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## Negotiated Truths and Iterative Practice: The Women in Conflict Expressive Life Writing Project

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## **Negotiated Truths and Iterative Practice in Action: The Women in Conflict Expressive Life Writing Project**

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'I have come to believe that human rights work is, at its heart, a matter of storytelling [...] the most important act of rescue [...] is not delivering supplies but asking questions, evaluating answers, and pleading with those of us who observe from a distance.' (Dawes 394)

As James Dawes argues here, storytelling is central to the advancement of human rights in our time. But how these stories are elicited, by whom, using what protocols and under what conditions is at least as important to the success of that humanitarian project as their dissemination. This chapter focusses on the research, collaborative development and delivery of the *Women in Conflict Expressive Life Writing Project*, which investigates the complex relationship between storytelling and human rights through an intervention at the site of the interview. The aim of this project is to test the use of expressive life writing workshop methodologies with survivors of sexual violence in conflict as an ancillary approach to evidence-gathering that might move beyond 'do no harm' by supporting recovery from traumatic experiences. By doing so the Expressive Life Writing Project interrogates current best practice guidelines on the documentation and investigation of such rights violations and suggests adaptations to existing protocols for the interviewing process.

As we shall explain, the methodology as well as the key research questions raised by this work has been to large extent iterative: our enquiries, theories and procedures have been shaped by extensive and ongoing interaction with local stakeholders, by practical application and, of course, by the interviewees themselves. That is perhaps our clearest learning outcome: research on best practice in interviewing begins and must proceed with intentional, active, responsive listening that leads to an ongoing reiterative feedback of lessons learned and experiences shared into new, flexible and collaboratively achieved solutions.

In the pages that follow, we—Jensen and Campbell—will outline the initial research development, further iterative research, listening, adaptation and finally the implementation of the *Expressive Life Writing Project*. It was developed with the support of *Beyond Borders Scotland* a not-for-profit organisation facilitating international cultural exchange, and INMAA, a non-governmental legal aid organisation based in Kirkuk Governorate, Northern Iraq. INMAA currently deploy a team of Mobile Human Rights Defenders to document instances of sexual violence in conflict. Both this documentation project and our research were generously funded by the UK Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO), Human Rights fund.

## Background

Through our joint work as mentors for the John Smith Memorial Trust (JSMT), a UK non-governmental organisation that supports human rights in developing democracies, we (Jensen and Campbell) began working with young leaders from the Middle East and North Africa in 2010, helping them develop strategies for rights campaigning using the power of life-story telling. More recently, we were asked to mentor fellows of the *Women in Conflict Peace Initiative* developed by *Beyond Borders Scotland* and launched by First Minister of Scotland Nicola Sturgeon in 2015.<sup>1</sup> These women, working in civil society building and rights defense in Syria, Yemen and Iraq, spoke with us about their desire to run life story-telling projects with women in their regions, particularly those who were victims of sexual violence. Campbell had recently completed a number of projects in which she developed and successfully tested a set of creative life writing methodologies to support UK combat veterans who suffered from stress-related disorders.<sup>2</sup> Subsequently she had adapted these materials for use with settled refugee groups in Jordan.<sup>3</sup> The initial research question for our joint project therefore, was: *would it be possible for these materials to be further adapted for use by the Women in Conflict fellows in their local communities?*

As our discussions continued, however, it was also clear that the *Women in Conflict* fellows wanted more than writing exercises and workshop materials. They wanted access to the conclusions of the most recent research on the complex relationship between traumatic experience and life narrative and, to hear more about traumatic injury and evidence-based treatments. They also wanted training in the best practice protocols for delivering these materials, to learn how best to conduct life story-telling workshops and interviews in such a way as to empower witnesses and survivors of rights violations to speak out and seek justice.

Much of Jensen's recent research had convinced her, however, that speaking out about trauma can be psychically dangerous even in relatively safe communities: the process of telling itself can re-traumatise the witness/victim (Jensen 2014; 2016). Moreover, each of the communities the *Women in Conflict Fellows* were returning to was very different: some were in the midst of long-term and ongoing conflict, others were new conflict zones or just at the start of a post-conflict recovery period. And the women to whom these materials might eventually be delivered were also widely diverse: some would be highly educated, multilingual city-dwellers, others semi-literate poorly educated women in rural communities and, when working in Internally Displaced Persons Camps, a complex and changing group of mixed ethnic, religious and educational backgrounds and experiences. Moreover, the needs of these women would necessarily be wide-ranging: while some would be victims of sexual violence in conflict, others might be seeking support for a friend or neighbour, or they might be survivors of domestic violence or other kinds of civil or criminal rights violations. Our second research question, therefore, was: *Is it possible to research and develop a set of training and*

*expressive writing and telling materials that could be adapted to suit the needs of diverse individual communities such as these?*

As we began to consider these initial questions, we came across a project under development by a former JSMT Fellow, Asmaa al Ameen. Al Ameen, a human rights lawyer, is now the General Director of INMAA, a legal aid charity in Kirkuk. Her project, entitled 'Beyond Do No Harm,' jointly managed with *Beyond Borders Scotland*, is a training programme for the INMAA team that takes as its overriding principle the UK FCO's directive to 'do no harm' to victims in the investigation and documentation of sexual violence in conflict (*Protocol 6*). As the title of the project suggests, however, INMAA and *Beyond Borders* wanted to do more than avoid harm: they wanted a programme that actively supported survivors of trauma.

### **The International Protocol**

In 2014 The FCO published best practice guidelines for the documentation of sexual violence as a crime under International Law (hereinafter *Protocol*). In the section on interviewing and collecting testimony, the *Protocol* offers interviewers practical tips aimed at ensuring the justiciability of the evidence gathered by these means. It begins by reminding interviewers to be sure to obtain the witness's 'informed' consent to participation:

Explain clearly that the survivor/witness has a choice whether or not to speak to you, and that s/he can exercise this choice before, during and after the interview. (114)

Likewise they are told what equipment might be useful to them during the interview process and warned about the volatile potential of such materials:

Have sketch paper and pens available. Bring a camera and a ruler in case you need to take photographs of the injuries. (Be careful, however, not to show a survivor/witness any diagram or photograph or video which would lead them to alter their evidence). (114)

The interviewers are given a template requiring more than twenty elements of information to be collected from the survivor/witness before the process of documenting rights violations can begin.<sup>4</sup> And those twenty-plus questions are just the start. The interviewers are given a further set of advice and warnings about the questions that can and should be raised in determining the facts of the case:

Make sure to cover the "who", "what", "where", "when" and "how" of the crimes (while remaining wary about asking the survivor/witness any "why" questions, so as not to apportion blame to the survivor/witness). (114)

As those of us who have studied the complex relations between trauma and life narratives will know, a survivor/witness will likely encounter many difficulties when trying to respond to questions presented in this form. While the pursuit of linear, chronological collection of data as outlined here might suit legal purposes, research has long demonstrated that traumatic experience disrupts normal memory processes, leaving victims with a fractured sense of their past.<sup>5</sup> The reasons for this narrative disruption in post-trauma are complex and continue to be an area of intense debate among scholars in both bio-medical and psychological arenas.<sup>6</sup> But the felt effect on survivors of trauma is clear.

As we read through the FCO material it was equally clear that because of this disruption of linear life narratives, the *Protocol's* suggested interview approach was neither practical in terms of the collection of data, nor beneficial to victims. By using such methodologies, interviewers may unknowingly be 'doing harm' as they push witnesses to recall terrifying experiences in a manner that is either re-traumatising or simply impossible to remember or recount in the ways elicited by the interviewer. Moreover, while the *Protocol* advises interviewers to avoid any considerations of 'why,' there is much evidence to support the view that victims of trauma cannot begin to heal until they are able to construct some narrative of 'meaning' for their experiences.<sup>7</sup>

For most persons, 'life stories' provide space for the reflection upon and the processing of experience, enabling the production of meaning. As Sophie Nicholls has argued, much of the current research on the therapeutic potential of expressive writing for trauma survivors 'employs the notion of a "holding space," a space in which we can feel both sufficiently free and sufficiently sage to let go and begin to access increasingly felt, bodily material [...] the page itself can provide some of this holding' (Nicholls 174).<sup>8</sup> The exercises developed for the *Expressive Life Writing Project* draw upon the work of James Pennebaker, Celia Hunt, Antonio Damasio, Kathleen Adams and Nicholas Mazza, among others, to elicit responses that provide just such a 'holding space.'

A fuller overview and examination of the various literary/cultural, bio-medical, psychological and neurochemical sources of this project can be found in the *Women in Conflict: Expressive Writing Project* ebook. For the purposes of this chapter, however, it is sufficient to note that the most recent therapeutic modalities in the treatment of traumatic disorders concentrate in a variety of ways upon the complex relationship between memory and narrative.<sup>9</sup>

### **Best Practice in Interviewing**

In a recent extensive overview of all published research on psychosocial interventions over the past two decades, Duncan Pedersen and his colleagues reached the following conclusions in determining

the best practices in 'medical and humanitarian assistance programmes' dealing with traumatised people in conflict and post conflict settings:

(a) a primary concern in identifying those persons at risk (screening) b) an implicit commitment to avoid inflicting further damage[...] (c) gaining in-depth insight, identifying specific cultural resources at the local level [...] d) building on the existing endogenous resources [...] and e) promoting empowerment [...] where the community of actors and survivors is involved from the early stages. (18)

These key elements for best practice (screening, do no harm, awareness of local resources and contexts, use of local actors and stakeholders, promoting empowerment) have been embedded into the development of the *Expressive Life Writing Project* in a number of ways, most notably in our partnership with INMAA.<sup>10</sup>

INMAA travels to mainly rural, traditional communities in Northern Iraq, holding informal, informative town meetings, usually attended by men of the community in the first instance. At these, Asmaa al Ameen and her team offer free legal advice and hand out informational pamphlets. In order to avoid being perceived as trouble-makers encouraging women to speak out against men in the community, in these initial meetings the INMAA team highlights the role of the men in the audience as protectors of their families. In a number of lively discussions with al Ameen, she told us how she would ask the men 'What would you do if someone was harassing your wife? Your sister? Your daughter? How would you help your daughter if her husband was cruel to her or takes her money? What if an enemy attacked your wife?' The INMAA town meetings make it clear that in such circumstances the most effective means of achieving justice is to go to the law, and that INMAA is available to take on any such cases for free.

In this context where there is a cultural assumption of men's responsibility for 'vulnerable' dependents, INMAA uses local knowledge and sensitivities to foster an atmosphere of empowerment among key stakeholders. These visits also serve another purpose, however. As the INMAA pamphlets are taken home, they begin to circulate among community members. Women traditionally do not attend town meetings in these rural regions, but in private they discuss what INMAA can do for them, or for their sisters, daughters, mothers and friends. Sometimes these initial visits elicit a flurry of phone calls to INMAA—women calling in, often secretly on a borrowed phone, to report a range of difficulties, criminal and civil, domestic and conflict-related. At other times INMAA has needed to visit a given community on several occasions before any members of that community contact them. In some instances, they offer legal workshops and 'surgeries' for general advice, and in others they are invited back to offer women-only meetings, usually held in the home of a community elder. Whether these women call or visit the INMAA office, the rights defenders are there to offer free help.

The staff of INMAA have, over the past several years, logged over two thousand such cases, all of them beginning with a phone call or visit. Of these, a large, though as yet unquantified, proportion involve sexual violence. The FCO Human Rights Fund is providing INMAA with support to create a database for recording these historical, current, and future cases. This database, being developed jointly with *Beyond Borders Scotland*, will document claims reported to INMAA. Once this information is input, the cases themselves can be sorted and quantified, providing reliable figures on the number of cases of sexual violence against women with which INMAA is dealing, thereby supporting its ongoing search for sustainable funding and further development. The database will also provide much needed information to the FCO as regards the provision of aid and services to the region.

The *Expressive Life Writing Project* intervenes at the point of the initial interview with prospective clients, by utilising an 'implicit commitment to avoid inflicting further damage to those at risk' to use Pedersen's phrase. We have done so by developing materials and training interviewers in the relationship between life narratives and traumatic experience and in the use of expressive writing and telling methodologies in the collection of those rights violation narratives. The initial interview with a client also serves the purpose of screening: the INMAA lawyers and social workers collect case narratives from all clients, and will offer the expressive exercises to all. Jensen and Campbell, via the database, will have access to the case histories of these clients. Thus in our later analysis of their narratives, we will be able to contextualise the responses of each client in relation to the rights violations for which they sought legal help.

Pedersen's review stresses the importance of making use of local resources and knowledge (18). The approach of the *Expressive Life Writing Project* builds on 'existing endogenous resources' and promotes empowerment of those resources. It does so by collaborating with local stakeholders on the development of tools for gauging the emotional impact of rights violation on the one hand, while on the other hand enabling the witness/survivor to produce and integrate into their whole life stories a narrative of that violation that supports a sense of agency and detachment, thus benefitting their recovery.

Perhaps the most important of Pedersen's recommendations is that of the necessity for inbuilt flexibility:

The collected qualitative evidence [...] reiterates the need for psychosocial interventions to remain flexible and adaptable to the prevailing social and cultural context and specific circumstances of the massive traumatic experience. (20)

This imperative is echoed in a related recent study of 'capability gaps' in the implementation of post-conflict reform initiatives (Andrews, Pritchett, Woolcock 2012). That research argues that such reforms often fail when those implementing them aim to reproduce *external*/top-down solutions considered 'best practice in dominant agendas' using predetermined 'linear' processes (9). The study

further posits that ‘capability traps’ can be avoided by aiming to solve ‘particular problems in local contexts’; creating an ‘authorising’ local environment that enables ‘experimentation’; involving the ‘iterative feedback’ of lessons into ‘new solutions’ and creating sustainable programmes that are ‘politically supportable and practically implementable’ (10).

In the development of our initial research and drafting of materials for this project, we drew on the best practice guidelines from the FCO. What we found, however, when we began to work more closely with local stakeholders, was precisely the necessity of challenging conventional wisdom, the need to listen as well as speak, and for practicality, functionality and sustainability in application. Perhaps most importantly we realised the necessity of ongoing reiterative feedback of lessons learned into new solutions, collaboratively developed through a problem-driven-iterative-adaptation—or what might more helpfully be called listening, learning, and reacting by adapting.

### **Challenges, Solutions and Opportunities**

In developing the set of expressive writing exercises with reference to how they would be used by the INMAA human rights defence teams, we encountered several challenges. It was in the continual reiterative approach that solutions and opportunities began to be approached and discovered. The resulting adapted exercises bear direct relationship to descriptions of good practice outlined by Pedersen, especially with regard to flexibility, adaptability and the agency provided to interviewer/facilitators to work within locally indicated practices.

Among the practical questions we faced when drafting the expressive life writing exercises in relation to the pilot for Kirkuk were the following:

- A. How to manage the apparent tension between the juridical aims of the initial and subsequent interviews alongside using these to first introduce and then implement the options for expressive writing or telling?
- B. How to reflect the hard-pressed nature of the situation of those initial and subsequent interviews where women may not reliably have the ideal amount of time to be in the interview situation and may be under outside pressures while present?

### **Writing or Telling**

Generally speaking, the first meeting between an INMAA team member and a client is used to record the details of an incident or incidents which might lead to a juridical process. With the advent of the Expressive Life Writing project, this initial interview was to now be used to fulfil a second aim of offering an expressive telling or writing option to that client. The move to include ‘telling’ as well as possibly ‘writing’ was indicated as essential by INMAA to reflect the diversity of their clients. Whereas many women would be educated, literate and articulate, others would not and, moreover, some



would feel more comfortable giving their stories orally rather than in writing. This new information necessitated the adaptation of a set of exercises into a complete unit for 'expressive telling'. The application of 'telling' or 'writing' is now designed as interchangeable, depending on the situation and the timing. We were grateful for the understandings gleaned from our partners that led to the development of this other set of expressive narrative options. In both, narratives would be recorded in the database for future analysis.

### **Justice or 'healing'?**

INMAA's own intake form, used to gather information in the initial interview, provided a starting point to address the first challenge. We noted the section of the 'intake' form that already asked for a narrative of sorts. This blank box is headed 'Briefly describe the background to the case'. This 'story' is elicited by the interviewer who then reads this narrative back to the interviewee/client. The presence of this descriptive 'background' question allowed us, in training the interviewer/facilitators directly, to suggest they make the links between their clients' 'telling' and the potential for going beyond the aim of creating solely a record of incident at this point. The facilitator would offer a brief introduction and if the client were interested, offer her the information sheet, asking if she would be willing to try a short exercise. After the short exercise, if the client was still interested in the project, an appointment would be made for a mutually agreeable time to meet to conduct the first session, at which a consent form would be signed by the participant.<sup>11</sup>

In discussion with our partners, it became clear that in this locus at least, the option for expressive telling/writing would be seen as potentially useful even in relation to the juridical. If this adapted form of interview had the effect of helping an interviewee to understand herself as the expert in her own case as well helping her to feel more at ease, it might be less likely for her to drop out of the process (something that is always a concern due to family and other pressures). INMAA also helped us to understand that a developed ability in expressive telling might help the process at a later stage as a plaintiff could *inter alia* be enabled to tell their story more fully for court appearance. Our partners agreed that even if the juridical was not being pursued (as the cases suitable to be pursued are decided upon by legal counsel), the exposure to expressive telling or writing might enable a sense of agency or of self-worth among those who agreed to pursue this option during the contact. There was also the hope, though the result of this cannot be verified empirically, that in the same way INMAA knows that word of mouth from woman to woman is how many people hear of their services, these expressive elements could also enhance this form of onward telling, leading INMAA to more fully fulfil their own brief.

### **Flexibility and Contingency Guidelines**

In answering B above, we built in a flexibility of approach that allowed for shorter and longer versions of exercises, depending on the time available to the participants. Within the body of several individual

exercises, we informed the facilitators of a number of paths through the exercises that can be followed, dependent on how the opening section has been received, what kind of writing/telling emerges and the time available in these sessions.

We supported this flexibility with extensive notes to facilitators outlining risks, solutions to commonly encountered problems, and counter-indicators that are met with the interview or workshop being stopped. Our approach was to empower the interviewer/facilitator by conveying (during training) some of the knowledge-from-experience we had built up through delivery of expressive life writing interventions but also to indicate that *they* were the expert in their own locale and that both the facilitator and client are considered experts in this regard.

### **Resilience in Support of Justice**

In addition to the research outlined in this chapter (and in greater detail in our ebook) that suggests the potential therapeutic benefits associated with the elicitation of narrative or story, it became clear that by acknowledging the expressive as having a relationship toward the juridical, our work brought certain linkages clearly into focus. By building in adaptability to every stage of the story gathering, these approaches—while born out of necessity and reflecting the pressures on the ground—are actually in line with research that shows the potential for resilience-building and the development of ‘hardiness’ (including an ability to draw on support), among participants in research interventions that elicit story.<sup>12</sup>

Such hardiness, as a support for the capacity to draw on their services, was acknowledged as necessary and desirable by our partners at INMAA as part of the set of enabling factors empowering women to pursue the juridical. Other researchers agree. B. Lee Murray, for instance, in investigating therapeutic benefits for participants during the qualitative interview process, found that, through the telling of personal stories to a recording researcher, an increased understanding and new perspectives could be gained.<sup>13</sup> Leseho and Block in considering storytelling and its relationship to social action conclude that ‘listening is social action’.<sup>14</sup> As East *et al*/put it, ‘Elucidating personal stories involves sharing which can help form bonds and supportive networks. With reflection, these can help to develop resilience.’<sup>15</sup>

What these researchers also appear to agree upon is that the inclusion of a reflective or self-reflexive element is key to the development of resilience. What is of interest to our partners, INMAA, in this regard is the aspiration that such a benefit, conveyed via the expressive, could be then relayed back to support the juridical. These rights defenders hope that by participating in these exercises, their clients might be enabled to exhibit that ‘hardiness’ that could support the often fraught and time-consuming process of pursuing legal justice.

## **Adaptations in action**

In our project, both approaches to the expressive (via telling or writing) allow for 'starter exercises.' These are designed to show that there is no wrong way to respond to this work and that everyone can do it. Starter exercises also have the effect of establishing a rapport between the facilitator/interviewer and the participants/client. Such exercises encourage associative thinking, which happens when one word or phrase stimulates another in the mind. Jensen and Campbell trained the INMAA facilitators in responding with intentional listening with an emphasis on the fact that all responses are welcome.<sup>16</sup>

The focus of the primary stage of the expressive telling process is on enabling participants to begin valuing their own story, to appreciate that this is a safe place to tell that story, and to trust the facilitator will not make judgements on that story, even if it emerges as non-chronological and sometimes even contradictory.

Then, after word list/clustering exercises, participants are led through exercises designed to increase ability in identifying and describing feelings and experiences.

## **The Exercises**

These exercises are broken into three 'Units'. Each Unit has a focus of operation while allowing flexibility of application.

### **Unit 1: Exercises toward expressive writing or telling**

Unit 1 presents exercises designed to systematically induct the participant into ways of approaching expressive writing/telling while building in two structural elements:

- a. Two-part exercises where part one sets up and elicits the writing/telling and part two consolidates the practice. This format has the benefit of allowing the first part to be experienced even if the second part is not reached and leads to the second structural element of *b* below.
- b. The exercises elicit different types of thinking and take account of the pressures on the ground. For instance, regarding the exercise sequence: *Working with Elements; Things in Season and in Time; Window on Your World; Writing a Letter*, an instruction is given that it is best to do more than one of these in one session. If time is short, the facilitator can offer one from the first pair (more abstract) and one from the second (more concrete). This format thus maximises the encounter by facilitating as many kinds of thinking/learning as possible.

Initial exercises in this unit allow for participants to recall any kind of incident or experience. Such recollections may or may not be related to trauma, or to the incidents for which they are seeking INMAA's help. Subsequent exercises, eg. *Window on Your World* and *Writing a Letter*, are the first that expressly ask for recollections from the present and, crucially, from the past. They were refined in response to our discussions with INMAA. The rights defenders explained to us how interviewees often give their stories piecemeal, in non-chronological ways, and in ways that at first may leave out certain details (that may be key for the juridical process). They also sometimes appear to change or adapt details, which is obviously also problematic in juridical terms. INMAA therefore found that taking the 'story' a number of times is always necessary for the aims of justice. This insight corroborated everything we had learned from our research and practice before this project. Working from the knowledge outlined in the first half of this chapter regarding the effect of trauma on memory and its consequent impact on the ability to form linear life-narratives, from experience of writing workshops with combat veterans (which corroborate these facts) and from the knowledge imparted by INMAA of the kinds of interviews they conduct, we developed the two further 'Units.'

### **Unit 2 – Bridging the past to the present**

These exercises are designed to provide participants with several ways of writing that create 'bridges' of feeling and emotion between the experiences of the past and the realities of the present. They were developed to reflect the move that Antonio Damasio identifies in his model of the self with its two levels of consciousness, the 'core self' and 'autobiographical self.'<sup>17</sup> The bridging effect of Unit 2 is to allow the telling or writing to begin to embody the felt, bodily images that Damasio speaks about when moving away from a constantly generated 'narrative without words' towards a verbalised set of thoughts and images.<sup>18</sup>

Unit 2 focusses on 'Beginning a map of the self' and is the first time that a specific memory is asked for as part of a narrative of place. The bridging effect from earlier exercises provides a transition into the next unit where the reflective self is encountered.

### **Unit 3 – Identity and feelings / Moving toward Life Narratives**

We know from Nicholas Mazza that 'By beginning to write down personal feelings, the individual begins to identify those feelings in a more coherent fashion, thereby promoting a sense of control.' Units 1 and 2 are designed for participants to move from early starter-exercises towards activities that can elicit parts or sections of life stories containing recognition of feelings and may entail, via the writing, an expression of internal states.

The goal of Unit 3, in addition to allowing longer life stories to emerge, is to work more closely with the reflective 'self' and the self in relation to others. The aim of doing so is to increase the participant's awareness of the wider environment in which particular incidents have occurred. This process begins to match the need described above to create meaning and to construct a narrative

that can be viewed with detachment but which has been created with knowledge of its potential importance and as something *owned* by the writer/teller.

The exercises in Unit 3 have several different areas of focus including:

- Myself and others
- Other characters
- The self of now
- The past self
- The self of the future.

Christine Cohen Park says 'an exploration of who the self is at the moment of writing is key.'<sup>19</sup> This insight and those related to the place of the reflective as central to building resilience were incorporated into the development of reflective exercises in the Expressive Life Writing Project to appear alongside the more purely narrative-enabling exercises. The former expressly allow for participants to reflect on the process of their writing, its 'affect' and on their actual experience of undertaking the unit. Reflective exercises are marked as such and instructions for facilitators give the context and reasoning for this, and encourage the use of at least one reflective exercise per session.

The development of exercises to reflect the situation on the ground ensured we remained realistic in our aims for the project. Perhaps most importantly it helped us to understand that the best case scenario (several weeks of either one-to-one meetings or group workshops) might not be readily applicable. We felt, however, that it was important to still build in a progression of approach through the exercise units, allowing for future use or use in other environments by those who had undertaken the training. To maximise effectiveness however, while we retained the cyclical 'return' of certain motifs and exercise riffs that we hoped would have incrementally been built upon during a writing or telling process, we designed the exercises to have identifiable outcomes whether attempted sequentially or in single repetitions. For example, while in Unit 3, *'Window into the Self'* mirrors the *'Window on Your World'* exercise from Unit 1 and is a progression from the latter, it is also possible to repeat the work in Unit 1 where the consequent increased facility of participants may elicit more fully formed narratives over time.

## **Conclusion**

If James Dawes was right about the central relationship between 'human rights work' and 'storytelling,' our work with INMAA and *Beyond Borders Scotland* has demonstrated the importance of flexibility and problem-driven iterative adaptation in collecting those stories. Our project adopted malleable approaches to achieving solutions that are in several ways akin to those outlined by Pedersen, while also fashioning expressive exercises for use among a culturally diverse population

(including Kurd, Arab and Turkmen, city dwellers and rural communities, the highly educated and the minimally so) and in circumstances previously focussed on the pursuit of the justiciable. The key generative factor in all such adaptations of course was the ongoing dialogue with our partners.

We were keen to ensure that the exercises and the variety of their implementations met readily with Pedersen's description of best practice in terms of this emphasis on the local as well as allowing for deviation/experimentation. We believed we had also allowed for the involvement of iterative feedback as leading to new solutions. In relation to Pedersen's description of creating sustainable programmes that are 'politically supportable and practically implementable,' there is more study required. As of this writing, we have completed training the INMAA team and they will begin now to collective expressive telling narratives from interested clients. Next, we will need to analyse those narratives as they appear on the INMAA database. Afterwards, we will be presenting our findings and recommendations to the Foreign and Commonwealth office in the hope of influencing, and improving, the procedure for investigating and documenting crimes of sexual violence in conflict—for moving beyond 'do no harm.'

As noted, the exercises are currently being developed for use in multiple and disparate settings and we will no doubt encounter many more problems for which we will need to collaboratively develop solutions. Likewise, the participants in our project will need to continue to develop their own narratives—life stories flexible enough to accommodate a myriad of possible future stories. The *Expressive Life Writing Project* exercises allow for capstone work with the umbrella title of '*Looking at Future Selves*': The final exercise, a '*Letter to Your Future Self*' invites the participant to address that future autobiographical self.<sup>20</sup> Our own hope is that those who participate in the *Expressive Life Writing Project* may be enabled to approach that future with an increased sense of agency, an enhanced resilience, and a sense of how life story narratives can begin to help them find their own, flexible answers to the question '*why?*'

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<sup>1</sup> *John Smith Memorial Trust*. 2016. Web. April 17 2016. <http://www.johnsmithmemorialtrust.org/> *Beyond Borders Scotland*. 2016. Web. April 17 2016. <<http://www.beyondbordersscotland.com/>>

<sup>2</sup>See the Research Excellence Framework 2014 report on this study. *The Military Writing Network: Creative Writing, Life Writing and Trauma* 2014. Web. April 17 2016.

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<sup>3</sup> *Mapping Jabal Al Natheef*. 2014. Web. April 17 2016.

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<sup>4</sup> Annex 4: This is a list of basic information that practitioners should collect from a survivor/witness when conducting an interview:

1. Code [for security purposes].
2. Name of survivor/witness (first and last, and any previous or alternative names by which the survivor/witness is known).
3. Sex of survivor/witness.
4. Date of birth of survivor/witness.
5. Place of birth of survivor/witness.
6. Name of father of survivor/witness.
7. Name of mother of survivor/witness.
8. Languages spoken by survivor/witness (Including the survivor's/witness's preferred language).
9. Language of Interview.
10. Current residence/address of survivor/witness.
11. Permanent residence/address of survivor/witness.
12. Phone number(s)/email(s) of survivor/witness.
13. Occupation/work of survivor/witness – current or former.
14. Family status (names, age and location, if known, of any stated family members).
15. Nationality of survivor/witness.

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16. Religion of survivor/witness (If relevant and contextually appropriate).
  17. Ethnicity/tribal origins of survivor/witness (If relevant and contextually appropriate).
  18. Date, place and time of Interview.
  19. Persons present during interview and positions/roles.
  20. Additional evidence provided by the survivor/witness in the context of the Interview (e.g. photographs, diagrams, maps, videos, medical reports, other documents, etc.) and coding of same.
  21. Information regarding whether the survivor/witness agrees to be contacted again.
  22. Information regarding whether the survivor/witness requires psychosocial support.
  23. Information regarding whether the survivor/witness agrees to have her/his evidence shared with national judicial authorities (specify which)
  24. Information regarding whether the survivor/witness agrees to have her/his evidence shared with international judicial authorities (specify which). (Protocol 118).

<sup>5</sup> Researcher Maggie Schauer, who led the development of Narrative Exposure Therapy or NET, a groundbreaking trauma treatment designed for use with refugee communities, argues that 'it is extremely difficult for [patients] to narrate the [traumatic] event in a detailed consistent and chronological manner [...] if asked to report the event the narrations are typically disorganized, fragmented, and incoherent' (Schauer, *et al.* 21). Here, Schauer draws on Bessel van der Kolk's study of memory fragmentation in trauma. See van der Kolk Dissociation and the fragmentary nature of traumatic memories: overview and exploratory study. *Journal of Traumatic Stress* 8.4 (1995): 505-25. Further support for these results includes E. LeDoux, Emotion Circuits in the Brain. *Annual Review of Neuroscience* 23 (2000):155-84; L.M. Shin, S.L. Rauch and R.K. Pitman, Amygdala, medial prefrontal cortex, and hippocampal function in PTSD. *Annals of the New York Academy of Sciences* 1071 (2006): 67-79; Israel Liberzon, Chandra Sripada, The functional neuroanatomy of PTSD: a critical review. *Progress in Brain Research* 167 (2007): 151-69.; Jennifer Vasterling and Mieke Verfaellie, Post-traumatic stress disorder: a neurocognitive perspective. *Journal of the International Neuropsychological Society* 15 (2009): 826-29.

<sup>6</sup> A number of recent works outline the complex relationship traumatic experience and life narrative disruption including, among the neurochemists, Katy Robjant and Mina Fazel (2010) among the psychologists and narrative therapists Maggie Schauer et al (2011) and among the scholars of therapeutic writing, Celia Hunt (2013).

<sup>7</sup>For further reading on this finding, see Robjant and Fazel 1031; Nicholls 173-4 and MacPherson 30.

<sup>8</sup> Here Nicholls draws on both Dale Winnicot's notion of 'a holding space' (*Playing and Reality*. London: Tavistock, 1971) and Dominic McLoughlin's study of poetry in hospice care ('Transition, transformation and the art of losing: some uses of poetry in hospice care for the terminally ill.' *Psychodynamic Counselling* 6.2 (2000): 215-34.)

<sup>9</sup>Andrew Bisson, Psychological treatment of posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD). *Cochrane Database of Systematic Reviews* 3 (2007); E. B. Foa and B.O. Rothbaum, *Treating the trauma of rape: Cognitive-behavioral therapy for PTSD*. New York: The Guilford Press, 1998; Dana Bichescu, F. Nuener, M., Schauer and T. Elbert, Narrative Exposure Therapy of political imprisonment-related chronic trauma-spectrum disorders. *Behaviour Research and Therapy* 45 (2007):2212-20. Exposure therapy encourages controlled confrontation with feared object in order to develop a healthier sense of the present day threat. Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT) challenges unhelpful thoughts surrounding the traumatic event such as 'it was my fault' in order to desensitise the patient. Narrative-Based therapies aim to help patients produce retroactively a clear, detailed and chronological narrative of their lives. As yet, neurologically based treatment for PTSD is only in its early phases and there is no straightforward psychopharmacological treatment. See Cris Scaglione and Patricia Lockwood 'Application of Neuroscience Research to the Understanding and Treatment of Posttraumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). *International Journal of Applied Science and Technology* 4.1 (2014): 35-45.

<sup>10</sup> INMAA. 2015. Web April 17 2016. < <http://www.inmaa-iraq.com/>>

<sup>11</sup> Examples of all the forms and exercises are available in the *Women in Conflict: Expressive Life Writing Project ebook* (ISBN 978-1-5262-0260-4). All forms have undergone scrutiny and approval by University Ethics Review Boards prior to use.

<sup>12</sup> East, Leah, Debra Jackson, Louise O'Brien and Kathleen Peters, 'Storytelling: an approach that can help to develop resilience.' *Nurse Researcher*, 17:3 (2010):17-25. This paper examines the links between the development of personal resilience and storytelling for research purposes and argues that storytelling also provides opportunities to celebrate the hardiness of research participants who 'contribute to knowledge by recounting their stories of difficulty and adversity' (17).

<sup>13</sup> B. Lee Murray. 'Qualitative research interviews: therapeutic benefits for the participants', *Journal of Psychiatric and Mental Health Nursing*, Volume 10, Issue 2, (2003): 233-236.

<sup>14</sup> Leseho J. and Block, L. ' "Listen and I tell you something": storytelling and social action in the healing of the oppressed' *British Journal of Guidance and Counselling*, 33,2 (2005):184.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid. p.17.



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<sup>16</sup> 'Intentional listening': keeping the focus on participants without introducing value- or other judgments and while also not allowing factors like timing to distract from that focus. The concept has a relationship to 'active listening' and its use in this project is outlined in *Holistic Nursing: A Handbook for Practice* by Barbara Montgomery Dossey et al. Burlington: Jones and Bartlett, (2016):146,161.

<sup>17</sup> 'The autobiographical self depends on systemized memories of situations in which core consciousness was involved.... I use the term autobiographical memory to denote the organized record of the main aspects of a organism's biography... the autobiographical self arises from the core self.' Antonio Damasio, *The Feeling of What Happens: Body and Emotion in the making of consciousness*, New York: Mariner Book (2000):18.

<sup>18</sup> Damasio, 2000: 168.

<sup>19</sup> Christine Cohen Park, cited in Celia Hunt, *Transformative Learning through Creative Writing*. Abingdon: Routledge (2013):177.

<sup>20</sup> The 'letter' part of this exercise mirrors the 'letter exercise' in unit 1 but there the focus is the future. In Part 1 are sections including: If I could be... then I would... and If I were... then I could.... In Part 2, there's a move toward looking at the self in relation to others while in Part 3, participants write to a future 'other'. This may be someone who is already in a life narrative as a relative, friend or partner. The participant considers including:

- What I wish for you is...
- What I wish for myself is...
- What I hope for us both is that...