Canadian Journal of Counselling and Psychotherapy /
Revue canadienne de counseling et de psychothérapie
ISSN 0826-3893 Vol. 54 No. 3 © 2020 Pages 430–450

Storying the Past, Creating the Future: Hope and Narrative Openness in a Writing Group for Older Women
Mettre en récit le passé, créer le futur : espoir et ouverture narrative au sein d'un groupe d'écriture conçu pour les femmes plus âgées

Kelly J. Mills
University of Saskatchewan
Jennifer J. Nicol
University of Saskatchewan
M. Shaun Murphy
University of Saskatchewan

ABSTRACT
Studies on the therapeutic impacts of writing and sharing stories in older adulthood have focused on groups facilitated by professionals. The present inquiry sought to investigate the experiences of older women in a grassroots, community-based writing group. Participants were three women writers aged 79 years and older. Their experiences with their group were encountered using a narrative inquiry approach that involved semi-structured interviews, writing samples, and field notes. The women's practice of writing and sharing stories with female peers was understood to enhance their hopefulness for the future and their sense of agency. This inquiry extends research on creativity and well-being in older adulthood, emphasizing the therapeutic implications of older adults leading their creative practices in group settings.

RÉSUMÉ
Les études sur les effets thérapeutiques de l'écriture et du partage d'histoires chez les adultes plus âgés se sont centrées sur des groupes animés par des professionnels. Cette étude-ci tenta d'examiner les expériences de femmes plus âgées au sein d'un groupe d'écriture local et communautaire. Les participantes étaient trois femmes écrivaines âgées de 79 ans et plus. La relation de leurs expériences au sein du groupe s'effectua par le biais d'une enquête narrative comportant des entrevues semi-structurées, des exemples de textes et des notes prises sur le vif. Il semble que chez ces femmes, la pratique de l'écriture et le partage d'histoires avec d'autres femmes ont permis d'améliorer leur espoir en l'avenir et leur sentiment de pouvoir agir. Cette enquête s'inscrit dans le prolongement de la recherche sur la créativité et le mieux-être chez les aînés, en soulignant les implications thérapeutiques chez les adultes âgés qui prennent en main leurs pratiques créatives au sein de groupes.

The word *therapy* is derived from the Greek word *therapeia*, which means to heal. In Greek mythology, the god of poetry fathered the god of healing, suggesting a meaningful connection between creative expression and health (Longo, n.d.). The practice of reflecting on and writing about personal experiences has been associated with various benefits to individuals' mental health and well-being (Baikie & Wilhelm, 2005). Individuals aging into older adulthood may be drawn to writing as a leisure activity, given the accumulation of their lived experiences. At the same time, older adults' sense of hope can be threatened during the aging process (Erikson & Erikson, 1997). Still, research suggests that both social contact (Moraitou et al., 2006) and opportunities for creative expression (Cadrin, 2006) are associated with enhanced feelings of hope.

Research on creativity and community in older adulthood is vast and continually expanding. Still, only a small number of studies has focused on writing groups as meaningful sites for older adults. Such studies have described the therapeutic aspects of older writers' participation, including reduced symptoms of depression (Chippendale & Bear-Lehman, 2012), but the literature on writing groups for older adults is focused mostly on professionally facilitated groups rather than grassroots circles. Furthermore, findings are often centred on researcher interpretation rather than on participants' expressions of meaning. Finally, few studies examine writing groups for older women specifically. Exploring how older women experience the process of writing and sharing life stories, in a grassroots, community-based setting, may provide counsellors and other helping professionals with a more sensitive understanding of self-directed creativity and its implications for well-being in older adulthood.

Therapeutic Potential of Writing and of Writing Groups

Creative expression has been deemed an essential human need and a means through which individuals may overcome personal challenges (Furman et al., 2002). Expressive writing has been proposed to facilitate various positive changes in mental health. For example, writing has been associated with reduced symptoms of depression (Graf et al., 2008). Other benefits such as stress reduction have been summarized in some reviews (e.g., Baikie & Wilhelm, 2005; Sloan & Marx, 2004). However, much of the research on this subject has used Pennebaker and Beall's (1986) paradigm, involving the quantitative measurement of different dimensions of mental health after participants are asked to write about a prescribed topic (often past traumatic experiences) for a specified period. Far less research has sought to understand the experience of spontaneous, self-directed writing in non-experimental settings. Researchers have often chosen to control the writing process rather than to study how people experience writing in the absence of prompts or schedules.

When people share writing in group settings and interact as writing peers, they not only transform lived experiences into stories but also have others bear witness to those stories. Thus, the benefits to mental health may expand to include feelings of social connection (France, 1984) and a sense of universality within a group (Adkins et al., 1985). In the context of a writing group, group members may interact both verbally and non-verbally to convey reactions to one another's stories. For example, members may comment on or critique one another's stories, show appreciation through clapping, or signal attention through silence and body language.

Although these interactions may be highly meaningful to group members, researchers have tended to use their judgment in appraising and describing such interactions. Sluder (1990) reported that individuals belonging to a writing group enjoyed positive responses to their readings but did not explore members' enjoyment in depth. Similarly, Koch (1977) noted that, in a writing group situated in a nursing home, the act of reading poems out loud "was important for the students' pleasure" (p. 39) but did not engage the writers in articulating what reading meant to them. Overall, studies on writing and on writing groups have privileged a high degree of researcher involvement, both by assigning specific writing conditions to participants and by neglecting to explore fully how individuals experience the process of writing and sharing stories with others.

Writing Groups for Older Adults

Older adults, defined as persons over the age of 65 (Ng et al., 2014), may be particularly drawn to the practice of autobiographical writing, considering the accumulation of their life experiences. In many communities, writing programs tailored to older adults specifically have been developed and implemented. As Manheimer (2001) wrote, "for decades, older persons' life history writing has been promoted through classes and workshops designed to enhance self-development and promote self-esteem" (p. 276). Self-perceptions may be an especially important aspect of mental health as people age into older adulthood.

In addition to the physical transitions of aging, Gullette (2004) proposed that older adults must often contend with oppressive social narratives that totalize aging as a process of diminishment and decline. According to such narratives, older adults have little reason to hope for even the maintenance of their quality of life, let alone the possibility of personal growth as the years pass. These narratives may oppress women in particular as their perceived social significance often is tethered to their physical appearance (Twigg, 2004). Thus, as women's bodies inevitably become less youthful, their traditional source of power is undermined (Sontag, 1998).

Hope, defined as an "enduring belief in the attainability of wishes" (Moraitou et al., 2006, p. 73), has been correlated positively with self-care (Irving et al.,

1998), physical health (Pedersen et al., 2009), and motivation to sustain meaningful relationships (Joiner & Rudd, 1996). If we consider loss-oriented views of aging and the significance of hope to individuals' well-being, then the therapeutic potential of writing for older adults becomes an issue worthy of exploration. Indeed, the literature on writing groups for older adults has noted positive changes in writers' perceptions of themselves and of their lives.

In Malde's (1988) study, writers completed a structured autobiography course that included specific writing prompts. The participants demonstrated significant positive changes in self-reported views of themselves and their past, present, and future. Participants remarked on new perceptions related to greater self-worth as a result of reviewing their lives and sharing their stories with the group. Sluder (1990) integrated poetry writing into a geriatric mental health program, using props such as Easter eggs to stimulate participants' creativity. She spoke about poetry as a way for participants to share emotions while maintaining a sense of control over that sharing. Researchers have discussed other benefits to older adults who belong to writing groups, including a reinforced sense of purpose (Getzel, 1984; Schuster, 1998) and reduced depressive symptoms (Chippendale & Bear-Lehman, 2012; Supiano et al., 1989).

Reminiscence has been defined as the process of recalling episodes from one's life (Bluck & Levine, 1998), either introspectively or out loud, as a form of "oral reminiscence" (Campbell, 1984). Prompted engagement in reminiscence has been associated with various benefits to older adults' well-being (Bohlmeijer, 2007). Recollecting is a necessary task within the autobiographical writing process and may account partly for the positive impacts of writing noted in many studies. Importantly, research has indicated that reminiscence combined with writing is associated with higher measures of late-life adjustment in older adults when compared with reminiscence alone (Sherman, 1995). Campbell (1984) offered one perspective on the unique impact of writing when he argued that "through writing … the writers select from their experience in a more conscious fashion than they would during oral reminiscence and thus recreate their own identities" (p. 139).

As previously discussed, the literature on writing and on writing groups tends to investigate writing as a prescribed intervention, one that privileges researchers' interpretations of participants' experience. This pattern is prevalent in studies on older adult writing groups as well. Many studies on this topic have examined groups devised and facilitated by researchers (Chippendale & Bear-Lehman, 2012; Saunders, 2005; Stevens-Ratchford, 1993) or by professionals such as continuing care staff (Kelly & Mosher-Ashley, 2002; Sluder, 1990) or counsellors (Supiano et al., 1989).

Literature that has offered guidance to the facilitators of writing groups for older adults has, of course, also focused on facilitator-led groups (Birren & Deutchman, 1991; Kazemek, 1997, 1999; Koch, 1977; Smith, 1982). Although Nora (2008) asked older adults to design their writing group and participants

were given licence to choose their meeting times, writing topics, and so forth, she did approach participants with the idea for the group. Instead, Nora positioned herself as the group facilitator. Thus, it seems that researchers interested in the experiences of members of writing groups for older adults have focused primarily on groups administered to rather than formed and sustained by older adults.

Grassroots and Feminist Perspectives

The question of how professional guidance shapes the creative process underpins a long-standing debate in the field of expressive art therapy (Slayton et al., 2010). Some believe that creative practices such as writing can serve a therapeutic purpose only when mediated by a trained professional. In contrast, others think that the creative process can be "therapeutic in itself, regardless of the specificity of therapeutic intent" (Maddalena, 2009, p. 223). Weiser (2004) proposed that professionally guided "art-in-therapy" and self-directed "art-as-therapy" can be imagined as two poles of a continuum along which all arts-based healing activities would be situated (p. 31).

In the present inquiry, the term *grassroots* describes endeavours that proceed without professional expertise. The positioning of participants in professionally facilitated versus grassroots writing groups may be rather different. For example, in a facilitated group, writers may be required to follow a predetermined order of writing topics (e.g., Bowers & Buchanan, 2007; Larsen et al., 2003). In grassroots groups, where individuals create their writing practice fluidly, writers may identify as artists rather than as recipients of treatment. The issue of how group members perceive their role in the group may relate to their sense of connection with the group. Indeed, having the opportunity to see themselves as writers or as poets rather than as patients or customers can affect individuals' decisions to join writing groups (Howells & Zelnik, 2009).

The term *grassroots* can be used to describe not only the level of professional involvement in the group but also the generation of research findings. A grassroots approach that would elevate older writers' voices has been largely neglected in research on writing groups. Studies of older adult writing groups have often assessed impact through quantitative measurement (e.g., Chippendale & Bear-Lehman, 2012; Stevens-Ratchford, 1993), or researcher observation that integrates few participant quotes (e.g., Kelly & Mosher-Ashley, 2002; Saunders, 2005). The irony of this trend is that writing groups are often construed as avenues for self-expression, providing individuals with an opportunity to be seen and heard.

The literature on older adult writing groups may be enriched by both a grassroots perspective and a feminist perspective as participants' gender may also influence how they experience the process of writing and sharing stories. The act of writing has been framed as a feminist tool for women, given the suggestion

that it engages women in active self-definition (McLaren, 2002). Women's relationships with autobiographical writing have shifted over time. In the Victorian period, a woman writing about her personal experiences was likely judged for transgressions of self-involvement (Heilbrun, 1999), unless those writings were restricted to the privacy of a diary (Beattie, 2007). The female point of view was devalued, both when voiced and when written.

The pressure put on women to refrain from self-expression is not a relic of the past, unfortunately. In their study, Farrell et al. (2000) reported on the experiences of women between 70 and 85 years of age who took part in a creative writing workshop. The authors noted how the participants were initially resistant to writing stories focused on their own experiences, discussing later the ways in which "women of their generation had been actively discouraged from talking about themselves" (p. 86). Heilbrun (1999) noted that as women move away from the peripheries of stories to assume the role of the protagonist, they cease to be "appendages" (p. 27) and become fully human.

Although some studies have focused on the creative writing group as a meaningful site for older adults, few studies have examined grassroots groups that proceed without the guidance of facilitators. Furthermore, the literature on the writing of older adults tends to favour researchers' interpretations and seldom includes a feminist perspective.

The present inquiry sought to address these gaps by exploring the experiences of three older women who belonged to a grassroots writing group, based in a local community centre. The primary question guiding the inquiry was "What is it like to write, share writing with others, and sustain a writing community as an older woman?"

Method

The methodology known as narrative inquiry (Connelly & Clandinin, 2006) was employed in the present study. Narrative inquiry seeks to understand individuals and their experiences through the stories they tell and aims to investigate human experience from a distinctly holistic perspective (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990). The study was conducted in a mid-sized Western Canadian city, and ethics approval was obtained from the behavioural research ethics board of the affiliated university. Three older women who belonged to a community-based writing group were invited to participate in this research based on their fulfillment of four criteria: (a) willingness to spend a minimum of four hours in interviews, with additional time for reviewing transcripts, (b) group membership for at least one year, (c) attendance of at least six group meetings, and (d) English-speaking.

The women's experiences were encountered through interviews, writing samples, and group observations. Each woman participated in four semi-structured, audio-recorded interviews and was asked to select two pieces of writing to be read

at a time of her choosing during the interview process. The first interviews established how each woman had come to join the group and how she had engaged in writing throughout her life.

In contrast, subsequent interviews explored the meaningfulness of participants' experiences with writing and sharing stories. Over the seven months in which the interviews were held, the primary researcher also attended and observed the writing group's monthly meetings. These observations were sometimes used to invite discussion during interviews. Together, the verbatim interview transcripts, participants' written stories, and observation field notes formed the field texts from which final research texts were generated. Field text analysis was an iterative process, guided by a narrative view of the experience that underpins the methodology of narrative inquiry (Connelly & Clandinin, 2006). This process is described in further detail in the full study (Mills, 2018).

Narrative researchers acknowledge that findings are shaped inevitably by the relationships formed between researchers and participants in the inquiry process. The researcher enters in multiple dialogues with participants and over time they co-construct knowledge (Ponterotto, 2005). Thus, the distinction between the present study and many other studies concerning writing is not necessarily a lesser degree of researcher subjectivity but a greater inclusion of participant subjectivity throughout the research process. As Fraser (2004) noted, narrative inquiry "subdue[s] the [researcher's] inclination to posture as an expert" (p. 181).

Interviews were semi-structured to create space for participants to guide the conversation. After each interview, participants received interview summaries and were invited to voice any preferred changes, to discuss misunderstandings, or to generate new areas of exploration. Participants were also included in the interpretative stage between interviews and the final research text. The researchers recursively examined interview transcripts and writing samples to trace narrative threads across the participants' experiences. Full-text drafts of findings were emailed to all participants and their commentary was encouraged. Finally, a large portion of the final research text was allocated to direct quotes from participants. The findings are thus rooted in the lived experiences of older adult writers themselves, as conveyed in their voices and validated through their review.

Findings

The Writers

Three older women—identified by the pseudonyms Margaret, Helen, and Josephine—participated in the present inquiry. The women belonged to a community-based creative writing group of women over the age of 60. Group members met once a month to share autobiographical writing. The women wrote stories about experiences from across their lifespans, from recollections of early

childhood to the present day. Meetings did not include any writing instruction, and there were no expectations for members to exchange critique.

Margaret

Margaret was 79 years old at the time of her first interview. She had worked as a nurse for much of her life and had raised five children. After her husband passed away, Margaret joined a bereavement support group. While there, she learned that a group of senior writers met in the same building once a month. She soon joined and had belonged to the group for about four years when the present inquiry began. Margaret was particularly interested in the historical significance of personal writing and viewed the group's stories as important artifacts that preserved the past. Accordingly, Margaret's writing was rich in historical detail. She often wrote about times spent with her family, recounting birthday parties, camping trips, and other fondly cherished scenes.

Helen

Helen was 83 years old at the time of her first interview. Like Margaret, Helen had also raised five children and had worked in a government administrative role for many years. She retired at the age of 62 and started taking seniors' classes at her local university. When enrolled in a writing course, she was referred by her teacher to the writing group as an opportunity to continue sharing stories after the term's end. Helen joined soon after, and at the time of this inquiry, her years of membership tallied to over two decades. Helen enjoyed welcoming new members to the group and could often be found encouraging members to help themselves to coffee in the minutes before a meeting started. Helen's writing conveyed her sincere appreciation for her family, the natural world, and her faith beliefs.

Josephine

Josephine was 88 years old at the time of her first interview. In her younger years, she had been an English teacher. Eventually, she stepped away from this role to raise four children of her own, but her love of the written word never diminished. A friend who knew of Josephine's writing impulse recommended the writing group to her. She had been a steady member of the group for 13 years when the present inquiry began. Josephine expressed a life-long love for stories with independent heroines like *Anne of Green Gables* (Montgomery, 1908/1970) and *Little Women* (Alcott, 1868–1869/2004). While most of the writing group members wrote prose only, Josephine was inclined to write both prose and poetry. Her writing voice veered often into playfulness, especially in the rhyming stories she wrote for her grandchildren.

Hope Emerging

In "Rhetoric," Aristotle (350/1924) wrote that people of older age "live by memory rather than by hope; for what is left to them of life is but little as compared with the long past; and hope is of the future, memory of the past" (p. 86). In his proposition, Aristotle opposed memory with hope, suggesting that to look back on life signals a lack of hope for what remains. He presumed that older adults dwell on the past because their futures are "but little."

Throughout this narrative inquiry, older women who belonged to a community-based writing group conveyed how memory and hope were far from mutually exclusive in their lives. The writers challenged Aristotle's simplification, demonstrating that the process of gathering to recall, to write, and to share the past served as a steady source of hope in their lives.

Specifically, three forms of hope seemed to emerge in the women's accounts of their writing group. First, belonging to the group helped women recover memories, giving them hope for the further discovery of their pasts. Second, group meetings reminded women of their capacity to "read" their lives and still to find stories to be written, providing hope for the writers' continued artistic generativity. Third, group membership led women to consider and envision how they would share their stories within and outside the group, cultivating members' hope that their writings would have a lasting impact beyond themselves.

The Hope of Recovering the Past

Memories Returning

When Margaret, Helen, and Josephine attended their writing group meetings, they had the opportunity to read their pieces of writing and to listen to the stories of fellow members. Members were not required to bring pieces of writing to every meeting, and none of the women referenced feeling pressured to bring new stories each month. Because meetings involved multiple women taking turns to read, even the most regular contributors spent the bulk of each meeting's time listening to others' stories in silence. All three participants expressed that listening to stories often prompted them to recall related scenes from their own lives and, in this way, the group served as a catalyst for recollecting memories. Margaret described common reactions to readings:

> People often say, "Oh, I remember that" or "Oh, I remember doing exactly the same thing when I was young," so I think you kind of feed off of each other in that sense. Something someone else says will twig another memory. (Interview 1, July 2016)

Indeed, in the meetings that were observed, it was noted that readings would often end to resounding choruses of "I'd forgotten all about that!" When Helen shared a piece entitled "Tribute to Brother" with the group, she referred to a

particular farm chore that had been the duty of other members in their childhood years: "We worked on the land together. I remember picking stones using the horses and stone boat as well" (Interview 1, July 2016). Sometimes, initial remembrances could bring forth related memories, as Margaret noted: "when I thought of the train wreck then I also wrote about another train accident that had happened, and some incidents around the train and what it meant to the community" (Interview 3, October 2016). This kind of memory triggering has been documented in other groups in which older adults are prompted to share memories (Wadensten & Hägglund, 2006).

Sharing and Revelling in the Past

Both Helen and Margaret remarked that the high degree to which group members shared life experiences contributed to the triggering effect. All three participants grew up in small farming communities in the southern part of their province, all had been mothers to at least four children, and all were close in age. Speaking of fellow members, Helen said, "We find there's something in their stories that is so familiar" (Interview 1, July 2016). For example, Josephine described how one member's story about her mother's "wash day" rippled through the women's minds as they listened to its reading, reminding them of their own mothers' laundry habits. She explained how the story brought "very vivid memories that you hadn't explored for years" to the women's minds (Interview 3, November 2016). Margaret shared that sometimes memories that "you don't even know are there" would return to the group members as they sat and listened to stories being read (Interview 2, September 2016).

For Helen, being triggered to remember details of the past was important because, as she expressed, "you forget a lot of things, you know, like it just goes, it just goes 'whoosh' [hand gesture] … I'm so thankful for [the group] because a lot of things come back to you that you'd forget otherwise" (Interview 4, February 2017). In sharing one memory, Josephine emphasized how gratifying and meaningful the act of reminiscence could be:

> I remember it was a beautiful day … We were sort of following a tiny little river, and there was a green starfish, just a tiny little emerald green starfish, and it was so absolutely beautiful and beyond anything I'd ever seen … and [I remember] thinking, "You know, this is an absolutely perfect moment. I have the three people I love the most in the world here with me, and this gorgeous little creature, and the sun shining, and nobody's sick, and the temperature's warm, and all our tummies are full, and we're all happy." And life is made up of all those moments, right? (Interview 3, November 2016)

Although the writing group was highly predictable concerning structure—meetings were held at the same building on the second Saturday of every month

for years on end—what the women came to experience and recall in the group was far from predictable. Merely by attending group meetings and listening to others read their stories, the women had opportunities to recover further images, sensations, and impressions of their own. Randall and McKim (2008) described the vast, complex, and crowded repository of a person's memories as a "thicket of the past" (p. 148). Group meetings invited women to journey back through these thickets, and each member's reading was imbued with possibility and hope for those listening.

The Hope of More Stories

Turning Life Into Stories

As the women attended meetings and heard other members' stories, they were often inspired to work on new pieces of writing. The writers seemed to be inspired in two distinct ways. First, as they reconnected with their past experiences, through the memory triggering they described, their recovered memories became raw material from which writing could be crafted. As Margaret noted, "Sharing with the group is definitely appealing to other people's memories … They often have another story then to tell" (Interview 1, July 2016). Coming to group meetings and being surrounded by stories stimulated Helen's creativity as well. As she explained,

> I think sharing is wonderful because it brings memories back to you that you remember, and then you can remember to write your story and have that included in it … I know this one lady … her whole life sounded a lot like my life, you know. She went skating at night and all these things … it brought back a whole flood of memories. And that's good because then you think, "Oh, I can write that down in my life story." (Interview 1, July 2016)

Secondly, the writing group helped the women not only to recall more stories from their respective pasts but also to "see" more stories in the present. The group meetings seemed to endow women with more attention to the stories embedded in the fabric of their daily lives. Helen discussed being inspired by one member in particular: "Every little thing was an experience [to her] … Just walking across the street she'd run into somebody, maybe somebody asking her for money or something, but she could get a story out of it" (Interview 2, September 2016). As she listened to the other members' stories, Helen gained a new sense of the stories "waiting" in her life: "I'd just get excited about things and think, 'Oh this, this would make a good story'" (Interview 2, September 2016).

Josephine explained that when she heard the different subjects the women wrote about, she also gained writing inspiration. The group gave her "new ideas that you can kind of piggyback on" (Interview 3, November 2016). The mutual inspiration that the women discussed has emerged in other research on writing

circles. In Thornton and Collins's (2010) study, a writing group helped one person see that "there was a lot more happening in my life than I imagined" (p. 35). In one interview, Josephine shared a poem she had written about her summer cottage that demonstrated how even seemingly mundane subjects like cleaning could have stories built around them. Josephine rhymed:

> Must clean the fridge, must drain the pump, must take my garbage to the dump,
> Must stow the board, tip the canoe; there are a lot of chores to do …
> Must pull the drapes, must lock the door, must leave here for one winter more
> But when the geese return next year, God willing, lake chums, I'll be here. (Interview 4, November 2016)

Not only did the women experiment with writing about a wide range of subjects, imbued with varying emotional tones, but also, they employed different narrative strategies such as flashbacks and flashforwards to create new representations of experience. In a prose piece entitled "A Bright Red Rose," Margaret used temporal movement to convey the significance of her relationship with a childhood neighbour:

> It was the most exciting day of our summer social life when we dressed in our Sunday best for Dada Rhodes's garden party … Now, over 60 years later, as we walked quietly through the old house, tears streamed down my cheeks. (Interview 3, October 2016)

New Ideas Every Day

The writing group nurtured Margaret, Helen, and Josephine's hope for the continuation of their writing practice. In each meeting, the women were reminded that their lived experiences were indeed stories—formerly private sensations and impressions that could be narrated, artfully shaped, and shared. The group reminded the women of their capacity to continue "reading" their lives for stories waiting to be written, showing members the inexhaustibility of their storytelling potential. Helen conveyed her hopefulness with her belief that "there's lots of stories that still need to be told" (Interview 2, September 2016), and Margaret expressed that she did not know whether she would ever feel ready to stop writing stories. Margaret touched on the tension between her intent to finalize her body of writing and her enduring desire to write:

> Eventually, I want to pass these stories along … and I'd probably have to attempt to put them in somewhat chronological order … I've got to decide when enough is enough, you know, because there's a new idea pops into your head every day. So, I was saying that to somebody that was there, and they said:

> "Well, there's nothing preventing you from writing a sequel!" (Interview 4, November 2016)

The Hope to "Leave Tracks"

The women's writing practice, though often prompted and inspired by group meetings, took place outside the group circle. Women brought some of their stories to the group, reading them aloud when they felt their work was ready. Some stories were not shared beyond the meetings, while others were intended for further circulation to loved ones or even to wider audiences. Margaret, Helen, and Josephine all looked forward to the possibility that at least some of their stories would have an impact beyond themselves and the group. They envisioned different possible readers, including family members, archivists, and future generations generally. Josephine suggested that members of the writing group all wanted to create stories that would withstand time's passing: "There's a very common thread in the group … I think we all want to leave tracks" (Interview 1, August 2016).

Windows to the Past

The women all discussed passing on pieces of their writing to their families. Helen explained that her family was, in fact, at the heart of her writing practice: "You have to hope that you can do stories for your children. To me, that, I guess, is really what I want" (Interview 2, September 2016). One of the appeals of passing writing on was the idea that stories could serve as windows to the past, giving younger family members a richer understanding of the women's lives. Josephine related, "Things have changed so much since we were young and I don't think children or grandchildren have any idea of how we lived" (Interview 2, September 2016).

The stories the women shared in their interviews contained details that illustrated the powerful effects of time. In Helen's piece entitled "Going Back Home," she described her childhood hometown as it was in the past and as it is now: "The landscape had changed so much that I was not sure just which road I should take … The two-room school I attended is gone and replaced with a larger facility … That's the way life goes—nothing ever stands still" (Interview 3, October 2016). In Margaret's story about a much-loved neighbour, she recounted how he had built his own home from the ground up: "[He] harvested the plentiful growth of stones from his property to build this beautiful two-storey stone house" (Interview 3, October 2016). Margaret emphasized the way that stories could inform her family members of a very different—but not too distant—past:

> There has just been such a tremendous change from my time of being their age to [now] … Ordinarily, they wouldn't think about what it would be like to not have power, to not have communication tools that they have, to not have water

without melting the snow for it. It just sort of comes as a surprise, I think, like, "My goodness, you're alive now and in that ice age." (Interview 1, July 2016)

Windows to the Person

Beyond providing knowledge of how the women lived, stories could also communicate deeper insights about who the women were. Josephine expressed that every person only has "a certain window of opportunity" to know their family members (Interview 2, September 2016). She felt that she had missed the opportunity to know her grandmother, and this regret fuelled her writing: "I didn't get to know my grandmother … I would have given a lot to have seen something she wrote … That's one reason I think I want to write, because I felt deprived" (Interview 1, August 2016). Some of the women thought that their stories, particularly those of the far past, may be valued beyond their families and appreciated for their historical significance. This wider audience was one that Margaret sometimes held in mind as she wrote stories: "You think of history as being some big historical happening in a country … but really history is every day, everybody is part of history … There's some historical value in people's personal happenings" (Interview 4, November 2016).

Randall (2012) wrote that aging "increases our desire to influence the generations that follow, by passing on our wisdom, our legacy, our stories to those we leave behind" (p. 177). People may use a range of creative media such as songwriting (Cadrin, 2006) or photography (Bolton, 2008) to express their legacies to loved ones, in a process generally referred to as "legacy work" (Cadrin, 2006, p. 111). For the women of the writing group, prose and poetry seemed to be the preferred tools of their legacy work. Participating in the writing group provided the women with the opportunity to exert some control over how they might live on even after death and in this way seemed to give them a greater sense of permanence and hope.

Discussion

Margaret, Helen, and Josephine's writing group reminded them continually that they still had more of their lives to remember, to write, to live, and to share. As they gathered to share stories once a month then parted to write about more of their experiences, it seems they gained a sense of moving forward both in their creative endeavours and in their lives. Their writing group gave them a sense of a future in which they could recover memories they had forgotten, maintain their ability to write stories, and persist in the lives of others through their writing. In short, the women of the group were prompted to see their memories as further knowable, their lives as further writable, and themselves as further endurable. Their practice gave them hope not only that they would continue as writers but also that the content of their future is unknown. They did not know what they

might be triggered to remember in group meetings, what kind of stories they might yet still write, or who might treasure their writing in the years to come.

Hope and Narrative Openness in the Writing Group

The women's hope to continue remembering, writing, and sharing their lives may be considered a form of "narrative openness" (Randall, 2013). Narrative openness describes the perspective that a person's life story—the internalized understanding a person has of their life's course and identity—is not already determined but is still imbued with possibilities for "deepening and expanding" (Randall, 2012, p. 177). The opposite of narrative openness—narrative foreclosure—has been defined as the belief that a person's life story is already determined in advance. Thus, life has effectively ended, although the person is still alive (Freeman, 2010).

Randall (2012) explained that in a state of narrative foreclosure, "life itself is hardly over, but in our hearts, our story might as well be" (p. 174), and Freeman (2010) noted that from this perspective, "there is little left to do but play out the pre-scripted ending" (p. 126). In addition to a lack of hope for the future, a person in this foreclosed state also has no hope that the past might be re-examined and reinterpreted. Older adults may be more prone to feeling narratively foreclosed because social expectations of later adulthood are often shaded by ideas of stasis and decline rather than by progression (Bohlmeijer et al., 2011).

Gullette (2004) expanded on the notion that culture ages individuals just as powerfully as biology ages bodies by arguing that marketing directed at older people perpetuates stereotypes of decline, spreading fear about the changes to health, lifestyle, and independence that age is suggested to bring inevitably. Social discourses that fuse aging with decline challenge narrative openness, implying that older adults cannot move toward richer, more deeply realized lives. This master narrative is particularly constraining for aging women, whose changes in appearance are judged as undesirable and associated with personal failure and loss of power (Twigg, 2004).

The present inquiry suggests that writing groups might be therapeutically significant in the lives of older adults because the writing and sharing process promotes narrative openness while challenging narrative foreclosure. As the women regained memories in group meetings and reviewed their lives in the writing process, they were able to encounter themselves in new ways. Randall (2013) stated that "as we view and review the past, as we read and re-read it," our understanding of who we are continues to evolve (p. 14). A participant in another study on writing groups noted that "it's in the telling that I rewrite my story" (Thornton & Collins, 2010, p. 31).

When fellow group members inspired the women to write and share more stories, they envisioned future ventures in self-discovery and self-expression. Overall, Margaret, Helen, and Josephine's group was understood to enhance their sense

of being active and capable artists, poised to create and to share many more as yet unknown life stories. Thus, their continued participation in the group was one means through which they maintained narrative openness. Randall (2013) suggested that narrative openness provides individuals with resiliency, particularly in later life. Where there is still a sense of possibility and self-determination, individuals are better able to cope with difficult events and unexpected setbacks.

Implications for Counsellors

Given the narrative foreclosure that may be imposed upon and internalized by individuals as they age, counsellors must be aware of how certain spaces might promote older adults' hope for a life still open to possibility. As Snyder (2002) argued, hope is not the happy expectation that a person's goals will be met but the belief that a person can and will be able to shape the future, through effort rather than luck or reliance on others. In this definition, hope is predicated on a sense of agency. An individual must feel capable of marshalling the necessary resources and mustering the desire required to achieve goals to feel truly hopeful. Throughout the present inquiry, the writing group came to be understood as a site of agency. With its non-hierarchical structure, the group prompted women to share leadership and to take an active role in guiding their writing practice. Thus, Margaret, Helen, and Josephine wrote stories of their lives with paper and pen, but figuratively, they also wrote stories of themselves as active and engaged artists, continuing to shape futures of possibility by attending the writing group, composing stories, and sharing themselves with others.

Overall, these findings encourage professionals who work with older adults to honour the power of writing and sharing stories. Although writing about one's life may seem to be a simple task—one that does not rely on specialized knowledge or skill—this study demonstrates that writing can have profound implications for an individual's sense of hope. Honouring the power of writing groups, in this context, means having a curiosity about how clients may be engaged already in writing and sharing stories outside of the therapeutic domain, recognizing writing and writing groups as psychological resources in clients' lives, and considering which clients may benefit from referrals to writing groups in the community. The present findings suggest that referrals may be particularly beneficial for older adults who present with a sense of hopelessness for the future.

The present inquiry also challenges certain ideas professionals may have held about the therapeutic aspects of writing. One such idea may be that writing can be so self-scrutinizing and revelatory that the process unfolds best under the supervision of a professional (perhaps one with training in expressive art therapies). Connected to this idea is the notion that writing groups should use specific, empirically validated prompts and exercises to effect therapeutic change (e.g., Larsen et al., 2003). Professionals who hold these ideas might consider it reckless to refer clients to groups as unstructured and under-researched as the

writing group presented in this inquiry. Recent research seems more focused on how writing about hardships or past traumas can be impactful (van Emmerik et al., 2013) at the expense of exploring the potential of lighter writing, such as the childhood vignettes shared in Margaret, Helen, and Josephine's group. This trend in the research may bias professionals toward seeing writing as a healing balm, to be reserved for the traumatized, rather than as a growth-oriented praxis that could benefit any older adult.

Conclusion

In summary, Margaret, Helen, and Josephine's experiences challenge rigid ideas about what differentiates writing therapy from writing for enjoyment. They demonstrate that the sharing of stories does not have to take place in a therapy group or in a support group to have a therapeutic bearing. Sharing writing in more casual group settings positions writers as artists choosing to communicate life rather than as patients trying to cope with life. The findings presented here indicate that writing is not only an intervention to be prescribed but also a pleasurable everyday activity—therapeutic not because it is administered or engineered to be so, but simply because it is.

References

Adkins, B. J., Taber, J. I., & Russo, A. M. (1985). The spoken autobiography: A powerful tool in group psychotherapy. *Social Work*, *30*(5), 435–439. https://doi.org/10.1093/sw/30.5.435

Alcott, L. M. (2004). *Little Women* (A. K. Phillips and G. Eiselein, Eds.). W. W. Norton and Company. (Original work published 1868–1869)

Aristotle. (1924). *Rhetoric* (W. R. Roberts, Trans.). Clarendon Press. (Original work published 350 BCE)

Baikie, K. A., & Wilhelm, K. (2005). Emotional and physical health benefits of expressive writing. *Advances in Psychiatric Treatment*, *11*(5), 338–346. https://doi.org/10.1192/apt.11.5.338

Beattie, H. R. (2007). *"The texture of the everyday": Appraising the values of women's diaries and weblogs* (UMI MR36295) [Master's thesis, University of Manitoba]. ProQuest Dissertations & Theses.

Birren, J. E., & Deutchman, D. E. (1991). *Guiding autobiography groups for older adults: Exploring the fabric of life*. Johns Hopkins University Press.

Bluck, S., & Levine, L. J. (1998). Reminiscence as autobiographical memory: A catalyst for reminiscence theory development. *Ageing and Society*, *18*(2), 185–208. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0144686X98006862

Bohlmeijer, E. T. (2007). *Reminiscence and depression in later life* [Unpublished doctoral dissertation]. Vrije Universiteit.

Bohlmeijer, E. T., Westerhof, G. J., Randall, W., Tromp, T., & Kenyon, G. (2011). Narrative foreclosure in later life: Preliminary considerations for a new sensitizing concept. *Journal of Aging Studies*, *25*(4), 364–370. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jaging.2011.01.003

Bolton, G. (Ed.). (2008). *Dying, bereavement and the healing arts*. Jessica Kingsley Publishers.

Bowers, M. J., & Buchanan, M. J. (2007). A group-based program of emotional recovery for younger women following myocardial infarction. *Canadian Journal of Counselling and Psychotherapy*, *41*(2), 77–90. https://cjc-rcc.ucalgary.ca/article/view/58810

Cadrin, M. L. (2006). Music therapy legacy work in palliative care: Creating meaning at end of life. *Canadian Journal of Music Therapy*, *12*(1), 109–137.

Campbell, R. (1984). The aging experience as reflected in creative writing. In S. F. Spicker & S. R. Ingman (Eds.), *Vitalizing long-term care: The teaching nursing home and other perspectives* (pp. 128–156). Springer Publishing Company.

Chippendale, T., & Bear-Lehman, J. (2012). Effect of life review writing on depressive symptoms in older adults: A randomized controlled trial. *American Journal of Occupational Therapy*, *66*(4), 438–446. https://doi.org/10.5014/ajot.2012.004291

Connelly, F. M., & Clandinin, D. J. (1990). Stories of experience and narrative inquiry. *Educational Researcher*, *19*(5), 2–14. https://doi.org/10.3102/0013189X019005002

Connelly, F. M., & Clandinin, D. J. (2006). Narrative inquiry. In J. L. Green, G. Camilli, & P. B. Elmore (Eds.), *Handbook of complementary methods in education research* (pp. 477–487). Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

Erikson, E. H., & Erikson, J. M. (1997). *The life cycle completed (extended version)*. W.W. Norton and Company.

Farrell, L., Kamler, B., & Threadgold, T. (2000). Telling tales out of school: Women and literacy in "New Times." *Studies in the Education of Adults*, *32*(1), 78–92. https://doi.org/10.1080/02660830.2000.11661422

France, M. H. (1984). Responding to loneliness: Counselling the elderly. *Canadian Counsellor*, *18*(3), 123–129. https://cjc-rcc.ucalgary.ca/article/view/59829/45215

Fraser, H. (2004). Doing narrative research: Analysing personal stories line by line. *Qualitative Social Work*, *3*(2), 179–201. https://doi.org/10.1177/1473325004043383

Freeman, M. (2010). *Hindsight: The promise and peril of looking backward*. Oxford University Press.

Furman, R., Downey, E. P., Jackson, R. L., & Bender, K. (2002). Poetry therapy as a tool for strengths-based practice. *Advances in Social Work*, *3*(2), 146–157. https://doi.org/10.18060/36

Getzel, G. (1984). Old people, poetry, and groups. *Journal of Gerontological Social Work*, *7*(1–2), 193–199. https://doi.org/10.1300/J083V07N01_13

Graf, M. C., Gaudiano, B. A., & Geller, P. A. (2008). Written emotional disclosure: A controlled study of the benefits of expressive writing homework in outpatient psychotherapy. *Psychotherapy Research*, *18*(4), 389–399. https://doi.org/10.1080/10503300701691664

Gullette, M. M. (2004). *Aged by culture*. University of Chicago Press.

Heilbrun, C. G. (1999). *Women's lives: The view from the threshold*. University of Toronto Press. https://doi.org/10.3138/9781442657557

Howells, V., & Zelnik, T. (2009). Making art: A qualitative study of personal and group transformation in a community arts studio. *Psychiatric Rehabilitation Journal*, *32*(3), 215–222. https://doi.org/10.2975/32.3.2009.215.222

Irving, L. M., Snyder, C. R., & Crowson, J. J. (1998). Hope and coping with cancer by college women. *Journal of Personality*, *66*(2), 195–214. https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-6494.00009

Joiner, T. E., & Rudd, M. D. (1996). Disentangling the interrelations between hopelessness, loneliness, and suicidal ideation. *Suicide and Life-Threatening Behavior*, *26*(1), 19–26.

Kazemek, F. E. (1997). They have yarns: Writing with the active elderly. *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy*, *40*(7), 516–523.

Kazemek, F. E. (1999). "A gathering of individuals": A longitudinal study of a writing workshop for older adults. *Adult Basic Education*, *9*(1), 3–20.

Kelly, L. M., & Mosher-Ashley, P. M. (2002). Combining reminiscence with journal writing to promote greater life satisfaction in an assisted-living community. *Activities, Adaptation & Aging*, *26*(4), 35–46. https://doi.org/10.1300/J016v26n04_04

Koch, K. (1977). *I never told anybody: Teaching poetry writing in a nursing home*. Random House.

Larsen, D. J., Cumming, C., Hundleby, M., & Kuiken, D. (2003). Innovating a writing group for female cancer patients: A counselling field description. *Canadian Journal of Counselling and Psychotherapy*, *37*(4), 279–294. https://cjc-rcc.ucalgary.ca/article/view/58724/44213

Longo, P. (1999). Poetry therapy. *Perie Longo*, http://www.perielongo.com/therapy.html

Maddalena, C. J. (2009). The resolution of internal conflict through performing poetry. *Arts in Psychotherapy*, *36*(4), 222–230. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.aip.2009.04.001

Malde, S. (1988). Guided autobiography: A counseling tool for older adults. *Journal of Counseling and Development*, *66*(6), 290–293. https://doi.org/10.1002/j.1556-6676.1988.tb00872.x

Manheimer, R. J. (2001). Refashioning later life [Review of the book *Aging and Identity: A Humanities Perspective*, by S. M. Deats and L. T. Lenker, Eds., and of the book *Beyond Nostalgia: Aging and Life-Story Writing*, by R. E. Ray]. *The Gerontologist*, *41*(2), 275–279. https://doi.org/10.1093/geront/41.2.275

McLaren, M. A. (2002). *Feminism, Foucault, and embodied subjectivity*. State University of New York Press.

Mills, K. J. (2018). *Writing and sharing life: Older women's experiences in a grassroots writing group* [Master's thesis, University of Saskatchewan]. University of Saskatchewan Electronic Theses and Dissertations.

Montgomery, L. M. (1970). *Anne of Green Gables*. Grosset and Dunlap. (Original work published 1908)

Moraitou, D., Kolovou, C., Papasozomenou, C., & Paschoula, C. (2006). Hope and adaptation to old age: Their relationship with individual-demographic factors. *Social Indicators Research*, *76*(1), 71–93. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11205-005-4857-4

Ng, E., Sanmartin, C., Tu, J., & Manuel, D. (2014). Use of acute care hospital services by immigrant seniors in Ontario: A linkage study. *Health Reports*, *25*(10), 15–22. https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/pub/82-003-x/2014010/article/14099-eng.htm

Nora, K. (2008). *"A new lease on life": A narrative case study of an older adult, participant design writing group* (UMI 3303567) [Doctoral dissertation, Indiana University of Pennsylvania]. ProQuest Dissertations & Theses.

Pedersen, S. S., Denollet, J., Erdman, R. A. M., Serruys, P. W., & van Domburg, R. T. (2009). Co-occurrence of diabetes and hopelessness predicts adverse prognosis following percutaneous coronary intervention. *Journal of Behavioral Medicine*, *32*(3), 294–301. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10865-009-9204-9

Pennebaker, J. W., & Beall, S. K. (1986). Confronting a traumatic event: Toward an understanding of inhibition and disease. *Journal of Abnormal Psychology*, *95*(3), 274–281. https://doi.org/10.1037/0021-843X.95.3.274

Ponterotto, J. G. (2005). Qualitative research in counseling psychology: A primer on research paradigms and philosophy of science. *Journal of Counseling Psychology*, *52*(2), 126–136. https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-0167.52.2.126

Randall, W. L. (2012). Positive aging through reading our lives: On the poetics of growing old. *Psychological Studies*, *57*(2), 172–178. https://doi.org/10.1007/s12646-011-0103-0

Randall, W. L. (2013). The importance of being ironic: Narrative openness and personal resilience in later life. *The Gerontologist*, *53*(1), 9–16. https://doi.org/10.1093/geront/gns048

Randall, W. L., & McKim, E. (2008). *Reading our lives: The poetics of growing old*. Oxford University Press. https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780195306873.001.0001

Saunders, P. P. K. W. (2005). *Silent no more: Older adults as poets; Creative writing as a preventative approach to cognitive decline of the elderly* (UMI 3262830) [Doctoral dissertation, Union Institute & University]. ProQuest Dissertations & Theses.

Schuster, E. (1998). A community bound by words: Reflections on a nursing home writing group. *Journal of Aging Studies*, *12*(2), 137–147. https://doi.org/10.1016/S0890-4065(98)90011-1

Sherman, E. (1995). Differential effects of oral and written reminiscence in the elderly. In B. K. Haight & J. D. Webster (Eds.), *The art and science of reminiscing: Theory, research, methods, and applications* (pp. 255–264). Taylor & Francis.

Slayton, S. C., D'Archer, J., & Kaplan, F. (2010). Outcome studies on the efficacy of art therapy: A review of findings. *Art Therapy*, *27*(3), 108–118. https://doi.org/10.1080/07421656.2010.10129660

Sloan, D. M., & Marx, B. P. (2004). Taking pen to hand: Evaluating theories underlying the written disclosure paradigm. *Clinical Psychology: Science and Practice*, *11*(2), 121–137. https://doi.org/10.1093/clipsy.bph062

Sluder, H. (1990). The write way: Using poetry for self-disclosure. *Journal of Psychosocial Nursing and Mental Health Services*, *28*(7), 26–28.

Smith, M. B. (1982). The time of their lives: Teaching autobiography to senior adults. *College English*, *44*(7), 692–699. https://doi.org/10.2307/376808

Snyder, C. R. (2002). Hope theory: Rainbows in the mind. *Psychological Inquiry*, *13*(4), 249–275. https://doi.org/10.1207/S15327965PLI1304_01

Sontag, S. (1978). The double standard of ageing. In V. Carver & P. Liddiard (Eds.), *An ageing population* (pp. 72–80). Open University Press.

Stevens-Ratchford, R. G. (1993). The effect of life review reminiscence activities on depression and self-esteem in older adults. *American Journal of Occupational Therapy*, *47*(5), 413–420. https://doi.org/10.5014/ajot.47.5.413

Supiano, K. P., Ozminkowski, R. J., Campbell, R., & Lapidos, C. (1989). Effectiveness of writing groups in nursing homes. *Journal of Applied Gerontology*, *8*(3), 382–400. https://doi.org/10.1177/073346488900800308

Thornton, J. E., & Collins, J. B. (2010). *Adult learning and meaning-making in community-based guided autobiography workshops*. Canadian Council on Learning.

Twigg, J. (2004). The body, gender, and age: Feminist insights in social gerontology. *Journal of Aging Studies*, *18*(1), 59–73. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jaging.2003.09.001

van Emmerik, A. A. P., Reijntjes, A., & Kamphuis, J. H. (2013). Writing therapy for post-traumatic stress: A meta-analysis. *Psychotherapy and Psychosomatics*, *82*(2), 82–88. https://doi.org/10.1159/000343131

Wadensten, B., & Hägglund, D. (2006). Older people's experience of participating in a reminiscence group with a gerotranscendental perspective: Reminiscence group with a gerotranscendental perspective in practice. *International Journal of Older People Nursing, 1*(3), 159–167. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1748-3743.2006.00031.x

Weiser, J. (2004). Phototherapy techniques in counselling and therapy: Using ordinary snapshots and photo-interactions to help clients heal their lives. *Canadian Art Therapy Association Journal*, *17*(2), 23–53. https://doi.org/10.1080/08322473.2004.11432263

About the Authors

Kelly J. Mills is a counsellor and provisional psychologist at Medicine Hat College. Kelly's research interests include creative writing and identity making.

Jennifer J. Nicol is professor emerita at the University of Saskatchewan, a registered doctoral psychologist (non-practising), and an accredited music therapist. She has expertise in qualitative methodology and a long-standing interest in music as a means of restoring or maintaining well-being across varied populations and circumstances.

M. Shaun Murphy is professor and head of the Department of Educational Foundations at the University of Saskatchewan. Shaun's research interests are based in relational narrative inquiry; self-study of teacher practice; familial and school curriculum making; identity; rural education; the interwoven lives of children, families, and teachers; and teacher education.

This research was supported by a grant from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada.

Address correspondence to Kelly J. Mills, Mental Health and Counselling Department, Medicine Hat College, 299 College Drive S.E., Medicine Hat, Alberta, Canada, T1A 3Y6. Email: kmills@mhc.ab.ca