and coding, categories were induced and deduced from the units of texts.

Induction shows themes emerging from the raw data through repeated examination and comparison, deduction uses pre-formulated themes derived from theoretical premises of the study and brings them in connection with the text. A "methodological controlled assignment of the category to a passage of text" follows Mayring's 2000 "Qualitative Content Analysis" (13). I have connected the themes that emerged with the theoretical concepts underlying my definition of personal development as set out in Chapter 3, first staying very close to the raw text, but inevitably abstracting and becoming more removed from origins with each phase of coding. I took special notice of mentions of 'negative' and 'no change' utterances, counteracting possible bias.

I have used Mayring's step model for deductive category application in qualitative content analysis, which enables the giving of "explicit definitions, examples and coding rules for each deductive category, determining exactly under what circumstances a text passage can be coded with a category. Within a feedback loop those categories are revised, eventually reduced to main categories ..." (Mayring, 10–15).

A detailed agenda (Table 6.2) provides the key to how the coding scheme was developed. In the thematic content coding of texts I have been assisted by another coder, in a process of consensual decision-making on each final code. Where a consensus could not be reached this has been noted. Disputed codings are not counted.

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[29] Future use of material is covered by the Letter of Consent, and will be re-confirmed with the participants at the time of actual analysis.

6.3 Assessment instruments presented in chronological order

In the following sections the form and structure of each instrument is described and explained in the sequence in which it was presented to participants, as can be seen in Table 6.1 giving an overview at the end of the general introduction. Portions of that table accompany the sections as an indicator of 'place and time' in the assessment process.

6.3.1 Biographical and writing experience questionnaire

The formal, written baseline-gathering instrument, named 'Biographical and Writing Experience Questionnaire' (Appendix C), was filled out by participants at the first session of their respective writing group, after signing the letter of consent to participate in the study. I devised the questionnaire to be relevant to the research topic, while being minimally intrusive to personal privacy.

The questionnaire is semi-structured, including closed and open questions. The closed part of this format allows for the collection of basic facts of life, like date and place of birth, gender, number of years of formal education, occupation and family status. The open part makes room for individual life accounts, prompted by topics relevant to a writing group. These accounts – in line with symbolic interactionism – are not easily categorised and their text has been subjected to content analysis.

The first seven questions are closed and provide biographical data. Questions 8 and 9 are open, to elicit existing knowledge, skills, values, experiences the participant has learned throughout life, independent from schooling and which s/he deems important to mention at the start of the group.

People used various ways to answer questions 8 and 9. Some simply made a list, like for question 8: "Working as part of a team; Computer skills"; others wrote longer, as shown in an answer to question 9: "The birth and death of my younger brother. When he was born I was 22 months old and his birth transformed my role in our family. He died of cancer in October 2010, just a few months after telling me he was ill."

Questions 10 to 15 focus on past and present writing experiences of different kinds, again offering a semi-structured format, to which each person has responded in a more or less elaborate fashion.

This baseline-gathering instrument yields a simple biographical overview for each participant and a general picture of the study population, as shown in Section 7.1.1.

6.3.1.1 Analysis method of the baseline questionnaire

The dry biographical data gathered in questions 1 to 7 of the questionnaire are

recorded 'as is' and entered into a table showing a picture of the study population (See Table 7.a).

The textual answers to the questions 8 to 15 of the questionnaire were analysed on their content in three phases, as described in Section 6.2 above. I present some examples encountered in the baseline questionnaire.

In the first phase the text was prepared, by 'cleaning' the question texts from the answers, to avoid contaminating the person's choice of words with those given in the questions.

For example, the wording of question 9: "I'd like to mention the following things that had a big impact on my life" is regarded only as the prompt for an answer. Where these same words appear in the answer, they have not been coded as belonging to the responder's text. Where people chose to respond in list form (e.g. 'marriage'; 'motherhood'; 'the loss of my father') instead of a full sentence, such 'cleaning' was not necessary.

Where a person answered in a sentence using their own words, unlike those of the question, their full sentence is considered a unit of analysis. An example for question 8: "I'd like to mention these important things I learned outside of formal education": 'Life itself can teach you sometimes more than just being educated.' [Ver/base/1][30]

The second phase was organising the text into Units of Analysis, identifying all utterances relevant to the research questions.

The third phase, less technical and more interesting to me, consisted of identifying criteria, values and beliefs in the answers, that is any statements that express how persons view themselves and their world. Which themes in their lives do people find important enough to mention in writing on a short questionnaire? Of the many things they have learned and experienced in life, what do they single out here?

Since answers have not been given in a perfunctory way, I take them to reflect something of people's views of their world at the starting moment of the writing group. And a person's baseline view of the world can be traced during the writing group process and up to the follow-up moment to find out if any sustained changes appear that may, according to the participant, have been triggered by the group. One's view of the world says something about one's Sense of Coherence (SOC), which plays an important part in the study. The extent to which life is comprehensible, manageable and meaningful to a person can be gleaned from their spontaneous written and spoken utterances. When for example someone responded that she writes "a journal of understandings and insights as to how life works" [Ail/base/9], it shows that through

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[30] Letters and numbers in square brackets after verbatim examples refer to data sources. Sociometry is a forerunner of Social Network Analysis.

writing she engages actively in improving the comprehensibility of her life.

The Sense of Coherence (Antonovsky, *Mystery of Health*) encompasses the degree of comprehensibility, manageability and meaningfulness persons experience in their life and world. Viewed from a high level of abstraction, any expressions of what is important, meaningful, possible and their opposites: meaningless, unimportant, impossible relate to people's SOC, the topic of Section 6.3.3.

Identifying and recording all individuals' criteria (i.e. topics important to them) based on their literal words in the questionnaire is an elaborate procedure, producing an unwieldy wealth in data. It was, however, a necessary intermediate phase for me in my later role of researcher, rather than in my earlier role as facilitator of the groups, to acquaint myself intimately with the way in which participants introduced themselves on paper and to study their written words with an open mind, before reviewing them through a theoretically informed lens. It also forced me to focus on what was expressed at the exact starting moment in time, in contrast to the dynamic process of verbal group experience that began there.

Such initial coding of criteria is an inductive and iterative process: watching for themes that emerge from respondents' own words. In the fourth phase of analysis, I listed the emerged criteria alongside the themes developed from my theoretical sources. I then re-coded all answers to the questionnaire into seven overarching themes derived from the concepts constituting my definition of personal development, as set out in the previous chapters and shown as categories in Table 6.2 below.

Different utterances ended up in a theme by connecting their personal meaning taken from the literal text and context to the more abstract concept, to the best of my understanding and after discussion with a second coder. The same utterance may include one or more coded themes and themes may often overlap, as can be seen in the starred* examples given in Table 6.2 (structurally based on an example by Mayring 16).

Table 6.2 Coding Agenda for the baseline questionnaire (4 pages)

Category	Definition	Examples from baseline texts	Coding clues
Learning levels	*Direct and indirect expressions of learning, acquiring additional capabilities, changes in frame of reference, shifts to higher order thinking (meta cognition, compared to one's earlier level). Learning is more than incidental coping, it is integrated into the behavioural repertoire.*	*I learned to face things that unsettle me.* *I learned to cook.* *I learned that the education system is rigged in favour of the middle class.** *I now write less in my diary as its lessons are being absorbed inwardly.** *I would, if I knew how to write...*	*Expressions connected with: learning, mastering, now able to use a skill, a realisation, an understanding that has made a difference. A change in perspective, a wider / clearer view of things, which influences behaviour. Explicit indications of lasting change compared to earlier times. LL is coded as positive when it pleases the person; negative when indicating an inability to learn something, or a displeasing development; neutral when personal 'value' could not be established from the text.*

Category	Definition	Examples from baseline texts	Coding clues
Coping (Cop)	*Expressions of (Cop) (in)ability to lower tension / stress and to overcome adversity and difficulties as they arise.*	*I wrote a journal to deal with a painful break-up. Writing helps me to make difficult situations fun.* It is hard for me to write serious stories.*	*Mentions of dealing with problems by words, deeds and thought (e.g. reframing); of using options e.g. humour), a different behaviour (from before) or reflection, resulting in a lowering of internal felt tension.* *Coping is coded as positive when tension is lowered, problem solved.* *Negative, when tension persists, problem unsolved.*
Sense of coherence (SOC)	*Expressions of beliefs about oneself and about the world. Statements on what the world/life is like, the 'status quo', habits of thought and behaviour. Things that make life comprehensible, manageable and meaningful, showing a person's stability over time, a sense of identity.*	*Your first impression is not always right. It is important to stay in touch. This is how it's always been. I am not a poetry person I don't have enough discipline to keep a diary.*	*Expressions of things considered to be stable, long-standing, giving structure and support.* *General self descriptions.*
Internal communication	*Awareness of communication with Self.*	*I thought to myself...*	*Words like: thinking, realizing, noticing,*

Category	Definition	Examples from baseline texts	Coding clues
(InC)	*Direct and indirect indications of internal dialogue. Comparisons, necessarily involving a thinking process. Awareness of communication with others. Direct and indirect mentions of external communication via speech and writing.*	*After hesitating I decided I realised... I have become more X than when I was young.*	*being aware of.* *Comparatives of any kind.*
Interpersonal communication	*Awareness of communication with others. Direct and indirect mentions of external communication via speech and writing.*	*What I wrote will be read by my daughters. Letters let them know I haven't forgotten them. I learned to listen to others. Some say they like my stories.*	*Words like: talking, discussing, listening, writing (for readers), collaborating, responding, sounding board.*
Telic	*Differs from the original sociometric method, based*	*It grieves me that...*	*Telic coded as positive for emotional*

Category	Definition	Examples from baseline texts	Coding clues
communication	on direct questions and mutual feelings. Only spontaneous expressions of tele are counted, plus other affective utterances.	To amuse me, cheer me up. I have loving friends.* The death of my mother. Creating a family.	expressions of being attracted to, comfortable, enjoyable, happy. Telic coded as negative for expressions of unpleasantness, aggravation, annoyance, repulsion. Telic coded as neutral when the emotion cannot be assigned another value (mostly because it's personal meaning is unkown).
Expectations (Exp)	Expressions of personal goals and hopes. Includes mentions of coping to be learned.	I hope that I will learn to... I'm looking forward to this new experience. I hope to write my life story for the MA. I'd like to write more letters by hand.	Words like hope to, expect to, would like to. Expectations are coded as positive when attractive and negative when unattractive. Coded 'neutral' when meaning was unknown.

6.3.2 My World and I Today

For the small sample of my writing groups I wanted a highly personal way for participants to express themselves in their own style, and not only in words, providing them with an 'empty space' to freely draw their world in with a minimum of prompts.

'My World and I Today' (MWT) is a predominantly non-verbal assessment instrument that I have fashioned out of elements from applied sociometry[31] (Moreno, *Sociometry*) and the Kinetic Family Drawing (KFD – Burns and Kaufman). However, unlike the projective diagnostic use of the KFD and pure sociometry's giving of insight in the social dynamics of groups, I designed MWT to elicit a visual expression of persons' perceptions of their world at three moments in time: the first and last sessions of the group and six months afterwards. The visual part is augmented by explanatory texts written by the participants. Eliciting these pictures served my aim of following changing representations of personal world views, which I take to reflect personal development.

I chose to construct this test, because none of the conventional measures known to me capture what I want to discover. For example, I do not see compartmentalised measurements of single 'traits' providing the kind of information about the development of 'whole persons' over time that I am interested in. Neither do abstracted, partially metaphorical and theoretical concepts, like, for instance, scales of 'ego-strength' (Barron 327) provide this. The venerable psychodynamic concept of ego strength now has a place in the wide-ranging studies of 'resilience', in which Antonovsky's Sense of Coherence also features. In the 2012 Handbook of Adult Resilience it is emphasised that "only by gathering longitudinal data in studies of the turning points in the trajectory of an individual ..., along with contemporaneous assessment of everyday life ... will we begin to specify the mechanisms that underlie resilience" (Zautra et.al. 23).

Measuring by means of checklists, psychological testing (e.g. MMPI, Nichols and Kaufman) and other ways of verbal self-report, mostly elicited through prescribed questions instead of respondents' own words, may be suited to large sample sizes intended to detect changes on a population level. My interest is in individual development only.

My world today combines the KFD's personal family focus with the wider group and societal scope of sociometry. To assess personal development I find it important to cast such a wide net, capable of capturing persons' individual and social world-maps. MWT drawings stimulate the drawers to represent their actual connections in the external environment while simultaneously highlighting their internal world, for example by

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[31] I have used principles of "Sociogram Construction" (Hollander), without the prescribed symbols for people and relationships.

what they value, dream and wish in life.

In the following summary of the *Sociometry Training Network* I have quoted only those parts that are relevant to my construction of the MWT:

> Sociometry is a study of both the quantitative (the numbers of connections) and qualitative (the nature of connections) interpersonal relations. We explore the choice-making activity of groups of all kinds, examining choices people make ... with whom to interact, share time and space, energy and states of consciousness. Sociometry is both a left-brained activity and a right-brained activity, with pen and paper ... and action components ... Sociometrists assist in the sharpening of interpersonal perception, in learning to recognize ... patterns which contribute to group dynamics, role accessibility, act-hunger, isolation, burnout, change, impasse and disintegration, as well as those patterns which are crucial to well being across the life span ...This includes attention to emotional states, personal history, implicit and explicit memory, right brain to right brain patterns of relating, and embracing a wide array of belief systems. (Hale)

Inspired in part by Moreno's sociometric work, I assume in my study that persons' views of their world may change during and after participation in a structured writing group and that such changes will be visible in their three pictures. Hollander emphasised in his *Introduction to Sociogram Construction* (8) what I call the 'snapshot' quality of such maps of relationships. After their drawings people's circumstances change, they continue to make choices guided by changing criteria.

Importantly, MWT is a behavioural tool, unlike questionnaires and interviews, which just yield verbal self-report data. The essence of a pictorial behavioural tool is to make visible non-verbal and sometimes semi-conscious elements of a person's subjective experience.

The nature of the task is strictly fixed in time, in other words date-bound (today, the day of drawing), and it is almost certain that pictures created by the same person on different dates will differ from each other, with or without a writing group. Which differences show up as meaningful, that is expressing a developmental change in world-view, is the first challenge of my analysis. The second challenge is to establish whether any perceived changes are at all related to experiences in the writing group. After all, participating in twelve weekly sessions and doing some exercises is not much compared to the rest of a person's life. Changes in world-view may come about through circumstances other than an intensive structured writing group. Here I will add that 'intensive' is a key aspect of changes in life. Only after crossing a certain threshold of intensity of feeling (want, need, interest, pain) one is challenged to seek novel ways of coping with life. Without this intensity things tend to continue as they are.

Several participants went through intensive physical and emotional experiences during the study and follow-up period that had no connection to the group. Unless they themselves explicitly linked their changes in outlook to the group there is no way to establish an association. The participants' self-evaluation is the final word on this.

The MWT pictures form a unique part of the data that I analyse. They are of a different nature from written self-evaluations, answers to questionnaires and verbal utterances.

6.3.2.1 Form and procedure of MWT

Before presenting my method of analysis, a short look at the assessment procedure is in order.

The printed instruction given to participants, identical at the three assessment moments, is:

> *Imagine the blank space on this paper as your world, place yourself somewhere inside it in a pictorial way of your choice that shows your relationship with or towards your world. You can add other persons important to you and show your connection with them with lines or other signs. On the other side of the paper you can write down any explanation of signs and meanings you want to get across.*
>
> *Please state your age and gender in the place provided.*

The first assessment is done in the group, with coloured felt-pens on the table, to give participants a choice of tools besides the pen or pencil they use for writing.

The second and third versions are done at home, just before the last session and before the follow-up interview. Here the choice of tools lies fully with the participant.

The sparse, open instructions, the empty page and an often needed verbal reassurance that 'this is not about drawing, any marks will do', evoke a reflective process. People think about how they want to picture themselves and their connections to people, activities, aspects of life that are important to them. After a short reflection (sometimes only a few seconds) they start their creation, completing it often in less than ten minutes. After creating the second MWT at the end of the group, participants are invited to compare, in writing, the two pictures they have made. For this a second-order reflective process is required, in which a person evaluates any differences and may ponder the reasons for them. Some people express surprise at the differences they perceive between their two 'worlds'. One person was happy to discover that her two pictures were quite similar: "this made me feel true and honest to myself" [Jul/SC/3].
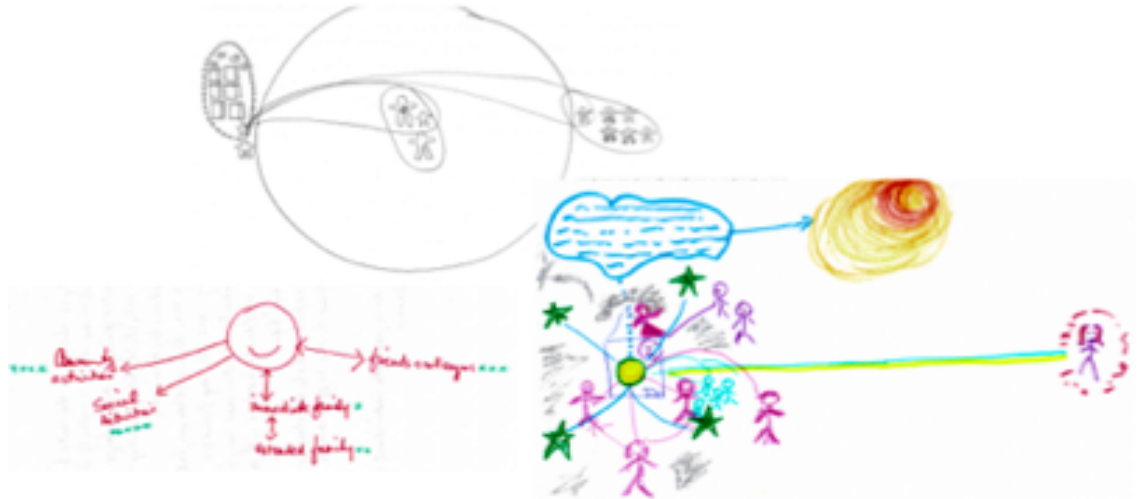
Fig. III.6.2 What MWT's can look like: a mini collage of 3 types of drawing.

6.3.2.2 Analysis method of MWT

The data produced in MWT are pictorial drawings, with the possible addition of written descriptions and explanations of these creations by their creators.

Even if each picture is individually unique in content, categories of form and style can be distinguished and compared for each person. The categories I employ are explained, operationally defined, and ordinal numerical values assigned to degrees of difference in each category.

I want to make it clear that my treatment of the pictorial data, as of all other material created by participants of this study, aspires to respect the subjective meanings ascribed to them by their creators. Intentionally imposing an external interpretation on those meanings is incompatible with my methodology both from an ethical standpoint and from the overall aim of my study to discover whether personal development can be found. And yet structuring and presenting raw material for analysis purposes implicitly also interprets it. I see no way to avoid this paradox, except by noting its inherence. Using a 'drawing tool' resembling those used in psychological–projective disciplines may also mislead readers familiar with these tools. My analysis runs as it were alongside the self-understandings of participants, and deals with the data in relation to the research question only. I stay aware at all times that my understanding is just another subjective view on the data.

To choose the criteria for analysis I started with describing the visual data in my own terms, while relating them to the operationalised research question of how personal development occurs through structured writing groups. Out of an exhaustive description of a total of 60 pictures created by the 20 participants of the groups I distilled a list of five

categories, namely Organisation, Connections, Balance, Self, and Perceptual Positions. They are elaborated in the Tables 5.3 to 5.7 below in the form of coding schemes.

To clarify these categories, I had to choose a terminology, as much variation exists in the usage and implied meaning of descriptions of visual material.

The terms Structure, Form and Shape are a case in point. These are not formally linguistically differentiated and are loosely considered synonyms. To me 'shapes' are figurative gestalts (e.g. person, flower) and 'structures' are formal, geometrical, or hierarchical gestalts (e.g. circles, squares, connected boxes). Order is connected to Structure but not identical to it. A drawing can be (dis)organised with(out) a recognisable structure. For example when figures float around on the page in a symmetrical, ordered, way, unconnected to each other. A minority of the MWT pictures are ordered like that, without a structure. Conversely there are a few with structure that got out of hand and look disordered.

I have made 'Organisation' into one overarching category that includes order, complexity structure, and form. In a way similar to the one shown above I fine-tuned the meaning for each of the categories that I consider significant in tracking any differences per person, to approach a level of reliability in their identification.

6.3.2.3 Scoring

Numerical codes are used as an aid to summarise the data and to simplify reading and processing them. They have no absolute value in themselves. Using them creates an illusion of quantification with which I am not at ease. Yet by providing only verbal descriptions of the drawings another illusion would have been created, namely the pretension that I am not evaluating and comparing people's creative outputs. I have tried to code by readily observable categories, but the data have not been coded by others to obtain inter-rater reliability.

Some categories lie on a continuum, indicated by an interrupted line --- between two or more values. They have been assigned ordinal numerical scores 1–3.

Digital categories, like 'absent-present', are scored 0–1.

Either-or categories, like 'embodied – disembodied' are scored 1–2.

Criteria for these codings are explained with the categories below.

MWT categories

I.   Organisation**,** indicating the ordered complexity of the picture, consists of four elements: Order, Complexity, Structure and Form shown in Tables 6.3.1–6.3.4

II.   Connections are the ties with animate and inanimate elements of their world depicted and described by the participants. Ties depicted are interpreted as more meaningful to the person than ties not depicted, at the moment of drawing.
Connections as a category indicates the quantity of connections and their quality as specified by kind.
Quantity consists of the number of all connections drawn. The count of connection quantity is not included in the MWT score for this thesis. This number tended to overwhelm all other scores resulting in uncontrolled bias. It may be relevant in studies with another focus. [32]
Quality of the connections is derived from any verbal labelling in the picture and / or from the written explanatory notes, shown in Table 6.4.

III.   Balance, which indicates the use of space is shown in Table 6.5.

IV.   Self, the manner in which the drawers represent themselves, is shown in Table 6.6.

V.   Perceptual Positions, indicating point of view / perspective, Table 6.7.

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[32] My study cannot show if some correlation exists between Quantity and Quality of connections.

Table 6.3.1 The scoring of Order

Order	Score
Low (scattered elements without clear connections between them)	1
Medium (some connections between elements, not enough to form a unit)	2
High (structurally connected elements forming a type of unit, whose meaning by the drawer is recognisable to the scorer)	3

Note: The degree of order is evaluated 'at face value' of the drawing by the scorer.

Table 6.3.2 The scoring of Complexity

Use of dimensions and hierarchical ordering	Score
Simple (2-D, all elements at same plane)	1
Complex (2-D, hierarchical ordering of elements)	
Highly complex(3-D visual perspective, more than one time frame	2

Table 6.3.3 The scoring of Structure

Interrelationships between elements of the drawing	Score
Diagrammatic/schematic (systematic use of geometrical forms)	0–1
Figurative (representing 'real' objects)	0–1
Static ------- Dynamic/movement* (see indicators below)	1–3
Time: present time only - past/ future appear in the picture (e.g. a time-line).	1–3

- *The indicators for 'movement' are: arrows, wavy lines, and figures performing activities. Where Self appears more than once in the drawing, supported by written explanation, this has also been scored as movement.*

Table 6.3.4 The scoring of Form	
The way in which elements are drawn	**Score**
Linear = positioned along one line	0–1
Hub/'Mind Map' = central element with branches	0–1
Circular = main elements are circles/ellipses	0–1
Rectangular = main elements are rectangular frames	0–1
Pictorial/non-verbal = only drawings	0–1
Verbal = text (as labels, as explanations)	0–1
Disembodied (people as abstract shapes) – Embodied (people as human shapes)	1–3
Concrete ------ Symbolic = signs, objects signifying something else.	1–3

The total of the scores for 'Organisation' lies in the region 11–23. A drawing's composite score is the sum-score of Order, Complexity, Structure and Form. I am aware that I have invented these scores without a statistical foundation of any kind. Their reliability can conceivably be tested, but I have not yet done so. Such a test would show whether the simplistic counting and adding of my scores can be assigned a meaning beyond the utterly subjective one.

Table 6.4 The scoring of the quality of connections	
Connections: quality	**Score**
Illustrations from the data are given in *italics.*	
a. Unnamed and unspecified, (*members of the public)*----specified by role (*cousin, boss*)-----named (*Pat*)	1–3
b. Grouped as context, area of interest, as activity, animal or object (*the festival; music; work; books*)	0–1
c. Self is coded as connection if mentioned by name, or as *me, I, my.*	0–1
The possible range of scores for 'connections' is unlimited.	

Table 6.5 Balance indicates the use of the space	
Balance	**Score**
Sparse, Scattered or Skewed (to one side of page) – Full, Centered	0–1
Underload (empty space with very few elements) – Overload (very full with many small details) – Balanced load	0–1
Centered drawings with a 'balanced load' suggest a higher Sense of Coherence in the drawer. More about this in the justification below the next category.	

Table 6.6 Self the manner of representing the drawer of the picture	
Self	**Score**
Location: absent* – peripheral – central *Omitting Self disregards the instructions of the task.*	0–2
Disembodied – Embodied	1–2
Unlabelled – Labelled, impersonal (*male*, *age 70*) – Labelled, personal (*me*, *first name*, *initials*)	1–3
Size compared to other elements of the drawing: small – large – proportionate	1–3
The justification for giving higher scores to 'central', 'embodied', 'personal' is based on the concept of Sense of Coherence (Antonovsky, HSC). A person with a strong SOC (a high score on the SOC questionnaire, one of the assessments in this study) perceives her world as Manageable, Comprehensible and Meaningful. A peripheral, disembodied and impersonal depiction of Self in the MWT task suggests a low SOC. Accordingly scoring is designed to show if a change in MWT in this aspect corresponds with a change in SOC.	

Table 6.7 Perceptual Position the point of view, or perspective of the drawer	
Perceptual Position	**Score**
First position: view through one's own eyes, beliefs and assumptions; use of first person when writing about Self.	1
Third or meta position: a point of view outside of the relationship between Self and the world as pictured, taking into account own and sometimes other's beliefs and assumptions; use of third person language when writing about Self.	**3**

Notes: These are the two positions appearing in my data. Therefore I have omitted the second position from the scoring scheme.

Perceptual Position is included because it relates to frames of reference and also appears in the content analyses of texts over time..

Summary of MWT analyses

I have summarised each participant's series of three MWT drawings with three scores, an Impression and a Trajectory.

Impression: My summary impression as the researcher. Here I note, in free style, the overall impressions the pictures give me. It may also serve as part of an audit trail.

Trajectory: Short verbal notation of each of the categories in the three pictures from start to follow-up, translated to three numerical scores per person. The three scores show a trend of sameness or difference at a glance.

Summary scores

As described above these represent a convenient aid to add up all pictorial elements in each drawing. They are however only a crutch. A reliability analysis that I have not conducted, may show whether all the scored items correlate positively. Only then scores can justifiably be added together.

The quality of change is concluded from all the criteria per set of three drawings of each person.

Positive change from start to follow-up shows increasing clarity of organisation, movement, vitality, improved balance, self representation, connections, and point(s) of view.

These variables are related to Antonovsky's descriptions of the three interrelated components of the Sense of Coherence, as illustrated by quoting just one:

> A greater sense of Comprehensibility is developed by repeatedly experiencing that things fit together and that unknowns are explained to one's satisfaction in an ordered pattern. (*Mystery of Health*, chapter 6)

No change shows either no change at all or an initial positive change from start to end of group, followed by a return to the baseline level at follow-up.

This pattern corresponds to a trajectory of short-term change that is not sustained over time. Antonovsky observed *fluctuations around their mean* (score) in people's SOC as they move through life with its ups and downs.

> If, however, a substantial number of people, in a sample of persons experiencing a given mode of therapy, increase their SOC scores by five points on the average, this will be a statistically significant change. (McCubbin et al. 15)

Correlations between MWT trajectories and SOC scores will be addressed in Chapter 7 (Section 7.5) together with other assessments.

Negative change shows the reverse of the positive: decreasing clarity of organisation, of movement, of vitality, vagueness, imbalance, etc. The most compact way to present the results is by a simple count of participants on a 4-point scale of change between positive and negative.

1 very positive	2 positive	3 neutral / undecided	4 negative

As stated, the quality of change is concluded from all the criteria per set of 3 drawings of each person. No comparison between persons is made. It is a qualitative, subjective measure.

A more content-rich presentation entails a large verbal table, specifying all categories in which change can be recorded and the trajectory of change identified for each set/person (Appendix E).

6.3.3 Sense of Coherence questionnaire

The theoretical background of sense of coherence (SOC) has been set out in Section 2.2.6. Antonovsky's SOC construct refers to a

> global orientation that expresses the extent to which one has a pervasive, enduring though dynamic feeling of confidence that one's internal and external environments in the course of living are Comprehensible, i.e. structured, predictable and explicable; Manageable, meaning that the resources are available to one to meet the demands posed by these stimuli; and Meaningful, in the sense that these demands are challenges, worthy of investment and engagement   (*Mystery of Health*, 19).

As the construct is based on 'orientation and feelings', which are personal evaluations of the resources at one's disposal in life, it is congruous with symbolic interactionism. SOC is a measure of belief in one's capacity to understand and deal with the vicissitudes of life, and the extent to which experiences are seen as meaningful. The 'strength' of persons' SOC influences their actions in real life, very similar to Bandura's 'self-efficacy' ("Judgment and Action" 263*)*, and thus exemplify the SI's precept that people act according to what they understand situations to mean (Blumer 69). The 'strength' of individuals' SOC is measured by the standardised 'Orientation to Life questionnaire'. It came out of Antonovsky's attempt to explain "the movement towards the health pole of the ease / disease continuum", the process he named salutogenesis (*Mystery of Health)*.

Here I describe the questionnaire that measures the SOC construct and that I have used to longitudinally track any changes in 'global orientation' of participants in the writing groups at my three assessment points in time. The SOC measure is the only one of the concepts I employ to have been studied and validated quantitatively over many years and across cultures. It is relatively robust and does not depend on subjective evaluations of the researcher. It measures however the subjective evaluations of respondents and belongs to the category of 'self-report' data.

For this questionnaire two versions exist, the original 29-item long form, and the later 13-item form. Since the short form has been shown in a validation study to produce a statistically better fit than the original scale (Van Schalwyk and Rothmann 37), I have chosen to use it in my study. It has the additional advantage of requiring less time to complete for the participants.

Orientation to Life Questionnaire

This is a series of questions about various aspects of our lives. Each question has 7 possible answers. Please **circle** the number which best expresses your answer: the numbers 1 and 7 are the extremes, the words next to them show the start and end points of the range. Choose one answer only for each question.
There are no right or wrong answers, everyone has different experiences in life!

1.   Do you have the feeling that you don't really care about what goes on around you?
     very seldom or never 1 - 2 - 3 - 4 - 5 - 6 - 7 - very often

2.   Has it happened that you were surprised by the behaviour of people whom you thought you knew well?
     never happened 1 - 2 - 3 - 4 - 5 - 6 - 7 - always happened

3.   Has it happened that people who you counted on disappointed you?
     never happened 1 - 2 - 3 - 4 - 5 - 6 - 7 - always happened

4.   Until now your life has had:
     no clear goals or purpose at all 1 - 2 - 3 - 4 - 5 - 6 - 7 - very clear goals and purpose

5.   Do you have the feeling that you're being treated unfairly?
     very often 1 - 2 - 3 - 4 - 5 - 6 - 7 - very seldom or never

6.   Do you have the feeling that you are in an unfamiliar situation and don't know what to do?
     very often 1 - 2 - 3 - 4 - 5 - 6 - 7 - very seldom or never

7.   Doing the things you do every day is:
     a source of deep pleasure and satisfaction 1 - 2 - 3 - 4 - 5 - 6 - 7 - a source of pain and boredom

8.   Do you have very mixed-up feelings and ideas?
     very often 1 - 2 - 3 - 4 - 5 - 6 - 7 - very seldom or never

9.   Does it happen that you have feelings inside you would rather not feel?
     very often 1 - 2 - 3 - 4 - 5 - 6 - 7 - very seldom or never

10. Many people –even those with a strong character- sometimes feel losers in certain situations. How often have you felt this way in the past?
     never 1 - 2 - 3 - 4 - 5 - 6 - 7 - very often

11. When something happened, have you generally found that:
     You overestimated or   1 - 2 - 3 - 4 - 5 - 6 - 7 - you saw things in the
     underestimated its importance   right proportion

12. How often do you have the feeling that there's little meaning in the things you do in your daily life?
     very often 1 - 2 - 3 - 4 - 5 - 6 - 7 - very seldom or never

13. How often do you have feelings that you're not sure you can keep under control?
     very often 1 - 2 - 3 - 4 - 5 - 6 - 7 - very seldom or never

Please sign with your pseudonym!
_____
date:

Fig.III.6.3 Sense of coherence questionnaire used (easier to read in Appendix D).

6.3.3.1 Analysis method of Sense of Coherence questionnaire

The questionnaire was administered at the three assessment times, start (baseline) T–1, end of group T–2, and six months follow up T–3. Scores for each questionnaire were added up to yield one sum score per person, per assessment time.

For statistical analysis the SPSS program (V.20) has been used.

By inspecting the item-test correlations it appeared that item 10 was not correlated with the remainder at T–2 (.02) and item 2 was not correlated with the test at T–3 (.01). These two items were also reported to be of questionable value for the scale by van Schalwyk

and Rothmann (37). However, there is no conceptual explanation for the zero correlation at one time and not at others, therefore I decided to include both items in the final analysis for all three times of assessment. Another item (Question 5) however had to be deleted from all analyses, because of a fatal error of formulation at T1. Final results were thus computed over 12 identical items for each time of assessment, accidentally supported by the 2000 study of Feldt et al., unconnected to the quirks of my study:

> In the present study, the short-form worked best as a 12-item measure comprising four meaningfulness, four comprehensibility and four manageability items. The longitudinal factor analysis models revealed that sense of coherence represented a moderately stable personality factor over the one-year interval and no mean changes in the latent structures of sense of coherence were detected. (Op. cit. 255)

To test the assumption that SOC is a stable trait, I computed stability coefficients (Pearson correlations). These were .69 between T1 and T2; .65 between T2 and cT3; and .68 between T1 and T3. It can be concluded that the SOC questionnaire measures a quite stable characteristic of the participants, in line with the literature on adult populations (e.g. Eriksson and Lindström, *Scale*, 378–79; Feld et al., *Longitudinal*, 255).
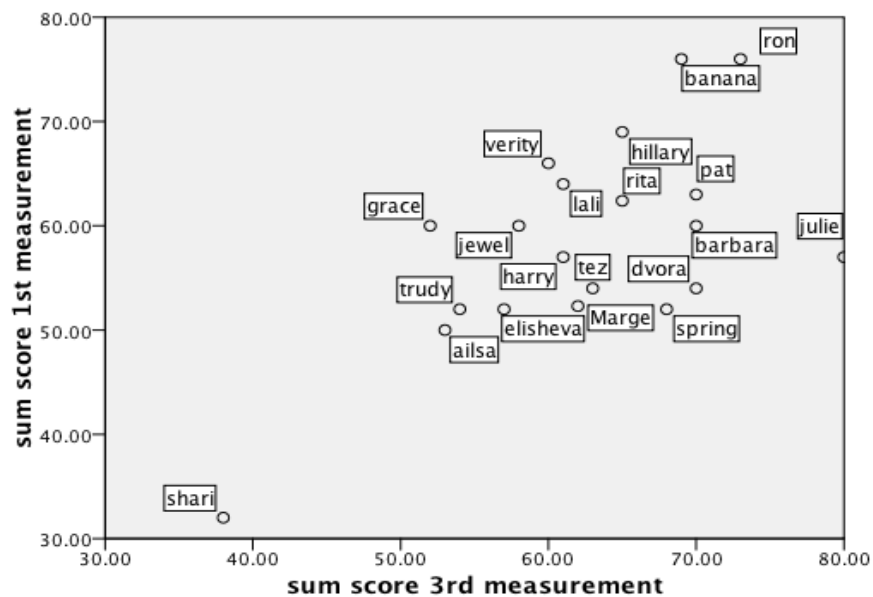
The Scattergram in Figure III.6.4 visualises on what basis the stability coefficients were calculated for T1 and T3.

Two-tailed T-tests for paired samples were executed to test the assumption that the participants' total scores on the SOC do not differ between the three times of assessment.

6.3.4 First 'letter to self'

True to their name, 'letters to self' are a self-evaluation instrument. Participant wrote three letters to themselves, the first at the start, the second at the end of the group sessions, and the third and last at follow-up. The letters are primarily for private use, but parts of the understanding they yielded haves been made available for analysis at the discretion of their writers, in a way to be explained soon.

I devised the letters-to-self method to enable participants to keep track of their own trajectory along the three assessment points. It has been my experience with writing groups over the years that participants start out in a group carrying certain personal goals and expectations they are free to share, or not, verbally with the group, but in the course of time they tend to forget what they set out to do. When they attain a goal this may thus pass unnoticed and does not add to any conscious sense of achievement or adjustment to a new level of learning. Interestingly, participants sooner recall the avowed goals of others in their group than those of themselves When they are set the task to write (and read) their own goals, expectations and outcomes from the group, the issues conducive to self-evaluation are repeatedly brought to conscious awareness.

Letters to self are a variation on the types of letter writing that have been found useful in therapeutic settings (e.g. Esterling et. al; Lange 377–92; White and Epston). Letter writing in a therapeutic context is often conceived as 'self-confrontation' and as a means for 'cognitive reappraisal' used in "Treatment of Posttraumatic Stress Through the Internet" (Lange et al. 74). In a non-therapeutic setting like writing groups I take self-confrontation and cognitive reappraisal to signify the functions of reminding participants of their original goals upon joining the group and of periodically (re-)appraising what has happened during and after, in relation to the group-experience.

In a 2006 qualitative study of the wishes of adult literacy learners for evaluation Lefebvre et al. also found support for additional instruments like letters to self:

> Current measures of learners' progress are incomplete, learners want multiple ways to talk about progress and find talking about their learning useful and stimulating. Therefore it is important to help learners understand their own ways of learning, to recognize the progress they make in all aspects of their lives once they entered a literacy program and to articulate their learning needs and dreams (4–5).

The guidelines given to participants in the writing groups for the first letter to self are as follows:

First Letter to Myself

Hereby you are invited to write a letter to yourself about starting in the writing group.

Use empty ruled pages for your letter.

Greet yourself by name or by the pseudonym you chose for this study, or in any other way you see fit, like you would write a letter to someone else. Because when you read this letter in a few months' time you will not be exactly the same as you are at this moment.

The following questions may guide you and you can write anything else you find important in connection to starting the writing group:

What do I want to achieve for myself in this group?

What are my expectations upon starting the writing group?

How easy or difficult is it at present to talk about my feelings?

How easy or difficult is it at present to write about my feelings?

Should people keep their feelings to themselves, whether in talking or writing?

Am I looking forward to writing exercises to help me, or do I prefer to write at my own pace, without the prompts of writing exercises?

Sign and date the letter

When you have finished, please put your letter in the envelope at the very back of your ring binder and close it. It will stay closed until you will read the letter again at the last session of this group.

What is the purpose of these guidelines? They prompt the writers to imagine themselves as readers of their letter at a later date, when they will not be exactly the same as at the moment of writing. Two issues are addressed here. One is the possibility of dividing the 'Self' between writer and reader, thereby creating a space between them in which the letter contains externalised thoughts and feelings that can be examined repeatedly. The other is the notion of inevitable and undefined change over time.

One participant challenged this assumption immediately after reading the guidelines and I answered that there is always change, even if only physically, and that it is precisely the purpose of the study to discover if any change occurs beyond the growth of hair and renewal of cells.

The questions about the ease of expressing feelings are geared to discovering whether writing in the group has an effect on a basic tendency to disclose internal experience, and making a distinction between spoken and written expression. This is a question on which a 2006 meta-analysis on the usefulness of individual writing (mainly about traumatic stress) has not provided clear-cut answers (Frattaroli 860). Some studies show that such writing only benefits people who already find it easy to express their feelings and may even be harmful to those unaccustomed to expressing feelings (ibid. 824). Some found no difference in benefits (Lange et al. 84). Early studies observed that those who found it hard to express feelings benefitted more than those who found it easy, a finding contradicted by later research (Smyth and Pennebaker, "Right Recipe" 3). Different methods and study designs probably account for these opposing findings. The findings of the most recent study I know of, published in 2013, suggest that "for people who already tend to manage emotions through expression, expressive writing may be particularly beneficial in reducing anxiety. However, for those who are less expressive, written expressive disclosure may be contraindicated" (Niles et al. 15).

Considering that my study does not require participants to write about traumatic experiences (but they are free to do so if they choose), and considering too that they can share their expressions with a group instead of writing alone, without receiving feedback, the conditions for disclosure are different from those set up in EW studies. Including these questions in the private Letters to Self may not contribute much to the building of systematic knowledge, but will point writers' awareness to the underlying essence of writing, namely that it is an expression of what one has 'inside', and that one can choose what to reveal, how much of it and to whom. It is our inner voice that guides what we writes, driven by the way we think, feel and notice at the time and based on our language history (Pennebaker, *Secret Life* loc 4120).

The question '*Should people keep their feelings to themselves, whether in talking or writing?*' addresses a cultural norm influencing the choice of disclosure, with which the writers can compare their own tendency. Especially when participants come from different cultural backgrounds, as is the case in this study, it can prove illuminating on the individual and group-level.

The last question '*Am I looking forward to writing exercises to help me, or do I prefer to write at my own pace, without the prompts of writing exercises?*' reminds people that they have joined a structured writing group, built on exercises. At this point some participants admit to themselves that they are not so much looking forward to exercises, but possibly they are looking forward to other aspects of the group. 'Writing at my own pace' is given as an equivalent option to be aware of. When composing the next evaluation letter a writer may have changed her mind about this point one way or the other.

As a road sign on the journey of this chapter, I repeat the first part of Table 6.1 to mark the completion of the presentation of the baseline assessments.

Table 6.1.1 Baseline assessment instruments

Phase of study	Sequence
Start / baseline	Biographical and writing experience questionnaire
Start / baseline	My World and I Today (MWT) (1st)
Start / baseline	First letter to Self

The next sections describe the additional instruments used during and at the end of the group: the Verbal Group Evaluation, the comparison of the first two letters to self and private journaling.

6.3.5 Verbal group evaluation session

The second assessment of the longitudinal study, at the end of the group, three months from baseline and six months before follow up, informs us of what participants want to express about their writing group experiences and any personal impact they have noticed. In line with the distinction I make between immediate impact and sustained change –personal development in my definition – the evaluation at the end of the group will at best provide data on the effects from the short-time activity of a 12-session group. While this is interesting and necessary information in order to follow a developmental trajectory, the important information about which, if any, changes have been sustained for longer has to come from the follow up assessment. Figure III.5 is an attempt to highlight the place of the group and their assessments occupy in the course of participants' life.
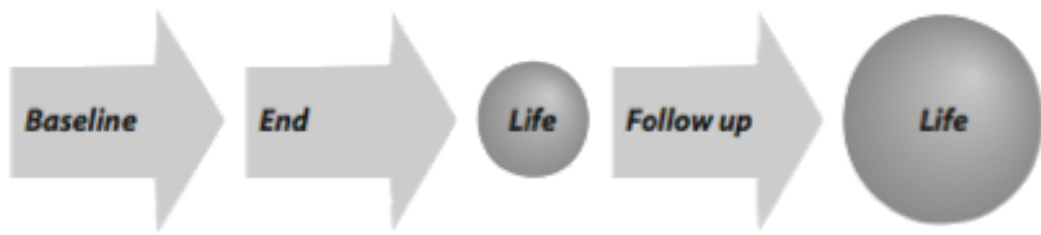
Fig. III.6.5 Longitudinal trajectory (leaving out 'Life before and during the group')

At the end of each group, to be precise at the eleventh session, the groups evaluated themselves in a focus-group-like manner. In preparation for this session I wrote a topic-guide, which largely corresponded to the guide for participants' second letter to self (see Section 6.3.6), to be written before the group evaluation. Writing their letter thus prepared participants for the topics to be evaluated in the group during the same week.

Topic Guide for Group Evaluation

1) *What was the group like for me?*
   a) *How and what did it contribute?*
   b) *How and what did it impede?*
   c) *How important or relevant was this group in my life?*

2) *What did I learn from:*
   My own writings
   Others' writings
   The group's discussions

3) *What kind of group is this?*
   Is it like any type of group I've participated in previously, for example a reading group, an art group, a club, a course, a class?

4) *If I had done the same writing exercises on my own, not in the group, how would it have been different?*

5) *Has the way in which I communicate with others been influenced by the group and if so, in which way?*
   a) *inside the group*
   b) *outside the group*

6) *Have my physical experiences been influenced by this group:*
   a) *breathing*
   b) *using my senses*

c) *posture, movement*

d) *handling discomfort and pain*

e) *expressive gestures, showing emotion*

7) *Did my goals change over the course of 12 sessions?*

8) *Did anything else besides my writing change and in which ways?*

9) *What happened to my writing skills?*

I facilitated this session by presenting each of the topics for open discussion. The proceedings were audio recorded with permission obtained ahead of time and again at the start of the session. Later I transcribed these recordings, adding as much non-verbal information as could be heard on them or that I had written down at the session. This includes for instance communicative gestures like pointing towards parts of one's body, as in "It wasn't just here (pointing to head), but went down to here (pointing to heart)." Other prosodic details like changes in tone, tempo and volume of speech that can indicate shifts in mood and meaning of the message conveyed were also included in the transcript notes.

I organised the transcribed text in two ways, providing two views of the evaluation process. One is according to topic: a section of all interactions on each discussion point, thus allowing a view on the group level. This includes, besides the contents, an overview of 'turn-taking': the number of people interacting on each topic, the order and length of the conversation. The second way is a grouping of individuals' utterances on all topics, separated from other people's utterances, which links to the personal trajectory. This enabled me to do a content analysis, resulting in categories comparable with my treatment of baseline and follow up.

Of the wealth of material described above, only the contents of the verbal group evaluation are analysed in this thesis. Yet the context in which they have been expressed, as shown through the data of the group evaluation process, serves as an important background of writing in a group, unlike solitary writing, studied under the label of Expressive Writing in the tradition of Pennebaker (as, for example, Smyth and Pennebaker review in the 2008 article "Right Recipe"). Since the context data do not relate directly to the main questions of the thesis I have not analysed them at this stage. They comprise a ready body of data that can inform future study. Important for the main question is, however, that group processes provided the possibility to reflect on one's writing and to discuss those reflections with others, leading to further reflection and reflexivity. Both reflection and reflexivity rely on internal comparison processes, crucial in noticing and evaluating change.

Section 5.2.1 introduces some approaches to clarifying the distinction between reflection and reflexivity, which both lead a person to discover whether their experience has changed. Like Bateson (*Mind and Nature* 74–75), Yigael argues that if everything is the same ('no news of difference') then no learning occurs; without a challenge to the brain there is no development. But were everything to be different, one would live in chaos, probably leading to mental shut-down, which allows no development either. We need interactions that we can make sense of between the known and the unknown, thus we need to compare, thus to reflect (Yigael, *Evolving Psyche* 24ff).

To perform the comparisons of reflection a person needs to be aware of a 'core-self' (Stern 71), a preverbal capacity of healthy infants, which form the foundation of the conscious 'Felt Sense' concept developed by Gendlin from 1978 onwards and explored in Nicholls's 2009 thesis *"Writing the Body: Ways in which creative writing can facilitate a felt, bodily sense of self"*.

'Comparison' as a core internal operation, is a part of my content coding category scheme for 'Internal Communication' (Fig. 6.2 above).

6.3.5.1 Analysis method of Verbal Group Evaluation

The content of group evaluation texts is analysed per person, like the baseline and follow-up texts, in consecutive stages as described in the earlier sections of this chapter, resulting in comparable longitudinally thematic categories.

The facilitator's utterances, which are included in the transcripts of the group discussions are taken into account in a way similar to prompts and questions of the initial questionnaire and follow up interview; in the rare instances where it was necessary, their wording has been 'cleaned' out of the responses from participants.

Answers to the informative topic 'What kind of group is this?' which are only indirectly relevant to personal development have been listed separately. Their purpose is to glean how participants 'label' the writing group, compared with the range of groups they have experienced before. A genuine question is behind this: 'structured writing group' is an unknown label that does not convey its meaning to potential participants. How can it be better publicised?

6.3.6 Self-Evaluation tools: Journaling, comparing MWT and Letters to Self

Writing personal journal entries[33] relating to each session was introduced as an extension of the letters to self, following the same rationale of keeping self-awareness and conscious learning alive during all twelve sessions. In the ring binders participants received for the course materials a section was reserved for this, pictured in Fig. III.6, with this invitation:

In this journal you are invited to quickly jot down your thoughts and feelings at the end of each session and also, if you wish, at home in connection to your writing.

Journaling is a personal activity. It is not intended for sharing. The writing in it does not have to be shaped or crafted in any particular form. Nobody else will be reading it!

What you write in this journal can be a reservoir of ideas for you to use in other writing later.

When you finish the 12 sessions and get to evaluate your experiences, the journal writings may assist you.
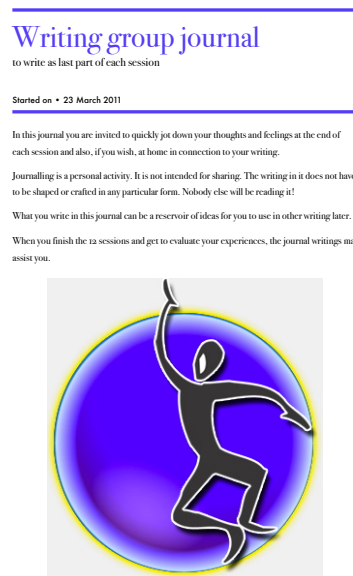
Fig. III.6.6 Instructions for personal journal

Towards the end of each session about five minutes were devoted to silently writing in these journals, in which people looked to be intensely absorbed. In the later verbal evaluations journal entries were often referred to, thereby proving their usefulness as intended.

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[33] Journaling is an intervention and therefore not included in the list of assessments in Table 6.1

At the end phase a second Letter to Self was written along the following guidelines:

Second Letter to myself

(To write just before the 12th (last) session of the writing group.)

Take your first letter to yourself out of the envelope in your ring-binder and read it again.

Now write a response to this letter, again just for yourself, about what has occurred during the time since you wrote the first letter in regards to your expectations, plans, goals, projects or anything else that you wrote about at the start of the group. The notes you made in your journal after each session may help you to remember!

If you write by hand, please use empty ruled A4 pages for your letter. If you write on the computer, please print out this second letter.

Greet yourself by name or by the pseudonym you chose for this study, or in any other way you see fit, like you would write a letter to someone else. You will read both letters again in six months' time, when we will have a follow-up meeting, and you will – again – not be exactly the same as you are at this moment.

Please respond to the following guiding questions, even if you did not make use of those given for the first letter. You can also write anything else you find important in connection to having participated in the writing group:

What have I achieved for myself in this group?

Which of my expectations upon starting the writing group have been fulfilled? Which have stayed unfulfilled? Has something changed in my life (for better or worse) that I did not expect?

How easy or difficult is it at present to talk about my feelings? Has this changed since before the group?

How easy or difficult is it at present to write about my feelings? Has this changed since before the group?

Should people keep their feelings to themselves, whether in talking or writing? Has your opinion on this changed since before the group?

> Did I enjoy the writing exercises, or do I prefer to write at my own pace, without those prompts?
>
> What was it like to be part of a group-process focused on writing?
>
> Sign and date the letter!
>
> When you have finished, please put both your letters in the envelope in your ring binder and close it. Keep them at least for 6 months, until our follow-up meeting.

A second My World and I Today drawing was invited at the end of the group, with the same instructions as the first.

After writing the second letter and creating their second MWT drawing, participants were asked to write what they had noticed by comparing their drawings of the start and end of the group helped by the contents of their two letters. This written comparison was made available for analysis.

6.3.6.1 Analysis method of self-evaluations

The textual components have been analysed for content as described above and the pictorial components according to the MWT categories presented earlier (Section 6.3.2.2).

At this stage discrepancies appeared of two kinds. Persons sometimes seemed to contradict themselves, like in: "I think I'm more confident in expressing views that I otherwise might have kept to myself, because of the group." And shortly after: "I think I am the same. My wife is always saying that I don't say a word in other people's company" [Ha/GE/Q5]. The person later explained that the first utterance referred only to his writing and the second to verbal expression.

The other discrepancy was when I had to bracket my impression of someone's experience, because it was understood in another way by the person, as evidenced in their text.

This concludes the presentation of the End of group assessment instruments shown in table 6.1.2 below.

Table 6.1.2. End of group assessments

Phase of study	Sequence
End / last session	My World and I Today (2nd)
End / last session	Self-comparison of 1st and 2nd letters and MWT drawings
End / last session	Sense of Coherence questionnaire (2nd)
End / last session	Verbal group Evaluation session

6.3.7 Follow-up interview

The individual follow-up interviews took place six month after the ending of each group and were conducted by an external interviewer. Their purpose was to provide an extensive review of the group experience, 'the very last words' regarding any trace the writing group may have left in participants' lives after half a year's passing.

As explained before (in 6.1), I deemed it more appropriate and useful for a person other than me to conduct these interviews. Any criticism that might be suppressed in talking with me could be voiced with more ease, even with the knowledge that I would hear and analyse the interviews afterwards. Speaking to an outsider, who had not taken part in the group, necessitated the explanation of personal reflections based on the group experience. Nothing could be taken as self-evident or known to the interviewer, who skillfully made use of this fact by questioning responses to elicit clarity. An example of such an exchange:

> *Interviewee*: Well, I could do a drawing of something I saw, say, a while ago and you may look at that drawing and think 'What's it about?' But if I wrote about it, it would be more explanatory. To explain more why I wrote that story and what happened. More the details behind it. Because some people don't understand visual language as well as – others.
>
> *Interviewer*: What's visual language? [Spr/FU/TC25]

The follow-up interview proved an intervention in its own right, by sparking reflective processes in interviewees, and also in me through collaboration with the experienced interviewer.

Participants brought their third 'batch' of assessments with them when they came to be interviewed, to wit: the third MWT drawing and SOC questionnaire. They had also

written their third Letter to Self, of which the guidelines prepared them for the topics of the interview.

The interviewer asked detailed questions around these topics, depending on the way the conversation went, but in essence she followed the same topic guide given here for the letter, with one addition: she specifically asked for possible disagreeable experiences and criticisms participants may have had during the group.

Third Letter to Myself

Write a third letter to yourself, relating to the following topics, beside anything else you want to write. This letter is for yourself only, and serves as a preparation for the follow-up interview you are about to give. At the same time it is a tool to follow the way you have gone with the writing group and for six months after it. After writing this third letter you may enjoy re- reading the first and the second letters you have written and review this 'road'. Of course you can also review your journal and other writings, or write without them, whatever is best for you.

The topics for this letter are:

 • The Writing Group was one of the many experiences of my life. What place do I give it among those many?

• Do I see myself differently after the writing group?

• Has my writing changed? Do I continue to write?

• Has anything else changed in me, in my life, that's to do with this group?

• Has anything changed in the way I (re)view my personal past, present and future?

 • Has anything changed in my behaviour, in dealing with life, in what I do or how I do things since the group?

6.3.7.1 Analysis method of follow-up interview

The interviews, which took between 30 minutes to 1 hour to complete, were content-

analysed by two coders, in the same way as the baseline texts of the biographical and writing experience questionnaire (Section 6.2), resulting in comparable overarching categories as defined in Table 6.2: Learning Levels, Coping, Sense of Coherence, Internal Communication, Interpersonal Communication, Telic Communication and Expectations. Regrettably it turned out that the level of operationalisation in my content analysis was not sufficient for the category 'Expectations' to yield indications of change.

Three additional categories, only relevant to follow-up assessments have been added: Group Experience, Group as Cause and No Change.

Table 6.8 shows the definitions and criteria for the inclusion of utterances in these categories (again structurally based on Mayring's example, 16)

Table 6.8 Definitions and criteria for the inclusion of utterances

Category	Definition	Examples from follow-up texts	Coding clues
Group Experience (GE)	Direct and indirect mentions of group activity	We did an exercise. It ended up as a communal poem. This became a bit of a joke in the group. I found it hard to understand what they're writing about, this stuff it's completely over my head.* It wasn't like a creative writing group I had been to before.	Expressions emphasising doing things together in the group, discussions, readings, laughter. GE is coded as Positive when it pleases the person; Negative when indicating a displeasing group experience; Neutral when personal 'value' could not be established from the text.
Group as Cause (GC)	Direct and indirect mentions of the writing group seen as the cause of a personal change.	The language has flowered a bit more, so that's been helpful, Writing about my brother was a bit of a breakthrough in that I felt it opened up that area in my mind which had been blocked,* It also caused backache, because I can't touch-type, so I'm looking down and everything.	Ascribing personal change to the group, by using words like: useful, helpful, I became more able to… Usually associated with the categories of Learning and Coping. GC is coded as positive when it pleases the person; Negative when indicating a displeasing development.
No Change (NC)	Direct statements that something has not changed,	I don't feel anything physical has changed in my behaviour. I've always been able to communicate with people, so I don't feel that's changed.	All expressions indicating that (parts of) experience are the same as they were before the group. Can be associated with SOC, strongly held beliefs, values and habits, but also with high baseline level, e.g. of writing skill.

These 'difference-categories', appearing only in the final assessment, required a separate analysis.

I need to specify the comparability, mentioned above, of the categories that appear both in the follow-up and the baseline coding. To identify personal development it is crucial to distinguish between baseline and follow-up levels of learning and coping. Very close reading of the follow-up texts had to separate a person's abilities already present at baseline being mentioned again from any newly learned ones, ascribed as 'caused' by the writing group. In the same way a distinction was made between baseline expressions of SOC, the world views held before the group, and any new or changed views after, and regarded by the person as inspired by the group.

The category of 'expectations' includes in the baseline mainly personal goals for life or, sometimes, the group, for example

"Originally I hoped it would make me rich and famous, but this never happened"

[Tez/base/38]

"I would like to think it will help my writing" [Ail/base/44].

Expectations in the follow-up were sometimes implicit, sometimes couched in surprises, as in

"*funnily enough, the difference between writing in first and third person is very powerful*" [Dvo/FU/33];

"*Poetry wasn't as bad as I thought...*" [Ver/FU/51].

And sometimes straightforward but vaguely so, as:

"*hopefully – my future will produce some meaningful writing*". [Barb/FU/83]

Other times FU texts revealed baseline expectations that were not expressed at the time like:

"*I always had a hankering to write a book, so that was the idea of going to the group in the first place*". [Barb/FU/7–8]

Identifying such distinctions, often from context as much as from 'surface' text, separating the new from the old, enabled links between writing group experiences and any new developments to become visible.

Follow-up categories were organised in table form per person, allowing to compare the content data of the three assessment moments, showing personal trajectories. Graphic visualisations illuminate elements in these comparisons and open a view on trends across the participants.

All follow-up measures have now been presented.

Table 6.1.3 Follow-up assessment instruments

Phase of study	Sequence
Follow up 6 month after	Third letter to self
Follow up 6 month after	My World and I Today
Follow up 6 month after	Sense of Coherence questionnaire (3ʳᵈ time)
Follow up 6 month after	Individual follow up interview

6.3.8 Session's last words: group affective themes

As a closing ritual of each session participants wrote anonymously, in one or two words on a slip of paper, how they were feeling at that moment. These words of 'feeling' can be of a physical (cold, hungry, tired) or an emotional (excited, inspired, irritated) nature.

I collected these 'last words' with the aim of preparing a compact example of the effect a writing group has on awareness, and have grouped the themes that came out from the four groups. These serve mainly to illustrate the effects the groups have on atmosphere and feeling tone as expressed by participants. Since the words were written anonymously these data cannot be part of personal trajectories. They show an 'affective picture' over time, compiled from all sessions of all groups taking part in this study.

Table 6.9 shows a thematic grouping of these words, in order from most to least frequently appearing themes.

Table 6.9 Themes in Sessions' Last Words, condensed from 329 words

Energy	excitation, vitality, energizing
Ease	relaxation, comfort , calm
Tension	unease, tense, discomfort
Enjoyment	joy, pleasure, happy, fun
Connection	connected, sociable, supported, encouraged
Difference	note difference, otherness, change(d)
None	no category, not a feeling as such

6.4 Summary

This chapter presented the participants and the empirical methods of my study. It described the background features of the twenty people that took part in four writing groups. It explained data collection, assessment instruments and the methods used to analyse the data.

This being a longitudinal study, data collection took place at three moments over a period of nine months: Baseline (start of group), End of group (after twelve weekly sessions) and Follow-up (six months later).

Two qualitative and one quantitative assessment instruments served a mixed-method approach. Instruments included the textual biographical and writing experience questionnaire, the verbal group evaluation session, and individual follow-up interview, the pictorial 'my world and I today' (MWT), and the standardised sense of coherence questionnaire (SOC). Self-evaluation measures like 'letters to self' and journaling were additional instruments, which simultaneously functioned as interventions during the group process.

Methods of analysis were content analysis of written and spoken texts, categorizing, evaluating and coding of the visual elements of the MWT drawings, and numerical scoring of the SOC questionnaire.

The ethical position entailed by the double role of practitioner and researcher has been pointed out. Strict ethical boundaries directed my conduct in designing and carrying out the study respecting the mental, physical and social integrity of the participants.

I have attempted to report my methods in a manner detailed enough to enable their replication in future studies. Although groups will never be identical in their features, it may make it easier to accumulate findings from studies that share methods. The study of writing groups could certainly benefit from an accepted way of examining concepts and processes relevant to potential benefits of their medium, and I hope this thesis contributes to finding such a way.

Chapter 7 will present the separate findings of each assessment method and combines those findings to gain a multifaceted perspective on personal development through structured writing in the groups studied here.

> The only true voyage, the only fountain of Eternal Youth, would be not to visit strange lands but to possess other eyes, to behold the universe through the eyes of another, of a hundred others, to behold the hundred universes that each of them beholds, that each of them is.
>
> Marcel Proust, The Captive.

CHAPTER 7 – FINDINGS

Prelude

> Will we have cake for desert? Will it have currants and cream, please, please
> say yes.
>
> We'll have to wait and see, my child. I've followed my own recipe, and for
> now it is still a-baking.

7.1 Introduction to findings

Do structured writing groups engender personal development in non-clinical adults–
This is the research question the findings in this chapter relate to. I aimed to find out if,
with the assessment methods of this study, signs of people's beneficial changes in the
context of their lives could be observed, after they had engaged for a limited period in a
group writing activity.

Change over time can only be assessed longitudinally, thus I present the findings
resulting from three assessment moments: Baseline, End of group and Follow-up,
spanning a period of nine months: three months of group activity and six months of 'just
life' until the follow up.

My primary interest is in the development of individuals, compared to their own
baselines and as evaluated in their own words and behaviours, framed by the
methodology of symbolic interactionism (see Section 5.2.2) and going by the premise that
people's behaviour is determined by their interpretation of events and experiences.

In reading the presentation of the findings it is of the essence not to lose sight of the
individual focus of the study, especially where themes are foregrounded. Interspersed
case vignettes are used with the intention of bringing individual participants back to
mind.

To present the findings concisely, the chapter leads up to a 'mixed-method' conclusion
bringing together, in the form of a thematic review across participants, the different
analyses conducted in my study and the multiple case studies of all twenty participants.
In this way I hope to make inferences from individual trajectories to general trends. Such
extrapolation may inform the future uses of structured writing in various contexts, such
as adult education, health and social support groups.

Section 7.2.5 focusses on links between the group aspects and personal development, to
highlight the features specific to writing in a group and to distinguish them from
individual writing as studied in 'expressive writing' research (e.g. Smyth and
Pennebaker, "Right Recipe"). To my knowledge the specific influence of structured
group writing has not until now been systematically and longitudinally researched.

The story in this chapter travels back and forth between the personal and the group. Findings are grounded in three different bodies of data, as explained in Chapter 6, augmented with my own observations and analysis as a practitioner-researcher. Case vignettes illustrate the findings with the hope of bringing participants to life from disembodied data. [34]

The choices made in presenting only certain aspects of the potentially bewildering complex of data are driven by two considerations. The first is my theoretical stance, operationalised to investigate only such constructs as I have assumed to be indicative of personal development. The second is the constraint of time and other resources, which reduced the work to analysis of only part of the data, leaving me with a substantial further task for the future. This concerns in particular the body of data formed by the writings done in response to exercises in the groups. For these reasons, here I offer a partial story to the best of my ability, with acute awareness of its lacunae.

Appendix E presents one case to demonstrate how the full range of analytical tools resulted in the findings, Appendix F contains short summaries of 14 individual trajectories, those not used in the chapter as illustrations. [35]

In a study of such a complex system as personal development in a group context, data gathered by my instruments are unequal to the task of showing the rich workings of overlapping and intersecting layers of people's experiences through time. Therefore I add information that cannot be obtained from the bare data presented: impressions, even post-factum learned facts, which I derived in my role as practitioner-researcher, as a participant in 24 hours of group interaction with each of the persons, and as the reader of their writings during an intensive period of 12 weeks.

> The paradox is that we can never know the world without a map, nor definitively represent it with one.
>
> Jerry Brotton

To understand the meaning of the findings beyond their plain reporting, I've matched the terms of my definition of personal development with the names of the categories used in the analyses. This reductively translates the detailed analysis to a concise developmental trajectory for each participant. By visualising the terms of my definition I gained an abstracted overview of all findings for an individual, which in a glance tells me

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[34] Participants are identified by their self-chosen pseudonyms for this study. I have not questioned their choice of pseudonyms, although some of them arouse curiosity. My therapist part assumes pseudonyms reflect something of the self, but I have excluded my 'psychodynamic interpretations' from this study.

[35] The appendices are long, but I recommend them for giving insight into the compacted findings of this chapter.

about the behavioural change that person had sustained by Follow-up (FU), and the relation between a change towards more flexibility and a person's stable sense of self. The key for this translation of the combined outcomes of my mixed assessment methods is depicted in Figure III.7.1 and is revisited towards the end of the chapter as Fig. III.7.1.1 showing the direction of content analysis findings.
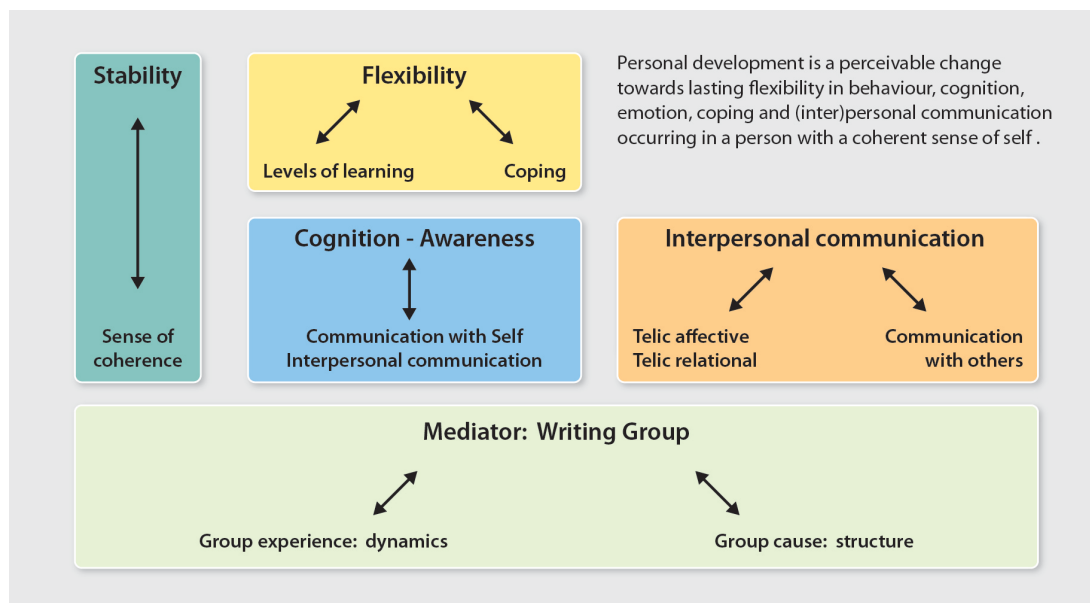
Figure III.7.1 The elements of personal development in structured writing groups

In this figure the conceptual constructs making up my definition of personal development feature as titles of coloured shapes. The shapes represent the operationalisations of each construct, described in Chapter 6. The figure functions as a tool to simplify reading developmental trajectories found by applying the coding schemes to participants' verbal and non-verbal behaviours.

Flexibility includes the categories of Levels of Learning and Coping; and Stability relates to expressions of sense of coherence, as measured in content analysis of texts and in the SOC questionnaire (Antonovsky, *Mystery of Health*). These are the two elements that need to balance each other for development to be beneficial.

Cognition–Awareness is assessed by expressions of communication with self, and interpersonal communication by the two categories of 'telic' (affective) and 'communication with others'. The three forms of communication can be found in written and spoken texts.

The role of the writing group in mediating any changes over time in any of the above elements is differentiated between 'group cause' (GC) and 'group experience' (GE). To what extent participants ascribe any changes to GC or GE or both is the essential answer

to my research question.

Content analysis of the explicit linking of any experiences of personal development with these two aspects of the group activity made visible the relative importance to participants of group experience and group cause. While GC and GE are certainly overlapping, the coding of utterances has followed this distinction:

'Group cause' includes mentions of the structure of the groups' assignments, exercises, program and facilitation. They refer to those elements specific for a structured writing group (see Chapter 4), to which participants ascribe new learning, coping and change of world views (SOC).

'Group experience' contains mentions of the group's atmosphere and its relational aspects.

The purpose of this focus is to investigate whether structured group writing can give rise to development that lasts beyond the salutary effect that has been shown for individual expressive writing in prior studies under laboratory conditions for people with specific clinical conditions (Smyth and Pennebaker, "Right Recipe"). Questions 3 and 4 in the end-of-group evaluation try to tease apart individual and group writing conditions by asking: 'If you had done the same writing exercises on your own, not in the group, how would it have been different?' And: 'What kind of group is this? Is it like any type of group you have participated in previously, for example a reading group, an art group, a club, a course, a class'? Responses to question 3 are set out in Section 7.2.5.

After separate analysis of the three assessment instruments I have grouped the status of my twenty participants at End and Follow-up as four development ranges: high, moderate, low and no. The 'developer groups' serve analytical convenience, to give an easy overview by ranking the 'scores' of each person in relation to their starting point. Again I want to emphasise that only the personal development of each participant in relation to his or her own baseline is meant here. What may appear as a 'low' ranking in this group view may in fact represent a major step in an individual's development.

The difference between the content analysis scores for each of the assessment moments (Base, End and FU) formed the basis of the End and FU 'developer' groups below. Added to these score-rankings of the content analysis were the differences appearing in the My World Today and Sense of Coherence questionnaire scores between End and FU. In combining the outcomes of the three methods, content analysis intentionally carries the most weight for reasons explained in Section 7.1.2.

At End there are 8 High, 8 Moderate, 3 Low and 1 No developers[36]

At FU there are 6 High, 9 Moderate, 4 Low and 1 No 'developers'.

The fact that there is a difference between participants' ranges at End and at Follow-up underscores the importance of the longitudinal design. People's immediate self-evaluations at the end of the group differ from what they express and are aware of having sustained six months afterwards. The direction of this difference is not uniform. Three participants show high benefit at End and have dropped to moderate at FU, for three it is the other way round, from moderate at End to high at FU, and three went from moderate at End to low at FU[37], two from low at End to moderate FU. Unchanged was the position of nine participants – four at the high end of the scale, three at the moderate, and two at the lower end. The rank order of eleven participants has 'moved' up or down between these two assessment times.

7.1.1 Sample population baseline features

Table 7.a gives the baseline demographic characteristics of the study's sample. The divisions for age and education conform to the actual ages and years of schooling present in the sample, showing the minimum age (= 37) and maximum age (= 78), and for education minimum 10 to maximum 22 years.

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[36] One participant was absent during both End and FU evaluations, but stated firmly in writing that nothing had changed for her.

[37] One participant was absent during both End and FU evaluations, but stated firmly in writing that nothing had changed for her.

Table 7a. Demographic characteristics of the study's sample

GENDER	Group 1 (n=5)	Group 2 (n=6)	Group 3 (n=5)	Group 4 (n=4)
Male	1	1	0	1
Female	4	5	5	3
COUNTRY OF ORIGIN				
UK – Yorkshire	4	5	3	2
UK – northern counties	1		1	
UK – southern counties		1		1
India – Punjab				1
The Netherlands			1	
MOTHER TONGUE				
English	5	6	4	3
Punjabi				1
Dutch			1	
AGE (years)				
37- 43	1	1	0	1
55 - 62	2	3	5	3
71 - 78	2	2	0	0
EDUCATION (years)				
10 -12	1	4	0	0
13 - 17	3	2	3	3
18 - 22	1	0	2	1
PERSONAL STATUS				
lives alone	3	1	3	0
lives with partner	1	4	2	2
alone with family members	1	1	0	2
OCCUPATION				
Works full or part time	3	4	4	2
Retired + volunteering	1	2	1	1
Retired + active (hobbies)	1	0	0	0
unemployed + active	0	0	0	1

7.1.2 The different nature of the three assessment instruments

It is important to keep in mind how the three assessment instruments differ from each other, before I present their findings. Analysis of the content of spoken and written text provides verbal self-report, a predominantly conscious form of social expression.

The closed sense of coherence (SOC) questionnaire also elicits self-report consisting of the choices between a set of fixed responses in the form of a number. Making these choices may seem to be a conscious activity, yet the constraint from the particular wording of the questionnaire forces responders into a standardised framework, the meaning of which is unknown to them. The administered sheet of the SOC questionnaire is neutrally titled Orientation to Life Questionnaire (Antonovsky, *Mystery of Health*).

My World and I Today (MWT) is a behavioural measure, predominantly non-verbal, although text labels and explanations appear with the drawings. The MWT starts with a pictorial task and elicits creations in a form of expression unusual in social discourse, and presumably not as conscious as those requiring the formation of words.

Another difference between these assessment instruments is that the content analysis of texts used here came from responses to questions directly relating to the writing group experience and its possible influence on other aspects of life. In contrast, the SOC questionnaire and the MWT drawings had the wide focus of orientation to one's own life in general, unrelated to the writing group. When comparing the findings from these three disparate instruments any causal links between the writing group and personal development can be seen through Content Analysis only, endowing it with greater relevance to my research question.

Critics of self-report measures will not be satisfied, but true to the methodological underpinnings of Symbolic Interactionism my study values self-report, especially when grounded in behavioural examples. Thus the weight of CA in the final ranking by all three methods is much higher than that of MWT and SOC combined. Technically this is a result of CA's purely numerical scores adding up to higher totals.

Theoretical justification for endowing them with higher importance is that Content Analysis findings, although based on self-report, relate to the period between End and FU, giving substance to a longitudinal process of development and its direct links to sustained behavioural options and to the group as mediator. The qualitative utterances from which the numerical scores were derived exemplify why content analysis is the main assessment instrument of the study, as is illustrated by quotes throughout the chapter.

My world today, in contrast, is a series of three snapshots, the relation of which through time cannot really be established. It plays an explorative and supportive role in this study, by showing whether any resemblance exists between the non-verbal creations and the content analysis and sense of coherence trajectories of each person. My findings attest

to unevenness in the relation of my world today to both content analysis and sense of coherence scores.

Sense of coherence likewise shows three separate scores, which is explained by underlying theory as representing a fluctuation around the personal average of a very stable characteristic (Antonovsky, *Mystery of Health*, 124). And also based on research (Coe et al. 274; Nilsson et al.; Lövheim et al.). Based on such previous studies, sense of coherence scores are expected to change little if at all in a nine-month period of an adult's life. Hence they function as a yardstick for sustained change in this study. Content analysis findings bring to light that the mediating process of the structured writing group is associated with a significant, modest, change in sense of coherence scores for the sample as a whole.

A fourth, hitherto only hinted at, assessment instrument is my 'intuition' grounded in professional knowledge, experience and conscientious reflexivity, documented in the study's logbook. By means of this intuition I have added impressions and organised the data in ways that make sense to me. Where I thought it important to point out that my impressions differ from participants' own evaluations I have done so. The premise of the study however is, that only what participants learned and have integrated in their behaviour stays with them. My ideas and understandings are mine only and contribute to my personal development.

7.2. Content analysis findings

To examine content analysis findings I determined the sum score of each category in proportion to the total number of units of analysis per person. The summary below is organised by the elements of the definition of personal development to which the categories belong, as visualised in Figure. III.7.1.

In the content analysis at End and FU, from the six categories comprising the definition of personal development 'levels of learning and 'coping' together are taken to represent flexibility: the acquisition of more behavioural options compared to baseline. Sense of coherence represents expressions of the sense of self.[38] Telic and interpersonal communication represent the expression of affective and social interaction, intrapersonal communication represents awareness and cognition. Mentions of group cause and group experience were coded as the two mediating categories. They indicate their relevance to the participant in connection with the six categories listed above. Separate mention is made of structured exercises, expectations and 'no change' (in Sections 7.2.6–7.2.8), which are not part of the definition of personal development.

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[38] The SOC category in the Content Analysis (SOC/CA) differs from the SOC questionnaire (SOC-Q). In CA spontaneous utterances are coded in the words of the participants.

7.2.1 Flexibility

'Level of Learning' (LL) indicates increased understanding, which enables people to consistently choose their behaviour from a set of options larger than before. 'Coping' (Cop) indicates the increase of specific, concrete, incidences of dealing with situations that were associated with tension or difficulty before. New LL and Cop mentions appear unlinked or linked to their perceived 'group cause'.

To discover the extent to which flexibility has increased and any such increase was attributed to the writing group I computed the proportion of the combined LL and Cop scores linked to Group Cause, compared to the total number of LL and Cop utterances per person at each assessment time.

Flexibility in general, whether or not linked to Group Cause, is abundantly represented in the utterances of all participants at End of group, while scores at FU have dropped to lower levels for 14 and risen for 5 participants. All over, flexibility has risen for all participants, but not all of this gain was sustained six months later. This means that at the End evaluation, people strongly remembered what they learned during the group, but that some of these learnings had faded from memory, and possibly from behaviour, by Follow-up. Group Experience turned out to be linked mainly with Telic and Interpersonal Communication, and hardly at all with LL and Cop, although it was often mentioned as the context for the safe atmosphere that enabled learning in general.

Here I introduce the first of the case illustrations that accompany the findings in each section of this chapter. The following vignette of Dvora can be compared and contrasted with Elisheva's story on a different direction of developmental trajectory (in Appendix F).

Dvora's is a story of increased integration of flexibility ascribed by her to the writing group. She moved up from the moderate to the high developers' group between End and FU.

Meet Dvora

Dvora, 63, lives alone and is the mother of two adult daughters. She is British born and has 13 years of formal education. She is a self-employed financial advisor, specialised in coaching women after divorce or widowhood.

A vivacious presence, looking younger than her age, blond curls framing an expressive face, came into the group. Towards the end of the group she had started to suffer from a lung condition that seriously depressed not only her breathing, but her spirits and looks as well. At group's end she needed to make disconcerting choices about medical treatment, which she had been trying to avoid.

In her baseline responses she stated that outside of formal education she had learned

Flexibility triumphs.

Say Sorry when you are.

How to listen and how to say no when you want to. [Dvo /base /1–4]

Her use of the term 'flexibility' of course attracted my attention from the start. I was interested to find out whether her meaning for this word would correspond with the one I use in the definition of personal development. My findings confirm that Dvora's course illustrates that she has made good use of the writing group with her pre-existing belief in flexibility. Her own words convincingly tell of added levels of learning, which she consolidated from End to Follow-up. When, for instance, at End she mentions in a general way having learned from the Point of View exercise, at FU she specifies it:

'Point of view' was that early on what we did? Yea, I learned a lot from that particular lesson. [Dvo End 15]

I think that it taught me to look at things from different ways. It taught me the difference of knowing how you see something, if you're a spectator or a participant. Although I knew that, it brought a lot of things I knew together. [Dvo FU 30–32]

She discovered new forms of writing to cope with emotions:

I've learned that, by writing things down – I've made lists in my life, endless lists – but writing down in a poem or something is so unusual, so different to anything I've done – that was very therapeutic – I was able to deal with emotional stuff, you know. [Dvo End 29]

...when she does things and we all get a bit aggressive sometimes, so I don't, whereas I did, and I thought, well, at one time I would have fought back while now I sort of play it back. Like it is a story. Like I'm sitting somewhere else. [Dvo FU 181–3]

I do have the ability now to turn things into writing. That's something new to me to use this experience. So from that point of view it was very powerful – not massive – well yeah, it was massive, if it gives me a skill that I didn't have before. [Dvo FU 201–203]

To a great extent she ascribes her learning to the group's programme (GC), while she credits Group Experience mostly for making the group an especially enjoyable time:

When you look back at things you see things differently, so this three months in time is set aside in my head as a special time, because it involved us all in a way that I've never been involved with anybody before writing – so that made it very special to me, and I discovered things about myself and about other people, which again was fascinating – so for me this three months is like a little cameo in my life, that I sometimes look back on and I think 'oh, that was lovely' and I wouldn't have wanted any other people (...) Yes, it's the right people. Yes, it's the right balance. [Dvo End 3]

At FU Dvora tells how she integrated her learning and expects this process to continue. The following quote also illustrates how the follow-up interview is an intervention in itself.

If I change, and it's always subtle, not a massive experience, – so changes are subtle and it's almost difficult to see – when you're pushing down on yourself gently, gently, gently, it's more difficult to see where the boundary started and stopped. You are suddenly there where you are. I use those devices and those things that I learned.

After this conversation I should go back and think about it on the bus and I'll think about what you said and what I said and that will change again, won't it? [Dvo FU 177]

I felt, thinking about it now, I did wonder, when somebody says they're doing a PhD in personal development through structured writing courses, how come? So therefore, because of the way I learn and because of the way I've thought, that week on week I took things in and it became me, I suppose that's what it is. You learn – it's not like you start here, as I say, every experience is pushing up your knowledge, so after the first week everything I'd learned became me again. So then the second week was 'me' plus that week, and so I wondered how you could do that. And I suppose, after this conversation yes, it works like that.

Because how can you develop in the ten or so weeks? How can you do it in twelve ? it's a short measure of time. A couple of hours. How can you do that? And yet, obviously it does. [Dvo FU 223–227]

7.2.2 Awareness / cognition

Awareness, represented by Intrapersonal Communication (InC) in my data, appears to be a fairly stable feature of participants' speech, and much less expressed in writing. While writing may reflect only the conclusions of internal processes like thinking and debating with oneself, the verbal question-and-answer frame of the evaluations elicits 'thinking aloud' while composing answers. This was most prominent at the group evaluation at End, where the discourse went in directions persons could not have prepared for. At the one-on-one follow-up interview InC scores for most people were lower than at End, possibly because they had thought about their responses to the questions before, prompted to do so by the themes for writing the third letter to themselves. A few notable exceptions may indicate that for participants who at baseline were less accustomed to conscious deliberations, intrapersonal communication was activated by journaling and verbal reporting of their writing and group experiences during the period of the study. At FU Harry, for instance, had proportionally more than five times as many utterances coded as InC than at the group evaluation at End, without apparently being aware of this:

Do you consider the way you address yourself in your inner dialogue as changed in any way?

Harry: Where?

You know your internal dialogue, that voice that talks to you and you talk to it.

Harry: No I don't.

Is it something you're familiar with, an inner voice?

Harry: I don't think about it, but now that you mention it I suppose that there is one there. It's the thing that stops you from making comments that are inappropriate and that's all – An inner voice chatting. [Harry–FU 57–59]

Another example is of Trudi who replied in surprise:

> I think I'm getting nicer to myself I think I might be a bit nicer to myself. [Trudi-FU 110]

Concluding the findings of the 'awareness category', for 14 participants this has not shown to be an indicator of personal development because it was relatively stable across time, spiking at End and then at FU returning to a level similar to Base. For 6 people an increase was notable from Base to Follow-up, presumably prompted by the writing group's activities that emphasised conscious awareness through journaling, discussions and verbalisation of experiences.

Now is a good time to meet Harry, quoted above as he was being prompted to acknowledge his internal voice, and to consider him a little more in relation to the category of Awareness. His is a story of disbelief in the possibility of change at his age, which can be contrasted with the story of Rita's intense awareness of an inner voice (Appendix F).

Meet Harry

Harry is a youngish looking man of 71, the sole male participant of his group. A father and grandfather, born in Manchester, living with his wife. Harry has 13 years of formal education and names chartered accountancy as his profession. An experienced writer with a strong preference for fiction, he is the group's skeptic, doubting that development is possible and strongly denying that elements of fictional stories may have a connection with the 'real' life of the author. Like a benevolent gentleman he encouraged the less experienced lady writers, trying his best not to be condescending.

He completed the baseline questionnaire in single words, or short sentences that became longer as he proceeded, like in the following quotes (bracketed text is part of the question, not his words):

(I learned) Social skills; Fatherhood (had a big impact on my life). [Har-S base 1+2]

I have been a member of a creative writing group for eleven years. The experience has given me confidence and enhanced my range of writing skills. [Har-S base 8–10]

Harry's path seen through quotes of his words at each of the three assessed stages:

Baseline quote

I don't enjoy writing about myself, I much prefer to write fiction. [Har S-base 15]

End quotes

I don't know if I have developed during the course of this group at all. [Har End 13]

I wasn't conscious of my goals changing at all, but when I opened my envelope and read what I said to myself 3 months ago, I was completely wrong as to what I thought they were. When I looked back through the papers of the course, I said I wanted to write fiction that is interesting to people, but it wasn't one of the goals that I set myself at the beginning of the course. So, I think my goals have changed, but not consciously and not deliberately. [Har End 28]

Follow-up quotes:

I don't know whether the fact that I'm writing in the 3rd person means I'm – less willing to – reveal or explore things. [Har-FU-48]

I think I'm at an age where you don't find a great deal to change. [Har- FU-units 42]

Harry's interpersonal communication (IpC), which increased with time, may be of interest, set off against his wife's opinion: "my wife is always saying that I don't say a word in other people's company" [Har End 22]. There are also more affective expressions (Telic) from base to FU, the kind of things he repeatedly says that he is not prone to feeling, let alone expressing: "I always find it difficult to express feelings." [Har End 45]

Harry ascribes IpC and Telic to Group Cause or Group Experience modestly at End and less so at FU. If he is usually as taciturn as his wife says, then his communication with and about others in and after the group is an observable change he did not acknowledge.

To sum up Harry's trajectory via the separate assessment instruments, I conclude that in his verbal responses he attempts to adhere to the belief of not changing, while still enjoying the group experience, and especially the group's appreciation of his writing. Any learning and coping that may have occurred he acknowledged in passing only, thus mostly at End, when they were still fresh. His three my world today drawings also show his liveliest drawing at the End phase, and almost a return to Base in the third drawing, with minor adjustments that look beneficial in his life. That his sense of coherence score has risen a little, but not above the possible range of normal fluctuations in life, supports Harry's evaluation of not having changed. The verbal, the pictorial and the numerical findings all show that his sense of self has stayed as it was, supported by the same definitive view of the world. Many areas of his life have not changed. Following my definition of personal development Harry has not developed in his own evaluation.

I really don't think I have changed at all through the writing group.
[Harry FU units 62]

7.2.3 Sense of coherence in content analysis

Utterances coded as Sense of Coherence spontaneously represent qualities of the sense of self in the speaker's own words, unlike the set formulations in the standardised SOC questionnaire. These are expressions of beliefs about oneself and about the world, on what life is like, the 'status quo', habits of thought and behaviour. Things that make life comprehensible, manageable and meaningful, showing a person's stability over time, a sense of identity. In other words these express all things considered to be stable, long-standing, giving structure and support. They are often in the form of general self-descriptions like 'being the kind of person that I am, I always ...', ' I told you I was a thinker'.

My findings document great variations in content and in quantity of SOC utterances at the three assessment moments. Most new SOCs are expressed at FU, possibly as a result of the interview context.

Only the findings at FU can indicate a sustained change. SOC is only counted at End and FU when a person expresses a new or revised belief about self and life. Any SOCs expressed at End or FU about pre-existing beliefs are not counted, but coded as baseline,

even if they did not appear in the baseline questionnaire.[39] When asked, for example, if their speaking skills had changed during or after the group some answered amused by saying: 'No, I've always been a pretty good speaker'.

In understanding this category there is no advantage to be gained by analysis of numerical data, because it does not matter if a new belief is stated once or ten times. Content Analysis SOC findings can only be understood qualitatively, by comparing the actual utterances of each person at all three assessment moments.

Ailsa's story illustrates development of increased flexibility combined with a strengthening of her sense of self. It can be contrasted with Shari, who had no words in her repertoire to express abstract things like world views and beliefs (Appendix F).

Meet Ailsa

Ailsa (59), mother to two adult daughters, lived with her husband when she started the group and at the time of follow-up had moved away, trying to decide where and with whom to live. Formerly a highly regarded Sussex-born poet, recently unemployed in Yorkshire and worried about that. She has 17 years of formal education. Besides writing she dances flamenco, plays music, keeps house and considers herself an observer, 'a bit out of joint with the times' [Ailsa MWT 1]. Trying to make sense of her place in the world is a major occupation for her at the time of the group, one for which she has used writing as a tool before. Self-awareness, reflection and bafflement alternated in her effusive verbal expressions. She was a very lively and thought provoking presence. Her expectation of the group was to 'rekindle' the poetry in her.

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[39] Baseline SOC codes detected at End and FU are kept apart and not added to the original baseline codes.

Ailsa's content analysis shows much new learning, and new or revised SOC at End, of which much is sustained and integrated at FU. She attributed slightly more of these increases to Group Cause than Group Experience, but still the group's composition and dynamic are emphasised and highly valued by her. Three areas of her life have not changed she says: writing skills, thinking skills and her view of the past. Her high baseline level of awareness by communicating with herself (InC), which she calls 'thinking too much', has been maintained throughout, and so have her interpersonal communications. A selection of what she said at End and FU may give a taste of how she saw her journey through the group as it challenged her habits of mind, (Mezirow, *Perspective*) expressed as SOCs by writing differently.

I think that with a course like this it's only towards the end that you begin to see the value of it. Because at first I was very caught up with trying to be 'answering the assignments in the right way', do what was required, and in some respects I rebelled internally and I thought ' What use is this' and I'm gonna do it because I've decided to do the course and I'm sure C has got something to offer us, but it was a bit peculiar, because I'd never written in this way. And I think that this course is – the value of it is more than the sum of the parts. And it's by the time you get to this sort of point or perhaps the last couple of weeks, towards the end, that you actually see that there has been some sort of change, some sort of alteration, in one's relationships and one's world and perhaps other people, that you hadn't actually realised what was going on at all [Ailsa End 28]

The goal I had set before was to tap into the place where poems come from and write more. And I'm sure I will write more, but that had a tight feeling about it and that seems to have melted away. 'Maybe I'll write them maybe I won't'. In the meantime I shall be myself and that will be the best thing of all. I'm not saying that I've come to that just by doing this course. It's partly a sort of life-process that's been happening for me, to which this course has definitely contributed, sort of focussed. [Ailsa End 43]

It's as if we got to know a bit about each other's essences. We don't necessarily know how many children you've got, I don't even know things like whether you're married, got partners, or working, and that sort of thing. But there is something that we know about each other that is more important than that. I can't think of another word except sort of 'essence', the essence of each other. [Ailsa End 45]

That exercise we did, where we wrote a poem and you asked us to breathe and feel the pulse of our bodies and our being and write each line in tune with that. That's something that I kind of knew about doing in the past, but I didn't actually specifically do, and I think it's terrific. The power of the 'now', that actually brings that really alive for me. The pulse, concentrating on that pulse. And that has influenced, changed my writing. Will add to my writing, I should say. [Ailsa End 46–47]

I think one of the things that the writing course gave me was to remind me of what's important to me. But I could see that I was hiding behind my roles as mother and wife and homemaker. And I think the course helped me to see that. Doing the early assignments made me realise what a close connection I can have with myself when I'm writing. It's in my head but I's getting down to the body, so like a dialogue between me and my world. [Ailsa FU 20–23]

I remember writing in the journal of making the discovery during about halfway through the course, because this course was geared towards opening up a kind of pathway into yourself, I realised that there were certain things that I don't need to tell people. It was enough that I understood. That was quite a liberating thing. It didn't mean that I could stop being open or kind, but that I had choices about what I held back and what I gave out. [Ailsa FU 35–38]

I suppose my inner world has become stronger, so it feels OK to be in it to experience it for myself, so that when I'm with somebody else I come out of it, join them halfway, rather than communicate with them from right in the centre of my inner world. [Ailsa FU 50–51]

The group was really - the course looks at the person, each person in the group, and says 'Who are you–' [Ailsa FU 114]

Ailsa saw herself as a person who thought too much, who was too rigid:

I've always been very consciously concerned with being responsible and doing the right thing by my family and my daughters and my husband. [Ailsa FU 19]

She entered the group at a stage in her life where she was already starting to free herself of this frame and in the group this process may have been speeded up.

It's hearing how other people responded to the assignments, how they dealt with them, not just what they wrote, but what they made of the assignments, that was interesting, partly because it helped me to see that my own way is perhaps a bit rigid, my interpretation, and therefore it sort of enabled other ways of doing things. Or the possibility of not being so rigid. [Ailsa End 22–23]

What struck me when I wrote this letter to myself was that I had said in the first letter that I'd noticed that I was inclined to be rather rigid and I wrote in the third letter that rigidity has been dug into, kind of partially eroded. And I'm less rigid and more inclined to respond spontaneously to life rather than living it along the lines of pre-dug, arranged channels that I've made for myself. How much this got has to do with the course and how much with other things I don't know, but perhaps it's not useful to separate them or, there are things that happen and come all together at the same time. [Ailsa FU 11–13]

By the end of the group her view of herself was more alive and optimistic, as can also be seen in her drawing at that time, and in her SOC score.

It may have been that very optimism that emboldened her to leave her familiar world behind to try a different life, in another place, with other people. She travelled back from afar to her follow-up interview in the midst of ambivalence about the direction she wanted her life to take. Her responses in the interview convey quite rationally how she evaluated what she experienced since the writing group, and attest to considerable benefits. Next to her rational, verbal responses the MWT drawings and the SOC scores reveal her emotional vulnerability, or her openness to tolerating uncertainty, at that moment in time. There is no contradiction. I see this as an example of the three assessment instruments producing findings of a different nature, about differen facets of a person, giving a 'thicker description' of all that goes on in life at the same time, conscious and unconscious.

7.2.4 Interpersonal Communication

Interpersonal Communication, as derived from the categories of affective (Telic) and general communication with others (IpC), does not show to be an indicator of personal development as I had expected. For almost all participants the proportion of Telic utterances increased only at the End group evaluation and decreased considerably at FU. Telic coding was at first overrepresented in the baseline questionnaire, where in relatively few Units of Analysis many (as much as 29%, but varying between participants) mentions relate to past emotional family circumstances like deaths, births, marriage and divorce. However when these past references were excluded and I only counted actual interpersonal affective utterances at End and FU, the result was still similar. The expectation I incorporated in the definition of personal development was based on tentative findings in a previous study, based on long-term writing groups, where actual (not biographic) Telic expression had increased over time (Cune, 21). The reasons why my current findings do not support this effect in the short-term groups may lie in the difference between short- and long-term groups, or in an insufficiently fine-tuned coding scheme, but most likely to the incomparability of the assessment contexts. After all, the End evaluation was the only setting where direct communication between participants took place, while the FU was an individual interview, in which Telic could be reported indirectly to the interviewer.

IpC shows the same pattern as Telic, a tendency for higher interpersonal communication scores at End, understandable because of the group discussion, and then a drop at FU. At End, IpC appears on average in 40% of the units of analysis, at FU on average in 32%.

At End, Telic appears on average in 44% of the units, at FU on average in 28%, with hardly any deviations among participants.

I have to conclude that neither IpC nor Telic can be considered signs of personal development in this study. They appear however to be expressions about the group experience, which will be dealt with in the following section. As an aside I add some remarks relating to communications with the facilitator:

The interaction between participants and the facilitator, beyond the 'regular' group dynamics, carry a different 'charge', because of the special role the facilitator holds. Depending on the 'eye of the beholder' this role will be positively interpreted as expert, leader, authority, teacher, trainer, unconditional supporter. Negative views may be 'interruptor 'and 'misunderstander'. The interpretations of the facilitator role can vary from moment to moment, or become fixed during the life of the group. Due to the centrality of the facilitator, interactions with them may carry more weight than those with other members of the group, and in particular feedback received from facilitators has greater weight. Such differences have been noted in people's utterances, but not analysed.

7.2.5 The group as mediator

> Waiting are five glasses of crystal water
>
> plus one hot steaming cup of tea.
>
> With some serious discussion and laughter
>
> this is the place where I want to be.
>
> With an open space for thinking
>
> to write words from the top of my head
>
> all my conscious thoughts are linking
>
> ideas and feelings so that they can be read.
>
> The writing and following feedback starts
>
> to make me see my stories in a new light,
>
> as I try to understand all the complex parts
>
> so that my written words sound alright.
>
> Encouraged to create stories that are new
>
> happened from the group being brought together,
>
> and by the listening and reading that I do
>
> has made all my words relate to each other.
>
> [Spring End poem]

In Spring's poem both Group Cause (GC) and Group Experience (GE) feature together, as they do in reality. In the content analysis they have been prised apart into two categories. GC and GE are the two components of the group as a mediator in personal development.

The GE category includes mentions concerning the group dynamics, its atmosphere, discussions, the company of other members, thus all that could conceivably occur in any group dynamic.

The GC category holds the mentions of any new learning, coping, other changes in behaviour and world views, which are ascribed to the specific structure of the writing groups' assignments, exercises, program and facilitation.

I noted the proportion of GC and GE utterances in the total number of Units of Analysis per person. The inverse of mentions of change are coded separately in the category No Change, where unchanged areas of life are listed by name as said by each participant (Section 7.2.7.1 table 7.c).

Needless to say GC and GE can only be assessed at the End and FU moments. Overall GC

was slightly more mentioned than GE. This is shown is Figure III 7.2.

At End the sample sizes are 375 GC +258 GE utterances =n 633. At FU 654 GC + 376 GE utterances add up to n=1030.
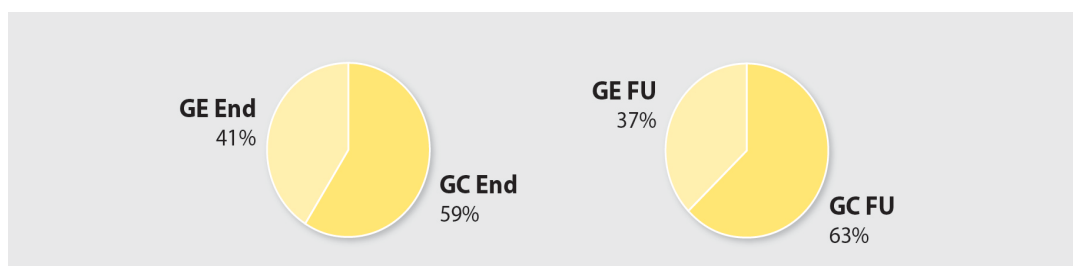
Figure III.7.2 The proportion of GC/GE mentions at End and FU

At least two qualifying arguments can be brought to bear on this finding. Firstly that any mentions of the group were prompted by the topic guide at both the end and the follow-up evaluation. And secondly that during the group discussion, which was the context of the end evaluation, it is natural that the group experience is repeatedly mentioned, and that in the individual setting of the FU interview the absent group was likely to be mentioned less. It is indeed the case that there are fewer mentions of GE at FU, but not by much.

At End two participants emphasised GE over GC.[40] Of all participants only one mentioned GE more than GC at FU, and this is Harry who concluded that he has not changed, but that he enjoyed the group and the fact that he could contribute to the writing skills of group members.

> I got feedback, got and gave feedback, and I think it definitely helped the others in the group, who, as I say, were far less experienced than I, and who I suspect got more out of the group. ... it is nice to know that the stuff you write is enjoyed by people of all kinds. [Harry FU 16; 68]

The importance of the group setting, in comparison with solitary writing, jumps out when people responded to question 3 of the topic guide at the End evaluation:

If I had done the same writing exercises on my own, not in the group, how would it have been different? If this would have been an online course that you could do at your leisure at home, but the same exercises and even getting feedback over the email, but not with the group, would it have been different for you?

---

[40] A study by de Medeiros et al. 2010 concluded that the group aspect had more impact with older adults than the writing exercises.

Themes that came up repeatedly were the sense of isolation, the lack of immediate feedback and motivation in solitary writing. Harry is again the only person who replies that it would have made no difference to him to do the exercises on his own, notwithstanding his enjoyment of the feedback he received from others (see above).

The following quotes illustrate the flavour of responses collected from all four studied groups.

If we were not writing in a group

Well, I wouldn't have done it at all. Where would have been the motivation, the prompt, the focus... [Dvo End 19]

Totally different I would think. You could get wrapped up in yourself, because you could be writing and thinking 'O, this is wonderful, this is wonderful' and then you get a surprise because somebody else might think well it's not so wonderful. You also have a little debate and a discussion, so we've got all sorts of things rolled up into one, that's turned out, just from the writing group we've got lots more out of it. [Jul End 50]

Well, we'd have felt more isolated – with not getting the feedback you wouldn't actually have a sense of what you had written and – you know – not listening to a different point of view when somebody is looking and hearing what you have written.

When you're by yourself you don't have necessarily as much of a vested interested as you do when you're sharing a piece with the group; it's different. [Shari End 16–17]

I think a particular thing for me was *reading my own work out* in a *live* situation, that was the thing that was very powerful to me, just trying out how does this *sound*. And as I was reading things you *do feel the reaction* of other people. I felt 'It's OK, I can take chances here and try things out', there's that *safety* there, so, yea, *absolutely different* than just doing it on my own. [Tez End 26; 29; 35]

There was self-discipline for myself, but also because I'm part of a group – in a way – contribution for the group and respecting the group in a way, that they are doing all that work, what is my contribution, what am I doing– That kind of a thing. So I made sure that I make time and that I do the work. And also I wouldn't have had that support I had here if I was doing online. I wouldn't have had those comments from you all, so it wouldn't have as much supporting and enabling, although it might have got academically some tools. But emotionally I think it wouldn't have the same impact. [Lali End 38–40]

I did some of the exercises on my own in Spain and I found it very frustrating. [Jewel End 25]

If I had done them on my own – this is partly a character flaw I think – if I do things on my own I don't really believe in it as much. You see, when you do something for yourself in a way it's limited, it doesn't go any further than a particular point, but when you do it with other people it sort of opens it out into an apparently limitless range of possibilities. So I think I enjoyed that very much. [Ail End 23]

I did an online course, and I really struggled with that, because although you have online discussions, and online feedback, doing things in isolation was *just* – I had no *sense* of the other people at all, I like to *see* them and what their reaction is in taking, in putting, cherry-picking – it's all part of it and that's important for *me*. It may not be for everybody. [Rita End 29–30]

7.2.5.1 Structured exercises

Structured exercises form the main content of the group program. As such they play an important part in utterances about Group Cause. The topics of exercises most often associated with lasting changes are listed below. During the twelve sessions of the group, on average ten exercises were given as home assignments.[41] The topics of exercises most named as influential to development were:

- Writing from different points of view – changing pronouns.
- Photo writing – writing inspired by a picture chosen from personal history.
- Flexible narratives – writing one story in several forms, for a different readership.
- Awareness and use of tenses – for example write the same experience in different

[41] I am indebted to more than one source for most of these exercises and some I cannot even remember. The most recent however are the teachers on the MA for Creative Writing and Personal Development at Sussex University.

tenses, and playing with time.

- Awareness and use of senses – noticing each sense in an experience, then choosing how and what to combine in a story.

Participants saw the following elements, associated with the exercises above, as leading to their development:

- Affirmation by the group of their creative thinking and of the expression of feelings in their stories.

- Added writing skills – mastery of new tools to translate their inner experience to words.

- Writing in unusual ways with surprising outcomes – poems, scripts, lists, construing characters, collaborative writing.

- Pause and cause for reflection resulting in new self-knowledge.

- Hearing and discussing different views through mutual feedback.

The connection between the exercises and elements mentioned as engendering developments is an example of how the group's content – its exercises – and the group's experience – its dynamics – support each other.

7.2.6 Expectations and goals

A category titled 'expectations' includes explicit mentions of personal goals and hopes, but also implicit ones, as evidenced in being surprised by an experience that was unexpected. The expression of goals or expectations is not part of the definition of personal development, but has become a category by default, because those expressions do not fit any of the other categories and are also meaningful to a person's view of themselves, their plans and their hopes in relation to the writing group.

Some of them are polite ways of giving feedback to the group facilitator about what was lacking in the group, as in:

> I would have liked to have gone into more depth into what I'd written. I did find some of the exercises did stir up quite a lot, and I don't really know – well I do know why, because I don't deal with them, I keep those things, like we all do, under wraps, to keep them down. I just think individual, – perhaps tutorials about the writing that I'd done, that would have been nice. [Jewel FU units 104–107; 114]

Examples of other utterances coded as expectations are:

> Poetry wasn't as bad as I thought, I was really scared because I'd never done poetry before, but it was fine, I enjoyed it. [Ver FU 51]

> I really don't want to spend the next ten years writing more bits and pieces. So it's quite important to focus. [Tez FU 108]

> You're almost surprised that you can remember these things. [Hil FU 39]

Funnily enough, the difference between writing in first and third person is very powerful. [Dvo FU 33]

Table 7.b The four most frequent themes of expectations

Surprise	Personal goal	Hope	Expectation of group
72	40	24	33

Utterances of surprise form the majority, followed by (concrete) personal goals, expectations of the group and/or facilitator and (vague) hopes.

Surprise relates either to persons' discovering the unexpected in themselves and in others, or to the differences between this writing group and earlier experiences they have had.

Personal goals at Follow-up should be a meaningful finding. They attest to a purposefulness which is often linked with having done the writing group (see also Layous et al.). On the other hand they may be a restating of a long-standing goal that has still not been attained. The nuances between these possibilities may be glimpsed only by an even deeper analysis of the content of participants' evaluations than I have done up until now. As an example of little awareness about developmental process I re-quote our 'unchanged' Harry, showing his surprise at having forgotten his goals:

I wasn't conscious of my goals changing at all, but when I opened my envelope and read what I said to myself 3 months ago, I was completely wrong as to what I thought they were. When I looked back through the papers of the course, I said I wanted to write fiction that is interesting to people, but it wasn't one of the goals that I set myself at the beginning of the course. So, I think my goals have changed, but not consciously and not deliberately. [Har End 28]

Despite acknowledging the potential importance of goals and expectations in setting and following a more or less conscious course in life, at the current level of operationalisation in my content analysis 'Expectations' was not included in the categories of my analysis for indicators of change.

7.2.7 No change and change

The follow-up interviewer asked participants specifically if certain areas of life had changed at all linked to the writing group. Areas in which participants said they felt no change during and since the group have been listed by name. The wording of these may correspond to the one in the interview topic guide, but was sometimes spontaneous and idiosyncratic. An example of a question asked in the interview is: Has the way you communicate with others outside of the group changed in any way– This could get a straight answer of yes or no, or an elaborate, convoluted one like:

> ... as good as ever. I've always been a good communicator and it's where I'm very astute and I don't think anything has changed there. I think that's always been my strength. [Rita FU 60]

Many times in their first response to a question about change during the follow-up interview people immediately replied that there has been no change. Shortly afterwards, when the interviewer pointed out how they seemed now to be actually telling her of changes in the relevant area, they then modified their first statement, often to the point of reversing it. In these cases they are coded under the pertinent Learning or Coping categories. Such instances highlight the role of the interview as an intervention in its own right and not just an assessment. An example is this interchange with Pat:

> Interviewer: *It sounded as though your thinking changed a little bit there in the group, as you became aware of your own contribution.*

> Pat: I suppose it did change a bit, but I wasn't consciously thinking of it. On reflection I suppose it has changed. [Pat FU units 47]

In the next two sections No Change and Change are compared following the areas of life asked about in the Follow-up interview. In the accompanying tables, meant to give a comparable overview per category between Change and No Change, each topic is now counted only once, identical to the counting of new SOCs, but different from the system for counting how often Learning, Coping etc. were mentioned.

7.2.7.1 No Change

Table 7.c Number of participants showing unchanged areas of life

View of self	3
Writing skills	3
Impact beyond writing	2
Speaking/verbal skills	10
Thinking skills	3
Feelings and their expression	3
Internal dialogue/how you talk to yourself	3
Communication outside group	6
View of past, present, future	7
Behaviour: what you do or how	4
Physical experience (in general)	6
Dealing with pain, discomfort	5
Total mentions of No Change	**51**

That speaking skills stayed unchanged in 10 persons does not appear to be of much importance in my sample, where baseline speaking skills were already satisfactory to their 'owners'.

Notable – in the light of other research on writing – are the five persons for whom writing in or since the group did not change their capacity to deal with pain. These participants suffered considerable pain in connection with chronic or acute physical conditions. Specific writing assignments designed to address some conditions have been shown to be of modest benefit in expressive writing research, e.g. rheumatoid arthritis and pelvic pain (Smyth et al. "Symptom Reduction"; Baikie). A meta- analysis by Fratarolli in 2006, Sophie Nicholls' critique of such expressive writing research in 2009 and a review by Lumley et al. in 2012 have dampened the initial hopes for pain relief stemming from early studies of 'writing cures' (King, "Benefits of Writing"). The writing groups of this study did not however include specific exercises for addressing pain, since they were set up for a non-clinical population. The findings may therefore indicate that writing 'in general' does not alleviate physical pain and discomfort, although specific forms of writing may do so selectively for people with various psycho-physiological preconditions (Kaufman; Niles et al.).

Most of the other No Change categories at this general level of presentation do not indicate trends, aside from the finding that persons with many mentions of No Change,

and especially those stating that their view of themselves has not changed, have developed moderately or very little, as represented in my ranking (Section 7.1).

7.2.7.2 Change

At the other end are those with none or very few No Change mentions, with more descriptions of various changes, especially in their view of themselves. These are persons who rank high–moderate in their development. This may be seen as a corroboration of the soundness of my coding and ranking scheme.

Change in 'view of self' is in almost all cases accompanied by specifying 'impact beyond writing', like for example becoming more creative also in other media beside writing, or improved relationships with friends and relatives.

Table 7.d shows the topics of change in a little more detail than in the No Change table, because – prompted by the interviewer – changes were more (behaviourally) defined than with No Change. More than once people also named changes in areas they were not asked about, like reading and listening. Changes falling outside the questions' categories and named only once appear as 'Other' in the table. The table paints a very crude picture, devoid as it is of the rich language in which changes are expressed. Only the bare bones of Content Analysis can be seen in it. A few quotes will give an inkling of what the table cannot convey.

> I've now become much more aware of myself and other people. [Jewel Fu 40]

> I don't find life as difficult as I did before, so I don't have to bite back on feelings. I flow with them. [Ail FU 56]

> It changed the way I think about him and about the way we grew up, my childhood, it gave me some insights and that was useful. [Tez FU 74]

> I got myself very affirmed, I gained lots of confidence, by doing the course. I learned a lot about what my tendencies are, what I like and don't like. [Rita FU 10; 29]

Table 7.d Number of participants showing changed areas of life

View of self	16
Writing skills	14
Impact beyond writing	16
Speaking / verbal skills	3
Thinking skills	10
Feelings and their expression	9
Internal dialogue / how you talk to yourself	6
Communication outside group	6
View of past, present, future	7
Behaviour: what you do or how	6
Physical experience (in general)	2
Dealing with pain, discomfort	0
Listening	4
Reading	3
Use of senses	6
Other	3
Total mentions of Change	**111**

The significance of the No Change coding lies in its paucity across participants compared with the abundance of changes reported. Since people were asked to respond whether specified aspects of their life had changed at all in relation to the writing group, if No Change was 'denied' it meant that something had changed. In that case the interviewer always asked 'in what way' it had changed, until receiving a behaviourally concrete reply.

Although the tables give an interesting insight in the areas of Change and No Change at the group level, for my purpose of looking at development per person, it is not helpful to compare and contrast the number of mentions in Tables 7.c and 7.d. I have to keep in mind that if persons change in even one area only, this can be an important development to them. What may appear as little change in a group view may represent a major step in an individual's development.

7.2.8 Conclusion of content analysis

Content Analysis is the main method among the three used in this study.

From looking at all aspects of content analysis findings reported in this chapter I

conclude that personal development in the terms of my definition is made visible in participants' evaluations of their overall writing group experiences and that on a group level development far exceeds mentions of No Change. Moreover, a large part of the development is ascribed to the group's program (GC).

Flexibility as seen in the combined mentions of Levels of Learning and Coping is strongly represented in all participants at End of group, while scores at FU have dropped to lower levels for 14 and risen for 5 participants. Thus flexibility has risen for all participants, but this gain was only partially sustained six months later. By the end of the group participants still remembered what they learned during the group, but by Follow-Up some of this learning had faded from memory, and possibly from behaviour too, although we can never be sure of this.

With the use of Figure III 7.1 (1) the elements of personal development are marked to show the main findings of CA. An arrow represents the direction of the summary findings for each element.
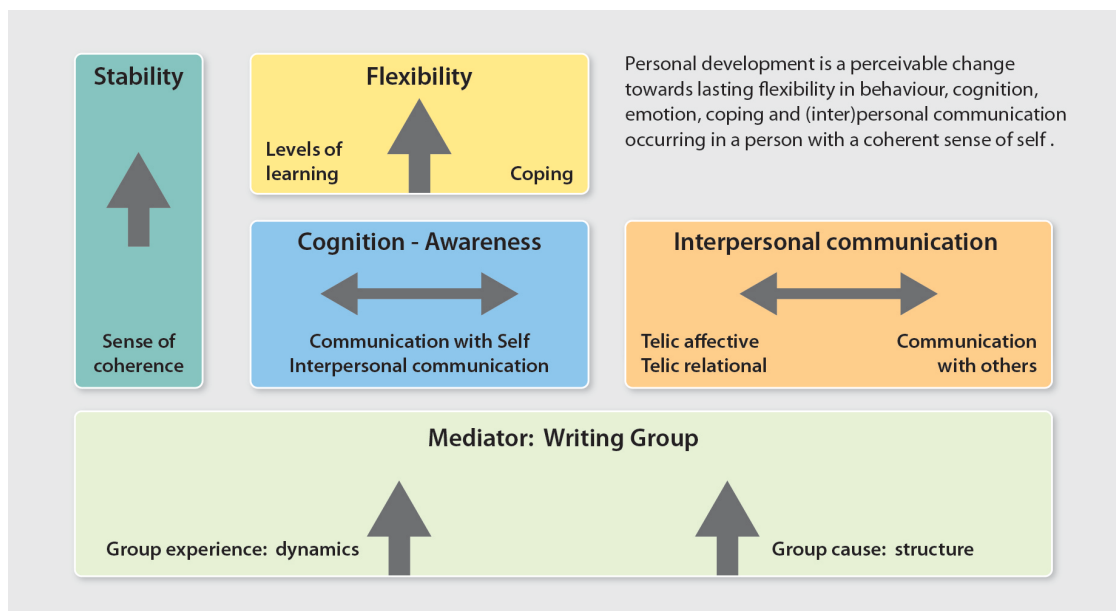
Fig. III 7.1(1) The elements of personal development with direction of content analysis findings

Flexibility and stability have both overall increased, although the trajectories show both ups (at End) and downs (at FU) for 14 participants.

Cognition–Awareness was relatively stable across time, also spiking at End and returned at FU to a level similar to Baseline. This was the case for 14 participants. However for 6 people an increase was notable from Base to Follow Up, presumably prompted by the writing group's activities that emphasised conscious awareness through journaling, discussions and verbalisation of experiences.

Interpersonal Communication, as derived from the categories of affective (Telic) and general communication with others (IpC), does not indicate personal development as I had expected. For almost all participants the proportion of Telic utterances increased only at the End group evaluation and decreased considerably at FU. This is most likely as a result of the difference between the group or individual assessment contexts at End and FU. It could also be an effect of insufficiently fine tuning the coding categories. I will say more about this in the summary to this chapter (Section 7.5) and in the forthcoming discussion of limitations (Section 8.2).

The next sections are devoted to the findings of the other assessment methods.

7.3 My World and I Today findings

Together the three[42] pictures of each participant's world at baseline, end and follow- up in sequence, portray a curve of their world views held during and after the group. They are in essence snapshots of these views at each date of drawing. In Table 7.e people are grouped according to their individual changes as scored for their MWT drawings, and their trajectories are drawn as a simple graph from baseline to follow up.

Table 7.e Individuals' changes in MWT scores at follow-up compared to baseline, and the graph of their trajectory from baseline to FU (next page).

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[42] Trudi voluntarily made 4 pictures, the 4th was done 3 months after follow-up, because of a broken leg. The 4th score has been included in the calculation of net change. Her lowest score is at the point of being completely incapacitated by her injury.

High Increase at FU >10	Medium Increase 9 - 3	Low/No Increase 2-0	Decrease
Hilary	Verity	Harry	Rita
Banana	Pat	Shari	Trudi
Barbara	Ailsa	Ron	Grace
Spring	Dvora		Lali
Tez	Elisheva		Jewel
			Julie
			Marge

The blue line of the trajectory shows changes from left (baseline) to right (follow-up). The MWT part contributing to the rank order of the 'high-low developers'' groups (see Section 7.1) is the net change at follow-up compared to baseline. It can be seen that the trajectories of MWT do not run parallel with the final ranking of developers (Section 7.1). In Table 7.e, 5 people show 'high', 5 'medium', 3 'low or no increase' and 5 'decrease'. This hardly resembles the FU ranking arrived at by a combined score of the three assessment methods with 6 High, 9 Moderate, 4 Low and 1 No 'developers'. Without going into the individual stories behind these naked numbers (and without employing dynamic interpretations which are against my methodological rules in this study), Table 7.e tells us about the variability of drawings at three assessment moments, and about the relatively small part MWT scores have contributed to overall development as computed here.

Spring's story, as told by her three gradually evolving drawings, illustrates the trajectory of a talented woman who did not enjoy many opportunities to participate in creative groups in her geographical area. It is a story of self discovery, expanding by adjusting to her age and changing family position as a grandmother. Spring's trajectory stands in stark contrast to Jewel's, which can be read in Appendix F.

Meet Spring (part 1)

Spring is the pseudonym chosen by a portly, married woman of 57. She likes creating with her hands rather than virtually on a computer. Her specialty is making 'altered books', refashioning old books into 3-D artworks depicting a chosen concept. Soft-spoken but not timid, she was a serious, thoughtful member of the group. Her recent work was exhibited in the Leeds Library Art Space shortly before the follow-up interview. She is English born and lives with her husband. She has 17 years of formal education and does not specify a profession or skills that she uses. Later it turned out that she is a proficient amateur artist.
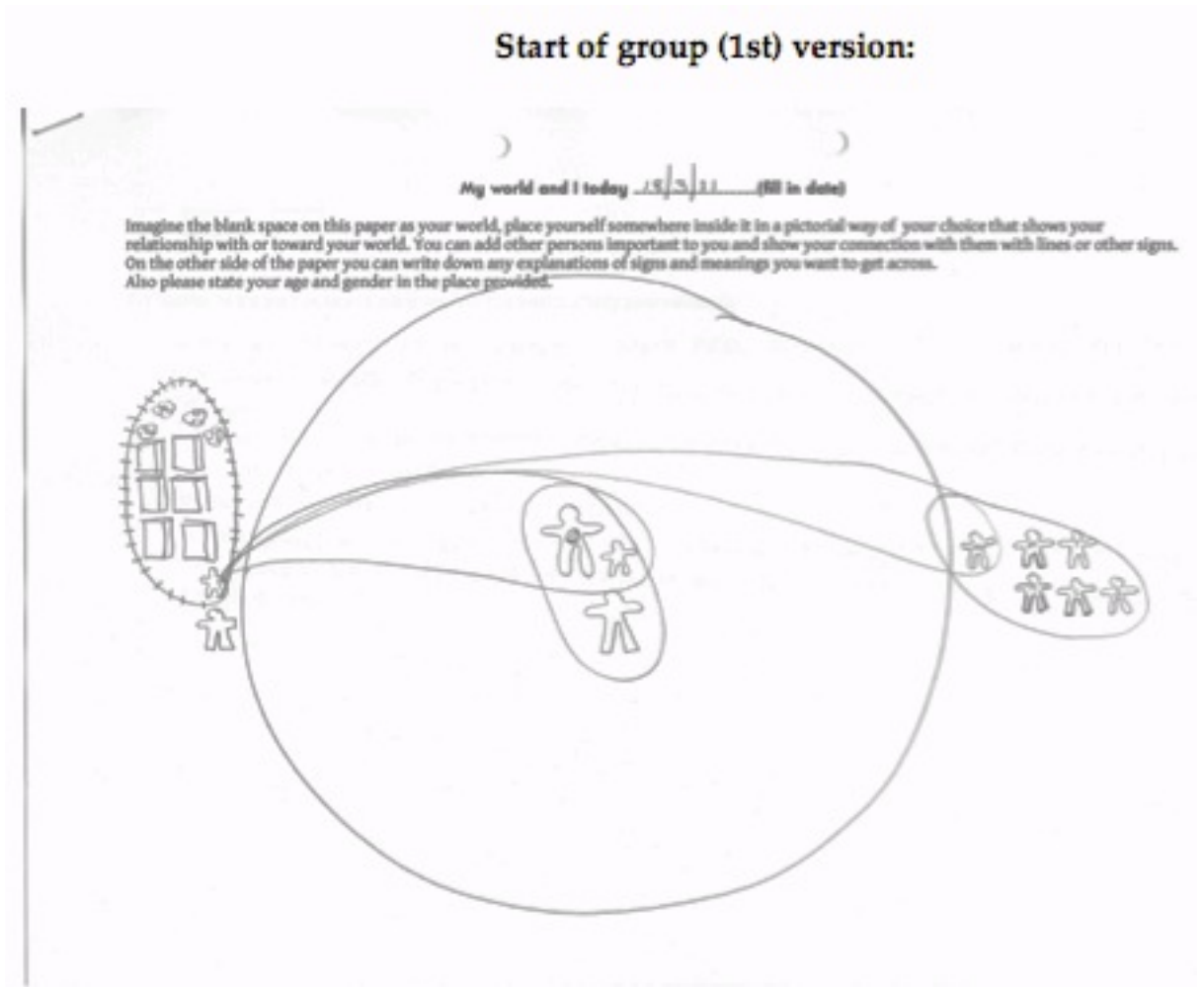
Figure III.7.2.1 Spring's 1st MWT drawing

Figure III.7.2.2 Spring's 2nd MWT drawing

Self-comparison of first and second drawing

Spring wrote:

> 1. I am on my own, I don't mention my family.
>
> 2. The flowers are more prominent than just a mention before.
>
> 3. I am drawing my environment, not a circle with my Family on.
>
> 4. No roads are mentioned, I'm in my own space, my own world.
>
> 5. The flowers and books have become more of an interest to develop in the future. The Fence has disappeared and the garden has enlarged.
>
> 6. I'm trying to connect to my family by writing about what might magically be in my garden compared to be separated.
>
> 7. I'm happier in my garden, the other drawing is about my Family, all in different places, in my garden I have the freedom from thinking about Family commitments. The outside world is fenced off.
>
> 8. I'm happier in my world today.
>
> 9. Looking at the old drawing, looks like a world with things floating around it, i.e. satellites, head, nose and two ears.
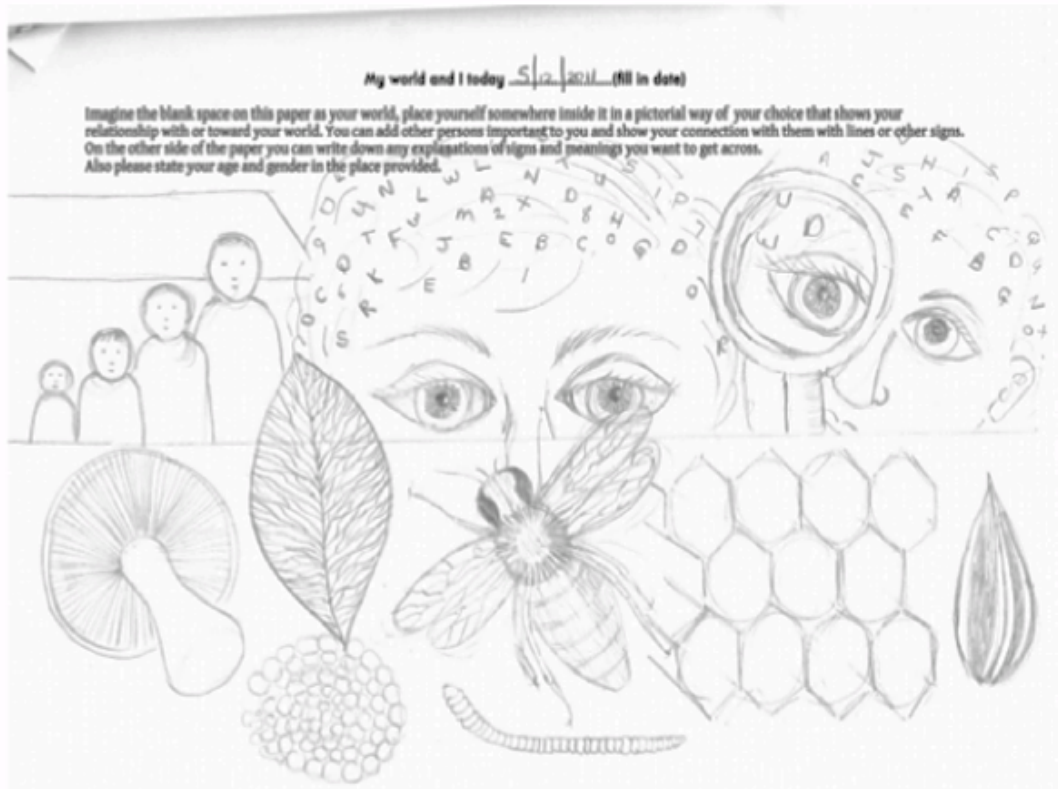
Figure III.7.2.3 Spring's 3rd MWT drawing

Table 7.f Spring's MWT trajectory from start to follow up

PHASE and 'score'*	START - 30	END - 39	FOLLOW UP - 41
Order + complexity	high + simple	high + complex	high + highly complex
Structure	diagrammatic, disjointed, static	figurative, dynamic story	diagram+ figurative
Form	circular, embodied, non-verbal	embodied, concrete, non-verbal	embodied, dynamic + poem
Connections	self and disconnected family members	self and nature	two selves, family and nature integrated
Balance	balanced but underload	well balanced	well balanced
Connectors	lines + distances	organic, physical	symbolic placement, shifting perspectives
Self (integration)	marginal, very small, separated	large at centre, happy, integrated	doubled, fulfilled, integrated
Perceptual Position	3rd in pic + 1st in explanatory text	3rd in pic + 1st in explanatory text	3rd + meta-reflection from higher PoV
Impression	Starkly shows feeling her separateness from mundane family life and obligations, in a simple way.	Focus on where she feels happy, she needs to be alone in nature. Expresses her deep involvement with the natural world. (see self-comparison text above)	She has found her place in the world and through her passion connects to her family and others.

*The numerical score derived from the coding agenda given in Section 6.3.2.2

Spring's poem accompanying her third drawing nicely sums up where she was, nine months after starting the group.

Looking, seeing

Discovering structure

and sharing

details via words

of hidden worlds

of everyday Life.

Summary of Spring's full trajectory, combining all assessment instruments

Spring's development as seen in the findings of the separate assessment instruments is evident. Her flexibility has increased not just in writing but in cognition, emotion and external behaviour too. At the same time that she integrated those new options into her repertoire, changing some of her basic views of herself, stability has increased and continues to support her in feeling more confident across many contexts, which she mentions.

Spring is a thoughtful lady, who lives in a region with few opportunities to attend workshops of this kind. She started the group with a specific goal of creating a book for her five-year-old grandson. She worked on her ideas for the book during and since the group, allowing herself to be inspired by the group's exercises and feedback. This inspiration has influenced many more areas of her life than just the child's book idea, as Spring reports and shows in her texts, her drawings and her elevated sense of coherence scores. The last verse from her 'End' poem lets us glimpse some of this development:

Encouraged to create stories that are new

happened from the group being brought together,

and by the listening and reading that I do

has made all my words relate to each other.

7.4 Sense of coherence questionnaire findings

The statistical analysis of sense of coherence (SOC) deals with a quantified effect at the group level. On the individual level scores may have fluctuated (see Table 7.g), but an upwards movement of the scores is seen when taken over all 20 participants from base to follow-up.

Final results were computed over 12 items, identical for each time of assessment.

The reliability of the SOC scale's Cronbach's alpha was calculated for each time of assessment. The resulting values were .76, .77 and .81 respectively.

Over the three means three t-tests have been done, the results of which are shown in Table 7.g. The mean of the group scores increases from Baseline to Follow-up, and this increase is statistically significant at Follow-up compared to the mean Baseline score (pair 2). The differences between Baseline and End of group score (pair 1), End of group and Follow Up (pair 3) are not significant. This means that the difference between SOC scores at Time 1+2 and 2+3 is not large enough for statistical generalisation, but the difference between 1+3 is large enough to be real in a statistical sense.

Table 7.g Paired Samples test of SOC scores

Paired Samples Statistics							
		Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	t	degrees of freedom	sign. 2-tailed
Pair 1:	Baseline	58.43	9.83	2.20	-0.10	19	0.33
	End of group	60.26	8.44	1.89			
Pair 3:	End of group	60.26	8.44	1.89	-1.21	19	0.24
	Follow-up	62.45	9.19	2.05			
Pair 2:	Baseline	58.43	9.83	2.20	-2.15	19	0.04
	Follow-up	62.45	9.19	2.05			

The importance of this finding can be viewed against the background of the longitudinal research that has been published on changing sense of coherence in adult populations (Nilsson et al.).

A four-point mean increase of SOC scores, which is observed in Table 7.g for the difference between Baseline and Follow-up, can be considered small to moderate, based on the fact that is equals a little less than half of the average standard deviation. Of course no causal relationship with the writing group can be inferred. However the concurrence of the period of the increase in SOC and the writing group experience indicates that at the very least no harm has been done to participants' sense of coherence and that possibly the positive experience of the group had a protective effect on the SOC against various life stresses confronting many of the participants[49]. A life-long virtuous circle of protective effects in older adults with a relatively high sense of coherence has been found in 2007 by Van der Hal (81), and was already postulated in 1987 by Rutter in his often cited "Psychosocial Resilience and Protective Mechanisms" (324). Such a protective effect would support structured group writing as a positive mediating intervention to engender personal development for non-clinical adults, not yet substantiated by research to date (e.g. Kaufman, 2006; a group intervention study by de Medeiros, 2010 and a person-centred therapeutic intervention study by von Humbold and Leal, 2013). Research to date points to a mutual relationship between a strong sense of coherence and choosing activities and contexts that will support and enhance it, so that the 'mediating' will be in both directions: persons choosing to join a writing group from relative strength they already possess and then being further strengthened by it. In the current study I have not pursued this issue.

In Table 7.h the differences between the SOC scores at Follow-up compared to Baseline are shown per participant. These data are used with the outcomes of the other two assessment instruments to construct the ranking of the 'high-to low-development groups' mentioned in Section 7.1 above.

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[49] Severe health issues, accidents and the death of relatives and friends occurred in the lives of 12 participants during the study period.

Table 7.h The difference between Base and Follow Up SOC scores

Person	Base – FU
Ailsa	3
Banana	-7
Barbara	-7
Dvora	16
Elisheva	5
Grace	-10
Harry	4
Hilary	-6
Julie	23
Marge	12
Pat	7
Rita	2
Ron	-3
Shari	4
Spring	26
Trudy	2
Verity	-6
Lali	-3
Jewel	-2
Tez	10

Much personal information cannot be read in the table, because each person's trajectory is a different story. Statistical means obscure more than they reveal on the individual level. Behind each positive or negative comparison between Base and FU lies a plethora of possible reasons, causes and life circumstances. I have written my surmises about each person's fluctuations in the case studies in Appendices E and F. Here I present only one of them, which can be contrasted with the story of Tez, whose SOC score at FU was 10 points higher than at Base.

Meet Grace

A long, slender and slightly awkward 58-year-old unmarried woman, Grace wears very thick spectacles and speaks softly. She is a full-time carer of two old and ailing family members. Often she mentions her dream of becoming a ballet dancer, unfulfillable in waking life, recurring in sleep. As a visually challenged person from childhood she is sensitive to the burden of carrying a social label of disability. For her the writing group became a level playing field, with respectful relations between all. In the group she felt free of the constraints of the outside world, enabling her to create and participate on an equal footing. Grace showed great appreciation for the group almost from the beginning. She can write well, but used the group as a sounding board, a social occasion and an inspiration to give herself some time away from the carer's role. She derived emotional support for her creative, mentally dancing side. Very seldom did she need to bring out the community activist fiercely defending the role of carers and of disabled people in society.

Her life has never been easy, its obstacles led her to fight for her place in the world. In her baseline questionnaire Grace wrote:

Things that had a big impact on my life are: My disability which has pushed me to break boundaries. [Gra-base-7]

My poems and stories are usually about topics that might be taboo and that I feel are inspirational to others. [Gra-base-18–19]

Hence her relief at the group, which she expressed at the End evaluation:

I think the group's beauty, to me anyway, is that it's non-competitive and that encouraged those of us who maybe lacked confidence or hadn't be part of a group for a long time to write. [Gra End 10]

I think there's been no boundaries in this course, we can in certain exercises write a letter, write a poem, make it from the heart, make it comical, I think that's been enjoyable, yea without all restrictions, 'You have to do this' 'This is the way you do it'. You know we've been like free spirits really, haven't we– [Gra End 13]

And this had stayed with her, as evidenced in her follow-up statements:

I was stagnating and I started to read more, and I think I started to look at things a bit more openly than I used to through this group. [Gra FU 20–21]

Everybody was equal in that group, you know there were people in that group who were very well educated and I think, it was very inclusive, it was a very welcoming group. [Gra FU 32]

Notwithstanding her obvious enjoyment and new learning which she ascribed to the group, both Grace's MWT drawings (Table 7.e) and the SOC scores (Table 7.g) show a decrease at FU compared with baseline. Just before the follow-up interview she was almost blind after her umpteenth eye-operation, and the interview, as an exception, took place at her home, where she could not leave her dying mum alone. These painful life events are reflected in the lowering of her SOC and MWT scores, having overwhelmed the positive effect seen through the Content Analysis. The combination of her ranking in all three assessments places Grace – with only three others – in the lowest developers' group compared to the other participants. This ranking is devoid of any personal importance to Grace, who feels enriched by the group.

7.5 Summary of mixed methods findings

The changes in the development of twenty individuals have been assessed longitudinally with three instruments in a mixed method format over a period of nine months.

My findings support the possibility that structured writing groups engender personal development in non-clinical adults, the research question of my study. Signs of people's beneficial changes in the context of their lives can be observed, after they engaged for a limited period in a group writing activity.

Content analysis (CA) of participants' utterances is the major method among the three used for the study. The findings from content analysis, grouped according to the theoretical elements of my definition of personal development, show that Flexibility (levels of learning and coping) and Stability (sense of coherence) can serve as indications of personal development.

Neither telic nor intrapersonal or interpersonal communication indicated personal development in this study. They appear however to be expressions relating to or stemming from the group dynamics.

Cognition–Awareness, as measured by 'communication with self' (internal monologue

and dialogue given voice) was relatively stable but responsive to context across assessments. During the group discussion people voiced more of their internal processes than at baseline or follow-up, both of which did not involve group interaction requiring 'explaining' of opinions.

The group as a context (the category named 'group experience') and the program of the group (group cause) are found to be strong mediating factors for personal development, by the links participants very specifically mention.

Participants named the following elements in particular as leading to their development:

- Affirmation by the group of their creative thinking and the expression of feelings in their stories;
- Added writing skills – new tools to translate their inner experience to words;
- Writing in unusual ways with surprising outcomes;
- Pause and cause for reflection resulting in new self-knowledge;
- Hearing and discussing different views through mutual feedback.

The exercises most named as influential to development 'belong' to these element, namely: Writing from different points of view:

- Flexible narratives;
- Photo writing;
- Awareness and use of senses and tenses.
- Group dynamic themes and structured exercises interconnect and support each other.

Group experience was described as a safe place, enabling comfortable openness. I see this as a confirmation of the importance of Bowlby's *Secure Base*, the cornerstone of education and therapy in the humanistic tradition (Rogers, *Client-Centered* and *Facilitation of Learning*; Heron).

The findings of My World and I Today drawings reveal individual trajectories between three points in time. Some follow a uniform direction 'up' or 'down' in the scoring scheme, some show an upward spike at End of group and by FU have returned to Baseline level. My findings show effects from the group to the drawing only when these have been written down or explained by participants. Beyond such explicit links I can only surmise. My impression is that the decreases in MWT scores at FU compared to Base of five participants were caused by overwhelming life events that occurred in the six months after the group. For these participants SOC scores also decreased more than normal fluctuations around a personal mean would explain.

The findings of the sense of coherence as measured with the quantitative, standardised questionnaire of Antonovsky showed a small but significant strengthening for the sample as a whole at FU, compared to Base. The gains from Base to End and from End to FU were not statistically significant. Considering that the sample consists of only 20 persons, even finding a small significant effect is encouraging.

The findings of the content analysis, sense of coherence questionnaire, and the MWT taken by themselves differ from each other. Yet seen in the wider context of people's full story, of which illustrations appear in this chapter, they complement each other to create a generously multidimensional impression of personal developmental trajectories from start to follow up, in the spirit of Johnson et al.'s 2007 article "Toward a Definition of Mixed Methods Research".

> Mixed methods research is the type of research in which a researcher or team of researchers combines elements of qualitative and quantitative research approaches (e.g., use of qualitative and quantitative viewpoints, data collection, analysis, inference techniques) for the broad purposes of breadth and depth of understanding and corroboration. (Johnson et al. 123)

The findings have been organised here in the form of a thematic review across participants, in the hope that this may inform the future uses of structured writing in various contexts, such as adult education, health and social support groups. Paradoxically by relating to a non-clinical sample they may help refine the debate about the uses of writing for specific populations and conditions in the search for 'the right recipe' that Smyth and Pennebaker were already looking for in 2008. The significance of my findings is discussed and put in a wider context in the next, and final, chapter.

PART IV

CHAPTER 8 DISCUSSION AND REFLECTIONS

Prelude

> I travelled through the shifting sands of the research process, the myriad
> large and tiny choices that determine the final version of methods and
> findings. It is a meandering, faltering progression through an as yet largely
> uncharted territory. When starting to trek into it, step by step its complexity
> becomes clear. Around each bend may lie another crossroads, another
> obstacle, another dead end. This expedition is guided by patchy maps
> drawn by others before me. Even if earlier adventurers travelled along some
> of the same roads, they will have chosen a different course from me at least
> some of the time, ending up at other places. The same will be true for those
> travelling after me. This is how a map of the world takes its ever-changing
> form, filling up with ever more complex details, which may form pleasing
> patterns, or spark chaotic debates.
>
> I learned to be a humble explorer and discoverer.

8.1 Introduction

The study of personal development straddles many disciplines, fed by many theories, as shown in Section 2.1. The studies of interventions capable of mediating personal development likewise vary in their methodologies and methods. Throughout the literature it appears that theoretical and practical methodologies have differed widely. It is, however, interesting that studies starting out from dissimilar epistemologies still tend to show roughly similar outcomes with respect to developmental processes of participants (e.g. Hunt – critical realism; Lengelle and Meijers – dialogical self theory). They may even be called 'ontological outcomes', by possessing the "type of flexibility that might make them more likely to be accepted by healthcare professionals than are standard guidelines" (Kumar, Smith et al. 1). Kumar et al. explain the "ontology of plans" (ibid. 4) in a way that makes the current findings fit my claim of general applicability. Like best-practice guidelines for facilitators of structured writing groups, according to Kumar et al. a work-plan "involves branch-points at which decisions must be taken between alternative paths in light of prevailing circumstances". This distinguishes plans from procedures, which prescribe a single path to follow (4). My study adds to the diversity in outlook and methods. Six things I think make this worthwhile:

- The sample of adults (aged 35–73), a period of life when the view of self is presumed to have consolidated after the so-called formative years. Little work has

been done on older people, so my work may add to our understanding of the life course.

- A non-clinical population, which may by its inclusiveness shed light on core aspects of structured group writing applicable to other general and specific populations [44]

- A mixed method design, including the use of a non-verbal assessment in addition to the verbal, adding a less cognitive/conscious dimension for (self-) evaluation over time.

- A longitudinal design, which overcomes the momentary 'high' often found at the end of an activity/intervention.

- The central role of stimulating awareness and reflection in participants.

- A combination of theoretical and practical knowledge, with the purpose of matching relevant theory to embodied practice. (See also 8.5.2 Reflexivity and Ethics).

8.1.1 What I set out to do

This study is an attempt to substantiate developmental processes associated with pervasive factors in structured group writing, not restricted to particular populations, in a sample of a non-clinical, adult population.

At the outset my aims and objectives revolved around the question whether – and how – personal development, defined and operationalised, can be engendered in non-clinical adults by structured writing in a group. In other words: can structured writing groups be a pathway for personal development in adults from a non-clinical population and how can this be achieved? To investigate this I used a short-term format of small writing groups and a longitudinal mixed-method design.

The study was conducted from a constructivist point of view and used the methodological framework of Mead's symbolic interactionism, described in Chapter 5. This choice appealed to me as especially suitable to the live dynamics of interaction in a group setting, in addition to my life-long view of the world. A constructivist ontology entails that researchers are seen as actors, in contrast to reactors, or information processors. While doing their research they constitute theories, actively construe 'nature' by interpreting it, rather than describe a reality that is supposed to exist in a fixed form by 'realist' ontologies. Therefore theory and practice cannot meaningfully be separated

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[44] Esterling et al., however, held that if participants in previous studies were psychologically healthy, this will limit the possibility of generalization to patients suffering from psychopathology (92).

(Peters et al. 338) and their purpose should be "to understand people's stories (and their meaning), and why some people's stories have priority over other people's stories" (Harré quoted in Peters 338). Combining constructivism with symbolic interactionism, which rests on the interpretivist perspective that people's own stories guide their actions in the world, led me to employ methods that give priority to people's stories in various forms of self-report and behavioural assessments.

8.1.2 What I found

The contribution of this study to the field of writing groups lies first of all in confirming that writing in a group is beneficial to adults interested in furthering their personal development, providing that the group is professionally facilitated.

Secondly, the study points to the content and structure of writing exercises which participants found conducive to their development.

In addition, the study adds to theory by proposing a definition of observable elements of adult development, and to methodology by its combination of methods framed by symbolic interactionism.

The report of this study's findings is short in relation to the complexity of the materials explored. The brevity reflects an attempt to highlight only perceived effects of distinctive elements of structured writing groups, without unsubstantiated claims drawn from the iterative rehashing of the data and from my experience in practice.

My main findings support an affirmative answer to the research question: structured writing groups can engender personal development in non-clinical adults. Almost all participants reported beneficial and sustained changes in the context of their lives after a short term group writing activity. They mention both the group's content and the group dynamics as strong mediating factors for personal development. More details about the powerful dimension of writing as the group's medium in addition to the complex and personally significant experiences to be expected in any well-led group activity below (Section 8.3.1 ff).

For reasons explained in Chapter 7.1.1, content analysis of participants' utterances is the major method among the three used for the study. Categories of the content analysis, operationalised from the theoretical elements of my definition of personal development, show that Flexibility (levels of learning and coping) and Stability (sense of coherence) can serve as indications of personal development and appear to perform an unending 'balancing act' while dealing with the vicissitudes of life over time.

The categories of Telic, Intrapersonal and Interpersonal Communication did not indicate personal development in this study. They appear however to be expressions relating to or stemming from the group dynamics.

Intrapersonal communication (communication with self, i.e. internal monologue and dialogue given voice), the Cognition–Awareness category, was relatively stable but

responded to variation in context. In group discussions people voiced more of their internal processes than in the dyadic follow up interview.

The findings of the pictorial assessment My World and I Today reveal irregular fluctuating individual trajectories between three points in time. Decreases in MWT scores at follow-up compared to baseline of five participants appear to be caused by overwhelming life events that occurred in the six months after the group. In these cases sense of coherence scores decreased more than normal fluctuations around a personal mean would explain. The findings of the sense of coherence as measured with a standardised questionnaire showed a significant strengthening for the sample as a whole at follow up, compared to baseline.

Although the findings of the content analysis, sense of coherence questionnaire, and my world today, taken by themselves differ from each other, they are complementary and create multidimensional impressions of personal developmental trajectories.

The main content-elements perceived by the participants to be instrumental to their personal development are: writing from different points of view; flexible narratives; writing about a significant photo; awareness and use of senses and tenses; added writing skills – new tools to translate inner experience to words; writing in unusual ways with surprising outcomes.

The most influential group-dynamic elements mentioned are: respect and affirmation by the group of creative thinking and the expression of feelings in stories; pause and cause for reflection resulting in new self-knowledge; hearing and discussing different views through mutual feedback.

Group dynamics and the content of structured exercises were found to support each other. Participants described the group experience as safe, enabling them to be comfortably open.

8.1.3 What has stayed undone

This section is intended to be distinct from Section 8.4 on future research, although it is related. Here I bemoan the topic I planned to investigate but was unable to.

I had hoped to shine a light into the 'black box' of what happens inside persons when writing, to answer the question: how does writing in groups create changes– Due to the limited scope and time for this thesis I could not analyse a large part of the written data that might give insight into this little understood area. The unanalysed data, consisting of a large body of participants' stories and poems written as exercises, await future study.

The question of how writing in groups creates changes relates to the, as yet unanswered, basic question about the nature of the writing process, be it solitary or in a group, the mystery of the processes at work:

Nor in this case, is it clear what learning processes are involved when personal development-through-writing occurs. Practitioners are often content to abide by ''the mystery'' just as most of us are content to watch a cut heal on a finger without pondering the presence of blood platelets. (Lengelle and Meijers, Mystery to Mastery 62)

8.2 Limitations

The study falls short in some areas related to operationalisation of theoretical concepts and methods. The limitations identified here lead to suggestions for future research (Section 8.4) in which they may be addressed differently.

One limitation is that I studied my own work in groups that I facilitated alone.

Although this has the advantage of a uniform style and approach, which I 'tested' by audio recording my verbal instructions and group interventions during three of the four studied groups, it does not answer the question whether the findings would hold up across different facilitators.[45] Future studies may shed light on factors of different facilitator methods and styles. Can effective key principles of structured writing groups be maintained when detached from personal facilitator styles? What are the boundary requirements for non-therapeutic writing group facilitators, like educators, trainers, community workers?

The second limitation concerns the representativeness of the sample. The participants of this study cannot be considered a representative sample of the population, not even of the non-clinical adult population of those 'who like writing'. It is a self-selected, geographically determined convenience sample with limited diversity, fairly culture- and language-bound (Table 7.a in 7.1.1). This opens up possibilities for future research of a diverse range of human backgrounds and experiences.

The absence of a control group is also a drawback. It was not possible to include a control group in the constraints of time and resources available for this study. It would be possible to conduct a meaningful study of writing groups in comparison with a control group. More compelling assessments could be done over a period, say, twice as long, thus 18 months, with the same people who have expressed a willingness to be part of such research. I can envision such a study and hope it will be conducted in the future. A recently published protocol for the systematic review of the effect of therapeutic writing on people with long-term conditions recognises in its inclusion criteria "Non-writing,

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[45] I concluded that my style of presenting and responding is consistent and coherent. My experience in working with colleagues shows a similar consistency in their own style attained after several years of facilitating writing groups.

waiting list, placebo (inexpressive) writing, attention controls and any control thought to be inactive" (Meads, Nyssen et al. 3).

Questions can be raised about the methods of this study. I tested a combination of three very different assessment instruments longitudinally to discover the extent to which they support, contradict and run parallel to each other. Choices resulted from a struggle with various methods, during which I rejected some that have been used in other studies, and adopted unusual ones. I have explained my choices in previous chapters. Is the contribution of these instruments at all relevant to the assessment of personal development? Does their combination shed more light on developmental processes than each separate one, or another, as yet untried combination? These questions especially concern the use of the Orientation to Life questionnaire (SOC-Q) and the not-yet validated drawing tool My World and I Today (MWT). These are focused on life in general, collected in the context of the writing group, and do not specifically concern the group experience. In addition they are pertinent to the particular way of defining the categories of the content analysis (CA), based on my definition of personal development, as described in Chapter 3. The findings can be dealt with from several perspectives and I have opted to do so from three only, of which content analysis is the most weighty. These choices reflect my hope to capture more, both in scope and in time, of individual persons' lives than of the experiences during the group at which I was present. I may have bitten off more than I can chew with academic teeth.

My choice of methods carries other limitations with it. The value of findings from self-reported evaluations, as used in my content analysis, may be disputed. I base this choice on the methodology of symbolic interactionism's position that the individuals' interpretation of experience determines their subsequent behaviour, and draw some assurance from the fact that studies based on other premises turn up similar results (e.g. Hunt – critical realism; Lengelle and Meijers, – dialogical self theory). However, a consensual theoretical understanding of personal development in adults and its operationalisation would enable better comparisons between studies. I hope future cooperation will result in an agreement on how to define personal development.

Goals and Expectations have not yet sufficiently been differentiated and analysed, although I consider them important, as set out in the structuring features of writing groups (Section 4.2.1) and in the findings (Section 7.2.6). Formulating a personal goal or intention related to writing guides people to contemplate a possibility of changes in their writing. It activates an inner search to ask "What do I want / hope to achieve in this group?" It is an awareness-focusing, reflective experience. At the same time it sets up a personal method for assessing any developments that may occur. The starting point can be compared to the end point and serves as a personal benchmark along the time-line of the groups' life. At the end of the groups' life, participants can reread their journal entries to discover to what extent they have reached their initial (or other, unplanned) goals.

Expectations are too diffused as a category, which I now see needs to be separated from goals and differentiated by type. Findings show that from 169 utterances coded as 'expectations' only 40 were personal goals. The rest were expressions of surprise, hope and expectations from the group (Section 7.2.6 Table 7.b)

The follow-up interview used in this study for longitudinal assessment may be useful for the researcher but presents a challenge for the practitioner. Assessments during the life of the group can easily be incorporated into a writing group outside of a research framework. But six months after the end of the group the interview itself is an additional intervention, where people may come to new realisations while answering the questions (Sections 7.2.1 and 7.2.7). People's memories of the group would be in a different state, maybe fade(d) after six months without the 'waking up awareness' of the interview. What does this mean for real life writing groups not studied with a follow-up stage? Is the follow-up a necessary boost, or can it be dispensed with?

8.3 Practical applicability – the contribution of writing groups in a wider context

...We do not know in any deep sense as yet how we shall, in the future, better empower men. Insofar as the sciences of knowing can throw light on the growth of mind, the efficacy of the culture in fulfilling its responsibility to the individual can likely be increased to levels higher than ever before imagined.
 Jerome Bruner, *Cognitive Growth* (326)

How can the findings about personal development in writing groups be of use in the general salutary empowerment of people? To practitioners inside the field of writing groups the answer will most likely be self-evident. This may even have been a reason why these developmental processes until now have been very little systematically researched. The current study is an attempt to fill this gap in knowledge. Writing may be one pathway to development among others in education, health and social support, suited mostly to those who are drawn to it, and I suggest that some of the findings can be used to advance approaches in these fields whether in therapeutic or non-therapeutic group work. These suggestions appear diffuse and not specific, because I truly believe that the findings can be adapted to many 'general' populations and contexts. I refer again to Kumar et al.'s treatment of ontological frameworks for clinical guidelines, mentioned in 8.1, where they point out how their approach "enables implementations … that processes in health care organizations may deviate in different ways from the norms set forth in corresponding guideline definitions" (Kumar, Smith et al. 1). The research dealt with a sample of a non-clinical adult population and thus is generalist in nature, intending to reveal pervasive processes of development through writing in groups.

Kumar et al. illuminate this by stating that "well-constructed ontologies serve not only to make it easier to re-use existing knowledge in new settings, but also as the foundation for standardization efforts, since they make explicit the conceptualizations behind given terminologies and models"(ibid 3). Consequently it may appear presumptuous to limit applications to specific populations, which are surely to be found in the general fields of health and wellbeing, life-long education for those who are motivated to continue their development, the vast area of post-trauma, and even preparation for possible future trauma. Structured writing groups conducted well are a gentle and enjoyable way to engender personal development in those adults who like writing. With Nicholls I share the view that writing is not to be seen as suitable for everyone, much less a panacea (Nicholls, "Writing the body" 120).

The very question and the theoretical frame of this research lead to a stumbling block, because the study was born from experiences in the field, not sufficiently academically demonstrated in the literature. For this reason existing applications of writing in groups may be little-known and stay unacknowledged. An example is the extensive experiences with short writing groups for adults of the Jewish Social Work agency of the Netherlands[46] which inspired the work I have been doing in Israel since 1995 (Section 4.1).

Structured writing can be one intervention combining the building of social support among people who increasingly value themselves and each other and become more flexible in coping with surprising conditions alone and together.

Participants who have benefitted in any way from participating in a writing group are likely to be more resilient members of any group in their personal network (e.g. family, neighbourhood, committee). Their development towards increased flexibility combined with a strengthening of their sense of a coherent self as evidenced in my findings, translates into behaviour enabling them to play a more vital role in their environment than they did before the writing group.

Resilience, like self-efficacy and sense of coherence, is considered by Monica Eriksson to be an asset for health and well-being, or salutogenesis. She draws on the study of salutogenesis as an umbrella, covering about thirty theoretical concepts which serve health (Eriksson, Related Concepts). Gowan et al.'s 2014 "Building Resiliency: A Cross-Sectional Study Examining Relationships Among Health-Related Quality of Life, Well-Being, and Disaster Preparedness" is an example, from another context, of the powerful impact of being part of a non-clinical group. Gowan's paper shows support for the conjecture that resilience is connected to 'social vitality'. Specifically the two main components of short term structured writing groups, namely the group experience (Section 8.3.1) and the contents of the program (Section 8.3.2), which my findings show to

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[46] Based on a model set out in the book by Franssen, J. *Van Vroeger: Levensverhalen Schrijven Met Ouderen* 1995. (From earlier times: Writing Life Stories with the Elderly).

be linked to self-perceived development could also inform groups and programs in other fields, some of them, addressed in Gowan, preparing for behaviour crucial to survival under extreme circumstances. Also in 2014 Cherry, Sampson et al. report a longitudinal study showing that perceived social support was associated with reduced post-traumatic stress disorder at 6 to 12 months after disasters (2, 8–9). Such findings about outcomes of extreme events point to a necessity to develop protective interventions for non-clinical populations living in areas prone to natural disasters such as floods and earthquakes, thus relating to a sizeable proportion of the world's population. In 2015 Canto et al. researched art-based group work with students who are combat veterans, and mentioned poetry as one of the modalities for such workshops (Canto et al. 5, 14). They based the group-writing option on Deshpande's 2010 paper, where she reported that the group setting was a "definite advantage" for the veterans in a writing program of 18 months' duration (Deshpande 250).

The findings of my study attest to the additional power of writing as a medium for development. The features intrinsic to the act of writing in addition to the power of group dynamics, bestow a special place on writing groups compared to other types of activities, to which writing may fruitfully be added. Structured writing can be a versatile and powerful intervention.

Academic evidence for the effectiveness of writing as a medium for reflection and integration of any kind of learning is accumulating in many fields and affirmed in the findings presented here. Certain basic thinking-feeling-writing skills have been found to enrich people's ability to reflect, and these skills can be taught through structured exercises in various group contexts. Exercises can be adapted to the needs of specific populations with common concerns, for example homelessness. Mazza's expressive/creative component (Section 4.2.1), which forms the main part of my writing groups, was particularly helpful in this respect (Mazza, "Words From the Heart" 204). Similarly writing has been a medium for working with refugees (Ljubinkovic in 2010), or doctoral students (Crème and Hunt in 2002).

Adaptation to a particular group consists of incorporating the key principles of writing exercises in content relevant to the specific concerns of the group's members (Deshpande 250). Exercises are presented at a linguistic level suited to participants and the group will be conducted at a fitting pace. Specific needs dictate the amount of time devoted to writing, sharing and discussing inside the time frame of each session or a fixed course of sessions.

The following sections intend to give examples of applications of my findings in widely diverging contexts. As before, I distinguish between Group Experience and Group Content, which are in practice intertwined elements of a structured writing group. Where, however, group experience is a feature of any group, the contents of the program investigated here are specific to writing groups. Writing is emphasised as an element that

influences group experience, thus setting it apart from groups that do not employ writing.

8.3.1 Group experience

Group experience represents the sum of personal impressions participants/students retain of the group's interpersonal dynamics. Nineteen out of twenty participants in my study expressed a clear preference for group work rather than individual writing/learning, because of the safe feeling, the mutual support, the immediate feedback, encounter with multiple perspectives and the feeling of commitment to the group which all enhanced their motivation. They experienced security in the group and that security emboldened them to try out new behaviour. This stands in contrast to themes mentioned in connection with solitary writing, namely a sense of isolation, the lack of immediate feedback, dwindling motivation, the abandoning of projects with frustration leading to less self-confidence.

I have argued that group experience can enhance the salutary effect of individual writing. What can be transferred to other fields is the need to create what Bowlby named a secure interpersonal base as a starting point for learning. This finding is in line with earlier outcomes of educational and therapeutic studies in the humanistic tradition (e.g. Rogers, *Client-Centered* and *Facilitation of Learning*, 304–305; Heron, *Facilitator Handbook*). It strengthens the idea that writing in a group can enhance the effects of solitary writing, provided a safe atmosphere is maintained by the facilitator/teacher of the group/class/course (e.g. Golden, "Use of Collaborative Writing"; Mazza, *Poetry Therapy* and "Group Work").

Writing requires a pause between feeling, thinking and translating to words. The physical act of writing, on paper as well as computer, may slow down internal processes, but having to think about how best to express your thoughts and feelings clearly belongs to 'Slow Thinking' (Kahneman) and in Walter Ong's words "Writing is a Technology That Restructures Thought". Slowing down may provide respite, a breathing space, from a fast pace of life. It can create another, less hurried, atmosphere when people sit and write together.

Training and education often take place in a group context, and writing is a major modality in the communication used in training. Writing is so common in our literate society that its importance is often overlooked. But writing is not only an art it is also an almost indispensable skill today. As an art it can be studied for its own sake, as in creative writing courses. However as a communicative ability the development of writing carries with it the development of other mental and behavioural abilities. Pennebaker's conclusions about the uniqueness of writing, compared to other forms of expression, confirm this:

> Traditional research on catharsis or the venting of emotions has failed to support the clinical value of emotional expression in the absence of cognitive processing ... gains appear to require translating experiences into language.
>
> <div align="right">Pennebaker, "Forming a Story" (1247–48)</div>

Translating experience into language and recreating it in the form of stories propel people forward towards attaining personal and professional goals, in other words to go beyond points of stagnation (Hunt, *Transformative Learning*; Josselson et al., *Narrative Research*; King "Health Benefits of Writing"; McAdams, *Stories We Live By*; Meijers and Lengelle "Narratives At Work"). To go beyond a fixed habitual level, that is to open up to the unknown, is a frightening challenge, which people undertake only when an optimum of safety is guaranteed. Entering a group may be attractive for many reasons but can at the same time be terrifying. Teaching creative writing to people who want to publish their work requires a tougher approach to feedback than facilitating a group where writing is the medium for health, well-being and development. And again I repeat: the responsibility of creating an appropriately safe atmosphere for all participants lies with the teacher/facilitator[47].

8.3.2 Group content

> By three methods we may learn wisdom: first, by reflection, which is noblest; second, by imitation, which is easiest; and third, by experience, which is the bitterest.
>
> <div align="center">Confucius</div>

The content of the writing groups studied here can be divided in two types, namely set elements directly applicable in other contexts, and variable elements to be adapted to other contexts.

Set elements are the stimuli built in to the group's structure for evoking awareness and reflection in participants. Participants are asked to write letters to themselves, write in a learning journal each session, and conduct self-evaluations at predetermined ties during and after the group. Findings confirm how these actions prompted personal development and encouraged its retention (see also Di Stefano et al.[48]). They enabled participants to

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[47] 'Appropriate' refers first of all to the needs of the participants and their capacity for handling challenging feedback and secondly to the purpose of the group.

[48] Di Stefano et al. found that the time spent to reflect on what has been learned pays off in terms of retention and mastery, mediated by self-efficacy (Bandura 1977), a concept closely related to Sense of Coherence. Asking participants to write their reflections down is more effective than only thinking them over.

conceptualise goals, put them into words and track their pursuit and degree of attainment through their writing. Since this is a private process, triggered by the group structure, but not necessarily shared with the group, it shows respect for and confirms personal agency. It gives space to all participants to go their own way within the group. The secure base of the group reduces anxiety and makes it safe to open up to experimenting with unfamiliar options. Realising that each person follows her own developmental path, striving towards her own goals, makes interpersonal competition in the group irrelevant, thereby further reducing stress.

Learning Journals, Letters to Self, and Self Evaluations can easily be included in training activities of any, and I really mean any, kind.

The variable elements in this study's writing groups are specific to the program offered to this non-clinical adult sample. The contents of the program, consisting of particular writing exercises and their sequence, are not a fixed protocol to be 'delivered' to other groups and other populations. However the program embodies concepts of learning by means of writing, which may be adapted to suit different contexts. Findings show that cognitive and affective mechanisms activated by writing exercises have effects on personal development experienced by participants, even if those effects are not yet fully understood.

Basic writing exercises are suitable at the beginning stage of groups in any population. Examples are exercises to hone the skill of attention to all senses in perceiving a situation and then choosing the words to relay your perceptions to the reader; the skill of deciding from which point of view to write; distinguishing between sensory perceptions and your emotions and opinions about them; becoming aware of the level of abstraction or detail you're writing at, leading to competently moving between generalities and specifics. The common denominator here is recognising and distinguishing between options of perception, usually unconscious, and the behavioural skill to choose between them through written expression. The introduction of such exercises needs to be tailored to the unique characteristics of each group. In a group consisting of housewives, or cooks for instance, awareness of the use of their senses may be initially activated by directing their attention to how they know when a dish is ready. This will send their memory to probe multiple instances where they probably had to use smell, sight and hearing to decide to lower the heat, take a dish off the stove, or finalise the cake decorations. In less uniform groups the facilitator will use various common experiences as prompts to link participants' attention to the use of senses, the uses of present, past and future, perspectives and levels of abstraction.

Advanced writing exercises may be suitable only to relatively resilient populations and not, or only with caution, to vulnerable participants.[49] An example is switching pronouns and tenses in a personal story (e.g. writing about trauma in the first person, present tense can result in re-traumatisation). As a general rule for exercises in non-therapeutic settings people are told not to write about traumatic or even just painful memories in the first person, present tense.

Systematically documenting the application of future exercises will aid the study of the effects of these mechanisms as translated to practice, and recent work in fields as diverse as academic education and problem solving in a business environment is already making inroads into understanding them (e.g. Hunt, Transformative Learning; Di Stefano et al. 1–148). Successful examples of the use of structured writing groups in other special contexts vary from professional hockey players, who coped with athletic failures, injuries and burn-out, (Scott-Reid 187–95), to midwives, aimed at experiential and personal development, (Rosetti, personal communication), establishing communication between young and old (Elah Intergenerational Writing Groups (web)) and making prisoners conversant with writing to express their external and internal situation (Harthill "Making Hay" 47–62).

To conclude this section I propose that the efficacy of a programme's content is heightened by the safety of a group, by the opportunities for interaction, feedback, reflection and encountering multiple perspectives. Building on the valuable results about the power of solitary structured expressive writing, the study of structured writing groups can leave the laboratory and therapy behind and venture into the world. The advantage of this approach lies in being able to reach many people by using a low-threshold (literacy, motivation), relatively low-cost intervention that may answer diverse developmental needs. 'Low-cost' refers to the modest physical conditions necessary (a quiet room, paper, pens), but less so to the cost of trained facilitators. 'Diverse needs' is intentionally vague, because these include the varied interests of clients and also of the researchers of human learning, health and educational programs.

8.4 Suggestions for future research

Many questions of interest are left unanswered and await future investigations based on similar or different methodological starting points.

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[49] In fact the facilitator can never be sure about the level of resilience of any participant at any moment in time and has to gauge people's reactions to exercises closely, even in a 'non-clinical' group like in this study.

Nicholls points to three areas of healthcare supported by the theoretical basis of embodied writing:

> the self-management of stress and depression; with people whose bodily felt sense has been disturbed in some way, such as in the treatment of eating disorders and in relation to so-called 'alexithymic' states; and in the ongoing training and development of healthcare professionals. (Nicholls, "Writing the body" 198–199).

The suggestions I make for future research concern the topics that interest me, and others will undoubtedly add to the list. Much can be gained from gathering more baseline data, perhaps relating to a longer period, at the start of the group and collecting follow-up writing data spanning a longer period after the end of the group. What are the different 'effect sizes' on personal development from writing groups of different durations? Can a minimum group-time be established as effective for specific purposes? How does the time frame relate to fulfilling participants' goals and expectations? Comparisons between facilitation styles may eventually result in understanding the key elements and boundary requirements for group facilitators. Work of this kind has been done in other fields already (e.g. Heron 1999) and is also applicable to writing groups. In fact I intend to set up such a comparative study in the near future among a substantial group of colleague facilitators in Israel.

Time, concerning the duration of writing groups, is one of my abiding concerns. My study of a 12-session, 24-hours group does not answer the practical question of what can be a useful time frame for sustained personal development. How to determine the trade-off in relation to investment of time, costs and energy? In my own experience with long-term groups, although only studied retrospectively, I witnessed considerable personal development, attested to be sustained years after the groups ended. Long-term groups obviously require more investment from all persons involved. How to shorten them while maintaining their benefits? Even single-session writing groups have been reported to benefit people, as is shown with terminally ill participants in 1998 (Archer 93–103). Clearly there will be no definitive answer to this question, which depends on the coming together of varying needs among populations with the availability of human and material resources in a community. Still I hope that future studies will discover factors to facilitate decision-making about duration and frequency of groups and sessions.

More can be done to fine-tune the operationalisation of the components of my definition of personal development to determine the relevance of each component and the definition as a whole. The category of Telic communication, for example, is not defined sensitively enough for my purpose, and as a consequence has not yielded a reliable finding. The baseline questionnaire coding counted all mentions of attachment figures

from the past (parents, siblings, spouses) as Telic. This skewed the baseline Telic measure unduly.

In future studies I will separate affective utterances to or about absent persons from the interactive ones directed to (or about) group members. In this way I expect to find whether Moreno's 1961 observations (and mine in former groups) apply, namely that Telic utterances increase with time in a (writing) group, as explained in Sections 1.3.2 and 2.2.2. However, a pilot attempt to do this with a re-coding of my current data showed no increase, indicating that other, as yet undiscovered, factors have to be considered.

It will be interesting to follow the resemblances between my single category of Internal Communication (i.e. communication with Self, indicating cognition / awareness in my current study), and the more detailed categories, called I-positions, used in applications of Dialogical Self Theory (Batory et al.; Hermans and Giessen; Lewis). Further research on internal communication could discover what happens with(in) the self that enables beneficial development. To combine such study of internal communication with the study of writing groups would be illuminating and Lengelle is currently combining the two in her doctoral study about developing a narrative career identity. She emphasises that an internal and external dialogue is necessary, yet an internal dialogue is often missing (personal communication).

Future research will benefit from collaboration between practitioners and theorists in debating and refining theoretical constructs, like personal development, awareness, flexibility, and their operationalisation. In 2009 Nicholls expresses a similar hope for collaboration in the concluding chapter of her thesis "Writing the Body" (198), one of the few academic studies akin to mine. She also proposed in Beyond Expressive Writing, Evolving Models of Developmental Creative Writing that qualitative and "critical approaches to health psychology may offer more detailed ways of understanding the mechanisms by which writing can be beneficial and how it might best be used beyond the predominantly quantitative methods used in the study of Expressive Writing"(178). Hunt's 2013 book *Transformative Learning Through Creative Life Writing* does just that. However, more will have to be studied in the future, informed by the combined forces of psychosocial, linguistic, cognitive, educational and neurobiological perspectives, to reveal what happens in our 'black box' while writing.

It would be gratifying if this small slice of writing group research turns out to converge with the extensive studies done in interpersonal neurobiology (IPNB), operationalised, digested and popularised by the clinical psychiatrist Daniel Siegel in "The Developing Mind" and *The Mindful Brain*. His views on the process of change include internal and interpersonal behaviours moderated by a continuous feedback loop that is naturally available in groups:

> Mind, Brain and Relationships are the three irreducible anchor points of our human experience. Mind can be seen as having a core process that

regulates the flow of energy and information; Brain is the mechanism by which energy and information flow throughout the whole body, and Relationships are the ways we share energy and information flow with one another through patterns of communication. With a mind that is resilient and coherent, the brain is integrated, and relationships emphatic. This is the triangle of well-being.   (Siegel, The Mindful Brain 262)

Combining the specific view of writing groups with findings from the wider scope of interpersonal neurobiology and other perspectives on the processes of human learning and development will gradually advance theoretical and practical knowledge of why, how, when and with whom to use structured writing groups for personal development.

8.5 Further reflections

I spent most of my life

Doubting my belief

Believing my doubts

My mind was so complex

So it remained inflexible – Oh...

So why not try

to simplify

Believe your belief, doubt your doubts.

HaBanot Nechama – singers/songwriters

In this section I address a mixture of concerns of theoretical, philosophical-methodological and practical nature, which reflect sometimes unvoiced doubts about my own study and research at all. I present observations on persisting questions, on reflexivity and ethics. I sum up *my* personal development as it has taken place throughout this study and the writing of the thesis.

8.5.1 Avoiding misconceptions

To study the course of a life, one must take account of stability and change, continuity and discontinuity, orderly progression as well as stasis and chaotic fluctuation.

> *It is not enough to focus solely on a single moment; nor is it enough to study a series of three or four moments widely separated in time, as is ordinarily done in longitudinal research.* It is necessary, in Robert White's (1952) felicitous phrase, to examine "lives in progress" and to follow the temporal sequence in detail over a span of years.

Daniel Levinson, *Adult Development* 3–4 (*italics added*)

Levinson's words point to an illusionary aspect of studies like mine that call themselves longitudinal. Results of a study of changing processes at three points in time spanning nine month in total, cannot presume to portray more than a small slice out of the course of life, albeit showing more than a cross-sectional study. Such research does no more than follow the effects of an intervention during two hours a week for twelve weeks. The researcher can be in danger of forgetting that the participants live their own lives during the remaining 166 hours of the week when they are not in the writing group session, plus all the years before and after the group. Regarding life before the group, rich textual material is to be found in the baseline questionnaires: exposés of world-views, gathered wisdom and writing experience. The meaning participants see in their life and their

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strategies to cope with adversity are brought to the fore in these texts. Although the study has been set up to yield a before-and-after comparison, more can be done by systematically collecting spontaneous pre-group – thus before baseline – and post-group – after follow-up – writings to compare their characteristics, using additional text analysis methods, qualitative and quantitative (e.g. Pennebaker et al., *Linguistic Inquiry and Word Count*).

Mixing qualitative and quantitative methods in the way I have done may cause some confusion. The translation of qualitative data to numbers (the counting of utterances in content analysis, assigning numerical values to aspects of drawings and the summary computation resulting in a development ranking) may be misleading in conjunction with the quantitative findings of the Sense of Coherence questionnaire, which are amenable to more than just descriptive statistical operations. This mixed-method approach is however supported by Sandelowski who states that:

> In qualitative content analysis, counting is a means to an end, not the end itself. Researchers may use a "quasi-statistical analysis style" by summarizing their data numerically with descriptive statistics. But the end result of counting is not a quasi-statistical rendering of the data, but rather a description of the patterns or regularities in the data that have, in part, been discovered and then confirmed by counting. Qualitative content analysis moves farther into the domain of interpretation than quantitative content analysis in that there is an effort to understand not only the manifest (e.g. frequencies and means), but also the latent content of data.
>
> Sandelowski, *Combining* 338

For my approach this means that counting frequencies and numbers in all cases has to be taken as an auxiliary tool to the main effort of interpretive analysis.

8.5.2 Reflexivity and ethics, my role as practitioner-researcher

My double role as the facilitator of the groups and their researcher places this work in the category of practitioner-researcher, which I put in a more rigorous perspective in Section 6.1 within a mixed method design. I lodge reflexivity and ethics under one roof because to me they are intertwined. My whole approach regarding writing groups entails the embedding of reflexivity and ethics in all action and reflection. I see this as a fundamental requirement for the practice, and not only the study, of work with people, based on Tsekeris and Katrivesis's 2009 "Ethical Reflexivity and Epistemological Weakness" (26) and on Roth's 2005 introduction to the debate "Ethics and Social Practice" (par.5 and 15). To be responsible in both I had to stay acutely aware of my external and internal behaviour, my ingrained assumptions, my feelings and my thoughts. The role of a

practitioner-researcher required me to adhere simultaneously to two codes of conduct, two not entirely overlapping ethical domains. My primary professional identity is shaped and bound by the values guiding clinical social workers and psychotherapists. This means giving precedence to upholding and if possible strengthening the mental, physical and social integrity of persons while I work with them. That is the role I am most familiar with.

I adopted the role of researcher rather late in life and had to familiarise myself with the practicalities of behaving like one, without betraying practitioner values. The challenges of this combination have presented themselves strongly in two contexts, the first being that as a researcher I set stronger boundaries, to limit personal contact with participants outside the group setting. As a practitioner I would have made myself more readily available for consultation than I have done during the research period. I felt it was necessary to limit my personal influence to facilitating the groups, and not 'contaminate' possible effects of the group process by communicating with participants in private. Thus the only extra-group communication was built into the structure of the research and consisted of giving written feedback on exercises by email. No private communication was exchanged between participants and me during the period of the study, including the six months until after the follow-up.

> Our conductor watched with sad, wise eyes,
>
> Mothering, fathering, childing the group.
>
> We splashed her with adverbs and conjunctions,
>
> But she never jumped in.
>
> (part of a longer poem about the group by Tez)

The second context in which I felt friction between the two roles was during the writing-up of the thesis. In writing the researcher needed to set an academic tone, which rankled with my practitioner self. The practitioner kept pressing for a style that would honour the intimately personal experiences, the energy and vibration of the whole endeavour. Sandelowski ("What's in a Name?" 83) defends such 'practitioner' writing in a framework of qualitative description. According to others (reviewed in Hyett) giving in to the practitioner would certainly have lessened academic rigour. The preludes to the chapters of the thesis were a minor outlet for the practitioner. I hope my young researcher self has also benefitted from my practitioner's unruly writing style.

8.5.3 Does culture matter?

> *Pat*: Channa said 'What is wing-walking?' She didn't understand. So we explained it to her. The other thing she couldn't understand was **'man-flu'**. So I think she got a little out of it.
>
> *Julie*: I'm sure she got a lot out of it.
>
> *Pat*: Other than the certification she'll get for it, I think she got little extra bits and pieces, you know. [Pat FU 33a]

I did indeed get a lot out of working with writing groups in England, from expressions unknown to me as a non-native speaker of the language to larger cultural features different from my home country. That I would learn more expressions I had expected, but for the subtler things taken for granted by locals I was much less prepared. I grew up in the Netherlands, worked professionally in Israel for decades and conducted the study in Yorkshire. When I began the study I considered myself to be a fairly flexible, adaptable person. Nevertheless I found myself repeatedly surprised by the reserve of the English (for want of a better label), in comparison with a communicative approachability, even garrulousness, considered normal in Israel. I learned that 'my house is my castle', far from being a dead metaphor, is very much alive and kicking in the UK. When a participant actually saw it as a huge personal change in herself to have invited members from the group to her house as a result of getting to know them, I was astounded.

> Jewel: A change in my behaviour is, I've had L. and T. around to the house, which is something I would not normally be doing. I just don't do that, I just don't have people around to my house. ... If people come to my house I feel – I can't tell you why – I just feel very trapped. [Jewel FU 98]

English reserve has also come to mean to me that one tells people personal things on a strictly 'need to know' basis. It's actually quite nice for me as a facilitator to find that participants do not expect me to listen to unasked-for information. It helps in structured writing, because people in this culture are already proficient (sometimes too much so) in filtering their expressions according to the intended audience / readership. Today I can say that in Israel often the opposite is the case. In Israeli groups it may be necessary to curb the flow of information volunteered in speech and writing. The few participants with non-British backgrounds helped me and their groups to become aware of and to understand other ways of dealing with disclosure that were normal to them.

Even though my study is situated in a developed western country (UK), in a particular area (West Yorkshire) and only in the English language, diversity exists among its participants. Rather than aiming for a uniform sample, representative of some defined

'condition' (e.g. problem, illness), I consider it fortunate that each of the four groups, formed by self-selection, happened to include some diversity of culture, age and gender, as well as some differences in country of origin and mother tongue. Such diversity befits the study's question whether structured writing in a group context enables personal development in adult participants from a 'general', unrestricted population.

Interactions differed between the four groups, in each of which participants came from slightly different geographical and cultural backgrounds. Did the nature of interaction influence the individual results my study looked for– Findings do not show that differences on the individual level of personal development reflect group interactions observed on the group level. The most native 'Yorkshire' group, which had less dynamic interactions than the others, also included individuals in the 'high developer group' (see Section 7.1). This is based on conversational analyses of interaction for all four groups, which is not presented here as part of the findings since the focus was solely on individual development. These data are however available for further study on the relationship between group dynamics and personal development.

I feel that I have now worked at two opposing ends of a continuum of personal expression and may be more capable of steering members of diverse cultural groups towards finding a level of disclosure satisfactory to them in their writing.

8.5.4 What I have learned: my personal development

Altogether my research has been an endeavour of testing assumptions based on a lifetime's worth of work and of reporting the process and findings in a scholarly manner. It has reminded me of the wider importance of my work at the overlapping margins of therapy, education and social action and my motivation for doing it. I have learned much more than the reported findings from my study.

After many years of facilitating 'special' writing groups for participants living with chronic post-trauma I concluded that similarities exist in the writing of trauma-survivors beyond the particular details of the trauma. General underlying developmental processes still appeared to be at work in adults, some well over 65 years of age, who joined a writing group. Distinctions between times, circumstances and locations of atrocities such as wars or disasters slowly started to lose their importance when looking at the commonalities of the processes set in motion by certain writing exercises. The writings I have gathered over time in many groups showed that survivors gradually develop through their written reflections towards what I call a more encompassing view of the world.

Starting from this background I constructed my operational definition of personal development and decided to test it on a sample of non-clinical adults in a different

culture. The questions this study asked stem from the assumption that successful adult development, enabling the person to live a fulfilling life, is characterised by evolution towards the flexibility of a more encompassing world view and a sense of interconnectedness with others, compared to a personal baseline.

The study substantiated my understandings by explicitly showing processes of generative learning in participants' reports of their experience.

I don't know if this is an outcome of writing groups, or just a sign of self-selection among those who join and stay in such a group. It is probably a bit of both. But during more than thirty years of working as a therapist my experience is, without exception, that not a single post-trauma client working one-to-one has been able to develop beyond their 'stuck' self. In contrast there have been quite a few who evolved in a writing group towards a stronger sense of connection with others, who gained agency, possibility and hope for themselves. People who are very much set in their way of being have often expressed themselves to be uninterested in reflective writing about experiences, but they may also sometimes wish to convince others, to preach or to prove they are right. And this has been enough motivation for them to have joined writing groups and, to their surprise, to have found themselves were influenced by the process, willy-nilly.

The continuous reflection necessitated by the study and the writing of the thesis has strengthened my understanding that writing groups need to be facilitated with the appropriate skills of group work, psychosocial knowledge and personal writing experience. This is true for clinical and for non-clinical groups. A skilled facilitator will be able to support the development of participants according to individual needs and capability. As long as the person is self-motivated to be in the group, different personal tendencies need to be accommodated and validated. I believe I have improved my skill to enable many kinds of participants to benefit in their own ways from writing.

On the practical side I have started to learn a style of academic writing and reasoning I was unaccustomed to. The whole process, with its ups and downs, has boosted my own sense of coherence, for which every little bit helps as life goes on.

8.6 Summary

The results of the present study make a contribution to understanding the effect of structured writing groups on personal development in a non-clinical adult population. In section 8.2 I wrote about some of the limitations of this study. But to quote a saying by the Dutch 'philosopher' soccer player Johan Cruyff: "Every disadvantage has its advantage", this may apply to my study.

The main strengths of the study lie in its longitudinal design, the use of mixed qualitative and quantitative methods yielding a multidimensional picture of individual processes, and its generalist[50] approach of investigating non-clinical older adults, combining theory and practice. Key principles of writing exercises identified in the study enable application in a wide range of fields.

Its main weaknesses are the shortness of the follow-up period in relation to a person's life span, the lack of a control group, and insufficiently validated categories in the content analysis for an accurate 'test' of my definition of personal development. Future research may remedy this and discover valid assessments for personal development in adults.

I regret that the framework of a thesis did not allow me the time and the resources to expand my investigations as much as I would have liked to do.

In the study presented here development through the writing groups varied among participants and a small minority (2 out of 20) did not benefit. The findings indicate that the inability to benefit from a group-writing intervention depends partly on pre-existing conditions of the participants, as explained in the summary of Chapter 7. It is essential but not sufficient for participants to join a writing group by free choice out of an interest in personal writing. It is recommended that a taster session be conducted to find out whether prospective members join with an attitude of openness to diversity and sharing. Such a preliminary phase will assist potential participants in deciding whether a writing group is likely to suit them (and may give the facilitator the chance to suggest alternative activities to those people), since I know from experience that this is not an activity for everyone.

Combining the roles of practitioner and researcher presented challenges in the two contexts most associated with the code of ethics of each separate role. While conducting the groups the practitioner needed to be mindful of the less familiar researcher role by maintaining stricter boundaries of distance between her and participants. The writing of the thesis was encumbered by ongoing friction about writing style between me as the researcher and me as the practitioner. Only by considerable reflection and reflexivity was

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[50] Generalist in contrast to approaches dealing with special 'clinical' populations.

it possible to manoeuvre between the two to reach a document resulting in a compromise to me.

I have tried my best at investigating my assumptions unbiased, challenging them with rigorous methods and procedures. General results lend support to my assumptions; detailed analysis shows flaws in the operationalisation of some categories in my definition of personal development. As a beginning researcher at a late age I have become acutely aware of my naivety.

CODA

From the place where we are right

Flowers will never grow

In the spring.

The place where we are right

Is hard and trampled

Like a yard.

But doubts and loves

Dig up the world

Like a mole, a plow.

And a whisper will be heard in the place

Where the ruined

House once stood.

Yehuda Amichai

APPENDICES

Appendix A – Explanation of study to participants

Dear participant in the writing group,

I am undertaking a doctoral research project at the University of York, to learn about the nature of personal development in writing groups. This is an innovative investigation, aimed to achieve a better understanding of the benefit of writing about life, reflecting and discussing the thoughts and feelings that are expressed through writing in a group setting.

My earlier studies show that while you create written narratives of your life to share with others, various personal and interpersonal processes are set in motion, which may benefit you now and in the future.

This study wants to find out about these developments, how they connect to writing (as distinguished from talking about life) and how they may be enhanced by writing in a group which enables discussion and reflection (as distinguished from writing privately, alone).

As a participant in my group I hope you will take part in this research. By taking part you will be making a contribution to our knowledge of the processes that take place in writing groups.

Participation in the research requires:

your commitment to attend all 12 sessions of this group.

responding to a questionnaire and other tasks at the start, the end and at 6 months after the end of the group.

giving a short interview about your experiences after the end of the group to a researcher other than the facilitator.

sharing your written exercises with me (the facilitator) after each session, to allow study of your text and to receive personal feedback (in writing).

Participation in the research is not a requirement for taking part in this group, but would be very much appreciated This is a collaborative and highly interactive undertaking between you, the participants, and me, the facilitator/researcher. Your input is invaluable

Thank you,

Channa Cune

Appendix B: Letter of consent

Letter of Consent

I want to take part in the research project about Personal Development in Writing Groups.

I understand that, for the purposes of her research and the writing that arises from it, Channa Cune will want to discuss and quote from my answers to the research questionnaires, and I am happy for her to do that.

I understand that, for the purposes of her research and the writing that arises from it, Channa Cune may want to discuss and quote from my writings during the group, and I am happy for her to do that.

I understand that the material used by Channa Cune for her project and whatever writings will arise will be presented anonymously, thereby protecting my identity.

I would like Channa Cune to use a pseudonym when referring to me: YES / NO

[The pseudonym is used to make the research report more readable, as an alternative to referring to people by random letters or numbers. It ensures confidentiality while the writing still relates to 'real people'.]

The pseudonym I would like to be referred by is ....

I am aware that Channa Cune will be adhering to the ethical guidelines of the University of York and to those of her profession as a group facilitator.

I have the right to withdraw from the project at any time, but I am aware that full participation requires attendance at all 12 meetings of the group.

Name: _____

Signature: _____

Date: _____

I promise to inform you of my findings at the conclusion of the project. This will in all likelihood be towards the end of 2013.

With sincere thanks,

Channa Cune

Note: The completion of the thesis took a year longer than planned at the time this LoC was written.

Appendix C: Baseline biographical and writing experience questionnaire

Note: Lines for responses have been omitted here from original form.

Biographical and writing experience

please fill in or circle your answers where appropriate

1. My pseudonym for this study is _____
2. I was born in the year_____
3. My country of birth is_____(if you like you may add county or place)
4. I live alone / with a partner / with the family I created / with the family I was born in / with others _____
5. I work/ am retired / am unemployed / study / do something else_____
6. I have skills I use / a profession: _____
7. I have __ years of formal education (schools of any kind)
8. I'd like to mention these important things I learned outside of formal education:
9. I'd like to mention the following things that had a big impact on my life:_____

10. In the past I have used writing to cope with difficult situations in life.

true	false	don't know
if so, please give one or more examples	if so, please give one or more examples	if so, what are your thoughts about this topic

11. In the past I have kept a diary or a journal for myself.

true	I am still doing this	no
if so, please write how it served you.	if so, please write how it serves you at present.	if so, what are your thoughts about this topic

12. In the past I have regularly written letters to family and friends.

true	I am still doing this	no
if so, please write how it served you.	if so, please write how it serves you at present.	if so, what are your thoughts about this topic

13. In the past I have written stories and/or poems.

true	I am still doing this	no
if so, please write how it served you.	if so, please write how it serves you at present.	if so, what are your thoughts about this topic

14. In the past I have participated in writing activities with others.

true	I am still doing this	no
if so, please write how it served you.	if so, please write how it serves you at present.	if so, what are your thoughts about this topic

15. In the past I have written (part of) my life's story.

true	I am still doing this	no
if so, at which age did you write it and for which purpose–.	if so, please write for which purpose	if so, what are your thoughts about this topic

I am willing to provide a copy of this life story, *or another story* I have written in the past, for the purposes of this research: yes / no

Today's date is: _____

Your collaboration in this research is greatly appreciated.

Thank you very much for taking part.

Channa Cune

Appendix D: Orientation to life (SOC) questionnaire and permission by copyright holder

Orientation to Life Questionnaire

This is a series of questions about various aspects of our lives. Each question has 7 possible answers. Please **circle** the number which best expresses your answer: the numbers 1 and 7 are the extremes, the words next to them show the start and end points of the range. Choose one answer only for each question.
There are no right or wrong answers, everyone has different experiences in life!

1. Do you have the feeling that you don't really care about what goes on around you?
    very seldom or never 1 - 2 - 3 - 4 - 5 - 6 - 7 - very often

2. Has it happened that you were surprised by the behaviour of people whom you thought you knew well?
    never happened 1 - 2 - 3 - 4 - 5 - 6 - 7 - always happened

3. Has it happened that people who you counted on disappointed you?
    never happened 1 - 2 - 3 - 4 - 5 - 6 - 7 - always happened

4. Until now your life has had:
    no clear goals or purpose at all 1 - 2 - 3 - 4 - 5 - 6 - 7 - very clear goals and purpose

5. Do you have the feeling that you're being treated unfairly?
    very often 1 - 2 - 3 - 4 - 5 - 6 - 7 - very seldom or never

6. Do you have the feeling that you are in an unfamiliar situation and don't know what to do?
    very often 1 - 2 - 3 - 4 - 5 - 6 - 7 - very seldom or never

7. Doing the things you do every day is:
    a source of deep pleasure and satisfaction 1 - 2 - 3 - 4 - 5 - 6 - 7 - a source of pain and boredom

8. Do you have very mixed-up feelings and ideas?
    very often 1 - 2 - 3 - 4 - 5 - 6 - 7 - very seldom or never

9. Does it happen that you have feelings inside you would rather not feel?
    very often 1 - 2 - 3 - 4 - 5 - 6 - 7 - very seldom or never

10. Many people -even those with a strong character- sometimes feel losers in certain situations. How often have you felt this way in the past?
    never 1 - 2 - 3 - 4 - 5 - 6 - 7 - very often

11. When something happened, have you generally found that:
    You overestimated or underestimated its importance 1 - 2 - 3 - 4 - 5 - 6 - 7 - you saw things in the right proportion

12. How often do you have the feeling that there's little meaning in the things you do in your daily life?
    very often 1 - 2 - 3 - 4 - 5 - 6 - 7 - very seldom or never

13. How often do you have feelings that you're not sure you can keep under control?
    very often 1 - 2 - 3 - 4 - 5 - 6 - 7 - very seldom or never

Please sign with your pseudonym!

_____

date:

March 3, 2014

PhD Student Channa Cune-Van Gelderen,
University of York
United Kingdom
(write.ingroup@gmail.com)

Dear Channa Cune-Van Gelderen,

I hereby grant permission to use the 13-item version of the Sense of Coherence (Orientation to Life) Questionnaire, originally found in Unraveling the mystery of health: How people manage stress and stay well, by Aaron Antonovsky (Jossey-Bass Publishers, 1987).

The permission is granted upon fulfillment of the following conditions:

1. You may not redistribute the questionnaire (in print or electronic form) except for your own professional or academic purposes and you may not charge money for its use. If administered online, measures should be taken to insure that (a) access to the questionnaire be given only to participants by means of a password or a different form of limited access, (b) the questionnaire should not be downloadable, and (c) access to the questionnaire should be time-limited for the period of data collection, afterwhich it should be taken off the server. Distributing the questionnaire to respondents via email is not permited. Finally, any electronic version of the questionnaire which you may have for your research purposes (other than distribution to research participants) should be in PDF format including password protection for printing and editing.

2. In any publication in which the questionnaire is reprinted, reference to the abovementioned source should be given, and a footnote should be added saying that the questionnaire is reprinted with the permission of the copyright holder.

3. The copyright of the Sense of Coherence (Orientation to Life) Questionnaire remains solely in the hands of the Executor of the Estate of Aaron Antonovsky.

If possible, I would appreciate receiving a copy of any forthcoming paper concerning a study in which the SOC questionnaire has been used, for private use in building an SOC publication database.

Sincerely,

Avishai Antonovsky, Ph.D.
Estate of Aaron Antonovsky Department of Education and Psychology The Open University Israel

On behalf of Avishai Antonovsky:

Monica Eriksson, PhD, Associate Professor Department of Nursing, Health & Culture University West, Center on Salutogenesis Trollhättan, Sweden

Appendix E: One participant's full analysis
linked with Chapter 7

Meet Barbara

Barbara is a stout widow of 76 who still works part-time as a coordinator of volunteers in the same office where the group meets. She walks with a cane, but when she sits at the table she exudes energy. Because she found herself too succinct and short in her written expression, she set herself the goal to learn to write 'more', by which she meant narratives and stories.

She completed the baseline questionnaire concisely and sparingly, like in the following quotes[51]:

Am very interested now in learning how to put thoughts into writing. [Barb-S base 11]

Learning to cope on my own (had a big impact on my life) [ibid. 4]

She is English born and lives with her adult daughter. She has 12 years of formal education and names shorthand and typing as skills that she uses. Friends are important and so is the ability to mix with other people outside her own circle: "This is something not taught in the education of the 40's" [ibid. 2]. She also wrote: "I don't tend to express my feelings in writing, but in letters to family and friends I always managed to express genuine feelings." [ibid. 7, 9-10]. A positive self image shines through her statement that

Working for the same organisation both professionally and voluntary for the past 59 years has made me well known and respected in the community. [ibid. 5]

A shortcut to view Barbara's path from start of the writing group (baseline) to its follow up (FU), leads through quotes of her words at each of the three assessed stages. As a shortcut it of course misses the context and the scenery of the full route.

Baseline quote

I am sorry now not to have kept a diary or a journal for myself, because could have kept record of situations experienced. Now want to record events. [Barb S-base 8; 12]

End quote

I think we all have gained something different from the experience, nevertheless I was still writing what I wanted to write. In the end I enjoyed it, but I don't think it's inspired me any more, I still went on my way, but on the way I feel as though I've improved. Now I don't know whether that is 'because of' or that I would have done that anyway through

---

[51] Wordings of the questionnaire are in italics and round brackets. The location of the quote in the data is in square brackets.

the weeks. [Barb End 3]

Follow Up quotes

My thoughts about writing have changed. Since the group I've been reading more and more, and not only reading more but reading with a different view. [Barb-FU 13-15]

I used to put one word down, concise, it's flowered, you know, the language has flowered a bit more. Where I started at the very beginning, which became a bit of a joke in the group – my pen went down for about 30 seconds and in the end sometimes they were waiting for me to finish, so yes, from beginning to end, that changed. [Barb-FU 38; 42-43]

7.E.1 Content Analysis of written and spoken text assessments

Barbara's Content Analysis: the full route

As explained in Ch.7.1, the content analysis of written and spoken texts is organised in categories, which are theoretically linked to my definition of personal development.

While baseline categories naturally cannot include group experience and group causes, these are important in the end and follow up stages. So is the category 'No Change'. Any change mentioned is coded under its 'area', be it Learning, Coping, Sense of Coherence etc., according to the coding agenda given in chapter 6. But No Change and its topic are recorded by name in a separate category, e.g. 'My verbal skills have not changed'[52].

The coding and subsequent counting of utterances has been done in a recurrent, iterative process by two coders. Utmost attention was given to context.

Figure E.7.3 shows the count of Barbara's baseline utterances. Here we see how her presentation of herself at the start of the group, in response to the questionnaire, is organised along the categories of the definition:

Levels of Learning (LL), Coping (Cop), Telic (affective, relational) communication (Tel); Intrapersonal communication (InC, is internal communication with Self), Interpersonal communication (IpC, is communication with others), Sense of Coherence (SOC).

The communication categories of Telic and Interpersonal in the baseline questionnaire contain references to affective relations and interactions important to the responder, e.g. "I did not recognise my father when he returned from the war, so we never bonded." These written references at baseline are not, like at the next two assessments, live interactions within the group, or with an interviewer and, as such, are not comparable to them. Moreover, all mentions of parents and siblings have been coded as Telic at

baseline, which may have led to a misleading overrepresentation, compared with 'live' affective interaction at the later assessments. Expressions of affective relating do however reveal people's 'relational style', which can vary with context and time.

Units denote units of analysis, the total number of utterances coded. The pie graph shows the relative presence of each category in the baseline utterances, the bar graph gives their frequency in absolute numbers.The number of units in Barbara's baseline is only 12, which yields 21 codes, providing a 'skinny' picture.

A good half of Barbara's utterances expresses affective and relational communications with or about others (Tel and IpC), over a quarter convey beliefs and values about herself in the world (SOC). The scant wording of her responses does not reveal any communication with herself (InC). She mentions 19% combined learning and coping in this presentation of herself.

Barbara	base
LL	3
cop	1
telic	6
inc	0
ipc	5
soc	6

frequencies

Barbara Baseline

LL 14%
soc 29%
cop 5%
telic 29%
ipc 24%
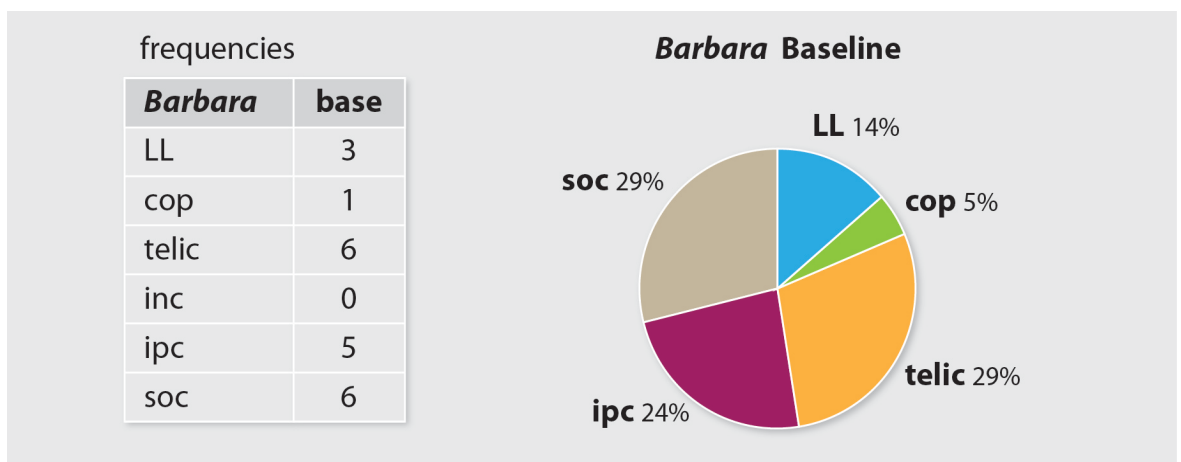
Fig. E.7.3 Barbara baseline content analysis frequencies and percentages.

Figure E.7.4 shows the count of Barbara's coded utterances at the end of the group. One needs to keep in mind that this is not a straightforward comparison between the categories. Only utterances that express views and behaviours that are different from those already mentioned in the baseline are now included in Learning, Coping and SOC. Explicit mentions of unchanged behaviours are recorded as No Change at follow up.

The communication categories of Telic, Intra- and Interpersonal are also of a different nature at the end of the group, because here a verbal text, from live interaction with the group, is analysed. Any comparison with their namesakes at baseline is probably misleading, if not futile.

categories	LL	cop	telic	inc	ipc	soc	units	GE	GC
total	3	11	17	18	13	0	30	11	11
plus									
minus									
neutral									
baseline					1				

Barbara **End all cats**

ipc 21%   LL 5%   cop 18%   inc 29%   telic 27%

Barbara **End frequencies 30 units**

Barbara **End GC/GE**

GC 50%   GE 50%
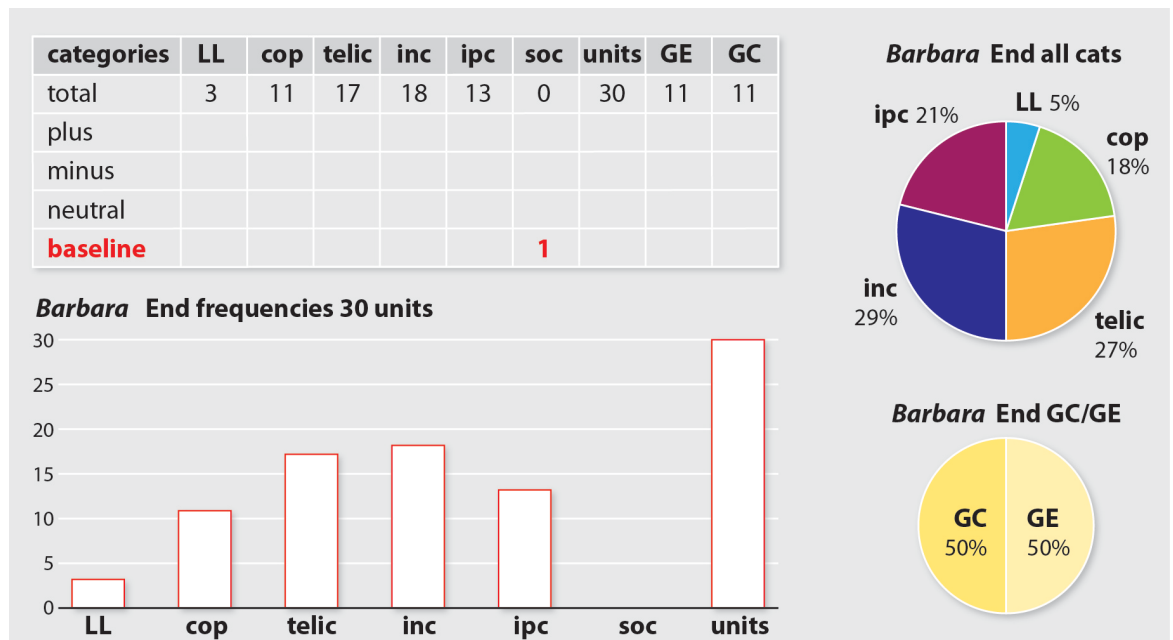
Fig. E.7.4 Barbara end content analysis frequencies and percentages.

Group Experience and Group Cause appear for the first time at this stage. These categories contain mentions of group aspects important to the person. They enabled me to gain insight into the extent to which the persons consider the writing group to have 'caused' or enabled changes they notice in themselves. They are crucial in their relation to my research question whether such structured writing groups can engender personal development, in other words: function as mediators.

Analysis of the mentioning of these categories also made visible the relative importance to participants of Group Experience and Group Cause. While GC and GE are certainly overlapping, the coding has followed the distinction of GC = mentions of the structure of the groups' assignments, exercises, program and facilitation, and GE = mentions of atmosphere, discussions, the company of other members. GC denotes what is specific for a structured writing group, GE what could conceivably occur in any group dynamic. In fig. 7.4 above, the count of Barbara's 30 coded utterances at the End stage, we see two pie

251

graphs:

'GC/GE' shows that for Barbara Group Cause and Group Experience were of equal importance.

'End %all' pie includes also the relative mentions of GC and GE, which amount to a quarter of all utterances, which can be expected in a group discussion.

This brings us to figures 7.5.a and 7.5.b, which shows how often certain categories are ascribed to (linked with) Group Cause and Group Experience, findings of special importance to my research question. The first row of the table "GC End links" gives the number of utterances per category that was linked to GC.

The second row gives the percentage linked to GC of the total number of utterances in each category, which is shown in the bottom row "total all cats".

End GC links	LL	cop+	telic	inc	ipc	soc	GC
linked	3	5	17	18	13	0	11
totals	3	11	17	18	13	0	11
baseline						**1**	

Barbara **End GC 11 units links**

ipc 14%   LL 14%

inc 24%   cop 24%

telic 24%

Barbara **End GC 11 units links frequencies**
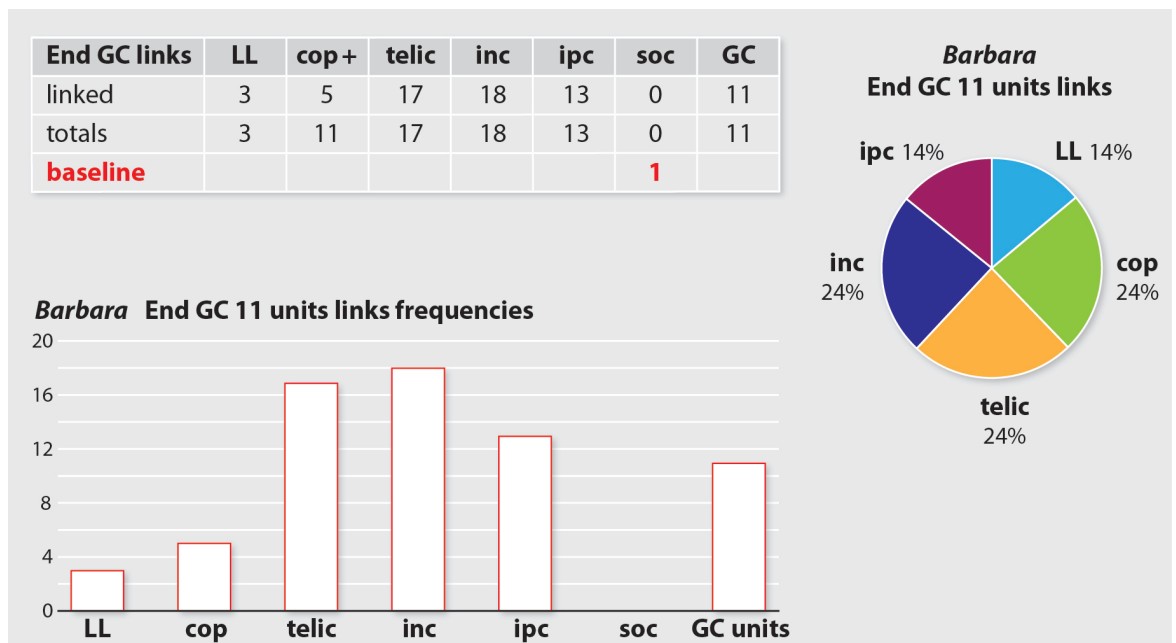
Fig. E.7.5.a Barbara's GC links at End

End GE links	LL	cop+	telic	inc	ipc	soc	GE
linked	0	1	9	6	8	0	11
totals	3	11	17	18	13	0	11
baseline						**1**	

Barbara
End GE 11 units links

cop 4%
ipc 33%
telic 38%
inc 25%

Barbara End GE 11 units links frequencies
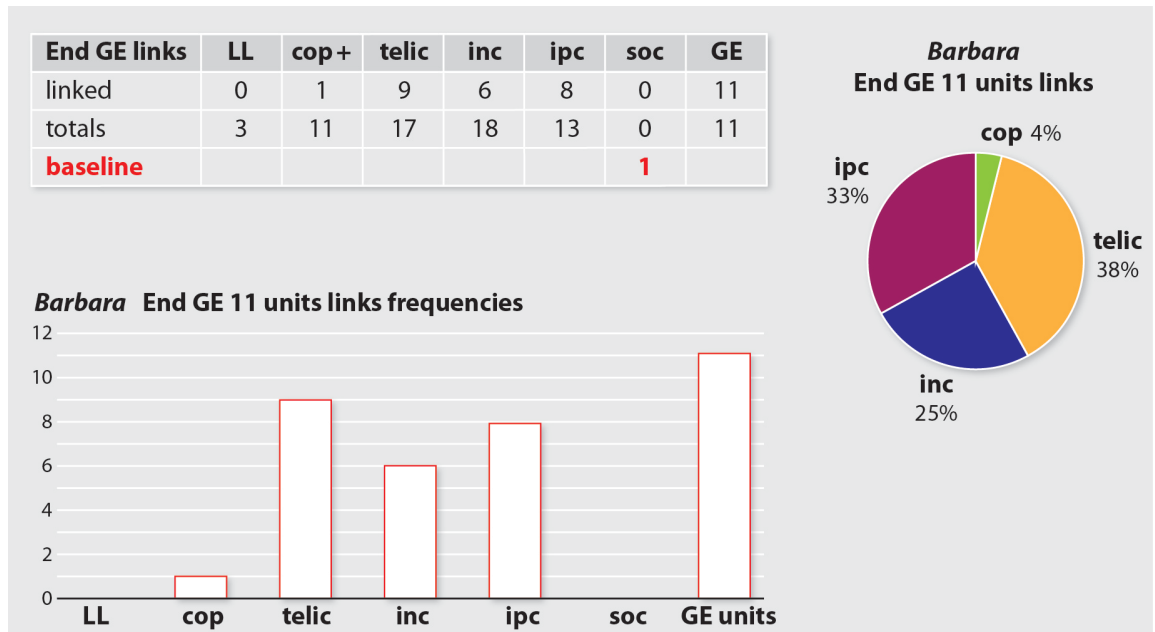
Fig. E.7.5.b Barbara's GE links at End

The table "GE End links"is to be read in the same way as the above GC link table and shows the amount of mentions per category linked to Group Experience as well as the percentage of the total mentions of each category linked with GE.

The 'GC links' graph shows that Barbara connects all of her new learning to GC and 45% of new coping (see Fig 7.4) to the group, as well as 29 % of Telic and 23% of IpC and 28 % of InC (expressions of cognition and awareness).

The 'GE links' graph shows that Barbara ascribes no new learning at all to group experience. Only 1 of her new coping behaviours, 53% of Telic, 62% of interpersonal communication and 33.3% are linked to expressions of cognition and awareness (InC). This may show that GE evokes expressions of internal communications, thereby 'creating' awareness that may have stayed unvoiced, non-verbal, without interaction in the group.

In fig. 7.6 the count of Barbara's 69 coded utterances at Follow Up, the pie titled 'GC/GE' shows that for Barbara the relative importance of Group Cause and Group Experience has shifted much in favour of Group Cause. At End both GC and GE were mentioned 11 times. This has changed to 36 GC and 15 GE at FU.

Behaviours that stayed unchanged in her life (NC)[53], appear in 9/69 units.

'FU all categories %' shows the relative mentions of the categories in the PD definition. Just over 40% is new learning, coping and SOC together, just under 40% consists of the communicative behaviours Telic and Interpersonal, and the rest of cognition/awareness.

FU all categories	LL	cop	telic	inc	ipc	soc	GE	GC	No changes	Units of analysis
total	16	13	13	18	27	9	22	36	9	69
plus	0	12	13							
minus	0	1	0							
neutral	0	0	0							
baseline	0					10				

Fig. E.7.5 Barbara Follow Up content analysis frequencies and percentages

This brings us to Fig E.7.6.a and E.7.6.b which show at Follow up how often certain categories are ascribed (linked) to Group cause and/or experience.

Most important to the research question is that at FU almost all learning (15/16) and 7/11 of coping were linked to GC. So were 69% of Telic, 61% of IpC and 61% InC. 56% of SOC is linked to GC.

Barbara's account tells that the group's program has influenced her in a way that evoked learning and coping sustained at least six months later.

FU GC links	LL	cop+	telic	inc	ipc	soc	GC units
linked	15	7	11	16	17	6	36
total	16	12	13	18	27	9	36

Fig. E.7.6.a Barbara Follow Up Group Cause links

FU GE links	LL	cop	telic	inc	ipc	soc	GE units
linked	2	1	8	1	12	0	14
unlinked							2

Fig. E.7.6.b Barbara Follow Up Group Experience links

The 'GE links' table shows (in small numbers) that Barbara ascribes 12.5% of new

---

[53] No Change in 9 areas of her life in Barbara's words: Communication outside group; View of self; Verbal communication; Listening; Thinking/excluding writing; Deal with life in general.

learning and 8% of new coping behaviour to group experience. 62% of affective and 48% of interpersonal communicative behaviours is linked to GE. Utterances of cognition/awareness (InC) have lessened at FU and only 1 is connected with GE (1/18). It may be that in the individual interview at follow up, when the live group experience has receded to a six months old memory, the expressions of awareness from that time have been integrated and do not need to be voiced again. Possibly these expressions are also less used by her in a one-to-one conversation.

To attach importance to the high correlation between GE and the interpersonal and telic communication would be spurious. Group experience for most people capable of speech obviously consists of verbal interaction. However the category of communication with Self (InC), taken as an indication of active cognition and awareness, can vary even during group interaction. InC was not coded automatically whenever a person said "I think". From the context of the utterance it had to become apparent that communication with Self had to have taken place, by evidence such as the expression of comparisons, realisations, conclusions, or searching for words to explain. While this type of internal process understandably is often not mentioned at all in the written responses to the baseline questionnaire, they appear in the verbal end and follow up texts.

7.E.1.1 Summary of Content Analysis

The following summing up of Barbara's trajectory through Content Analysis is the format for presenting fourteen shorter summaries of participants' findings in Appendix F. The format uses the elements of Fig.7.1 in the introduction to Chapter 7 and emphasises the role of the group (GC and GE) as possible mediator for personal development.

In Barbara's content analysis trajectory Flexibility, as seen in Learning and Coping has 'grown' from start to follow up, mostly linked to Group Cause.

Stability, derived from Sense of Coherence, which was very strong to begin with, has been strengthened with new understandings of the world.

Interpersonal communication is unchanged just under 25%. Telic expressions have steadily fallen (29-27-14%) contrary to my expectations based on theory. This might be due to overrepresentation of telic codes at baseline (see Ch.7.2.1.3), or Barbara has become more open to interpersonal communication, while showing less emotionality and

attachment than in her baseline.

Expressions indicating cognition/awareness (InC) are absent at Baseline, prominent at End (29%), less so at FU (20%). A remark such as "and then when I read the story again with that feedback, I realised what I could have done" [Barb FU units 73], is an example of the process of becoming aware through the group process of something that relates to behaviour.

One of her final remarks, expressing both No Change, Expectation and SOC, was:

> Nothing has changed in my thoughts about past and present, but – hopefully
> – my future will produce some meaningful writing. [Barb FU units 82-83]

7.E.2 Barbara's My World and I today: the full route

My World and I Today has been analysed following the coding agenda presented in Ch.6.3.2.2, where numerical scores are assigned to elements of the drawings. The findings are mainly reported verbally with only the final numerical score at Base, End and FU. The detailed description of Barbara's MWT drawings is summarised in table 7.i at the of the section, immediately followed by her numerical Sense of Coherence scores.

Start, first drawing:

My world and I today ....23/03/11....(fill in date)

Imagine the blank space on this paper as your world, place yourself somewhere inside it in a pictorial way of your choice that shows your relationship with or toward your world. You can add other persons important to you and show your connection with them with lines or other signs. On the other side of the paper you can write down any explanations of signs and meanings you want to get across. Also please state your age and gender in the place provided.
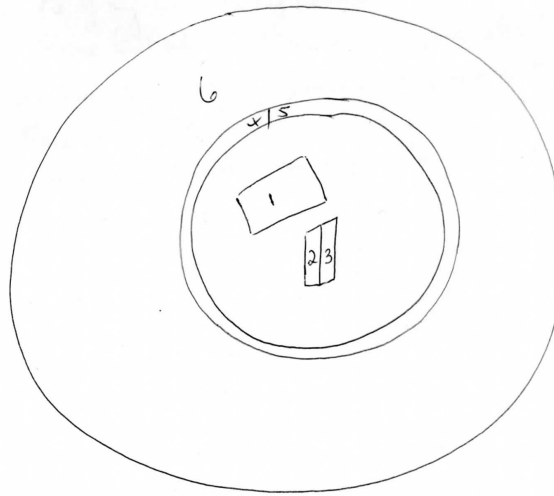
My world and I today ....23/03/11....(fill in date)

I am [female] [male]
My age is 15

Explanation of my creation (use as many words as you need to clarify your meaning):

2/3 → The Centre of my world is my children
1 → Me. Alone but always there for everyone else!
4/5 → Friends & relations always Surrounding me with care & love & just being there.
6 → The Community, always in my world

Figure E.7.7 Barbara's baseline MWT. Diagram with verbal explanation.

I. Organisation, indicating the ordered complexity of the picture, consists of four

elements: Order, Complexity, Structure and Form.

High order; Simple (2-D); circular diagram labeled by numbers; static.

II. Connections are the ties with animate and inanimate elements of their world depicted and described by the participants.

Connectors: proximity and concentricity.

Connections identified in text only:

1 Self

2 children

narrow circle of friends and relations

wide circle of the community

III. Balance, indicates the use of the space:

Centered on page, fairly symmetrical.

Balanced load: although the drawing is sparse and leave much empty space, the explanation shows that it depicts her 'whole' world concisely, as is her style.

IV. Self, indicates the manner of representing the drawer of the picture:

Central disembodied oblong, labelled number 1 ('Me alone, but always there for everyone else ')

Large relative to the childrens' oblongs next to it, drawn to be 'the centre of my world'.

V. Perceptual Position - indicates the point of view, or perspective of the drawer:

First position derived from her text written in the first person.

Impression: My summary impression as the researcher. Here I note, in free style, the overall impressions the pictures give me.

Bare bones, generalised, integrated, static and fixed. 'This is me and this is it.'

End, second drawing:

My world and I today ...22.06.11...(fill in date)

Imagine the blank space on this paper as your world, place yourself somewhere inside it in a pictorial way of your choice that shows your relationship with or toward your world. You can add other persons important to you and show your connection with them with lines or other signs.
On the other side of the paper you can write down any explanations of signs and meanings you want to get across.
Also please state your age and gender in the place provided.

My world today is all to do with the theatre festival.
I am the core in the centre running from theatre to theatre. The X's are the volunteers under my direction + , hopefully, all geared to a successful end.

The figure represents me on the telephone, printing out papers, other papers on the table + the inevitable cup of tea. My world today is a very busy one.

Fig. E.7.8 Barbara's End MWT drawing with verbal explanation.

I.Organisation

High order and high complexity (Two locations, attempt at perspective)

Figurative, connected objects, symbolic, non-verbal. Focus on dominant activity at the exact date of drawing.

II. Connections

Connectors: a straight 'path' between Self and the area of work, + bi-directional arrows between the 3 venues.

Connections identified in text only:

>   2 Selves, differentiated by activity. One is abstract, one embodied.

>   Volunteers ('under my direction')

III. Balance

Centre piece gives schematic overview of the 'topic'. Right side is richly alive showing Self doing her work. Left and bottom of page are empty. A zooming in on the current focus of her life, while the empty space is where the rest of her life is taking place, as she explains in words. Life is busy, but the drawing shows a balanced, well organised load.

IV. Self

Double depiction:

1 Large smiling stick figure with blue skirt and purple hair, phone at one ear, paper in other hand. Vivid, moving. Placed on the right of the page, proportional to the objects she handles.

1 purple, dark framed, oblong ('I am the core in the centre running from theatre to theatre'). Size of oblong is similar to size of theatres.

V. Perceptual Position

First position for the disembodied Self, derived from her text written in the first person.

Third position for the embodied Self "The figure represents me at the telephone".

Impression:

Alive, organised, specific, focused, links cognition and emotion, happy, expresses choice.

Meticulously drawn, very clear and explicit, literal without words. Although the text does explain more than an outsider could understand.

Self-comparison of first and second drawing

Barbara wrote:

In March my world belonged to my children and my family, but also in the picture is the Community and my work there. In June the Community has now come to the forefront and today all my energies are diverted to the Theatre Festival. Whilst my children and family are not physically in the picture, they are still in my world and in my heart.

To this I add:

- The first biro line drawing shows abstract concentric, numbered circles with terse structure explanations attached on other page.

- The second is made with a pencil outline filled in with coloured felt pens, meticulous figurative and symbolically rich visual content.

- 1st Self is the number 1 in a square. 2nd Self is - in addition to an oblong - a person, drawn as a stick figure, No attempt at showing any resemblance to her body, apart from wearing a skirt. But the body's position clearly indicates her actions, one hand holding a phone to her ear the other hand holding a paper sheet at arm's length. Self is smiling.

- 2nd is very vibrant, alive even without her verbal explanation. The 1st is just a diagram, incomprehensible without text.

The change in drawing style to me reflects the changes in writing and thinking that I observed in her during the group. From over-concise, generalised, bland descriptions to more detailed, sensory specific, personal, emotional. This is related to her goal for the group, although her initial formulation was less detailed than mine is now.

Follow Up, third drawing:
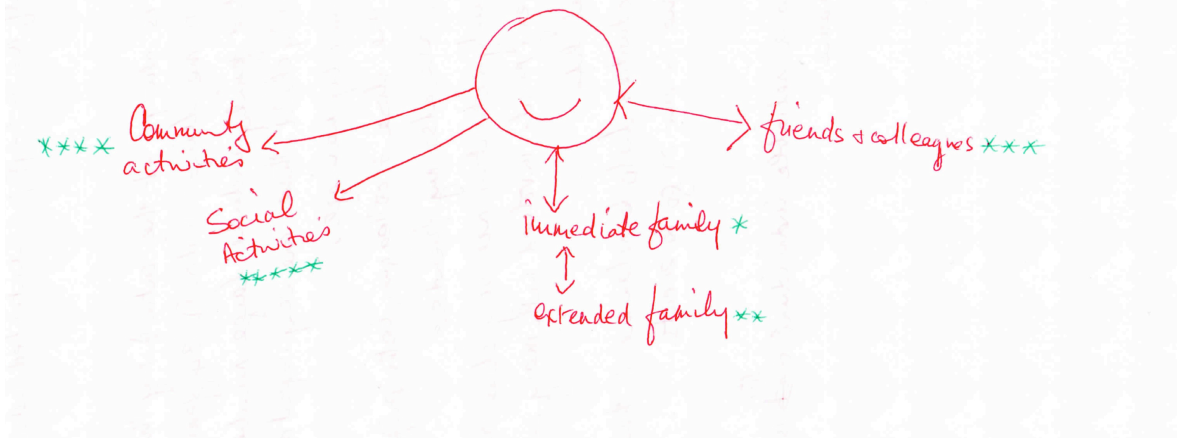
Fig. E.7.9 Barbara's Follow Up MWT drawing

Her explanation written on the back of this drawing is as follows (green stars in original):

I see myself as a happy and contented individual, hence the smile.

* My family is always at the centre of my thoughts and mean very much to me being a

  widow of 34 years.

*** Friends are close and colleagues, both professional and community, are also my

  friends.

**** My community activities are very close to my heart and I am very much involved

  with many aspects of communal life.

***** Social activities help to relax me and there always seems time to mix or go to events.

I am known as a reliable individual and this is a great source of pleasure.

I. Organisation

> high-simple, schematic

> Spare, lines with verbal labels.

II. Connections

Connectors:

> 2 Uni-directional arrows (to activities)

> 2 primary bi-directional arrows (to people)

> 1 secondary bi-directional arrow (to people)

green stars denote the order of explanation, maybe also of importance.

Connections:

    1 happy, contented Self

    Family immediate

    Family extended

    Friends and colleagues

    Community activities

    Social activities

III. Balance

Centered, few elements, but not empty. Each context is a large chunk of content, therefore again seen as a balanced load.

IV. Self

Smiling, otherwise featureless, face, large at centre. Connectors to and fro.

V. Perceptual Position

First position, excepting her concluding sentence ("I am known as...") = 3rd position, in which she expresses others' view of her.

Impression: Integrated, happy overview, again very generalised like at start, but with more emotion (smile) and verbal labels.

7.E.2.1 Summary of MWT

Table 7.i Barbara's MWT trajectory

PHASE	START - 28	END - 41	FOLLOW UP - 40
Order + Complexity	high + Complex	high+ highly complex	high+ complex
Structure	diagram, static, present only	diagram + figurative, dynamic, locations/times	diagram+ figurative
Form	circular, non-verbal +explanation, disembodied, sort of symbolic	specific, non-verbal +explanation, embodied, concrete + symbolic	hub, verbal, partly embodied, symbolic
Connections	1 Self, 2 kids + 2 contexts	2 Selves + many volunteers	1 Self + 3 groups of people + 2 contexts.
Balance	well balanced	well balanced	well balanced
Connectors	concentric circles	path and arrows	arrows
Self (Integration)	integrated, static	integrated, dynamic	integrated, dynamic
Perceptual Position	1st position, static	1st and Meta + dynamic activities	1st and Meta abstracted + process
Impression	Generalised, cognitive, integrated, static and fixed.	Alive, specific, focused, links cognition and emotion, happy, expresses choice.	Integrated, happy generalised overview, with emotion and verbal labels. Condensed resources through people and activities, tends to higher-level PP

7.E.3 Sense of Coherence questionnaire

Table 7.j Barbara's SOC trajectory

Baseline score	End score	Follow Up score
63	62	70

A significant increase of 7 points at follow up, above the normal range of fluctuation during an adults life.

7.E.4 Conclusion

To sum up the demonstration of Barbara's findings via the separate assessment instruments, I conclude that in her responses analysed through content analysis she reports being aware of some considerable changes from baseline which are sustained at follow up. Her three MWT drawings express a progression from sparsity and bareness to vitality and joy and her SOC score has increased. The verbal, the pictorial and the numerical findings all show that her sense of self has stayed intact. Many areas of her life have not changed, even if her writing (and her drawing) style can now flower: "it's flowered, you know, the language has flowered a bit more."

Her writings during the group, not included in the analysis presented here, reveal a gradual progression from her starting conciseness, boringness even, to the ability to imagine and write a complex narrative, potentially the beginning of a novel.

> The group felt that all the people that I had written about was, in inverted comma's, 'a book in their own'; so that one book with these seven or so characters could expand it. And I thought 'O, do you know what– ' I could see this one doing something and that one doing something else. So yes, in that way, I could expand and I think that's what I'm going to do eventually. Expand on that story, because it's given me an opening to seven different characters. [Barb-FU units 21-23]

Barbara is a level-headed person, not prone to exaggerate or inflate emotions. She started the group with a specific goal of learning to write 'more', which she has attained. My findings indicate sustained personal development beyond this goal, which Barbara ascribes to the group: her reading and understanding of it has changed, she has become

more aware of the diverse world views of others and of her own diverse inner voices that can inspire her writing. She has retained her self- reliance and concludes the follow up interview with the words:

I feel that I've done all I could do as far as the group is concerned, now I suppose the only thing to do is up to me, at the moment - I'm quite happy with what I've done. [Barb FU-units 100-102]

Appendix F Summary Trajectories of Participants

Linked with chapter 7

Index of summaries:

1. Banana

2. *Elisheva*

3. Hilary

4. *Jewel*

5. Julie

6. Lali

7. Marge

8. Pat

9. *Rita*

10. Ron

11. *Shari*

12. *Tez*

13. *Trudi*

14. Verity

This appendix reports the summarised findings of 14 participants not presented for illustration purposes in Chapter 7. Their abbreviated stories are told here mostly without numerical data, yet are derived from the full analysis of the findings as demonstrated in Appendix E.

Each trajectory intends to foreground what was most noteworthy for each person, in particular the relation between goals and their attainments attributed to the writing group. As a consequence the stories differ from each other.

Names in *italics* can be read as counterexamples to case studies presented as illustrations in the body of the chapter. They include conspicuous contrasts between experiences or findings of participants. Cross-references to these appear in the chapter.

Abbreviations:

Base, End and FU denote Baseline, End of group and Follow Up assessment moments.

MWT denotes My World and I Today

CA denotes Content Analysis

SOC/CA is the Sense of Coherence category in CA

SOC-Q denotes Sense of Coherence questionnaire

C. denotes the facilitator (initial of Channa)

Meet Banana

Banana is the pseudonym chosen by a married woman of 62, small of stature and large in the energy she radiates. She is born in England, her young adult children study abroad. She works as the project manager of the bustling community centre where the writing group meets. On her request a few of the meetings are held in her ailing mother's living room nearby. She has 17 years of formal education and is a fervent reader of literature. Her husband, who has written a series of children's books in the past, is a source of aspiration as well as frustration to her. She floods him with ideas for further books to no avail and the group inspires her to start writing up her own stories instead of trying to offload them on him. At first she only saw herself as the organiser of the writing group, not even planning to take part herself, but after the first session she became intrigued and threw herself into putting her thoughts down in written shape. This required much effort from her, because she appeared to find it hard to explain to others how her mind works and has developed the habit of keeping much unsaid, while on the outside her external behaviour is very practical, quick and efficient.

Baseline Quotes

> *I have learned* The value of education, of learning and of sharing. [Ban-Base 1-3]
> I often think of things at night and may get up to write them down. [Ban-Base 14-15]

End Quotes

> These 12 weeks really have made me be creative I suppose more than I would normally be – plus all my other commitments – so how it will continue I don't know [Ban End 17]

> This wonderful feeling that one little instruction on paper has five such very different responses That's what I loved about it, you know, you say 'do this, do this' and when you looked at it actually it was whatever you wanted to make of it and that's exactly what we made of it - and that was at was so good. [Ban End 13-14]

FU Quotes

> I was hoping that maybe we'd continue, but of course it's that security, you know you feel ok in that group, [Ban FU 77-78]
> That's when I realised how emotional writing can be. [Ban FU 105] 367

Summary of trajectory

Banana has moved from attesting to little development at End to a moderate level at FU, showing partial consolidation of new learning, coping and views of herself and her world. This development was evidenced in her CA and MWT scores, while SOC/CA and SOC-Q appear to reflect some upheaval present at FU.

Banana's baseline SOC-Q score is one of the highest scores in the sample. In the following two assesments the lowering of her score by 7 points indicates that her SOC-Q is 'under strain', a finding, which in addition to worries in life concerning the health of close family members, I also relate to her experiences in the writing group, where her habitual behaviours of thinking, speaking and writing with an audience in mind were challenged and unsettled, as can be read in the following SOC/CA utterances:

> It just started to click that I could do something and then change it, and then change it again into a completely different thing, and that seemed to make more sense. [Ban FU 16-17]
>
> If you can develop it, if you can change it, and try and adapt it and then –
> ...somehow it sort of improves as it goes along. I'm not that good at it,... It's the best I can do anyway. [Ban FU 25-27)
>
> Many writers kid themselves that what they got is a masterpiece, but it's not about that – it's just finishing something that I'd like to finish. [Ban FU 68)

These utterances express a phase at which her development has not yet consolidated, a stage of partial integration. She is one of those who expressed a longing for the group to continue (see earlier FU quote), although recognising this would not happen.

Meet *Elisheva* – compare and contrast with Dvora on direction of developmental trajectory (7.2.1) and with Barbara on length/conciseness of writing (Appendix E).

Elisheva, a divorcee of 63 of Dutch origin, daughter of holocaust survivors, very much preoccupied with her family of origin in the context of war crimes and psychological effects thereof. A former art historian turned speech therapist, she introduced herself as a 'life-long diarist', only writing for herself. The group was her first experience of writing for other readers and she was curious as well as ambivalent about it. Her main challenge was to come to the point, meaning that she needed to abandon the meandering style of longwinded diary writing in order to create a well circumscribed text in prose or poetry. To do this she had to overcome the urge to explain more than the readers need to know in order to understand her writings. Group feedback was invaluable to her, also by giving her insight into earlier relationships that had suffered from her endless verbal explanations. During and after the group she suffered from several medical problems, underwent a knee-replacement and two close friends died, one of them in a house fire.

Baseline Quotes

> I have learned awareness of different cultural and social attitudes by having lived in France, Canada, USA and the UK.[Eli Base 2]
> I'm looking forward to this new experience and wonder how I will feel about sharing my stories.[Eli Base 16-17]

End Quotes

> In the beginning I found it quite difficult, and I've been looking back on my notes, to listen to other people's stories because there was a part of me that didn't want to hear other people's experiences and every time when I looked through my personal journal I found this: 'Become an active listener Do it now ' [Eli End 6]
> I haven't written in my diary now for 2 months And I think this is because I needed to think about other forms, and other things, and other elements started to come through, through the writing course. That was the important part, the writing itself and to deal with some of the material that I've written extensively about in the diary, which is now in a very different form [Eli End 10-12]

FU Quotes

> What has changed really is that I never would have read anything from my diaries to anybody, I would have never allowed that to anybody and in this case I could share something. Realising that I had read out something that had significance for me but also significance for other people, that I had the power to evoke emotions through my writing. It happened once, I don't know if I'll be able to replicate it, but who knows [Eli FU 97-101]

Summary of trajectory

Elisheva moved from attesting to much development at End to a moderate level at FU. Where at End her CA, MWT and SOC-Q scores show development, she had not sustained all of this at FU, possibly due to the many blows she was dealing with at the time, however pleased she was with her attainments as expressed in the FU quote above.

> It was good for me to be short and concise. At the beginning I wanted to give the group a bit of background about why I wrote something, and I went wider and wider and wider and C. brought me back. I always felt that the historical part was so essential to understanding what the issue was and they didn't want the history. [Eli FU 130-133]

She expresses awareness of the need to adjust this feeling that in the past had led her to behaviour which caused a mismatch between herself and others. Contrast this to Barbara's need (Appendix E) to write longer, to enable herself and her readers to become emotionally engaged with her stories, instead of bored.

> I think I need a lot of support and guidance to look at these fragments, because they're all little fragments, which might be drawings, images, writings, and how to put all of that together into something solid. We need somebody who is willing to say 'Come on, that's not the way to go forward' [Eli FU 128-129]

She needs more structured support to integrate what she has gathered so far, i.e. the new conciseness in writing and the courage to share her written work. She would have liked the facilitated group to continue. At End she felt in better shape (supported by the 'peak' in findings) than at FU. This may be contrasted with Dvora who increasingly integrated her development from End to FU, Rita's story, for whom the group was long enough, or Barbara who intends to continue on her own.

Meet Hilary

Hilary, a small, energetic grandmother of 62 who works in a hospital research lab and is a leading volunteer for cancer fundraising, after having recovered from cancer herself. She has been born in England, had 11 years of formal education and lives with her husband. Meticulously dressed, efficient looking and outspoken she stood out in her group, which did not lack other frankly vocal members. Already proficient in writing in the service of good causes and in creating rhyming verse for social occasions when the group started, she was however convinced that no one would be interested in any writing from her in the way of memoir or stories. Very focused, she manages her time and energy with precision. Writing freed her from such constraints that she adheres to in her daily life. There is more room for unplanned, surprising, events to happen or at least to be noticed in her stories.

Baseline Quotes

> I have an open mind, I'll wait to see how this group participation feels. [Hil Base 17-18].

End Quotes

> If we look at what we wrote in our journals, that feeling, we wouldn't have had those feelings 'cause we wouldn't have been together, and it's that somehow that social interaction for me that set me going, ready for the next week. [Hil End 24]
>
> I recall saying 'who would like to read or listen to my work–' I realised everybody here is being forced to listen, therefore it isn't really any proof, but it has given me the confidence to believe that 'okay, when I'll write that down and maybe somebody else will want to read it' [Hil End 7]

FU Quotes

> A lot about one's experiences in life came out onto the written page. But I only let those out that I wanted to let out. I think I could now put pen to paper for myself and bring out some of my feelings towards this current (*family*) situation. It might be cathartic. [Hil FU 79-81]
>
> Now I feel better, I feel I could know where to start. In a way it doesn't matter where you start, because I've always been too structured in my thoughts: beginning – middle – end. But you don't have to, because the beginning could be the middle, couldn't it, if you wanted it to be. [Hil-FU 49]

Summary of trajectory

Hilary's responses analysed through content analysis indicate awareness of changes from Base to End which are mostly sustained at FU. Her three MWT drawings express a remarkable progression from a factual, overloaded view of her world to a lively, personal and balanced view. Yet her SOC-Q score has decreased by 6 points. Her sense of self has stayed intact with more behavioural options available to her as she reports verbally and can be seen in the second and third drawings she felt free to do, after having started her first with "Drawing pictures is not my forté. So I have to write a few words of explanation rather than draw any real pictures." [Hil MWT/1]

What does the decrease in her SOC-Q score reveal–I surmise that at FU she was still integrating, or consolidating world views that had been challenged during the group. This can be glimpsed in SOC/CA too, where she emphasises the many things she has learned, but here and there insecurity and ambivalence shine through:

> But I sometimes do look back on the past. And although you've got to accept, I wish I could have gone in a different direction. So for the future **maybe** if really I wanted to be more **creative**, so maybe I could try and get something **written**, which - I don't know – satisfies me, I'm not saying it could ever be in print, I wouldn't even dare to think I could ever be in print. [Hil FU 131-132]

Hilary entered the group as a socially central personality, efficient in the many roles she fulfilled. Nevertheless she explicitly revealed a lack of confidence in her abilities, especially in self-disclosure, showing herself underneath her social persona. In her verbal utterances she professes to have gained the confidence that others are interested in her stories. Hilary credits the group with the growing of her self confidence and with now being able to express herself to others more openly than before, both in writing and in speech. She realises the distinction between her considerable ability in formal and utilitarian social interaction (e.g. public speaking, fundraising) and choosing when and how to make herself present as a person with feelings, doubts and memories, as she learned to do by writing stories in the group.

Meet *Jewel* – compare and contrast with Spring's MWT (7.3)

Jewel (57), mother to four adult children, is married to a man who years ago became disabled by a stroke. As an energetic and passionate person who loves the outdoors, her allotment and Andalusia, she came to the group in pain and vexation due to a worn out hip. She wore this like an insult to her sense of self: not being able to lead the active life she had taken for granted, but still not committing to the recommended operation. By follow-up time she had a date for it.Born in Yorkshire, with a strong awareness of working class disadvantages, she developed a keenly critical view of society. She lists 11 years of schooling, not counting her studies at the time of the group towards a degree in creative writing. She repeatedly expressed her dissatisfaction with that course and her co-students who were too young to understand any of her concerns. In contrast she was very pleased with the writing group and with the program, saying that she learned more in 12 sessions than in 3 years at university.Writing always was an emotional outlet for painful experiences from an early age. Reticent at first, when she started to voice her opinions she stood out in her group by her 'culturally unusual' frankness, without beating about the bush or euphemising.

Baseline Quotes

> I believe writing prevented me from descending into a very desperate place during my early fifties. [Jewel Base 10]

End Quotes

> I love to be in this kind of group where there is something going on, besides just chit chat and just very mundane kind of things. So for me that's a big difference. I feel very motivated whereas sometimes in groups I don't feel motivated to go. [Jewel End 17]

FU Quotes

> There's something about sharing your writing. It's an indirect way of sharing yourself. It's less putting yourself out there. You can stay a little bit behind your metaphors, if you like. [Jewel FU 64-65]

> I just always got this feeling that there was some old script, and I just didn't want to do it any more. I'm open to new ways of being. New ways of being with people, new relationships. I try to listen to people better. I think I wasn't brought up in a family where that was done, the way people were. And I think most of my life I haven't really listened to people very much. I haven't been able to put myself in their positions and see their side, or see that they may have a different perspective or way of doing it. So that's something that I am developing in myself. [Jewel FU 45-51]

Summary of trajectory

Jewel is a skilled writer. All her life writing has been a means to deal with difficult issues. She started the group with strong self awareness and reflection, in addition to a lot of anger about her circumstances. She mentions four large areas of her life that have not changed in connection with the group: view of self, internal dialogue, view of past, present and future, and physical experience. Especially bleak is her statement " I wish anything had changed in the way I view my past, present or future, but it hasn't" [Jewel FU 95]. She said this shortly before her hip operation, while being in great pain and in doubt about her chances of improvement: "an operation which may or may not give me back my life." [Jewel MWT 3 text]

Her MWT drawings also show how during the period of the study her life is gradually becoming dominated by feelings of pain and incapacity, leading to a social and physical retreat which threatens Jewel's sense of coherence. The clearest blow can be seen in the drop of her SOC scores from 60 to 53 at End, after which she appears to concentrate her considerable resources on coping with the threat, including making the delayed decision to have her hip replaced. Although she benefitted from the group while it existed, and she remembers this at FU, the benefits that she has retained for use appear to have been swallowed up by the power of her pain. She made it very clear that she needed more from the group and the facilitator to meet her needs, then she acquiesced and withdrew.

> I think at the end of the group we felt quite bereft. You know, that I wasn't going to see these people again. But that feeling is gone. [Jewel FU 122-123]

The extreme change in her experience at FU is expressed in her MWT's shown.

Base (left)　　　　　　　　End (right)　　　　　　　　FU (below)

Fig. E.7.10 Jewel's MWT drawings

Explanatory text: The entire rhythm of my life is interrupted and broken by the red pain which dominates all experience other than sleep. The black cage surround is the constriction and entrapment I feel because of being unable to live a normal active life. The dark straight stakes/spears are the disability which has put a colourful rhythmic life on hold. I am halted and kibbled. Waiting and preparing for an operation which may or may not give me back my life.

Meet Julie

Julie, a divorcee of 55, lives on her own with seven cats she frequently mentions in the group. She had resumed being an active artist after an hiatus. A very lively and verbose presence, eager to be heard. During the group renovations were carried out in her house. To this she ascribed her perpetual tiredness, missing some sessions and being behind with her assignments. At the end she was in high spirits and suggested she would coordinate unfacilitated social meetings of the group members, but she did not put this idea into practice. Instead, she discontinued all contacts and expressed anger about the follow-up interview, claiming she had not been made aware of the nature of the study, although she had signed the letter of consent and was happy to participate while the group was active.

Baseline Quotes

> *Things'that'had'a'big'impact'on'me:* Getting to 50 and realising that things start to make sense and "choice" is in my own hands   [Jul Base 4]
> Sometimes it is easier to write down thoughts etcetera They tend to make things real and acceptable.[Jul Base 6-8]

End Quotes

> I feel that I have found it easier to write things down and explain emotions and feelings within a piece of text. This I believe is what I have achieved from attending and sharing experiences within the 12 week course of the writing group. I remember I was a little wary in the beginning, frightened to speak up, wondering what my peers would think of me. Now I feel happy to write things down and explaining things more, [Jul MWT self-comparison 4]

FU Quotes

> My view of myself will always stay the same (PRIVATE PERSONAL AND NOT FOR PUBLIC ANALYSIS) [Julie FU written interview -2 *Capitals in the original*]
> I've learned to stay away from people I don't like [*smiley*] instead of tolerating them to be polite. [Julie FU written interview -15]
> I found the writing group interesting but too personal and I did not like the depth of people's personal stories. Hoped for it to be a fun thing, not an analytical study for someone else [Julie FU written interview -16]

Summary of trajectory

Julie's scores underwent a baffling drop from End to FU in her apparent development. Her writing was much more childish than her drawing at which she has professional skill. At End the emotions expressed are extremely enthusiastic, which I thought to be her habitual style, based on her behaviour during the group sessions. In the light of the FU data I can surmise a slightly manic period flipping into some sort of depression, but I certainly lack information about this. In all three assessment methods her scores at FU differ greatly from End and as a consequence she ranks among the 'low developers'. A high level of Telic at FU is due to the expression of anger, where at End all emotion was positive. Her SOC score at FU is so high in no relation to her earlier scores that I consider it to be a 'Fake SoC', as mentioned by Antonovsky (*Health, Stress and Coping* 158-9 and 1987:24), which is equivalent to the presentation of a 'false Self' (Winicott, *Ego Distortion in Terms of True and False Self* 140-52). The 'definitive conclusions' she strongly declares, represent in my view a regression to an even more rigid position than at baseline.

Meet Lali

Lali (43), born in Punjab, came to the UK at the age of 18. She has 21 years of formal education and English is her third language. She works as a primary care counsellor and teacher of Punjabi, practises yoga and meditation for self-development and health and is a lover of horses. She is divorced and lives with her grown daughters and elderly mother. In writing she is often undecided about the language to write in and acutely aware of what can or cannot be expressed by one of her languages. Ambivalent about choices in life and struggles to establish her own boundaries. She came to the group with the purpose of using writing to process the recent breakdown of an important relationship.

Baseline Quotes

> Writing is helping me at present to make realisations and helps me to let go and move on.
> [Lali Base 11-14]
> Writing allows me to say what I want to say without interruption. Writing enables me to be open and confident to say what needs saying and sharing.[Lali Base 23-25]
> When I read my old writing, it shows the patterns and differences. [Lali Base 28]

End Quotes

> I can pick out from my writing where I was more descriptive, what I can see from my eyes, rather than what's going in here (she points to her head). I still need to continue working because I still go in here, in my mind, in my head and other people might not be able to see that. [Lali End X]
> For me I think that the boundary and the guidance, where you was affirming those boundaries, has given my inner child that security. And then you also allowed the freedom in that, that 'OK, do whatever' as well. So that worked really well for me. I can say that's developed me personally as well as professionally.[Lali End X]

FU Quotes

> Thinking has moved, to the next layer. Thinking has layers of awareness, so thinking has definitely shifted. [Lali FU 33]
> I wrote a bit of it in English, then same thing in Punjabi. I reread and re- write that, I see it as that all the feelings can not be processed in one go. So I noticed that how each time I was moving deeper, in feeling more secure within myself. [Lali FU 39-40]

Summary of trajectory

In Lali's content analysis Group Cause weighs considerably more than Group Experience (At End GC/GE = 70/30%, at FU 74/26%.) Her trajectory is characterised by the linkage to Group Cause of all her learning (12/12), most of Coping (20/23) and new SOC/CA (4/5) at End. At FU the links for Learning are 15/20, for Coping 22/34 and for new SOC 7/21. According to this Lali has added more behavioural options and new insights to her repertoire. She talks about these in great detail, crediting the group with useful learning. She also mentions quite a few expectations about goals she intends to pursue, the most pronounced of which is balancing her time and her energy. She has become more aware of the urgency of this goal:

> I am also aware that how I still need to cut down a little bit more all those things I am interested in, but I am still stretching myself than what I think I can afford easily. I feel that yes, I am managing it, but not managing where I am more relaxed entirely ... it's like I'm coming here, going there, it's like then in my head I couldn't keep track of everything. Because I still think, now, I'm doing still too much. So that is the area I need to do work on. [Lali FU units 99-100]

Lali mentions 2 areas of her life that have not changed in connection with the group:

> I wouldn't say I have changed – much – what I will say is what I needed was available for me to maintain the function, in the sense that helped me to continue what other things I needed to do. So it was a support mechanism for me, rather than making a change.[Lali FU units 6-7]

> So I won't say that I have changed the way that I express, what has changed is that working on the same period, going back to it, enabled me to process. [Lali FU units 42-43]

Likewise her MWT drawings show small signs of what changed in her view of herself in this period. This also fits her SOC-Q trajectory, which is stable. The writing group has been beneficial for Lali, it fitted her goals, she felt supported and strengthened. Her sense of self stayed intact and the group was one section on the life-long learning path she pursues through writing, yoga and meditation.

Lali was content with her development, having achieved the emotional processing she needed, using the group mainly for support. Her own words, supported by the findings, express this best:

> Definitely there is a change. That how I will view my past now be different. And writing enabled me to write about some experiences and talking about my feelings and thoughts, so, yes, I am not changed person as a dramatic changed person, but I am in proportion changed person from where I was [Lali FU 83-84].

Meet Marge

Marge, 77, is a sprightly lady who often came walking a long way to the group from her home in a village with little public transport. With 16 years of formal education she is a retired teacher from the south of England, nurturing a deep love of writing for her own pleasure and also for lady's magazines. She spurned the use of computers and even typewriters, relying on handwriting only. "The magazines type them if they want to publish them", she used to tell the group. She feels lonely, her children and grandkids live in a far away country and contact is sporadic, because by telephone it's not the same and who writes letters nowadays– She comes to the group "for the company, to be out of the house", and the structured writing is not her cup of tea. She already knows how to write, likes her own style and does not see the point of exercises. Most of the stories she brought to the group as home-assignments were pieces written earlier, not in direct response to the assignments. She said she did not understand the tasks and their purpose. While she was busy doing her own thing all along, she started to worry me and the other members of the group. She became forgetful, misremembering the time and at follow-up even the place of the meetings: "It is so confusing, they are now changing the streets around..." Despite many reminders over the phone Marge missed both verbal evaluation sessions and her findings are thus incomplete. They document her increasing befuddlement, rather than beneficial development.

The last prose text she wrote shows signs of regression to the semiotics of childhood: associative strings of rhythm and rhyme with themes of a young child. Poetic reminiscences or the onset of dementia–

> What can I do that would be better–
> Perhaps I'll write a letter to Granpa
> Then maybe I'll grow till I'm big and strong
> And then I can say "Gramps please take me along"

[Marge End 4-13, underlined in original]

Summary of trajectory

Marge has made her own way through the group, unrelated to the structure of the work. The exercises did not interest, nor motivate her. She was either annoyed by them or ignored them completely in her writing.

Apart from any other processes that may be at work in the social and mental areas of her life, she was an outlier in that she had no wish to improve her writing and did not need this group to write. Her farewell sentence in her third MWT is as follows:

> * The Writing Group - Nothing has changed in my life or the conception of almost any situation that I may be involved in.

In the line pre-printed to fill in the date of the drawing, she wrote instead of the date:

> (*My world and I today*) CoExist in Comfort (*fill in date*).

Meet Pat

Pat, 73, a tall, serious looking widow carefully walks with a cane. She suffers from

chronic fibromyalgia made worse during the group period by a slipped disk. She lives with pain most of the time, but true to her upbringing with a stiff upper lip she uses strong pain killers before she comes to the sessions "to make sure I wouldn't make life difficult for everybody." [Pat FU 65]

Her face is elongated and wears a permanently 'prim and proper' look, her eyes are bright and lively. She presents herself as a down-to-earth, civil, humble person, taking care not to offend anyone. Towards the end of the group she revealed that she has been a trained Samaritan for about thirty years and is still active in that capacity. She has 10 years of formal education and regrets that circumstances at the time did not permit more formal studies after her schooling.

She completed the baseline questionnaire with few words, in which the circumstances of her life 'explain' her basic limitations and her needs to cope with problems, as in: " The war meant that...." "Problems in my first marriage meant that I had to be a single mother...." [Pat Base 2-4]. The centrality of family in her life shines through most of her responses, like when she states her goal in joining the writing group: " I am writing my life story for my granddaughter." [Pat Base 8] Pat gave me her unfinished life story before the group and it was striking to witness the changes she has made to it, both stylistically and emotionally, during the group.

Baseline Quotes

> However bad you feel there is always someone worse off than you. [Pat Base 1]
> I hadn't seen an opportunity to participate in writing activities with others, which is why I took this when it came up. [Pat Base 9-10]

End Quote

> I am so glad that I answered that advert, as I have found that writing about things that happened years ago has made me understand a great deal about the way I now feel about things that happened many years ago. [Pat End 5]

FU Quote

> I really enjoyed the meetings, and especially after I began to feel that I could talk to the others and not feel that I was - down here where they were up here if you see what I mean [Pat FU 15]

Summary of trajectory

Pat started the group with the goal of writing her story for her young-adult granddaughter and she is slowly writing and editing it. Her writings during the group reveal a progression from a matter of fact chronological summing up of life events, to the ability to voice her emotional re-evaluation of events. She started to exercise choice as to the level of disclosure she wanted for herself and for other readers.

Pat acknowledges that the group's structure and program has increased her learning, and

relates to her group experience with nuanced and sober feelings[54], more as the social context of her own learning than as a causal factor.Towards the end of the FU interview she speaks in her typical down to earth way about parts of her uneasy group experience:

> Spring's work I could understand beautifully, because she wanted to write a book for her grandson, and everything she wrote I could understand perfectly, the other thing was that Julie – most of what she wrote, apart from the art, was about

cats. My daughter has got four and that's enough for me. [Pat FU 85-86]

Findings indicate further sustained personal development, which Pat ascribes to the group: her self-confidence, initially low, has grown and supports her in the needs of her advancing age and physical limitations. A re-evaluation of some critical periods in her life, which she said that the group enabled, has contributed to viewing herself in a more positive, happy way and to a willingness to share this view openly. Some changes, as expressed for example in her level of awareness, were stronger at End and may have faded until FU. Pat's remarks in a fictional letter to a friend may illuminate the process she is aware of at the end of the group:

> We were given a file, and began with writing a letter to ourselves, saying how we felt about joining the group, and what we felt we would gain from it. This was quite therapeutic as I hadn't realised exactly how I felt until I wrote it down. [Pat E cats 2]

Her trajectory showing a peak at End and a relative lowering at FU is consistent with a recognisable pattern of people taking part in workshops: great enthusiasm at End, when changes are still fresh in the mind, and a gradual receding with time. However in Pat's case the content of her FU evaluation reveals that much new learning, coping and world view has stayed with her, that she values it and associates it with her participation in the group.Her three MWT drawings express a progression from being reserved to communicative-dynamic and her SOC-Q score has increased by 7 points. The verbal, the pictorial and the numerical findings all show that her sense of self has stayed intact. Some areas of her life have not changed, notably her painful physical problems which the writing group did not alleviate. She also did not expect that, she wanted to cope with it:

> I had to deal with it because I wanted to be here. If I hadn't, if I was in some sort of pain that I couldn't stand it would have been hard 'cause I wanted to come, so I had to put up with the pain to get here. [Pat End 34]

Meet *Rita* – compare and contrast with Harry in relation to awareness (7.2.2)

Rita, 60, married and very recently retired from working in community health resource

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[54] 'Nuanced' means that her mentions of Group Experience included negative and neutral utterances.

management, came to the group as part of discovering what she wanted to do in her workfree life. She was born in the north of England with 18 years of formal education, including mental health counselling and performance arts.

A petite, energetic, expressive woman of many talents, she was able to be both a serious and a funny presence in her group. The writing group challenged her tendency to spread herself thin over many areas of interest and activity. Focussing on the assignments opened time and space for new self reflection. The group itself is a resource that helps her cope, more than the structured writing, at which she is already experienced from years of taking part in other groups. In the End group evaluation she may have deliberately emphasised the 'dynamic' contribution of the group to her process, especially in enabling her to focus and benefit from feedback. At FU however she attributed the increase of her learning and coping more to GC, perhaps because the group was not present at the interview. Possibly the elapsed time between End and FU led her to identify and separate the learning in this group from things she learned elsewhere.

Baseline Quotes

> I now recognise my skill as an artist and writing is central to it. I have written pieces that I am pleased with and have learnt some craft in writing through courses classes etc. [Rita Base 15-17]

> I find writing alone difficult to motivate and flow. Classes/courses contradict that.[Rita Base 19]

End Quote

> I think I learned something about the Point of View and how much I went into motivations and people's emotional states and things like that. I write from the inside anyways, so to write something, when I did a play and everything is what you see – I found it excruciatingly hard – that was very ...That was really hard but I think it was very interesting, because I just don't do it. [Rita End 24-25]

FU Quotes

> The struggle I had – I've still have actually – is writing solitary. So I've been writing for a long time and I have done various courses and I've learned quite a lot, but I need a structure in order to write. [Rita FU 6]

> I think the other thing I've learned was – – and I'm carrying on learning this, is that – my writing is for performers. Whether it's fiction, or, - but it's to be alive. [Rita FU 26-27]

Summary of trajectory

Rita derived marginal benefit from yet another writing group among the many she has

attended and this makes sense for a person as group-savvy and reflexively aware as she is. (But stands in contrast to Tez who, with a similarly sophisticated background, got a lot out of the group for himself.) She used the group to channel her diverse and scattered creative energies to produce a communicative message of her thoughts and feelings. Her SOC-Q scores reflect no change, but their initial strength is retained during the first phase of her retirement, which is a potentially stressful period of life. Her MWT drawings show a progression from past constraints to managing future possibilities with firmer grounding in a secure sense of self. The writing group fell accidentally in the transition period to retirement, and its influence cannot be separated from Rita's many other courses and activities. In her case financial security is also of importance, allowing her to pursue her interests unhampered by material constraints, an exceptional condition among the participants in this study.

Rita mentions five areas of her life that have not changed in connection with the group: Verbal skills, communication outside group, listening, physical experience, and her view of past, present and future. The last topic appears however to have undergone changes, seen in her MWT trajectory, which she did not acknowledge.

In comparison with Harry's relative unawareness of his communication with himself and specifically of the possibility of listening to an 'inner voice' informing thoughts and deeds (7.2.2.), Rita specialises in this area, stating how writing in a group helps her cope with a critical internal voice.

> There's such a **loud voice in my head** that says: 'and who do you think you are' and all that sort of stuff – and **that** when I'm on my own it's hard to quiet that one **down**, you know what I mean, or a set of **doubts,** or whatever it is with different people, we've **all** got those **critics** that tell you who – you know - with a bit of writing it becomes very **loud** when I'm on my own**.** But if there's **somebody else there,** that says 'Oh I **like** that ...well sometimes it disappears. Well it's always there - but if I'm reading it out and getting a very good response – it goes very quiet... but I think it's always **there**, but there is a body of work *(she means internal)* that says 'We **have** done it before' Yes, o yes I have an argument. [Rita End 32-35]

Meet Ron

Ron, smallish and chubby of stature, is a bachelor of 38, an IT professional and graphic artist. The accents of Yorkshire dominate his speech and together with the associative flow of his thoughts this makes listening to him a bit of a challenge. His writing is

however much clearer, even when his subject matter is 'quirky', as he calls it. He is simultaneously sociable and distant and goes his own way in the group. He deferred his decision to join the study, until he trusted the process and wanted the benefit of written feedback on his writing from the facilitator. He is English born and lives alone. He has 22 years of formal education and names IT as his profession.

Baseline Quotes

> *These things had a big impact on my life*: Degree; Art; Information Technology [Ron Base 2-4]

> From experience everything filters in. However, not always directly – always different parts into different parts – not a full biopic. There are no hard or fast rules and it is never about my life story it is about drawing material from experiences in my life. [ibid. 15-19]

End Quotes

> I found it interesting from feedback that others sometimes find my own writing quite hard to understand. [Ron End 17]

> I think, reading the first letter to myself now... I can see that I've kind of achieved what I set out to do, basically exploring methods and processes further and to challenge and progress my writing further so yea, I'm quite happy that's what I did in 12 weeks. [Ron End 33-34]

FU Quotes

> **The Feast**
> My poetry has flourished
> The goblets of wine plentiful
> My images relate
> Of shadow hands
> And bridging gaps
> I congratulate myself
> I pat myself on the back
> I laugh at myself looking outwards, Looking inwards
> I poetically recite verses
> The images are moving,
> Flickering, dancing
> Success tastes good
> It smells good...
> In actual fact all I felt was relief
> A sense of achievement
> A satisfied completeness
> That everything was now done.
>
> [Ron, 'What I will remember' poem]

> After the writing group I think I became more focussed. I started to channel myself better to force myself to produce something on a larger scale and I managed my time better. [Ron FU 8-9]

Summary of trajectory

To sum up the demonstration of Ron's findings via the separate assessment instruments, I conclude that in his responses analysed through content analysis he reports many 'useful' changes from baseline which are sustained and put into practice at follow up. These changes relate to his writing and to other aspects of his life, notably behaviour needed to restore his health. His three MWT drawings give a varied account of his views of himself and his world, without indication of development. His SOC-Q score, already high at Base, has fluctuated but indicates no significant change. The verbal, the pictorial and the numerical findings all show that his sense of self has stayed intact and that he has integrated the changes of which he is aware.Ron started the group with the goal of 'further exploring methods and processes of writing' and he has achieved that. He also ascribes to the group sustained personal development beyond this goal, of which he has kept me informed on his own initiative since. He has self-published several small art and poetry books and compilation of artwork-linked autobiographical pieces, without quitting his day job. His health has improved considerably.

Meet *Shari* – compare and contrast with Ailsa on SOC /CA (7.2.4)

Shari has lived in several countries and cultures. She survived Hurricane Katrina. Aged 56, divorced, she works in education and struggles with physical and mental health issues. The group brings out her tendency to engage challenges and stand up for herself. She presents her plucky side, even when literally out of breath and metaphorically feeling out of her depth. She started out with the idea that she was unable to write. A gentle and open presence in the group.

Baseline Quotes

> My world has changed dramatically thru the years. I am finally putting myself first and finding out who I am and what I have to offer. I used to be just a label: mother, wife, bookkeeper, decorator, cheerleader, Cantor's wife. [Shari/MWT1 explanatory text]

> Some of *the things that had a big impact on my life were*: failing 11-plus, giving birth and raising my son; Hurricane Katrina. [Shari Base 4; 6; 10]

End Quote

> Sometimes my mind felt like a cork in a bottle
> Others like a fast flowing river
> Racing to write down each thought
> Before they disappeared forever
>
> My mind was a closed tap at first
> Opening slowly each week with a trickle
> Gathering speed with each turn of the tap
> My mind is wide open at last.
>
> [Shari- Remember, verses 3-4]

FU Quotes

> Probably about 20 years ago I was this very shy, this very, trying to hide in the woodwork type of person, so it's like I've been unlocking all these layers... [Shari FU 40]

> It was almost like opening a tap or taking a cork slowly out of a bottle of fizzy pop and all this stuff was coming out and it was hard to keep my hand writing quick enough to get all the stuff down on the paper. It was something I'd never had before.

> Because before if you'd ask me to write about whatever, I couldn't do it. I'd be thinking 'ok, what can I write–' Do you know, look at the blank piece of paper and nothing...[Shari FU 8-9, underlined in original]

Summary of trajectory

Shari's findings show that she consistently attests to much development at End and FU, with FU scores only a little lower. Having started the group with low self esteem and the lowest Baseline SOC-Q scores in the sample to match, and having to contend with worsening health throughout, she nevertheless consistently expressed new learning, coping and feelings of liberation and accomplishment that she put into practice.

In contrast to participants like Ailsa who made their world views (SOC/CA) explicit at Base and any changes in it at FU, Shari hardly formulated them in her evaluations. She often said in the group that she is a visual thinker, picturing mostly concrete things in her mind. It was not easy for her to verbalise abstractions like beliefs and assumptions. When group members did so it literally gave her a headache.

> I found that because I'm a visual person just hearing someone's story was hard for me to **picture**, but actually being able to read it **and hear it** made much more sense.[Shari End 12] It kind of opens up and becomes very interesting and listening and realising that I'm more factual, more concrete, whereas other people are much more idealistic. For me it's very hard sometimes to understand when they're writing about this stuff it's completely over my head. [Shari FU 58-59]

She talks about emotional issues in terms of 'stuff' and how hard it was for her to share those with the group. The metaphor of a corked bottle appearing in the poem quoted above keeps popping up and it can clearly be read how this is a concrete visual/bodily image for Shari, rather than an abstract idea.

> I wouldn't have had this if I hadn't been part of the group and taken part in it. So it would have stayed – all this stuff would have stayed inside of me. And also talking about them because normally I keep my feelings to myself and keep all bottled up. So the idea of actually **me being in a situation where I could openly talk about whatever it was that I'd written** – that for me was the most difficult thing to do. [Shari FU 15-17]

The overall importance of the writing group for Shari can be inferred from her reply to the last question of the interviewer, who hoped to wrap up the many veiled references to the 'stuff that's been going on'.

Interviewer: The issues that you talked about in the last year, which presumably started before the writing group, do you think if you'd had the opportunity to participate in a writing group from when these issues began, do you think that would have changed how you have experienced the past year–

> I think it might have helped me - it might have been more helpful mentally and

emotionally, that I might have been able to cope with what has and is being thrown at me. Had I started this before I started with this – downfall, the stuff that's been going on – it possibly could have had a greater – influence for the positive. I'd still been having these things but been able maybe to look upon them from a slightly different view than I have had. So yes, I think it could have helped. Obviously nothing helps physically, but looking at things within the course you're looking from different perspectives that could have maybe helped me more emotionally to deal with it. [Shari FU 85-87]

Meet *Tez* – compare and contrast with Grace's decreased SOC score (7.4) and Rita's moderate development with similar background in writing experience.

Tez is a single 60 years old father and grandfather. Slender, gentle and soft spoken he was a soothing presence in his group, where he was the only man. He is Yorkshire born, a scholarship pupil outside his native community, resulting in his 'posh' accent, which set him somewhat apart from his roots. He has 16 years of formal education and is self-employed as a trainer/consultant in mental health, including the facilitation of writing groups for survivors of the mental health system. He is also a guitarist and writes poems he sometimes sets to music. His goal was to reach a state of mind enabling him to finish the novel he has been working on for five years.

Baseline Quotes

> There are not two different kinds of people, mad people and sane people, just people who are more or less distressed. [Tez Base 4]
>
> Human beings are at one and the same time unique, distinct individuals, and also part of a single process, called variously the 'Tao', the 'Way', the 'Great Spirit' etc. [Tez Base 5]
>
> I've used writing poetry since being at school to help express my feelings and thoughts about the world, [Tez Base 13]

End Quote

> Reading my own work out in a live situation, that was the thing that was very powerful to me, just trying out how does this sound, and as I was reading things I could – you do feel the reaction of other people. And then I'd think: 'Oh that went well', or: 'Yea, they didn't quite get that one, did they, so there must be something in it that's not, not – I didn't put it over well.' [Tez End 29-30]

FU Quotes

> I wanted to write and the particular thing was that I'd been engaged in a big writing project, trying to write a novel. And I got a bit stuck with it, so I kind of wanted to get back into that. And I thought that if I was writing regularly, then that would help and that's really what happened. [Tez FU 1-2]

Summary of trajectory

Tez is an experienced writer and facilitator of writing groups himself. He started the group with a well developed capacity for self-awareness and reflection. His evaluation attests to having gained further development of the goals he set himself, but also unexpected developments relating to his ability to communication with his close family. A recurring theme in his evaluation was the regularity of writing every week, prompted by assignments. The effect was that the regularity bypassed his 'queue' of many conflicting priorities, allowing him to focus and channel his efforts to conclude his unfinished novel, but also to other regular activities like starting a blog. This effect is emphasised five times by him at FU and can also be seen in his MWT drawings. His SOC-Q score was 10 points higher at FU compared to Base. Unlike others in the sample (e.g. see Rita above) who had a similar wealth of writing experience Tez attests to much benefit from the group. Although his overall scores are higher at End than at FU, at both points in time he is ranked in the 'high developer' group.

Meet Trudi

Trudi, a 62 year old former teacher of French, caring for her elderly mother and chronically ill son. Very active in her community and in the group, she often casts herself in a (quasi) apologetic role, when she negotiates her place and her divergent opinions about how exercises 'should' be done. She used to compared herself with others in the group, trying to be polite and respectful about it, but with anger shining through her self-deprecation. She must have been struggling, trying to be 'good or better' while feeling these conflicting emotions about her place, her abilities, her lack of time.

She participated assiduously, devoting much time and energy to her home assignments, to the annoyance of her husband.

Baseline Quotes

> I learned how to speak in front of an audience. [Tru- base 4]

> I learned how to take care of my body and cope with pain. [Tru- base 5]

> It might have been a good idea to use writing to cope with difficulties if I had had the time. [Tru- base 11]

> I wrote poems that expressed my fears and my happiness. [Tru- base 15]

End Quotes

> It's a different focus, your brain starts to work, you're not just thinking about what you're gonna make for the next dinner, but also I wouldn't have started sitting down and actually giving myself time to write if I hadn't had to do it, It's all very well saying 'one day I'll write something', but I wouldn't have done it without this impetus, to get on with it and start writing. [Tru- End 8]

> You know I can talk a lot, but I am a good listener, I know I am. I was one before but I'm more aware of a person's needs when they're talking to me now, - I think. [Tru- End 19]

> It's like a breath of fresh air into your life when you're doing something that is just for you [Tru- End 47]

FU Quotes

> My mind was active all the time on it - and I think it was stressful for my husband, but it was good, yes it was, because it just woke me up. [Trudi-FU units 12]

> I think I'm getting nicer to myself I think I might be a bit nicer to myself. [Trudi-FU units 110]

> I'm aware of structures in other people's writing in books now. [Trudi-FU units 86]

Summary of trajectory

Trudi's writings have developed from being long and elaborate, to more compact and communicative. She used to be quietly aggravated by others' lengthy writing, while she did her best to curb herself and stick to my guidelines. In her content analysis I read the gradual process of coming to see the irrelevance of comparing herself with others inside and even outside the group. Her Sense of Coherence has been strengthened, according to her utterances and her SOC-Q scores. This was striking at FU, because Trudi had badly broken her ankle just before her interview. She found herself in an unusual situation of needing help. Her world had been turned upside down when she became the disabled one instead of the carer, and she found out that she had enough internal and external resources to cope and recover with time.

She made a fourth MWT drawing on her own initiative nine months after End of group, in which she departed from her earlier static story of life and expressed movement, feeling and coping behaviour. Her fourth picture shows a firm and clear vision of going somewhere, out of the injury.

Trudi concludes that she has become nicer to herself and more understanding, less condescending towards others. Her overall trajectory shows her as having benefitted steadily during the group, and having sustained that benefit in word and deed at FU, which in her case was nine months after the end of the group. She went on to write the life history of her mother (now deceased) and published it in her community's newspaper.

Meet Verity

Verity has two young daughters and works as a teaching assistant to a pupil with special needs. She is 39 and married to a man from a different culture and religion than the one she grew up in. In the - far seeming- future she wants to become a film writer and director, but meanwhile she describes herself as an always tired house-proud mother, juggling work and family commitments. Her fast movements and high-speed, unclear speech carry this self image to the sedate group of older participants, of which she initially is in awe. She has many stories in her head and concentrating on writing is a challenge to which the group meetings and assignments lend support.

She is English born and lives with her husband and daughters. She has 12 years of formal education and did not specify a profession or skills apart from referring to "The job I'm doing now, the child who I work with."

Baseline Quotes

> Don't judge a book by its cover. I've learned in my job how to treat a special needs child, you need patience and a lot of care, energy and tolerance. [Ver Base 1-9]
>
> I have not used writing to cope with difficulties. I prefer talking about this subject with someone who loves me or who's been through the same situation. Also sometimes you have to muddle through difficult times and cope the best way you can. [Ver-S base 15-16]

End Quotes

> The more writing I do, the better, when I first started I wasn't as good. [Ver End 12]
>
> And my husband thinks I'm crazy 'why are you doing this–' It's because I enjoy it, that's my reason to do it. [Ver End 21]

FU Quotes

> My writing is more confident, I broadened my horizons, I'd write about maybe just my work, and now I can write about more things, not just what I'm doing. [Ver FU 8]
>
> Now I think about writing, do it not in a hurry, because I'm quite a quick person, you know, take your time, "is that right the way you write–"...[Ver FU 21]

Summary of trajectory

In Verity's responses analysed through content analysis she reports being aware of new learning and coping associated with the group and sustained at follow up. Her three MWT drawings express a progression from a stressed Self dreaming of rest to a more aware, differentiated Self, who copes better with overload. Yet her SOC-Q score has decreased. The verbal, the pictorial and the numerical findings show that her sense of self has stayed intact, with some signs of being challenged. Many areas of her life have not changed. Close reading of her statements give me the impression that Verity's world view was challenged by her group experiences to such an extent that she needed to counterbalance this by repeatedly confirming, in five statements, that she is not changing:

> I'm not a deep thinker – I just get on with my life, I don't sort of think about what I'm doing, I just do it, you know what I mean– [Ver FU 32]
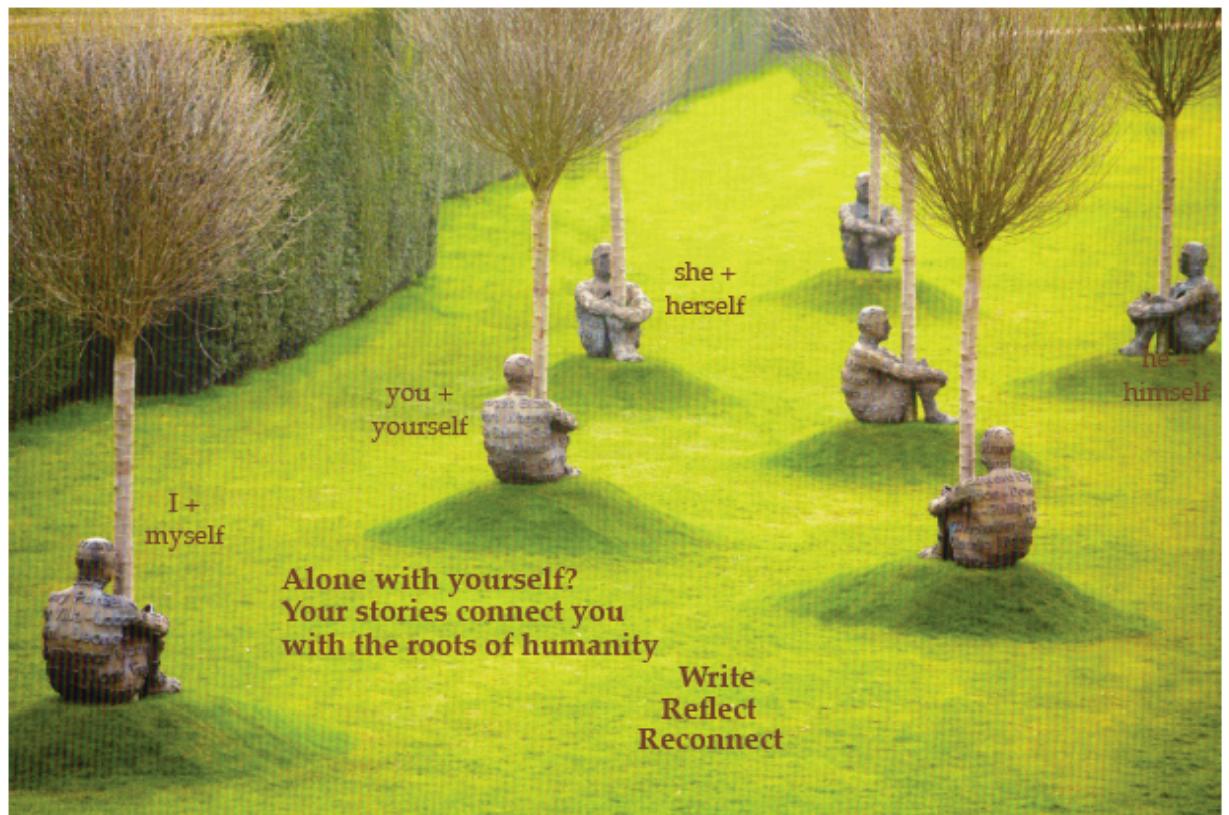
Verity is not prone to introspection. She's no intellectual and her initial writing was unsophisticated. Despite her stressful life and arriving rushed and tired at the sessions, her love of writing and motivation to engage with it led her to open up and absorb what fitted her needs during the group. This involved guarding the boundaries of what she was able to integrate at the time, a process that can be followed in the content analysis. She gained a freedom of expression that may have also been a big challenge to her, one for which she was too tired, or not relaxed enough in her own words.

> I did go to a writing group probably about 5 or 6 years ago. ...This one was a lot different. There was more sort of – whatever we wrote was ok, whereas the other was more set, you had to do it a certain way and that was it. That's writing, you can choose any way of doing things. It was more free. {Ver FU 10-11]

She found out that some of her earlier ideas may need adjusting, as in:

> You think everybody is like you, but actually they're not. [Ver FU 29]

Appendix G: Showcase poster

WRITE YOURSELVES ...

she +
herself

you +
yourself

I +
myself

Alone with yourself?
Your stories connect you
with the roots of humanity

Write
Reflect
Reconnect

TOGETHER, GROW AND CONNECT

Personal Development in Structured Writing Groups
an interdisciplinary study by Channa Cune
English and related literature & Health Sciences
write.ingroup@gmail.com

THE UNIVERSITY of York

Sculpture 'Heart of Trees' by Jaume Plensa. Photo: Jonty Wilder, Yorkshire Sculpture Park. Used by permission
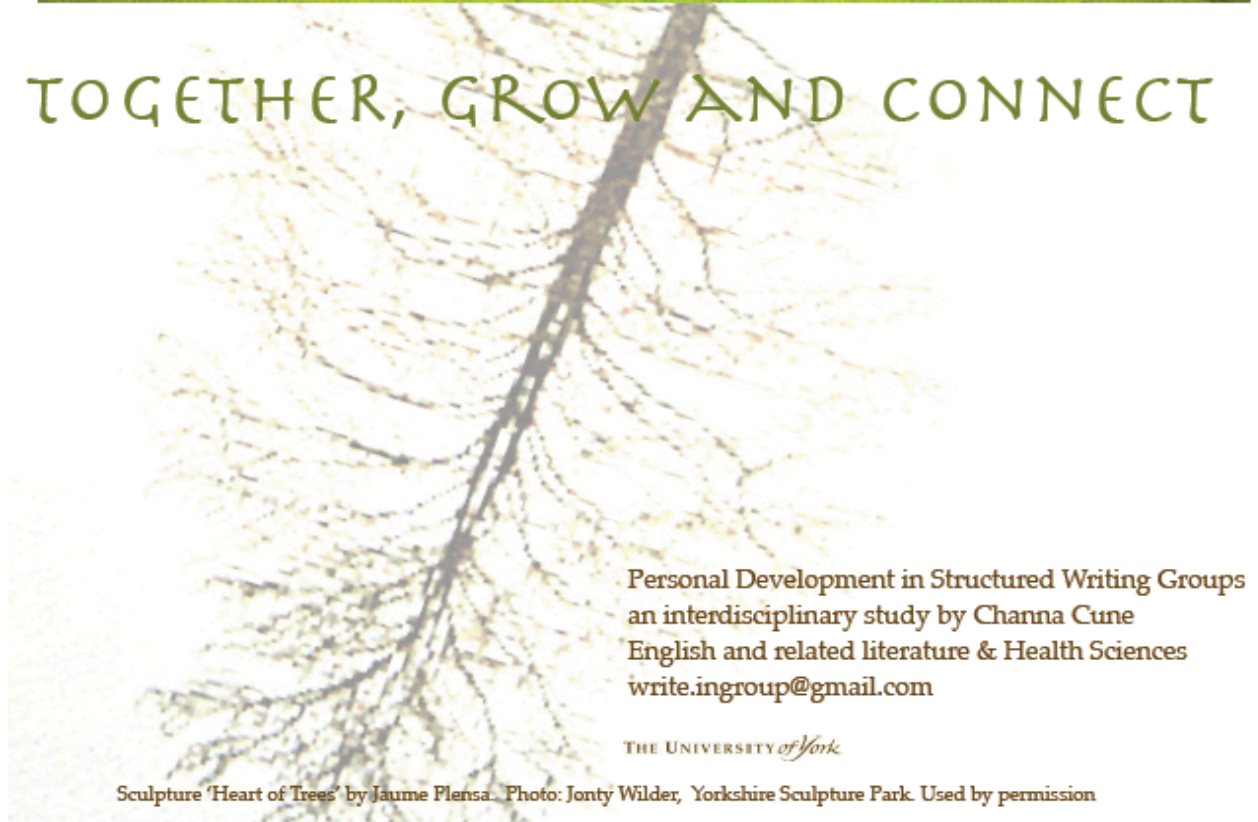
Glossary and Abbreviations

Base, End and FU denote Baseline, End of group and Follow Up assessment moments.

MWT denotes My World and I Today

CA denotes Content Analysis

SOC/CA is the Sense of Coherence category in

CA SOC-Q denotes Sense of Coherence questionnaire

C. Denotes the facilitator (initial of Channa)

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