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Another String to Our Bow: Participant Writing as Research Method

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Abstract: Social scientists have a complex relationship to the psychotherapeutic domain: they have borrowed from it extensively, been openly critical of its individualizing tendencies, and somewhat nervous about any blurring of the boundaries between psychotherapy and the social sciences. In contrast, the author of this article adopts a pragmatic stance towards the psychotherapeutic domain, suggesting that social scientists might usefully adapt some of its techniques for their own purposes. Writing personally and expressively about important aspects of one's life is one such technique. Personal, expressive writing has been shown to enhance the writer's psychological and physiological well-being. The beneficial effects of personal writing provide grounds for extending its use as a method of inquiry with research participants. Knowing that participants benefit from their involvement in qualitative research is especially important when social scientists are exploring sensitive or traumatic topics. Participant writing is thus a method of inquiry that can serve the interests of participants and researchers alike: it attends to the well-being of research participants whilst providing social scientists with access to rich qualitative data, as the author shows.

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1. Introduction

It is not uncommon for those working in the domain of psychotherapy to borrow, sometimes quite heavily, from both psychological and sociological literature. Nowhere is this more evident than in the burgeoning field of narrative or discursive therapies. Narrative and discursive therapies owe much to the widespread influence of Foucauldian theory and other post-structuralist thinkers across the social sciences over the last 20 years. Although the traffic in texts between these domains has not been one-way—psychoanalytic literature, in particular the writings of FREUD, KLEIN and LACAN, has been hugely influential in the social sciences and humanities—the tendency of late has been for social scientists to approach the psychotherapy as on object of critical analysis (for example, FUREDI, 2003; MOSKOWITZ, 2001; ROSE, 1990, 1996). Put succinctly, psychotherapy is often blamed for contributing to a problematic trend

towards intensified processes of individualization, normalization, pathologization and de-politicization. [1]

In contrast to these critical accounts, I want to take a more pragmatic stance towards the psychotherapeutic domain by suggesting that recent developments in the use of writing as a therapeutic practice might be usefully harnessed to extend possibilities for pursuing qualitative sociological inquiry.[1] In particular, I want to consider the benefits that might accrue to research participants, and in a different manner to researchers, in having participants write about their lives. The notion that research participants might write, either as a replacement for or as an adjunct to speaking, challenges the privileged place interviewing occupies within qualitative inquiry, and parallels the way that writing as therapy challenges the presumption that it is talking that cures. The realization that writing therapy may be as effective as talking therapies has resulted in an increased interest in the role it might play in psychotherapy: a number of authors point to the transformative effects writing has on people who are dealing with troubling issues, including violent victimization and chronic illnesses (BOLTON, 1998, 1999, 2003, 2004; DESALVO, 1999; PENN, 2001; PENNEBAKER, 1990, 1993; PENNEBAKER & SEAGAL, 1999). [2]

Writing's place in the social sciences is also being re-examined. For this we owe much to feminist scholarship as well as to individuals like Laurel RICHARDSON (1994a, 1994b, 1997, 2000, 2001, 2002a; also RICHARDSON & LOCKRIDGE, 2004; RICHARDSON & ST. PIERRE, 2005), Carolyn ELLIS (1997, 1998, 1999, 2003, 2004), Art BOCHNER (1997, 2001; also ELLIS & BOCHNER, 2000; HOLMAN JONES, 2004) and Norman DENZIN (1997; see also BEHAR, 1996; KRIEGER, 1991; PELIAS, 2003, 2004; SPARKES, 2000; SPARKES, NILGES, SWAN & DOWLING 2003; VICKERS, 2002). Traditionally, writing within the social sciences has been construed as an activity that transparently records the research process and research findings. As such, writing is presented as the final step in a supposedly orderly research process, occurring well after the researcher-writer knows what they want to say; we "write up" already existing findings, rather than discovering our findings in the process of writing (RICHARDSON, 2000, pp.924-5). In stark contrast to this "mechanistic" view of writing, RICHARDSON encourages us to think of writing as a "method of inquiry." She states:

> "Although we usually think about writing as a mode of 'telling' about the social world, writing is not just a mopping up activity at the end of a research project. Writing is also a way of 'knowing'—a method of discovery and analysis. By writing in different ways, we discover new aspects of our topic and our relationship to it. Form and content are inseparable" (RICHARDSON, 2000, p.923). [3]

1 In adopting a pragmatic stance towards the psychotherapeutic domain I am not suggesting that some of the criticisms of this domain are not well-founded. Nor am I suggesting that the relationship between therapist and client should operate as a model for the relationship between researcher and participant. I am suggesting, however, that a judicious engagement with practices derived from the therapeutic domain can be of benefit to social scientists and those that they research.

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The shift from writing as a method of recording to writing as a method of inquiry is closely linked to the spread of post-structuralist and post-modernist thought across the social sciences during the 1980s and 1990s. Within post-structuralist theory, language is understood to operate productively rather than mimetically. Thus, language is central to the social construction of social realities, including the "realities" we come to (partially) know through our research and writing. Once language is reconceived as a productive force, writing emerges as consequential activity. Writing is simultaneously ontological and epistemological: in RICHARD-SON's words (2000, p.923), we "word the world" into being in the same moment as we come to know that world (see also DAVIES et al., 2004; ESGALHADO, 2002; KING, 2002; SOMERS, 1994). Thus how we, as social scientists, write is critical both to the kinds of realities that are constructed and known, as well as to how we relate to that reality. [4]

The new attentiveness given to the role of writing within research has prompted RICHARDSON, ELLIS, BOCHNER and DENZIN (amongst others) to experiment with writing forms (e.g. poems, diaries, multi-layered texts, dramas and other performance techniques) as well as writing subjects. Of significance for my purposes is their use of the autobiographical genre, a genre which has grown in popularity over the last 10-20 years, in part, because of feminist interest in personal experiences (JOLLY, 2005).[2] Although the terms used to refer to work within this genre have proliferated—for example, *critical autobiographies*, *personal narratives*, *first-person accounts, evocative narratives, reflexive ethnographies,* etc.—ELLIS and BOCHNER (2000, p.740) suggest that *autoethnography* has become the term of choice for academic work that links the personal to the cultural. In spite of the emergence of autoethnography as an umbrella term, ELLIS and BOCHNER acknowledge that, "[a]utoethnographers vary in their emphasis on the research process (graphy), on culture (ethnos), and on self (auto). Different exemplars of autoethnography fall at different places along the continuum of each of these axes" (2000, p.740). [5]

Primarily written for sociological purposes, authors of personal narratives often acknowledge a therapeutic side-effect to their work (see for example, BOCHNER, 2001; ELLIS, 1997, 1999; ELLIS & BOCHNER, 2000; FLEMONS & GREEN, 2002; KIESINGER, 2002; RICHARDSON, 1994a, 1997, 2000; also COFFEY, 2002). Speaking back to those within the social sciences who deride this form of scholarship, Art BOCHNER says,

> "[p]ersonal narrative is part of the human, existential struggle to move life forward. … I get impatient with writers who belittle or diminish the therapeutic consequences of stories. They tend to draw a hard-and-fast distinction between therapy and social research, implying that narratives are useful only insofar as they advance

2 As Liz STANLEY and others argue (e.g. ELLIS, 1999, 2004; KRIEGER, 1991), the self that we come to know through writing is not an isolated individual but a self embedded in a socio-cultural world. Thus, "there is no need to individualise, to de-socialise, 'the individual', because from one person we can recover social process and social structure, networks, social change and so forth, for people are located in a social and cultural environment which constructs and shapes not only *what* we see but also *how* we see it" (STANLEY 1993, p.45; emphasis in the original).

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> sociological, anthropological or psychological theory. For these critics, narrative threatens the whole project of science. … A text that functions as an agent of self-discovery or self-creation, for the author as well as for those who read and engage the text, is only threatening under a narrow definition of social inquiry, one that eschews a social science with a moral center and a heart. Why should caring and empathy be secondary to controlling and knowing? Why must academics be conditioned to believe that a text is important only to the extent it moves beyond the merely personal?" (In ELLIS & BOCHNER, 2000, p.746) [6]

Despite the growing awareness amongst social scientists of the therapeutic power of autobiographical writings, writing remains an under-utilized research technique. At present, its use in the social sciences—and, therefore, its benefits—is largely confined to those sociologists who choose to write personally; participants are rarely granted a similar opportunity. However, the therapeutic power of writing should make it an attractive method of inquiry for researchers, like me, who are or want to be, investigating what it means for people to have been subjected to potentially harmful experiences (for example, interpersonal violence). While therapeutic outcomes may not be our primary aim as researchers it is, nevertheless, reassuring to know that the methods we use for interacting with research participants may have beneficial consequences (see for example, ORTIZ, 2001). An additional attraction of writing as method, especially for feminist researchers, lies with its potential to contribute to productive change—individually through the research process and socially through our research products. [7]

It is now time to explore how writing is being talked about and used in the therapeutic domain. As part of this exploration I consider some of the reasons behind writing's apparent appeal and efficacy. Having undertaken this background work, I move to specifically discuss how writing might be used as a method of sociological inquiry across several different research fields with which I am currently involved, namely, academic researcher identities and childhood experiences of corporal punishment. That participant writing may have utility across such different domains is, I would argue, indicative of its potential to have a broad reach. [8]

2. Writing as Therapy

> *It's better out than in* is a saying often heard; there are ducts other than tears. (BOLTON, 1999, p.122; emphasis in the original)

Generally speaking writing therapy refers to "client expressive or reflective writing, whether self-generated or suggested by a therapist/researcher" (WRIGHT & CHUNG, 2001, p.279; WRIGHT, 2004, p.8; see also RIORDAN, 1996). Like talking therapy, therapeutic writing is a process that is intended to assist a client's movement towards psychosocial well-being. Since the early 1990s there has been a resurgence of interest in writing as a therapeutic technique that, following WRIGHT (2004; WRIGHT & CHUNG, 2001), can be attributed to three features of the contemporary therapeutic landscape: namely,

the general rise of creative art therapies of which writing is a part (e.g., BOLTON, 1998, 1999, 2001, 2003, 2004; DESALVO, 1999; THOMPSON, 2004); the development of narrative or discursive therapies (BIRD, 2000; MCLEOD, 1997; O'GRADY, 2005; PAYNE, 2000; SPEEDY, 2004, 2005); and the seminal work of social psychologist James PENNEBAKER and colleagues on expressive writing (PENNEBAKER, 1990, 1993; PENNEBAKER & SEAGAL, 1997; see also KING, 2002; LEPORE & SMYTH, 2002; LUTGENDORF & ULLRICH, 2002; SMYTH, STONE, HUREWITZ & KAEL, 1999; SMYTH, TRUE & SOUTO, 2001; SMYTH & GREENBERG, 2000; SMYTH & HELM, 2003). [9]

In most therapeutic uses of writing clients are encouraged to engage in the Freudian inspired practice of free-writing: in free-writing writers simply allow the writing hand to record whatever comes to mind without pause for second thoughts, or concern for correct spelling, punctuation or grammar (BOLTON, 1998, p.35). As a technique, then, free-writing is thought to overcome the silencing effects of what is often called the "inner-critic" or "censor" (BOLTON, 1998). Freed from the constraining effects of the "inner-critic," free-writing has been likened to "dropping a bucket into the well of the mind [and] pulling it up dripping to see what is there" (BOLTON, 1999, p.120; see also BOLTON, 1998, p.24).[3] [10]

Unsurprisingly, then, free-writing forms the basis of the suggestions for writing within the expressive writing experiments initiated by PENNEBAKER and colleagues (PENNEBAKER, 1990, 1993; PENNEBAKER & SEAGAL, 1999; see also KING, 2002; LEPORE & SMYTH, 2002; LUTGENDORF & ULLRICH, 2002; SMYTH et al., 1999; SMYTH et al., 2001; SMYTH & GREENBERG, 2000; SMYTH & HELM, 2003). For example, students who participated in the experimental group in one of PENNEBAKER's first expressive writing experiments were given the following instructions:

> "For the next four days, I would like for you to write about your very deepest thoughts and feelings about the most traumatic experiences of your entire life. In your writing, I'd 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 the same general issues or experiences on all days of writing or on different traumas each day. All your writing will be completely confidential" (PENNEBAKER & SEAGAL, 1999, p.1244). [11]

The control group of students was similarly instructed to write freely but on such mundane matters as their plans for the day. To PENNEBAKER's surprise, the middle-upper class students participating in the experimental group wrote candidly about, "a painful array of tragic and depressing stories. Rape, family violence, suicide attempts, drug problems and other horrors were common topics.

3 Although, following RICHARDSON and in contrast with BOLTON, I would want to temper this analogy by placing greater emphasis on the inscriptive quality of such writings, an inscription that takes the form that it does as a consequence of the social and historical context within which the writing occurs.

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Indeed, approximately half of the people wrote about experiences that any clinician would agree was truly traumatic" (PENNEBAKER & SEAGAL, 1999, p.1245). [12]

Just as significantly, at least for PENNEBAKER's purposes, the experimental writers were healthier—as measured, in his first experiments, by visits to the doctor—than the control writers in the months after their participation in the experiment. [13]

Following on from the success of PENNEBAKER's early research, expressive writing experiments have been conducted with a wide range of people, in a variety of life situations: psychiatric prisoners (RICHARDS, BEAL, SEAGAL & PENNEBAKER, 2000), professional men recently laid off from engineering jobs (SPERA, BUHRFEIND & PENNEBAKER, 1994), women with breast cancer (STANTON et al., 2002), people suffering from asthma and arthritis (SMYTH et al., 1999). In each case, the experimental group is asked to write about a life-stressor, while the control group is asked to write about ordinary, everyday matters. Almost invariably participants write openly about the stressful situations they are confronting or have confronted (see, for example, the Appendices to SMYTH & GREENBERG, 2000). And almost invariably a significant proportion of the experimental group is found to have improved mental and physical health. Indeed, in the area of mental health, there is some indication that expressive writing can offer comparable therapeutic outcomes to talking with a therapist or counselor (PENNEBAKER, 1993; SMYTH & GREENBERG, 2000).[4] [14]

2.1 The self-revelatory character of personal writing

How might we explain the apparent candidness of PENNEBAKER's expressive writers? To answer this question it seems important to consider, first, the social and cultural context within which the invitation to write about personal narratives occurs and, second, the social context of the expressive writing exercises. As numerous authors have pointed out, the late 20th and early 21st century has seen a veritable explosion of psychotherapeutic practices across a wide variety of domains—from clinical settings, to judicial bodies that foreground mediation between disputants, as well as public and private social welfare agencies, and even television talk shows—motivating some to dub the age within which we live a "therapy culture" (FUREDI, 2003; MOSKOWITZ, 2001; see also BESLEY, 2005; GIDDENS, 1991; LEMERT & ELLIOTT, 2006; MCLEOD, 1997; ROSE, 1990, 1996). Indeed, the cultural pervasiveness of therapy-styled practices means that qualitative interviews on personal matters may be experienced as akin to a therapeutic encounter, prompting participants to be self-revelatory and self-reflexive in a manner similar to PENNEBAKER's expressive writers (BIRCH & MILLER, 2000; ORTIZ, 2001; see also COTTERILL, 1992). [15]

4 The utility of expressive writing across a wide range of social groups has been confirmed by SMYTH's (1998) meta-analysis of expressive writing studies which indicates the efficacy of such exercises across differences of age, educational attainment, class and culture (cited SMYTH & GREENBERG, 2000; see also PENNEBAKER, 1993; WRIGHT, 1999). However, some doubt remains over the efficacy of expressive writing with people who are suffering from severe emotional or mental disorders (PENNEBAKER, 1993; SMYTH & GREENBERG, 2000).

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One of the key features of a therapy culture is the widespread use of a confessional mode of representation, a mode that incites and requires individuals to speak about and reflect on their, sometimes hitherto silenced, experiences and inner-most feelings. Although making the confessor vulnerable to the judgments of those who hear the confessor's story[5] (ALCOFF & GRAY, 1993; FOUCAULT, 1978; ROSE, 1990, 1996), confessional practices have also been cast as both personally redemptive (in that they permit the cathartic release of pent-up feelings and the reflexive reconstruction of the self) and socially transformative (in that they challenge society to acknowledge and do something about the prevalence of the ills described by confessor) (ALCOFF & GRAY, 1993; BESLEY, 2005; GIDDENS, 1991; MCLEOD, 1997; ORTIZ, 2001).[6] [16]

Indeed, one of the areas in which personal, revelatory speech has been adopted with much alacrity is the feminist, anti-violence movement where disclosing personal experiences of violence, abuse and trauma has been advocated as a strategy of personal and collective empowerment (ALCOFF & GRAY, 1993; HEBERLE, 1996). As a consequence of feminist activism, amongst other social phenomena, it has become commonplace, if not obligatory, to speak out about traumatic events in one's life, should the opportunity arise (ALCOFF & GRAY, 1993).[7] The invitation extended by PENNEBAKER and colleagues to write about traumatic experiences clearly counts as such an opportunity. It is, therefore, hardly surprising that most of the participants in PENNEBAKER's experimental groups took advantage of this opportunity to bear their souls. [17]

No doubt participants' willingness to disclose highly personal matters was enhanced by the (a) social context within which their "confessional" acts took place; the participants in PENNEBAKER's experiments wrote in a solitary space, and were granted anonymity and confidentiality. Such a context minimizes social interactions: the absence of someone who listens, even a listener as supposedly trustworthy as a therapist or researcher, protects the speaker/confessor from a range of undesirable consequences, including a number of unpleasant emotions (e.g., anxiety, embarrassment, humiliation, rejection).[8] For many people the

5 While social science interviews are seldom likened to a confession, the recognition of the way in which researchers can exercise power over research participants has been at the root of a great many methodological discussions over the last twenty years (for a couple of recent example from this literature see, RILEY, SCHOUTEN & CAHILL, 2003; TOM & HERBERT, 2002).

6 According to BONDI (2003) one of the problems with many of the social critiques of therapeutic practices is that they privilege a separate and autonomous self rather than a relationally produced self. Yet, as BONDI argues, if we abandon the notion of the self as a separate entity in favor of an understanding of the self as always enmeshed relationally then confessional practices cease to be as problematic because these practices become one of the key social sites affording the construction of our-selves within a different and hopefully more enriching relational milieu.

7 Actually, many argue that putting trauma into some kind of narrative is imperative to resolving the traumatic event (BRISON, 2001; BOLTON, 1998; ETHERINGTON, 2003, 2005; HERMAN, 1997; PENNEBAKER, 1990; PENNEBAKER & SEAGAL, 1999; ROTHSCHILD, 2000). Others, however, argue that an in-depth re-examination of past traumas is unnecessary and may even be harmful (BONANNO & KALTMAN, 2000; KING, 2002).

8 Arguably, the absence of a listener, who may be attentive and empathetic, has its downsides too. For example, the possibility that people will receive reassurance is diminished, as is the possibility that they might move beyond the standard or stock-stories that they tell (KEHILY, 1995; see also BRISON, 2001).

specter of these unpleasant feelings is enough to prompt them to watch and even limit what they say and how they say it (ALCOFF & GRAY, 1993; BOLTON, 1998, 1999, 2003; FOUCAULT, 1978). In other words, self-surveillance is often a feature of speaking during a conversation, while self-castigation or self-recrimination is not uncommon afterwards (BOLTON, 2001, 2003; O'GRADY, 2005). [18]

Reflecting on her reluctance to speak about her traumatic childhood experiences, BOLTON contrasts what she sees as the perils of speaking with the virtues of writing:

> "I realised that writing was private, that the paper would not snarl at me, frown at me, burst into tears or be horrified. I could say what I liked, and unsay it, or say the opposite if I liked. There was always a danger in speaking to or being with a person, especially if they knew things. … A piece of paper and pencil were safe enough. I'd had little experience of safety" (BOLTON, 2003, p.128). [19]

BOLTON's comments arise out of her personal writings, writings that she was under no obligation to share with another. Yet, in most instances we write with at least some concept of an audience, even if this audience is strictly limited as happens in expressive writing experiments. Understandably, writing—fluency, content and style—is affected by the nature of the audience as well as our relationship to that audience (BOLTON, 1999; CONNOLLY BAKER & MAZZA, 2004; HJORTSHOJ, 2001; HUNT, 2004). Writing is more likely to be self-revelatory when the audience has not been conferred with powers of evaluation (CONNOLLY BAKER & MAZZA, 2004; HJORTSHOJ, 2001) or is unable to "name and shame" the writer, either because the writer is unknown to the audience or because the writer, although known, has been guaranteed anonymity (CONNOLLY BAKER & MAZZA, 2004). When writing is conducted under these circumstances it may be thought of as a much safer practice than speech (BOLTON 1998, 1999, 2001, 2003), a perception that undoubtedly encourages writers to give expression to highly personal matters. [20]

The notion that writing is a safe practice may be somewhat overstated, however. Writing also has its risks (a point to which I will return shortly).[9] For one thing, writing fixes words—and, hence, constructions of selves and others—on paper. Thus, the stories we record in writing may be harder to undo than the stories we commit to speech. After all, words spoken in the absence of some means of recording are subject to the vagaries of recall, whereas words written down can be re-materialized—by the writer, a friendly associate or even foe—as an incontrovertible reminder of a story told and possibly long forgotten or now regretted:

> "Reflexive writing can be passionate and emotional. It can be writing in which the mind, heart, and body are all engaged. Yet once the words are out there in the world,

9 The notion that writing can be a risky practice for the writer means that researchers using this as a method will, like researchers using the more conventional interview, need to develop ways of working with participants that minimize these risks.

> objects themselves of reflexion by others as well as ourselves, they can become weapons to turn against us" (DAVIES et al., 2004, p.383). [21]

Furthermore, the fixed nature of the "worlds we word" into existence through storying either in writing or through talk, can

> "make suffering real and objectify it. What people may have defined as fleeting and unreal now becomes fixed and real. A story locks experience in time and catches it in social space and meaning. Thus by giving voice to suffering, people make it theirs. Not everyone wishes that" (CHARMAZ, 2002, p.310). [22]

2.2 Writing beyond trauma

Writing, like speaking, may be dangerous or risky in another way too. In writing (or talking) about their suffering people might be brought perilously close to troubling memories that may have the capacity to re-traumatize them (BONANNO & KALTMAN, 2000; DESALVO, 1999; CONNOLLY BAKER & MAZZA, 2004; ROTHSCHILD, 2000). Re-traumatization is indicative of what SCHEFF calls "underdistancing" (1979, cited SMYTH & GREENBERG, 2000, p.127; see also MCLEOD, 1997), an emotional response to recollecting past traumas that leaves the person feeling overwhelmed and helpless all over again. The ideal—optimal distancing—occurs when people re-experience trauma-related affects in a "context of present safety" (SCHEFF, 1979, cited SMYTH & GREENBERG 2000, p.127; see also MCLEOD, 1997). According to SCHEFF, a context of safety means that the feelings of distress brought about through the recollection of traumatic events are balanced by a sense of reassurance and wellbeing that enables the person to process their feelings. Under these circumstances SCHEFF believed the outcome would be catharsis: a sense of relief and renewed enthusiasm for life (SMYTH & GREENBERG, 2000; see also PENNEBAKER, 1990; PENNEBAKER & SEAGAL, 1999). [23]

Clearly, given the importance that HERMAN (1997) also attaches to safety in "healing" trauma, a great deal rides on the achievement of a safe environment. While a non-evaluative audience in conjunction with guarantees of confidentiality and anonymity go some way to providing a context of emotional safety, other measures also seem important if re-traumatization and other unbearable emotional experiences are to be avoided. For instance, DESALVO (1999) warns against engaging in expressive writing in the midst of a crisis or a period characterized by intense emotions. Additionally, the pace at which one engages in the process of recollection and writing may well be pivotal to preventing re-traumatization (ROTHSCHILD, 2000). In this regard, writing in small bursts, interspersed by time spent on absorbing activities or recollecting people and places associated with psychic well-being, seems advisable (ROTHSCHILD, 2000). Further, the work of BONANNO and KALTMAN (2000) suggests that rather than attempting to recall the often elusive memories of traumatic events, those who have had such experiences are better off engaging in a process of narrative revision that "allows the traumatized individual to accept the occurrence of the traumatic event as something that, however, unfortunate, has actually

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happened but is over and is now in the past" (BONANNO & KALTMAN 2000, p.191; see also CONNOLLY BAKER & MAZZA, 2004; HERMAN, 1997).[10] [24]

No doubt PENNEBAKER would concur with BONANNO and KALTMAN's conclusions. PENNEBAKER's analysis of the writing features most strongly associated with enhanced psychological and physiological health indicates that it is important for people to form a coherent narrative out of their experiences (PENNEBAKER & SEAGAL, 1999; see also BOLTON, 1998; BOOTH & PETRIE, 2002; CONNOLLY BAKER & MAZZA, 2004; DESALVO, 1999; KING, 2002; SMYTH et al., 2001). In particular, PENNEBAKER found that the people whose storying contained a high rate of what he called emotional processing words (e.g., "sad," "hurt," "guilt," "joy," "peace"), insight words (e.g., "realize," "understood," "thought," "know") and causal words (e.g., "because," "reason." "why") showed the greatest benefits from the expressive writing exercises (PENNEBAKER & SEAGAL, 1999; see also LUTGENDORF & ULLRICH, 2002). On the basis of these findings, PENNEBAKER has concluded that some meaning-making processes are better than others if the maximum benefit from writing is to be obtained. [25]

Given differences in language usage across differences of class, ethnicity and gender, PENNEBAKER's finding raises the possibility that the beneficial effects of writing will be unevenly distributed amongst participants. To some extent, this fear has been allayed by the meta-analysis SMYTH conducted (1998, cited SMYTH & GREENBERG, 2000). The results of SMYTH's study suggest that differences in age, educational attainment and class have minimal effects on the efficacy of expressive writing. However, somewhat surprisingly, the psychological and physiological benefits of expressive writing were stronger for men than for women (SMYTH & GREENBERG, 2000). And, as SMYTH notes, the effect of ethnicity could not be ascertained because of the small numbers of non-white people who have participated in expressive writing experiments to date. [26]

When reviewing the utility of expressive writing, one of the things that appears to underpin its efficacy is the agency of the writer. According to Peggy PENN, writing is in-and-of-itself an act of agency: "… when we write we are no longer being done to; *we are doing*" (2001, p.50, emphasis in the original; see also CONNOLLY BAKER & MAZZA, 2004). If nothing else, what writers are doing in the moment of writing is declaring that they and the stories they record on paper matter (PENN, 2001; see also DAIUTE & BUTEAU, 2002). In other words, writing is an act that furnishes the writer with agency in the present even if, paradoxically, the contents of the writing point to the writer's lack of agency in the

10 In BOOTH and PETRIE's (2002) sophisticated account the process of accepting and making sense of events through storying generates a sense of psychosocial peace. This causes a significant shift in the overall self-identity of the individual which is matched by a change in the person's biophysical self. In turn, changes in an individual's biophysical self leads to an improved capacity to discriminate between what they refer to as self (i.e., cells and tissues) and nonself (i.e., viruses, bacteria and cancer cells) components. According to BOOTH and PETRIE, the enhanced discriminatory capacity enables the biophysical self to respond appropriately to these "self-nonself" components by accepting the self and attacking the nonself (2002, 169). Unfortunately, it is beyond the scope of this article to consider BOOTH and PETRIE's analysis in any detail.

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past. The process of putting words on paper, however, assists in putting past and present selves in dialogue with each other. As such, writing personal stories paves the way for what PARKER (1991, cited CROSSLEY, 2000; see also DAVIES et al., 2004; GIDDENS, 1991, ONYX & SMALL, 2001) indicates is the basic element of human agency, self-reflexivity. According to DAVIES et al. (2004) 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" (DAVIES et al., 2004, p.380). [27]

Put more simply, the capacity to be self-reflexive, to turn language on itself, enables people to re-work their biographical narratives (GIDDENS, 1991), a process that also lies at the heart of therapy (MCLEOD, 1997). [28]

The capacity for self-reflexivity may be critical in moving beyond the tendency amongst people recounting traumatic experiences to construct these experiences in highly determinate ways. That people narrate traumatic experiences as if such experiences both determine and circumscribe their present and future agency should come as no surprise: a discourse of determinacy has become culturally dominant (BECKER-BLEASE & FREYD, 2005; REAVEY & BROWN, 2006) and buoyed by dominant constructions of human development (GREENE, 2003) and many branches of psychotherapy as well. However, when a discourse of determinacy is utilized to construct stories about traumatic experiences it facilitates the attribution of what REAVEY and BROWN (2006, p.182) refer to as a hyper-dichotomized version of agency—"I didn't have any then and I don't have any now." Stories about traumatic experiences that speak to the narrator's lack of agency usually arise out of simplified and condensed accounts of the past (REAVEY & BROWN, 2006) that typically mask other aspects of the person's lived experience of trauma that denote their resistance to their violation (REAVEY & BROWN, 2006; WADE, 1997). [29]

Writing tasks that bring these neglected aspects of lived experience to the fore may well enable writers to re-narrate their lives in more life-enhancing ways (KIESINGER, 2002; MCLEOD, 1997; O'GRADY, 2004). WADE (1997) describes one way in which narrative reframing can occur so that the author's agency—past and present—is more apparent: shift the narrator's focus from the effects of violent trauma to the narrator's responses to the violence, both then and now. KING (2002) offers another possibility through which narrators might re-position themselves in more agentic ways: she and MINER (2000, cited KING, 2002) invited research participants to explore the positive aspects of a traumatic experience through writing abut how they had changed or grown as a person as a result of that experience (KING 2002, p.126). Both WADE and KING's suggestions provide touchstones for how to create writing exercises about traumatic experiences that diminish, but do not necessarily exclude, the possibility that

writing about these experiences will result in re-traumatization. As such WADE and KING's insights are worth keeping in mind as I turn my attention to thinking about how free-writing might be used to further sociological inquiry. [30]

3. Implications for Social Science Inquiry

The above discussion of expressive writing suggests that researchers and the researched have much to gain from writing as a method of social science inquiry, albeit with some provisos (see previous section). At this juncture in the article, I want to give flesh to some of the possibilities afforded by writing, locating them within two areas of current research interest, namely, academic-researcher identities and the violence of corporal punishment. While my discussion around academic-researcher identities is grounded in the actual use of writing as part of pilot study for focus group work, my discussion in relation to corporal punishment will be speculative, mapping out an approach to research that I plan to take in the near future. [31]

Recently a colleague and I experimented with the use of free-writing to address the question of how academics understand the identity of the academic researcher. During a focus group with approximately 15 female colleagues (mostly from the social sciences and the humanities), participants were asked to free-write in response to the following question: When you say to yourself "I am a researcher" how do you feel, what do you think, and what assumptions do you make? Participants wrote, it seemed rather feverishly, for just over 10 minutes. This was followed by an animated discussion between the participants about the meanings they associated with being an academic researcher and the ways in which they either felt included or excluded from this construct. [32]

Unsurprisingly, given the constraints on time, the pieces that the focus group participants wrote were relatively short, varying from just over a hundred words to just under three hundred. Looking over these writings now I am struck by their poetic richness, as well as their complexity. Indeed, the poetic richness of these writings inspired me to turn to the poetic form as a mode of representation (ELIZABETH, 2006; see for other examples GLESNE, 1997; RICHARDSON, 2000, 2002b). Despite the brevity of their writings, participants were able to engage with a range of ways academic research is defined, to consider how they conformed to or otherwise departed from that definition, and to ponder how they felt about their positions as researchers. In the writings of our participants research emerged as a pleasurable activity, something that challenged and excited them, but also something that was fraught and frustrating. For instance one participant wrote the following:

> "I feel mixed because I enjoy the challenge of it—the extensions of knowledge, and networks that I gain and the accumulation of paper, articles, documents etcetera. I think of having to do justice to my participants' words but also now there is real pressure to do research and greater expectation and it is now seen I think as a commodity but something that can bring external money so I guess I feel resentment

> in this new meaning the spirit of it has changed for me so I feel pressured in a way in a way I never used to" (Social Scientist 2). [33]

As this comments suggests, the focus-group participants attributed the challenges and frustrations of doing and being researchers either to aspects of the institutional context in which they as researchers were located or to their interactions with others. Thus their writings point to the socially situated character of research and the researcher identity; research is bound by obligations that variously constrain and enable researchers. Some of the obligations mentioned by the participants are in tension with each other. For example, researchers are obliged to write and publish, yet this obligation is often experienced as one that sits uneasily with commitments to teach; this in spite of an emphasis on research-led teaching. However, the obligation to teach forms a critical part of the conditions of their employment and is thus critical to being able to do research. Others wrote eloquently about the tensions that arise out of their obligations to their research participants on the one hand and to meeting publishing criteria on the other. For example:

> "I love new projects; the excitement and privilege of talking with others about their lives. That is mostly what my research consists of—voyeur, an observer of their struggles. Having a vicarious life—one that I don't want but that is central to my discipline. I am a bearer of secrets, the asides when the tape is off. The many culled comments that lie on the cutting room floor. I feel the agony and injustice of discarding people's less interesting lives or unexpected lives. They don't make the squeezed output of 5-6000 words extrusions into the public/published world" (Social Scientist 1). [34]

The frustrations that many of our other participants wrote about were similarly social in origin, indicating the dependency researchers have on others, generally senior colleagues, for recognition. Thus, it would seem that it is not enough to *do* research to *be* a researcher. Being a researcher requires the possession of appropriate symbols: a doctorate, a coherent research program, and publications:

> "My first reaction is that I am an impostor saying that because I don't feel sorted in knowing the ropes and haven't published much. Then I feel that I am a researcher because I do some research" (Humanities 2). [35]

However, as this participant went on to write about, gaining the time needed to do research is often denied to academics who do not possess the recognized signifiers of a researcher identity, for example, a doctorate or publications. [36]

Given the small number of our focus group participants and their gendered specificity, these findings are clearly provisional. Yet the quality of the writing that was generated in response to our question indicates it is a method worthy of more widespread use. Free-writing, as a method of data collection, enabled this group of academic researchers to reflexively consider what it meant for them to do research and be researchers. In the process of their free-writing, our participants constructed research as a particular kind of activity, constructed

themselves as particular kinds of researchers, and reflected on the significance of these constructions in relation to a changing institutional context. Put more simply, this group of academic women used free-writing to engage in an internal dialogue over the nature of academic research. Such dialogues form a starting point from which to re-work our self-narratives (GIDDENS, 1991), in this case, the self-narratives associated with research. By facilitating the re-working of self-narratives, free-writing contributes to one of the key goals of feminist research—productive change—albeit at the level of individual subjectivities. [37]

The pieces of free-writing produced by these women were frank and forthright, whilst also being rich and nuanced. In part these qualities might be attributable, as discussed in the preceding section, to the non-interactive nature of free-writing (although clearly the skill of our free-writers is pertinent too). In free-writing the primary purpose, in contrast with an interview or focus-group discussion, is to explicate ourselves and our situations to ourselves and to reflect on this explication. We do so with a much more limited, though not entirely absent, sense of our audience (see HUNT, 2004). Or, to put this slightly differently, free-writing as a method of generating research data is less subject to the mediating effects of the interviewer or focus group participants. [38]

This feature of free-writing has several noteworthy methodological consequences. First, the responses that free-writing participants produce in relation to the researcher's question are controlled by the writer alone; free-writers are not influenced by another's interjections or their looks of surprise, puzzlement or amusement etcetera. Instead, the flow and links made through free-writing are the result of the creative interplay between free-writers and the discourses that are available to them; the writing contains the writer's lines of flight (DELEUZE & PARNET 1977/1987 cited RICHARDSON & ST. PIERRE, 2005, p.967). As a result, free-writing provides researchers with access to the unique, partial and situated perspectives of our participants; we gain insight into the discourses that circulate in their social milieu and the way in which these vie for our participants' subjectivities. Second, free-writing gives participants an opportunity to reflect on "private" dimensions of their lives without fear of another's reaction. The personal safety afforded by free-writing enables participants to self-disclose in a manner that is often thwarted by the dynamics of focus groups in particular. In other words, free-writing is a method through which our participants might have a "voice." Third, and somewhat relatedly, data collected through free-writing is not punctuated by moments of self-consciousness or exchanges that seek to establish if one is being understood correctly. There is thus a streamlined quality to free-writing data (see above and below) that makes it highly amenable to conventional forms of analysis and representation, as well as "creative analytical practices" (RICHARDSON & ST. PIERRE, 2005, p.962; see also ELIZABETH, 2006). [39]

These claims are borne out in the examples of free-writing generated during our focus group with academic researchers. The free-writing appears to be highly self-revelatory; our participants looked inwards to write about academic research in highly personal terms, whilst also commenting on the institutional contexts

within which they operated. Thus, we read about experiences of pressure, feelings of excitement, enjoyment, resentment, anxiety and so on in relation to various aspects of the research process. Such sentiments are expressed in a highly compressed form without the hesitancies that mark speech. It seems unlikely that the kind of personal revelations contained in our sample of free-writing would have been produced within a typical focus-group setting comprised of acquaintances or strangers (though similar kinds of comments have been forthcoming in the one-to-one interviews we have conducted as part of the same project; more on this in a moment). In our experience, free-writing in conjunction with a focus group discussion enabled us to collect the private musings of our participants, as well as to record their interactions afterwards. Significantly, the interactive dialogues of our participants were clearly informed by their writings, but did not reproduce them exactly. In the focus-group discussion our participants tended to foreground the intellectual dimensions of what it means to be an academic researcher, rather than the emotions they experienced in relation to this role. Hence, the combination of free-writing and focus group discussion led to the collection of a rich data set that contains our participants' reflexive engagements with a variety of discourses on academic research, as well as their personal reflections on the significance of these discursive constructions for them. [40]

Clearly collecting data in this manner is epistemologically significant. However, the way social scientists assess this significance will be dependent on their epistemological allegiances. For qualitative social scientists of a more positivist bent free-writing might be used, especially when part of a process of triangulation, to increase the validity of one's findings. For qualitative social scientists influenced by post-modernism and post-structuralism, free writing contributes to crystallization—an appreciation of a complex, multi-dimensional and unstable world (RICHARDSON & ST. PIERRE, 2005, p.963). For such social scientists (and I largely place myself amongst them), free-writing as a method gains its value from its capacity to: reflect lived experience and generate credible insights; enable the production of aesthetic research texts; and foster reflexivity amongst participants and researchers alike (RICHARDSON & ST. PIERRE, 2005). [41]

The content of free-writing and one-to-one interviews, as mentioned above, can be quite similar, perhaps because interviews are also perceived as relatively safe and because they also invite participants to engage in self-disclosure. Certainly, the one-to-one interviews my colleague and I have conducted as part of our research on academic researcher identities have yielded similar responses from our participants: in the interviews our participants have also spoken about their sources of pleasure and angst in relation to research. Yet note, if you will, the difference in tone as well as content between, first, a piece of free-writing and, second, a segment from an interview with participants in the project on academic identity:

> *Humanities 3:* I think of the intellectual life, and of how lucky I am to be able to pursue interests which have little impact on the world and people's welfare in comparison to

> research in medical science. At the same time, the label researcher gives kudos to the profession of an academic or intellectual, and is another way of describing an 'intellectual worker'. Which is to say that I can only do research through having a job which obliges me to teach. So being a 'researcher', in the present climate, isn't as 'no strings attached' as it sounds. As a researcher in the [humanities] I feel part of a larger conversation which is fascinating and attractive to me. At times I feel anxious about my own voice—can I hold my own? Contribute anything original? But the magic about research is that you can follow your own instinct about what is worth exploring, and creating more written discourse about.
>
> *Interviewer:* You have talked about the pleasures of writing and research. What other things about research give you pleasure, that keep you wanting to do it?
>
> *Humanities 4: …* It [writing] is creative, its *um*, its very satisfying and what's frustrating is when the things aren't coming out and *you know* you kind of feel like you're working on things and they're not *um*, there's not an end (mm) I guess but *um* which is why I'm not really that keen to write a book because I don't want to go back into that stage but at the moment producing, *you know* working on articles, sending them off feels good and now accepting (laughing) It's, yeah writing is, is difficult work but its creative *you know* (mm) and its really, it's a really big part of why its good. (mm) Yeah and then there's the side of it that *um* that does feel like, sometimes it feels like you're part of a conversation (mm) *you know* which is the reading, critiquing, responding (mm) through writing and that's a big part of it too. I like *um*, I like that curious thing of being in conversation with another's mind. I mean it sounds kind of old fashioned but it is almost that. [42]

During the free-writing and the interview both participants construct themselves as curious academic subjects, subjects who are in conversation with other academic subjects. As such both forms of collecting research data afford insights into the subjectivity of the researcher and how it is discursively constructed. Nevertheless there are differences between the two sources of data that warrant attention. The interview text is punctuated at frequent intervals by "you knows" and "ums" which fragment the flow of the interviewee's comments and contribute to its tentative quality. In addition, this segment of interview text is less concerned with feelings and when feelings are spoken about they are less intense than those mentioned by the free-writer. This might indicate that data collected through interviews tends not to be able to capture the intangible dimensions of our lives—our emotions, imagination and memories—as well as free-writing. Of course, differences in the expression of emotions may simply reflect differences between individual participants rather than differences in methods. Nevertheless, the possibility that free-writing is a better method for gaining access to the intangible dimensions of our lives warrants further investigation. [43]

No doubt further use of the free-writing method will contribute to the clarification of these issues. It is partly for this reason, but also because the outcomes of our initial use of this method have been so fruitful, that I intend to diversify my use of free-writing. In particular, I have in mind its potential to explore childhood experiences of corporal punishment. My interest in this topic is an outgrowth of research that I have undertaken in the broader area of violence within familial

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relationships over the last few years (ELIZABETH, 2003, 2004a, 2004b, 2005a, 2005b). As I give thought to how I might gather accounts of childhood experiences of corporal punishment, writing seems an eminently suitable approach to take; childhood experiences of corporal punishment can, like other forms of personal violation, be traumatic; although it is important to remember that corporal punishment is not automatically so. The question that arises, then, is how might free-writing be suitably deployed so as to avoid, as much as possible, re-traumatization? To answer this question I want to take a lead from SMYTH et al. (2001), WADE (1997) and KING (2002). [44]

In a recent adaptation of PENNEBAKER's research, SMYTH et al. (2001) showed that participants gained the most from writing about past traumas when they engaged in multiple writing sessions and were encouraged to construct a story rather than simply produce disconnected statements. Bearing this finding in mind, it seems advisable to fashion a study of corporal punishment that is based on three writing sessions, of around 30 minutes each, spaced over fortnightly intervals. During the first writing session participants would be asked to use free-writing to create a story, in third person, based on their experiences of corporal punishment. Writing in third person has been linked to the creation of emotional distance (ONYX & SMALL, 2001). Hence, its use in this context would assist in the generation of an emotionally safe environment within which participants might recollect past experiences that may be emotionally laden for them with minimal risk of re-traumatization. This writing session would be followed by a de-briefing interview that would invite participants to speak about a connection they have had with person, place or animal that is associated with feelings of safety and well-being (ROTHSCHILD, 2000). According to ROTHSCHILD (2000), anchoring people in such experiences is an important way of protecting people from disintegrating in the face of past wounds. The second session would draw on WADE (1997) and encourage participants to write about how they responded to their parents' use of corporal punishment: What steps did they take to protect themselves from punishment and/or delimit its effects? For the third and final session participants would be invited to reflect on the ways they might have "benefited' from their experiences of corporal punishment (KING & MINDER, 2000, cited KING, 2002). While the focus of this writing session may prove difficult and challenging for some, KING's work suggests that the opportunity to begin reframing the past through an optimistic lens is highly beneficial, leading to improved levels of self-efficacy. Once again, the writing session on the last day would be followed by an interview providing participants with the opportunity to add extra material and to comment on the research process. To enhance participants' sense of safety and control all of writings produced through these exercises would be returned for editing and even destruction if participants wished. Participants would, of course, be guaranteed anonymity and confidentiality. [45]

For potential participants writing as a research method has the advantage of providing them with an opportunity to narrate their experiences in their own terms—an important element in overcoming possibly traumatic experiences—and, in the second and third writing sessions, to construct themselves as agentic figures

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in relation to those experiences. In addition, the findings from the research of PENNEBAKER and others suggest that a likely by-product of the use of writing as a research method is enhanced levels of physical and psychological well-being. For the social scientist, the benefits of writing as a method lies in its capacity to generate rich and insightful data for analysis on potentially stressful experiences, whilst simultaneously mitigating some of the harmful emotional consequences often associated with such research. Indeed, as my review of the literature indicates, both researcher and participant can reasonably expect the use of writing as a research method to be therapeutic in the best senses of the word. [46]

Of course, researchers might also make use of free-writing to not only collect data from their participants, but to generate their own data in relation to their research projects. Most social scientists are familiar with writing fieldnotes as an extra source of research data. Increasingly, fieldnotes are the repository of the researcher's reflexive engagements with the researched and the research project; researchers use fieldnotes to record and ponder their shifting positionalities in relation to the research question, the fieldwork data and so on. As a reflexive tool free-writing has much to offer, enabling researchers to record, without initially censoring, their thoughts and feelings as the project unfolds over time. When using free-writing to construct fieldnotes researchers might consider following Elizabeth ST. PIERRE (RICHARDSON & ST. PIERRE, 2005, p.970) who broadens the scope of what is worthy of textualizing to include our emotions, dreams, and embodied responses to our research. All these become available to the researcher as data that can, like more conventional forms of data, powerfully contribute to our understandings (see for example, HONAN, 2007). [47]

4. Conclusion

In this article I have made a case for participant writing as a research method that might usefully supplement already existing techniques. To date, free-writing has largely been overlooked as a means of gaining access to people's life-worlds. Yet, as I have demonstrated, participant writing has much to recommend it, not the least because of its potential to produce therapeutic effects in the lives of those who participate in our research. Free-writing is a relatively safe mechanism for generating self-reflexive accounts in relation to both ordinary and troubling dimensions of our lives. The method also allows social scientists to diversify the manner in which they engage with research participants, the kind of material they collect and, hence, the kinds of research accounts they might produce (see for example, ELIZABETH, 2006). In recommending free-writing, I am not claiming that it should be epistemologically privileged over other methods—I do not imagine that participant writing will replace talking—but I am suggesting that free-writing is a "viable way to learn about ourselves and [our] research topic' (RICHARDSON & ST. PIERRE, 2005, p.959). As such, participant writing deserves to become another string to our bow. [48]

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