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**Unravelling the written word:  
Expressive Writing, narratives and Counselling Psychology**

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Portfolio submitted in fulfilment of the  
Professional Doctorate in Counselling Psychology (DPsych)

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## THE FOLLOWING PARTS OF THIS THESIS HAVE BEEN REDACTED FOR COPYRIGHT REASONS:

- pp 219-261: **Publishable paper.** Pennebaker's expressive writing paradigm: a counselling psychology perspective.
- pp 262-264: **Publishable paper appendix.** Submission guidelines for Journal of Counseling Psychology.  
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## THE FOLLOWING PARTS OF THIS THESIS HAVE BEEN REDACTED FOR DATA PROTECTION REASONS

- pp 172-179: **Appendix J:** Individual narrative analysis – stages of analysis.
- pp 182-184: **Appendix L:** Extracts from interview transcript.
- pp 191-214: **Part 2: Clinical case study.** Working with difficulties in emotional regulation within a brief CBT framework: a case study.

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*In memory of my grandmothers,*

*Rebecca Savvides (1932- 2013) and Stavroulla Pavlides (1914- 2014)*

*Their kindness, love and courage will forever be remembered*

## **Declaration**

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## Preface

The use of writing for therapeutic purposes has a long tradition in psychology. Writing expressively has appeared in a variety of forms and types of interventions in the psychotherapeutic literature. This doctoral portfolio takes a closer look at one of the most well-researched paradigms of writing, namely Pennebaker's Expressive Writing paradigm, and aims to shed further light on its therapeutic use and value. In line with the scientist-practitioner understanding of the role and identity of Counselling Psychologists, this portfolio is comprised of three sections: an original piece of research, a clinical case study and a publishable paper, whereby each section provides a different perspective on how Expressive Writing can facilitate psychological wellbeing.

There is currently a plethora of research on the use and effectiveness of Pennebaker's Expressive Writing paradigm, with increasing suggestions for its use as a self-help intervention or as an adjunct to psychotherapy. *Section 1* of this portfolio, an original piece of research, goes beyond the traditional quantitative methodologies used in studies on Expressive Writing and takes a qualitative view on the intervention. Based on the assumption that narrative is both a method of knowing and an ontological condition of living, this thesis uses narrative methods of inquiry to explore how people construct meaning and their sense of self through Expressive Writing. The study also explores the subjective experience of individuals taking part in the writing task, highlighting the dialogical nature of the intervention. Emerging findings are discussed in terms of their contribution to theory, suggestions for further research and implications for using Expressive Writing as an adjunct to Counselling Psychology practice. In line with the ethos of Counselling Psychology, the thesis concludes with recommendations of how Expressive Writing could be a valuable addition to Counselling Psychology practice. Embedded in these recommendations is the importance of using Expressive Writing as part of an individualised therapeutic plan developed through collaborative conceptualisation and within a good therapeutic relationship.

*Section 2* of this portfolio, a clinical case study, puts into practice the increasing suggestions of using Expressive Writing as an adjunct to psychotherapy and illustrates how writing was used as an intervention to facilitate the process of therapy. The case study demonstrates how both

disorder-specific and trans-diagnostic processes were integrated to develop a collaborative case conceptualisation within a brief Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT) context. It draws from emotional regulation literature to identify maladaptive emotional regulation strategies that maintained the client's difficulties, and makes suggestions for appropriate interventions to address the individual goals of the client. Guided by the application of theory to clinical practice, it also illustrates how Expressive Writing was incorporated into the therapeutic plan to facilitate psychological wellbeing. Finally, the case study highlights the importance of effective use of supervision and of developing a good therapeutic relationship to facilitate the process of therapy.

*Section 3* of this portfolio, the publishable paper, returns the reader to the quantitative research on the Expressive Writing paradigm, providing a critical review of the literature. The article critically evaluates evidence for the effectiveness of Pennebaker's Expressive Writing intervention and discusses implications for its use in Counselling Psychology practice. The review demonstrates how, although research provides encouraging evidence for the therapeutic benefits of the intervention, there still remains much scope for research in regards to its use in psychotherapy. The need for more scientific exploration of the task of Expressive Writing in line with the ethos of Counselling Psychology is highlighted and suggestions for future research are discussed. It is noteworthy that this article was originally written as a critical literature review in my first year on the doctoral programme and formed the foundation of the original research presented in section 1. The revised version, presented in this portfolio, was prepared for submission to the Journal of Counseling Psychology.

Implicit in all three components of this portfolio is the centrality of narratives in psychotherapy and the importance of paying attention to the subjective meanings of verbal and/or written stories that clients share. Counselling Psychology emphasizes the empathic engagement of the therapist with the world of the client and places subjective experience, feelings and meanings at the core of the therapeutic work. In line with this, the publishable paper highlights how exploring the Expressive Writing intervention only through quantitative methodologies, fails to take into account the subjective meanings that individuals construct in the process. Building on this idea, the original piece of research argues that Expressive Writing provides people with the opportunity to re-construct their experiences in the context of the intervention, and in the process construct a sense of self through their written narratives. Finally, the clinical case study reminds

the reader how therapist and client also co-construct the narratives that guide the therapeutic process, which in turn can open up space for new narratives and meanings to exist.

At the heart of this portfolio lies my own journey and development as a Counselling Psychologist. The motivation behind engaging with this topic evolved from my own personal experience of using writing as a way to express, process and make sense of my thoughts and feelings about myself, others and the world. As I engaged with the literature I noticed that it was predominantly guided by quantitative research, with little attention given to the individual narratives that emerged. Moreover, quantitative research at times presented conflicting or equivocal evidence. This led me to move away from the false sense of comfort that positivist epistemologies may offer and to embrace the richness of subjective meanings that can only be discovered through qualitative work. As I moved from one position to the other, I got to appreciate the beauty of pluralistic thinking and practice embedded in the ethos of Counselling Psychology. Specific methodologies will answer specific research questions, but a single methodology cannot cover all aspects of a phenomenon. Similarly, specific interventions might be helpful for some clients, but not all. Engaging with the world of Expressive Writing in each section of this portfolio allowed me to reflect on my assumptions and understanding of what it means to be a scientist-practitioner in this profession. Taken together the three components of this portfolio demonstrate how I have moved from a more positivist way of thinking (in my initial literature review and later publishable paper) to a more pluralistic understanding of theory, research and practice as demonstrated in my thesis.

Expressive Writing has much to offer to the psychotherapy world, but is by no means a panacea. It is hoped that this portfolio will help shed light on how Expressive Writing could be incorporated into Counselling Psychology practice and open up areas for further research. Embedded in all sections is the ethos of Counselling Psychology which privileges reflection and engagement with subjective experience, in both research and clinical practice.

## **Part 1: Doctoral research**

*The construction of self through Expressive Writing: An exploratory study*

## **Abstract**

There is a growing body of evidence supporting the use of Pennebaker's 'Expressive Writing' paradigm as an adjunct to psychological therapy or as a self-help therapeutic intervention. Research, thus far, has predominantly focused on measuring, explaining and analysing the effects of 'Expressive Writing' as a therapeutic intervention through randomised controlled trials, paying little attention to the subjective experience of the individuals and the types of narratives people write. This doctoral research approaches 'Expressive Writing' from a narrative perspective, which argues that individuals construct their sense of self and create meaning of their own lives through the use of narratives. The aim of this thesis is to explore how people construct their sense of self through 'Expressive Writing'. Following an adapted version of Pennebaker's 'Expressive Writing' guidelines, six participants were asked to spend 50 to 60 minutes writing about an emotional life-changing event and then share their stories, and their experience of writing about their stories, in an hour-long interview. The study used qualitative methods of inquiry, namely narrative analyses to explore the process of the construction of sense of self in both the written and oral narratives. The emerged findings point to the natural tendency of people to write in a narrative form using culturally available narratives and highlight the dialogical nature of the intervention. Findings are discussed in terms of implications for Counselling Psychology practice, their contribution to theory, and suggestions for future research. Overall, this thesis suggests that Expressive Writing could be a valuable addition to Counselling Psychology practice, when used in line with the ethos and values of Counselling Psychology.

# 1. Introduction

*‘Write hard and clear about what hurts’*

Ernest Hemingway

The relationship between writing and healing has a long history, dating back to the ancient Greek and ancient Egyptian cultures (Bolton, 1999). With an increase in literacy skills and improved access to education (see Clark, 2012), writing has become an essential component of everyday living in the Western world. It is, thus, not surprising that over the past three decades, researchers and practitioners have shown an increased interest in the use of writing for therapeutic purposes (e.g., Bolton, Howlett, Lago, & Wright, 2004; Pennebaker & Beall, 1986; Pennebaker & Chung, 2007; Thompson, 2010).

Perhaps the most influential and well researched model of therapeutic writing is Pennebaker’s Expressive Writing paradigm (EW), with over 200 studies published in English language journals alone (Pennebaker & Chung, 2011). In this first chapter I provide an overview of the therapeutic uses of writing and review the rapidly growing literature on Pennebaker’s Expressive Writing paradigm, paying particular attention to recent meta-analyses on the effectiveness of the intervention, the possible underlying mechanisms, and the limitations and gaps in the literature. I then turn the focus on how narrative theories can help us shed further light on the complex process of writing for therapeutic purposes. Finally, I present the rationale and aims of the present study.

## 1.1 Overview of therapeutic uses of writing

The use of writing for therapeutic purposes has a long tradition in psychology. Allport (1942) was one of the first to report the therapeutic benefits of writing and, since then, writing has been used in varied and creative ways to promote physical and psychological well-being (see Bolton, Howlett, Lago, & Wright, 2004; Pennebaker & Chung, 2007; Thompson, 2010). Currently, a number of psychotherapeutic models use writing as a way to facilitate the therapeutic process. For example, the practice of diary keeping and letter writing is common in Cognitive Analytic

Therapy (Ryle, 2004) and Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (Prasko, Diveky, Mozny, & Sigmundova, 2009). Similarly, compassionate letter writing has featured in some of the third wave Cognitive Behavioural Therapy models (Gilbert, 2009; Leahy, Tirsch, & Napolitano, 2011) and unsent letters are commonly used in constructivist approaches to psychotherapy (Mahoney, 2003). The use of narrative and writing has also been adopted by family therapists (L'Abate, 1991) and there is a growing body of evidence regarding the use of Journal Therapy as a way to facilitate emotional and physical healing (see Thompson, 2010). The varied ways in which written expression has been used in psychotherapy resonates with the pluralistic ethos underpinning the practice of Counselling Psychology, that is, the 'engagement with different models in an informed approach to therapeutic practice' (McAteer, 2010; p. 8).

Beyond specific psychotherapeutic models, simply writing about one's thoughts and feelings has been posited to promote physical and psychological well-being (e.g., Bolton, 2008; Pennebaker & Chung, 2011). Consequently, recent years have seen a growing number of popular self-help books encouraging writing for personal development (e.g., Adams, 1990; Bell & Magrs, 2001; Bolton, 2011; Goldberg, 2005) and creative writing workshops aiming to facilitate emotional healing (e.g., Bolton, 2008). Moreover, there are increasing suggestions for using creative and expressive writing as an adjunct to therapy (e.g., Bolton et al., 2004; Graf, Gaudiano, & Geller, 2008) and more recently websites run by therapists promote online therapeutic writing (e.g., [www.write-as-rain.co.uk](http://www.write-as-rain.co.uk)).

In reviewing the research literature, Wright and Chung (2001) speak of a continuum between the polarities of 'humanities' and 'scientific' paradigms. Within the humanities paradigm, researchers and practitioners have mainly explored the therapeutic benefits of writing through facilitating creative writing groups using fiction, poetry and diaries (e.g., Bolton et al., 2004; Bolton, 2008; Hunt, 2000). From this perspective, writing expressively is seen as a creative process similar to other expressive arts such as drawing, dance and movement, where creativity is a mystery which allows for psychological insight (Wright & Chung, 2001). Hunt and Sampson (1998), however, have highlighted that there is a need for a conceptual framework to ground writing therapy theoretically; and indeed, recently, some suggestions within the humanities paradigm have begun to emerge (Nicholls, 2009).

Hunt (2000, 2004, 2006), for example, takes a developmental approach to fictional autobiographical writing looking at how it can transform learning in higher education. Although in her earlier work Hunt (2000) drew on a 'Horneyan literary psychoanalytic approach', suggesting that writing increases intellectual understanding and emotional experiencing of defences, her more recent work has focused on a more bodily felt sense approach. Drawing from neurophysiological, psychodynamic and cognitive models of the self, and consistent with Nicholls' (2008, 2009) theoretical framework, Hunt (2010) argues that writing fictional autobiography eases the 'psychic stuckness through facilitating the 'letting-go' of familiar, sometimes inhibiting self-concepts and the development of a stronger and more flexible sense of self rooted in the felt body' (Hunt, 2010; p. 234). Hunt's (2000; 2006) and Nicholl's (2008) works, however, have mainly focused on guided fictional autobiography writing groups with students enrolled in a Creative Writing and Personal Development university course, which makes it difficult to infer how effective their intervention would be in a therapeutic setting, and whether research on non-fiction autobiography might yield the same results.

In exploring writing in clinical settings, Bolton draws largely from the humanistic literature focusing her research on the use of therapeutic creative writing in the medical humanities (see Bolton, 2008, 2010). She places the act of writing within the narrative literature and argues that narrating a life story in writing, and reading it back silently, can create a critical dialogue with the self. Her research has mainly focused on exploring the benefits of using creative writing groups in medical settings, with some promising findings. For example, in facilitating creative writing groups in palliative care for cancer patients, she described how creative writing allowed patients to express deeply personal thoughts, feelings and experiences, reflect upon their relationships and events, communicate painful experiences with significant others and gain a sense of pride and achievement in the creation of their writing (Bolton, 2008).

It is important to note, however, that researchers in the 'humanities' paradigm have used a variety of forms of writing such as poetry and guided fiction autobiography, and have mainly utilised their interventions in a group setting (e.g., Bolton, 2008; Hunt, 2004; also see Bolton et al., 2004). Although their research provides some important insights into the therapeutic benefits of writing, and their qualitative research methods take into account the subjective experience of their participants, which is key in Counselling Psychology practice, their paradigms have not

been explored in psychotherapeutic settings. There is, therefore, a need for more consistent and systematic research in order to clarify how, why and for whom writing works; otherwise, we fall into the trap of presenting therapeutic writing as a panacea. Indeed, Bolton has been criticised for implying that there are no risks in writing therapeutically (cf. Wright, 2004), whereas Hunt (2004) briefly notes that a few of her participants have found the writing exercises distressing with one having an adverse reaction. She explains that it is important that therapeutic creative writing takes place in a therapeutically oriented group where emotions can be contained and worked through (Hunt, 2004). It is, therefore, important to have consistent and systematic research into writing for therapeutic purposes before we can promote creative writing as a self-help therapeutic intervention or use it as an adjunct to therapy.

In contrast to the humanities paradigm, researchers who have focused on the scientific paradigm have been largely interested in measuring, explaining and analysing the effects of writing as a therapeutic intervention through randomised controlled trials (see Frattaroli, 2006; Pennebaker & Chung, 2007). Pennebaker and Beall (1986) were the first to experimentally manipulate the process of written disclosure to explore the effects of writing about a traumatic event on physical and emotional health. In this first study, participants were randomly assigned into four groups: writing about the facts of the traumatic experience, writing about their emotions of the traumatic experience, writing about both the facts and the emotions of the traumatic experience and writing about a neutral topic such as the description of their living room. The experiment took place over four consecutive sessions where the participants were asked to spend 15 minutes writing about the topic they were assigned. In order to explore the effects of the written disclosure the participants' blood pressure, heart rate and self-reported measures of mood and physical symptoms were collected before and after each writing session. The results showed that the group that wrote about both the facts and their emotions regarding the traumatic experience demonstrated a significant reduction in illness-related doctor visits and reported less physical health complaints at a follow-up two months later, compared to the other groups. The findings of this study, although not definite, were viewed as promising by the research community and initiated a tradition of research exploring the effects of EW on emotional and physical health through randomized controlled trials.

Almost thirty years after the original study, research on Pennebaker's paradigm continues to grow, with findings supporting the benefits of EW in a range of clinical and non-clinical settings, in different population groups and for specific psychological and physical difficulties (Pennebaker & Chung, 2011). As with the humanities paradigm, there are now growing suggestions for the use of EW as a self-help intervention or as an adjunct to psychotherapy (e.g., Graf et al., 2008; Pennebaker & Chung, 2007). If we are to promote therapeutic writing as a self-help tool or use it as an adjunct to psychotherapy, and more specifically in Counselling Psychology practice, then it is important to use a model of writing whose process and effectiveness have been systematically explored. Indeed, Strawbridge and Woolfe (2010) endorse this understanding, highlighting that Counselling Psychology "recognizes the importance of clear conceptual frameworks within which we can research, evaluate and develop practice" (p. 5). Although both the humanities and the scientific paradigms have offered important insights into the benefits of writing as therapy, in contrast to the humanities paradigm, Pennebaker's paradigm has been applied in psychotherapy settings and some of its boundary conditions have been identified. The large body of research on Pennebaker's paradigm, albeit not without limitations, provides promising support for the effectiveness of the intervention. The following section provides a review of the growing research on Pennebaker's EW model.

## **1.2 Overview of Pennebaker's Expressive Writing paradigm**

Similar to the original study by Pennebaker and Beall (1986), the basic EW protocol asks participants to spend 15 to 30 minutes writing about their very deepest thoughts and feelings about a significant event in their lives. The writing usually takes place over three to five consecutive days, although several variations of these procedures exist. In the experimental studies, participants in the control group are usually asked to write about an emotionally neutral topic such as the description of their room or their plans for the day. Effectiveness is then assessed by comparing the outcome measures of the experimental groups to those of the controls, as well as through differences in outcome measures taken pre- and post- intervention (see Pennebaker & Chung, 2011; Pennebaker, 1997). Over the last three decades, researchers have used a range of measures and variations of the original protocol, to explore the benefits of EW on physical and psychological health, providing support for the effectiveness of the intervention.

Most of the early research on EW explored the physical health benefits of the intervention in healthy student populations. Some notable findings demonstrate that EW reduces health centre visits (Pennebaker & Beall, 1986; Pennebaker, Kiecolt-Glaser, & Glaser, 1988; Pennebaker, Colder, & Sharp, 1990; Pennebaker & Francis, 1996) and decreases self-reported upper respiratory problems (Greenberg, Wortman, & Stone, 1996). Beneficial effects of EW have also been shown in clinical settings, indicating the transferability of EW benefits from laboratory setting to clinical setting. For example, in regards to medically ill populations, research suggests that, among others, EW reduces physical and emotional dysfunction in rheumatoid arthritis and asthma patients (Smyth, Stone, Hurewitz, & Kaell, 1999), reduces pain and improves well-being in women with fibromyalgia (Broderick, Junghaenel, & Schwartz, 2005) and produces lower evaluations of pain intensity in chronic pain patients (Norman, Lumley, Dooley, & Diamond, 2004).

Research has also shown that EW facilitates emotional and psychological well-being. For example, EW has been shown to reduce depressive symptoms prior to impending exams (Frattaroli, Thomas, & Lyubomirsky, 2011; Lepore, 1997), improve mood, physical health and social functioning in individuals who had experienced a recent relationship breakup (Lepore & Greenberg, 2002) and improve gay men's psychosocial functioning (Pachankis & Goldfried, 2010). Moreover, Sloan and Marx (2004a) explored the effects of EW upon physical and psychological health in female undergraduates who had experienced one or more traumatic stressors. Participants in the written disclosure group showed a significant reduction in psychological and physical symptoms, although only decreased depressive symptoms were shown to be clinically meaningful. Similarly, Sloan, Marx and Epstein (2005) explored the effects of EW upon students with a history of trauma and at least moderate PTSD symptoms. Results showed that participants who were instructed to write about the same traumatic experience showed physical and psychological improvement, as measured by self-report measures and cortisol levels, noting that the reduction in PTSD symptoms was clinically significant.

There is also some evidence to suggest that EW facilitates emotional well-being in clinical populations. Bernard, Jackson and Jones (2006) examined whether EW can be used to reduce psychosis-related PTSD symptoms, and reported that the EW group showed a significant

decrease in overall severity and avoidance of traumatic psychosis-related stimuli. Similarly, Smyth, Hockemeyer and Tulloch (2008) investigated feasibility, safety and efficacy of EW in individuals diagnosed with PTSD and reported that, while severity of PTSD-related symptoms was not reduced, participants who wrote about traumatic events showed significant decreases in dysphoric mood and physiological response. Some limited benefits were also reported in male psychiatric prison inmates (Richards, Beal, Seagal, & Pennebaker, 2000) and victims of natural disaster (Smyth et al., 2002). Moreover, equivocal evidence exists in regards to the effects of EW in individuals with mood disorders (Baikie, Geerligs, & Wilhelm, 2012), and eating disorders (Johnston, Startup, Lavender, Godfrey, & Schmidt, 2010) and in individuals with a distorted body image (Lafont & Oberle, 2014), as these studies have found that, although individuals in the EW groups benefited from the intervention, the control samples benefited as well.

Despite evidence suggesting that EW improves physical and psychological health, a number of studies examining different populations have not found any significant effect upon emotional well-being. Brown and Heimberg (2001) explored its impact upon rape victims by examining whether writing about emotions that accompanied the rape incident had a different effect than only writing facts about the incident, and found no significant difference between the EW and the control groups. Similarly, Kearns, Edwards, Calhoun and Gidycz (2010) utilised the EW paradigm in a study of college women with a history of sexual assault and found that, while those writing about their most severe victimization initially showed decreased negative mood, no significant differences were found at one-month follow-up. EW has also failed to show significant benefits in facilitating recovery from bereavement (Stroebe, Stroebe, Schut, Zech, & van den Bout, 2002) and in students screened for suicidality (Kovac & Range, 2000).

It is also noteworthy that, although most studies report that EW has a positive effect on physical and psychological health, Gidron, Peri, Connolly and Shalev (1996) showed that participants with PTSD assigned to an EW group appeared to worsen compared to a control group. Their methodology deviated largely from Pennebaker's paradigm, however, by asking participants to write at home, and by requiring them to read and verbally elaborate upon the content of their writing in a group setting. Lepore, Ragan and Jones (2000) argue that the combination of written private disclosure and verbal public disclosure may mask or distort effects of the EW intervention. Furthermore, Smyth, Nazarian and Arigo (2008) suggest that, if EW interventions

are “administered under highly controlled circumstances, even participants with severe psychiatric conditions (that self-select into such treatment) are generally not harmed” (p. 91).

### **1.3 Meta-analyses and systematic reviews of the EW research**

Although evidence suggests that EW can improve physical and psychological health, there is a lot of variation between studies in terms of populations studied, symptoms measured, instruments used, time between initial and follow-up measurements, environment, time between writing sessions, and instructions given (Frattaroli, 2006). The equivocal findings have, thus, highlighted the need for a synthesis of relevant research in order to establish generalizability of findings and consistency of results.

Smyth (1998) was the first to conduct a meta-analysis of early EW studies in order to examine overall significance and effect size, and to determine moderators of the intervention. The meta-analysis included 13 studies that examined EW in healthy participants and had at least one outcome measure of either physical or mental health or general functioning. The analyses showed an overall positive medium effect size ( $d = .47$ ), which represented a twenty-three percent improvement in the EW groups compared to control groups. In examining specific outcome types, EW was found to produce significant effects on reported health, psychological well-being, physiological functioning and general functioning, with psychological well-being and physiological functioning outcomes showing higher effect sizes. The overall effect size was moderated by gender and spacing of sessions, whereby studies with a higher percentage of males and studies with longer time periods between writing sessions were positively related to the overall effect. Number and length of writing sessions were unrelated to improvement. Moderators of psychological well-being included use of student participants, instructions to write about current traumas, and unpublished studies, with each increasing the effect size. With regard to physiological functioning, writing about past or current traumas showed higher effect sizes, as opposed to writing only about past trauma. It is noteworthy, however, that although EW was found overall to be beneficial, Smyth’s (1998) meta-analysis focused only on ‘healthy’ participants, which prohibits the findings to be generalised to a clinical population.

Frisina, Borod and Lepore (2004) focused their meta-analysis on the effects of EW on physical and mental health in clinical populations. They included nine studies which used at least one

quantitative measure of health, assessing specific mental or physical health behaviours or general functioning. The overall mean effect size ( $d=.19$ ) was positive and statistically significant for clinical populations, but relatively modest compared to Smyth's. Contrary to Smyth's findings, EW did not significantly improve overall psychological health outcomes. It did, however, have a significant effect on measures of depression, anxiety, mood and sleep quality. While this meta-analysis reveals some important findings, it suggests that EW is less effective for psychiatric than physically ill populations. It is noteworthy, however, that both Frisina et al. (2004) and Smyth (1998) used a small number of studies and a fixed effects approach in their analyses, which limits the generalizability of their findings.

Inconsistent with the above meta-analyses, Meads, Lyons and Carroll (2003) systematically reviewed 61 trials which examined the effect of EW on physical and psychological health outcomes in both healthy participants and clinical populations. Their results showed inconclusive evidence for the effectiveness of the intervention. Several objective measures of physical health that showed improvements were offset by a larger number showing no difference between intervention and control groups. Similarly, in regards to psychological outcomes the authors reported equivocal results for depression with no difference between EW and control groups, and no differences for anxiety. There was, however, a significant increase in positive mood at follow up and a reduction in health care utilization overall for the EW groups compared to controls. The authors argued that there seems to be a bias towards reporting only positive results, as not all outcome measures collected were actually reported in the results of these studies. Furthermore, the fact that control groups also benefited from the writing task raises issues around methodological procedures; that is, whether the 'neutral' writing instructions are in fact as neutral as they are assumed to be. In concluding their systematic review, Meads and her colleagues suggested that there was no clear evidence to demonstrate the effectiveness of the intervention (see also Meads & Nouwen, 2005).

Similarly, Mogk and his colleagues (2006) used a random effects approach to meta-analyse 30 studies examining the effect of EW on physical and psychological health in participants from a clinical population and in healthy students. Their analyses focused on the long-term effects of EW, defined by an interval of at least four weeks between the last writing session and the follow-up. The results showed no significant overall effect, with no evidence suggesting a significant

effect on specific outcome categories, with the exception of the category of health behaviours (e.g., visits to physicians or health care centres, sick days, drug use, smoking, alcohol consumption, sleeping and eating habits, sports), for which they reported a marginally significant effect. Consistent with Meads et al. (2003), the authors suggest that their findings were inconclusive in regards to the effectiveness of EW on physical and psychological health, although they do acknowledge that the number of clinical trials they included was small.

Partially in response to the findings of Meads et al. (2003), Harris (2006) meta-analysed 30 studies of EW, focusing exclusively on health care utilization, as reduced utilization has been the most frequently reported longer term effect of the intervention. The analysis found that EW significantly reduced health care utilisation in samples of healthy people but not in samples defined by medical diagnoses or exposure to stress or other psychological factor. It is noteworthy, however, that some of the effects observed were produced by increases in health care utilization by the control groups. Reviewing ten studies focusing on psychological factors, Harris tentatively concluded that more writing sessions may in fact increase health care utilization for this group. The author noted that EW may be contraindicated in cases of risk, such as suicidal ideation or trauma, given that this group was shown to decrease health care utilization compared to control groups, when in fact such visits may have been crucial for their well-being. This highlights the fact that reduction in health care utilization may not always be the desired goal.

Following the increasing number of studies exploring EW, Frattaroli (2006), conducted a meta-analysis on 146 studies, using a random effects approach. The overall effect size ( $d=.151$ ) showed that EW had beneficial effects, although it was smaller than the mean effect sizes found by Smyth (1998) and Frisina et al. (2004). Frattaroli's large scale meta-analysis also allowed her to identify a number of moderating factors. Larger effect sizes were found for studies that included only participants with physical health problems or participants with a history of trauma. Other moderating factors contributing to larger effect sizes included disclosing at home, disclosing in a private setting, instructions given, timing of follow-up, use of non-college student participants, writing session lasting at least 15 minutes, writing about more recent events, and whether the topic of writing was previously undisclosed. Psychological health selection criteria, participants' gender, age, ethnicity, education level, and mode of writing, such as hand writing or

typing, were not significantly related to the effect size. These findings are inconsistent with Smyth's meta-analysis, which found significant effects for psychological health, with higher effects found in studies with higher proportions of men. Further investigation of gender as a moderator, however, supports Frattaroli's findings, as a number of studies have found no significant relationship between gender and EW (e.g., Kelley, Lumley, & Leisen, 1997; Rivkin, Gustafson, Weingarten, & Chin, 2006; Sheese, Brown, & Graziano, 2004) and two have found that EW benefited women more (Crow, 2000; Pennebaker et al., 1990). Null effects found for psychological health by both Frattaroli (2006) and Frisina et al. (2004) raise questions around the effectiveness of the intervention in clinical populations. Furthermore, although Smyth found a significant effect size for psychological health, it is noteworthy that he only included studies with non-clinical populations.

A closer examination of psychological health criteria in Frattaroli's (2006) meta-analysis shows that EW may be beneficial for some specific psychological health problems. Deconstructing the psychological health variable into specific subcategories, Frattaroli observed that, of 112 studies measuring psychological health, the majority focused upon positive human functioning, a number examined stress, distress, depression and coping, and a small number studied anxiety, grief and bereavement, cognitive schemas, post-traumatic growth, eating disorders and dissociative experiences. Effects of EW were found to be significant for distress, depression and positive human functioning. These results substantiate those of Frisina et al. (2004) in finding significant decreases in self-reported depression.

The systematic reviews and meta-analyses described above provide some support for the overall effectiveness of EW; three report positive overall effects, one reports a positive effect on health care utilisation for the healthy population only, and two report no overall effect or an inability to draw conclusions. All of them, however, suggest that EW may be effective in unique outcomes and specific populations. Perhaps part of the reason for the differential support is the variability between studies in terms of symptoms measured, instruments used and populations examined. Indeed, Sloan and Marx (2004) argue that, given differences in methodologies it would be inappropriate to compute an overall effect size. Instead, they suggest examining moderating variables in order to understand better the effectiveness of the intervention. Furthermore, the reviews themselves have used different selection criteria, and despite the large number of

existing EW studies, all of the reviews, with the exception of Frattaroli's, included a relatively small sample of studies. It is also noteworthy that after the meta-analyses mentioned above were conducted, numerous studies have been published that have provided further support for the benefits of EW on physical and psychological health (e.g., Bernard, Jackson, & Jones, 2006; Frattaroli et al., 2011; Pachankis & Goldfried, 2010).

#### **1.4 Expressive Writing as homework in psychotherapy**

Despite evidence for the therapeutic benefits of EW, and recent calls for its use as a self-help intervention (e.g., Pennebaker & Chung, 2007), Baikie and Wilhelm (2005) warn that EW should not replace appropriate medical or psychological treatment in clinical populations. They suggest however that EW could be used as an adjunct in appropriate therapeutic contexts. Some research on how EW could be used in psychotherapy settings is now beginning to emerge.

Hayes and her colleagues (2005) offer one such example in their preliminary research into Exposure-Based Cognitive Therapy (EBCT), whereby depressed clients engage in 20-minute writing tasks between sessions. Incorporation of EW in EBCT aims to facilitate self-monitoring, increase awareness and affective labelling, and allow for exposure and emotional processing. Preliminary findings suggest that higher levels of processing within narratives predicted decreased depression and increased hopefulness, whereas higher levels of avoidance predicted less symptom reduction and more hopelessness. While their study supports the use of EW as an adjunct to psychotherapy, its generalizability is limited given its specificity to this type of therapy developed for depressed clients (Cummings, Hayes, Saint, & Park, 2014; Hayes et al., 2007, 2005).

A literature search in various databases (e.g., PsycINFO; EBSCOhost) revealed only one randomized controlled study examining the benefits of EW as an adjunct to psychotherapy. Graf et al. (2008) recruited participants starting psychotherapy at a university clinic, and asked the experimental group to write using the EW instructions for 20 consecutive minutes per week for two weeks. In order to control for potential therapist effects, therapists gave clients instructions in sealed envelopes after each therapy session and were kept unaware of their clients' assigned conditions. Participants in the EW group showed greater reduction in depression, anxiety and overall distress than the control group. In addition, they reported greater satisfaction with both

the psychotherapy and their therapists and showed greater overall progress in therapy. The fact that the study recruited 18 psychotherapists from different orientations and clients with a range of primary concerns (e.g., depression, trauma and anxiety) strengthens the external validity of the study. Of 71 clients approached, however, 27 refused to participate, suggesting possible group differences. These findings nonetheless offer preliminary evidence for the effectiveness of EW in outpatient psychotherapy.

## **1.5 Underlying Mechanisms**

Despite the evidence for the benefits of EW, the exact mechanisms still remain unclear (King, 2002; Pennebaker & Chung, 2011). A number of theories have been proposed over the years, aiming to ground the intervention theoretically, with some gaining empirical support. Pennebaker and Chung (2011) argue however that, no one theory can account for all the findings. Moreover, it is possible that some of the underlying mechanisms proposed may not be mutually exclusive, and may actually occur simultaneously. The following section reviews some of the most prominent theories to date.

### **1.5.1 Emotional Inhibition theory**

It is now widely accepted that inhibiting emotions can have negative effects on both physical and psychological health. This idea can be traced back to Freud's 'talking cure' and remains central to a number of psychotherapeutic models (Ellis & Cromby, 2009). The initial EW studies were guided by inhibition theory, which posits that inhibiting thoughts and feelings about a traumatic event acts as a cumulative stressor on the body, and is associated with prolonged physiological arousal, intrusive thoughts and rumination (Lutgendorf & Ullrich, 2002), and longer term disease (Baikie & Wilhelm, 2005; Pennebaker & Beall, 1986; Pennebaker, 1985). It was therefore suggested that EW allowed for the disinhibition of traumatic experiences and the associated feelings, leading to reduced stress and improved psychological and physical health (Pennebaker & Beall, 1986; Pennebaker & Chung, 2011).

Several studies lend support for inhibition theory, with evidence suggesting that confronting upsetting experiences is physically beneficial, with greater improvements observed in individuals who wrote about previously undisclosed topics (e.g., Pennebaker & Beall, 1986; Pennebaker,

Kiecolt-Glaser, & Glaser, 1988). Furthermore, research has shown that EW had greater benefits for individuals exhibiting more inhibition (e.g., Gortner, Rude, & Pennebaker, 2006), and in stigmatized populations experiencing ongoing social and internal pressures to inhibit self-expression (e.g., Swanbon, Boyce, & Greenberg, 2008). Qualitative data from patients' feedback also provides some support for the role of disinhibition in the benefits of EW (e.g., Byrne-Davis et al., 2006; Gellaitry, Peters, Bloomfield, & Horne, 2010).

Despite the evidence, however, not all findings are consistent with inhibition theory. In an experimental manipulation of the EW instructions, Greenberg and Stone (1992) found no difference between writing about previously disclosed and undisclosed trauma, thus failing to replicate previous findings. In addition, Greenberg, Wortman and Stone (1996) found that asking participants to write with as much emotion and detail about an imaginary trauma, that they had not actually experienced and therefore could not have inhibited, produced the same effects as writing about an experienced trauma. Moreover, the explanation that mere emotional expression is sufficient has also received criticisms, as studies comparing EW to other forms of expression such as dance (Krantz & Pennebaker, 2007) and drawing (Pantchenko, Lawson, & Joyce, 2003), indicate the importance of translating emotions to language. The mixed support for inhibition theory suggests that, although disinhibition of thoughts and feelings about an upsetting event may be important, other processes may also be implicated in the underlying mechanisms of EW. This has led the research community to explore additional mechanisms of action.

### **1.5.2 Cognitive and emotional processing: translating emotions to language**

In order to further understanding, Pennebaker, Colder and Sharp (1990) asked participants who had benefited from EW to discuss how they thought the intervention had helped. The majority of the participants reported that EW allowed them to gain better insight into their experience, leading researchers to propose that EW may facilitate cognitive processing. Drawing from the trauma literature and the role of language, they proposed that stressful or traumatic memories can be fragmented, disorganized and inconsistent with other memory structures, thus leading to distressing and intrusive thoughts, rumination and avoidance (Harber & Pennebaker, 1992; Pennebaker & Chung, 2011; Pennebaker, 1993). From this perspective, linguistically labelling the event and its emotions allows for the experience to be structured, thus facilitating

assimilation and understanding of the event (Pennebaker, Mayne, & Francis, 1997). Thus, it has been suggested that EW forces the event to be submitted to linguistic form, allowing the individual to gain insight and construct an organized and coherent explanation of the event and the associated emotions, thereby alleviating the maladaptive effects of incomplete emotional processing (e.g., Pennebaker & Chung, 2011; Pennebaker et al., 1997).

A similar understanding has been proposed by Lutgendorf and Ullrich (2002), who emphasize the experiential aspect of integrating the new cognitive perspectives in the cognitive, emotional, and physiological patterns associated with the stressor. Within this understanding, traumatic or stressful experiences which are inconsistent with pre-existing schemas about the self, others and the world, can cause cognitive, affective and autonomic tension, as observed through persistent, distressing and intrusive thoughts, rumination, hyperactivity and avoidance strategies (Harber & Pennebaker, 1992; Lutgendorf & Ullrich, 2002). It has, therefore, been suggested that EW facilitates the experiential processing of the event (i.e., cognitive and emotional processing), thus allowing the individual to gain insight about the event and organize and structure the memory, resulting in more adaptive schemas about the self, others and the world and ultimately leading to improved physical and psychological health.

Defining and measuring cognitive and emotional processing however, is difficult. Consequently, research has turned its attention to the linguistic properties of the written texts, aiming to explore whether language use in EW could explain the physical and psychological benefits observed in EW studies. To facilitate this, Pennebaker and Francis (1996) developed the Linguistic Inquiry and Word Count (LIWC), a computerized text analysis programme, which calculates the percentage of the total number of words associated with a particular dimension of language, such as ‘negative emotion words (sad, angry), positive emotion words (happy, laugh), causal words (because, reason), and insight words (understand, realize)’ (Pennebaker & Chung, 2011; p. 439). Despite some limitations, which are discussed later in this chapter, the LIWC programme has been widely used in studies exploring the content of EW texts and has provided interesting insights regarding the mechanisms of EW.

### ***Use of emotion words***

It was initially hypothesized that the more negative words one used during the EW task, the more ‘cathartic’ it would be, and that it would therefore lead to more health benefits. In one of the early studies looking at the linguistic components of the written narratives, Pennebaker (1993) provided some support for this, reporting that people who benefited the most used a higher proportion of negative emotion words than positive. Subsequent studies, however, failed to replicate these results. In fact, Pennebaker and Francis (1996) found that the use of negative emotion words was unrelated to health benefits, and more surprisingly, the more positive emotion words participants used in EW, the more their health improved. Consistent with these findings, Pennebaker and his colleagues (1997) re-analysed data from six previous EW studies and found that use of positive emotions was linked to better health. The authors also noted, albeit briefly in the footnotes, that subsequent curvilinear analyses showed that individuals who used a moderate number of negative emotion words benefited more than those who used a very high or very low percentage of negative emotion words. This might suggest adaptive emotional processing, whereby individuals who benefited the most were able to find positives in their experience instead of ruminating about the event, thus achieving positive emotional balance.

It is noteworthy, however, that not all studies support the claim that the use of more positive emotion words predicts physical and psychological benefits (e.g., Rivkin, Gustafson, Weingarten, & Chin, 2006). In fact, Holmes and his colleagues (2007), examined the relationship between cognitive and emotional processing with changes in pain and depression among intimate partner violence survivors and found that women who used higher mean levels of positive emotion words tended to report increased bodily pain symptoms. The authors, however, speculate that emotional processing in trauma narratives of intimate partner violence survivors might be different to other populations studied (Holmes et al., 2007).

### ***The construction of a story: analysis of cognitive words***

Consistent with cognitive processing theory, it has also been suggested that EW facilitates the development of a coherent narrative, thus allowing the stressful memory to be structured and integrated more efficiently (Pennebaker, 1993). Indeed studies examining the effects of narrative formation in EW support the idea that writing in an organized way is more beneficial than

writing in a fragmented way. For example, Smyth, True and Souto (2001) experimentally manipulated the EW instructions, specifically asking the participants in the EW groups to write in either a narrative way, like telling a story, or in a fragmented way, such as in the form of a list or a telegraphic, unintegrated fashion. Although both experimental groups disclosed substantial details and emotions, only the group instructed to form a narrative showed significant health improvement at follow-up, suggesting that the formation of a narrative is an important process within EW.

As Smyth et al. (2001) did not include a standard EW instruction group, Danoff-Burg, Mosher, Seawell and Agee (2010) examined whether specific instructions to write in a narrative format would produce more physical and psychological health benefits than standard EW instructions. Participants were assigned to three groups: an EW, a narrative and a control group. The narrative group was given a definition of narrative and a set of instructions about how to construct a narrative of their traumatic event that was both emotional and factual, whereas the other two groups were given the basic protocols used in previous studies. While both experimental groups showed significantly less perceived stress and fewer depressive symptoms than the control group, the two experimental conditions did not differ significantly from each other. These findings suggest that instructing participants to write in a narrative format may not improve the effectiveness of the technique. It is possible, however, that participants in both experimental groups may have organized their thoughts within a narrative structure, regardless of whether or not they were explicitly instructed to do so. This idea is in agreement with narrative psychology perspectives, which argue that narratives are the organizing principle for human experience, allowing individuals to construct their sense of self and create meaning in their lives (e.g., Sarbin, 1986).

Furthermore, there is also indirect evidence to suggest that EW may allow people who have difficulties organising their experience to create a coherent narrative. For example, Sloan, Marx, Epstein and Dobbs (2008) examined whether EW was moderated by two ruminative styles: brooding, which focuses on abstract processing and interferes with successful problem solving, and reflective pondering, which allows the ruminator to turn inwards for effective problem solving. Their results showed that only participants with tendencies toward brooding showed significant decreases in depressive symptoms. Moreover, Gortner et al. (2006) found that EW

reduced the brooding, but not the reflection aspects of rumination in depression, indicating that EW may facilitate emotional processing by providing a context whereby individuals can create a narrative structure, and organize and make sense of their stressful experience.

The importance of narrative formation in EW was first observed when researchers focused on the components of the written narratives. Using LIWC Pennebaker and his colleagues (1997) found that changes in insight and causal words over the course of writing predicted more benefits. Specifically, individuals who reported more health benefits, better grades and who found a job after writing, went from using relatively few insight and causal words in the first session to using a high rate of them in the last one. The authors noted that people who benefited the most from EW appeared to be constructing a story, thus providing support that constructing a coherent narrative during EW is important. Similar results were also reported by more recent studies where an increase in insight and causal words across sessions was associated with greater working memory improvements (Klein & Boals, 2001), less intrusive thoughts (Boals & Klein, 2005), improved psychological well-being (van Middendorp & Geenen, 2008) and meaning making (Boals, Banks, Hathaway, & Schuettler, 2011). This change in causal and cognition words also seems to indicate some form of cognitive processing, whereby EW allowed the participants to structure and assign meaning to the stressful event, leading to assimilation and resolution.

The above evidence, however, needs to be interpreted with caution. The findings from the linguistic studies reflect a causal relationship. That is, people who benefit the most tend to increase their use of causal, insight and positive emotion words. This does not necessarily mean that instructing participants to use more positive words or to construct a story would yield more improvements. In fact, as mentioned earlier, specifically asking participants to write in a narrative form, compared to the standard EW instructions, would not appear to be more beneficial than the standard EW instructions (Danoff-Burg et al., 2010). As Pennebaker and Chung (2011) suggest, it is possible that ‘the use of these word patterns may simply be reflecting some underlying cognitive and emotional changes occurring in the person’ (p. 432). Taken along with evidence that EW improves working memory (Klein & Boals, 2001) and lowers brooding rumination (Gortner et al., 2006), the findings from the linguistic studies provide some support that both cognitive and emotional processing are important in EW. It is still unclear, however,

whether the linguistic changes observed to predict improvements in physical and psychological well-being reflect the actual cognitive and emotional processes proposed. The linguistic studies, for example, cannot account for benefits found in people who wrote about imaginary trauma (e.g., Greenberg et al., 1996) or intensely positive experiences (e.g., Burton & King, 2004). Constructing a coherent story, however, seems to be an important part of the process, and is consistent with narrative theories (e.g., Sarbin, 1986). The importance of constructing a narrative, along with the limitations of using LIWC to explore narrative structure, is discussed in more detail later in this chapter.

### **1.5.3 Exposure and habituation to emotional stimuli**

Repeated exposure to a stressful experience, whereby one experiences a reduction of thoughts and feelings associated with that experience (Foa & Kozak, 1986), may also explain the benefits observed in EW. Consistent with social learning theory, when a traumatic event (unconditioned stimuli) elicits negative emotional arousal (unconditioned response), other neutral stimuli such as the memory of the trauma can become paired (conditioned stimuli) with the unconditioned response, evoking a fresh negative emotional reaction (conditioned response) in the absence of the unconditioned stimuli. The avoidance of the conditioned stimuli maintains the negative emotional response, as it prevents the individual from realising that the conditioned stimuli may not be followed by the unconditioned stimuli. In developing this idea further, Foa and Kozak (1986) proposed that individuals who experience trauma may develop a fear network in memory, which includes stimulus, responses and meaning elements, and elicits escape and avoidance behaviours.

It has therefore been suggested that EW may serve as a context that allows for exposure to the conditioned stimuli that had been previously avoided (fearful stimuli), thus facilitating habituation through emotional processing (Sloan & Marx, 2004b). Within this understanding, initial exposure to a fearful stimuli triggers high levels of arousal as it activates the faulty cognitive representations, individual responses and the associated meanings of the stimuli. Repeated exposure of the fearful stimuli provides corrective information about the stimuli, responses, and their meanings leading to reduced arousal across sessions (Sloan et al., 2005).

This process is in line with psychotherapeutic interventions for the treatment of PTSD (see Foa, Keane, & Friedman, 2000).

Research provides some evidence that exposure may be implicated in the EW paradigm and that it may account for some of its effects. Several studies show high initial physiological arousal, as measured by cortisol levels, with subsequent reduction across writing sessions, in the EW groups but not in the control groups (Sloan et al., 2005; Sloan & Marx, 2004a, 2006; Smyth, Hockemeyer, et al., 2008). This pattern of activation has been found to reduce depressive symptoms in participants writing about a traumatic experience (Sloan & Marx, 2004a), with a clinically meaningful reduction in PTSD symptom severity and physical symptom complaints (Sloan et al., 2005). Indeed, exposure theory may explain the initial distress, negative mood and physical symptoms increase, which is often observed in the EW groups but not in the controls in response to the first writing session.

Consistent with exposure theory, Sloan et al. (2005) have shown that only participants who wrote repeatedly about the same trauma showed physical and psychological improvement. These findings, however, cannot account for the benefits found in studies where participants were allowed to switch topics across sessions (Baikie & Wilhelm, 2005; Pennebaker & Chung, 2011) or in single session studies (e.g., Morgan, Graves, Poggi, & Cheson, 2008; Walker, Nail, & Croyle, 1999). Moreover, research with non-trauma populations has also failed to support the exposure theory hypothesis, with no difference found between groups writing about the same experience or writing about a different experience across sessions (Kloss & Lisman, 2002). Also, in exploring the content of the written essays, Campbell and Pennebaker (2003) found that similarities in the content of writing across sessions was unrelated to health benefits. These mixed findings have led Pennebaker and Chung (2011) to suggest that pure habituation might not be sufficient to explain the benefits of EW and to highlight that, ‘beyond any habituation processes, some form of cognitive change is also important’ (p. 428). It is therefore possible that, although exposure theory may underlie some of the benefits found in EW, especially when writing about trauma, other mechanisms are also involved.

#### **1.5.4 Social integration theory**

Changes in social dynamics following EW have also been suggested as a contributing mechanism of action. It has been proposed that EW allows for changes in the way individuals interact with their social world, enabling them to share their stressful event and seek support from others, beyond the context of the study (Frattaroli, 2006; Pennebaker, 2004). Indirect support for this model comes from linguistic studies, where EW participants who were asked to wear an Electronically Activated Recorder (EAR) made more self-references, used more positive words in their interaction with others (Pennebaker & Graybeal, 2001) and were more socially engaged (Kim, 2008) than the control groups. Moreover, EW has been linked with increases in emotional expressiveness between couples (Slatcher & Pennebaker, 2006) and the likelihood of reuniting or staying with a romantic partner (Lepore & Greenberg, 2002; Slatcher & Pennebaker, 2006). Participant feedback also provides some support that people feel more able to share thoughts and feelings with others (e.g., Kovac & Range, 2000).

More recently, it has been suggested that EW may also increase perceived emotional support. Gellaitry et al. (2010) found that cancer patients in the EW group were more satisfied with the emotional support that they were receiving from significant people in their lives, compared to the control group. There was no evidence, however, that EW increased perceived practical support (Gellaitry et al., 2010). Research on the effects of EW on social and emotional support is still limited, and although there is evidence to suggest changes in the way people interact with their social world, it is difficult to make any conclusive comments. Indeed, Andersson and Conley (2008) argue that the vast number of factors influencing socialization makes it difficult to assess the extent to which changes in social dynamics underlie EW benefits.

#### **1.5.5 Self- regulation theory**

Recent theories regarding the mechanisms of EW have also focused on self- and emotional regulation theories. Within this understanding, under-regulation or over-regulation of emotion can have negative effects on both physical and psychological health (see Lepore, Greenberg, Bruno, & Smyth, 2002). It has therefore been suggested that EW allows for adaptive regulation of affect, behaviour and cognitions, thus improving physical and psychological well-being. Indeed, effective emotional regulation has been associated with good health outcomes, improved

relationships and academic and work performance (Aldao, Nolen-Hoeksema, & Schweizer, 2010), which would be consistent with EW findings.

Although emotional regulation overlaps with the theories mentioned above, the findings of Greenberg et al. (1996), about the benefits of writing about an imaginary trauma, led the authors to suggest that the traumatic event itself was relatively unimportant in producing health benefits; rather, the confrontation of negative emotions, whether real or imaginary, enhanced emotional regulation through enhancing affective awareness, tolerance, and modulation and perceptions of control and self-efficacy in the context of aversive emotional arousal. Similarly, Lepore and his colleagues (2002) have argued that EW may provide individuals with a higher sense of self-efficacy in regulating emotions by enabling a feeling of control over stressors, challenges and problems.

Research directly exploring emotional regulation as an underlying mechanism is difficult (Andersson & Conley, 2008). The model, however, overlaps with the cognitive processing and the exposure models, in that cognitive adaptation and inhibition are essential elements for effective emotional regulation (see Leahy et al., 2011; Lepore, Greenberg, Bruno, & Smyth, 2002). Thus evidence supporting the aforementioned models also provides support for emotional regulation theory. Furthermore, studies that have enhanced EW instructions to promote emotional regulation provide some positive results that cannot be accounted for by the other theories. For example, King and Miner (2000) demonstrated that writing only about the positive aspects of a traumatic experience was associated with the same health benefits as writing about trauma. Furthermore, Cameron and Nicholls (1998) found that writing about coping with a forthcoming stressor improved physical health. Similarly, Kirk, Schutte and Hine (2011) found that enhancing EW instructions to facilitate emotional self-efficacy, by explicitly asking them to write about how they regulated emotions in their self and others, improved self-efficacy in participants with initially low or moderate scores in self-efficacy measures. From a wider self-regulation perspective, King (2002) reported that writing about goals allows the individual to clarify emotions and goals and facilitate goal attainment. Moreover, King (2001) reported that individuals who wrote about their best possible future selves showed enhanced psychological well-being and physical health benefits, and Burton and King (2004) showed that writing about an intense positive experience has a positive effect on mood and buffers against illness.

The above findings are important as they provide evidence that EW can be beneficial even when the topic of writing is not negative, or based on a traumatic or stressful event. Although they do not provide conclusive evidence about the underlying mechanisms of EW, and it is possible that there are different mediational pathways for positive and negative events, the studies outlined above lend support to the idea that EW might have a more general effect on self-regulation (Burton & King, 2004).

### **1.6 Limitations of research on Expressive Writing so far...**

Despite evidence supporting the effectiveness of EW, there are some limitations in regards to how EW has been studied thus far. As mentioned earlier, the construction of a coherent and meaningful narrative in EW is seen as essential in achieving physical and psychological health benefits. Within the existing EW literature, and following difficulties in identifying the psychometric properties of narratives (e.g., Pennebaker & Graybeal, 2001), the written narratives have been deconstructed and explored through their linguistic components using the computerised word analysis program LIWC. LIWC, however, has several limitations. First, although it counts words in various categories, it does not take into account the context in which they appear. For example, two phrases such as “I had a really good time” and “I didn’t have a good time” are coded equally for positive emotion (cf., Tov, Ng, Lin, & Qiu, 2013). Furthermore, Bantum and Owen (2009) note that, compared to human raters, LIWC cannot disambiguate words that are often used to convey quite different meanings, and tends to over-identify emotional expression words. Words such as ‘good’, ‘hope’ and ‘like’ are coded as positive emotion words by LIWC, whereas manual human coding does not classify them as emotion words (Bantum & Owen, 2009). Moreover, LIWC cannot detect linguistic nuances such as irony or sarcasm (Pennebaker, 2011). Thus the variability of how language is used and the meanings individuals assign to their words cannot be captured with LIWC.

In line with the above, most studies exploring the Expressive Writing intervention have used quantitative methodologies to measure, explain and analyse the effects of the intervention through randomised controlled trials. Using only quantitative methodologies to explore the process of change through EW can objectify human experience. Indeed, EW research has been

criticised for failing to take into account the lived experience of the individual (e.g., Mishara, 1995; Nicholls, 2009).

### **1.7 Towards a narrative approach: the storied nature of human experience**

The difficulty in establishing a clear underlying mechanism for EW has led researchers to suggest that perhaps we need to look at the benefits of EW from a ‘life story’ perspective, that is, the possibility that EW may allow us to stand back and reflect on our life narrative (e.g., Burton & King, 2004; Pennebaker & Chung, 2011). Indeed EW is somewhat in line with narrative theories, in the sense that they place the formation of a coherent and meaningful narrative at the centre of the intervention (e.g., Boals, 2012; Pennebaker & Chung, 2011; Pennebaker et al., 1997; Smyth et al., 2001). As mentioned above, however, the way EW narratives have been studied thus far remains problematic.

In his seminal works, Bruner (1986, 1990, 1991) distinguishes between ‘paradigmatic’ and ‘narrative’ knowing. Paradigmatic knowing, he argues, is rooted in the formal, mathematical system of description and explanation, whereby verifiable procedures are employed to find an empirical ‘truth’. In contrast, narrative knowing, organizes human experiences and memory in a storied form. While he suggests that both paradigmatic and narrative modes of knowing are essential in making sense of our worlds, he explains that ‘many domains are not organised by logical principles or associative connections, particularly those that have to do with man’s knowledge of himself, his social world, his culture’ (Bruner, 1991; p. 4).

Bruner’s narrative mode of knowing is grounded in narrative theories, which suggest that we live in a storied world where we construct the world through narratives, and live through the stories told by ourselves and others (Murray, 2008; Sarbin, 1986). Within this understanding, ‘narrative’ is seen as ‘coterminous with story [...] that has a temporal dimension’ (Sarbin, 1986; p. 3); and can be defined as ‘an organized interpretation of a sequence of events’ (Murray, 2008; p. 113). According to Ricoeur (1984), since human beings live in a temporal world we synthesize our experience into narrative plots in order to bring order and meaning to a constantly changing world. Human lives are full of disruptions, from major ‘narrative wreckages’ (Frank, 1995) such as illness and trauma, to everyday disruptions such as personal and relationship problems. Recasting these disruptions into narratives, which include causal sequences, mental states and

actions, allows us to sort out and make sense of what happened. As Bruner (1990) argues, one of the main functions of narratives is to form ‘links between the exceptional and the ordinary’ (p. 47).

In line with the above, Bruner (1990) explains that, although narratives involve sequences of events, feeling states and distinct actions, these constituents do not have a meaning of their own; rather meaning is given by how they are organised in the story plot. Similarly, in talking about the importance of emotions in narratives, McLeod (1997) argues that ‘emotions are connected to other roles and meanings in a person’s life through the medium of the stories in which they are embedded’ (p. 41). Narratives, therefore, provide some information about the subjective experience of the narrator and the meaning they assign to their particular life events, which cannot be captured through quantitative studies examining meaning making through LIWC (e.g., Boals, 2012) or through counting emotion words (e.g., Pennebaker et al., 1997) out of the context of the whole narrative.

Moreover, through the stories we tell to ourselves and others, we also construct a narrative identity, a sense of self that allows for a sense of localized coherence and continuity in the plot of the story that a person tells about him- or herself (Ricoeur, 1988). It is noteworthy, however, that ‘narrative identity is not a stable and seamless identity’ (Ricoeur, 1988; p. 248). Instead, our sense of self encompasses a multiplicity of narratives connected to different situations and relationships. Thus the stories we tell and the way we construct meaning and our sense of self, depend on the social context. There is, however, experiential unity and temporal coherence in the way we construct our life narratives<sup>1</sup> (see Crossley, 2000). In line with this, the narratives we construct are not factual representations of what happened. Instead, our sense of self is constructed through ‘selective remembering to adjust the past to the demands of the present and the anticipated future’ (Bruner, 2003; p. 213).

The narratives we tell to ourselves and others have implications for our psychological wellbeing. How we shape our stories can move us closer or further away from specific emotional states (McLeod, 1997). In specific narrative therapies, psychological difficulties are conceptualised within the framework of disrupted and disorganised life stories, where client and therapist work

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<sup>1</sup> A more in-depth discussion of the ontological assumptions underpinning this study is provided in the next chapter.

together to transform faulty life narratives into more adaptive stories (e.g., Dimaggio & Semerari, 2004; Neimeyer & Tschudi, 2003). Although different types of therapy have conceptualised narratives differently, narratives lie at the core of every model of psychotherapy as clients share their stories about their past, present and future within the process of therapy (Davy, 2010). Thus, in many ways, psychotherapy can be seen as story reformulation (see (Angus & Mcleod, 2004).

## **1.8 Rationale and aims of the study**

When participants are asked to engage in EW and write about a significant life event, they are essentially asked to select, organise, connect and evaluate, thus give meaning, to that event in their lives. Indeed, from within the quantitative studies on EW literature, Boals et al. (2011) argue that the instructions of EW which typically ask participants to explore their deepest thoughts and feelings are ‘an explicit encouragement to engage in the meaning-making process’ (p. 398). Although research on EW, thus far, has provided us with important evidence for the effectiveness of the intervention, drawing on the pluralistic ethos of Counselling Psychology, in both research and practice, exploring the intervention from a different perspective might help us shed light on the complex process underlying EW, and facilitate its use for therapeutic purposes.

From a narrative perspective, EW can be seen as a process whereby individuals construct their sense of self and create meaning of their significant life experiences. Research in EW has mainly used quantitative methodologies to explore narrative construction and meaning-making (e.g., Boals, 2012; Pennebaker & Graybeal, 2001), paying little attention to the subjective experience of individuals. The present study rests on the assumption that narrative is both an ontological condition of living in a storied world and a method of knowing. It thus uses qualitative narrative methods of inquiry to explore the participants’ written narratives. The aim of this study is twofold: to explore how people construct their ‘sense of self’ and create meaning when they write expressively about a significant emotional event; and to qualitatively explore the participants’ experience of writing expressively about their emotional life changing event through semi-structured interviews. Moreover, following the increasing suggestions for the use of Expressive Writing as a self-help therapeutic intervention and/or as an adjunct to psychotherapy (e.g., Pennebaker & Chung, 2007), it is hoped that the present study might allow

us further insight into the complex process underlying the intervention, which in turn could facilitate better use of EW in Counselling Psychology practice.

## **2. Methodology**

The aim of this chapter is to provide a detailed account of the research process that guided this study. I begin with an overview of the research aims and the rationale for choosing qualitative methods to address them. I then position the study epistemologically, clarifying the assumptions that underpin the methods of inquiry and handling of the data. I, also, provide an overview of narrative methods of inquiry and my understanding of narrative analytic methods. Following from that, I proceed to explain the methods of collecting and analysing the data, as well as the ethical considerations of the study. In concluding this chapter, I provide an evaluation of the methodology and end with some personal and epistemological reflections.

### **2.1 Research Aims**

This study aims to explore how individuals construct their sense of self and create meaning of their own lives through Expressive Writing (EW). More specifically, it aims to explore how people organize and create meaning of emotional life-changing experiences through their written narratives; and how they integrate this understanding into their views of themselves, and into their life story. The study approaches the Expressive Writing intervention from a narrative psychology perspective and uses narrative methods of inquiry to explore the participants' written narratives.

Given the increasing suggestions for the use of Expressive Writing as a self-help therapeutic intervention and/or as an adjunct to psychotherapy (e.g., Pennebaker & Chung, 2007), it is hoped that the present study could allow us further insight into the complex process underlying the intervention, which in turn could facilitate better use of Expressive Writing in Counselling Psychology practice.

### **2.2 Rationale for Qualitative Research**

Most of the research on Expressive Writing has focused on measuring, explaining and analysing the effects of the intervention through randomized control trials (see Frattaroli, 2006; Pennebaker & Chung, 2007). In adopting a quantitative methodological approach, however, there is a danger of objectifying human experience and losing the individual in the process. This is due to the fact that quantitative methods tend to lie within a positivist epistemology, with the ontological

assumption that there is an objective reality that can be measured (see Ashworth, 2008; Ryan, 2006). Of course, this is not to say that studies so far have been based on strict logical positivism, as there is always an element of interpretation in the production of theory and understanding of the findings. There is, however, an emphasis on objectivity and statistical analyses, with the underlying assumption that the studies produce reliable knowledge, independent of the researcher or instruments of research (see Madill, Jordan, & Shirley, 2000; Sherrard, 1998).

Despite the growing body of scientific evidence that supports the benefits of EW for therapeutic purposes, the underlying mechanisms still remain unclear. As Pennebaker and Chung (2007) explain, no one of the proposed mechanisms can account for all the findings in EW research. Perhaps this reflects the complexity of human nature, that is, that human experience when writing expressively cannot only be reduced to quantifiable measurements. Although the quantitative research on Pennebaker's paradigm has offered us important information in regards to the use of EW as a therapeutic intervention, the present study takes the position that exploring the subjective meanings and experiences narrated in each individual's written narrative might help us shed further light on this process.

More recently, and as a reaction to positivist epistemology, researchers in the social sciences have turned towards using qualitative methodologies to explore 'the quality and texture of experience, rather than [...] the identification of cause-effect relationships' (Willig, 2008; p. 8). Qualitative research is concerned with how individuals make sense of their world and their experiences, and how meaning-making is embedded in cultural and social contexts (see Willig, 2008). The aim of this study, which is to explore how people construct their sense of self when they are asked to write expressively, is consistent with the assumptions reflected in qualitative research. This study aims to engage with the subjective world of the individuals when they use writing to make sense of their experience and to explore their meaning-making process through the richness of their own written words.

## **2.3 Epistemological position**

In moving beyond positivism as the epistemological assumption underpinning most EW research, it is important to consider the nature of knowledge the present study aims to create; namely the epistemological position of this research. Madill et al. (2000) suggest that

epistemological assumptions lie on a spectrum, with 'naïve' realism, which is akin to positivism at one end, and radical constructionism on the other. Realism, at one end of the spectrum, can range from 'naïve' to 'critical', where 'naïve' realism assumes a direct access of the true representation of the world as it is; whereas 'critical' realism acknowledges an inherent subjectivity in the production of knowledge. At the other end of the continuum in which radical constructionism is situated, knowledge is considered to be constructed from the 'tools' we use to create knowledge, including language and discourses. Between 'realism' and 'constructionism' lie several other positions, including 'contextual constructionism' which assumes that, although knowledge is context specific, there is an implied inter-subjectivity in the production of knowledge (see Madill et al., 2000). Qualitative research highlights the importance of situating each study epistemologically before embarking on the research journey, as the position one adopts will influence both the handling and interpretation of the data, as well as the evaluation of the study (Willig, 2008).

The research question this study aims to answer, which is how people construct their sense of self through Expressive Writing, carries with it underlying assumptions that position this study epistemologically. The term 'construction' points towards the social constructionist understanding of knowledge. Such position suggests that the accounts that are produced through EW are situated within, and shaped by, social contexts; and are inextricably linked to language and linguistic practices (see Burr, 2003). Adopting a rigid social constructionist position, however, can itself be problematic, as the individual subjectivity can often be overlooked from such a position (Crossley, 2000b). This study is not only concerned with how individuals construct their narratives, but also with the subjective meaning that those narratives have for the individuals. There is, therefore, a phenomenological aspect in wishing to explore the lived experience of the participants. This situates the present study closer to a 'Contextual Constructionist' epistemological position (see Madill et al., 2000). This means that it does not assume that the interview or written texts only elicit information about the unique meanings of the participant, nor does it assume that the participant's stories were simply constructed in the research settings as something independent of the participants' reality. Instead, it is concerned with how the participants' life-changing experiences have been structured and conveyed in the written narrative to become part of the participants' life stories, whilst acknowledging the intersubjective construction of collecting and interpreting these accounts. Pidgeon and Henwood

(1997) endorse this understanding, arguing that the participants' own subjective meanings, the researcher's interpretations and cultural meaning systems informing those interpretations, play a role in the production of knowledge. This position is in line with the assumptions underlying narrative inquiry (see Phoenix, Smith, & Sparkes, 2010; Smith & Sparkes, 2006). As Crossley (2000a) argues: 'It is possible to consider that what respondents say does have some significance and 'reality' for them beyond the boundaries of the specific interview context, and that this is part of their 'ongoing story' which represents a manifestation of their psychological and social worlds' (p. 88).

### **2.3.1 Ontological assumptions**

In arguing that narratives constitute the organising principle of human life and that individuals give meaning to their experiences and construct a sense of self through narratives, it is also important to clarify the ontological assumptions guiding the present study (Crossley, 2000a; Riessman, 2008). There are tensions within narrative inquiry regarding the relationship between narrative and 'self' and the ontology of the narrative (see Smith & Sparkes, 2006). This is further complicated when we consider the differences between oral and written narratives, a topic of much discussion in the philosophical world (e.g., Derrida, 1976; Ong, 1982).

Ontologically, this research lies between 'realist' and 'relativist' ontologies, and assumes that although people construct a sense of self when they are writing expressively and their narratives are socio-culturally derived, their stories have some significance and reality for them in terms of how they shape their psychological and social worlds. Similarly, although this study acknowledges the multiplicity, flexibility, variability and context-specificity of sense of self (Gergen, 1991; Langellier & Peterson, 2004); it also assumes that individuals' sense of self is characterized by experiential unity and temporal coherence. As Crossley (2000b) argues, 'conceptualizing 'self' only as fragmented, fluid, flexible and context and discourse dependent leaves little space for the idea that 'human beings have any fundamental or internal 'sense' of themselves as a self' (p. 530); and citing Augustinous and Walker (1995) she emphasizes that such a position tends to neglect the subjective moment-to-moment experience. Therefore, the present study acknowledges the 'unfinalizability' of narrative identity and sense of self, whilst

appreciating that ‘we understand our lives in terms of the narratives we live out’ (MacIntyre, 1981; p. 197).

### ***The ontological constancy of the written word***

A similar ontological position between ‘realism’ and ‘relativism’ is adopted in regards to the ontology of the written texts. Tensions exist in the literature in regards to what a written text represents. For example, a rather extreme position of relativism is taken up by Derrida (1976), when he argues that a text does not represent anything outside itself. The present study, however, takes a less rigid position, and is in more accordance with Ong's (1982) ideas of the ‘technologization’ of the word. From this position, Ong (1982) explains that, although once a text is written it is separated from its author, and it may no longer reflect the author’s reality, the text itself continues to exist, representing the reality of the author at the moment of writing it. This position allows for the ‘unfinalizability’ of the narrative and sense of self, as with new awareness or at a different point in time an individual might construct a different narrative, providing different meaning and understanding to the story. Nonetheless, at that point in time, when the narrative was written, there was a ‘reality’ that was conveyed through the written narrative, albeit that ‘reality’ is never accessed directly but through the ‘contextual constructionism’ understanding of meaning. As Ong (1982) explains, ‘writing introduces division and alienation, but a higher unity as well. It intensifies the sense of the self and fosters more conscious interaction between persons. Writing is consciousness-raising’ (p. 179).

In relation to this understanding, Nygren and Blom (2001) argue that the difference between an oral and a written story is the ontological constancy of the written text. Through this they explain that speech is fleeting, and a narrator of an oral story needs to rely on memory to make sure that the story includes, or excludes, the elements that are wished to be conveyed. The difference in the written narrative is the interaction of the author with the text, the allowance for revisiting the story and entering a dialogue with the self. Through this understanding, Nygren and Blom (2001) argue that ‘a person who writes, has more potential in the moment of the storytelling to understand her- or himself, compared to someone who tells the story verbally’ (p. 373). The understanding of the present study, which is in line with Nygren and Blom's (2001) arguments, is that through their written narratives, participants construct a sense of self which, although it

represents a sense of self at the moment of writing, also has implications for the understanding of an earlier way of being, as well as the present and the future prospect of the self.

## **2.4 Narrative Inquiry**

In line with the aforementioned epistemological assumptions, and the rationale for conducting this research, the present study is situated within the narrative form of inquiry. Following a narrative theory perspective it assumes that narratives are the organizing principle for human experiences and that ‘human beings think, perceive, imagine, interact and make moral choices according to narrative structures’ (Sarbin, 1986; p. 8). According to Carr (1986), the main function of a narrative is to organise the sequence of experiences in a temporal way that gives coherent order and meaning to our life. Although, as Riessman (2008) explains, the term ‘narrative’ carries many meanings, and has been defined differently by different researchers, within narrative psychology ‘narrative’ is seen as ‘coterminous with story [...] that has a temporal dimension’ (Sarbin, 1986; p. 3); and can be defined as ‘an organized interpretation of a sequence of events’ (Murray, 2008; p. 113). Within this understanding human beings are seen as living in a storied world where we make sense of our world through stories, but also live through the stories told by us and others (Frank, 2010). This ‘narrative turn’ in psychology that took place in the 1980’s and 1990’s (see Crossley, 2000a; Murray, 2008; Sarbin, 1986) opened up the way to the narrative methods of inquiry in psychology and other social sciences. From this perspective, narrative is seen as both an ontological condition of living in a storied world and a method of knowing (Smith & Sparkes, 2006).

Central to the narrative psychology perspective is that individuals construct their sense of self and create meaning of their own lives through the use of narratives (Crossley, 2000a). Ricoeur (1984) uses the word ‘emplotment’ to describe how human beings synthesize their experience into narrative plots in order to bring order and meaning to a constantly changing world. Similarly, Bruner (1990) highlights the property of narrative to mitigate and forge links between the exceptional and the ordinary. This need for coherence and meaning is particularly evident at moments when we experience disruption in our life, and it is through constructing narratives that we bring order and coherence to those events. Furthermore, through constructing narratives, we are also constructing a narrative identity, a sense of self, which as Ricoeur (1988) argues allows for sameness and continuity in the plot of the story that a person tells about him- or herself.

Narratives, however, are not constructed in a social vacuum. They are inevitably embedded in a social and cultural context and have a 'performative' and dialogical nature as they are constructed in interaction with others (see Ezzy, 1998; Murray, 2008; Riessman, 2008). Based on these theoretical assumptions, the present study approaches the written narratives produced through EW from a narrative analytic perspective.

Although most qualitative methods of inquiry tend to be concerned with meaning (Willig, 2008), narrative inquiry is concerned with 'how people construct meaning in (and for) their lives' (Willig, 2008; p. 133). It is this construction of meaning and sense of self through EW that this study aims to explore. Although narrative psychology draws from phenomenology, a pure interpretive phenomenological exploration of the written narratives might have lost the constructive element of the stories and might have failed to take adequate account of the social structure of participants' narratives. Similarly, in exploring the narratives from a discourse analytic perspective, the danger lies in losing the subjective experience of the individual in the process. In line with what is noted in the epistemological assumptions, narrative analysis takes into account both the linguistic and discursive structuring of human experience, whilst acknowledging the subjective experience of the individual (see Crossley, 2000a).

#### **2.4.1 Narrative Analysis**

Although a shared belief among narrative researchers is the importance of stories, there is no one way of doing narrative analysis. Riessman (2008) explains that the term 'narrative analysis' encompasses the varieties of methods for analysing storytelling. Depending on the research aims, researchers have approached the analysis of narratives from different perspectives focusing on different aspects of the narratives. Murray (2000) describes four levels of narrative analysis: the personal, which is concerned with the lived experience of the individual; the interpersonal, which focuses on the narratives co-constructed in dialogue; the positional; which looks at the differences in social positions between narrator and listener; and the societal level which looks at the shared narratives that exist in specific cultures and communities. Squire, Andrews and Tamboukou (2008) argue that approaches to narrative analysis can be largely categorised as structural, content and context-based approaches. Similarly, Riessman (2008) presents a typology of four broad approaches to narrative analysis which includes: thematic narrative

analysis which is concerned with the ‘what’ is spoken or written, (i.e., the content); structural forms of narrative analysis, which are concerned with the ‘how’ a story is told; dialogic/ ‘performative’ analysis which is concerned with the dialogical and ‘performative’ nature of narratives (i.e., the interaction between speakers); and visual analysis, an emerging area in narrative inquiry. It is important, however, to note that regardless of the perhaps seemingly discrete approaches of narrative analysis, the approaches are not mutually exclusive (Riessman, 2008; Willig, 2008). In fact, within narrative research in psychology, helpful guidelines for conducting narrative analyses, such as Langdridge's (2007) Critical Narrative Analysis and Hiles and Cermák's (2008) Narrative Oriented Inquiry model, do not limit the analysis specifically to structure, content or context. Instead, both Hiles and Cermák (2008) and Langdridge (2007) recommend the use of a variety of interpretative lenses to explore the narrative. As Coffey and Atkinson (1996) suggest, ‘there are no formulae or recipes for the ‘best’ way to analyse the stories we elicit and collect. Indeed, one of the strengths of thinking about our data as narrative is that this opens up the possibilities for a variety of analytic strategies’ (p. 80). In a similar tone, Willig (2008) explains that ‘ultimately, it does not matter which approach is taken as long as the narrative analysis is systematic and clear, and as long as it generates insights into the structure of the narrative, its functions and its social and/ or psychological implications’ (p. 133).

In order to explain the narrative analytic method that was employed in the present study, it is important to first describe the nature of the data collected and how it informed the analytic process. In the following part I present the methods of collecting and analysing the data, before I proceed to evaluate the chosen methodology.

## **2.5 Methods**

As the main aim of this study was to explore how people construct their sense of self through the EW intervention, methods of data collection and analysis were influenced by the literature on both EW and narrative inquiry. The following section provides information and clarification of the methods employed in addressing the research aims, including the recruitment strategy and data collection.

### **2.5.1 Recruitment strategy**

Individuals were recruited via the snowballing method, a type of purposeful sampling common in narrative inquiry (Holloway & Freshwater, 2007). This method allowed for the recruitment of individuals who met the inclusion criteria for the study, namely individuals with English as their native language, with sufficient literacy abilities, who had experienced an emotional life changing event and were willing to share that experience in the context of this study. Although research on Expressive Writing has shown that use of native language did not moderate the effectiveness of the intervention (Kim, 2008), the decision to exclude non-native English speakers was based on research indicating that use of non-native language in bilinguals can inhibit emotional expression and lead to rationalization and distancing from the emotional experience (e.g., Javier, 1989; Pavlenko, 2006; Imberti, 2007). Literacy ability was assessed informally, through informing potential participants in the initial email communication that this study entails writing, and checking whether they would feel comfortable with that, as well as through collecting information on their level of education. The understanding of what constituted a ‘life-changing event’ was left to the participants to decide, as the study aimed to focus on the subjective view of what makes an experience ‘life-changing’. A more detailed discussion regarding the choice of topic is provided in the ‘Writing Task’ section. It was assumed however that, following narrative psychology’s understanding that human beings tend to use narratives to make sense of unusual or out of the ordinary experiences (see Bruner, 1990), writing about a ‘life-changing experience’ would allow the exploration of how participants produce meaning and construct their sense of self through the written narratives.

There was an ethical dimension in regards to the population that this study recruited from. The initial thinking around the design of the study was to recruit individuals who were receiving psychological therapy for trauma. The rationale behind this was the limited number of studies using EW as an adjunct to psychological therapy, as well as the fact that a large number of studies supporting the effectiveness of the intervention asked the participants to write about a traumatic event (e.g., Kearns, Edwards, Calhoun, & Gidycz, 2010; Pennebaker & Beall, 1986; Richards, Beal, Seagal, & Pennebaker, 2000). From a narrative psychology perspective, Crossley (2000a) talks about how traumatic events can lead to a breakdown of a coherent life story. This breakdown of the story is similar to what Frank (1995) describes as ‘narrative wreckage’ in his

exploration of illness narratives; and it is at these times that constructing a coherent narrative can help bring order and meaning in ones' life. For the present study, however, it was important to consider both the ethical and practical implications of recruiting from a population with trauma history, given that this study was conducted as part of a Doctoral thesis. First, taking into consideration the evidence that negative emotional affect increases after the writing task (Frattaroli, 2006), it was not deemed ethical to subject individuals with a trauma history to further distress for the purpose of this research. Even if individuals from such a population were engaged in psychological therapy, I was concerned with how their participation in such research might interfere with their therapeutic process. Furthermore, my clinical placements at the time of data collection did not allow me to ask my own clients to participate, an issue that would involve further ethical dilemmas given the power imbalance in the therapeutic relationship and the duality of my role in such a case. Following careful consideration of the above issues which were discussed with my supervisor, and after consulting the BPS 'Code of Human Research Ethics' (British Psychological Society, 2010), it was decided that recruiting individuals from the general population who met the inclusion criteria would still provide rich enough data with less risk of causing emotional distress. Further discussion regarding the ethics and the management of risk is provided in the 'Ethical Considerations' section.

Participants were initially recruited from university campuses using recruitment leaflets and email advertisements circulated in three London universities (see Appendix A). An online webpage was also created using the social media platform Facebook, which included the recruitment leaflet, inviting potential participants to contact me for further information regarding the study. Although a total of 15 potential participants contacted me via email asking for further information, not everyone fulfilled the inclusion criteria. Two of the potential participants were excluded as English was not their native language, two did not reply to the email after the initial contact, and four mentioned that they worked full-time and were not able to offer two hours of their time to participate in the research. One of the potential participants was turned away after several email exchanges, as we agreed that the life changing experience she wished to share was too fresh, and could evoke an intense emotional reaction. Information about local services where she could seek help, should she feel she needed to, was provided via email. Exclusion criteria for this study also included suicidal tendencies, risk of harm to self or others or use of English as a second language. These were assessed in the initial briefing before any data was collected.

The initial aim of this study was to have six to eight participants share their stories, a common sample size in Doctoral level qualitative research (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). Following difficulties with recruiting, a total of six participants took part in this study. The small number of participants, however, is not unusual in narrative research. In fact, a review of the published literature shows that the number of participants in narrative research could range from two (e.g., Birmingham, 2010), to 14 (e.g., Smith & Sparkes, 2005), to hundreds (e.g., Labov & Waletzky, 1967). Lal, Suto and Ungar (2012) argue that the quality of findings in narrative research does not depend on the actual number of participants. Instead they suggest that the sample size would depend, among other things, on the type of data collected, the duration of researcher-participant relationships and the number of contacts with participants. It was assumed in this research that six participants would provide rich enough data given the type of data collected, through the written task and the interview. The data collection is discussed in more detail below.

### ***The sample***

A total of six participants, five females and one male, ranging from 25 to 45 years of age participated in this study. Reflecting the recruitment strategy, all participants had completed at least an undergraduate level of higher education, with one working towards a Master's degree, two working towards their Doctoral degree, and one having received her Doctorate a few years ago. The first three participants contacted me via email after seeing the leaflet advertised at their university's notice board. The rest were introduced to the study by a friend who either participated or saw the leaflet and forwarded it to them.

The participants' relationship with writing varied across cases. Two of the participants reported keeping diaries regularly to express themselves, one was a professional non-fiction writer, one kept a humorous online blog and two reported that they kept diaries as teenagers but had not done so in years. (For information about each participant's relationship with writing please see Appendix B).

### **2.5.2 Collecting stories**

There is no one way of collecting narratives for research purposes (Riessman, 2008). This is embedded in the narrative psychology idea that we live in a 'storied' world, where narratives are

the organizing principle for human experience that gives coherent order and meaning to our life (Crossley, 2000a; Sarbin, 1986). It is, therefore, not surprising to witness the discussions in the narrative research world, around the ‘big’ versus ‘small’ stories debate (e.g., Bamberg, 2004; Georgakopoulou, 2006). That is, whether the main methodological tool which is currently used in narrative research, namely the narrative-interviewing method (Georgakopoulou, 2006; Riessman, 2008), might be neglecting the ‘small’ stories that occur in natural social settings, and are perhaps more dynamic and fluid than interview narratives (see Georgakopoulou, 2006). It is now more widely accepted that narrative interviews, albeit the most commonly used method of data collection, represent only one way of ‘listening’ to stories (Riessman, 2008). More recently narrative research has used archival documents such as letters and paintings (e.g., Tamboukou, 2010) and photographs (e.g., Bell, 2002), as well as a combination of multiple means of expressing stories, such as visual, written and spoken stories of the same experience (e.g., Keats, 2009).

The data collection of the present study follows the rationale and aims of the study, which are grounded in the assumption that when individuals are asked to write expressively about an experience, they are constructing narratives (see Danoff-Burg, Mosher, Seawell, & Agee, 2010). This research moves away from the traditional quantitative studies on EW, and uses qualitative methods of collecting data. The data collection in this study had two parts: the Expressive Writing task, followed by a semi-structured interview. These are discussed in more detail below.

### **2.5.3 Data collection**

Following potential participants’ interest in the study, each individual was emailed a copy of the Participants’ Information sheet (Appendix C), and was given the opportunity to ask any questions he/she might have had regarding the study. Participants were also informed that, before taking part in the study, they would need to give their written consent. Individuals who met the inclusion criteria, and felt comfortable with sharing their stories in the context of this study, were met individually at a pre-arranged time and place.

The settings where the data collection took place reflect the recruitment method. Four of the participants were met in a pre-booked quiet room at City University London and two were met at their own house. A prerequisite of meeting participants outside the university settings was that

during the length of the study there would be no outside distractions. This was kept by both participants. When meeting the participants, I always carried two separate mobile phones, my personal one and one used only for research purposes. Two close friends were kept informed of my whereabouts both prior to travelling to the meeting place and after I had finished.

At the beginning of our meeting, participants were given a verbal explanation of the purpose and procedure of the study, as well as a copy of the 'Participant information' sheet (Appendix C), and a copy of the 'adapted Pennebaker's (1997) instructions' (Appendix D) for the writing task. Subsequently, participants were given a few minutes to read the information and instructions provided, with the opportunity to ask any questions they may have had. Following from that, they were asked to read and sign the 'Consent form' (Appendix E), indicating that they understood what the study entailed and that they had the right to withdraw at any time during the study without penalty or any questions asked, and that any data collected up until that point would be destroyed if they decided to withdraw their participation. Following informed consent, participants were asked to complete a brief 'Demographic Information' sheet (Appendix F).

## **2.5.4 The Expressive Writing task**

### ***The adapted version***

The first part of the study was the Expressive Writing task, which was based on an adapted version of Pennebaker's (1997) standardized instructions of Expressive Writing. The instructions asked participants to spend 45-60 minutes writing about an 'emotional life-changing event' with as much emotion and detail as they could (see Appendix D). In the standardized EW paradigm, participants are usually asked to spend 15 to 30 minutes writing, for three to five consecutive days (Pennebaker, 1997). There is, however, evidence to suggest that even a single session of writing can be beneficial (e.g., Cohen, Sander, Slavin, & Lumley, 2008; Morgan, Graves, Poggi, & Cheson, 2008; Walker, Nail, & Croyle, 1999), as well as that writing for longer than 15 minutes is more potent (see Frattaroli, 2006). The reasons for employing this adapted procedure for the 'Expressive Writing task' were based on both the aims of this study as well as logistical issues. It was assumed that asking participants to spend 45 to 60 minutes writing would produce richer data for qualitative analysis and would allow a more in-depth exploration of the

construction of narratives through expressive writing. Furthermore, as this study was conducted as part of a doctoral thesis, the timeline for data collection, and the difficulties in recruiting participants, did not allow for subsequent writing sessions. As the aim of this study was not to explore the effectiveness of the intervention, but to explore the written narrative produced when using the EW paradigm, a single session of writing was assumed to produce rich-enough data. Moreover, the length of writing for 45 minutes reflects suggestions by Smyth, Nazarian and Arigo (2008) for the use of EW in psychotherapy settings.

### *The choice of topic*

The choice of a ‘life-changing event’ as a topic for the Expressive Writing task lies within the question this study aims to address. This study focuses on how people construct their sense of self through their writing when they are asked to write expressively. It is assumed, that a ‘life-changing event’ disrupts the coherent life narrative of the participants, but it does not necessarily have to be a negative experience. Opening up the possibility of positive life experiences as ‘life changing events’ aimed to explore the construction of the narrative in a broader way, than if simply focusing on negative life experiences. Research on EW has explored a variety of topics and events being disclosed, including ‘the most traumatic and upsetting experiences of their entire life’ (e.g., Pennebaker, Kiecolt-Glaser & Glaser, 1988); ‘an extremely important emotional issue that has affected their life’ (e.g., Pennebaker, 1997); bereavement (e.g., Stroebe, Stroebe, Schut, Zech, & van den Bout, 2002); gay-related stress (e.g., Pachankis & Goldfried, 2010); as well as more positive events (e.g., Marlo & Wagner, 1999); one’s best possible self or future goals (e.g., King, 2001) and unspecified life-transitions (e.g., Chung & Pennebaker, 2008). Although there is variation among the topics participants were asked to disclose in the EW studies, a common thread is that the disclosed event permeates the ‘ordinary’ and perhaps usual life experiences. This might reflect part of the reason why participants tend to write in a narrative form in such studies (see Danoff-Burg et al., 2010), as according to narrative psychology narratives help us form links between the ordinary and the exceptional (see Bruner, 1986).

In the present study, participants were given the opportunity to give their own definition of what constituted as ‘emotional life-changing events’. Prior to the writing task, they were cautioned not to write about an ongoing stressor in their life or a very recent intense emotional experience, in

order to protect them from possible emotional distress. Consequently, there was a variety of topics chosen by participants, although all of them chose to disclose past events in their lives that they had considered to have been both emotional and life-changing. Three of the participants wrote about breaking up with a romantic partner, one wrote the story of meeting her current partner, one wrote about experiencing bullying in the workplace and one wrote about coping with an eating disorder. Further information about the choice of topic is provided in the Analysis chapter, where summaries of each participant's stories are provided.

### ***Procedure***

For the expressive writing task, participants were asked in advance whether they would prefer to write by hand or type on a computer. This choice aimed to allow the participants to feel as comfortable as possible. Studies exploring handwritten and typed disclosure in EW showed no difference in the effectiveness of the intervention (see Frattaroli, 2006). In the present study, four out of the six participants chose to type their disclosure on a laptop computer provided by the researcher which had no internet access or other programs that could distract the participant from the writing task. Two of the participants chose to write by hand, with the researcher providing blank paper and pens (see Appendix B for an overview of each participant's chosen mode of writing and his/her relationship with writing in general).

Following the initial briefing and signed consent, participants were left alone in the room to engage in the writing task in their own privacy. Frattaroli's (2006) meta-analysis of research on EW has shown that participants with greater privacy during disclosure had larger overall and psychological health effect sizes. For the participants who were met at the university settings, the privacy also aimed to avoid exam conditions, where the researcher might have been perceived as an invigilator. Of the two participants who I met at their homes, one participant used a quiet indoor room for the writing task, while I sat in the garden, whereas with the second one, we both sat in her garden, far from each other and without any visual contact. This aimed to encourage a sense of privacy in order to freely engage with the writing task.

Although participants were left in their own privacy during the writing task, I made sure that prior to leaving the room they knew how and where to reach me in case they needed to. For the participants who I met at the university setting, this included making sure that they had my

research phone number and that they were aware that they could find me at the cafeteria, which was in the same building and easily accessible. Prior to leaving the room, we also agreed that I would return to the room after 45 minutes, at which point they could let me know whether they needed the additional 15 minutes or whether they felt they had finished with the writing task. This also served as a reminder for them that they had 15 minutes left. All but one participant asked for the additional 15 minutes (see Appendix B for each participant's chosen mode of writing and length of time spent writing).

### **2.5.5 The interviews**

Following the writing task, participants were given the opportunity for a brief break before engaging in the second part of the study, the interview. The interview was based on a semi-structured design and had a dual focus (see Appendix G for an example of the interview schedule). First, it aimed to gather further information about the participants' emotional life-changing event, giving them the opportunity to share their story in person. This served to complement the written story and add validity to the analysis of the written data. The interview also followed a narrative interview style, as suggested by Riessman (2008), where open-ended questions aimed to generate detailed accounts of the participants' life-changing events. I purposely did not read any of the written texts prior to the interview in order to avoid any assumptions or biases when listening to the participants' stories. Inevitably, however, and perhaps in a different way to the written narrative, the story generated in the interview setting was co-constructed by the participant and me (see Riessman, 2008).

The interview also aimed to qualitatively explore the participants' experience of writing expressively about their emotional life changing event. As most studies on Expressive Writing use quantitative measures to evaluate the effectiveness of the intervention (see Frattaroli, 2006), the aim of this focus was to explore the participants' subjective experience of writing and talking about their emotional event. This is in line with the ethos of Counselling Psychology which places the importance of the subjective experience of the client at the heart of the therapeutic work (Strawbridge & Woolfe, 2010). The interview was also a way to check with the participants that, if there were any negative affect evoked by the written task, this was manageable.

Each interview was conducted in the same place where the writing task took place and lasted for approximately 50 to 60 minutes. The interviews were recorded on a portable audio recording device with the participant's consent. Throughout the research process I tried to provide the participants with an empathic, accepting and non-judgemental environment where they could feel safe and contained. Basic counselling skills such as open-ended questions, reflecting back my understanding and being an active listener, were particularly relevant during the interview process. Most narrative researchers (e.g., Crossley, 2000a; McAdams, 1993; Murray, 2008; Riessman, 2008) highlight the importance of forming a good rapport, as well as being an empathic and encouraging listener during the narrative interview. Following the interview, participants were given the opportunity to ask any questions they might have had and were given a copy of the 'Information sheet for emotional support' (Appendix H), which listed services where they could seek emotional support should they need to. During this debriefing process, I also asked participants about their overall experience of the study. All of them said that overall it was a nice experience and that they found it helpful to revisit their 'emotional life-changing event' from their current perspective. Perhaps this reflects the emotional benefits of both EW and the narrative interview, as it allowed them to revisit, and perhaps create new meaning of, their emotional life-changing experience. As Elliott (2005) explains, 'the [narrative] interview [...] becomes a site for the production of data and an opportunity to explore the meaning of the research topic for the respondent' (p. 22).

## **2.6 Narrative Analytic approach**

Following the aim of this study, which focuses on how people construct their sense of self through Expressive Writing, the written texts collected during the writing task were considered as the 'primary' source of data. Greater focus was therefore placed on the analysis of the written texts, with the data emerging from the interviews acting as 'secondary' data. The interview data aimed to complement emerging interpretations from the 'written data' and explore the participant's experience of engaging in the writing task. The analytic procedure followed in this study reflects this distinction, although the same analytic procedure was followed for both the written texts and the interviews.

As mentioned previously, there is no one way of doing narrative analysis. The particularities of the present study, that is, the narrative exploration of written texts gathered using a specific

intervention, namely Expressive Writing, played a key role in determining the analytic approach. Most studies in narrative research explore oral narratives gathered through narrative interviews, with written narratives such as diaries and archival documents usually explored with a distinct focus in mind. For example, in narrative research diaries have been used to explore the process of change in psychotherapy over time (e.g., Dimaggio, Salvatore, Azzara, & Catania, 2003), archival documents have been used to examine the subjectivities of women teachers regarding space and place (e.g., Tamboukou, 2003) and newspaper articles have been explored for their structural elements (e.g., Bell, 1999). It leads from this that the analytic process adopted by each study should be carefully crafted to address the research question and aims of each study (Riessman, 2008).

The narrative analysis used in this study follows Willig's (2008) recommendations of working through the text asking different questions of the narrative and draws largely from Langdridge's (2007), and Crossley's (2000a) guidelines for narrative analysis. This includes looking at the narrative structure, tone and rhetorical features of the narratives, as well as looking at the social and psychological functions of the stories, such as what kinds of identities are being constructed and how is the sense of self brought into being in the story. The final step aimed to synthesize and weave the data all together into a coherent story and identify the typologies of plots found in this study. The analytic steps followed for the narrative analysis of the written texts and the interviews are discussed in more detail below.

### **2.6.1 Narrative analysis of the written texts**

All the data remained anonymous to protect the participants' confidentiality, and were only identifiable by an allocated participant's number, which also served to match the written texts with the interview transcripts (please see 'Ethical Considerations' for additional information on confidentiality and data storage). The two written texts that were written by hand, during the writing task, were typed into digital form, making sure that the paragraphs, structure and form matched the handwritten document. Each written narrative was analysed individually following the steps outlined below. Following each individual analysis of the written text, I proceeded to analyse the interview corresponding to that participant. I therefore treated each participant's data as an individual case before the final synthesis.

### ***Stage 1: Structural analysis***

As a starting point in the analysis, the aim was to explore the structure of the participants' written narratives in order to identify the 'stories' constructed through Expressive Writing. This was an important first step in the analysis given the variation in the EW instructions used in the current study, as well as disagreements within the research community regarding the narrative structure of expressively written texts. For example, it has been argued that, in both the 'humanities' (e.g., Bolton, 2008) and the 'scientific' (e.g., Danoff-Burg, Mosher, Seawell, & Agee, 2010) paradigms of expressive writing, the participants asked to write expressively tend to write in a narrative form. At the same time, however, psychometric studies looking at the EW narratives found little agreement between judges as to 'what is meant by coherent, understandable, or meaningful essays when it comes to writing about emotional upheavals' (Ramírez-Esparza & Pennebaker, 2006; p. 213) or in assessing what makes a 'good story' (Graybeal, Sexton, & Pennebaker, 2002). It was, therefore, important to begin the analysis of the data using structural analysis in order to identify that the participants' written texts were in fact 'stories'. This follows Squire's (2008) suggestions that a useful starting point for defining what 'stories' are is to explore the Labovian categories of the text, a form of structural analysis.

Within narrative methodologies, structural analysis is concerned with how the narrator organizes the sequence of events to communicate the story (Riessman, 2008). In exploring the structure, the main focus is on the narrative itself rather than the narrator's experience, even though the content of the narrative still plays an important role. As with narrative methods of inquiry in general, there is no one way of doing structural analysis (Riessman, 2008). There are several approaches to analysing the structure of a narrative such as Labov and Waletzky's (1967) and Gee's (1991) models, as well as adaptations of these models (e.g., Riessman, 1989; Guzik & Gorlier, 2004). Although these models have their origins in social linguistics, Riessman (2008) suggests that they can be adapted for research in the human sciences. Which analytic model will be used and how it might be adapted will depend on the focus of the research (Riessman, 2008).

As the purpose of this analysis was the identification of 'stories' and not an in-depth linguistic analysis, the review of the possible analytic models I could use focused on Labov's (1972; 1999) and Gee's (1985) models and their adaptations (e.g. Riessman, 1989; Guzik & Gorlier, 2004; Fleischmann & Miller, 2013). Although both Gee's (1991) and Labov and Waletzky's

(1967) structural analysis models were developed to explore oral personal narratives, the Labovian structure (see also Labov, 1999) has more recently been used in the narrative analysis of written texts (e.g., Bell, 1999; Chang, 2004; Georgakopoulou, 2006; Fleischmann & Miller, 2013). In addition, Riessman (2008) argues that although models of structural analysis for written texts can also be found in literary methods and the field of narratology, the models in these methods still need to be developed and adapted for narrative research in the human sciences.

Following careful review of the aforementioned structural analysis models within narrative methods, I decided that a Labovian analysis (see Labov & Waletzky, 1967; Labov, 1972; 1999) would be the most appropriate analysis to begin with. The reason for this was threefold. First, Gee's (1991) analytic method is better suited to analysing extended narratives of experience, in which episodes are reported in a non-temporal order, where time shifts through the use of flashbacks and flash forwards. For Labov (1999), however, narrative refers to a brief, topic-centred and temporally ordered story, that answers a specific question. It was assumed that a Labovian structural analysis would be better suited for the present study, given that the participants were asked to write about a specific life-changing event, which resembled the brief and topic-centred stories analysed by Labov. Furthermore, although both Labov's and Gee's models were developed for analysing oral personal experience, Labov's analysis of oral narratives is text-based (i.e., the narrative is transcribed and analysed as text), whereas Gee's model takes into account pitch pauses and other features of speech which are not evident in narratives collected through writing. Finally, as mentioned above, Labov's model has been effectively adapted for research using written texts in the human sciences (e.g., Bell, 1999; Chang, 2004; Georgakopoulou, 2006; Fleischmann & Miller, 2013).

Labov (1999) defines narrative as 'one method of recapitulating past experience by matching a verbal sequence of clauses to the sequence of events which (it is inferred) actually occurred' (p. 225). He highlights how clauses in narratives are temporally ordered in order to convey the semantic interpretation of the narratives. Labov explains that a *minimal* narrative can be defined as 'a sequence of two clauses which are temporally ordered' (p. 226), and can be considered as a complete narrative if it consists of a beginning, middle and an end. This idea is in line with narrative theory's view that a narrative is 'an organized interpretation of a sequence of events'

(Murray, 2008; p. 113) with the classic formulation of narrative comprising of a beginning, a middle and an end (e.g., Sarbin, 1986; Murray, 2008).

Building on the above, Labov (1999) argues that a ‘fully formed’ narrative, may include the following six elements: Abstract (a summary of the narrative); Orientation (time, place, characters, situation); Complicating Action (the event sequence, usually including the turning point); Evaluation (the means used by the narrator to indicate the point of the narrative, comment on meaning and communicate emotions); Resolution (the result or resolution of the narrative); and Coda (which signals the end of the narrative and returns the action to the present). It is noteworthy, however, that Labov acknowledges the complex chaining and embedding of these elements in a narrative and that not all stories contain all elements.

Labov (1997) suggests that a narrative is not merely a description of events but also provides an explanation, or ‘a personal theory of causality’, of the events. The narrator selects ‘the most reportable’ event, that is the event which ‘has the greatest effect upon the needs and desires of the participants in the narrative’, and presents it in a way that makes the narrative credible and believable. This ‘personal theory of causality’ is presented after the Orientation through the narrative clauses of Complicating Action and Evaluation. For Labov (1972), Evaluation is seen as ‘perhaps the most important element in addition to the basic narrative clause’ (p. 366) as it justifies its telling and reveals the narrator's perspective on the events being told.

Using the Labovian elements to identify the structure of the narrative enables one to characterize textual units within narratives and pinpoint the significant parts of the narrative, as well as identify commonalities in the structure among narratives (Patterson, 2008; Riessman, 2008; Fleischmann & Miller, 2013). In addition, Patterson (2008), drawing from narrative theory, argues that, since a personal narrative ‘is also and always a narration of the self, [...] Labov's work on evaluation provides analysts with useful, and useable, tools for undertaking a systematic textual analysis that can generate an interpretation of the perspective, and the claimed identity, of a narrator’ (p. 29).

### *Limitations of Labovian analysis and adaptations for the present study*

It is important, at this point, to note that Labov's analysis and categories have not remained without criticisms. For example, although it is possible to identify the structure in terms of elements that comprise the structural whole, Bamberg (2012) argues that 'the emergent whole is more than its linguistic components' (p. 90). Furthermore, within a strictly Labovian analysis, there is an underlying assumption that language represents 'reality' (Riessman, 1993), that is that the narrative represents what actually happened. This becomes problematic, given the epistemological assumptions underlying this research of the constructed nature of sense of self. As Patterson (2008) argues, a strictly Labovian analysis does not allow for the 'inevitably partial and constructed nature of any account of personal experience' (p. 29).

In line with the above, an additional problem arises when trying to identify the Labovian elements of the narrative. Given the selective nature of the reportable event, it may be difficult to distinguish the referential elements from the evaluative. It has been argued that a clause indicating a Complicating Action is not necessarily present in the text to indicate the event, but may also serve as an evaluative element supporting the point of the narrative (e.g., Culler, 1981; Patterson, 2008). Patterson (2008) highlights that personal narratives are primarily about experience rather than events and encourages an experiential understanding of personal narration which involves a reconstruction of the past for the purposes of the present telling. She explains that if used in isolation without taking into account the context in which the narrative was produced, a strictly Labovian approach may lead to 'losing' the narrative. She suggests, therefore, a flexible utilization of the linguistic tools and concepts of Labovian analysis to include all aspects of personal narration.

Patterson's (2008) understanding of the relationship between experience and narratives are in line with the epistemological assumptions underpinning this study. Here, the sense of self is seen as constructed in the specific research context for the purpose of this study. The use of a 'flexible' Labovian analysis was therefore the first step of the analysis of the written data, which in combination with the subsequent analysis, which is discussed later in this chapter, served to respect the meaning and purpose of the storied accounts. As Squire (2008) argues, Labovian analysis can be a good starting point in identifying the 'stories' in the narrative. Moreover, Riessman (2008) explains that a Labovian analysis can serve as a means of triangulation for any

subsequent analyses and can generate insight that might be otherwise missed when interpretation focuses solely on the content of the narrative.

Following the above, each of the written narratives was individually read multiple times before it was re-arranged into the Labovian elements (see Appendix I for an example). This included the identification of Abstract, Orientation(s), Complicating Action(s), Evaluation(s), and Resolution, and Coda. Although at times it was difficult to distinguish between elements, all of the narratives followed a Labovian structure, and included all the elements mentioned above. The transformation of the written texts into Labovian elements influenced all other aspects of the subsequent analyses and in particular the rhetorical functions of the narrative. Most importantly, Labov's framework provided an analytic perspective on how participants' narratives were structured and offered a perspective from which to reflect on the types of stories constructed.

### ***Stage 2: Brief narrative summaries and reflections***

Following the identification of the Labovian elements, I returned to the written text where I wrote my reflections about the participant's chosen 'life-changing event'. Langdridge (2007) calls this 'a critique of the illusion of subjectivity', drawing from Ricoeur's idea that we can never have a position from nowhere. This stage involved thinking about my own assumptions and beliefs about each participant's life-changing experience and becoming more aware about how they might influence the analytic process. I also followed Murray's (2008) suggestions of preparing a short summary of the narratives, identifying the beginning, middle and end. Although the structure had become evident from the Labovian analysis, writing the summaries allowed me to immerse myself in the content of each participant's narrative, and highlighted the main points of each narrative. It is noteworthy at this point to note that, given that the analysis was on written narratives which had a clear beginning, middle and end, I tried to analyse each narrative as a coherent whole instead of breaking it down. It was therefore difficult to go through the following steps individually and I noticed that each step in the analysis was intertwined with other steps. Nonetheless, the steps provided a comprehensive framework to work through the text systematically.

### ***Stage 3: Identifying the content, tone and rhetorical functions of the narrative***

In this stage my engagement with the text moved towards identifying the narrative tone and rhetorical functions of the narrative. Crossley (2000a) and McAdams (1993) suggest that the tone of the narrative is conveyed in both the content of the story and the manner that is being told, and according to Langdridge (2007) it provides insight into the meaning being expressed. As people construct stories to make sense of life-changing events, identifying the tone of the story allowed for insight into this meaning making process. As Murray (2008) explains ‘the tone is concerned with the overall emotional flavour of the narrative’ (p. 122). Although there are numerous existing typologies of narrative tones available, usually borrowed from literary studies, such as optimistic, pessimistic, comic or tragic, I followed Langdridge's (2007) suggestions and used the most appropriate descriptor rather than fitting the tone to existing frameworks. Moreover, this stage included the identification of the rhetorical features of the narrative, which further contributed to the emergence of the narrative tone, by shedding light on the participants’ explicit and implicit use of excuses, justifications and criticisms. This process placed attention to the function of the written narrative, allowing the meaning to be understood within both the wider world of stories that the participant inhabited, as well the specific research context. Specific attention was also placed on any changes in the narrative tone and rhetorical functions in the narratives.

### ***Stage 4: Exploring the dialogic/performative elements in the written narrative***

The rhetorical functions of the narrative also provided a view on the dialogic nature of writing for the study. This involved focusing on how narratives were constructed with an audience in mind. As Zittoun and Gillespie (2012) argue, ‘the paradox of any self-writing is that it is always addressed to another person, real or imaginary’ (p. 11). Thus, although I was not present in the room whilst participants were writing, there was a dialogic element in how they constructed their stories. This stage of analysis looked at both implicit and explicit ways that participants performed this dialogical nature of writing. The analysis was intertwined with the identification of the rhetorical functions of the narrative, and included paying attention to explicit statements referring to their process of writing, (e.g., explicit statements reflecting on how the reader might perceive the written story), as well as stylistic features such as direct speech or making a point

using someone else's voice in the narrative. This allowed me to reflect on how the participants were positioning themselves in the story and in relation to me as researcher, as well as how I might have impacted the construction of their narrative (Riessman, 2008).

### ***Stage 5: Identities and identity work***

Although presented as a separate stage here, exploring the participants' constructions of narrative identities or sense of self was inevitably intertwined with the previous stages. At this stage, however, I worked through the narrative asking questions specific to the constructed identities and social and psychological functions of the narrative, such as: 'What kind of identities are being constructed in the narrative? How does the narrative position the protagonist and others in the story? In whose interests do events unfold in the narrative? What kind of sense of self is brought into being in this narrative?' These questions followed recommendations from Willig (2008) and Langdridge (2007), in regards to exploring narrative identities and the social and psychological functions of the narrative.

### ***Stage 6: Thematic priorities and relationships***

Following the above, the next stage was to identify the main themes invoked in the narrative and how they related to each other. This section followed recommendations from Langdridge (2007) and Riessman (2008), in not breaking down the text too much in the thematic analysis process. As Langdridge (2007) suggests in narrative thematic analysis, it is important to keep the coherent narrative intact, thus systematic coding like one might do in a phenomenological analysis (e.g., first order, second order or descriptive to pattern), is not needed. I therefore aimed to work through the text systematically without breaking down the coherent narrative, identifying the key themes directly, making notes in the margins as ideas and themes jumped out. I then reviewed the themes and notes and organized them into clusters of meaning, mapping them as they emerged onto the previously identified beginning, middle and end structure.

### ***Stage 7: Synthesis of analytic stages***

The final stage of the individual narrative analysis of the written texts was to synthesize the information that emerged from the above steps into a coherent narrative for each participant.

This was structured in a temporal way with a clear beginning middle and end, and included material from across the analytic stages outlined above. This aimed to synthesize how each participant created meaning and their sense of self through Expressive Writing by ‘explicating deviations from the ordinary in a comprehensible form’ (Bruner, 1990; p. 47). The focus in this stage remained on trying to understand each participant’s unique subjective meaning and to adequately situate their meanings within the context of their world, as well as the wider world of stories that we inhabit. This process of weaving the stepwise analysis into a coherent whole allowed for the identification of several typologies of stories across participants. This is discussed in detail in the Analysis chapter (see Appendix J and Appendix K for examples of all stages).

### **2.6.2 Narrative analysis of the interviews**

Following the analysis of an individual written narrative, the attention shifted to analysing the corresponding interview for each participant. In line with the dual focus in conducting the interviews, the analytic process of the interviews also had a dual focus, although it is noteworthy that the processes intertwined, given that the interview data were collected in the same context.

Each interview was transcribed word for word, including pauses, sighs, exclamations and changes in the tone of voice. After the initial transcription, each transcript was reviewed again carefully with the audio recording in order to correct any errors in the transcription. Hiles and Cermák (2008) note that the transcription stage cannot be separated from the analysis; thus the review process also included initial notes and anything that stood out from the interviews.

The initial part of the analysis focused on the oral version of the ‘life-changing experience’ narrative and followed the steps described for the written narratives. The participant’s ‘life changing event’ narrative was identified and explored for the Labovian elements, the narrative tone, rhetorical function, dialogic/performative elements, narrative identities and themes. Following from that, I returned to the interview transcripts with a focus on the story about writing about ‘a life-changing experience’, employing the same analytic lenses as above, and paying particular attention to the main themes that emerged (see Appendix L). This aimed to explore the ‘metanarrative’; that is to shed further light on the participants’ way of making sense of their experience of writing their stories.

As the ‘primary’ source of data was the written texts, the purpose of analysing the interviews was to triangulate the findings from the written data. It is noteworthy, however, that in line with the epistemological and theoretical assumptions underlining this study, the use of the interviews to triangulate the written text data aimed ‘to get a fuller picture but not a more “objective” one’ (Fielding & Fielding, 1986; p. 33). This reflects the idea that the data collected through the interviews aimed to shed light upon different aspects of the participants’ stories, highlighting the ‘unfinalizability’ of stories (see Frank, 2010). The analysis of the oral versions of the life-changing experience stories was therefore not combined with the written narratives on an analytic level, but was used for the theoretical synthesis of the emerging findings. These are described in more detail in the following chapter.

## **2.7 Ethical Considerations**

Ethical approval was obtained from the City University London Psychology Ethics Committee, prior to recruiting participants (see Appendix M), with no further approval needed from outside agencies. The ‘BPS Code of Human Research Ethics’ (British Psychological Society, 2010) and the ‘BPS Code of Ethics and Conduct’ (British Psychological Society, 2009) were adhered and referred to throughout the study.

In order to protect the identity of the participants, the written narratives, audio recordings and transcriptions of the interviews were anonymous and only identifiable by an allocated participant’s number. The digital data, including the typed narratives, audio recording and interview transcripts were stored in a password protected folder, on the researcher’s computer, which only the researcher had access to. The hand-written narratives were typed into digital form and saved with the rest of the digital data. The original hand-written data along with any print-outs of digital data were stored in a secure locked drawer at the researcher’s home.

Prior to the study, the participants were given an overview of the purpose of the study, which clearly stated that they would need to write with as much emotion and detail as possible about an emotional life-changing event, and that this would be followed by an interview where they would be invited to share their life-changing experience as well as their experience of writing about their chosen event verbally. During the briefing, participants were advised not to write about an event that they considered as a current painful experience that was still troubling them,

in order to protect them from an intense emotional response. Participants were also informed that they could withdraw from the study at any given point without being penalized and that any data collected would be destroyed immediately. Furthermore, participants were informed that their data would be stored securely for a maximum of seven years and that their data may be used for my doctoral research and/or for publication. At the end of the briefing, participants were asked to provide written consent for participating in the study. The written consent forms were kept separately from the data collected and were stored in a secure locked drawer at the researcher's home.

Sensitivity toward participants' individual stories was kept throughout the research process, and specific attention to any emotional reaction that might have ensued from the writing task and/or the interview was paid, both during the interview and the debriefing process. At the end of the study, participants were given information on where they could seek emotional support should they needed to.

Specific to narrative inquiry, Smythe and Murray (2000) argue that there is additional ethical responsibility specific to the methodology. The central issue in narrative research, they argue, is narrative ownership: 'who wields the final control and authority over its presentation and interpretation?' (p. 324). This question is particularly relevant when we explore personal meaning and sense of self. As Josselson (1996) reflects, it is often the case that participants feel that the analysis fails to capture them fully in their personal uniqueness and individuality. Within this, there is an embedded 'power' issue; that is, who owns authority over the interpretation of the data. It is important, however, to highlight that narrative research does not aim to capture the 'reality' of each participant and represent them as 'finalized' self. The present study acknowledges that the participants are experts of their own life, and the researcher can never fully capture their 'life-changing experience' or sense of self. The standpoint the present study adopts is embedded in the epistemological assumptions, suggesting that it is through the interpretative process of the participants' accounts that the analytic observations emerge. Although I aimed to be faithful, and ground the interpretation, in participants' words, the analytic interpretations and the presentation of the data represent my own interpretative process. Through this, there is acknowledgement of the multiplicity of interpretations that can exist and that the analytic observations presented here do not hold privileges over other potential interpretations.

Similarly, it is important to highlight the acknowledgement of the multiplicity of aspects of sense of self and how time and context can always alter how personal meanings and sense of self are presented and interpreted.

## **2.8 Evaluation of Methodology**

Qualitative research moves beyond the positivist epistemology, that guides most quantitative research, and rejects the notion that there is an objective ‘truth’ that can be found and evaluated through objective measures of reliability and validity (Polkinghorne, 2007; Willig, 2008). It is still, however, concerned with evaluating the ‘trustworthiness’ (Riessman, 2008) of the data collected and the interpretations made. In discussing evaluation of qualitative methodologies, both Willig (2008) and Hiles and Cermák (2008) emphasize the importance of transparency in the assumptions guiding, and the methods used in, each study. Similarly, Yardley (2000) proposed four core principles for evaluating the validity of qualitative psychology research focusing on: a) the sensitivity to context, which refers to the importance that the study is grounded in relevant theoretical and empirical literature, whilst taking into account participants’ perspectives and socio-cultural contexts; b) commitment and rigour, which is demonstrated through methods of data collection, analysis and interpretation of data; c) coherence and transparency with regards to arguments made, methods of data collection, analysis, and reflexivity, and d) impact and importance, which refers to the practical and theoretical implications of the research. Following these recommendations, this chapter aimed to clarify the epistemological and ontological assumptions guiding the present research, and to provide a detailed account of how the data was collected and analysed, and what I, as a researcher, might be bringing in this process and how my own background experiences produced understanding in my interaction with the data. The practical and theoretical implications of this study are discussed in detail in the Discussion chapter.

Specific to narrative methods of inquiry, Polkinghorne (2007) argues that researchers need to address the validity of both the collection and the analysis and interpretation of the data. In doing this it is important to first clarify what stories represent. It is hoped that this was clarified in the ‘Epistemological assumptions’ section, however, it is important to reiterate that the present study aimed to gather evidence for personal meaning and not historical facts. In Spence's (1982) words

the ‘truths’ sought by the present study were ‘narrative truths’, not ‘historical truths’. In exploring participants’ personal meanings, this study aimed to take into consideration the inevitable co-construction of stories, the limitations of language to capture the full depth of experience as well as the ‘unfinalizability’ of human experience.

Although the main focus of the study was on the construction of personal meaning and sense of self through the written texts, the interviews served as an opportunity for participants to clarify meaning and sometimes add parts of the story that were not present in the written text. This is not to say that this process aimed for an objective validity; it allowed however for the inclusion of participants’ reflections upon and personal meaning of the written narrative. Furthermore, in evaluating the interpretations, Polkinghorne (2007) argues that ‘the claim need not assert that the interpretation proposed is the only one possible; however, researchers’ need to cogently argue that theirs is a viable interpretation grounded in the assembled texts (p. 484). In line with this, and following Willig’s (2008) suggestions, I aimed to ground my interpretations in the participants’ words using extracts from both the written narratives and the interview to present the analysis, whilst remaining aware of and reflective regarding the contexts in which they were generated.

## **2.9 Methodological Reflexivity**

A fundamental part of qualitative research is the awareness of the role of the researcher in the co-construction of meaning throughout the research process (Willig, 2008). Reflexivity on how the researcher’s own position, assumptions and subjectivities might be affecting and shaping the research process is therefore an integral part of qualitative research. Following recommendations from Willig (2008) and Langdridge, (2007), I kept a reflexivity diary throughout the research process, noting down thoughts, ideas, thinking processes and struggles, as well as turning points in my thinking and approach to this research. Discussions with my supervisor and peers also played a key role in my awareness and clarification of my personal, epistemological and methodological position in this process. Some of the key reflections on the methodology of this study are summarised in the section below.

One of the main positions that I needed to clarify before embarking on this journey was the assumptions underlying the research question. My understanding of the exploration of the

‘construction of sense of self’ through expressive writing was initially very naïve. As I reflected on my epistemological stance, I struggled with bridging the multiplicity, flexibility, variability and context-specificity of ‘self’ with the subjective experience of continuity of ‘self’. This was further complicated by my turn to philosophy literature, in an attempt to find a definition of ‘self’ that resonated with mine. Soon I realised that the question of ‘self’ has been around as long as human beings themselves, and the debates on what the ‘self’ is remain ongoing (see Gallagher, 2013). I therefore decided to use the term ‘sense of self’ instead of ‘self’, explaining my own understanding of this in the ‘Epistemological position’ section, rather than use an existing definition of ‘self’ that might carry with it its own definitions and assumptions.

In using the term ‘sense of self’ however, I could not escape the ethical dilemmas that arose in analysing a participant’s sense of self. Throughout the analysis and write up of this thesis, I strived to emphasize the ‘unfinalizability’ (Frank, 2005) of the narrative and the sense of self. Guided by the epistemological assumptions, the analysis did not serve to finalize the participant’s narrative or make claims that there is a sense of self that was discovered through the analysis. Instead, the analysis aimed to open up and continue a dialogue through which ‘participants will continue to form themselves, as they continue to become who they may yet be’ (Frank, 2005; p. 967). In addition to the ‘unfinalizability’ of the sense of self, was the acknowledgment of how my own interpretations of the narratives influenced the analytic observations. Along with being reflective in regards to my theoretical and epistemological assumptions that guided the analysis, I also followed Murray’s (2008) suggestions of ‘playing with the account’ whilst ‘remaining open to new ideas and challenges’ (p. 121).

Within this ongoing reflective process, it was also important to reflect on the boundaries of my identity as a trainee Counselling Psychologist and a researcher, and how each informed and influenced each other. This was particularly important given that participants were asked to write about an emotional life-changing experience, a common reason that motivates clients to seek therapy. Boundaries were important during the data collection, making sure that participants knew that my presence there was as a researcher and not as a therapist. My Counselling Psychology training, however, was important in being able to stay with the participants’ narratives during the interview and provide them with a containing and empathic space where they could reflect on their emotional experience. Given the variety of the experiences that

participants shared with me, I made sure that I noted my reflections, reactions, thoughts and feelings about each interview and topic in my diary after each interview. Furthermore, prior to engaging with the analysis of each set of data, I noted down my assumptions and theoretical knowledge about each topic, moving in a cyclical way between reflection and analysis.

There was also a personal aspect in my engagement with this research topic, as writing has been my way of making sense, and bringing order to, my own disruptions in my personal narratives. Following my personal experience, and evidence from quantitative studies (see Frattaroli, 2006), there was an underlying assumption that the participants would also find writing therapeutic. This was addressed in the interview that followed the ‘written task’, as the interview gave the participants the opportunity to clarify their experience of writing about their emotional event, and provided further insight into this process. The analytic observations from this study are explained in detail in the following chapter.

### **3. Analysis**

This chapter aims to synthesize the large breadth of data as seen and interpreted through the narrative analytic lenses described in the previous chapter. The four main parts presented in this chapter reflect the analytic process followed. Part 1 aims to introduce the narrators and provide an overview of their stories of their life-changing experience that were produced through Expressive Writing. Part 2 presents a synthesis of the structural elements of the written texts as they emerged through the Labovian analytic lens. The typologies of narratives, including the tones, thematic priorities and identity constructions, are presented in Part 3 with emphasis on commonalities and differences across narrators, and accompanied by extracts to support the interpretations made. The focus, then, turns to the interviews in Part 4, which presents the thematic priorities with the dialogic and performative elements of the participants' experience of writing about their life-changing event as they emerged through the interviews that followed the Expressive Writing intervention.

#### **3.1 Introducing narrators and written narratives**

In asking the participants to write expressively about an 'emotional life-changing event', it was assumed that it implied a disruption in the coherent life narrative of the participants. This breakdown in the coherent life story is similar to what Frank (1995) describes as 'Narrative Wreckage' in his exploration of illness narratives. In using this metaphor, Frank explains that illness is a call for stories, as in illness stories sense of being is 'shipwrecked by the storm of disease' (p. 54) by disrupting the narrative coherence, and it is through storytelling that 'repair work' on the wreck is done. This idea is in line with the function of the narrative as described by Bruner (1990), that is, that stories forge links between the ordinary and the extraordinary. Although the participants' stories in the present study were not 'illness stories', they were life-changing experiences, resembling narrative disruptions. The events narrated by the participants in the present study called for stories, as they were subjectively acknowledged by the participants as turning points in their lives, points where they encountered situations that made them re-evaluate their sense of self and direction in life.

In their written narratives, all of the participants followed the adapted version of Pennebaker's (1997) EW instructions and wrote expressively about a specific emotional life-changing experience in their lives. Despite the common theme of 'emotional life-changing experience', the written stories were heterogeneous in nature. The following section, therefore, aims to present a brief overview of each narrator's life-changing experience, including some contextual information. In order to protect the participants' confidentiality, participants are presented using pseudonyms and any personal details that might in any way make them identifiable have been removed or changed.

### **3.1.1 The narrators**

Emma was a 25-year-old woman who wrote about her experience of coping with an eating disorder. Her EW narrative began with Emma tracing the triggers for developing an eating disorder to a breakdown in close friendships and lack of emotional support from her family, beginning when she was 13 years old. She described the eating disorder as a way of coping emotionally and feeling more in control. This, however, led her to feel ashamed of herself and further contributed to her negative view of herself. Although she did not explain how or why she reached out for help, it was when she worked with a counsellor and began to treat herself with more compassion that she understood the function the eating disorder had in her life and was able to address her unhelpful behaviours. The end of her narrative focused on how, for Emma, coping with an eating disorder was empowering, and still served as a reminder for her that she was able to cope with difficulties in life. It is noteworthy that Emma wrote her narrative from a position of having overcome her eating disorder. During the interview she noted, 'It was an eating disorder that I suffered with for about six years, so it's been about six years that I've recovered as well, so it's quite nicely in the past'.

Sophie was a 28-year-old woman who wrote about her experience of going through a relationship break-up when she was 22 years old. She began her EW narrative by explaining that during the relationship they were inseparable and that she was really happy, but also explained that her boyfriend had difficulties with depression, and assigned the reasons for their break-up to his depressive mood. The middle of her narrative explained how she coped with the break-up. She explained that she reached out for support from her mother, moved in with her and eventually re-engaged with her friends that she had lost contact with because of the relationship.

Sophie ended her narrative by explaining what she learned through that experience and how the experience had affected how she saw relationships and herself at the moment of writing. During the interview, Sophie explained that although she ‘hadn’t moved on for years’ after the break-up, at the time of taking part in the study she had been in a ‘happier’ and ‘healthier’ relationship for the past three years.

Lauren was a 45-year-old woman who wrote about her experience of being bullied at work ten years ago. Her narrative began with Lauren finishing her doctorate, explaining how a lack of career options ‘pushed’ her to enter a career in academia. The middle of her narrative focused on her life-changing experience which included experiencing bullying and unfairness in her workplace. She described a number of incidences where she was treated unfairly, and placed her boss as a key figure in the process. She drew from other areas of her life, such as having a baby and caring for an ill member of her family, to offer examples on how her boss’s bullying behaviour affected her life, as well as how she coped during this experience. She ended the narrative by explaining how she had no choice but to give her resignation, although she did not explain how this had affected her current life and it is left to the reader’s imagination to interpret. During the interview, however, Lauren clarified that her life-changing experience was not only having to resign from her job due to the bullying, as having a baby also allowed her to re-evaluate her priorities in regards to her career and family. It is also noteworthy that at the time of engaging in the EW task, Lauren was a self-employed non-fiction writer.

Chloe was a 38-year-old woman whose EW narrative focused on her quest of finding her husband. She began her narrative outlining her teenage years, and how she struggled with not having a boyfriend, as well as with her appearance. The turning point is described as her decision to lose weight and engage in online dating. The main part of the middle of the narrative focused on her experiences of dating, as well as in explaining how she met her husband, highlighting her devastation when she realised that he was ‘all too human’. The end of her narrative focused on how she accepted the imperfections of her relationship with her husband, where Chloe offered reflections on how she wished to ‘have known better’ when she was a teenager, so that she wouldn’t have spent her teenage years ‘overshadowed by the fear of not finding a partner’. In order to contextualise the narrative, it is important to note that Chloe’s position of writing was from within a stable marriage with children.

Anna was a 25-year-old woman who wrote about her experience of breaking up with her boyfriend when she was 18. She started her narrative explaining how wonderful their relationship was as teenagers and how they had to negotiate their relationship when they went away to different universities. She described a series of incidences that took place whilst in a long-distance relationship, leading up to their break up. The break up, albeit difficult, was also a reason for Anna to re-evaluate her needs and values in life, as well as how she related to herself and others, including her relationship with her friends, family and romantic partners. At the moment of writing, Anna had been in a happy, stable relationship for the past few years.

Tom was a 25-year-old man, and the only male participant in this research project. Tom's narrative focused on his experience of being cheated on when he was a teenager and how that changed his perspective on life and relationships. He began his narrative explaining how his break-up occurred, reflecting on his feelings and the meaning it had for him. He noted how his girlfriend cheated on him on a trip away with some of his friends and reflected on his feelings of being left out and feeling out of control. The middle of Tom's EW narrative focused on how he dealt with the aftermath of the break-up and how he managed his feelings of betrayal and loss. He ended the narrative explaining how the experience affected his approach to relationships and life as he entered into young adulthood. From his current perspective of being a 25-year-old, approximately eight years since the event, Tom seemed to remove blame and responsibility from his girlfriend at the time, explaining that they were teenagers. He mentioned, however, that this incidence led him to behave in a way that would prevent him from losing control. Although he didn't mention this in his EW narrative, during the interview Tom explained that he had been in a stable relationship for the past six years and that both the maturity of age and life experiences had given him a more flexible perspective on relationships.

Despite the heterogeneity of the EW narrative topics, there were similarities in the ways the narratives were structured. These are discussed in more detail in the following sections, before turning the focus on the interviews.

### **3.2 Labovian Analysis**

Following my first few readings of the written narratives, it appeared that all of the participants' expressively written texts met Labov's (1999) and narrative theorists' (e.g., Sarbin, 1986),

definition of narrative. They were written as temporally ordered sequences of events, with a beginning, middle and an end. In addition, all of the participants followed the adapted version of Pennebaker's (1997) instructions and wrote expressively about a life-changing event or experience in their lives. Examining the text using the Labovian elements allowed me to notice how the story was put together. Riessman (2008) argues that 'examining the strategic placement can be of enormous aid in interpreting the relation between meaning and action' (p. 89). This was achieved by using Labov's 'question method' for the categorization of clauses which is 'based on the idea that a narrative can be understood as a series of answers to the underlying questions that all narratives address' (Patterson, 2008; p. 25). Within this understanding, the function of each clause is to answer different sets of questions. Table 1 provides an overview of the function of each clause.

**Table 3.1 Labov's elements and the questions they aim to answer**

Labov's clauses	Questions they aim to answer
Abstract (A)	What is the story about?
Orientation (OR)	Who, when, where?
Complicating Action (CA)	Then what happened?
Evaluation (EV)	So what?
Result (Resolution) (Res)	What finally happened?
Coda	This clause does not answer a particular question. Its function is to sign off the narrative and link it to the present.

*Source:* Labov (1997)

Following the adapted Expressive Writing instructions which asked participants to 'write about an emotional life-changing experience or event' there were variations in the ways participants presented their experiences. For example, rather than reporting a specific event, some participants talked about extended periods of their lives such as coping with an eating disorder or experiencing bullying in the workplace. Others, however, talked about a specific incident in time, such as a break-up that they perceived as a life-changing event. Despite this distinction, all of the written narratives seemed to map on to a Labovian structure when read as a whole, with the basic elements of Orientation, Complicating Action, Evaluation and Resolution present in all accounts. Within this overall structure, participants introduced smaller Labovian narratives with new Orientations, Complicating Actions and Evaluations which served to guide the overall plot.

Using the Labovian categories to analyse the structure of the text enabled me to characterize textual units within narratives and pinpoint the significant parts of the narrative, as well as to identify commonalities in the structure among narratives. These are discussed within the framework of the Labovian clauses below. It is important to note that the analysis presented in this part focuses solely on the structural elements of the narratives, which served as a starting point in the identification of plots that are discussed in Part 3 of this chapter.

### 3.2.1 Abstract

In line with Labov's definition of narrative Abstract, all of the participants started their narratives by summarizing the point of the narrative. This served to establish the point of the narrative emphasizing how the experience they wrote about was life-changing. For example, Sophie started her writing with a brief summary of the narrative.

(A)My life changing event occurred six years ago when I was 22 years old and I broke up with my boyfriend (Sophie, written text)

Four out of the six Abstracts, however, were also characterized by a reflective element of Evaluation of why the story is worth telling, an indication that participants chose to present what Labov (1997) calls the 'most reportable event'. Emma for example, started her narrative by explaining how the experience she was about to describe shaped who she was at the moment of writing.

(A)I am going to write about what I consider to be the biggest life-changing experience I have had. I consider it to be life- changing (A/EV) because it shaped me as a whole person, and continues to be a point of reference now, even though it is no longer happening (Emma, written text)

Similarly, Anna highlighted the significance of her experience and made explicit that, although readers might think it was superficial, for her it was life-changing and important.

(A)The topic I have decided to write about is when my boyfriend broke up with me when I was 18. (A/EV) As I thought about what I might write for this task I knew inside me that this felt like the most significant and important thing, but I was worried that it might come

across as superficial. I do think however, that this moment was the most significant and life-changing one for me. (Anna, written text)

In line with Labovian narratives the Abstract of the written texts reported the entire sequence of events of the narrative. The evaluative elements, however, which are not usually seen in the Labovian Abstract, added an emotional flavor to the expressively written narratives.

### 3.2.2 Orientation

Consistent with the Labovian model, the participants in the study provided an Orientation to their narrative after the Abstract. Their Orientations served to provide the reader with enough background knowledge necessary to understand the life-changing experience they were describing. For example, Emma, whose life-changing experience was coping with an eating disorder, set the scene by providing a timeline and explaining the triggers that led to the development of her eating disorder.

(A) I experienced roughly 6 years of dealing with binge eating and bulimia, beginning when I was 13. A real trigger for this was a breakdown in my close friendships at my school at that time. I was part of a classic kind of group of girls [...] (Emma, written text)

The participants' expressively written texts, however, deviated from the traditional Labovian narrative in their Orientation as they also included reflective and often emotionally charged Evaluation clauses. For example Chloe's initial Orientation orients the reader to her life-changing event by providing information on how her life was before meeting her husband. She interrupts the Orientation, however, to provide evaluative reflections from her current position of being a married woman.

(OR) I had, had big crushes on boys through my life and all of them knew this and enjoyed that I felt like that but without fail they chose someone else and it was never me. (EV) Looking back from my secure position of being in a good marriage with all the things I wanted I often try to think why I was always overlooked... (OR/EV) I have always been a bit fat, ranging from a little to a lot, but other bigger girls got boyfriends so why not me? I

am intelligent and as I got older more self-assured and charming, **(OR)** I have always had lots of very loyal girlfriends but still no boys. (Chloe, written text)

Similarly, Anna whose life-changing experience was a relationship break-up orients us to the story by explaining the beginning of their relationship but also reflecting on the meaning of that relationship for her.

**(OR)** [Boyfriend's name] and I got together when I was 15 (he was either 15 or 16, I'm not entirely sure) and I remember writing in my diary that I knew it was the start of something special. **(EV)** He wasn't my first boyfriend but he was the first boyfriend I was head over heels for. (Anna, written text)

In a classical Labovian narrative, evaluative clauses are often found after the Complicating Action and serve as Evaluations for the Complicating Action. In the expressively written narratives, however, the evaluative elements seemed to be interwoven in Orientations. Although the Orientation provides the reader with the background knowledge necessary to understand the life-changing event, in the expressively written texts it also provides the emotional flavour of the events at the time. This seems to have a double function: to ensure that the reader understands the significance the event had for the participants by involving the reader in the emotional plot and to set the scene for the development of the plot.

Furthermore, given that the written experiences were not momentous events, but a sequence of events occurring in a temporal way, participants introduced several Orientations throughout their written narratives, to facilitate the development of the narrative through introducing new characters and providing the temporal dimension of the overall story. This was observed in all six written narratives. A segment from Lauren's written text provides an example.

**(OR)** A year into the job, the head of department changed. Who took on the role? [Boss's name]. As the latest appointment I had to take minutes at the pompous Departmental Meetings, **(EV/OR)** which enabled her to sit on me to her heart's content.

**(OR)** Quite early on, I approached her with liking her to explain my predicament that unless I was promoted, my salary was pegged, and that this could last for FIVE YEARS, even though appointing me at the very top of my grade would seem to imply I was ready to

move onto the next grade pretty quickly. **(CA)** [Boss's name] told me that I would have to sit it out because she had had to. I tried to raise the issue with the previous head, who'd given me the signal I'd be fast tracked. She was sympathetic, and said she'd tell [Boss's name] **(EV)** I was worried, but felt I had nothing to hide. [Boss's name] was furious and clearly felt I'd undermined her authority.

**(OR)** At that point, about one and a half years into the job my father developed dementia.  
(Lauren, written text)

### 3.2.3 Complicating Actions

Participants varied in how they presented the key events, or Complicating Actions, that contributed to their overall emotional life-changing experience. In using the Labovian questions as guidelines, all the Complicating Actions identified in the analysis answered the 'then what happened?' question. It was difficult however to clearly distinguish Complicating Actions from Evaluations, as clauses often provided information about both the development of the narrative and the participant's evaluation of it. This is one of the main criticisms of the Labovian structural analysis (see Patterson, 2008), as other researchers have highlighted that it is often difficult to distinguish the referential elements from the evaluative. An example from Anna's written narrative demonstrates this intertwining of Complicating Actions and Evaluations in the expressively written texts.

**(OR)** About maybe a month after [boyfriend's name] and I broke up **(CA)** he said to me that I was turning into [friend's name]. That I was selfish and arrogant and that I had changed. **(EV)** There was part of me that shouted "no you're not, he's just saying this so he can place the blame on you" but I can see now in hindsight that there was another part of me that said "oh my god, I have changed for the worse" because **(CA/EV)** mine and [friend's name]'s relationship slowly deteriorated from then. I remember her saying in the car one day "did you and I take opposite pills over the summer or something". I just did not want to be like her any more. I did not want to be arrogant or overly self-confident. I guess I basically wanted to be the person that [boyfriend's name] fell in love with. (Anna, written text)

The segment below taken from Lauren's narrative provides a similar example of how Evaluation and Complicating Action intertwine in the expressively written narratives.

**(CA)** I cracked a joke to lighten the sombre mood. Everyone in the room laughed.  
**(CA/EV)** [Boss's name] stared at me with pure malevolence. Clearly for her, I had violated not the sorority and seriousness of the examination process, but my proper place- I had pushed myself forward unforgivably, and ignited her duty to crush me. (Lauren, written text)

Furthermore, although in the above examples participants use a past simple tense to describe specific events that contributed to the development of the story, most participants wrote their narratives in a past-progressive tense. In the initial formulation of the Labovian structure Labov and Waletzky (1967) described that a past-progressive tense usually describes Orientation, whereas a Complicating Action is presented in the past tense. In the later refinement of his model, however, Labov (1997) included 'sequential actions' as actions that could carry the story forward and answer the 'and then what happened' question. An example of how the use of past-progressive term serves to carry the story forward is evident in Chloe's account.

**(OR)** By the time I got to 29 I could not face turning 30 alone. **(CA/OR)** I went on a very determined mission to find a husband. Along with my quest to find a husband has been a quest to lose weight **(EV)** both had always been unsuccessful! **(CA)** But something clicked in my head and I lost weight and started internet dating. **(EV)** I loved it! I was suddenly very attractive to a range of very nice good looking men (and some weirdo's!) **(CA)** and went on loads of dates and was very firm when I didn't feel a connection and would say no thank you to a second date. I also got a bit carried away **(EV)** and now call that time my 'slutty' period and most of the time I was quite happy with a one night stand. (Chloe, written text)

A similar example of how the use of past-progressive tense can be used to carry the story forward is evident in Emma's written text.

**(OR)** My father always worked a great deal, and my mother had just gone back to work. With my brother not wanting to be in the house very much, **(CA)** I was left alone quite a

lot, (EV) and felt like I was left alone emotionally with this experience with the girls at school. Someone of 13 needs emotional support and I wasn't getting it at this time. Looking back, in developing this eating disorder it really was a kind of protection emotionally from feeling abandoned, as well as a way of feeling more in control. To binge and purge felt like shoving down my thoughts and needs, and then getting rid of them completely. (OR/CA/EV) I would binge and purge at school and in the evenings at home when I was left alone. There was a lot of sneaking of food to my room, and a very secretive approach to things. (EV) I felt ashamed of my behaviours, ashamed of myself, weak for engaging in such things, but also in real desperate need of support and understanding. (Emma, written text)

Although the underlined clause above could be perceived as an Orientation as it describes an ongoing event and answers the 'who, when, where?' question, it could also be read as part of her initial Evaluation which answers the 'so what?' question. Furthermore, it can also be interpreted as a Complicating Action as it answers the question 'then what happened?' in response to her initial Orientation that explains how she was left alone both literally and emotionally by her family. Although there is an embedded Evaluation, the use of a past-progressive tense also serves to carry the story forward as it provides supplementary information for the maintenance of the narrative action. A similar use of the past-progressive tense was noted by Eagles (1994) in her Labovian analysis of personal narratives. In the present study, all six written narratives had evidence of at least some clauses that used a past-progressive tense to carry forward the action.

### 3.2.4 Evaluations

As mentioned above, Evaluations were not always presented as distinct elements in the emotionally written texts. Evaluations were embedded within all the other elements, including Abstracts, Orientations, Complicating Actions, Resolutions and Codas. It is noteworthy at this point to highlight that Evaluations are considered to provide information on the consequences of an event and are not considered to be linguistic concept but a social/emotional one (Labov, 1997). As Labov (1972) explains, Evaluations are seen as 'perhaps the most important element in addition to the basic narrative clause' (p. 366) as they make explicit the personal meaning of the events. It is therefore not surprising that, in the expressively written narratives evaluations were

embedded within all other elements and played a key role in understanding the overall emotional flavor of the narrative.

Although Evaluations could be found embedded in the other Labovian elements, in the expressively written texts participants also provided distinct lengthy Evaluative clauses, reflecting on the emotional impact the experience or event they were describing had on them. This is illustrated in the following segment taken from Tom's narrative.

(EV) when she told me, that on this trip away, she kissed another boy I felt awful; betrayed, angry, sick, but also strangely relieved. The conflicting emotions engendered by the whole thing were difficult as a young man/teenager to deal with. What I found most difficult was the feeling of being betrayed, or the event in which this occurred, happening far away from me and the several people knowing about as I went along ignorant to the fact. It made me feel almost as if there were a conspiracy against me, between her and her friends, in which they were all complicit in getting her to cheat on me. The feeling of being hurt by somebody's actions was multiplied by the amount of people I thought were involved and intensified by the fact those who were involved were meant to be closer to me but were in fact, busy doing the exact opposite. I remember feeling alone and persecuted. Many of the people with whom she went on this holiday were friends of mine. What is more, I know that they were drinking alcohol, and this again intensified this feeling of being left out; I was missing this rite of passage as a teenager, going off for a few days with a group of mates and drinking beer etc. and while I was gone, everybody was having fun without me, including my girlfriend who decided to forget the supposed teenage bond that existed between us. (Tom, written text)

### **3.2.5 Resolution**

All of the participants provided a resolution to their story when read as individual narratives. According to Labov (1997) the resolution provides the answer to the question 'what finally happened?' It describes the final set of the Complicating Actions that resolve the story and the narrative. Most participants provided a clear resolution to the narrative, mentioning explicitly the end point of their story. There were differences however in how resolution was presented. For

example Sophie, writing about a break- up, provides a summary of the narrative, which itself has a Labovian structure, before providing the resolution.

**(O)** I was relatively happy before I started going out with [boyfriend's name] but going out with a depressive meant that I had picked up his depressive traits too. **(CA)** I became more melancholy [melancholic] and introverted because he didn't like going out, he hardly saw his friends and slowly over time I didn't want to go out without him. **(EV)** Therefore I lost touch with most of my friends. **(Res)** After the split I got back in contact with my old friends and relearnt how to be more sociable. (Sophie, written text)

Anna, however, who wrote about how breaking up with her boyfriend made her re-evaluate her relationship with her friends, provides the final sequence of Complicating Actions that contributed to the resolution of the story:

**(CA/EV)** Also, unfortunately, [friend's name] did not react well to me drawing back from her. She became quite nasty and bullied me for a significant period of time. My other so called 'friends', were, as I once was, very influenced by her and acted in similar ways, making fun of my clothes and the things I said, calling me a liar. **(Res)** Eventually, at the end of second year, [friend's name] and my so called 'friends' moved out of [City] to do a gap year [...] and I took the brave step to cut them out of my life. (Anna, written text)

Similarly, Lauren, who described an ongoing struggle with her boss, resolves the narrative by explaining the final Complicating Actions that led to the resolution.

**(CA)** She refused me flexible working. **(CA)** I heard myself say "Then we have nothing more to talk about". **(Res)** The next day, I sat on my mother's coffee table. I had a sheet of paper. I wrote a very short letter, saying that in the absence of any flexibility, I had no alternative but to resign.. (Lauren, written text)

Regardless of the way they presented the Resolution of the narrative, all participants provided an end to their narrative through the Resolution, an indication that participants' emotionally written texts were structured as narratives that had a beginning, middle and end and met Labov's criteria for narrative structure. It is noteworthy that only four out of six participants provided a positive

resolution. The identification of the type of Resolution participants provided played an important part in the subsequent analyses that are presented in the next part of this chapter.

### 3.2.6 Coda

Although the Coda is not considered necessary in a narrative, five out of six participants' emotionally written narratives provided a clear Coda following the Resolution of the story. According to Patterson (2008) 'the coda links the past world of the story to the present world of the storytelling and functions to 'sign off' the narrative' (p. 27). In the present study, Coda served to explain how they saw themselves as a result of the experience and what they had learned through this experience. This was stated clearly by all five participants who provided a Coda. For example, Anna ends her narrative by explaining how her life-changing experience helped her become more self-aware.

**(Coda)** I think of myself now as a person enriched but also wounded by these experiences. I am so much more self-aware. With this awareness comes choice, and strength. Strength to choose who I want to be, what I want to do, how I want to act.[..] (Anna, written text)

Similarly, Emma explains how coping with her eating disorder allowed her to acknowledge her ability to cope with difficulties and how she uses that awareness when she faces challenges in her present life.

**(Coda)** I do perhaps feel arrogant in saying it, but I coped exceptionally well. Hindsight allows me to see how much I coped with alone at a very young and vulnerable stage in life, and how impressive it is to just cope at all with an eating disorder. This is something I try to remember when I am faced with real challenges in my present life. That I can handle way more than I think I can. (Emma, written text)

Interestingly, four of the participants who provided a Coda to their narrative were the same participants who provided a positive resolution to their life-changing experience story. Tom, however presents a more pessimistic Coda to his EW narrative, explaining the implications of his life-changing experience on his current life.

**(Coda)** I think it is safe to say that the events changed my outlook on relationship quite a bit, in that I began to see clearly the way in which relationships and the sexual politics involved in them was about competition; men competing against each other, trying to impress women, trying to impress or steal away women in existing relationships. To this day I find the cattle-market of the dating scene (amongst men in particular) distasteful, even repulsive as it reminds me of that horrid feeling of betrayal or the loss of the competition. (Tom, written text)

Regardless of the type of Coda provided by the participants, the Codas indicated the moral of the story and showed how participants integrated this experience in their present life. Identifying the Labovian structure of the emotionally written texts had two main implications. First it demonstrated that when asked to use the Expressive Writing intervention, participants in the present study wrote in a narrative form. Moreover, it played a key role in allowing me to recognise the significant parts of the narrative and identify the commonalities and differences in the structure, which facilitated the subsequent analyses that are discussed in the next part of this chapter.

### **3.3 The story of the written texts**

As mentioned in the previous section, despite the heterogeneity of the emotional life-changing experiences across narrators, there was a shared narrative structure in their EW narratives. As Bamberg (2012) notes, however, the emergent whole is more than its linguistic components; and although the Labovian analysis allowed for the identification of the storied structure of EW narratives, it was only when the narratives were analysed as a whole that I was able to identify the main plots. Overall, the EW narratives shared basic plot elements, including elements of existing story typologies present in the narrative literature and the wider western culture. Moreover, in each of these stories the narrator and the protagonist were the same, a feature indicating that they were personal stories.

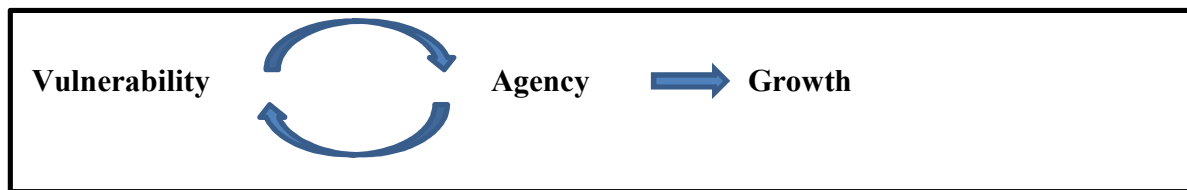
The analysis revealed two main story typologies characterised by specific narrative tones, direction, themes and identities constructed. Four out of the six EW narratives seemed to adhere to the same typology, which I have labelled ‘narratives of growth’. As all written narratives were structured in a classic ‘story’ formulation with a beginning, middle and an end, the analysis of

‘narratives of growth’ is presented in three Acts, resembling the beginning, middle and end structure. Although in presenting the findings in such way, there is a danger of interrupting the coherence of each individual story, the presentation and synthesis of the written narratives into a shared coherent narrative aims to highlight the commonalities and differences across narrators, as they emerged through the narrative analytic lens employed in the present study (please see Methodology Chapter). The second narrative typology that emerged from the analysis, which I have labelled as ‘narratives of loss’, is distinctly different from ‘narratives of growth’ in terms of tone, direction and identities constructed. Despite their commonalities, the two EW ‘narratives of loss’, also differ between them, and are thus discussed as individual cases under the ‘narratives of loss’ typology. The following section presents the two main story typologies, ‘narratives of growth’ and ‘narratives of loss’, which are discussed through their main themes and accompanied by extracts to support the interpretations.

### **3.3.1 Narratives of Growth**

Four out of the six EW narratives could be described as ‘narratives of growth’. Although participants described difficulties and challenges in coping with their life-changing experiences, the direction of their narratives was progressive, with overall optimistic and hopeful tones. Drawing from literary forms, all stories had a romantic form, that is, the protagonist embarked on a long journey, encountered and overcame difficulties and triumphed in the end (McAdams, 1993). In a simplistic form, the overall progressive movement of the narrative could be described as a non-linear move from vulnerability to agency, leading to growth. This is illustrated in Figure 1 and can be summed up by Emma’s quote:

There were many many times during my eating disorder where I felt there was no hope. That I would not live a happy or healthy life, that I was alone, and I felt completely desperate and broken. The fact that I could come back from that, or even just pick myself up enough to go to school, or to go to therapy, showed me that I have a drive somewhere that cannot be beaten by anything- a drive to live well and to make things better. (Emma, written text)



**Figure 3.1** Narratives of Growth: the non-linear movement from vulnerability and agency to growth.

The beginnings of the written narratives described in Act 1 set the scene for the life-changing event. They focused on explaining the origins and triggers of the participants' life-changing experiences, with participants positioning themselves as vulnerable and susceptible to their life-changing event. There seemed to be a 'victim' identity constructed by all participants, characterised by lack of control in regards to others and the events that preceded their life-changing events. In Act 2 of the narratives, participants provided information in regards to their life-changing experiences, the moment of 'narrative wreckage' and how they coped with the events that followed. Participants introduced new 'characters' and critical actions that contributed to the development of the plot. It is noteworthy however that, although vulnerability seemed to be the starting point of the narratives, all participants seem to have described a non-linear process where vulnerability and lack of control intertwined with agency and mastery which led to growth. Act 3 provided the resolution of the narratives. The four participants who wrote 'narratives of growth' (Emma, Sophie, Chloe and Anna) provided a positive resolution to their narratives with elements of growth, increased self-awareness and acceptance. When these narratives were read individually as a whole, they all had an optimistic tone with a progressive structure, and an explicit evaluation of how the participants' life-changing events contributed to their sense of self at the moment of writing. The three Acts that together comprise the 'narratives of growth' typology are discussed in more detail below.

### ***Act 1: Vulnerability***

Despite the overall optimistic tone, there was a tragic tone at the beginnings of the participants' EW stories, setting the scene for the acts to come. In explaining the triggers and origins of their life-changing experiences, participants presented the events that preceded their life-changing experience within what Polkinghorne (1996) calls 'victimic' plots, where the 'protagonists depict

their lives as out of their control' (p. 302). The 'victimic' plots characterised the beginnings of narratives of growth, with a common theme of vulnerability being evident across participants. Narrators positioned themselves as vulnerable, either in regards to being susceptible to the life-changing experience or because of the life-changing experience. For example, Emma positioned herself as emotionally vulnerable when she was explaining the triggers that led to the development of her eating disorder. She noted a number of events in her life to demonstrate her vulnerability and sense of lack of control over her life's circumstances.

I experienced roughly 6 years of dealing with binge eating and bulimia, beginning when I was 13. A real trigger for this was a breakdown in my close friendships at my school at that time. [...] My father always worked a great deal, and my mother had just gone back to work. With my brother not wanting to be in the house very much, I was left alone quite a lot, and felt like I was left alone emotionally with this experience with the girls at school. Someone of 13 needs emotional support and I wasn't getting it at this time. (Emma, written text)

The theme of vulnerability manifesting as lack of control over the life-changing event was evident at the beginning of Sophie's narrative when she described her relationship with her boyfriend prior to their break-up. In the segment below, Sophie described her ex-boyfriend's depression as a catalyst for the break-up, and noted that it 'seemed to be something inherent in him' indicating her lack of control over his mood. This was further evident when she noted that he would lock himself away from everyone, even from her.

During the relationship we were inseparable and I was very happy with him. Though it was obvious from the start that he had depression issues. It was never very clear why he was depressed, it seemed to be something inherent in him. Every few months he would get very down and more or less lock himself away from everyone even from me. He would stop communicating and just wanted to stay in his room. This could last a few days to a week. (Sophie, written text)

Vulnerability also seemed to permeate how participants positioned themselves against others. For example, Chloe's narrative began from a position of vulnerability. She portrayed herself as someone who was always overlooked by boys and positioned boys in her teenage years as the

ones who did the choosing and rejected her. Although she emphasized her ability to form friendships and acknowledged that as she grew older she became more intelligent, self-assured and charming, she also compared herself to other girls who despite their weight were able to have boyfriends, thus positioning herself as awkward and inadequate.

I had, had big crushes on boys through my life and all of them knew this and enjoyed that I felt like that but without fail they chose someone else and it was never me.[...]I have always been a bit fat, ranging from a little to a lot, but other bigger girls got boyfriends so why not me? I am intelligent and as I got older more self- assured and charming, I have always had lots of very loyal girlfriends but still no boys. I don't know why some girls so effortlessly do and I couldn't but it was a HUGE feature in my mind always there always making me feel awkward and inadequate. (Chloe, written narrative; emphasis is Chloe's)

It is noteworthy, however, that despite the vulnerability described, participants did not present themselves as completely powerless. Instead, the initial 'victim' identity constructed through the vulnerability at the beginnings of the narratives seemed to have served as a springboard through which an 'agentic' self could be constructed. Moreover, as mentioned in the Labovian analysis above, it seemed that this initial vulnerability aimed to highlight the importance the emotional life-changing event had for the participants.

### ***Act 2: Striving for agency and control***

The 'middle' of participants' narratives described their life-changing experiences in more detail, including how they coped with the vulnerability brought on by their life-changing events. Despite the heterogeneity of the life-changing experiences, there seemed to be an overarching theme of striving for agency and control, across participants. All participants presented this as a non-linear process where feelings of control and lack of control intertwined. It is noteworthy, that all participants moved from a position of vulnerability to agency.

The middle of Emma's narrative, for example, explained the development of her eating disorder and her journey towards recovery, including reaching out for emotional support from counsellors and learning to be more compassionate towards herself. She wrote about her struggle with her weight and need for control as well as the impact her eating disorder behaviours had on her sense

of self. She presented herself as weak but also expressed her determination to change her weight and with it her life, which seems to suggest her need for control at the time. This experience highlighted the ‘victimic’ narrative where she felt that she had no control over her life but also provided hints of an ‘agentic’ self.

I would binge and purge at school and in the evenings at home when I was left alone. There was a lot of sneaking of food to my room, and a very secretive approach to things. I felt ashamed of my behaviours, ashamed of myself, weak for engaging in such things, but also in real desperate need of support and understanding.[...] If I got something wrong at school, or if I forgot to reply to a text message, or if I said something to upset someone by accident- I blamed my being fat. I was going to change myself completely, and with it my life, and in doing so I would be putting right anything I ever did wrong (which I was convinced was a hell of a lot). I was extremely full of self-loathing and feelings of disgust physically. (Emma, written text)

As the narrative unfolded, Emma presented herself as gaining more agency. She reached out for help from a counsellor and actively engaged in the process of recovery, taking control over her recovery.

I worked with a counsellor, and a psychotherapist specialising in CBT who helped me on an emotional and then a practical level. I also read lots of books on the subject, and found some really helpful literature. (Emma, written text)

In a similar development in the middle of the plot, Chloe described how she moved from being vulnerable and rejected to taking things into her own hands. She moved to a position of agency, mentioning how she started a quest of losing weight and finding a husband. She presented herself as being in control of her life including finding alternative ways to meet people (e.g. internet) as well as being more in control of her weight. She constructed an ‘agentic’ self (Bruner, 1994; Polkinghorne, 1996), as, although her initial attempts were unsuccessful, she persisted and achieved her goals. This sense of agency is also reflected in her ability to reject others the same way she was rejected earlier. She, however, also noted how she didn’t always have control, mentioning that there were times that men held the power by not calling back. Although not mentioned in the segment below, as the narrative unfolded, Chloe described how despite finding

dating difficult, it also led her to meet her husband. Her sense of agency was evident in her persistence in dating even though it was difficult.

By the time I got to 29 I could not face turning 30 alone. I went on a very determined mission to find a husband. Along with my quest to find a husband has been a quest to lose weight. Both had always been unsuccessful! But something clicked in my head and I lost weight and started internet dating, and went on loads of dates and was very firm when I didn't feel a connection and would say no thank you to a second date. But sometimes I would meet someone who looked like they had potential and they would blow me off, stop calling, ignore me in that random inexplicable way men have when they are all over you, declaring all sorts of feelings only to never call again. (Chloe, written narrative)

The move from a 'victim' to an 'agentic' self was observed in all four narratives of growth. The tone of the narratives also shifted from tragic to more optimistic and hopeful, with the progressive direction being most evident in the turning points of the narratives; that is the participants' ways of coping with their life-changing events. Despite the non-linear process, all participants in the narratives of growth constructed an 'agentic' self. As Polkinghorne (1996) suggests, 'in the agentic plot, the protagonist is persistent and shows purpose and commitment' (p. 301).

### ***Act 3: Growth***

In Act 3, which focused on the endings of the participants' narratives, participants provided the resolution and the meaning the experience had for them. Although the first two acts provided information about the direction of the plot, the overall plot could only be identified when all three acts were read as a whole. In the overall plot of 'narratives of growth', participants were able to cope with the challenges following their life-changing events and overcome them, with the life-changing experience providing an opportunity for growth. Growth in these narratives was constructed in terms of becoming more self-aware and empowered, and gaining a sense of mastery over their life-changing events. This story typology is not new to the narrative literature. In fact, the 'emplotment' of an 'agentic' self that overcomes obstacles and challenges, finds meaning in difficulties and learns from the journey has been described numerous times in both narrative literature and the wider world of stories that western societies inhabit. For example, this

typology can be found in ancient texts such as Homer's *Odyssey*, as well as in personality research such as in McAdams' (2006) 'redemptive self', where a negative experience leads to psychological growth. Similarly, in illness stories, where illness can lead to 'narrative wreckage', Frank (1995) talks about stories of 'Quest', whereby the individual faces the challenge of illness head on, finds meaning in illness and finds a way to keep his/her life moving.

Narratives of growth could thus be understood in terms of positive change, characterised by personal insight and empowerment. Despite the heterogeneity of the life-changing experiences, these themes were evident in all four narratives of growth. For example, at the end of her narrative, Emma looked back at her experience of coping with an eating disorder, reflecting on her ability to cope and the lessons learned about herself through this life-changing experience. It seems that coping with an eating disorder had played a key role in how she viewed herself at the moment of writing. Her past was informing the present and future, giving her a sense of empowerment. The overall tone was optimistic and progressive. Emma's life-changing experience allowed her to move from an emotionally vulnerable position to developing an agentic and empowered self which can handle difficulties. Overall her written narrative seems to map onto Frank's quest narrative where the protagonist finds meaning in illness and finds a way to keep her life moving.

I do perhaps feel arrogant in saying it, but I coped exceptionally well. Hindsight allows me to see how much I coped with alone at a very young and vulnerable stage in life, and how impressive it is to just cope at all with an eating disorder. This is something I try to remember when I am faced with real challenges in my present life. That I can handle way more than I think I can. (Emma, written text)

Similarly, at the end of her narrative, Sophie explained what she learned through that experience and how she had re-evaluated the role of relationships. She implied that she had lost her identity in that relationship, and through the break-up she was able to re-evaluate how she wanted to be in her relationships. She used the word 'overcompensate', implying a sense of agency, wanting to keep a balance between her romantic relationships and social life and acknowledging the importance of not losing oneself in a relationship.

After the split I got back in contact with my old friends and relearnt how to be more sociable. Nowadays I seem to overcompensate for that time and try to go out as much as possible. The thing that I learnt from the relationship is not to give up your whole identity to be in a relationship, that you need to keep something of your self apart from the union (Sophie, written text)

Although this was not an ‘illness’ narrative, there were elements of both Frank’s (1995) restitution and quest narratives in the final part of Sophie’s narrative. She went through a difficult break-up, and then her life and perhaps sense of self was restored to ‘at least a reasonable approximation of the life that was led before’ (Frank, 2012; p. 47) the relationship. At the same time, the whole narrative seems to map onto Frank’s quest narrative, where Sophie went through a difficult life-changing experience but was able to overcome obstacles, develop a sense of agency and gain new awareness about relationships and herself. The whole narrative had a progressive and optimistic tone and although she did not use a lot of emotion words to describe her experience there was a transformation from a tragic place to optimism.

It is noteworthy that, in narratives of growth, participants did not simply construct an unrealistic heroic self. The emotional aspect of the life-changing experience, its challenges and wounds, were acknowledged and accepted. This is evident in the segment from Anna’s EW text below.

I think of myself now as a person enriched but also wounded by these experiences. I am so much more self-aware. With this awareness comes choice, and strength. Strength to chose who I want to be, what I want to do, how I want to act. (Anna, written text)

Moreover, in line with Bruner’s (1994) and Polkinghorne’s (1996) discussions in regards to the agentic self, the identities of participants in narratives of growth were constructed by ‘assembling and conceptualizing instances of one’s own agentic past acts and projecting that instances of agency will continue in the future’ (Polkinghorne, 1996; p. 301). All four EW ‘narratives of growth’ were characterised by a sense of optimism that the difficulties they encountered through their life-changing event, and their new self-awareness, better equipped them to face challenges in the future.

### 3.3.2 Narratives of Loss

Despite the commonalities in the Labovian structure of the EW narratives, Lauren's and Tom's narratives did not seem to adhere to the 'narrative of growth' typology. The way each participant constructed their sense of self in their EW narratives, however, differed, and their cases are thus discussed individually below.

#### *Lauren: a victimic narrative*

Lauren's narrative had a clear regressive direction with an overall tragic and pessimistic tone. Similar to the beginnings of the EW 'narratives of growth', Lauren started her narrative from a position of vulnerability. She constructed a 'victimic' narrative emphasizing her lack of control over her life circumstances. This was evident in one of the first lines of her EW narrative where it appeared that she aimed to explain her lack of choice over the route that led to her life-changing experience.

It seemed to me that I was destined to work harder than anyone around me, for almost no tangible reward, and that this state of affairs was not only my lot, but my vocation. There seemed to be no other way but the strait gate. (Lauren, written text)

Similarly, as illustrated in the segment below, she presented the events in a way that implied that she had no agency and was not actively making choices. Within that, she seemed to be using her mother's voice to validate her way of being at the end of her doctorate, and perhaps to justify in this way her lack of decision-making.

How does all this change my life? Well, for one thing it pushed me towards a career as an academic I never wanted. There seemed nothing else to do. I remember crying as I finished the doctorate, from exhaustion and resignation. My mother told me I was having a breakdown. I knew that I simply wanted to get away from the unpleasant ethos and mentality of most of the academics I'd met. But I simply didn't know how. It was easier to capitulate, apply for post-docs I didn't want, go through the motions of being passionate about [area of work] to win prestigious jobs.

The second way in which this work, this path, this non-decision making changed my life is that it placed my destiny in the hands of a bully. (Lauren, written text)

In the middle of the narrative, and similar to the ‘narratives of growth’, Lauren seemed to be striving for agency and control when she reflected on her experience of being bullied. Unlike in ‘narratives of growth’ however, Lauren continued to position herself as vulnerable, describing a sense of powerlessness and lack of control over events. She maintained a tragic tone in the narrative which was evident in her examples of how every time she acted in an agentic way, she was shut down. This can be seen in the following example, one of the numerous incidences she described, in regards to her boss’s bullying behaviour.

While I was on leave, the post I was stuck in was abolished by the university as “iniquitous”. [boss’s name] went out of her way to make the case that I was incompetent. She based this on feedback I myself had suggested she seek, because there were no feedback mechanisms linked to promotion. (Lauren, written text)

The tragedy in her narrative was also evident in the way she minimised any positive developments in the plot. For example she noted ‘I was of course promoted, because everyone was’. Her difficulty in acknowledging any positive developments seems to have served to maintain the overall tragic flavour of the plot, reinforcing the victimic self she constructed. Moreover, Lauren’s narrative seemed to be filled with what McAdams (2006) calls ‘contamination sequences’ where good things turn bad, where for example Lauren’s achievement of getting her doctorate led her to a job she disliked and any positive event such as a promotion was dismissed.

Throughout her EW narrative, Lauren also used strong metaphors to describe her boss, perhaps as a way to justify how the experience was life-changing and difficult to manage. The tone also appeared to be more sarcastic in those instances, which seemed to be a way to emphasise her feelings towards her boss, while at the same time it allowed a sense of control from her current position. The sarcastic tone also seemed to serve the purpose of creating a dramatic engagement with the reader and attracting the reader’s sympathy. This is evident in the segment below.

[Boss's name] looked as though she sucked lemons for a living. She had a face like a much reused paper bag. Nothing came out of her mouth that wasn't mean, belittling, or spiteful in some hard to define way. (Lauren, written text)

Lauren's final resolution of the narrative demonstrated some sense of agency while still constructing a 'victimic' self. She reflected on her thinking processes during an incident where she was refused flexible working hours, making the decision to leave her job. At the same time, however, and despite the sense of agency her decision to quit demonstrated, the phrase 'I had no alternative but to resign' highlighted the victimic self that was constructed throughout the narrative.

She refused me flexible working. I heard myself say "Then we have nothing more to talk about". The next day, I sat on my mother's coffee table. I had a sheet of paper. I wrote a very short letter, saying that in the absence of any flexibility, I had no alternative but to resign. (Lauren, written text)

Lauren's EW narrative was the only one that did not provide an explicit evaluation on the impact her life-changing event had on her current life and it is difficult to make any further inferences from the EW narrative alone. The impact of this event on her life, however, was further explored in the interview which is discussed in the next section. From the beginning of her narrative, and even before her life-changing experiences, Lauren constructed a victimic self which permeated the whole narrative. Throughout the narrative, there was an overall sense of helplessness and powerlessness with a sense of lack of control. As Bruner (1994) suggests, 'we construct a victim Self, by reference to memories of how we responded to the agency of somebody else who had the power to impose his or her will upon us directly, or indirectly by controlling the circumstances in which we are compelled to live' (p. 41).

### ***Tom: reactive agency***

Tom's narrative is presented differently from all the other participants. Although his life-changing experience narrative is one of loss, the way he re-constructed that experience from his position at the moment of writing reflected new self-awareness and insight in regards to his life-changing experience. His overall EW narrative, however, had a regressive direction with both

tragic and romantic tones. Similar to the other EW narratives, he started his narrative by explaining how breaking up with his girlfriend after she cheated on him was life-changing and used strong emotional words and images to make his point, positioning himself as emotionally vulnerable, even before the break-up.

I think I felt overwhelmed at such a young age to be in a relationship with somebody at all. Nevertheless, when she told me, that on this trip away, she kissed another boy I felt awful; betrayed, angry, sick, but also strangely relieved. The conflicting emotions engendered by the whole thing were difficult as a young man/teenager to deal with. (Tom, written text)

The middle of his narrative focused on his feelings and reactions following the break up. Similar to the other narratives, there seemed to be a theme of lack of control over his life-changing event, with elements of powerlessness and vulnerability. As it's evident in the following segment, he presented himself as having been betrayed by his friends, missing out on this 'rite of passage' which seemed to be important for him at the time.

What I found most difficult was the feeling of being betrayed, or the event in which this occurred, happening far away from me and the several people knowing about as I went along ignorant to the fact. It made me feel almost as if there were a conspiracy against me, between her and her friends, in which they were all complicit in getting her to cheat on me. The feeling of being hurt by somebody's actions was multiplied by the amount of people I thought were involved and intensified by the fact those who were involved were meant to be closer to me but were in fact, busy doing the exact opposite. I remember feeling alone and persecuted. (Tom, written text)

As the narrative unfolded, Tom reflected on how this experience changed him and influenced his behaviour in his young adulthood. He became one of the 'perpetrators' and joined them in a behaviour that he considered immature from his current position, but perhaps was necessary during the event. He used the phrase 'if you can't beat them, join them' as a way to indicate agency and being in control. In adopting this position, he was no longer powerless, he had the power to make her suffer, and he was now winning the power struggle/competition with others. Being a martyr, was his way of re-gaining control and agency over the events.

This transition was marked by this weird confusing event and I definitely spent the next few years engaging in the sort of immature teen, male sexual bravado that I so disliked, but which I saw as having beaten me in the past. (If you can't beat them, join them.)

Although I was genuinely hurt by what she had done, and the raw feelings of betrayal, sexual jealousy and anger were real, I think I took some perverse pleasure in being sinned against and being a martyr, of sorts. I realised the opportunity to make her suffer for what I felt was a serious crime against me and enjoyed occupying the high-ground. This meant that any gesture of kindness from me (I think I drove her home) was greeted with a huge gratefulness and I believe I enjoyed the power this gave me. Especially in contrast to the powerlessness I felt in the face of a group of drunk teenagers seemingly conspiring to cheat on me.

The underlined passages in the segment above, however, also reflect his evaluations of his way of being as a teenager from his current position. His use of words such as 'immature teen', 'male sexual bravado' and 'perverse pleasure' constructed a more self-aware sense of self, one that was able to reflect on, and re-evaluate his previous way of being. This is further evident in the final underlined line in the segment above, where he justified his behaviour by contrasting the powerlessness he felt with the power he 'gained' through being a martyr.

Similarly, in ending his narrative, Tom reflected on the impact this event had on his developing self and subsequent behaviours. He noted how his sense of loss of control affected his striving for being at the top of his 'social strata' when he was older. At the same time; reflecting from his position at the moment of writing, he seemed to be removing some responsibility from both his peers and himself, given the age they were in. This is described in the following segment.

In a sense, the loss of power and control was the most difficult thing to deal with. As I matured into a young adult, dealing with sexuality and new emotions, the loss of control in my inner life was complicated by a loss of control in my social life. As I saw it, the girlfriend I had presumed faithful was not, and the friends I presumed loyal were not. Of course, this was not necessarily the case; we were just a bunch of kids, I don't believe anybody is really responsible at that age, to an extent. But certainly, as I grew older, that memory of loss of control, I think, influenced me in that being at the top of my social strata

was very important as was being “cool”, as was having as many sexual partners as I could. More so than ever before, I wanted to be the master of my own personal milieu, to reduce the possibility of being usurped by becoming one of the people I saw as the cool drunk teens, rather than the one at home being cheated on. (Tom, written text)

Tom’s narrative seems to follow what Bruner (1994) calls ‘reactive agency’, where if agency cannot be attributed to one’s agentive acts, then an ‘agentic’ self can be constructed by ‘attributing it to the agency of another’ through becoming a ‘rebel, resistance fighter Uncle Tom, or James Dean’ (Brunner, 1994; p41). Tom also displayed self-insight in his EW narrative which, although not explicitly stated, is evident in the way he wrote about his life-changing experience, that is, his ability to reflect on the past and provide justifications for his behaviour at the time.

There is, however, a pessimistic tone that seemed to have stayed with Tom, regardless of his ability to reflect and gain insight on his past behaviour. In reflecting on how his life-changing experience affected him at the moment of writing, he drew references to social issues regarding dating and relationships and used strong emotional words to describe how the sense of loss of competition and feelings of betrayal had shaped his views on dating and relationships. This is summarised in the segment below.

I think it is safe to say that the events changed my outlook on relationship quite a bit, in that I began to see clearly the way in which relationships and the sexual politics involved in them was about competition; men competing against each other, trying to impress women, trying to impress or steal away women in existing relationships. To this day I find the cattle-market of the dating scene (amongst men in particular) distasteful, even repulsive as it reminds me of that horrid feeling of betrayal or the loss of the competition. (Tom, written text)

The two ‘narratives of loss’, albeit constructed differently, seem to have a common element of loss, whereby regardless of striving for agency and control, participants’ EW narratives maintained a pessimistic tone and a sense of powerlessness over the life-changing experiences. In contrast to ‘narratives of growth’, ‘narratives of loss’ were concerned with the violation of participants’ rights, whereby responsibility for participants’ feelings was attributed to the actions

of others. It is noteworthy, however, that in contrast to Lauren's narrative whose resolution of the story did not seem to provide relief from the emotional discomfort of the life-changing experience, Tom's evaluations from his current position show elements of insight and self-awareness in regards to his life-changing experience.

### **3.3.3 The dialogics of EW: a need for acceptance**

In moving beyond the structural form of the narratives, there seemed to be an overarching theme of a need for acceptance characterising both the content of participants' EW narratives as well as the way they were written. The need for acceptance seemed to run through all of the participants' narratives regardless of typology. In regards to content, the stories participants constructed all had a common theme of a need for acceptance from others. In Chloe's narrative, for example, the need to find a husband and be accepted by the opposite sex seemed to be the main focus of her narrative. Similarly, Anna, Sophie and Tom spoke about their difficulties following relationship break-ups, and Lauren spoke about her difficulties in her relationship with her boss, where their narratives focused on coping with rejection. Moreover, Emma wrote about her difficulties in her relationships with others, as well as her relationship with her body/self.

The need for acceptance seemed to transcend content, and was evident in the way the written texts were constructed. Participants made both explicit and implicit comments on how I might perceive their written narratives. For example, at the beginning of her EW narrative Anna noted: 'As I thought about what I might write for this task I knew inside me that this felt like the most significant and important thing, but I was worried that it might come across as superficial' (Anna, written text). Other participants, however, communicated their need for acceptance of their stories in a less explicit way. For example, Sophie wrote about herself through her mother's voice explaining how she was too good for him, perhaps in a way to offer credibility to her story and self- construction.

I moved in with my mother and I do remember she was very worried about me. Even though she liked [ex- boyfriend's name], she thought he was boyfriend material but not husband material. Meaning he wasn't someone you could build a future mainly because of his depression. She thought that I was too good for him and that he wouldn't find anyone better than me. (Sophie, written text)

The theme around acceptance and rejection placed participants' EW narratives in the context of this study. It raises the question of how using the EW intervention in the present study might have affected the typology of narrative and sense of self that participants constructed. The performative /dialogical elements of how participants constructed their sense of self through EW were therefore explored in the interviews that followed the EW intervention, and are described in the following part.

### **3.4 The story about writing a story**

#### **3.4.1 The world bearing witness**

##### ***A need for acceptance and validation***

In both the written texts and the interviews about engaging with EW, there was a common theme of 'the world bearing witness' to participants' life-changing events. Participants talked about their need for their story to be heard, understood and validated, with performative and dialogical elements of how I might perceive them and their stories. As mentioned above, this was more subtle in the written texts, and was often presented through detailed background information as well as through rhetorical means, such as providing lengthy explanations and evaluations of events. Some participants, however, noted this explicitly in their written texts. For example, in evaluating how she coped with her life changing event Emma wrote: 'I do perhaps feel arrogant in saying it, but I coped exceptionally well' (Emma, written text). In writing about how well she coped, Emma simultaneously reflected on how she viewed herself in relation to her life-changing event, as well as on how her evaluation might be perceived by the reader. Other participants shared this concern more explicitly in the interview setting. Lauren, for example, highlighted her need for the story to be understood, implying that she was trying to make sense of her story through sharing it with others. For her, there seemed to be two parallel processes going on while she was writing: a dialogical element with herself, trying to make sense of her life-changing experience, and a dialogical element with me as a prospective reader, wondering whether her story will be perceived as credible. This is summarised in the following interview segment:

Interviewer: Did you notice any changes in your mood as you were writing?

Lauren: Yes, I noticed that I was getting angry, although not in any kind of uncontrolled way but the event makes me angry. I also felt like I was digressing and I was going to run out of time. There's this kind of fear that my story won't be heard. I set about telling the story of the life-changing event in quite a long-winded way. I realised about halfway through, I was trying to put in too much detail. I think I was becoming afraid that the story wouldn't be heard, or wouldn't be believed. As I write it I'm thinking "Jesus Christ, did this really happen to me?" and at the same time it's so unbelievable that you're afraid people just won't believe you.

This dialogical element of having their life-changing experiences perceived as credible was also voiced by other participants. Anna goes further in explaining how writing for someone else helped her validate her experience.

Anna: Um, so yeah, it's something that has influenced me, um, ever since it happened really, like probably every day of my life. So, um, and I guess like, 'cause I do write stuff on my own, but it's, it's nice to have it validated, you know, to have someone else read it and I think, um, I don't know, maybe to read it and with like a state of acceptance and just be like okay, that's like, but I, I can understand that if I was in the same position as you, like I would be in exactly where you are now kind of thing. Like I don't know if, well, that's how it's gonna be when you read it, but yeah, I guess it's kind of, it's like validating it really, I think.

Later in the interview, Anna also explained her concerns about how I might perceive her story, indicating the dialogical element in the process of writing.

Anna: 'cause I thought like as soon as I read what it [the study] was about I was like, well this is it, like there's no other like life-changing event in my life that has changed my life as much as this one has. So this is the one, it kind of has to be, um, and as I was... and when I started I thought like this is like it's really superficial and, you know, like you might get people in your study that are writing about like, you know, having cancer and having their breast removed or something like that; here's me like writing all about like my ex-boyfriend, like... But actually writing about it makes me feel more validated, like instead of comparing myself to other people, like actually this was a huge thing for me, like it

was a huge, huge thing for me. Um, and it's okay for it to have been that huge, like it's not just like silly little teenage kind of thing, like actually it's a really important thing that gives, um, what's the word...? It's like validated but another word, like it's important, it's important and significant.

Anna in the segment above highlighted the need for her story to be heard and perceived as an important life-changing event. She made repeated use of the word 'huge' to stress the significance the life-changing experience had for her, extending her need for her story to be validated beyond the written text setting. The dialogic element between her story and the world (i.e., the reader) is extended beyond the written text. Tom's experience with writing, however, is presented from a more internal dialogical space. Although he acknowledged that there is always an implicit audience when one writes, he emphasized the internal dialogue that was going on whilst writing. He summarised this in the following segment when he explained how he was being more conversational in the way he wrote about his life-changing experience in order to make sense of it.

Tom: I was trying to be conversational as much as possible, because I find when I write I slip into a different set of vocabulary than I would when I would talk to someone.

Interviewer: In what way?

Tom: So I would use like more complex words or whatever in order to get a different point across that you wouldn't... can't get through in conversation. You know what I'm saying? So writing is a different medium which you can like get across really complex ideas, if I had like sort of complex words. But because this is sort of I was thinking as I was going along about something I didn't know about until I wrote about it. It was helpful to be able to use kind of conversational things to draw it out of myself if you know what I'm saying. Um, but, yeah, audience wise like I think when you write like it's implicit that there's an audience always. It's impossible to write without imagining an audience. But, um, I think less so in this, I was less thinking about an audience because I wasn't trying to... like I wasn't imagining myself telling someone while I was writing down a bit more. I was trying to... to generate like remembrances from the initial thing that I talk about you know. Or try and generate like how I felt or whatever rather than thinking about a definite

audience or like I wasn't too worried like you know... But definitely sometimes I overcomplicate like sentences and things. So I was trying to maybe keep that to a minimum for myself because I was reading it as I was going along you know what I mean. And if I made it too complicated I would be trying to think like, well, what... what... [laughs] like what am I saying or, um, what have I said or, you know. So in order to... to kind of keep as little emphasis as possible, you know, to keep it as kind of bold as possible, to use as simple language as possible. Not because of the audience maybe, because I was my own audience if you know what I'm saying.

In the segment above Tom highlighted his internal dialogic process and his need to present a coherent story for himself. Being his own audience seemed to have played a role in constructing meaning and gaining insight into his life-changing event. At the same time, however, there was also an implicit element of being understood in the interview setting. His repeated use of 'you know what I mean' seemed to be his way of checking with me that I understood his process. The theme of 'the world bearing witness', and the need of participants to provide a coherent story was not only evident in their stories about their life-changing experiences, but also in their interview stories of writing about their life-changing experiences.

### ***The impact of the Other***

This idea of the world bearing witness was further evident in the way participants compared their experiences of writing and talking about their life-changing experiences. Although most of the participants voiced that they found writing helpful and beneficial, they also talked about how the combination of writing the story first and then sharing it verbally was preferred. This was particularly evident in the emotional reactions participants had when they shared their stories in the interview. Chloe, for example, became quite emotional when she was telling the story, and started crying when I asked her how she was feeling about sharing her experience. Later in the interview, when talking about the experience of writing she explained this in her own words.

Chloe: Yeah, yeah like I said to you earlier, I think what was nice is sometimes to take – to, to not – to almost be forced because you, it's just you and you have to fill this page and when you are talking, like, you can kind of ramble and get off-point quite easily. You can go off on – and also you are looking for a reaction all the time. Whereas if you are just writing,

you can write almost uninterrupted and you don't need (Pause) the reassurance from the other person that they are interested, that they are listening to you. You know, are they reacting with shock or, you know, or – you don't have to worry about that reaction from the person that you are telling. But in my head I was telling you.

Although Chloe, in the segment above, talked about the benefits of writing uninterrupted without having to worry about the reaction of the other, she also raised important questions in regards to the stories that are constructed through this medium. Chloe highlighted the need for the story to be heard, and the importance of an attentive listener when sharing an emotional story in person. She noted however, that in her head, she was telling me, which raises the question of how the story might have been constructed if she knew that I wouldn't be reading it.

### ***Emotions and insight***

Despite the fact that the EW instructions used in the present study explicitly asked participants to write with as much detail and emotion, during the interview, participants noted that they were not always able to do that. Sophie, for example, explained that sharing her life-changing experience in writing provided a basic framework of her story, whereas talking about it allowed her to add more details into it.

Sophie: In some ways what I've written is like the, the – what do you call it? Like a basic framework and then when you talk about it you are adding the details into it.

A similar response was given by Lauren when I asked her whether the EW instructions had influenced the way she wrote about her experience.

Lauren: Yes, I think I was certainly trying to do what you had asked but I don't think I managed to really let go, except insofar as when I was describing my bully, I let go and expressed my hatred of her by being mean about what she looks like. I don't think I did explore my very deepest emotions. I was trying to, but I spent far too much time as it were, telling the facts of the life-changing event and not telling you what it felt like or showing you what it felt like. I've just told the bare bones of the story without the content. I've given you the frame, but you would have to intuit all of the feelings.

All participants talked about new insights and emotions evoked both in the EW task and during the interviews. It appeared, however, that writing the story first and then sharing it verbally in the interview allowed for deeper insight into how their life-changing experience impacted their lives. Chloe, for example, talked about how sharing her story allowed her to recognise feelings of sadness for her teenage self, explaining how sharing her experience verbally facilitated that understanding.

Interviewer: Mhh, and, and I noticed that when you were talking to me, when you were describing the event, you became quite emotional. Did that happen while you were writing as well? Did you notice any emotions?

Chloe: A little bit, a little bit, but not as strong as actually, again I think it's because you – you have a reaction, you, you know, to me maybe. I don't know. I don't know why I felt more strongly emotional. I did a little bit. I always do, you know, even just thinking about it, I always will. But, but actually what occurred to me now when I was talking to you about it is the, the sadness I feel for my teenage self, whereas before I don't know, like, I'd never thought of it that way.

Similarly, in the segment below, Lauren explained how exploring her life-changing experience during the interview allowed her to access feelings that she had not experienced during the EW task, which also enabled her to gain new awareness of her life-changing experience.

Lauren: I was being made to suffer at my own hands, I was complicit in the suffering and how sad; how could that have been? I'm actually a naturally optimistic person and strong. I have leadership qualities, how on earth could I have been in that position. It was almost like child abuse what happened to me really. It was just so sad and yet it was my career we were talking about. The behaviour of the person who hurt me so much amounted to a form of child abuse, in that I was behaving like a child and so she was able to ... I didn't write any of that down, I'm only thinking that now. So in other words, I don't think I did write about my feelings, it's only in talking about it now that I can access the feelings. It's only because you asked me, that I've gone beyond ...

Interestingly, as Lauren reflected on her life-changing experience in the interview, she also seemed to be in dialogue with other parts of herself, such as the 'naturally optimistic person', and

made references to how writing about this experience from her current perspective allowed her to have a sense of closure. Towards the end of the interview, and after she had shared her story verbally, she explained this in her own words.

Lauren: So I suppose I noticed that, that it's taken a long time to have any distance on the story but I suppose in writing it this time, there was a sense that you could have fun with it, it doesn't have to be this kind of grand confession on which the rest of my life depends. It was extremely life-changing, but it can be integrated into my life, it doesn't have to stand out as a trauma. I've digested it.

Overall, all of the participants talked about the positive benefits of sharing and reflecting on their life-changing experience through EW and in the interview. Anna, for example, talked about how writing about her life-changing experience made her feel empowered. She explained this as a surprising new awareness when she mentioned in the interview:

Anna: I didn't expect I would feel empowered by it. That's...erm... That's perhaps a new thing.

Similarly, towards the end of the interview, Tom explained in his own words how writing about an emotional life-changing event can facilitate a therapeutic journey back into one's self.

Interviewer: Is there anything else you would like to add on the whole process today?

Tom: Um, I suppose, yeah. I mean, one thing I'm interested in personally and one thing that's really surprised me is the kind of way in which writing facilitates that, that kind of journey back into yourself or whatever. And I'm surprised that... because writing's such an intensively personal process like writing about something like that. The way in which it threw up all the different relationship dynamics that were going on, um, yeah, I've... I've seen it as a really like kind of positive way to facilitate that kind of therapeutic thinking or whatever if you want to call it that. I mean, I don't think I need therapy on it or anything, but it was great to just kind of dig into it a bit and think about it like. And I'm surprised that writing... because writing's a difficult thing to do for even someone that writes quite often, I think it's difficult. Um, so I'm surprised that it facilitated it so well. So, you're onto something.

It seemed that engaging in EW allowed participants to gain insight into their life-changing experience, with sharing their experience in the interview facilitating this exploration further. Interestingly, both participants who constructed a ‘narrative of loss’ in their EW narratives seemed to be able to reflect on their life-changing experience from a more positive light during the interview, a reminder of how the context of sharing an emotional story influences ones construction of sense-of self.

### **3.4.2 Reflections on Analysis**

Engaging with the EW texts from the different narrative analytic lenses was both informative and daunting. Each narrative analytic lens added a layer of understanding of the participants’ EW texts, providing a view on the multi-dimensionality of how participants constructed their stories and sense of self through EW. Starting with the Labovian structural analysis allowed for the identification of the storied structure of the EW texts. Exploring the emplotment of stories through their main themes, tones and direction of the narratives allowed for the identification of the types of stories participants constructed, including the construction of their sense of self, while drawing on the dialogical elements in both the EW texts and the interviews added a further layer of meaning. In engaging in this pluralistic narrative analytic process, however, and given the difficulties of presenting all the analytic observations in the limited space of this thesis, there was a danger of not following each method to its saturation point. As Frost (2009) explains, however:

‘The combination of [narrative] approaches does not prioritize one over the other. Instead, it uses the text to guide the analyst from one perspective to the next. It draws on several narrative analysis techniques and combines the findings reached by using each approach. This means that no one method is necessarily followed through to its saturation point and each allows for ‘jumping-off points’ for researchers with a particular focus of interest (linguistic, social constructionist, structural and so on) in the narrative’. (p. 24)

For me, it was only after I had spent months analysing the EW texts and the interviews from the different narrative analytic lenses that I had realised the enormity of the project I set out to do. I therefore tried, even more rigorously, to keep the focus on the research question, constantly

questioning and reflecting on what each lens and observation could tell me about how people constructed their sense of self through EW.

The heterogeneity of the narrative topics perplexed the analysis further. Although methodologically it made sense to allow the participants to choose their own life-changing experience, the heterogeneity of the topics caused problems in the analytic process. Following the analysis of each individual narrative from the different interpretive lenses, I struggled to find a way to present the findings that would do justice to the individual subjective accounts while at the same time provide a coherent narrative of my construction of their stories. This difficulty has been addressed by Blom and Nygren (2010) who, drawing from Ricoeur's theory of interpretation, suggest that, when analysing heterogeneous stories that are only consistent within themselves, 'a reasonable connection between them is only possible to make at the end of the analysis, when comprehensions from each different narrative are merged into an aggregated comprehension'<sup>2</sup>(p. 33). The typologies of narratives presented in Part 3 of the analysis are thus my interpretations of the individual stories that might or might not share common themes, and are by no means finalised constructions of participants' sense of self. Similarly, I feel that it is important to re-iterate how although I aimed to ground all my interpretations in the text, and the interviews served as an opportunity for participants to clarify meaning and sometimes add parts of the story that were not present in the written text, the analytic observations presented in this chapter remain my interpretations of participants stories.

Moreover, by presenting the individual EW stories as typologies, there is a risk of putting people into boxes, thus losing the subjectivity and particularity of each individual story. In fact, Frank (2010) cautions that there is a danger that typologies could encourage 'the monological stance that the boxes are more real than the stories, and the types are all that need to be known about the stories' (p. 119). In line with the epistemological assumptions of this study, Frank (1995, 2010) suggests that no specific experience conforms to only one type of story and individuals can narrate the same experience using different narrative types. Identifying the narrative structure, however, can encourage closer attention to the stories people tell about themselves, how the stories weave together and how they change over time (Frank, 2010). As will be discussed in the

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<sup>2</sup> Comprehension is defined as 'a way to grasp the meaning in the empirical material in the form of a new text' (Blom & Nygren, 2010; p. 32)

following chapter, the type of stories people tell can have implications for their social and psychological worlds, and thus naming them can help individuals explore the function of the stories they are telling about themselves.

## **4. Discussion**

The main question this thesis set out to address is ‘how people construct their sense of self through Expressive Writing’. Despite a plethora of research on the therapeutic benefits of EW and increasing suggestions for its use as a therapeutic intervention, there is still little agreement on the underlying mechanisms of action (Pennebaker & Chung, 2011). Research on EW has recently turned its attention to the narrative aspect of writing using predominantly quantitative methodologies to explore narrative construction and meaning-making in EW (e.g., Boals, 2012; Pennebaker & Graybeal, 2001), but with little attention paid to the subjective experience of individuals and the types of stories people construct through EW. From a narrative theory perspective, EW can be seen as a process whereby individuals construct their sense of self and create meaning of their significant life experiences. In order to explore this process further, the present study used qualitative narrative methods of inquiry, whereby each narrative analytic lens employed provided another layer of understanding of the EW process.

This final chapter aims to bring together the analytic interpretations described in the previous chapter with the current literature on EW, and make recommendations on how narrative theories can inform the use of EW, in both research and Counselling Psychology practice. I begin with a brief overview of the findings, linking them to the narrative literature, before I proceed to discuss how they inform the existing literature on EW and the discussions around the underlying mechanisms. The focus then shifts to the implications of this research in regards to using EW as a self-help intervention and as an adjunct to Counselling Psychology practice. Finally, I provide a discussion on the limitations of the present study and offer suggestions for future research. I conclude the chapter with some final personal and theoretical reflections.

### **4.1 The storied structure of EW**

Following suggestions in the literature that the formation of a narrative is an important process underpinning the therapeutic benefits of EW (e.g., Smyth, True, & Souto, 2001), the first aim of this study was to explore the narrative structure of the EW texts. Previous quantitative research has shown that specifically asking participants to write in a narrative form did not improve the effectiveness of the intervention compared to the standard EW instructions, leading researchers

to suggest that it is possible that when people are asked to write expressively they naturally write in a narrative way (e.g., Danoff-Burg et al., 2010). Research thus far has mainly explored the formation of a narrative in EW using quantitative methodologies, measuring the use of causal and insight words (e.g., Boals et al., 2011; van Middendorp & Geenen, 2008), with little attention paid to the overall narrative structure. The Labovian analysis employed in the present study allowed for careful exploration of the narrative structure, with findings suggesting that when participants were asked to engage in EW and write about an emotional life-changing experience, they naturally wrote in a narrative form.

Participants' narratives had a clear beginning, middle and end, and followed a classic Labovian structure with all the basic elements of Orientation, Complicating Action, Evaluation and Resolution present in all accounts. It is noteworthy that evaluations in the EW texts were embedded in all clauses, and provided the emotional flavour of the EW texts and personal meaning of the events. In asking the participants to write expressively about an emotional life-changing experience, participants were essentially asked to select, organise, connect and evaluate, thus give meaning, to that event in their lives. This is in line with narrative theories, as well as the ontological assumptions of this study, that is, that narratives are the organising principle of human experience and allow us to forge links between the ordinary and the exceptional (see Bruner, 2003; Sarbin, 1986). The present study lends support to the suggestions that the formation of a coherent and meaningful narrative is an essential component of EW (Boals, 2012; J. W. Pennebaker & Chung, 2011) and that people tend to naturally write in a narrative form (Danoff-Burg et al., 2010).

## **4.2 Stories people write**

By constructing a narrative about an emotional life-changing experience through EW, which denotes the organizing of the sequence of events in a plot, participants inevitably constructed a narrative identity. From a narrative theory perspective, narrative identity can be seen as the construction of a sense of self that brings a sense of localized coherence and continuity in one's life story (see Bruner, 2003; Ricoeur, 1988). The present study identified two types of plot typologies that participants used to construct their sense of self through their EW texts, which I have named 'narratives of growth' and 'narratives of loss'.

In a simplistic way, ‘narratives of growth’ could be described as a non-linear move from vulnerability to agency, leading to growth. Participants began their narratives by locating themselves in ‘victimic’ narratives, where they constructed themselves as vulnerable and the events as out of their control. The ‘victimic’ narratives however served to set the scene for the ‘agentic’ narratives where vulnerability intertwined with personal agency, aiming to overcome the challenges presented by their life-changing experience. The direction of these narratives was progressive, with overall optimistic and hopeful tones. These ‘victimic’ and ‘agentic’ narratives were located within the overall narrative framework of growth which was constructed in terms of the life-changing event, helping the participants become more self-aware and empowered, and gain a sense of mastery over their life-changing events and their lives.

In contrast to narratives of growth the overall structure and emotional flavour of ‘narratives of loss’ had a more regressive direction and pessimistic tone. Similar to the ‘narratives of growth’, participants began by positioning themselves as vulnerable, depicting the events as out of their control, thus constructing ‘victimic’ narratives. Unlike narratives of growth however, the participants who wrote ‘narratives of loss’ maintained their ‘victimic’ narratives, and any attempt to gain agency over their life-changing event, and the subsequent challenges, served to maintain the initial ‘victimic’ identity that was constructed. It is noteworthy that the two ‘narratives of loss’ did not follow the exact same pattern as, despite the regressive direction, one of the participants’ narratives demonstrated elements of insight and self-awareness in regards to the life-changing experience, when evaluating the event from his position at the moment of writing. As mentioned in the previous chapter, however, ‘narratives of loss’ were concerned with the violation of participants’ rights, whereby responsibility for participants’ feelings was attributed to the actions of others. Thus, the two narratives of loss shared common elements in terms of the ‘victimic’ identities, regressive directions, pessimistic tones and sense of loss of control that were constructed through these narratives.

The types of narratives identified in the present study resonated with existing typologies present in the research literature and the wider stock of Western culture stories. Polkinghorne (1996) speaks of ‘agentic’ and ‘victimic’ narratives whereby in ‘agentic’ narratives narrators construct the sequence of events in such a way as to suggest that they have a sense of control, despite disruptions in their lives, whereas in ‘victimic’ narratives events are happening outside the

protagonists' control (Polkinghorne, 1996). The 'agentic' and 'victimic' selves can be seen as universal, that is, they exist in everyone, but the way they interact in the narrative provides information on how the sense of self is constructed. In the present study, both 'narratives of growth' and 'narratives of loss' began with 'victimic' narratives, but, in contrast to 'narratives of loss' which maintained 'victimic' identities throughout the narratives, 'narratives of growth' moved from 'victimic' to 'agentic' narratives, by constructing a sense of self able to overcome challenges.

Moreover, the typologies that emerged from the present study also seem to share elements with Frank's (1995) illness narrative typologies. Within the health psychology literature Frank (1995) has identified three typologies of illness stories: chaos, restitution and quest. In chaos stories 'the protagonist experiences multiple problems, crystallized by an illness, but usually not limited to that illness' (Frank, 2012; p. 47) with the protagonist having no control over the event and the plot having no resolution. In restitution narratives the plot highlights the restoration of life to a version of life before illness, whereas quest narratives are based on the transformational journey of illness, that is, that the protagonist 'encounters difficulties and gains wisdom and stature through the process of overcoming these' (Frank, 2010; p. 47). Although the experiences described by the participants in the present study were not illness stories, participants subjectively acknowledged their experiences as life-changing, resembling the disruption of life narrative described in illness<sup>3</sup> 'narrative wreckages'. 'Narratives of growth' as identified in the present study bear resemblance to Frank's quest narratives with hints of both chaos and restitution narratives. Similarly, 'narratives of loss' have similarities with chaos narratives in regards to loss of control, although in contrast to chaos narratives 'narratives of loss' offer a resolution to the story. Frank (2012) explains that the three narrative types weave within any specific story, and becoming aware of these typologies can help professionals identify the stories people tell on a particular day, and can allow people to reflect on the stories they have been telling to themselves and others. This understanding has implications for the use of EW in psychotherapy settings which are discussed later in this chapter.

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<sup>3</sup> Due to the nature of the events narrated by the participants, the severe breakdown in embodiment and the existential angst due to illness 'narrative wreckages', was not observed in the present study. Please see the methodology chapter for a discussion on the topic of writing.

Typologies and themes similar to the sequence of events of ‘narratives of growth’ and ‘narratives of loss’ have also been identified in the developmental life-story research literature. McAdams (2006, 2013) has described transitions in oral life narrative accounts in terms of ‘redemption’ and ‘contamination’ sequences. Within this framework, ‘redemption’ sequences ‘mark a transition in a life narrative account from an emotionally negative scene to a positive outcome or attribution about the self (p. 233)’, with themes including enhanced agency and communion, and personal growth (McAdams, 2013). In contrast, ‘contamination’ sequences describe the transition from emotionally positive events to negative outcomes. Interestingly, although the identification of the typology of plots was ‘the outcome of the research rather than its starting point’ (Willig, 2008; p. 134), the ‘narratives of growth’, as identified in the present study, map onto McAdams redemption sequence quite accurately. Narratives of loss share some common ground with ‘contamination’ sequences in regards to the regressive direction, but in contrast to McAdams’ construct, participants in narratives of loss started their narrative from an emotionally vulnerable position rather than an emotional positive one. This, however, might be due to the nature of narratives collected as McAdams life-story interviews aim to capture the whole life-story with high points, low points and transitions, rather than simply a specific life-changing experience through EW as in the case of this study.

The typologies identified in the present study illustrate how, through constructing their narratives and sense of self through EW, participants made use of common narrative typologies existing in Western culture’s collection of stories. This is not surprising as, in line with Bruner’s (2004) suggestions regarding the narrative construction of self, the narratives participants constructed were influenced by both the participants’ subjectivity, that is, their memories, beliefs, feelings and motivations about their life-changing event, and by the cultural norms and expectations of others in our social world. As Gergen (2006), paraphrasing Wittgenstein, explains: ‘the limits of our narrative traditions serve as the limits of our identity’ (p. 111).

But the stories people tell about their lives and the way they construct their sense of self through the ‘emplotment’ of significant life events has implications for their psychological wellbeing. As the focus of this study was on the process of how participants constructed their sense of self through EW rather than on the benefits of the intervention, there is no way of knowing whether participants who constructed one type of narrative over another benefited more from the

intervention. Within the Western societal culture, however, the values underlying ‘narratives of growth’, such as personal agency, and responsibility, are privileged, while ‘victimic’ narratives and loss of control are devalued (Gale, Mitchell, Garant, & Wesner, 2003). Reflecting this Western cultural ‘bias’, there are suggestions in the literature that people who construct ‘redemptive’ sequences are more ‘psychologically healthy’ (McAdams, 2013) and that ‘agentic’ narratives reflect psychological adjustment (Polkinghorne, 1996). In the present study, narratives of growth represented the positive narrative resolution of emotional life-changing events. This form of narrative processing has been suggested to be indicative of heightened well-being (e.g., King, 2001; Pals, 2006), and recent literature on post-traumatic growth would seem to support this (e.g., Triplett, Tedeschi, Cann, Calhoun, & Reeve, 2012; see Calhoun, Cann, & Tedeschi, 2010; Calhoun & Tedeschi, 2013). But, even within this framework, there is still little understanding of whether the construction of redemptive narratives increases well-being, or whether enhanced wellbeing leads naturally to the construction of redemptive narratives (McAdams & McLean, 2013).

#### **4.3 The dialogical aspect of EW**

Although identifying the types of plots people use to construct their sense of self through EW can be helpful in terms of understanding how one constructs his/her sense of self at a specific moment in time, it is important not to fall into the trap of ‘finalising’ participants’ narratives in a monologic way which assumes that there is only way to tell the story. The aim of this study was to explore how people construct their sense of self through EW, bearing in mind that there is no one sense of self that can be discovered, rather there is a multiplicity of selves, and narratives, that can be constructed depending on the context and current life- circumstances. Thus, the narrative identities constructed by the participants were not only constructed in the context of EW, but also in the context of the study and the context of the participants’ lives at the moment of writing. This included the participants knowing that they were sharing their stories with me and for the purpose of a Counselling Psychology doctoral thesis. The interviews that followed the EW intervention aimed to shed further light on how people constructed their sense of self through expressive writing through exploring the participants’ experience of writing expressively about a life-changing event.

During the interviews participants talked about EW allowing them to engage in a dialogue with themselves, in order to make sense of their life-changing experience while, at the same time, they were engaged in a dialogue with me as a prospective reader and as an ‘imaginary’ audience. This is in line with Baumeister and Newman's (1994) discussion on the interpretive contexts of stories, where they argue that the telling of stories is influenced by both interpretive and interpersonal motives. Within this understanding, stories are constructed as a means of making sense of one's experience, while at the same time they can be constructed as a means of achieving some effect on other people.

In talking about their experience with the EW task, participants expressed that through constructing their EW narratives they sought acceptance and validation for their life-changing experiences and consequently for the sense of self they constructed. This need for acceptance and validation was also evident in the EW narratives, through implicit and explicit comments regarding how I might perceive their narrative. Baumeister and Newman (1994) argue that, ‘telling stories about oneself to others may be a vital means of causing these other people to recognize and validate one's identity claims’ (p. 680), as well as a way of generating a particular reaction from the audience. Although during the EW task the process of writing was done in privacy, the types of EW narratives participants constructed were influenced by an ‘imaginary’ audience. Thus the way participants constructed their sense of self through EW was mediated by the imagined perspective of the reader. As Frank (2012) argues ‘people's stories report their reality as they need to tell it, as well as reporting what they believe their listeners are prepared to hear’ (p. 38).

Although Pennebaker and Seagal (1999) argue that a perceived audience would not mediate the effects of EW, knowing that their EW narratives would be read seemed to have been an important part of the EW process for the participants in the present study. This is in line with Frattaroli's (2006) suggestions that, when participants engage in EW, they expect or perhaps want the experimenters to read their writing. In an EW study that asked bilinguals to write in their preferred language, almost everyone wrote in English, presumably indicating a need for their stories to be read and validated by the English-speaking experimenter (Frattaroli, 2003; cf. Frattaroli, 2006). Moreover, a recent quantitative study has found that the benefits of EW were enhanced when the EW narratives were shared with the experimenter, compared to when kept

completely private (Radcliffe, Lumley, Kendall, Stevenson, & Beltran, 2007); and quantitative research that manipulated the context of EW has shown that the delivery of writing instructions affects participants' engagement in EW, as well as the language<sup>4</sup> they use to describe personally traumatic experiences (e.g., Corter & Petrie, 2008), with higher self-reports of gaining insight into their experience through EW when the experimenter displayed warmth (Rogers, Wilson, Gohm, & Merwin, 2007). Participants' need to feel accepted and have their stories validated, as observed in the present study, also echoes discussions in the narrative therapy literature which suggest that the opportunity to share one's story in an environment where one feels accepted and validated has a basic therapeutic value (see Angus & McLeod, 2004a).

Parallel to the process of writing for an 'imaginary' audience, participants also explained that EW allowed them to enter a dialogue with themselves and explore their life-changing experience from their current position. Similar findings have been reported by Bolton (2008) in her exploration of using therapeutic creative writing with cancer patients receiving palliative care, where she notes that narrating emotional experiences in writing and reading it back silently can create a critical dialogue with the self (see also Bolton, 2010). In the present study, this was also reflected in the evaluative elements of the EW texts, where participants provided their reflections about the development of the story from their current position and in the process constructed the emotional flavour and personal meaning of the events.

The dialogue between past and present self, which is akin to self-reflexivity, is facilitated by the constancy of the written word. Through writing expressively about emotional experience the author has the opportunity to distance his or her self from the text by reading what was previously written and use it as a reference to continue the narrative (Nygren & Blom, 2001). As Davies et al. (2004) argue, self-reflexivity entails 'a critical consciousness of the discourses that hold us in place, that is, a capacity to distance ourselves from them at the same time as we are constituted by them, a capacity to see the work they do and to question their effects at the same time as we live those effects. This does not mean that one is outside language or floating free of discourse. It means rather, that the possibility exists of reflexively turning the gaze of language on itself' (p. 380). In other words, the dialogue with the self when writing expressively allows

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<sup>4</sup> Language use was measured using the Linguistic Inquiry and Word Count program (Pennebaker, Francis, & Booth, 2001).

the author to re-construct the past in light of the present, and in the process bring their sense of self into being.

In line with narrative theories, constructing a narrative and a sense of self through EW can be seen as akin to a ‘polyphonic novel’ (Bakhtin, 1984; Frank, 2012; Hermans & Kempen, 1993), containing multiple voices that are in dialogue with one another. Within this understanding, Angus and McLeod (2004b) argue that ‘there is always more than one way to tell our life story, more than one voice to be heard, and more than one plot to be voiced’ (Angus & McLeod, 2004b; p. 371). Although there are several ways of conceptualising what these ‘voices’ represent, recent publications within the narrative therapy literature have advocated for a more integrative framework, as narrative theories share common principles (see McAdams, 2008)) and narratives provide a meeting point between schools of therapy (Angus & McLeod, 2004b). Applying this integrative understanding to the dialogical nature of life-stories, McAdams and Janis (2004) explain that, ‘someone is always listening or watching—be it friends and acquaintances, parents and children, therapists, or Freud's superego, Mead's generalized other, Perls's Top Dog, internalized attachment objects, or God’ (p. 166). It would thus seem that the types of narrative typologies that participants constructed through EW in the present study were formulated with both internal and external ‘imaginary’ audiences in mind that were engaged in dialogue with one another. This dialogical aspect of EW seems to have allowed participants to gain better insight into their experience and provided them with a sense of localised coherence by integrating the experience into their life story.

#### **4.4 Combining written and verbal emotional disclosure**

Participants also spoke about how, despite finding EW helpful, they preferred sharing their emotional life-changing experience in person, and how sharing their life-changing experience in writing provided a ‘basic framework’ for the life-changing experience, with the face-to-face interview allowing them to explore their experience in more depth. Although a direct comparison of written and verbal expression of an emotional experience is beyond the aims of this study, these findings, which reflect a more subjective experience of participants, challenge the utilisation of randomised controlled quantitative study findings that have argued that there are no

differences between verbal<sup>5</sup> and written emotional disclosure in self-reported measures of psychological and physical symptoms (e.g., Slavin-Spenny, Cohen, Oberleitner, & Lumley, 2011). Although there are obvious order effects in the present study, as all participants shared their emotional life-changing experiences first through EW and then verbally in the interview setting, it appeared that sharing their experience verbally allowed the participants to process their experience in more depth. Participants reported new awareness and feelings of empowerment after the EW task but also reported more intense emotions and further insights emerging from sharing their experience verbally during the interview. Naturally, sharing an emotional experience verbally allows for an additional mode of emotional expression, that is, vocal expression, which may arouse more emotions (Murray & Segal, 1994). It would thus seem that although EW can be perceived as beneficial on its own, the combination of EW and sharing the emotional experience with an empathic listener might allow for more in-depth processing of the experience.

It is also noteworthy that, when narrating their emotional life-changing experience in the interview setting, all of the participants, including the participants who wrote ‘narratives of loss’, provided a positive resolution to their narrative. This reflects the multidimensionality of the sense of self, that is, how in different contexts and through different mediums the same event can be narrated from different perspectives. Of course, the positive resolution provided by all participants may be due to social desirability, but it also reflects how in a face-to-face setting the story is co-constructed by the listener and the audience. Although, as mentioned above, the audience is part of the process of writing, the interruption of the story to ask questions, despite how minimal these are, can impact the way the story is constructed in the sense that an oral narration of the story can also lead the narrator to talk about things that s/he might not have paid attention to when writing alone (Nygren & Blom, 2001). The implications of these findings in regards to using EW in therapeutic settings are discussed in more detail later in the chapter.

#### **4.5 Contributions to the Expressive Writing literature**

The findings of the present study also contribute to the discussions regarding the underlying mechanisms of EW. As mentioned earlier, despite a plethora of research on EW there is still little

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<sup>5</sup> In the study of Slavin-Spenny et al. (2011) verbal disclosure was to an empathic listener.

agreement on the underlying mechanisms. Nonetheless, a number of theories have gained support over the years, leading researchers to suggest that there might not be a sole mechanism underlying the intervention, but several that may occur simultaneously (Pennebaker & Chung, 2011). The present study lends some support for the latter argument.

Consistent with cognitive and emotional processing theories, as well as with previous qualitative findings (e.g., Byrne-Davis et al., 2006; Pennebaker, Colder, & Sharp, 1990), participants in the present study reported that EW allowed them to reflect and gain better insight into their emotional life-changing experience. In addition, the narrative structure in which participants naturally wrote their EW texts, also lends support to the suggestions that some form of cognitive and emotional processing took place in the process of writing. From a narrative perspective, it has been suggested that constructing a narrative, that is, organising and structuring chaotic experiences into causal sequences, helps individuals gain understanding of how and why something happened and allows for the assimilation and resolution of the stressful event (see Angus & McLeod, 2004b; McLeod, 1997). It would thus seem that EW allowed the participants to revisit their experience from their current position and integrate it into their understanding of their sense of self at the moment of writing, albeit they were inevitably influenced by the context of the study.

Building on the above, the present study also lends support to suggestions that wider self-regulation theories might underlie the EW intervention. Participants spoke about feeling empowered and validated after the EW task, with the realisation that, despite the difficulties they encountered through their emotional life-changing event, they were able to cope well and gain a sense of mastery over their life-changing experience. Similar insights were reported by Byrne-Davies et al. (2006) in their qualitative study exploring participant's views on the mechanisms of EW. Interestingly, although in the present study the sense of empowerment and sense of mastery over the life-changing experience emerged as themes only in the EW narratives of participants who wrote narratives of 'growth', all of the participants, regardless of their EW narrative typology, shared such insights during the interview. From a narrative theory perspective, whereby EW can be seen as a process of self-construction, it is possible that by constructing a narrative through EW participants had the opportunity to identify, acknowledge and understand their emotions, needs and priorities at the moment of writing, which facilitated more effective

emotional regulation. This understanding is endorsed by, and would help explain, benefits found in studies asking participants to write only about the positive effects of trauma (e.g., King & Miner, 2000), intensely positive experiences (Burton & King, 2004) and life goals (King, 2001). Although there are no definite conclusions that can be made through this study in regards to the underlying mechanisms of EW, the emerging findings point towards a wider self-regulatory mechanism of action, whereby EW allowed participants to confront emotions and construct their sense of self in a way that enabled a feeling of control over their life-changing experience and future stressors, whilst writing for someone else, and being in dialogue with themselves and an ‘imaginary’ audience, facilitated feelings of validation, acceptance and empowerment.

Beyond the underlying mechanisms, the present study also points to limitations of using predominantly quantitative research to explore the EW paradigm. The increasing body of research continues to use randomised controlled trials (RCT) to assess the effectiveness of EW through different psychological and physical measures, with little attention paid to the fact that even participants in the control groups are still constructing stories. Indeed, some studies using RCT’s found no differences in self-reported measures of psychological distress between control and experimental EW groups but reported improvement in the before and after measurements in both groups, leading to questions about the neutrality of the control group (e.g., Baikie, Geerligs, & Wilhelm, 2012; Lafont & Oberle, 2014). In the control groups, individuals are given presumably neutral instructions, such as to write about their plans for the day, which still requires a personal engagement with the story. What the present study highlights is that, when people are asked to write about a personal topic, they are essentially asked to construct a sense of self at the moment of writing. The important question is what that narrative does to the individual who wrote it, what function the narrative serves, and how it maintains and/or alters one’s sense of self and social and psychological world. Perhaps these are questions that cannot be captured through quantitative measurements, and it is only through exploring them with the individual that the subjective meaning of the story, and its impact, can be identified. This is in fact the main function of therapy, and in particular therapy within the Counselling Psychology ethos, where the subjective experience of the individual is prioritised and the therapeutic work takes place within the containment of a good therapeutic relationship (see Strawbridge & Woolfe, 2010). The implications for using EW in Counselling Psychology practice are discussed in more detail in the following section.

## **4.6 Implications for Counselling Psychology practice**

Perhaps the most important implication of the present study is that EW should be used cautiously with highly distressed individuals. Engaging in EW, even if the topic is not considered to be a current stressor, can evoke an emotional reaction in the person. Although participants reported feeling more emotional during the interviews than when they were writing, with two of the participants showing visible signs of distress such as crying, reflecting on an emotional life-changing event seemed to have evoked a fresh emotional reaction. This echoes reports from the creative writing literature (e.g., Hunt, 2004), as well as findings from quantitative studies that have shown an increase in self-reported negative affect immediately after the EW task (e.g., Sloan, Marx, & Epstein, 2005; Sloan & Marx, 2006). Although in the case of this study negative affect was managed during the interview and the debriefing of the study<sup>6</sup>, using the intervention without appropriate support could pose risks for individuals. This is particularly important when EW is suggested as a self-help therapeutic intervention in high risk individuals as quantitative studies have shown no significant benefits in students screened for suicidality (Kovac & Range, 2000), and a worsening in PTSD symptoms (Gidron, Peri, Connolly, & Shalev, 1996).

Although EW can allow people to construct a narrative and find meaning in an emotional event, Frank (1995, 2010) reminds us that chaos stories can only be told retrospectively, as the chaos itself precludes a person's ability to tell the story. Moreover, not all experiences can be easily translated in linguistic form and constructed into a narrative and this should be kept in mind when using EW as a therapeutic intervention. Memories, and especially trauma memories, can often be fragmented and disorganised. Asking an individual to engage in EW too soon after trauma and out of a safe and containing environment could lead to flooding and overwhelm the individual, thus posing further risk on one's emotional wellbeing.

But the present study also offers insights on how EW could be used as a therapeutic intervention that would be in line with the ethos and values of Counselling Psychology practice. First, it highlights the relational aspect of writing, and the importance of having one's story witnessed and validated by someone in an empathic manner. Although participants reported that they had found the EW intervention helpful, they highlighted that they preferred talking to writing.

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<sup>6</sup> Please see Ethical considerations sections in 'Chapter 2: Methodology' for details.

Sharing their narrative in person after the EW task, allowed them to explore their emotional life-changing experience in more depth and enabled them to reflect on how this impacted their current life. Participants referred to using EW as a framework to outline and organise their experience with the interview allowing them to clarify meaning and process emotions further. Although the qualitative interview setting is not a therapeutic space, the two settings share similarities as both relationships are built on empathy, genuineness and acceptance (McLeod, 2003). Narrative researchers (e.g., McAdams, 1993; Murray, 2008; Riessman, 2008) highlight the importance of forming a good rapport, as well as being an empathic and encouraging listener during the narrative interview, and McAdams (1993) notes that participants taking part in his life-story research often report gaining insight into the stories they tell about themselves which can facilitate therapeutic change. EW could thus be used as a means to express emotions and organise one's experience in between sessions, which could then be explored in more depth in the containment of therapeutic setting. Preliminary findings from quantitative studies also seem to support this, with evidence suggesting that using EW in between sessions could lead to decreased emotional distress and greater satisfaction with the therapist and the overall psychotherapy process (e.g., Graf et al., 2008; Hayes et al., 2005).

In line with the above, and the ethos of Counselling Psychology, the use of EW as an adjunct to therapy can help move clients away from the 'medicalisation' of their distress. Clients often come to therapy with a diagnosis from their GP or medical practitioner which restricts the stories they can tell about themselves. In fact, it has been argued that all types of therapies are narrative therapies as clients share stories about their past, present and possible futures in the course of therapy (e.g., Davy, 2010). EW can help them construct and organise the meaning of the narratives they use to construct their sense of self and thus open up the space for the construction of more helpful stories. This understanding is in line with White and Epston's (1990) narrative therapy where they argue that externalising the problem can help people separate from the dominant stories that have been shaping their lives. Building on this McLeod (1997) argues that this strategy is common in any form of therapy as externalising the restrictive stories can open-up possibilities for other ways of being. In talking about the differences of written and oral narratives, Nygren and Blom (2001) explain that the ontological constancy of the written text allows the narrator to revisit the story and enter a dialogue with the self, a process that was also reported by the participants of the present study. EW can thus be a helpful medium to facilitate

this opening up of space for other stories to exist and facilitate the dialogical reflection on the function and impact dominant narratives might have on one's life.

There are a variety of ways that EW could be used as an adjunct to therapy. Although it can be used as homework in between sessions as in the aforementioned RCT studies (e.g., Graf et al., 2008; Hayes et al., 2005), the content and structure of the EW narratives can also be discussed during the sessions in order to help clients explore their experience in more depth. In a recent publication in the Counselling Psychology literature, Neimeyer (2006) describes an intervention called the 'chapters of our lives exercise' where clients write about significant times in their lives as chapters, which are then explored in the subsequent sessions using various facilitative questions that bear on its significant settings, characterizations of self and others, plots, themes, and implicit goals. EW would lend itself nicely to such in-session exploration both as a way to facilitate insight and change and for documenting progress in the course of therapy.

Ultimately, however, the most important thing would be to stay with the subjective experience of the client, both in terms of using EW as an intervention and in terms of what the EW narratives mean. Not all clients might be keen to use writing in between sessions, and as participants in the present study mentioned, discussing thoughts and feelings in person can enable a more in-depth exploration and better insight. Moreover, as mentioned earlier, the idea that narratives of growth reflect psychological well-being is a western cultural structure. It is thus important to work with the subjective meaning of a clients' narrative and explore the function of that narrative in a client's life, without assuming that one specific type of narrative is better than the other. Counselling Psychology highlights the importance of the therapeutic relationship, the collaborative stance of working with clients and the co-construction of both the stories told and the therapeutic process (Strawbridge & Woolfe, 2010). EW could thus be a helpful adjunct to the therapeutic process but, in line with the ethos of Counselling Psychology, it should only be used following appropriate individualised assessment, formulation and therapy planning and within a good therapeutic relationship.

#### **4.7 Evaluation of the study: Limitations and future research**

One of the main limitations of this study is the heterogeneity of participants' 'life-changing experiences'. Although all of the participants disclosed events that they subjectively perceived as

emotional and life-changing, differences in the emotional intensity and valence of the events may have influenced how their narratives were constructed. It is possible that the differences in the narrative structures that were found in the present study were due to differences in the nature of events participants wrote about. For example, the one participant who did not provide a positive resolution to the narrative was the only one who wrote about experiencing bullying in the workplace. It is possible that the experience of bullying in the workplace has a very different impact on a person's sense of self compared to a relationship break-up. This might help explain other discrepancies in the EW research literature where specific populations such as women who experienced intimate partner violence did not report benefiting from the intervention (see Holmes et al., 2007). Future research could help shed further light on how the type of emotional event impacts narrative structure by exploring the narrative process in specific populations and types of emotional events.

Another limitation of the present study is that it included only one male participant, which made it difficult to explore any possible gender differences in how participants constructed their narratives and sense of self through EW. Although quantitative studies have found no significant relationship between gender and the benefits of EW, some recent research recommendations suggest that it might be worth exploring whether EW might engage gender schema, social role, or socialization issues in ways that help some participants more than others to process traumatic events (see Range & Jenkins, 2010). Moreover, evidence from studies on oral narratives suggest that males and females construct their narratives differently whereby females tend to centre their narratives of personal experiences around relationships and social connections, whereas males focus more on achievement and autonomy (see Fivush, Bohanek, Zaman, & Grapin, 2012). Further research could thus focus on exploring whether there are differences in how males and females construct their narratives, when asked to write expressively, in terms of themes, direction and emotional expression, as well as how traditional expectations of masculinity and femininity might contribute to the construction of narrative identity.

It is also noteworthy that the present study deviated from the standard expressive writing protocol, where participants are usually asked to spend 15 to 30 minutes writing for three to five consecutive days (Pennebaker, 1997), by offering participants a single session and asking them to spend 45-60 minutes writing about an 'emotional life-changing event' with as much emotion

and detail as they could. Although research suggests that even a single session of writing can be beneficial (e.g., Cohen et al., 2008; Morgan et al., 2008; Walker et al., 1999) and that writing for longer than 15 minutes is more effective (see Frattaroli, 2006), further research could explore whether shorter writing time-frames impact how people structure their narratives. Moreover, it would be interesting to explore possible changes in narrative form and structure in participants' narratives across a number of writing sessions. For example, future research could focus on exploring whether there are differences in narrative tones, themes and direction in participants' first EW narrative compared to subsequent ones.

It is also important to note that the two participants who wrote 'narratives of loss' were both professionally engaged with writing and had studied literature at postgraduate level. It is thus possible that their writing style and how they constructed their narrative identity reflects a learned way of writing rather than a freely expressive way of writing. Moreover, they were also the only ones who chose to use pen and paper for their EW task rather than type on a computer. It is possible that the mode of writing might have influenced how the stories were constructed as the length of writing time given in the present study might have allowed the participants to revisit and edit their EW narratives stories when typing, whereas there was no evidence of editing in the handwritten texts. During the interview one participant who chose to type rather than write by hand, mentioned that she had added one paragraph in her EW narrative after she had finished writing. In closer examination of the EW narrative the added section was an Evaluation element (in Labovian terms) from her current position in regards to the events and did not appear to change the structure, direction or main themes of the constructed narrative. In regards to the benefits of EW, Frattaroli's (2006) meta-analysis showed that there are no differences between typing on a computer and writing by hand (see Frattaroli, 2006), although one early study by Brewin and Lennard (1999) showed that writing by hand was associated with greater negative affect, greater disclosure, and greater perceived benefit than typing, as measured immediately after the EW task. It is noteworthy, however, that Brewin and Lennard's (1999) study was conducted at a time when perhaps use of computers and typing were not as popular, whereas nowadays typing is becoming increasingly more common than handwriting, especially amongst university students (Mueller & Oppenheimer, 2014). In the present study, participants had the opportunity to choose the mode of writing that would feel more comfortable to them. Given the small number of participants, it would be difficult to explore mode of writing in the

context of this study. It would be interesting for future studies to explore whether and/or how the mode of writing affects how EW narratives and participants' sense of self are constructed.

Finally, in order to protect participants from possible emotional distress, participants were cautioned not to write about an ongoing stressor in their life or a very recent intense emotional experience. The time since the event, and their life circumstances at the moment of writing, might have influenced how meaning and their sense of self were constructed in the study. Both research and practice would benefit with future research exploring how people construct their narrative and their sense of self when they are asked to write about an ongoing stressor in their lives. Caution should be taken, however, when asking participants to write about a recent or ongoing stressor, as evidence from the present study and the research literature on EW show an increase in negative affect after engaging in EW. Such future studies would be best undertaken within the safety of a good therapeutic relationship where any adverse emotional reactions could be explored, processed and contained in an empathic manner.

#### **4.8 Final reflections**

In ending this research project I feel that it is important to note some significant turning points in my thinking during the write-up process. At times when looking at the data and my analysis, I wondered whether I was trying to reinvent the wheel. The emerging findings seemed to support different theories and mapped onto the literatures of narrative, personality and developmental psychology and therapy models nicely. I wondered however whether this study contributed anything new to the scientific community. Interestingly while I was reviewing the literature on self-defining memories and meaning-making, I came across a chapter written from a developmental and personality psychology research perspective by Thorne and McLean (2003) who at one point admitted that: 'Although psychotherapists and ethnographers have long understood that dialogue can help to clarify the meaning of events [...], we came to this discovery only recently' (p. 170). This contributed to a turning point in my thinking about this study. Although there is a vast amount of research on EW, narrative, and the process of self-construction in individual disciplines such as developmental personality psychology, psychotherapy and narrative theories, there is less discussion on how theory across disciplines could be integrated and provide further insight into other areas of research. Moreover, although

quantitative methodologies in EW research have offered important insights into the benefits of the intervention, the findings from the present study aim to open up the discussion between the various disciplines and methodologies in regards to the use of EW, narratives and the construction of self, and highlight the importance of cross-disciplinary research for the effective promotion and application of theory into practice.

In line with the above, the pluralistic ethos of Counselling Psychology advocates that there is no ideal method of doing research, but rather divergent methodologies can be equally valid in exploring specific questions (Kasket, 2012). The present study itself used pluralistic narrative methods of inquiry, whereby each analysis built on the previous one, aiming to shed further light on the process of self-construction through EW, while resting on the assumption that each analysis is only part of a greater process that could be investigated through different means, and could essentially never be finalized. The aim of this thesis is to contribute to the discussion on the processes underlying EW, without prioritising one approach over another. Rather, drawing from the pluralistic ethos underpinning Counselling Psychology in both research and practice, it aims to open up the dialogue in regards to the use of EW for therapeutic purposes.

A more personal significant point in the research process took place soon after I had finished the analysis of the data. As I reflected on the discrepancies between my research findings and the existing literature on EW, that is, how the participants in this study preferred talking to writing, a personal life-changing experience challenged some of my previously held assumptions about expressive writing and allowed me to relate more to my participants' experience with the intervention. My life-changing experience came in the form of an unexpected medical emergency, which disrupted the temporal and narrative coherence of life as I knew it and brought me face to face with the existential realities of being and non-being. As I took time off from writing my research, and tried to come to terms with the 'narrative wreckage' (Frank, 1995) I was experiencing, I tried to use some of my coping strategies, and more specifically writing, to facilitate the cognitive, emotional and physical healing process. No matter how much I tried to 'force' myself to write, however, I felt that no words could describe my experience at the time and even emotional words lacked meaning when I attempted to put them on paper. Perhaps this is similar to what Frank (1995) calls the chaos narrative, when the emotional hurricane of the process does not allow for a coherent narrative to form. I noticed, at that time, that what I needed

most was to have people around me to help me process the experience and find meaning in it, and sometimes simply to be with me in my chaos. Similar to what my participants noted in their interviews, I preferred having empathic listeners to talk to rather than write. It was only after the initial heightened emotions, and shock, had lessened that I was able to use writing to facilitate the emotional processing further. For me, this personal experience highlighted the dangers of promoting EW as a panacea, cure-all intervention. Similar to what my participants noted, although it can be helpful to write thoughts and construct a narrative following ‘narrative wreckage’, this is a process that should be introduced tentatively and mindfully. This is particularly important when the intervention might be used as an adjunct to the therapeutic process with highly distressed clients, and more importantly when it is ‘prescribed’ as a self-help intervention.

#### **4.9 Conclusion**

The main aim of this thesis was to explore how people construct their sense of self through EW. The idea that EW provides people with the opportunity to re-construct their experiences in the context of the intervention, and in the process construct a sense of self, is presented as an essential part of EW. Although a plethora of research on EW has offered us important information in regards to the use and effectiveness of the intervention, this is the first study, to my knowledge, that has explored the process of narrative construction through EW using qualitative methods of inquiry. The emerging findings point to the natural tendency of people to write in a narrative form using culturally available narratives. The identified narrative typologies, that is, ‘narratives of growth’ and ‘narratives of loss’, are but few of the possible ways of constructing a sense of self through EW. Reiterating, however, what was previously mentioned, identifying the narrative structure can encourage closer attention to the stories people tell about themselves, how the stories weave together and how they change over time (Frank, 2010).

Moreover, although the narratives remained the subjective experience of the participants, they were constructed through a dialogical process with the self and an ‘imaginary’ other. This seems to have allowed for new awareness and insights, along with feelings of validation and acceptance. Offering participants the opportunity to also share their emotional life changing

experience in person and in an empathic environment seems to have allowed for more in-depth exploration and facilitated cognitive and emotional processing further.

In conclusion, the present study lends support to the idea that Expressive Writing could be a useful addition to the toolbox of Counselling Psychologists, as a way to facilitate cognitive and emotional processing and enhance emotional regulation. It is important, however, that it is used mindfully following individual assessment, formulation and collaborative therapeutic planning, within a good therapeutic relationship.

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## **Appendices**

## Appendix A: Recruitment leaflet

### Express yourself through Writing!

My name is Rebecca Pavlides and I am a final year doctoral student on the DPsych in Counselling Psychology course at City University London. I am currently looking for native English speakers to participate in a study on people's experiences of writing about life-changing events that had caused an intense emotional response.

The study has two parts:

- In the first part of the research, you will be asked to spend 45-60 minutes writing about an event or experience in your life, that you consider to have been life-changing and had caused an intense emotional response. This will take place in a quiet room at City University London, on a date and time that is suitable for you.
- For the second part, I would like to invite you to share your experience of writing about your chosen event. This will last approximately 40-50 minutes and will take place immediately after the writing task.

Participants will have a 1 in 8 chance to win a £30 voucher from a bookshop.

All the data collected during this study will be **confidential**. This means that although some of the data collected might be used in my thesis and/or shared with my supervisor, all the data will remain **anonymous**. If you want to give it a try but change your mind at any point during the study, you are free to leave without any questions asked and any material collected will be destroyed immediately.

If you are interested in participating or have any questions about this study please contact me at:

██████████; tel: ██████████ or my supervisor Dr Susan Strauss at: ██████████.

**Please note that, due to the nature of this study only native English speakers will be recruited.**

Disclaimer: This study adheres to the British Psychological Society (BPS) Ethics guidelines and has received Ethical Approval by the Research and Ethics Committee of the School of Arts and Social Sciences, City University London. The study is being supervised by Dr Susan Strauss ██████████).

## Appendix B: Participants' demographic information and relationship with writing

Table illustrating selected participants' autobiographical details, relationship with writing and chosen mode of writing for the study

Participant's pseudonym	Gender /age	Life changing event	Age at the time of the event	Relationship with writing	Length of written narrative	Mode of writing	Length of time spent writing
<b>Emma</b>	F 25	Coping with an Eating Disorder	13-19	Writes songs/lyrics Keeps a diary	2 pages 1370 words	Typed on computer	60 minutes
<b>Sophie</b>	F 28	Break-up of romantic relationship	22	No use of writing or other form of reflecting	1 page 547 words	Typed on computer	45 minutes
<b>Lauren</b>	F 45	Bullied at work	30-35	Professional Fiction & non-fiction writer PhD in literature	3 pages 1555 words	Wrote by hand	60 minutes
<b>Chloe</b>	F 38	Meeting her husband	15- 30	Used to keep a diary as a teenager but hasn't kept one in years	1.5 pages 812 words	Typed on computer	60 minutes
<b>Anna</b>	F 25	Break-up of romantic relationship	18	Keeps a diary Writes poetry	4 pages 2005 words	Typed on computer	60 minutes
<b>Tom</b>	M 25	Break-up of romantic relationship	16	Keeps a blog (descriptive/ Humorous) PhD in literature	2 pages 1074 words	Wrote by hand	60 minutes

## Appendix C: Participant's information sheet

Thank you for showing interest in participating in this study! My name is Rebecca Pavlides and I am a student on the Doctorate programme in Counselling Psychology at City University London. This study explores people's experiences of writing about life-changing events.

*What is required from the participants?*

This study invites you to take part in two tasks:

- In the first part of the research, you will be asked to spend 45-60 minutes writing with as much detail and emotion about an event in your life that you think was life-changing and evoked an intense emotional response. This will take place in a quiet room in the Social Science building at City University at a time that is suitable for you.
- For the second part, I would like to invite you to share your experience of writing about your chosen event. This will last for approximately 50 minutes and will take place immediately after the writing task.

It is important that you select your topic of writing carefully! Please do not write about an event that you consider to be a current painful experience that is still troubling you! This is to protect you from any negative emotional reactions that might arise from writing with as much detail and emotion.

All the data collected during this study will be confidential. This means that, although some of the data collected might be used in my thesis and/or shared with my supervisor, all the data will remain anonymous. If you want to give it a try but change your mind at any point during the study, you are free to leave without any questions asked and any material collected will be destroyed immediately.

Disclaimer: This study adheres to the British Psychological Society (BPS) Ethics guidelines and has received Ethical Approval by the Research and Ethics Committee of the School of Arts and Social Sciences, City University London. The study is being supervised by Dr Susan Strauss [REDACTED]).

## Appendix D: Instructions for the Writing Task

Thank you for agreeing to participate in this study!

*For the purpose of this exercise, I would like for you to spend 45-60 minutes **writing about your very deepest thoughts and feelings about a life-changing experience or event that had caused an intense emotional reaction.***

*In your writing, I would like you to really let go and explore your very deepest emotions and thoughts. You might tie your topic to your relationships with others including parents, lovers, friends, or relatives, to your past, your present or your future or to who you have been, who you would like to be or who you are now. You may write about any event in your life that you consider to have been life-changing. You may give your own definition about what a life-changing event is.*

*Please refrain from writing about an event that is still troubling you and might elicit a fresh intense emotional reaction.*

Please note:

You can choose whether you would like to type or handwrite your life-changing experience.

If you choose to write by hand, please return your hand-written writings sealed in the envelope that you were given, without writing your name either on the writing or on the envelope.

If you choose to type on the computer, please save the document using your participant number, without writing your name either in the document or in the file name.

Although some material might be used in the write-up of this study and possible publication, all of your writing will remain anonymous and completely confidential.

Disclaimer: This study adheres to the British Psychological Society (BPS) Ethics guidelines and has received Ethical Approval by the Research and Ethics Committee of the School of Arts and Social Sciences, City University London. The study is being supervised by Dr Susan Strauss ([susan.strauss.1@city.ac.uk](mailto:susan.strauss.1@city.ac.uk)).

## Appendix E: Consent form

**Name of researcher:** Rebecca Pavlides

**Aim of this study:** This study aims to explore the experience of people writing about a life-changing event that has caused an intense emotional reaction.

In order to participate in this research, it is necessary that you give your informed consent. By signing this informed consent statement you are indicating that you understand the nature of the study and your role in this research and that you agree to participate in the research. Please consider the following points before signing:

- I have read the *Participant's Information sheet* and I understand the purpose, procedure and risks of this study.
- I understand that my identity will not be linked with my data, and that all information I provide will remain confidential. This means that although, some of the data collected might be used in the write- up of the thesis and/or shared with the person supervising the research, all the data will remain anonymous.
- I understand that I will be given the name and email address of the researcher and of the person supervising this research to contact if I have any questions about the research, my role in the research and my rights.
- I understand that participation in this study is voluntary and that I have the right to refuse to participate further without penalty at any stage of the data collection.

By signing this form I am stating that I am over 18 years of age, and that I understand the above information and consent to participate in this study.

**Participant's Name:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Date:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Participant's Signature:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Researcher's Name:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Date:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Researcher's Signature:** \_\_\_\_\_

Disclaimer: This study adheres to the British Psychological Society (BPS) Ethics guidelines and has received Ethical Approval by the Research and Ethics Committee of the School of Arts and Social Sciences, City University London. The study is being supervised by Dr Susan Strauss [REDACTED].

## Appendix F: Demographic information form

### Demographic Information

Participant number:

A. **Basic information:**

Age: .....

Gender: Male          Female (please circle)

Ethnicity: .....

B. **Language:**

Is English your native (first) language?      Yes                  No      (please circle)

Do you use English as your primary language?      Yes                  No      (please circle)

If No, what is the primary language you use in your everyday life (e.g. work/ university/ family home etc). .....

C. **Educational level** (please circle):

Undergraduate: BA BSc BEng Other..... (please specify)      Year: .....

Postgraduate: MA      MSc      MEng      PhD      Dpsych      Other..... (please specify)

Course you are currently studying: .....

Year:..... (if relevant)

D. **Occupation:** .....

## **Appendix G: Interview Agenda**

### **A: Background**

*What was it about this study that drew you into participating?*

*Do you usually use any form of writing such as keeping a diary or writing poetry, in your everyday life?*

*If so.. What form of writing do you use?*

*How often do you write?*

*Are there any particular triggers that prompt you to write?*

### **B: The experience of writing (general) :**

*What made you choose to hand-write/type over typing/handwriting?*

*Was there anything about the process of writing today that stood out for you?*

*To what extent, in your opinion, was your writing influenced by the instructions given to you regarding the writing task?*

### **C: The choice of topic:**

*I would like to invite you to tell me more about your choice of topic. What made you choose this particular experience as a life-changing experience? ”*

*How long ago did this happen?*

*What was it about this experience that made you see it as a life-changing experience?*

*How do you think it changed you/ the course of your life?*

*If I were to ask you to describe this event and how you felt about it, immediately after it happened, how would you describe it?*

### **D: The experience of writing about this topic**

*What was your experience of writing about this topic?*

*How did you feel when you were writing about this event?*

*Did you notice any shifts in your mood, ideas or viewpoint as you were writing?*

## Appendix H: Resource sheet

### Information for emotional support

If participating in this study has led you to feel distressed and you would like to speak to someone about your thoughts and feelings, please contact your GP or a healthcare professional through one of the following:

#### **British Psychological Society**

<http://www.bps.org.uk>

#### **British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy**

Tel. 01455 883 316

[www.bacp.co.uk](http://www.bacp.co.uk)

For details of local practitioners

#### **Samaritans**

<http://www.samaritans.org/>

Tel: 08457 90 90 90

24 hour emotional support line

#### **Cruse Bereavement Care**

[www.crusebereavementcare.org.uk](http://www.crusebereavementcare.org.uk)

Tel: 0844 477 4900

Helpline and advice for those affected by a death

The **emergencies** telephone number in the UK is **999** or **112**

You can also contact your **University's Student Counselling Services**

For **City University London** students the counselling services can be found at:

#### **Student Counselling Service**

Level 1, Drysdale Building

T: +44 (0)20 7040 8094

E-mail: [coun@city.ac.uk](mailto:coun@city.ac.uk)

Opening times: Monday to Friday 09:00 – 17:00

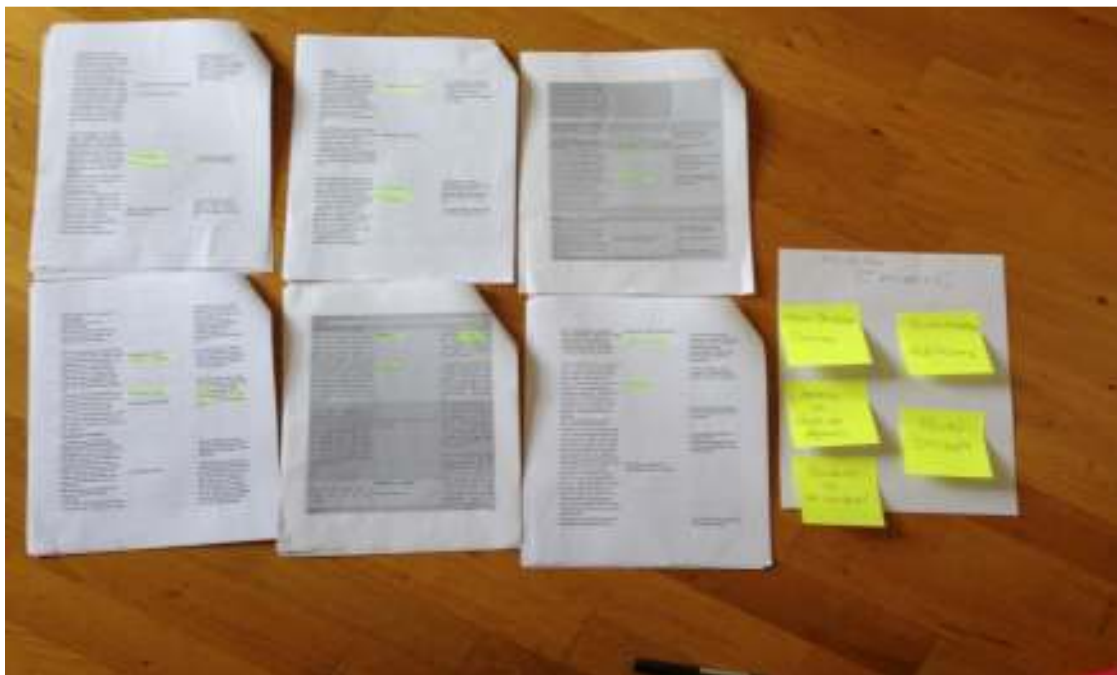
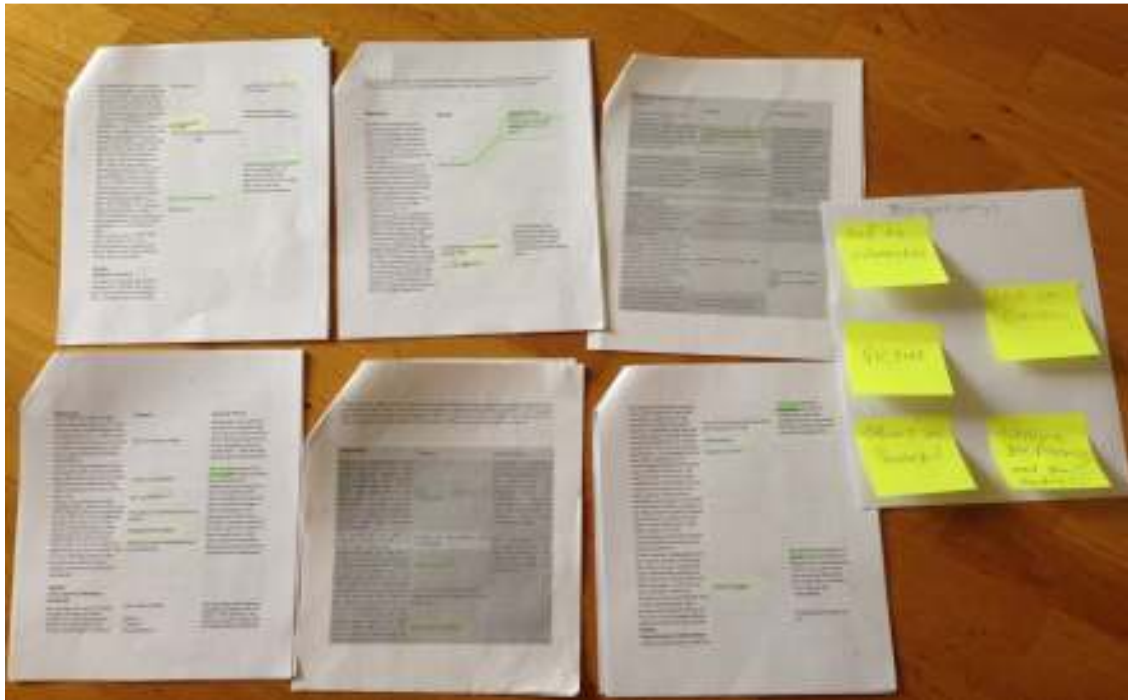
Disclaimer: This study adheres to the British Psychological Society (BPS) Ethics guidelines and has received Ethical Approval by the Research and Ethics Committee of the School of Arts and Social Sciences, City University London. The study is being supervised by Dr Susan Strauss [REDACTED].

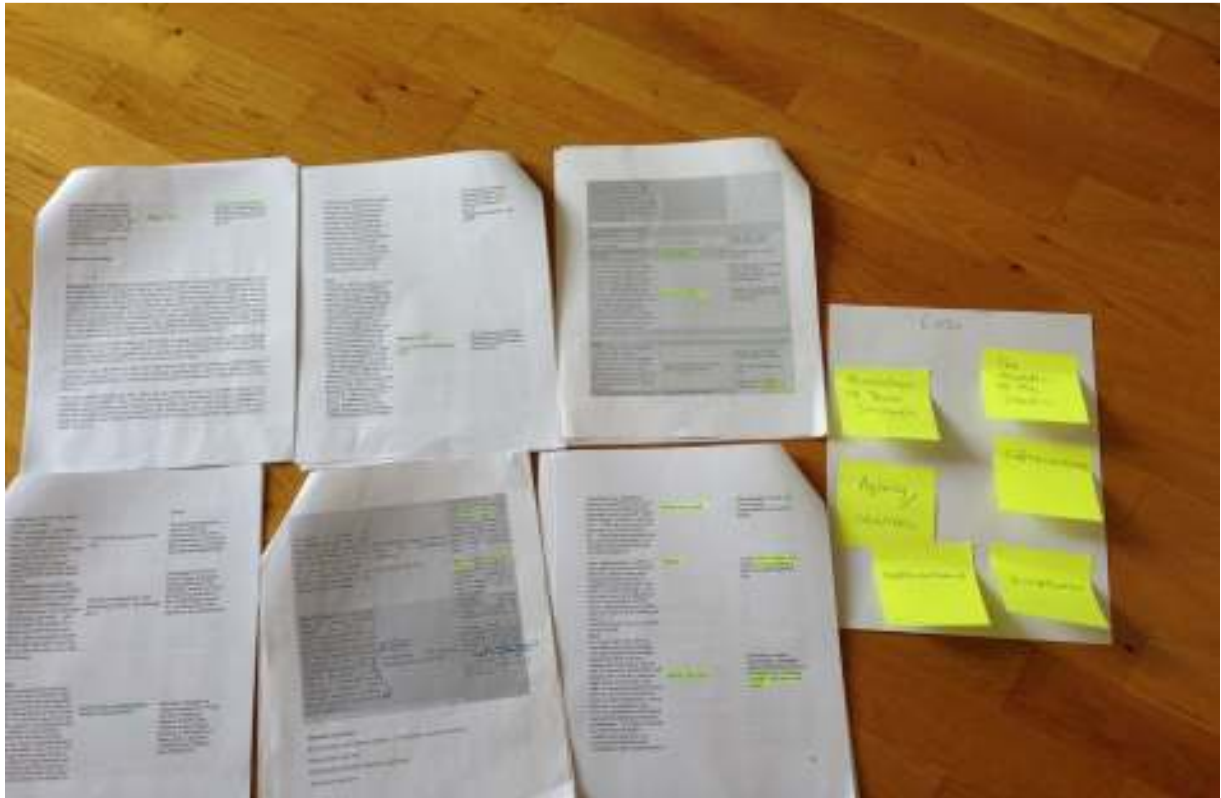
**Appendix I: Extract from Emma's Expressive Writing narrative illustrating Labovian analysis**

Labov's Narrative elements	Definitions	Written text
<b>Abstract (A)</b>	Summarizes point of the narrative	I am going to write about what I consider to be the biggest life-changing experience I have had. (A/EV) I consider it to be life-changing because it shaped me as a whole person, and continues to be a point of reference now, even though it is no longer happening
<b>Orientation (OR)</b>	Provides time, place situation, participants	I experienced roughly 6 years of dealing with binge eating and bulimia, beginning when I was 13. A real trigger for this was a breakdown in my close friendships at my school at that time. I was part of a classic kind of group of girls,
<b>Complicating action (CA)</b>	Describes sequence of actions, turning point, crisis, problem	the ringleader of which had turned on one member, who ended up leaving the school, and then seemed to work her way onto me.
<b>Evaluation (EV)</b>	Narrator's commentary on complicating action	I felt she didn't like me because I wasn't too bothered about her being a ring-leader; I didn't let myself be controlled by her and looking back now, I think that was a bit of a threat to her and the group she was trying to kind of be in charge of.

## **Appendix K: An illustration of the process of synthesis of the written texts**

The process of synthesizing the individual narrative analyses is illustrated below. As some of the text in the individual analysis documents may be unintelligible, an example of an individual narrative analysis can be found in Appendix J.





## Appendix M: Ethics release form

### Ethics Release Form for Student Research Projects

All students planning to undertake any research activity in the School of Arts and Social Sciences are required to complete this Ethics Release Form and to submit it to their Research Supervisor, **together with their research proposal clearly stating aims and methodology**, prior to commencing their research work. If you are proposing multiple studies within your research project, you are required to submit a separate ethical release form for each study.

This form should be completed in the context of the following information:

- An understanding of ethical considerations is central to planning and conducting research.
- Approval to carry out research by the Department or the Schools does not exempt you from Ethics Committee approval from institutions within which you may be planning to conduct the research, e.g.: Hospitals, NHS Trusts, HM Prisons Service, etc.
- The published ethical guidelines of the British Psychological Society (2009) Guidelines for minimum standards of ethical approval in psychological research (BPS: Leicester) should be referred to when planning your research.
- **Students are not permitted to begin their research work until approval has been received and this form has been signed by Research Supervisor and the Department's Ethics Representative.**

#### Section A: To be completed by the student

Please indicate the degree that the proposed research project pertains to:

BSc      M.Phil      M.Sc      D.Psych      n/a

Please answer all of the following questions, circling yes or no where appropriate:

1. Title of project

Exploring the process of the construction of self through expressive writing

2. Name of student researcher (please include contact address and telephone number)

Rebecca Pavlides

3. Name of research supervisor

Dr Susan Strauss

4. Is a research proposal appended to this ethics release form? ☒ Yes ☐ No

5. Does the research involve the use of human subjects/participants? ☒ Yes ☐ No

If yes,

8

a. Approximately how many are planned to be involved?

b. How will you recruit them?

Participants will be students recruited from university campuses across London using leaflets and email advertisements. Participants will be offered the possibility to win a £30 voucher from a bookshop.

S. 8  
7 March 13  
P.F.  
7/03/13

c. What are your recruitment criteria?  
(Please append your recruitment material/advertisement/flyer)

The participants will have to be current university students who use English as their first language. Exclusion criteria for this study will include any disabilities or medical conditions that might be worsened after writing for 20 minutes, use of English as a second language, suicidal tendencies and risk of harm to self or others.

d. Will the research involve the participation of minors (under 18 years of age) or vulnerable adults or those unable to give informed consent? ☒ Yes ☐ No

d1. If yes, will signed parental/carer consent be obtained? Yes ☐ No ☒

d2. If yes, has a CRB check been obtained? Yes ☐ No ☒  
(Please append a copy of your CRB check)

e. What will be required of each subject/participant (e.g. time commitment, task/activity)? (If psychometric instruments are to be employed, please state who will be supervising their use and their relevant qualification).

Participants will attend an initial briefing session where the researcher will explain the nature of the study, what is required of them and obtain written consent. Participants will be asked to spend 20 minutes writing with as much detail and emotion about a "life-changing" event. Following completion of the writing task, they will be invited to have a 50 minute interview regarding their experience of writing. The interview will be conducted by the researcher.

45-60  
S. 8  
29 Nov 12  
A.L. 12-3  
29.11.12

7. Is there any risk of physical or psychological harm to the subjects/participants? ☒ Yes ☐ No

If yes,

a. Please detail the possible harm?

Given the nature of this study, there is a possibility that writing about a personal topic might give rise to suppressed feelings and thoughts about the event, which might cause distress to the participant.

b. How can this be justified?

The participants will be advised not to write about an existing painful event, however, the researcher cannot control the reactions of the participants to their writing.

c. What precautions are you taking to address the risks posed?

During the initial briefing and in the instructions for the writing task, participants will be advised not to write about an event that they consider as a current painful experience that is still troubling them. As the researcher will be meeting the participants immediately after the writing exercise, any adverse effects following the writing exercise will be managed accordingly. In addition, the participants will be given the contact details of the student counselling services as well as of the emergency services, in case they feel that they might need emotional support following their participation in this study.

8. Will all subjects/participants and/or their parents/carers receive an information sheet describing the aims, procedure and possible risks of the research, as well as providing researcher and supervisor contact details?

☒ Yes

☐ No

(Please append the information sheet which should be written in terms which are accessible to your subjects/participants and/or their parents/carers)

9. Will any person's treatment/care be in any way be compromised if they choose not to participate in the research?

☐ Yes

☒ No

10. Will all subjects/participants be required to sign a consent form, stating that they fully understand the purpose, procedure and possible risks of the research?

☒ Yes

☐ No

If no, please justify

If yes please append the informed consent form which should be written in terms which are accessible to your subjects/participants and/or their parents/carers)

11. What records will you be keeping of your subjects/participants? (e.g. research notes, computer records, tape/video recordings)?

This study will be keeping audio recordings and transcripts of the interviews and the writings collected from the expressive writing task.

12. What provision will there be for the safe-keeping of these records?

The digital data will be stored on a password protected computer file on the researcher's computer. The data collected from the written task will be stored in a locked drawer that only the researcher will have access to. All the information stored will be anonymous.

13. What will happen to the records at the end of the project?

The data collected from this study will be destroyed following a successful completion of the project. Some parts of the data might be retained for publication purposes, however they will remain anonymous protecting the confidentiality of the participants.

14. How will you protect the anonymity of the subjects/participants?

All the data collected will remain anonymous and will be identified by an allocated participant number

15. What provision for post research de-brief or psychological support will be available should subjects/participants require?

At the end of the study participants will be given a de-briefing sheet that will include the researcher's contact details and information on where to seek emotional support.

*(Please append any de-brief information sheets or resource lists detailing possible support options)*

If you have circled an item in underlined bold print or wish to provide additional details of the research please provide further explanation here:

Signature of student researcher

[Redacted Signature]

Date

[Redacted Date]

**CHECKLIST:** the following forms should be appended unless justified otherwise

Research Proposal  
Recruitment Material  
Information Sheet  
Consent Form  
De-brief Information

### Section B: Risks to the Researcher

1. Is there any risk of physical or psychological harm to yourself? Yes ☐ No ☒

If yes,  
a. Please detail possible harm?

b. How can this be justified?

c. What precautions are to be taken to address the risks posed?

### Section C: To be completed by the research supervisor

*(Please pay particular attention to any suggested research activity involving minors or vulnerable adults. Approval requires a currently valid CRB check to be appended to this form. If in any doubt, please refer to the Research Committee.)*

Please mark the appropriate box below:

Ethical approval granted ☒

Refer to the Department's Research and Ethics Committee

Refer to the School's Research and Ethics Committee

Signature  Date

### Section D: To be completed by the 2<sup>nd</sup> Departmental staff member

*(Please read this ethics release form fully and pay particular attention to any answers on the form where underlined bold items have been circled and any relevant appendices.)*

I agree with the decision of the research supervisor as indicated above

Signature  Date

## **Part 2: Clinical Case Study**

*Working with difficulties in emotional regulation within a brief CBT framework:  
a case study*

## **Part 3: Publishable Paper**

### **Pennebaker's Expressive Writing Paradigm:**

#### **A Counseling Psychology Perspective**

The following manuscript has been prepared for submission to the *Journal of Counseling Psychology*. As the journal selected is a publication of the American Psychological Association (APA), please note that the article uses American English spelling. The guidelines for submission were identified in the journal's website (<http://www.apa.org/pubs/journals/cou/>) and a copy of these can be found in the appendix of this section.

## **Pennebaker's Expressive Writing Paradigm: A Counseling Psychology Perspective**

Rebecca A. Pavlides and Susan Maise Strauss

City University London

### Authors' Note

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The authors confirm that they have no conflicts of interest in relation to this work.

## **Abstract**

Written emotional disclosure has a long tradition as a therapeutic tool. Research in recent years has focused on the use of Pennebaker's Expressive Writing paradigm as a way to facilitate and promote physical and emotional health. This article reviews and critically evaluates evidence for the effectiveness of Pennebaker's Expressive Writing intervention and discusses possible underlying mechanisms. Central to this review are recent meta-analyses and studies that explore moderating variables such as location of disclosure and narrative writing. Although research provides encouraging evidence for the therapeutic benefits of the intervention, there is still limited empirical support for its use within psychotherapy. This review highlights the need for more scientific exploration of the task of expressive writing in this regard, in line with the ethos of Counseling Psychology. Finally, it makes suggestions for future research and discusses implications for the practice of Counseling Psychology.

Keywords: *expressive writing, therapeutic writing, counseling psychology, Pennebaker, narrative*