

**Writing and Sharing Life: Older Women's Experiences in a Grassroots Writing Group**

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By

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## **ABSTRACT**

This narrative inquiry explored the experiences of three older women who belonged to an ongoing community-based writing group. The meaningfulness and personal impact of writing and sharing stories with other older women was investigated. Field texts were gathered from semi-structured interviews, participant writing samples, and participant observation. Narrative threads that connected the women's experiences were identified, and two overarching findings were generated; engagement with the writing group was understood to enhance (1) the women's sense of self-compassion, and (2) their hopefulness for the future. The present inquiry extends research on adaptive aging and suggests new directions for both practice and research in this area.

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## DEDICATION

To Blake, Brooklyn, Hayden, and Macka,

for being the light in the trees

and the sound of the bees,

for making this long walk

so much easier.

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## **CHAPTER 1: NARRATIVE BEGINNING**

In August of 2016, I began my exploration of how three older women were impacted by their practice of writing and sharing stories. As I entered the women's lives and stories, I brought my own understanding of what writing "does" to every question I asked and conversation we had. My experiences with sharing my own autobiographical poetry - with family, classmates, teachers, and strangers - had developed this understanding, which had, in turn, compelled me to choose writing as a focal point of my graduate research. This first chapter articulates my understanding of what writing and sharing poems "does" for me, as this perspective affected where I pointed my gaze at each step of the research process.

### **The Writer in Me**

The last poem that I wrote and shared with others was based on experiences I had as a practicum student at a community-based counselling agency, where I was placed from September 2015 to April 2016. It was just a few weeks before Christmas, and everyone at the agency was trying to tie up loose ends before the holidays. A support group for survivors of intimate partner abuse was set to begin in January, but the task of interviewing all interested participants (as part of the pre-group screening process) was still waiting. With everyone's schedules filled to the brim, I was elected to run this emotional decathlon, and so I did. I spent an hour (sometimes more) one-on-one with each of the 12 women over the next few weeks, and in every single meeting I had to ask them to describe the physical and psychological violence that they had experienced. At the close of each meeting, I would feel many different things. There was always happiness that the woman had found the group, a bone-deep ache for the pain she had

clawed through to get there, and an awe at her ability to still pick up her children from school, get the mail, brush her teeth, smile at receptionists. But there was another feeling that lingered - an insistent and unappeasable sense of regret that while our world heaps the highest honours on actresses, models, and singers, these indomitable women are treated as ordinarily as anyone else.

A week or two after my last interview, I found this feeling of puzzlement and disappointment with our world still ebbing into my body at unpredictable moments. Sunday came and attending an open microphone poetry event was on my evening agenda, so that afternoon I sat down with pen and paper to try and put my dissatisfaction into words. I remember starting with the image of my speechlessness in each interview, writing the line: *my tongue, dumb and fumbling, gropes for speech*. The phrase felt whole and able-bodied as it slid out from under my pen tip – it expressed my truth while being, in my opinion, sensuous and understandable to others. I continued to write; some phrases flowed out fully-formed and others required a bricklayer's patience. By the time I had to leave for the open microphone event, the piece was still in progress and I resolved to finish it for the following Sunday. Hearing others read their work is always a catalyst to dive into the stories my own voice is waiting to tell, and so the next day I refocused and shaped my piece into its final form, a story of reverence and remorse that was my longest poem to date.

The sharing of my piece was done in a step-wise fashion, moving from the most known to the least known of audiences – mother, then partner, then friend, then finally the open mic audience that included the two counsellors who would be facilitating the women's support group with me. This ordering was, I think, based on whose reaction I

was most excited to get, rather than on whose judgement I most feared. At each revealing, my piece seemed to be impactful and appreciated, even evoking tears from my fellow counsellors and remarks from strangers at the open mic. I was very pleased with the piece and happy with myself for persevering through the draft stage.

### **Considering my Experience**

As I reflect on what it was like to create and debut this particular poem, I find myself thinking about the tension that envelopes my entire writing and sharing process. As I sit before my computer typing this newest composition for you, my reader, I am challenged with the task of naming and explaining this tension - the product of forces I often merely feel in my body, but do not consciously consider. These forces are at work when my pen quickens and slows, and when I flicker between calmness and terror while waiting for my name to be called at open microphone poetry nights. After hours of sitting down at my kitchen table, trying desperately to pin down the nature of these forces (while ironically being plagued by the nameless tension they incite) I have arrived at the idea that there are three directions in which I am pulled while I write and read my writing, which I will refer to as “Self,” “Other,” and “Relationship.”

The force of “Self” directs me to write as if I am bleeding – without control or elaboration. In this mode, I am self-absorbed and fully present, unoccupied with the concern of how my writing will be received by anyone. Bending under the will of this force is easier with the knowledge that no amount of labour over word selection will let the reader join my internal world anyway. I immerse myself in the task of excavating my own meanings and impressions of events. When my mind lands on words that fit just right, they settle on the page with a sense of immediacy and truth. The first line I wrote

for the poem described (*my tongue, dumb and fumbling, gropes for speech*) arrived in this way, as do the lines that come knocking when I'm trying to fall asleep. As I open my journal to read a piece to another person, or walk to the stage to perform a poem, this force drapes me with a warm sense of protection. My willingness to expose my voice and my vulnerability, despite the inevitable chasm between what I mean to say and how I will be heard, defines part of my identity and is a source of pride.

The force of "Other" pulls me down a rabbit hole of questions as I write – an unknown blackness that is simultaneously exhilarating and threatening. Will this piece be savoured or skimmed? Will anyone care? As others read this, what shape will I assume in their minds? Vapid? Syrupy? Scattered? Perceptive? As I wrote my first draft of the poem described earlier, I slashed lines that might sound inauthentic or tired. When my concerns of others' judgement are at the fore of my mind, I try to read my writing as if it is unknown to me, attempting to predict exactly how others might receive it. I envision the feelings of elation or disappointment to come when my piece is either praised or discarded. This force is most powerful just before I open my mouth to share a poem, as I wonder whether my mother will get my meaning, or if the open microphone crowd will approach me at intermission, with enthusiastic voices and admiration. I am electrified by nerves and hope.

The force of "Relationship" pushes me to be stoic, to continue writing even when the words are not landing exactly as they should on the page, or when the experience I am writing about seems too narrow, too particular for anyone but me to be provoked by it. This force reminds me that language - carefully arranged - can be a deeply powerful connector, and that the hours spent shaping and pruning a poem are worth it if, in the end,

it can speak to another's soul. When I descend from the stage on open microphone poetry nights, my mind wandering to the question of whether my piece was liked or understood, this force whispers comfortingly "you made contact with at least one person's world just now." Sometimes I get a little more than this internal voice. After I publicly shared the piece that honoured survivors, a man approached me to say that his girlfriend ("not a crier" in his words) was moved to tears by my reading. I wondered whether her reaction may have stemmed from past abuse or from past contact with survivors, but the reason is not particularly important to me. I am a human and she is a human, and I think that could be enough.

Although these three forces – "Self," "Other," and "Relationship" – all propel my hand to write and fill me with the resolve to read my work, in my experience it is the last one that has been the most substantial and enduring motivator. My desire to explore my own experiences ("Self"), and my desire to be seen as a skilled craftsperson (reaching toward a receiving "Other"), are powerful incentives, certainly, but they are ephemeral. What brings me back to writing and reading time and again is the possibility of human connection. One quote I find especially reflective of my motivations for sharing writing uses the imagery of thawing: "We melt into each other with phrases. We are edged with mist. We make an unsubstantial territory" (Woolf, 1992). Language has the capacity to dissolve us around the edges, the "particles" of the writer's experience warming then interspersing and weaving through the listeners' experiences.

It is highly coincidental that the first poem I can recall sharing with others was in fact called "Thaw." Written when I was 21 years old and mourning the end of my first serious relationship, the poem depicts a scene in which I stumble into my ex-high school



sweetheart in a grocery store. Sitting here, composing this piece of text years later, it is the first time I have considered how that choice of title relates to my experiences within writing communities. As I share my writing, I do feel as if I transition from being like ice - a solid, definable figure, a prop that populates others' worlds, the "Kelly" with blonde hair and street address, to being like water – fluid, nameless, universal, expanding outward as far as I can to cover the distance that once separated me and any listeners. Here is my present attempt to explore the theme of "Thaw" in this new context:

***Thaw***

*she glides to the stage  
glacier cutting the crowd  
earth shifting  
light glinting  
off blue hands*

*she opens her mouth  
cracks bloom like veins  
voice  
slick with heat*

*noise flows  
swift  
visceral*

*water filling  
every*

*mouth*

As I began this research inquiry, I knew that my experiences with writing and sharing writing may or may not be echoed in the stories of participants. I knew that the women I interviewed may not articulate any sense of tension, nor describe the pull of human connection that I have tried to describe. They may have pursued writing and membership in a writing group for reasons entirely separate from those I have noted for

my own practice. I differed from the participants in many ways – one of the most easily identified differences being our age – and each woman’s unique relationship to writing and sharing writing was precisely what I was interested in. I wanted to know how they made sense of the series of transformations and transpositions underlying every piece of their writing – from thought to pen to mouth to ear. What was the force that tugged on their sleeve, guiding them to sit down to compose then stand up to speak, and what meaning had this process brought to their own lives? With these questions in mind, I began my exploration.

### **Research Wonders**

The present inquiry explored how older, female writing group members experienced their practice of creating, sharing, and witnessing personal writing. The first research wonder that guided this inquiry was centred on the women’s lived experiences of their creative practice: What is it like to write, to share writing with others, and to help sustain a writing community, as a person, as an older adult, and as a woman? The second research wonder was centred on how their writing and sharing might influence or be influenced by their identities: How does their creative practice shape, or get shaped by, their understandings of their life, their aging and their womanhood? The third research wonder considered their creative practice in the context of passing time: How has individuals’ writing and their coming to writing evolved over time, in response to changing stages of life and social conditions?

### **Chapter Organization**

This inquiry is comprised of six chapters. In Chapter 2, literature on the impacts of personal writing and writing groups is reviewed, and intersecting research on aging,

female artistic expression, and grassroots activities is explored. In Chapter 3, the research methodology of narrative inquiry is outlined, specific research methods used to generate field, interim, and final research texts are described, and relevant ethical issues are considered. The findings of the inquiry are presented as stand-alone papers in Chapters 4 and 5. As such, in keeping with publication structures, these chapters reiterate the larger study in smaller ways and address methodological/method contexts so that a reader of the chapter without the larger thesis will understand the work. Each chapter is centred on a different aspect of the participants' experiences within their writing group. Findings are linked to existing literature, and appraised for limitations, strengths, and future implications in Chapter 6, which concludes with a personal reflection on the research process.

## CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

The following section will explore existing research on the impacts of personal writing and writing group membership, in general, in older adults, and in women. Literature on this subject has appraised impact using various constructs; some researchers have discussed “therapeutic gains” (Adkins, Taber, & Russo, 1985) while others have described outcomes in terms of individuals’ “psychological well-being” (Smyth, 1998), or more specific domains like “stress” (Baikie, Geerligs, & Wilhelm, 2012) or “depression” (Chippendale & Bear-Lehman, 2012). Despite terminology that varies across studies and that will, therefore, vary in this chapter, my discussion will maintain a common focus on impacts to individuals’ inner experiences - their thoughts and feelings. This section will first present research on the impacts of writing and sharing writing in general, then move into how this creative practice has been understood to function in older adults’ lives. Next, the implications of creative group structure (facilitator-driven versus member-driven) will be examined, in general and in reference to older adults in particular. Finally, as the present study engaged with a writing group comprised of women, the relationship between personal writing and feminism will be explored.

### **Individual Writing: What Does It Mean to Compose?**

#### **Writing and Well-being**

The need for creative expression has been deemed an essential part of human nature, that helps individuals overcome personal challenges and tap into their greatest potential (Furman, Downey, Jackson, & Bender, 2002). The word therapy is in fact derived from the Greek *therapeia*, which means to heal through expressive arts like song, drama, and poetry (Longo, 1999). The field of expressive arts therapy continues to evolve

into many forms and has demonstrated powerful impacts on clients in counselling settings (Malchiodi, 2005). Personal writing is one art form that has received considerable attention in research on mental health and well-being. In the present study, personal writing is defined as reflective and emotive (rather than technical) writing that is connected to personal experience.

Abigail Adams once articulated the necessity of her own writing practice, with the line: “my bursting heart must find vent at my pen” (1775, para. 1). Psychological benefits of personal writing have been summarized in a number of comprehensive reviews (Baikie & Wilhem, 2005; Esterling, L’abate, Murray, & Pennebaker, 1999; Sloan & Marx, 2004; Smyth, 1998). Examples of benefits identified in recent studies include reduced post-traumatic stress disorder symptoms (van Emmerik, Reijntjes, & Kamphuis, 2013), reduced stress in individuals with mood disorders (Baikie et al., 2012), and enhanced perceptions of emotional support in breast cancer survivors (Gellaitry, Peters, Bloomfield, & Horne, 2010). Despite the vast number of studies published on personal writing and well-being, most have used either the original or a modified version of Pennebaker and Beall’s (1986) writing paradigm, in which participants are asked to write specifically about traumatic or emotional events of their lives, for a dictated amount of time and number of sessions, often in a clinical setting. In such studies, writing is positioned as an intervention with measurable outcomes, and far less research has investigated the impacts of spontaneous, self-directed writing.

### **Writing and Identity**

Some researchers have suggested that therapeutic aspects of writing emerge from the development of a coherent personal narrative (Baikie & Wilhem, 2005). It is thought

that through the development of this narrative, writers can reappraise and make meaning of their experiences (Travagin, Margola, & Revenson, 2015). As McAdams and McLean (2013) noted, people are “natural storytellers,” continuously reconstructing past experiences and combining them with imagined future experiences or goals to create a coherent life story or “narrative identity” (p. 233). McLean, Pasupathi, and Pals (2007) suggested that this is a recursive process wherein selves create stories, and stories create selves. Through narrative identity, people “convey to themselves and to others who they are now, how they came to be, and where they think their lives may be going in the future” (McAdams & McLean, 2013, p. 233). From this perspective, identity is not comprised of different traits or behaviours one may exhibit or measure, but instead emerges from a person’s understanding of his or her own biography (Giddens, 1991). This idea was captured by Silverman (1983) who stated that a person “finds identity through discourse” (p. 45). As Freeman (2010) has noted, this process is automatic and used continuously to make sense of our day-to-day lives, but it may be made intentional and explicit through oral or written story-telling.

Researchers aiming to clarify the relationship between narrative identity and well-being have found that people who are able to articulate positive aspects of challenging life events show greater psychological wellness than those not able to do so (Tavernier & Willoughby, 2012), and people who articulate a sense of agency and control in stories about their hardships demonstrate reductions in mental illness symptoms (Adler, 2012). The therapeutic approach known as narrative therapy was born out of the recognition that individuals’ language use influences how they experience themselves and the world (White & Epston, 1990). In this approach, therapists attend to and seek to support

changes in clients' ways of speaking, the goal being to "acquaint people with optional story versions that they can use to regain control over their lives" (Parry & Doan, 1994, p. 157). The value of such "re-storying" has been supported by research; for example, when individuals are explicitly prompted to write about positive aspects of a hurtful event, they become more forgiving than those who were prompted to write about traumatic aspects of the event (McCullough, Root, & Cohen, 2006).

In addition to the impact that a particular narrative construction may have on an individual, the decision to first engage in story-telling may have its own implications for identity. In her autobiographical account of battling cancer, Lorde (1980) wondered if writing is one way to regain agency, and if "power comes from moving into whatever I fear most that cannot be avoided," (p. 79). In other words, her *willingness* to reflect upon what most distressed her - through the process of writing - may have impacted her sense of self separately from any conclusions she reached in her composition. Ergo, the courage to *tell* the story, regardless of its content, may also affect identity.

### **Writing Groups: What Does It Mean to Share?**

A number of studies have demonstrated that personal writing can impact different dimensions of one's well-being. Some researchers have connected these impacts to the process of narrative identity development. However, much of the existing research in this area has investigated the impacts of solitary writing only (see reviews: Esterling et al., 1999; Sloan & Marx, 2004; Smyth, 1998; Travagin et al., 2015; van Emmerik et al., 2013). When the art form of writing is pursued and celebrated within a group, the impacts of writing may become enmeshed with the impacts of social connection and belonging. This section will explore how sharing writing in a group setting may impact individuals.

Nora (2008) noted that “when we write for others, we hope to connect in some way to their thoughts and emotions” (p. 2). In other words, sharing one’s writing is a social endeavour wherein some level of congruence between the writer’s experience and the audience’s experience is sought. However, studies published on the impact of writing group participation (e.g. Bolton, 1999; Houlding & Holland, 1988; Larsen, Cumming, Hundleby, & Kuiken, 2003; Young, 2007) have actually devoted little attention to the nature and meaning of the sharing process, and have focused more on the impact of writing itself (e.g. organization of emotions in Houlding & Holland, 1988; construction of meaning in Larsen et al., 2003). Despite this omission, social interaction has nevertheless been recommended to facilitators of writing groups, for example: “conversation should also be encouraged within the group . . . giving the participants the opportunity to converse about their thoughts and feelings related to their writing” (Furnes & Dysvik, 2010, p. 429). Given the relationship between writing and identity, it seems that the process of sharing writing would connect to issues of selfhood as well, yet this possibility has remained largely unexplored.

In the context of a writing group, social interactions might take a number of forms both verbal and non-verbal (e.g. commenting on another’s piece, equating a piece to other work, considering a piece temporally in relation to the writer’s larger work in the group, listening attentively, etc.). Statements of what sharing might do for writers have been put forth, but these are often general observations imposed by a researcher or facilitator. For example, therapeutic writing group leader Bolton (1999) wrote “the response of others to our own writings can also help us with what our writing is trying to tell us” (p. 128) and bereavement writing group facilitator Young (2007) noted that sharing “helped



[participants] experience healing transformations far beyond [their] individual powers” (p. 366). Creative groups in general have been said to build a “shared sense of artistic identity” (Liddle, Parkinson, & Sibbritt, 2013, p. 333), and sharing writing was found to foster a sense of universality within a mental health treatment group (Adkins et al., 1985). Other research has suggested that writing group members enjoy positive responses to their readings, but the particulars of this enjoyment were not explored (Sluder, 1990). In sum, the few researchers that have attended to what it means to share personal writing have done so from a distanced, pre-supposing stance and have not engaged writers in articulating their own experiences of sharing writing with others.

### **Writing Groups and Older Adulthood**

As individuals age, they acquire a wealth of memories and anecdotes that span decades, generations, and major socio-cultural shifts in our world. Older adults may be particularly drawn towards writing groups for the opportunity to reflect on and articulate these memories. This section will firstly explore the various challenges that people may encounter in late adulthood, and then draw connections between these challenges, identity negotiation, and the writing group as an avenue for redefinition and growth.

#### **Challenges of Late Adulthood**

Canada’s senior citizens, defined as persons over the age of 65 (Ng, Sanmartin, Tu, & Manuel, 2014), are predicted to form one quarter of the country’s population by the year 2036 (Canadian Institute for Health Information, 2012, p. ix). Older adulthood, like any epoch of life, is characterized by change. Changes that may first come to mind when thinking of older adults are those that are biological and relatively predictable, such as increased risks for sensory loss (Brennan, Horowitz, & Su, 2005) and chronic health

conditions (Martel, Bélanger, & Berthelot, 2002). Such changes may reduce individuals' mobility and necessitate a reliance on others for care. In addition to more pronounced physical vulnerabilities, older adults' mental health vulnerabilities may increase as years pass. In a meta-analysis of 125 studies drawn from gerontological literature, Pinquart (2001) concluded that negative emotional affect appears to increase with age. The loss of significant others can have a tremendous impact on mental health, and such losses become much more likely in older adulthood. Depression is more prevalent in widowed compared to non-widowed adults, and widowhood has been found to be the most important predictor of loneliness when compared to factors such as physical disability, sex, and living arrangements (Golden et al., 2009). Loneliness is defined as the "subjective feeling state of being alone, separated, or apart from others" and is distinguished from social isolation (the term used to denote an objective separation from others) (Tomaka, Thompson, & Palacios, 2006). Both social isolation (Keefe, Andrew, Fancey, & Hall, 2006), and loneliness (Savikko, Routasalo, Tilvis, Strandberg, & Pitkälä, 2005) have been found to increase with age. In sum, as the body and mind ages, individuals become more vulnerable to a litany of potential, inter-related losses, from declines in physical health, to bereavements, depression, and loneliness.

### **Unique Responses to Late Life**

While it is clear that even the healthiest of older adults will inevitably face the biological consequences of aging, some have argued that these consequences have overtaken cultural understandings of aging, leaving elders to be no longer regarded "as bearers of wisdom but as embodiments of shame" (Erikson & Erikson, 1997, p. 114). Although late life can be a time of great challenge and difficulty, it can also be a time of

significant growth, learning, and affirmation. Erikson (1950) proposed a model of human psychological development in which he associated one central task with each stage of life. In the last stage of life, he argued, humans' central task is to survey one's life and the choices one has made and through this reflection come to a sense of either integrity or despair. Integrity, in this case, amounts to embracing one's "life as having been well lived" (Erikson & Erikson, 1997, p. 113). Similarly, Derne (2009) has suggested that well-being emerges from the "fit between a person's aspirations and a person's accomplishments (p. 143), i.e. the concordance between an individual's values and the extent to which those values have been enacted.

In Erikson's model, humans are seen as active and continually evolving identity-makers, not passive recipients of biological misfortunes. As Watson and Smith (2002) described, identities are assumed to be "discursive, provisional, intersectional, and unfixed" (p. 10). The theory of age identity similarly positions older adults as negotiators of their own experiences of aging. Age-identity is theorized to be an individual's story of how he or she has changed over time (Gullette, 2004). This concept seems to echo the notion of narrative identity discussed at the beginning of this chapter (McAdams & McLean, 2013). Researchers suggest that one's story of aging is partly shaped by the cultural storyline or dominant narrative of aging - widely promoted in our society - that dictates midlife as the dividing line between generativity and degenerativity (Gullette, 2004). Older adults may resist this master narrative by focusing on their own notions of growth, and by funnelling their energy into supporting the "positive and progressive aspects of their lives" (Cheek & Piercy, 2004, p. 323).

## **Writing Group Membership as a Unique Response**

Membership in a writing group may constitute one response to the challenges of late life. The following section will discuss research on the impacts of writing and sharing in the context of older adulthood.

**Writing as response.** Personal writing often begins with the process of reminiscence, defined by Bluck and Levine (1998) as “the act or process of recalling particular or generic episodes” from one’s own life experiences (p. 188). They explained that reminiscence can occur spontaneously or intentionally, covertly or overtly, and individually or in groups. Although reminiscence was once thought of as an escapist, non-productive mental activity for older adults, akin to daydreaming (Creanza & McWhirter, 1994), a growing body of research has substantiated the benefits of reminiscence (for a review, see Bohlmeijer, 2007). Bluck and Levine (1998) define “life review” as a type of reminiscence that involves not only recollecting memories, but using memories to make coherent meaning of present experiences and to guide the resolution of present conflict. This description is almost identical to that given for narrative identity development at the beginning of this chapter (McAdams & McLean, 2013). In addition to meaning-making and conflict resolution, Arian et al. (1993) add that life review can “facilitate acceptance of one's life with both its successes and shortcomings” (p. 1005), echoing Erikson and Erikson’s (1997) description of integrity.

In personal writing, reminiscence is followed by the physical recording of thoughts and feelings onto paper or in a word processor. Writing has been found to confer an impact on older adults’ mental health above and beyond reminiscence. Sherman (1995) investigated whether writing modulates the effects of life review on older adults

by comparing two groups – one that involved oral life review only, and one that involved oral life review plus writing. He found significantly higher measures of late-life adjustment in the writing group, compared to the oral review only group. These findings indicate that the process of writing memories down had a unique benefit for group members. Campbell (1984) offers one perspective on what this unique benefit may be; he argues 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). This identity re-creation may be a direct challenge to the master narrative of aging described earlier. Randall (2013) has argued that engagement with life review and reflection (through writing or orally) enhances resiliency in the later stages of life by conferring individuals with what he calls “narrative openness” (p. 9). By regarding life as a “richly ambiguous text” out of which many possible selves may emerge, one may resist viewing the final stage of life as one of certain closure and decline (Freeman, 1993, p. 184).

**Sharing writing as response.** As described previously, older adulthood can be a time of social isolation and loneliness. Membership in a creative writing group is one avenue through which social support may be obtained. Social support in general has received much attention in gerontological literature. When provided from family and friends, social support has been found to impact older adults’ depression (Hays, Steffens, Flint, Bosworth, & George, 2001), disease outcome (Tomaka et al., 2006), cognitive decline (James, Wilson, Barnes, & Bennett, 2011), perceived self-efficacy and exercise behaviours (Resnick, Orwig, Magaziner, & Wynne, 2002), and affective responses to widowhood (de Vries, Utz, Caserta, & Lund, 2014; Holtslander, Bally, & Steeves, 2011).

Adults over 60 have reported that social interaction is an integral part of successful aging (Reichstadt, Sengupta, Depp, Palinkas, & Jeste, 2010) and that having confidants and emotional support contributes to their feelings of belonging and well-being (Dunér & Nordström, 2007).

The studies mentioned above focused on support garnered from family and friends, but acquaintances made outside of these circles can also be impactful. Research has demonstrated that creative peer groups are a viable source of social support in older adults' lives. Johnson and Sullivan-Marx (2006) contended that for older adults engaged in creative activities, group settings "can provide a safe place for social exchange" (p. 310), and participation in creative groups has been shown to impact older adults' sense of community (Phinney, Moody, & Small, 2014). Interestingly, creative groups have been shown to confer benefits on older adults that are unique from the benefits of non-creative peer groups. In a sample of participants with dementia, aged 80 and above, participation in group art therapy was correlated with greater enhancement of mood and cognition when compared to participation in purely recreational groups (Rusted, Sheppard, & Waller, 2006). These findings demonstrate that social contact *and* artistic practice contribute to the impact of creative groups. Correspondingly, a study of seniors' participation in art classes found that the creative and social aspects of attending were equally valued by students; art-making fostered feelings of achievement while interactions with other artists were inspiring and provided opportunities "to be encouraged by and to learn from others" (Bedding & Sadlo, 2008, p. 375).

Only a few researchers have investigated the impacts of older adult writing groups specifically, but various benefits to group members have been demonstrated: increased

confidence and self-worth (Malde, 1988); a reinforced sense of accomplishment and connectedness (Sluder, 1990), as well as purpose (Getzel, 1984; Schuster, 1998); enhanced social relationships (Kelly & Mosher-Ashley, 2002); and reduced depressive symptoms (Chippendale & Bear-Lehman, 2012; Supiano, Ozminkowski, Campbell, & Lapidos, 1989). However, other research suggests that reminiscence and writing in groups does not affect older adults' mental health, as measured with depression and self-esteem inventories (Stevens-Ratchford, 1993). In his doctoral dissertation, Saunders (2005) analysed writing produced by older adults in his poetry workshops, and identified themes related to resiliency and transcendence beyond the material concerns of life. While Park and Brenna (2015) studied older adults' participation in a single writing contest, rather than group, the significance of a writing community emerged for participants: "writers who usually worked alone and in isolation saw this as an opportunity not only to get involved but also to have a place to share their writing . . . in doing so, the writers created a community" (p. 109).

Rather than focusing on an evaluation of impact, some literature has focused more on the "how" of writing group facilitation with older adults. Smith's (1982) intent in her paper, "Teaching Autobiography to Senior Adults," was to describe her own senior's writing course so that it may be offered elsewhere, but she still touched on the impact her group had on one of her students: "writing was the first thing in all her life that had engaged her interest over a period of months" (p. 696). Similarly, Koch's (1977) book, *Teaching Poetry Writing in a Nursing Home*, intended to provide guidance to fellow facilitators, but briefly appraised impact, noting, for example, that "reading the poems aloud was important for the students' pleasure" (p. 39).

## **Homogeneity in Older Adult Writing Group Research**

Overall, literature on older adult writing groups has suggested a number of beneficial impacts to individual group members. These studies differed in many respects, for example the frequency of meetings varied across different groups, from a monthly basis (Kelly & Mosher-Ashley, 2002) to a weekly basis (Supiano et al., 1989). The directedness of the writing programs also varied; some groups used specific, pre-determined writing prompts (Malde, 1988) while others encouraged participants to choose their own themes (Schuster, 1998; Sluder, 1990). Despite these differences, a striking commonality amongst most studies is that they examined groups devised and facilitated by researchers (Chippendale & Bear-Lehman, 2012; Malde, 1988; Saunders, 2005; Stevens-Ratchford, 1993) or professionals such as continuing care staff (Kelly & Mosher-Ashley, 2002; Sluder, 1990), occupational therapists (Schuster, 1998), counsellors (Supiano et al., 1989), or writer-instructors (Getzel, 1984) set apart from other group members as evidenced by the stark expression “the writer and the old people” (p. 193). Literature that has offered guidance to the facilitators of older adult writing groups has, of course, also focused on facilitator-led groups (Birren & Deutchman, 1991; Kazemek, 1997, 1999; Koch, 1977; Smith, 1982).

In contrast to the literature on leader-designed groups, for her doctoral dissertation Nora (2008) asked older adults to design their own writing group. Participants were given licence to choose their own meeting times, writing topics, mode of sharing, and so forth. Although her work represents a deviation from the other studies found on this topic, Nora did still approach participants with the idea for the group and did position herself as the group’s facilitator. Thus, it seems that researchers interested in the experiences of older



adult writing group members have largely focused on groups *administered* to, rather than formed and sustained by, older adults.

### **Writing Group Structures**

This next section will consider how the structure of a writing group – either facilitator-driven or member-driven – may carry different implications for senior writers’ experience of a creative community.

### **Grassroots Initiatives**

The term grassroots can carry many different meanings; for example, in some contexts the word has been used to differentiate the working class from a more privileged upper class (Batliwala, 2002). In this inquiry, grassroots initiatives are considered projects that are created and sustained by “average” citizens (individuals without special skills or training) who act without the incentive of compensation. Such initiatives forgo professional facilitation or expertise and put decision-making power into the hands of “everyday” community members. In this context, the descriptor of grassroots is also meant to signal collaboration and interdependence, rather than hierarchy.

As described in the previous section, most of the research on the impacts of older adults’ writing group membership has attended to groups facilitated by either researchers or professionals. Groups administered by researchers were typically short-term for the purpose of brief experimentation and analysis (e.g. 5 weeks in Malde, 1988; 8 weeks in Chippendale & Bear-Lehman, 2012). Given this bounded timeline, one potential difference between researcher-led groups and grassroots groups may be members’ reasons for participating. Everard (1999) showed that the reason an older adult has for engaging in a particular activity is highly correlated to the activity’s impact on subjective

well-being. More specifically, she found that engaging in an activity for the purpose of socialization is positively related to well-being, while engagement in an activity to simply “pass the time” is negatively related to well-being. While it cannot be said that individuals volunteer for researcher-led groups only to “pass time,” people’s motivations for, and hence impacts of, participating in such groups and in grassroots groups may differ. Another potential difference between these group formats is the extent to which members feel they are directing their own writing practice; this possibility will be explored in the next section.

### **Self-guided Expression**

In writing groups facilitated by professionals such as therapists, the facilitator’s role may involve selecting and distributing resources for group activities (e.g. Supiano et al., 1989) or administering pre-planned exercises (e.g. Larsen et al., 2003). While group members may have played a role in initially identifying or championing the need for a group to form, in such groups the facilitator takes the lead in deciding how that need will be met. In these scenarios, an older adult writer may be positioned “as a recipient of the professional’s goodwill, rather than an active, creative agent” (Schuster, 1998, p. 140).

In the field of expressive arts therapy, the question of the facilitator’s role is at the centre of a long-standing academic debate between “the two original theoretical orientations of the field” – “art psychotherapy” and “art as therapy” (Slayton, Archer, & Kaplan, 2010, p. 112). Those that align themselves with the former approach assume that art can only serve a therapeutic purpose when it is produced alongside a professional trained in psychotherapeutic methods. Proponents of the latter approach assume that simply engaging in creative activities can be “therapeutic in itself, regardless of the

specificity of therapeutic intent” (Maddalena, 2009, p. 223). In other words, engagement with art on one’s own accord, without professional guidance or feedback, can in itself have an impact on mental health. It has been argued that self-led explorations into the arts allow individuals to identify themselves as empowered artists, rather than disempowered candidates for psychological treatment. This essential distinction in self-concept is poignantly described by various researchers; Meunier (1999) wrote that “a poetry writing group allowed emotionally isolated patients to interact with the community and provided an alternative experience of self as a poet/writer instead of a patient” (p. 163), and Howells and Zelnik (2009) expressed:

Participant-artists described the doing of art as therapeutic, even spiritual, but it was distinctly not conceived of as “therapy.” Many people commented on this fact as an essential aspect of their decision to participate in the program— that is, they were looking for a place to do art, to be students, and not for a place to receive therapy. (p. 220)

As Saunders (2005) aptly described, research “on both the aging process. . . and creativity is already large and constantly growing. However, few studies deal with creativity and its manifestations in the elderly and even fewer, if any, deal with creative writing and the strategies for finding one’s voice, used by older persons” (p. 16). To his summation, I would add that even fewer studies have examined older adults’ creative writing in the context of community-based, non-hierarchical peer groups. As such, an examination of a grassroots writing group, comprised of older adults and founded on an “art as therapy” approach, seems particularly valuable.

## **Providing Support to Others**

Another point of difference between facilitator-led groups and grassroots groups may be found in the degree to which members feel they are supporting others. In lieu of professionals like therapists or nurses positioned as “helpers,” grassroots groups may position members as interdependent sources of support. Being a provider of social support in older adulthood has documented benefits. Brown, Nesse, Vinokur, and Smith (2003) found that for adults aged 65 and older, providing social support to a spouse or other social network member (e.g. a friend or neighbor) is correlated with reduced mortality, while Heaven et al. (2013) demonstrated that participating in a social network (e.g. by volunteering) during the transition to retirement improves retirees’ health and well-being.

## **Subjectivity in Writing Group Research**

As described in the previous section, nearly all of the literature on older adult writing groups relates to facilitator-led groups. In such groups, it seems that personal writing is viewed as a deliverable “treatment” to which members respond. This treatment-based perspective is widely used in psychotherapeutic research, and, as Bohart, (2000) explained, it tends to undervalue the client’s own role in his or her wellness. This perspective is reflected not only in the organization of the group under study, but in the researchers’ choice of methodologies. Of the nine studies found that assessed impacts of older adults’ writing groups, four assessed the impact on group members using only quantitative measurements (Chippendale & Bear-Lehman, 2012; Malde, 1988; Stevens-Ratchford, 1993; Supiano et al., 1989). The other five studies described impacts in qualitative terms, but all relied on researcher observation and interpretation, containing

none or only a few participant quotes (Getzel, 1984; Kelly & Mosher-Ashley, 2002; Saunders, 2005; Schuster, 1998; Sluder, 1990). The irony of this trend, towards evaluation instead of conversation, is that writing groups are often construed as avenues for self-expression, providing individuals with an opportunity to be seen and heard. Indeed, a common theme in writing group literature is that of personal empowerment. However, the research supporting the use of writing groups for self-expression seems to actually privilege an academic voice, which overlooks subjectivities. The present inquiry sought to address this literature gap by attending to the subjectivities of writing group participants themselves.

### **Women Writers**

The practice of personal writing is intimately linked to all aspects of an author's identity, including gender. Women's relationships to life-writing have assumed different shapes and significances across time. In the Victorian period, an autobiography of a woman's life would have exhibited "an impermissible form of attention for the female self," (Heilbrun, 1999, p. 69). Certain kinds of attention (namely the male gaze) were acceptably paid to women, but women were not encouraged to focus their attention on their own lives. Writing in a diary was once one of the few modes of creative expression a woman could engage in without appearing "presumptuous or inappropriate," as long as it was kept private, that is (Beattie, 2007, p. 17). Thus, the oppression of women's voices was enacted in both social and textual spheres.

Heilbrun (1999) noted that the proliferation of stories centered on female lives in the last century is itself a marker of feminist progress: as women move away from the peripheries of stories to assume the role of protagonist, they cease to be "appendages"

and become fully human (p. 27). She has suggested that with the rise of feminism and the emergence of new role opportunities for women, writings by women have also reflected new possibilities and “awakenings” (p. 8). By producing autobiographical art, women can subvert norms that firstly oblige them to exercise modesty in self-disclosures and that secondly threaten non-conformers with the label of narcissism (Watson & Smith, 2002). McLaren (2002) argued that women’s autobiography is fundamentally a feminist tool “because the subject plays an active role in her own self-constitution” (p. 152). Given that the act of personal writing, for women, carries implications of power and social position that extend far beyond the creative act itself, this inquiry sought to acknowledge and explore these implications with participants further.

### **Summary**

Writing about personal experiences has been shown to positively impact individuals’ mental health and wellbeing in many studies. However, in this area of research, writing has typically been studied as a clinical intervention; the topic and duration of writing has been prescribed to participants and various effects have been quantified. Another trend in writing research has been a focus on solitary writing practice, and though some studies on writing groups have been put forth, very few have explored the nature and meaning of group interactions in depth.

One demographic that writing groups may appeal to is that of older adults. As Campbell (1985) has argued, the power of the writing group to enhance older adults’ lives “may lie in its underlying assumption that despite the decline and loss present in aging, there are also positive changes, opportunities for creativity, growth, and wisdom” (p. 547). The present study sought to develop an understanding of how writing group

membership was experienced by older women. Literature on older adult writing groups is sparse, and that which does exist almost entirely attends to groups that are professionally facilitated, again reflecting researchers' tendencies to focus on personal writing as an intervention rather than a self-directed activity. Thus, not only were the women's experiences of writing and sharing explored in the present study, but their experiences of sustaining a creative community – without a professional facilitator – were investigated as well.

In the theory of narrative identity, story-telling is considered an innate drive rather than a clinical treatment, and individuals are thought to continuously reconstruct their identities by forming and internalizing an evolving life story (McAdams & McLean, 2013). From this perspective, personal writing carries clear implications for identity, and hence the present study explored how writers' understandings of themselves, their aging, and their womanhood has been influenced by their participation in a writing group. Conversely, the impact that individuals felt their age and gender had on the meaning of their writing practice was also explored.

Existing studies on writing groups tend to privilege quantitative measurement and researcher interpretation over writers' narratives. This trend is somewhat surprising, given that the subject under study – personal writing – has been intimately tied to individuals' own processes of meaning-making and identity negotiation. The present investigation aimed to address this neglect of the writers' own voices by using a narrative inquiry methodology. In this way, writers' own understandings of their creative practice and their lives was encountered, directly.

## **CHAPTER 3: RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

Using the qualitative research methodology known as narrative inquiry, I explored the experiences of older women who participated in a grassroots writing group. As Clandinin et al. (2006) related, narrative inquirers “talk, wonder, explore, question, and puzzle over moments lived . . . and stories heard, told, and shared” (p. 36). Narrative inquiries are always guided by wonders that stimulate exploration, rather than questions awaiting definitive answers. This inquiry was guided by three research wonders: (1) what is it like to write, to share writing with others, and to help sustain a writing community, as a person, as an older adult, and as a woman? (2) how does the women’s creative practice shape, or get shaped by, their understandings of their life, their aging and their womanhood? (3) how has individuals’ writing and their coming to writing evolved over time, in response to changing stages of life and social conditions? In this chapter, the qualitative methodology known as narrative inquiry is outlined. Next, sample selection and recruitment methods are outlined, and the participants’ writing group is described. The process used to compose field and research texts is discussed, and finally, key ethical issues are considered.

### **Setting the Ground for Narrative Inquiry**

Qualitative inquiry first emerged in the 1970’s, as a counter-movement to the quantitative tradition that had, until that point, dominated social science research (Schwandt, 2007). The qualitative movement argued that more informed understandings of some phenomena could be gained by exploring beyond “the limitations of what has been conventionally accepted as evidence” (Polkinghorne, 2007, p. 472). Ultimately, qualitative researchers are concerned with the subjective *meanings* that individuals

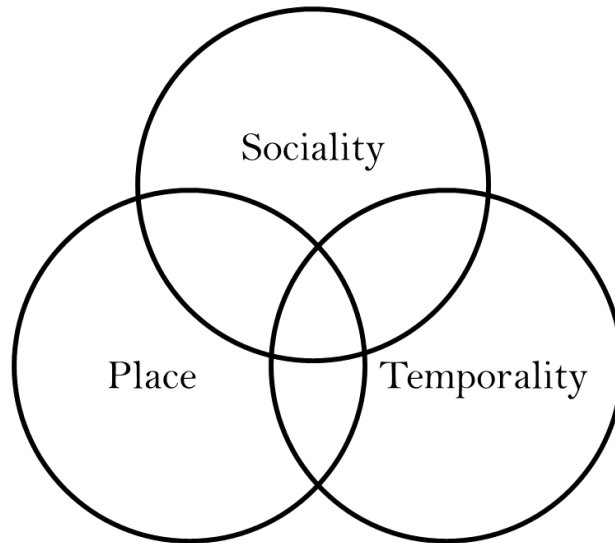


construct from their experiences (Greenhalgh & Taylor, 1997). This turn towards considering subjective voices was based on a new paradigm – a new “set of interrelated assumptions about the social world” (Filstead, 1979, p. 34). In this paradigm a singular objective reality, that exists independently from any human belief or interpretation, does not exist. Instead, an individual is thought to mentally construct his or her own reality (Ponterotto, 2005). Not only are realities multiple and idiosyncratic, they are influenced by an individuals’ contextual milieu: “the individual’s experience and perceptions, the social environment, and the interaction between the individual and the researcher” (Ponterotto, 2005, p. 130). Given that social interactions impact one’s reality, the research process is not viewed as a transaction in which the participant’s knowledge can be cleanly transferred to the researcher, as in the offering of a physical object. Rather, knowledge is thought to be socially generated through discourse. The researcher’s task becomes to engage an individual in reflection and dialogue, and to collaboratively create findings or knowledge through interaction (Ponterotto, 2005). Thus, any research inquiry is understood to be shaped by the temporal and local context in which it is conducted – a context which includes the researcher’s assumptions and values (Flick, 2002). Stivers (1993) captured the unique intent of qualitative research to aim for “believability, not certitude, for enlargement of understanding rather than control” (p. 424).

### **Narrative Inquiry**

Qualitative research is idiographic in nature (from the Greek *idios* meaning individual) and “focuses on understanding the individual as a unique, complex entity,” (Ponterotto, 2005, p. 128). 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). As Connelly and Clandinin (2006) related, to use narrative inquiry is to adopt a particular way of thinking about human experience – a view that simultaneously attends to three aspects of experience: sociality, temporality, and place. These dimensions are also referred to as the “three commonplaces” of narrative inquiry (Figure 1). The three commonplaces of narrative inquiry emerged out of Dewey’s (1938) philosophy of experience. Wright, McCarthy, and Meekison (2004) explained that from Dewey’s holistic view, “experience cannot be reduced to fundamental elements” (p. 46). According to Dewey, experiences can only be considered as such if they include the three elements of interaction, continuity, and situation, which correspond to the three commonplaces just mentioned.



*Figure 1.* Three common-places of narrative inquiry.

The first criteria of experience, interaction, is met when a person interacts with his or environment (which could be constituted by another person, an idea, the natural world, and so forth) and is both changed by and changes that environment through this interaction (Rodgers, 2002). Interaction is reflected in the narrative commonplace of sociality. When an inquirer attends to sociality, he or she explores both the personal conditions of an individual (e.g. feelings and hopes) and the social conditions in which the individual exists (e.g. other people, communities) (Ollerenshaw & Creswell, 2002). For example, in the present inquiry sociality was explored, in part, by engaging participants in discussions around the idea of “audience” and how they perceive the audience of their writing group.

The second of Dewey’s criteria, continuity, refers to the notion that we as humans “make sense of each new experience based on the meaning gleaned from our own past experiences, as well as other prior knowledge we have about the world” (Rodgers, 2002, p. 846). Interaction and continuity are inseparably linked, as interactions continuously inform subsequent interactions. As Dewey (1938) wrote, “Different situations succeed one another. But because of the principle of continuity something is carried over from the earlier to the later ones” (pp. 43–44). Continuity corresponds to the narrative commonplace of temporality. When an inquirer attends to temporality, he or she views an individual “as having a certain kind of history, associated with particular present behaviors or actions that might seem to be projecting in particular ways into the future (Connelly & Clandinin, 2006, p. 479). In other words, an individual or an event are located in time and the present manifestation of that individual or event is not thought to be somehow separate from the happenings of the past or future (Clandinin & Connelly,

2000). In this inquiry, temporality was attended to by probing how the women's experiences of writing had changed over time.

The third criteria of experience, situation, corresponds to the narrative commonplace of place and refers to the actual location in which an individual's experiences transpire (Ollerenshaw & Creswell, 2002) as well as the location of the research. Place, in this sense, is the "concrete, physical, and topological boundaries" (Connelly & Clandinin, 2006, p. 480) within which the happenings of a life (and a research process) have proceeded. In this inquiry, place was attended to by considering the geography of participants' lives, and how the places where they lived may have impacted their writing.

In narrative inquiry, the three commonplaces of sociality, temporality, and place are thought of as the boundaries that define a three-dimensional inquiry space (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). Throughout the research process, the researcher encounters participants within this space and moves in both directions along all three axes. What inflates the space three dimensionally is the work of the inquiry process. The researcher moves between the personal and social dimensions, and between the past and future dimensions, of both themselves and the participants. In this way there is an inward and outward motion from the internal to the external conditions of the experience, and a backward and forward motion over time. Clandinin and Connelly (2000), in describing this motion, have written,

By inward, we mean toward the internal conditions, such as feelings, hopes, aesthetic reactions, and moral dispositions. By outward, we mean toward the existential conditions, that is, the environment. By backward and forward, we

refer to the temporality – past, present, and future. . . to do research into an experience - is to experience it simultaneously in these four ways and to ask questions pointing each way. (p. 50)

Thus, the three commonplaces are to be considered in relation to the participants' lives, as well as in relation to the researcher's and participants' experience of the research process. For example, exploring "place" would entail considering both "places where [participants'] lives were lived" as well as "places where inquiry events occur" (Clandinin & Caine, 2013, p. 167). The research process is not considered a neutral recess from the participants' life, nor is the researcher considered an actor who somehow manages not to interact with participants. The entire research encounter becomes a part of participants' experiences and stories.

### **Methodology Rationale**

Two of the major proponents of narrative inquiry, Clandinin and Connelly (2000), express that the "why" of this approach is answered with a naturalistic argument: as humans "understand the world narratively. . . it makes sense to study the world narratively" (p. 17). The psychologist Bruner (1991) postulated that "we organize our experience and our memory of human happenings mainly in the form of narrative" (p. 4); in other words, we understand our experiences, ourselves, and the world, through stories that invoke the Deweyan criteria of interaction, continuity, and situation. As Coles (1989) related, stories are "what we all carry with us on this trip we take, and we owe it to each other to respect our stories and learn from them" (p. 30). As described in the previous chapter, narrative inquiry is particularly well-suited to an investigation of writing group members' experiences as so much research on the topic has neglected

writers' voices. Although literature on expressive writing often links narration to self-understanding and identity-making, researchers have often aimed to understand these links through objective observation. That is, much of the same research that acknowledges the storied nature of knowledge does not actually pursue stories, but outcomes. Furthermore, Dixon (1995) has argued that narrative inquiry may well serve investigations of community development endeavours (such as community-based creative groups) because participants are given more control than external researchers in creating the project's meaning; in other words, a "Community Story" can emerge (p. 329). Narrative inquiry was also chosen for its ethical stance, as it favours mutually respectful and collaborative relationships (Clandinin & Caine, 2013). By privileging participants' own "insider" wisdom of their experiences, and by ensuring participants' feel as though their knowledge has been accurately represented (through processes like member-checking), narrative inquirers keep relationships with participants at the fore of the research process.

### **Participants**

At the outset of this research, I actively searched for an expressive writing group in the western Canadian city where this research took place. The group I chose to conduct this inquiry with is here referred to as the "Wordsmiths" (pseudonym). When this study commenced, 19 people were listed in the Wordsmiths' member directory. All members identified as women. Attendance of group meetings was not compulsory, and usually five to nine members attended each meeting. The Wordsmiths group was the only local writing group I encountered that had (1) a non-professional leader, and (2) a specifically senior demographic. Given the unique challenges of later life outlined in the literature

review, and the tendency toward providing professionally-mediated services to this population, exploring experiences of individuals in a grassroots group like the Wordsmiths seemed particularly compelling. This group will be described in greater detail later in this chapter.

Purposeful sampling was used to recruit three participants for this inquiry. I contacted a total of five group members, each of whom I had selected based on factors such as our level of rapport and their verbal expressiveness in group meetings. As narrative inquiry emphasizes the collaborative nature of the researcher-participant relationship and acknowledges the researcher's impact on the generation of knowledge, a strong working relationship with participants (wherein they feel secure in expressing and negotiating their story) is ideal. In July of 2016, following ethics approval, I invited members to participate via an emailed letter (Appendix A). This letter contained a brief statement of the inquiry's purpose, potential benefits to participants, the time commitment involved in participation, participant inclusion criteria, and my phone and email contact information. The first two women I emailed agreed to participate. The third woman did not respond, the fourth woman explained that she had only recently joined the writing group and was therefore not well-positioned to speak about the group, and the fifth woman agreed to participate.

The three participants met four necessary criteria: (1) willingness to spend a minimum of four hours in interviews spread over three to four months, with additional time to check transcripts if they elected to do so (2) having been a member of the Wordsmiths group for at least one year, (3) having attended at least six meetings of the Wordsmiths group, and (4) being English-speaking. The first criterion was chosen to

ensure that group members were aware of the time commitment required to participate; this criterion formed part of the inquiry's informed consent process. The second and third criteria were chosen so that participants were able to speak to the experience of belonging to an expressive writing group for at least a moderate length of time. As this research sought to investigate how participation in a writing group is experienced across time and particularly across the transitions of aging, I wanted to explore my wonders with group members who had spent considerable time participating and forming relationships in their creative community. The fourth criterion was chosen to ensure that participants were able to articulate themselves during interviews without extraneous effort.

Given that narrative investigations seek to retain stories within their particular, local contexts, rather than to pool and subsequently fragment many different stories, and given the depth of understanding made possible with small sample sizes, this inquiry was limited to three participants. I had multiple points of contact with each participant and elicited narratives, both verbal and written, from them (as outlined in the coming section on field texts). Having a minimal number of participants allowed me to engage fully in a rich narrative analysis, and including three participants, rather than two, reduced the risk of making binary comparisons across narratives.

### **The Wordsmiths Group**

The focus of this inquiry engaged the experiences of the Wordsmiths writers, not the group itself. Although the group as a whole was not the central phenomenon of interest, the group did provide the backdrop for participants' creative experiences, and thus a brief description and history of the Wordsmiths will be provided here.



In the foreword to the collection of members' stories that the Wordsmiths group published over 20 years ago (research notes, 2016) the authors explained that at each group meeting, coffee and a brief agenda of business items is followed by "the main item on the program: the reading and discussion of papers written by members" (p. 1). Thus, at least in this volume, the primary goal of the Wordsmiths group emphasized the sharing of expressive writing. Founding members of the Wordsmiths had met through their enrollment in a seniors' life-story writing class and had wished to carry on meeting after their class had ended; hence, the group was established in 1989. Throughout the Wordsmiths' history, it had met at various sites in the Western Canadian city where it was located – at a library, at a school, and at the time of this inquiry, at a community centre that freely offered space to various community-based groups. At its largest, the Wordsmiths had approximately 35 members (men and women), but the roster at recent meetings had fluctuated between five to nine women, all of whom are over the age of 60. Each meeting lasted between 1.5 and 2 hours, and followed a relatively predictable structure: casual greetings and procurement of coffee or water in the first ten minutes, completion of business items in the next twenty minutes (these included the taking of attendance and the reading of last meeting's minutes), and the reading of members' writing in the last hour or hour and a half, depending on the number of pieces that members had prepared. Pieces were read one at a time, by any member who had prepared a piece and was inclined to share, and each piece was followed by an opportunity for the group to respond.

## **Composing Field Texts**

As Guba and Lincoln (1994) have argued, “an etic (outsider) theory . . . may have little or no value within the emic (insider) view of studied individuals” (p. 106). Thus, a researcher’s preconceived notions of what it may be like to exist inside the participants’ world may in fact be of little relevance to the participants’ reality. Thus, the present inquiry was guided by particular wonders, rather than concrete research questions, as set forth in Chapter 1. In this inquiry, these research wonders were explored by attending to the experiences of writing group members in two different contexts. Firstly, I had multiple, one-on-one research interviews with each participant, and secondly, I participated in the Wordsmiths group.

### **Research Interviews**

Interviews are often used as the source for composing field texts in narrative inquiries (Connelly & Clandinin, 2006). Riessman (2008) stated that in studies of biographical experience, “it is preferable to have repeated conversations” (p. 26). The three participants each joined me in four research interviews lasting between 45-90 minutes. Participants were invited to choose between meeting at their own homes, at a private interviewing room at the local university, or at the community space where the writing group met. All conversations were entirely audio-recorded with participants’ written consent (Appendix B). Audio files were stored on a password-protected computer, only accessible by me, for the duration of the inquiry, and will be stored for five years after the period of data collection has been closed. I also made field notes during and immediately after each conversation that were stored in the same manner.

These field notes further animated the conversations by providing contextual information and my own thoughts.

In narrative inquiry, interviews typically take on a conversational, rather than question and answer, form. As Clandinin and Caine (2013) have expressed, “conversations create a space for the voices and stories of both participants and researchers to be heard and composed,” (p. 167). Thus, the pacing and direction of each one-on-one encounter largely emerge as conversations unfold. This approach assumes that participants do not possess objective truths to be excavated through the asking of the “right” questions. Beal (2013) noted that the aim of her interviews was not “to arrive at an objective account of what occurred but to locate each [individual’s] experiences...and focus on the meaning and consequences of their actions” (p. 697). I prepared open-ended questions related to my initial and emerging research wonders prior to each conversation with participants (see Appendix C for a sample). Between conversations I listened to collected audio recordings and noted any elements of participants’ stories that I wanted to further explore. I entered each interview with some specific questions in mind, that I wove into our discussions when appropriate.

A minimum of three weeks elapsed between each conversation. Spacing the interviews afforded time for transcriptions, preparing interview summaries, and giving participants time to read and respond to those summaries prior to the next interview. By spreading conversations across a period of months, I was also able to gain a better sense of each participant’s life across the timeframe of the study. Connelly and Clandinin (2006) have argued that narrative inquiry “needs to take place over a long period of time for the inquirer to . . . be able to see things as they change rather than things are they are”

(p. 485). Although the schedule of conversations was flexible to some extent, I ensured that it was not extended interminably by informing participants that all conversations would take place within five months of the first meeting. This aspect of our negotiated participant researcher relationship gave a bounded sense to the interviews and provided an exit strategy for the inquiry (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000).

### **Writing Samples**

In addition to my conversations with participants, I invited each respondent to share some of their original writing with me. While these pieces are not featured in any of the findings chapters, they shaped conversation and the resulting data is included in part. The women were asked to select and share two pieces of writing – one piece they had shared with the Wordsmiths and one they had not. These writings were considered to be artefacts and served as further field texts. Respondents were invited to share these pieces at their leisure, at some point in the course of the four interviews. They were informed that excerpts from their writing may become part of the final research text. I inquired into each participant's reasons for selecting her pieces and explored how the pieces fit into her writing life. I also informed participants that if they felt compelled to generate any new pieces of writing reflecting on the research process, I would be honoured to hear or read such writing as well. As Clandinin and Caine (2013) wrote:

It is important as researchers to stay awake to the multiple ways to tell and live experiences. Each form of field text, and each negotiation of the same, tells us about how others make sense or meaning from experience, and might also point us to possibilities of diverse final research texts. (p. 172)

## **Group Participation**

Connelly and Clandinin (2006) explained that narrative inquiries proceed from two possible starting points: telling or living. To start in telling is to attend to life as it *has* been lived, as related through interviews or conversations. To start in living is to attend to life as it is *being* lived, i.e. to observe events of participants' lives as they unfold. In living, the researcher is positioned "in the midst of ongoing. . . life" (Connelly & Clandinin, 2006, p. 484). Although this inquiry engaged individuals in telling (as described in the previous section), it also involved a living component.

After initially contacting the Wordsmiths in August of 2015, I was invited to attend their next group meeting the following month. In addition to the contact I had with participants through interviews, I continued to attend more than half of the monthly meetings for the duration of the inquiry. I contributed to the group meetings as all members did – by responding to group members' writing and occasionally sharing my own writing. By joining participants in this setting, I was able to attend to their experiences in a manner distinct from our conversations; I not only heard the telling of their stories but immersed myself in the living of those stories. I observed and made field notes of group interactions, with attention to participants, as I worked alongside the larger group. I prepared a notice of research letter to give to non-participating members, explaining the nature of the observations I would be making in group meetings (Appendix D). I intended to give it to members present in each group meeting I attended during the active data collection stage of the inquiry, i.e. the period in which research interviews were conducted (August to December of 2016). However, I made the decision

to only gave it to members prior to the first group meeting I attended during this period, in August of 2016.

I made the decision only to circulate the letter once, based on my sense that I had already established my researcher role with regularly attending members and that members were comfortable with my presence in meetings. In the first group meeting I attended (September of 2015) I had expressed to all members present that I was interested in the group because of both personal and research motivations, and that I hoped to eventually conduct research with group members. Prior to commencing this inquiry, I had made a short film about my research plans and had informed members of the Wordsmiths, via a hard copy letter that I distributed in the January 2016 group meeting, that I hoped to submit it to a national research competition. I had asked members to please express if they had any issue with me using the group's real name in the film. The only responses I received were positive and encouraging, and no members expressed concerns. When my film was chosen as a winning entry in April of 2016, the group conspired to give me a congratulatory card and flowers. Thus, I felt that repeatedly circulating the notice of my research letter in each meeting I attended between August and December of 2016 would be inconsistent with the trust and rapport I had already established with the Wordsmiths. No members voiced concerns in response to the notice of research. To fully engage with the group during meetings, and to avoid becoming an alienated spectator to the group process, I made field notes outside of the meetings. Some of my observations informed the questions I prepared for research interviews with participants.

While my focus was on participants' experiences and events that I observed, field

notes also provided space for me to reflect on my relationships with participants. Living alongside participants in their writing group changed the relational space of our encounters, and such changes warranted documenting as they were “integral to understanding the composition or co-composition of field texts and research texts” (Clandinin & Caine, 2013, p. 167). Clandinin, Murphy, Huber, and Orr (2009) related their own process of documenting their experiences as researchers engaged in a narrative inquiry: “by giving voice and making visible our stories of our experiences in relation with participants, we created a space in which to tell our stories, hear others’ stories, and give these stories back to each other with new insight” (p. 83).

### **Composing Research Texts**

In this inquiry, interim texts were generated from field texts and, in turn, final research texts were generated from interim texts. At all stages of the inquiry, texts were positioned within the three-dimensional narrative inquiry space meaning that the commonplaces of temporality, sociality, and place were simultaneously attended to. These commonplaces were considered with both initial and emerging research wonders in mind. The movement from field to interim to final research texts was iterative rather than linear in narrative inquiry, as narrative researchers “continue to live in relational ways with participants throughout the process of making their findings public” (Clandinin & Caine, 2013, p. 172). Participants were consulted throughout the writing process (as described in the coming section on co-composition). Thus, the precise shape of the final research text was not known until the latter stages of the inquiry, but was intended to present the individual narratives of all three participants, and include a discussion of the narrative threads that emerged in the inquiry process.

## **Interim Research Texts**

In writing the interim research texts, inquirers begin to consider how participants' stories relate to their research puzzles and "begin to make meaning of. . .field texts" (Clandinin & Caine, 2013, p. 172). Morris (2001) argued that this process should involve thinking "with" stories and not merely thinking "about" stories; he explains:

Thinking about stories conceives of narrative as an object. Thinker and object of thought are at least theoretically distinct. Thinking with stories is a process in which we as thinkers do not so much work on narrative as take the radical step back, almost a return to childhood experience, of allowing narrative to work on us. (p. 55).

Morris (2001) also suggested that these processes cannot be cleanly divorced from one another, and that researchers dialectically engage in both thinking with and about the stories they encounter. One way in which narratives may "work" on us as inquirers is through engaging our emotions, and these emotional responses may inform moral and ethical actions (Morris, 2001). As Nussbaum (1986) wrote "we discover what we think . . . partly by noticing how we feel" (p. 15). Morris (2001) posited that emotion is not (as is commonly thought) the opposite of reason and thus is not meant to replace reason; instead, emotion, thought, and action are considered inextricably linked. Therefore, I endeavoured to allow narrative to work on me at the interim stage of my inquiry by attending to my emotional responses to the field texts, and reflecting on these responses with participants.



## **Final Research Texts**

When moving from interim to final research texts, the inquirer must consider the potential audiences that may receive the account of study participants' experiences. However, it is important that this consideration not sway researchers towards shaping participants' experiences into smooth, cohesive cover stories. Cover stories are those in which tensions (e.g. within an individuals' experiences, between personal and social narratives) are "perpetuated rather than interrogated and discussed" (Olson & Craig, 2005, p. 164). The narrative inquirer is tasked with the work of maintaining accounts of the complexities of participants' lives, and seeking out and illuminating such tensions, in the final research text. As Clandinin and Caine (2013) emphasized, "final research texts are never meant to have final answers . . . rather they are intended to engage audiences in rethinking, retelling, and inquiring into experiences" (p. 173).

## **Co-composition**

Fraser (2004) noted that narrative research, with its attention to the contextual and idiosyncratic nature of every story, "subdue[s] the [researcher's] inclination to posture as an expert" (p. 181). However, the position of researcher still entails interpretive engagement with the texts generated in an inquiry. Inviting participants to read and negotiate the stories of their lived experiences throughout the research process (in this case, through the movements from field to interim to final research texts) is one way to ensure that participants are connected to the study's authoring process. Sparkes (1995) wrote of the ethical power that is wielded through the composition of a research text:

Whose voices are included in the text, and how they are given weight and interpreted, along with questions of priority and juxtaposition, are not just textual

strategies but are political concerns that have moral consequences. How we as researchers choose to write about others has profound implications, not just for how readable the text is but also for how the people the text portrays are "read" and understood. (p. 159)

By co-composing texts, participants could exert a greater influence over the political and moral positioning of their life stories. In this inquiry, one- to two-page summaries of each interview were sent to the participants via email at least 3 days before the subsequent interview. Participants were invited to make any comments or amendments either over email or in the subsequent interview, and participants were also verbally prompted to do so at the beginning of each interview. Carlson (2010) recommended clearly communicating what kind of feedback the researcher desires from the participants and, thus, I invited participants to comment on the accuracy of content (e.g. sequence of events in their lives), how they felt about interpretive observations I have made, and their sense of emerging research puzzles. Participants were also included in the composition process during the move from interim to final research texts. Chapters 4 and 5 (findings) in this inquiry were emailed to all three participants after the completion of writing; participants' replies were minimal and primarily encouraging.

### **Significance of Study**

Throughout the entire research process, it was important to reflect on the justifications for the inquiry from personal, practical, and theoretical stances. Writing about my own narrative in the beginning allowed me to position myself within the inquiry and formed part of the personal justification for its undertaking. The personal significance of the inquiry was revisited as I generated final research texts, and these

reflections form part of Chapter 6. In considering practical justifications for the inquiry, I explored how participants' experiences "might be shaped differently in the future" (Clandinin & Caine, 2013, p. 174), and how those experiences may be related to or suggest social injustices or inequities. Practical considerations for professionals and community members are also presented in Chapter 6.

In considering the theoretical justification of the inquiry, I attended to how the research contributes to "new methodological and disciplinary knowledge" (Clandinin & Huber, 2010, p. 436). Such justification does not require that participants' experiences be generalized to an entire population; instead, one individual's experiences may be found to animate particular theoretical claims. Clandinin and Caine (2013) explained that "while narrative inquirers do not generalize from the experiences of their participants, they add to policy development by pointing out the complexities, contradictions, and inconsistencies often inherent in policies and their implementation" (p. 175). In other words, by working to retain the complex nature of participants' storied experiences, I aimed to contribute to a more nuanced understanding of how creative writing and community both function in the lives of older women. As the inquiry did not seek to confirm or deny a specific hypothesis, and as some research wonders "need to be generated in the midst [of the inquiry] rather than in advance" (Connelly & Clandinin, 2006, p. 485), the theoretical justifications for this inquiry also emerged within the research process and are discussed in Chapter 6. Research wonders that remained "unanswered" were also considered theoretically valuable as they can "propel the further development of the methodology" (Clandinin & Caine, 2013, p. 175).

## **Ethical Considerations**

Ethics approval for this study was obtained from the University of Saskatchewan Research Ethics Board. The application process included submitting detailed written plans for participant recruitment, obtaining informed consent, and data collection. As well, the application had to demonstrate my due diligence in considering conflicts of interest, and potential risks and benefits to participants.

### **Informed Consent and Confidentiality**

In this inquiry, I engaged with participants' experiences both through their telling (conversational interviews) and living (group meetings), and thus I needed to negotiate informed consent in both contexts. Each participant was given a consent form (Appendix B) at the outset of their first interview, and I verbally explained each of the form's sections. The form outlined the purposes of the inquiry, potential benefits and risks, and the required time commitments. The form stated that confidentiality would be maintained by storing all audio-recordings and field notes on a password-protected computer. Participants were also informed that although pseudonyms would be used, their anonymity would not be completely guaranteed because the thesis would make reference to the region of Canada in which they lived. The consent form explained that participants had the right to withdraw from the inquiry at any time, and that if they chose to withdraw, they could elect to have their recordings and associated field notes destroyed. Participants were informed of the ongoing member-checking opportunities that narrative inquiries entail, and provided with a rationale for this aspect of the methodology.

As discussed previously, a notice of research form was given to group members prior to my observation of group meetings (Appendix D). This form communicated the

purpose of my observations in relation to the inquiry and emphasized that I would not identify any group members by name in the final research text. The form also stated that if any individual did not feel comfortable, I would refrain from making field notes.

### **Relational Ethics**

As Clandinin and Caine (2013) have argued, “ethical matters pervade narrative inquiry” (p. 169), and these matters range from issues of story ownership to the changing relationship between researcher and participants. In narrative inquiry, developing personal connections with participants is acknowledged as an inevitable part of interacting with one another in the research process; Clandinin et al. (2009) wrote:

We do not stand outside the lives of participants but see ourselves as part of the phenomenon under study. As narrative inquirers, we study the lives of participants as we come alongside them and become part of their lives and they part of ours. (p. 82)

As such, the researcher’s imperative is not to prohibit relationships, but to engage in and attend to them from a relationally ethical stance. In narrative inquiry, this stance is based in an ethics of care (Clandinin & Caine, 2013). Noddings (2010) stated that in a caring relation, “the carer puts aside her own values and projects, and tries to understand the expressed needs of the cared-for” (p. 391). However, the carer’s response to those needs is not solely dictated by the cared-for, but impacted by factors such as “the resources available, and competence of the carer” (Noddings, 2010, p. 391). An ethics of care demands ongoing negotiation that engages both researcher and participant equally. Furthermore, the responsibilities of relational ethics “may not end when [researchers] negotiate that final research text but. . .may linger and reappear” (Clandinin, 2006, p. 5)

as both the researcher's and participants' lives continue on after the inquiry comes to a close. For example, in this inquiry, I needed to negotiate whether to continue attending writing group meetings even after I had moved into the stage of composing final research texts, and I chose to slowly decrease my attendance with passing time. After being a part of the group for many months, and even sharing my own personal writing, this negotiation demanded the qualities of caring ethics: "openness, mutual vulnerability, reciprocity, and care" (Clandinin & Caine, 2013, p. 169).

### **Rumination**

The present inquiry posed minimal risks to participants. However, a marginal risk to participants' psychological health was still of concern. In one-on-one conversations, I engaged participants in discussions of their experiences of the writing group and explored how their experiences of aging have intersected with their writing. As such, conversations with each of the three women did sometimes flow towards difficult transitions and events of aging, such as widowhood. Recounting emotional and painful episodes of their lives may have increased their risk for ongoing rumination. Rumination has been defined as a "persistent and repetitive ... focus on ... negative (grief-related) emotions" (Stroebe et al., 2007, p. 463). This phenomenon is of ethical concern as researchers have demonstrated an association between rumination and maladaptive adjustment to loss (Nolen-Hoeksema, 2001). To mitigate the risk of rumination, a short discussion of this risk was included in the participants' consent form (Appendix B) along with contact information for local counselling resources.

## **Transitioning to Chapter 4**

Chapter 1 examined the context of my personal entry point into this inquiry, while Chapter 2 positioned the inquiry among existing literature and conveyed theoretical and methodological justifications for its undertaking. Chapter 3 has articulated the methodology guiding the inquiry, and the specific methods applied. In this chapter, I have also examined the ethical principles assumed by narrative researchers. The following chapter explores the experiences of Margaret, Helen, and Josephine (pseudonyms) - three women who belonged to a community-based writing group, here referred to as the Wordsmiths. More specifically, the following chapter considers how the women's practice of writing, sharing, and listening to their own and one another's stories afforded opportunities to see themselves with greater self-compassion.

**CHAPTER 4:  
OLD STORIES, NEW VOICES: SELF-COMPASSION IN AN OLDER  
WOMEN'S WRITING GROUP**

**A Wordsmiths' Reading**

Five women sit facing one another, around tables that had been arranged into a square. Some hands lie folded, while others straighten papers or lift coffee cups, but all share the intricate lines and creases of old age. In the expectant stillness, one woman named Helen stands up to read her story. In the piece, she describes her home town - a small farming community - as it was when she was a child. Though her stance first appeared dramatic (few members stood when it was their turn), her reading is the opposite of theatrical. Free of the drawn-out pauses and forced rhythms that writers sometimes inject, her voice has the brisk and pleasant tone of a newsreader, until reaching the sentence about her mother. She suddenly stops in her reading, and her lips purse tightly as her eyes fill with tears. After taking a few steadying breaths, Helen continues. Her voice stretches thin, as if being passed through a clothes-wringer. Beneath the fluorescent lights, she speaks the words she had selected to signify her mother – words she may have laboured over when none seemed adequate, or words that perhaps came to her as easily and assuredly as her love for her mother persists. The women around the table do not break their silence with any attempts to comfort her, and with the next sentence, Helen's voice regains its evenness. As soon as she finishes reading, she sits down and apologizes to the group, shaking her head at herself and muttering that she should have read it through a few times before bringing it to the meeting. One of the eldest and longest-standing members, Elsa, replies with frank tenderness, "It's



okay. We're all going through the same problems.” From the other side of the table, Margaret nods her silvered head, “It’s part of life.” (Interim research text from field notes, September 2015).

### **Introduction**

The preceding passage characterizes a small group of older women writers, here referred to as the Wordsmiths, whose shared creative practice is the subject of the present research. Each woman’s membership in their writing group entailed two practices – first, individually writing stories from the experiences of their lives, and second joining together to read those stories to one another at monthly group meetings. Through narrative inquiry, the impacts of this creative community on the women’s lives was explored. This paper examines a specific aspect of the research findings, attending to the ways in which the women incorporated new narratives into their individual identities. Through penning, sharing, and listening to one another’s stories, the women nurtured more self-compassionate views of themselves.

### **The Changed Writer**

Many studies have examined how writing about personal experience affects individuals physically and emotionally. Often cited as the seminal publication on the subject, Pennebaker and Beall (1986) investigated whether a brief writing assignment, in which students were asked to write about a personal and highly emotional experience, could affect students’ health. The researchers found that students who completed personal writing made fewer visits to the doctor in the follow-up period, compared to students who were asked to write about trivial topics. Since their work, researchers have continued to ask questions about how writing impacts writers, finding results ranging from reduced

blood pressure (Willmott, Harris, Gellaitry, Cooper, & Horne, 2011) to diminished symptoms of post-traumatic stress (Di Blasio, Ionio, & Confalonieri, 2009). Although a breadth of research supports the notion that writing does influence psychological and emotional functioning (Baikie & Wilhem, 2005), it seems that less research has scrutinized how writing may be impactful via changes to individuals' beliefs about themselves and their lives. That said, some researchers have explored how writing may prompt such changes. For example, one study found that participants who completed an expressive writing exercise demonstrated higher measures of implicit self-esteem as compared to participants in a control condition (Connor et al., 2011). In the same year, Kirk, Schutte, and Hine (2011) found that writing was associated with an enhanced sense of self-efficacy. Focusing on writing in a group setting, Larsen et al. (2003) noted that a writing group provided women "the opportunity for discovery, changed meanings, and new interpretations of experience" (p. 289), while Chiang, Lu, Chu, Chang, and Chou (2008) found that men who joined a writing group gained "self-affirmation, confidence, and self-esteem" (p. 7).

### **A Closer Look at Self-Compassion**

Research on the impacts of writing suggest that the writing process can shape individuals' perceptions of their lives and themselves in positive ways. Although these studies connected writing to self-esteem and self-efficacy, the related concept of self-compassion was not discussed. Neff (2003) suggests that self-esteem amounts to an internal ranking that people assign to themselves, based on a process of self-evaluation and social comparison. According to Neff, self-compassion has less to do with ranking, and is a state in which a person sees themselves as imperfect, but still worthy of caring

and kindness. Robust self-compassion has been associated with both physical health, as indicated by a greater commitment to health-promoting behaviours like diet and exercise (Sirois, Kitner, & Hirsch, 2015), as well as emotional health, as indicated by less stress and rumination, and greater satisfaction with life (Galla, 2016). Allen and Leary (2010) reviewed research on self-compassion, concluding that self-compassion plays a significant role in a persons' ability to cope with adverse life events. They noted that more self-compassionate people were "less likely to catastrophize negative situations, experience anxiety following a stressor, and avoid challenging tasks for fear of failure" (Allen & Leary, 2010, p. 115).

Aging into older adulthood may bring a range of difficult life events, as individuals may lose functional abilities, roles, statuses, and loved ones. Older adults may find their self-compassion challenged by self-criticism, argued Gullette (2004), who described youthfulness as the "single best promise" of success in western society (p. 19). Allen, Goldwasser, and Leary (2012) found that self-compassion predicted adaptation to older age; older adults with more self-compassion were less resistant to using assistive devices, such as walkers, or assistive strategies, such as asking others to repeat what they are saying. They speculated that people with higher self-compassion may be more willing to "accept their limitations and see their difficulties as part of normal human experience rather than as unique and isolating" (p. 449).

### **Inquiring into Writing and Self-Compassion in Older Adulthood**

The process of writing about one's thoughts and feelings has been investigated by many researchers, with some linking writing to changes in self-appraisals (e.g. self-esteem in Chiang et al., 2008; self-efficacy in Kirk et al., 2011). However, less research

has explored how writing may contribute to self-compassion. Self-compassion is thought to play an important role in coping with adversity (Allen & Leary, 2010). Given the varied physical and emotional challenges that older age may bring, a better understanding of the relationship between writing and self-compassion could provide insight into the value of writing as a constructive activity for older adults. The present inquiry attended to the experiences of three members of an older women's writing group, delving into the personal significance that writing and sharing stories held for the women.

Many studies on the psychological impacts of writing ask participants to complete pre-scripted writing assignments, modelled after Pennebaker and Beall's (1986) expressive writing protocol, and less research has explored the experiences of writers in less structured, community-based groups. Furthermore, research on the impacts of writing has often focused on change brought about by the individual writing process, and has somewhat neglected to examine how *sharing and listening* to stories can affect members (e.g. Bolton, 1999; Houlding & Holland, 1988; Young, 2007). Studies that have focused on writing in groups have often privileged the perspectives of the researchers or group facilitators (e.g. Furman et al., 2002; Kelly & Mosher-Ashley, 2002; Young, 2007), while neglecting to seek or include first-hand accounts of the writers' experiences. The present research attempted to shed light on the experiences of individuals within a writing community, and to keep writers' experiences, as told in their own voices, at the fore of the inquiry.

## **Narrative Inquiry**

### **Methodology**

Narrative inquiry is a qualitative research methodology that attends to the

experiences of people's lives, as told through stories. Narrative inquirers are not primarily concerned with stories themselves, but instead aim to understand the *experiences* that people convey through the stories they tell. As Connelly and Clandinin (2006) explained, individuals interpret their experiences and imbue them with meaning by storying their lives. Stories thus become a researchers' "portal to understanding" (Connelly & Clandinin, 2006, p. 477), and the task of the narrative inquirer is to attempt to "illuminate the meanings" of a person's stories (Wang & Geale, 2015, p. 195). This approach also compels researchers to look at others' experiences through a narrative lens. According to Clandinin and Connelly (2000), Dewey's (1938) ontology of experience provides such a lens. Dewey proposed a theoretical framework that organized any experience into three necessary and inseparable dimensions: interaction, continuity, and situation. Many years later, Clandinin and Connelly (2000) retitled these dimensions as sociality, temporality, and place. Interaction or sociality refers to the relationships and tensions between one's internal states and the social world, while continuity or temporality refers to the continuous movement of an individual through time, and situation or place refers to the fact that any experience unfolds in a particular place or sequence of places (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Dewey, 1938).

Thus, in this research methodology, narrative "is both phenomenon and method" (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990, p. 2). Researchers study experiences as told through narratives and use a narrative understanding of experience to reflect upon participants' stories and lives. Narrative researchers also recognize the transiency of the research encounter, and accordingly, acknowledge the incompleteness of any understandings generated in the research process. Each participant's life extends into a past the narrative

inquirer can never encounter, and continually moves forward into an unknowable future, meaning that researchers both enter and conclude inquiries “in the midst” of their own and others’ lives (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 20). In the present research, narrative inquiry was used to explore the experiences of three women who belonged to a writing group. More specifically, the inquiry examined how the women made meaning of their shared practice of writing and sharing their lives.

## **Methods**

**The writing group.** Three members of a community-based writing group participated in the study. The writing group was based in a small Western Canadian city and is referred to throughout by its pseudonym the Wordsmiths. At the time of the inquiry, the attendance at group meetings fluctuated between 5 to 9 women, all over the age of 60. The group met for one to two hours on the second Saturday morning of every month. They gathered at a local community centre, whose director donated the space for the group’s use free of charge. Each meeting proceeded in approximately the same manner, with women taking the first ten minutes to greet one another, get settled, and help themselves to water and coffee. The group’s president officially began the meeting with a reading of the last meeting’s minutes (administrative decisions made, and the titles and authors of all the stories that were shared in the previous meeting). This reading only took a few minutes, and the remaining part of the hour, or hour and a half, was free for the main event – the women’s stories. Any writers who had brought drafted or completed stories were invited to read them aloud to the group, who always listened.

Women exclusively shared stories based on the events of their lives. Common topics of their life-writing included their families of origin, challenges, and joys of “the

old days,” school years, young romances, forays into independence and careers, parenting, travelling, and the aging process. Although there were no explicit rules on how much reading time each member was allotted, most readings were limited to one or two stories and kept under 10 minutes. At the end of a reading, the group members who had been listening often responded with appreciative remarks, and sometimes briefly shared memories that the story had triggered them to recall. The meetings tended to either end early (if few writers had brought pieces) or on time; if writers had not had enough time to read the stories they had brought, they merely kept them to read at the next meeting. The women bade each other farewell and returned to their lives outside the writing group, often not crossing paths until the next meeting, but possibly working on new stories in the interim.

**Participants.** I had the privilege of attending a few group meetings before starting my inquiry, and invited three group members to participate based on our rapport. The three women I selected met four participation criteria: (1) willingness to spend a minimum of four hours in interviews spread over three to four months, with additional time for transcript-checking, (2) membership in the group for at least one year, (3) having attended at least six group meetings, and (4) English-speaking.

**Composing research texts.** Ethics approval for the inquiry was obtained from the University Research Ethics Board and participants’ experiences were explored through a variety of methods. First, each woman participated in four unstructured interviews that lasted 45 to 90 minutes. Interviews were audio-recorded and later transcribed verbatim. Two participants chose to be interviewed in their homes, while one chose the community centre where the group met. The first interview established how each woman had come to

join the group and how she had engaged in writing throughout her life. Subsequent interviews further explored the participants' experiences of writing and sharing stories, attending to wonders that collaboratively emerged in the inquiry process. Second, at the outset of the inquiry, the women were asked to select two of their stories to share with me - one they had shared with their writing group and one they had not. They could choose to read their writings to me during any of the interviews. The context in which each story was written, the significance it held for the woman, and her reasons for selecting it, were discussed. Third and finally, I made field notes both on the interviews (attending to non-verbal communication and my after-thoughts), and on my participation in the writing group. Over the course of the inquiry (beginning in September of 2015), I attended and participated in several of the group's meetings - responding to shared stories and occasionally sharing my own writing. By joining participants in interviews and in the group, I was able to encounter their experiences both as told and as lived. Following each group meeting during the active data collection phase (August to December of 2016), I made field notes of how the women had interacted verbally and non-verbally, and occasionally invited women to respond to these observations during interviews.

The interview transcripts, participants' selected writings, and my field notes comprised the field texts, which then formed the basis of interim texts – intermediate writings in which I interrogated the meaning and significance of field texts (Clandinin & Caine, 2013). In writing interim texts, I first considered each participant's experiences somewhat separately. By reading through and appending notes to each woman's text/s in turn, I considered the particularities of their experiences. At the same time, I stayed awake to emerging “narrative threads” - elements of experience that echoed across



multiple participants' stories. Interim texts were shaped into final research texts through an iterative process of considering narrative threads, consulting literature, and member-checking (participants were consulted over email throughout the writing process).

### **Findings**

Over the course of interviewing and coming alongside the three women who participated, I developed an understanding of how their membership in the Wordsmiths writing group provided them with continuous opportunities to develop their identities. More specifically, the processes of writing, sharing, and listening to one another's stories appeared to afford the women new "voices," to use a term proposed by Penn (2001). Voices, in this sense, refers to the internal narratives the women had about themselves, their lives, and their world. It seemed that the Wordsmiths group served to nurture new voices of self-compassion for each of the three women. The processes that the women engaged in – writing stories, sharing stories, and listening to other members' stories – will be explored separately in this chapter, to demonstrate how each activity opened the writers to greater self-compassion. Overall, the findings emphasize that identity development is an ongoing process that continues throughout older adulthood. This inquiry advances the position that writing groups, without any therapeutic intent or expertise, create intimate spaces that promote this process.

### **The Women from the Wordsmiths Group**

The three participants are here identified by their pseudonyms Margaret, Helen, and Josephine. Margaret was 79 years old at the time of our 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 Wordsmiths and had belonged to the group for about four years when we met. Helen was 83 years old at the time of our first interview. 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 the local university. When enrolled in a writing course, her teacher had referred her to Wordsmiths, as an opportunity to continue sharing stories after the term's end. Helen joined soon after and when we met, her years of membership tallied to over two decades. Josephine was 88 years old at the time of our 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 Wordsmiths to her. She had been a steady member of the Wordsmiths for 13 years when I met her. All three women grew up in small, rural towns near the mid-sized city where the Wordsmiths ran and where they all lived at the time of this research.

### **Writing Stories**

To refer to the Wordsmiths as a "writing group," may be a slight misnomer, as that term envisions people who gather alongside one another and write as a group. Helen, Margaret, and Josephine's group might be more aptly called a "sharing group," as the women came together only to share writing that they had already composed in private. In conversations with all three women, we explored the individual acts of writing that preceded group meetings. The women's writing practices differed in frequency and purpose. Josephine was the most prolific writer as she had journaled almost every day since she was a teenager, while Margaret and Helen wrote more sporadically of their

pasts. The pieces that the women chose to share with me naturally varied in tone and topic as well, from Helen's pensive reflections on how her childhood town had changed, to Margaret's loving sketch of her husband, to Josephine's light-hearted rhymes about the winter-time, written for a grandchild. While each woman's relationship with writing was unique, all wrote about the people, places, and events they had directly experienced, and I came to understand that this process opened each of them to new possibilities of identity formation.

**Invitation to re-examine.** In one of our conversations, Margaret gave me a photocopy of a brief article on life-writing entitled "Lesson of a Lifetime," saying it might be of interest to me. The article's author noted that to remember one's past is "not simply a wistful exercise in sentiment" but rather an opportunity to re-examine oneself (Osborne, 2000, p. 358). This statement succinctly described an impact of writing that was most directly referenced by Margaret but could be traced through the other two women's experiences as well. For Margaret, membership in the writing group was an invitation to re-examine herself through the act of writing stories. In one interview, Margaret spoke about the harsh voice of her inner critic, and explained how the writing process could sometimes lead her to challenge the critic's messages:

You question yourself, you question your parenting, you question, uh...you know, the way you've lived your, your life, and what might have been, what might have been a better way, and uh...then you start writing about something and, and then you think, "okay, well...I don't think that I was such a bad parent," you know?

[...] when you start writing things that you actually did and how you did them and

think “okay,” you know? [...] [that] helps see yourself a little bit differently.

(Interview 4, November 2016)

As in all autobiographical writing, Margaret’s writing process involved reviewing and describing the events of her life. As she sifted through and reconstructed her memories for a story - perhaps a story about a child’s birthday party she had hosted, or a story about keeping vigil by a loved one’s bedside – she gathered moments of herself in action. In penning her past behaviours onto paper, she gave them weight and substance. Stories thus became artifacts that accumulated and presented concrete “evidence” of the person she was, and some stories, as she described, could present her with evidence of the good she had done in her life. The days, months, or years that separated Margaret, the writer, from Margaret, the protagonist, gave her a measure of distance from which she could consider past decisions and actions. Ayduk and Kross (2010) contended that “a self-distanced perspective” (p. 843) is an adaptive way to remember events, and involves looking upon, rather than reliving memories. In writing, Margaret could assume a self-distanced perspective, and saw herself with more appreciation and compassion. Thus, it seems that writing was not only a method by which she could craft stories, but also new self-appraisals.

**The voice of self-compassion.** To use Penn’s (2001) notion of “voices,” it seems that writing allowed Margaret to generate new inner voices that spoke of herself with greater self-compassion, reassuring her that she was not “such a bad” parent, or “such a bad” person in other ways. Voices, in this sense, refer to the multiple, co-existing, and ever-changing inner voices that inhabit every person, and that are used to describe ourselves to ourselves. Penn (2001) spoke about writing as an “act of discovery” in which

a person may come to unintentionally speak “in a voice that feels new” (p. 49). She explained that writing may nurture, for example, “the voice that forgives,” or “the voice that appreciates,” which can surround and lessen the importance of voices that may speak more negatively (p. 47). When Margaret was writing a story and recognized, in the writing process, that she had in fact been a good parent, she generated a new voice – one that would not necessarily drown out her inner critic but could engage it in a conversation. It seems that the Wordsmiths group, by prompting members to reflect upon and write about their lives, may have been a catalyst for many members to develop their own new voices, engaging themselves in these kinds of inner conversations, and nurturing positive self-talk.

**Carrying new voices forward.** Although the women in Margaret’s writing group examined and wrote of their *past* experiences, the voices they developed in this process seem to be carried forward through their present. Bruner (2004) suggested, “we become the autobiographical narratives by which we ‘tell about’ our lives” (p. 694). As the women of the Wordsmiths wrote stories, they re-constructed pieces of their personal histories, often describing discrete episodes with chronological beginnings and endings. For example, during one of the group meetings that I attended, one of the writers read an extraordinary story she had composed about the summer her father nursed an abandoned baby bear up to a healthy adolescence. However, this focus on the past did not necessarily mean that the writers only developed new understandings of past events. Rather, it seems that writing led the Wordsmiths women to shape new ideas about themselves (e.g. Margaret’s notion of herself as a good parent), that could span the continuity from the past to the present, and possibly to the future. As Randall and McKim

(2008) noted, the point of writing is “not to live *in* the past at all but live *off* the past; to experience it as biographical capital by which, in the present, our lives may be enriched” (p. 246, original emphasis). From this perspective, the women of the Wordsmiths were not just briefly re-entering the past as they wrote stories, and then returning to the present, completely unchanged, as soon as they put their pens down. Instead, to write a new story of a past experience was to add a new voice with which a woman could describe herself in the present. In Margaret’s case, that voice was one of self-compassion.

### **Sharing Stories**

The women of the Wordsmiths group could choose whether to bring their stories to monthly group meetings and share them aloud with one another. In these meetings, the group president would ask each woman in turn whether she had brought any pieces that she would like to read (as the atmosphere was casual and egalitarian, the president would sometimes ask other women to carry out this duty). This small politeness – individually addressing and inviting each woman in the group to read, rather than asking any would-be readers to identify themselves - symbolizes an attribute of the group that I understood to be central to its impact. Put simply, the women cared about what one another had to say, and by extension, one another. If one writer declined to read with a nicety like “I have some things but you’ve heard them before,” or “I brought something but it’s too long,” a few women would warmly counter: “we like to hear things again,” or “we have lots of time.” When the group demonstrated genuine interest in each other’s stories, those inner voices of self-compassion, which may have been seeded by the writing process, seemed to grow louder and surer.

**Receiving kind attention.** In other kinds of creative groups, where people might engage in tasks like painting or quilting while chatting about current events or their lives, it seems that each person's attention would move fluidly from the creative task at hand to other group members and back. The Wordsmiths provides a clear contrast to this kind of inter-relating, as members focused their attention on one woman at a time, intently listening to personal stories that often took a few minutes to read. Margaret expressed certainty that when the women listen, "their mind isn't anywhere else, it's there" (Interview 1, July 2016). Notably, the writers' concentration was not spent on picking out flaws or supplying critiques of pieces, but on the plain act of listening, or what might be described as kind attention. While listening, the meeting room was absolutely silent and still, and no cell-phones or side-conversations distracted any of the women away from the sound of a story being read by its author. After a reading ended, the women who had sat and listened often did respond, but only to offer their appreciation or reminiscences of their own that were sparked by the story they had heard.

**Sharing who you are.** Margaret, Josephine, and Helen all spoke about the act of reading a story as an act of revealing the self. As Helen said, by reading your stories to the group, "really, you're sharing who you are" (Interview 1, July 2016). Her comment indicates that the writers recognized how inseparable they, as people, were from the stories they wrote and shared. Even a story that did not focus on its writer still revealed a great deal about her. For example, one of the pieces that Margaret chose to share with me was about a family friend from her childhood, and his many contributions to her first community. In listening to her describe him with such fondness, I learned how much she valued generosity and the visual arts. Helen emphasized that sharing writing meant

significantly extending herself to others: “[reading is] a big thing to do if you feel like ‘this is really personal’” (Interview 1, July 2016). Josephine even compared her stories to her children, saying that when she writes, “it’s like producing a child and hoping it will be well-received” (Interview 2, September 2016). Ultimately, sharing stories meant sharing oneself with the group.

Sharing was a particularly vulnerable act when the story contained intense emotions. Josephine spoke about sharing her story of a “beautiful little girl” she had once taught to read in her days as a teacher. The story described how happy Josephine had been to watch her student succeed, and then her terrible grief when the student, in her adult years, had suicided. She explained, “reading aloud to people is more powerful than I had expected. [...] I had never wept about [her] before but I found myself weeping when I read it [to the group] and I had to stop” (Interview 1, August 2016). In sharing this story with the Wordsmiths, Josephine not only described the “facts” of what had happened to her student; she also bared how deeply she had cared for her student, and how long her feelings of desolation had persisted. She did not expect her reading to bring forth such emotions, but it did nonetheless. All three women I interviewed emphasized that the group did not judge readers’ displays of emotion. During my time in group meetings, I witnessed a few women brought to tears by reading their own stories and noted how the group neither ignored nor hurried to subdue these moments. As Margaret put it, simply, in the Wordsmiths meetings, it was “okay to be who you are and feel the way you feel” (Interview 1, July 2016).

**The group’s voice.** The women’s writing process invited them to look towards the past, and, in prompting re-examination, could catalyze shifts in how the Wordsmiths



women viewed themselves. One possible shift, as described by Margaret, was towards greater self-compassion. It seems that when women later brought their writing to their group, shared the stories of their lives out loud, and received kind attention, that self-compassion could be further nurtured. When the group witnessed and accepted a story, they witnessed and accepted the writer. Such non-judgement has been termed “unconditional positive regard” by Rogers (1951) and described as “a warm acceptance of each aspect of [a person’s] experience as being a part of that [person],” (Rogers, 1957, p. 98). Such regard is neither approval nor disapproval, but simple acceptance (Rogers, 1957). In this inquiry, it was apparent that the Wordsmiths writing group constituted a unique space that elicited this kind of non-judgement from members. It seems that positive regard may be built more quickly in writing groups than in other community groups where intimate memories are not shared. As Riikonen and Smith (1997) suggested, “being understood is another way of feeling morally worthwhile” (p. 109). As the Wordsmiths women revealed themselves to each other, one story at a time, they felt understood and sensed their lives to be worthy of sharing. Thus, even when the group only nodded and thanked a writer for sharing a piece, it seems that the members were adding the collective volume of their voices to the writer’s inner voice of self-compassion.

### **Listening to Stories**

Members of the Wordsmiths were not required to bring pieces of writing to every meeting, and none of the women I interviewed referenced feeling pressured to bring new stories each month. As 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. I came to understand that listening, a necessary task of group membership, could also shape the women's ideas about themselves, just as writing and sharing could. In simply listening to one another's stories, the women were again presented with fertile opportunities to develop new ways of seeing themselves. By learning about other women's struggles as documented in stories, the Wordsmiths saw the common threads of strife that bound them together. Thus, in addition to the processes of writing and sharing, the third process of group membership – listening – also seemed to lead the writers towards a greater sense of self-compassion.

**The surprise of similarity.** As Margaret, Josephine, and Helen all noted, hearing the other members read was an opportunity to learn about the people behind the stories. Stories, and the way stories were told aloud, revealed their authors. For Helen, listening to stories meant learning, over and over again, how people's lives tended to contain more pain than she had thought:

I've heard so many stories [...] and I've thought 'man, we don't even know what some people go through, we have no idea,' like you know it just kind of blows you [away] sometimes and you think that life has been so good for that person. All of a sudden you find out that it wasn't; it wasn't all peaches and cream.

(Interview 3, October 2016)

Thus for Helen, the writing group was a space in which to reconsider her ideas about other women. In hearing of other women's challenges, through the stories they read in meetings, Helen recognized that the outward appearance of a life did not always match its true plot. Over the course of our interviews, Helen shared with me her own gamut of challenges – a marriage that crumbled, a depression that she referred to only as a dark,

“hellish place” to which she would never return (Interview 3, October 2016) and, most recently, the sudden and terrible death of her young grandson. As Josephine poignantly stated in one conversation, “life has a lot of magic in it, and then there’s a lot that’s tragic in it, and you can’t live as long as most of us have without experiencing both” (Interview 4, November 2016). By listening to Wordsmiths stories, Helen realized that although her losses were vast and unique, she was not alone, and that struggle is common to the human experience. As Birren and Deutchman (1991) wrote, members of writing groups come to realize that “people are all survivors” (p. x). In her study of women’s writing groups, Virly (1998) also noted that listening to stories emphasizes “an interrelated, connected experience,” where similarities precede differences (p. iii).

**Common humanity.** Germer and Neff (2013) put forth the term “common humanity” to describe the notion “that the human condition is imperfect, and that we are not alone in our suffering” (p. 857). Schechter (2008) argued that having a sense of common humanity could reduce feelings of isolation, alienation, and shame, and is accordingly associated with greater self-compassion. As Helen attended meetings and heard stories of lives that weren’t “all peaches and cream” (Interview 3, October 2016), her ideas about a “normal” life were disrupted, and it seems likely that her own life would have assumed a more acceptable standing in her eyes. For all the women of the Wordsmiths, listening to one another’s stories exposed them to the joys and pains of one another’s lives, and affirmed the commonality, and hence acceptability, of their experiences. Thus, self-compassion seems to have been nurtured by all three tasks of writing group membership – writing, sharing, and listening.

## Discussion

Writing, sharing, and listening to stories seemed to offer the women of the Wordsmiths opportunities to further develop their identities, and more specifically, to nurture inner “voices” (Penn, 2001) of self-compassion. In writing, the women reviewed the events of their lives and were sometimes reminded of the “good” they had done, arriving at a greater appreciation for themselves. Later, in sharing their stories aloud, the women received the steady attention of the group, and were given a space of acceptance in which to share emotions. Thus, the sharing process further affirmed the value of both the women’s stories and themselves. Finally, by sitting and listening to the stories of other members, the women were reminded of the common threads that connected their lives and were assured that their own challenges represented commonality over abnormality, leading to a further turn towards self-compassion. This inquiry highlights how the women’s writing group allowed them both to “re-story” their pasts with pen and paper, and to “re-story” themselves at the same time. In revisiting and writing about their life experiences, Wordsmiths members seemed to soften the inner voices they used to speak to themselves. Although intrapersonal growth did not appear to form any part of the group’s outward purpose, or the members’ expectations, it was nonetheless an apparent dimension of Margaret, Helen, and Josephine’s experiences. Belonging to the Wordsmiths helped them assume a multitude of “voices;” as they participated in the group, they could try out, adopt, and abandon different voices with which to describe themselves and their lives. The voice of self-compassion was one of many they may have connected with over the course of their membership.

## **Growing Old Through Writing Groups**

These findings suggest that identity development is not intrinsically limited, nor is it slowed or stopped in older age. Randall and McKim (2008) saw older adulthood as a rich and fertile period of growth, proposing a distinction between passively “getting old” in a physical sense, and actively “growing old” emotionally and spiritually. They defined “getting old” as the inevitable physical trajectory that begins “from the instant of our birth” (p. 3) and growing older as becoming “better in some sort of way: riper, wiser, more mature” (pp. 3-4). Part of growing older, Randall (2013) argued, is the evolution of our self-understanding “as we view and review the past, as we read and re-read it, through the lens of an ever-changing present” (p. 14). When the Wordsmiths members wrote stories, they “re-read” themselves through the lens of present; when they shared those stories they “re-read” themselves through the group’s lens of acceptance, and when they listened to others share, they “re-read” themselves through the lens of common humanity. In the circle of a writing group, members’ identities become malleable. One’s life is understood not as a finished, foreclosed story, but “an evolving story,” which Ray (2000) noted is the true meaning of wisdom. Thus, to borrow Randall and McKim’s (2008) terms, writing groups may provide the scaffolding upon which members can grow older, rather than merely getting older. In doing so, they resist and rebel against the “narrative of decline” (Randall, 2013, p. 15), often associated with aging.

## **Sites of Identity Development**

Writing groups appear to be unique sites that may offer ongoing opportunities for identity development, precisely because the groups converge around *stories*. Stories, because they are so intertwined with their authors, seem poised to reveal vulnerability,

create intimacy, and incite self-compassion and connection, perhaps more than other practices that groups may gather around, such as walking, the visual arts, or coffee and conversation. In writing groups, members are not only sharing a space and a task, but the storied experiences of their lives. Adkins et al. (1985) argued that writing and sharing stories in groups creates group cohesion and trust, both elements central to successful therapy groups. All three of the women noted that they felt a degree of trust within the Wordsmiths that could not be matched by other leisure groups they belonged to. Furthermore, writing groups may be unique in the sense that they progressively foster deeper levels of sharing, as group members learn more and more about one another (Birren & Deutchman, 1991, p.46). Given this understanding of writing groups as sites of identity development, such groups clearly warrant further, in-depth study as informal, non-therapeutic sites of psychological growth.

## **Transitioning to Chapter 5**

The preceding paper explored how Margaret, Helen, and Josephine – three women who belonged to a community-based writing group - seemed to open themselves to greater self-compassion as they wrote, shared, and listened to life stories. The women described different means through which their writing practice led them towards more compassionate relationships with themselves. The following chapter also discusses how the writing group offered members opportunities for self-development. However, where Chapter 4 focused on the emergence of the women’s self-compassion, Chapter 5 examines how the women’s writing practice engaged them to look forward to their futures with a sense of hope and agency.

**CHAPTER 5:  
WRITING TOWARDS HOPE: HOPE IN AN OLDER WOMEN'S WRITING  
GROUP**

**“Wash Day”**

Mother's wash day was  
always Saturday  
each Friday night  
after church every Sunday

bent over the copper tub, she softly sang  
twisted her mouth  
in concentration  
sighed as her eyes found each  
small bloom of color  
where white should have been

I sat on an upturned bucket  
Stood  
Behind her shoulder  
Stayed as far away as I could

Her hair was long, golden  
flax fraying  
in the steam  
Red curls rolled  
and pinned at dawn  
black  
with grey  
seeping in at the temples

I remember how the powder flowed  
And scattered  
like fairy dust  
How the line swayed  
each time her hands flew away  
How warm air  
bathed us all

In quiet,  
In ritual,  
In love



## **Introduction**

The preceding poem, entitled “Wash Day,” was inspired by a research conversation I had with Josephine (Interview 3, November 2016), one member of a small group of older women writers here referred to as the Wordsmiths. The women of the Wordsmiths joined together once a month to share stories they wrote about their lives. Often these stories recounted scenes from their childhoods. In one group meeting, a writer read a piece about her mother’s wash day, triggering many women around the table to suddenly remember their own mothers’ clothes-washing rituals. Such triggering gave the women hope for further recovery of and revelry in their pasts and was only one of many ways in which the writing group provided women with a sense of hope and a forward-looking story of identity. The following research analysis, conducted in the narrative inquiry tradition, examined the experiences of three Wordsmiths writers’- Margaret, Helen, and Josephine. In part, this inquiry attended to the women’s experiences of hope, arising from their membership in their writing group.

### **Hope in Older Adulthood**

Hope has been defined as an “enduring belief in the attainability of wishes” that allows individuals to commit sustained efforts toward their goals (Moraitou, Kolovou, Papasozomenou, & Paschoula, 2006, p. 73). According to Snyder (2002), hope is not only the expectation that goals may be achieved (i.e. optimism) but the belief that one can and will play an active role in ensuring that goals are met. Quantitative measures such as the Adult Dispositional Hope Scale (Snyder et al., 1991) aim to assess this belief by asking individuals to rank themselves on statements like “There are lots of ways around any problem” and “I meet the goals that I set for myself” (p. 585). Many researchers have

explored how hope impacts health and well-being. In their meta-synthesis of hope research, Duggleby et al. (2010) demonstrated that outcomes such as increased physical energy and improved emotional well-being have been consistently associated with a sense of hope. Another study found that women rated as having high hope levels were more likely to take steps to protect their physical health, as compared to those with low hope (Irving, Snyder, & Crowson, 1998). Low levels of hope have been correlated with compromised physical health (Pedersen, Denollet, Erdman, Serruys, & Domburg, 2009), less motivation to form or sustain meaningful relationships (Joiner & Rudd, 1996), and a greater propensity towards self-harm and suicide (Joiner, Brown, & Wingate, 2005). Hope may be particularly significant to wellbeing in later life. Erikson and Erikson (1997) posited that older age is often a time of waning hope, as individuals may encounter successive physical and emotional challenges. They wrote that hope “may easily give way to despair in the face of continual and increasing disintegration, and in light of both chronic and sudden indignities” (p. 107). Recent research with a sample of nearly 1, 500 individuals did find that hope, as measured with a quantitative self-report, tended to decline from middle to late adulthood (Marques & Gallagher, 2017). However, other research has shed light on the perseverant hope and positivity that older adults may carry forward, even in the face of debilitating forces like dementia (Wolverson, Clarke, & Moniz-Cook, 2010).

### **Nurturing Hope**

Research has suggested that hopefulness is a fluid trait and can be modulated by different life experiences. In Zimmerman’s (1990) theory of “learned hopefulness,” hope is bolstered when a person has “opportunities to enhance perceived control” (p. 72). Just

as living through uncontrollable events can lead to a state of diminished motivation known as “learned helplessness” (Seligman, 1975), Zimmerman (1990) supposed that a more motivated and hopeful outlook on life can be developed by experiences where one feels in control. Moraitou et al. (2006) discussed learned hopefulness in the context of older adulthood. They noted that older adults who have a history of successfully achieving goals, and who perceive themselves as still having certain strengths, will have greater hope in their ability to continue setting and meeting goals. On the other hand, they related that older individuals who believe they are “worse off than others” (p. 75) in terms of their current capacities, may have diminished motivation to pursue goals. As one older adult participant expressed in another study, hope means focusing “on what you've got, not on what you haven't got, on the ability, not the disability” (Moore, 2012, p. 33). Given this cognitive understanding of hope, in which self-beliefs impact one’s outlook on the future, the question arises as to how hope may be nurtured in the lives of older adults.

### **Connection and Creativity**

Researchers have suggested that social contacts who support and encourage older adults may enhance their sense of hope, particularly when those allies disrupt individuals’ “fixation on blocked goals” and challenge “negative stereotypes regarding older adulthood as a time of suffering, inactivity, and increased dependency on others” (Moraitou et al., 2006, p. 75). In other words, peers who spread hope are those who help older adults focus on their capacities and on the possibilities of the future. Thus, social engagement in older adulthood is considered a key factor in sustaining hope, and this relationship has received empirical support (Hasson-Ohayon, Goldzweig, Dorfman, & Uziely, 2014). One way that individuals may expand their social networks is through

participation in leisure groups. While some research has investigated the impacts of structured therapy groups on older adults' hopefulness (e.g. Klausner, Snyder, & Cheavens, 2000), less attention has been devoted to non-therapeutic leisure groups. Zimmerman (1990) saw "natural" settings as nurturing hope differently than more structured "skills training" settings, writing that "natural settings" enhance one's sense of control and hopefulness "because they are connected to community life and are not deficit-oriented or dependent on professional expertise" (p. 74). Leisure groups that give members opportunities to reflect upon and creatively express their lives may be particularly hope-engendering, as this kind of self-expression has been shown to bolster individuals' sense of purpose and autonomy (Cadrin, 2006). Writing groups that invite members to write and share stories of their lives are circles that integrate social support, life review, and creative expression, yet little research has examined the relationship between older adults' involvement in writing groups and hope. The present research inquires into the ways that a community-based writing group impacted hope in the lives of three older women writers.

## **Narrative Inquiry**

### **Methodology**

The methodology of narrative inquiry was used to explore the experiences of three older women writers. Narrative inquirers regard stories - both verbalized and written - as expressions of individuals' inner experiences, and generate findings through closely studying narrated experiences. Storying is understood to be a universal process through which people interpret and glean meaning from their lives (Connelly & Clandinin, 2006) – a process that can proceed spontaneously or be prompted (for

example, in research interviews). While other qualitative methodologies similarly privilege stories as representations of experience (indeed, this is a defining feature of qualitative research), narrative inquirers consider narrative to be “both phenomenon and method” (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990, p. 2), and are unique in approaching participant stories with a narrative perspective of experience. With this perspective, experiences are considered to be “relational, temporal, and continuous” (Clandinin & Rosiek, 2007, p. 44), meaning that any experience necessarily involves encounters between one’s inner self and the social world, and that no experience can be truly parsed out from the continuously unfolding timeline of a person’s life. This narrative perspective dissuades researchers from seeing participants as isolated beings experiencing isolated events, and acknowledges that every person is embedded in a social and historical world. Another unique feature of narrative inquiry is the importance placed on researcher-participant relationships. Methodological decisions about the research process are guided by relational ethics (Clandinin et al., 2009), which primarily entail researchers’ commitment to maintain “openness, mutual vulnerability, reciprocity, and care” (Clandinin & Caine, 2013, p. 169).

## **Methods**

**Research wonders.** The present narrative inquiry attended to the experiences of three women who belonged to the Wordsmiths - a community-based writing group. The inquiry was guided by research wonders that evolved over time and through multiple encounters with participants. However, this research maintained a central focus on the women’s lived experiences of writing, sharing, and listening to stories in a group setting, and explored the meanings the women attributed to their shared creative practice.

**Participants.** Three women participated in the inquiry. They were invited to participate based on their fulfilment of four criteria: 1) willingness to spend a minimum of four hours in interviews, with additional time for member-checking, (2) belonging to the group for at least one year, (3) having attended at least six group meetings, (4) English-speaking. All three women lived in the Western Canadian city where their writing group was based. Group meetings, held at a local community centre, took place on the second Saturday of every month and were set to be two hours in length though they sometimes broke early if few writers had brought stories. At the outset of this research, group membership was entirely comprised of women over the age of 60, and meeting size seemed to range from five to ten women (attendance was not mandatory and thus fluctuated). The three participants, along with the other group members, followed a fairly regular rhythm in group meetings – they first settled around the table with water and coffee, then briefly discussed the minutes taken down in the previous meeting (administrative decisions made, and the titles and authors of stories that were shared). With the remaining 60 to 90 minutes, they devoted their attention to the oral reading of their stories. The stories that members brought to the group were composed in the women’s own time, away from the group. Stories were always based upon the women’s lived experiences, but ranged across their lifespans - from recollections of childhood to contemplations of older age - and across a spectrum of tones - from more serious, evocative writing to light-hearted rhymes. Sharing was entirely voluntary, and the group was devoid of any pre-planned writing exercises or peer critique.

**Composing research texts.** The women’s experiences were encountered through interviews and through my own participation in their writing group. Each woman took

part in four semi-structured, audio-recorded interviews each lasting between 45 and 90 minutes. At their discretion, two participants were interviewed in their homes and one participant in the group meeting space (when empty). In addition to discussing their experiences in the group, each of the women was asked to select two of their personal writings to share with me at any point in the interviewing process. Participants were asked about the significance of their selected pieces, and their experiences of either sharing or not sharing each piece with the group, in order to glean concrete examples of the women's writing and sharing processes. Over the seven months in which the interviews were held, I also attended and participated in the writing group's monthly meetings and noted how the women interacted with their peers. These observations were sometimes used to invite discussion during participant interviews. Verbatim interview transcripts, participants' written stories, and field notes I composed in group meetings together formed the field texts from which final research texts were generated. The movement from field texts to final texts was iterative, as close consideration was given to the unique aspects of each woman's experience, and the threads of meaning that seemed to weave through and connect their experiences.

### **Findings**

In "Rhetoric," Aristotle (1924/350 B.C.E.) 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 is left to live for. He presumed that older adults dwell on the past because their futures are "but little." Over the course of 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. By gathering together and sharing their memories, in storied form, the women gained hope for the future. 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 further discovery of their own pasts. Second, group meetings reminded women of their capacity to "read" their lives and still 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. Thus, the members of the writing group challenged Aristotle's simplification, demonstrating that the process of recalling, preserving, and sharing the past served as a steady source of hope in their lives.

### **The Writers**

Margaret, Helen, and Josephine (pseudonyms) had all belonged to their writing group for multiple years, and all were over the age of 75. Margaret was the newest group member, having joined the Wordsmiths approximately four years before this inquiry began. She was 79 years old, a mother of five children, and had enjoyed a dynamic career as a nurse. Margaret was particularly interested in the historical significance of personal writing and viewed the group's stories as important artifacts that preserved the past. Josephine's membership in the group tallied to 13 years, and she was 88 at the time of our first interview. She had pursued a career teaching English literacy, and had raised four children. She expressed a life-long love for stories, especially those with



independent heroines like *Anne of Green Gables* (Montgomery, 1970) and *Little Women* (Alcott, 2004). Helen was the longest-standing member, having been a part of the group for over 20 years. She had built a decades-long career in government administration and had a family of five children. She had developed an interest in creative writing in her retirement and was a steady attendant of Wordsmiths' meetings – in rain, in shine, and even in the occasional snowstorms that visited the women's city.

### **The Hope of Recovering the Past**

**The story as trigger.** When the women attended their writing group meetings, they had the opportunity to read their own pieces of writing, and to listen to other members' stories. All three participants expressed that listening to stories often “triggered” them to recall related scenes from their own lives and, in this way, the group served as a catalyst for recollecting memories. In the meetings I attended, I often noted how a reading would end to resounding choruses of “I remember that,” or “I'd forgotten all about that!” Such triggering is evident in groups where older adults are prompted to share memories (Wadensten & Hägglund, 2006). 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). Josephine described an example of such triggering, encapsulated in the poem that opened this chapter. She explained how one member's story about her mother's “wash day” rippled through the women's minds as they listened to its reading, bringing them back to memories of their own mother's

laundry habits, and to home terrain they “hadn’t explored for years” (Josephine, 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]” (Interview 4, February 2017). Helen reflected, “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).

Some research has suggested that the emotional content of memories affects whether older adults benefit from re-experiencing them (Alea, Vick, & Hyatt, 2010). However, it seems that for the writers, they greeted both memories of joy and those of hardship with gratitude: “sharing is wonderful because it brings memories back to you” (Helen, Interview 1, July 2016). In the space of the writing group, the ideas the writers held about their lives were not necessarily “complete,” and could grow and shift as stories reminded them of past experiences. Although the group was highly predictable in terms of structure – meeting 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. Simply 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). In each group meeting, the Wordsmiths journeyed through these thickets, and each member’s reading was imbued with possibility and hope for those listening.

**Agents of remembrance.** It seems that the group members were keen to continue meeting partly because a story was not always just a story, but sometimes a key, so to speak – a key cut in just the right way to “unlock” part of the listener’s past. Stories shared did not merely reveal the author’s world, but sometimes listeners’ worlds as well. Such memory recovery also takes place in what are sometimes referred to as reminiscence groups, wherein items like photographs, or stimuli like music, are used to trigger older adults’ memories and facilitate conversation. However, one difference between these groups and the Wordsmiths lies in the fact that such reminiscence groups are often highly structured and led by nurses, social workers, music therapists, and other professionals. In contrast, the women’s writing group flowed freely, with members guiding themselves through group meetings.

Thus, while the Wordsmiths women may have experienced many of the same benefits purported to arise from reminiscence groups (Pinquart & Forstmeier, 2012; Webster & McCall, 1999), a unique impact of their group may have been a sense of agency gained by leading their own process of remembrance. Agency, in sociological literature, has been associated with personal choice, autonomy, and independence – ways of being that women have struggled to achieve, historically (Wray, 2004). The concept has also been described as “the meaning, motivation and purpose which individuals bring to their activities” (Kabeer, 1999, p. 438). According to Snyder et al. (1991), agency is the belief that one is capable of achieving a goal through personal action, and constitutes a key dimension of hope. The women of the writing group may have held hope not only for the return of more memories, but also for their ability to actively procure these memories by attending, co-facilitating, and co-owning their writing group. In the space of

the group, the women assumed the roles of artist, audience, agent of remembrance, but never of patient.

### **The Hope of More Stories**

**Rousing the writer.** As the women attended writing group 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. Firstly, as the writers reconnected with their past experiences, through the "triggering" they described, their recovered memories then became raw material from which writing could be crafted. As Margaret noted, when a story prompted a group member to reminisce, she "often [had] another story then to tell" (Interview 1, July 2016). Coming to group meetings and being surrounded with stories had this effect on Helen; she explained that as writing was shared, "you remember and then you can remember to write your story" (Interview 1, July 2016). Simply put, the more memories the women pulled up from the wells of their minds, the more stories they had to write down. In this way, memories were not merely tours of the past, but catalysts that moved the women forward in their creative endeavours.

The Wordsmiths group helped writers not only to recall more stories from their respective pasts, but to "see" more stories in the present. The monthly group meetings seemed to endow women with more attention towards 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 Wordsmiths gave her “new ideas that you can kind of piggy back on” (Josephine, Interview 3, November 2016). The mutual inspiration that the women discussed has emerged in other research on writing circles. In Thornton and Collins’ (2010) study, a writing group helped one person see that “there was a lot more happening in my life than I imagined” (p. 35).

Listening to members’ stories prompted the women forward in their writing practice, both by triggering them to remember more memories to write about, and by expanding their notions of what might be “story-able” from their lives. In each meeting, the writers 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 own story-telling potential. Margaret did not know whether she would ever feel ready to stop writing stories because, as she said, “a new idea pops into your head every day” (Interview 4, November 2016), and Helen conveyed that “there’s lots of stories that still need to be told” (Interview 2, September 2016).

**Agents of creation.** The process of writing about personal experience tends to involve much more than simply remembering events and recording one’s thoughts. A writer has the tasks of selecting what subject she wants to write about, turning experiences over in her mind, assuming different perspectives on those experiences, and

choosing certain details to bring to focus, with certain words and in a certain order or “arc.” Writing has been suggested to help individuals order and make meaning of their lives (Travagin et al., 2015), as well as reach a sense of resolution about past experiences (Thornton, 2008). The women of the Wordsmiths did not passively recall the past and then quickly move on to a new task, as might happen in some reminiscence groups. The writers actively considered and engaged with their remembrances through story-writing. Writing, especially about one’s life, can require a certain measure of courage. As Bruner (1999) expressed, “working with high concentration on our life stories often reveals too much about our impotence or fecklessness as narrators of Selfhood. Perhaps that’s why it’s easier with a therapist” (p. 8). Choosing and arranging words to narrate ourselves, under our own guidance, can be a daunting task - so much so that authors like Goldberg (1986) have written entire books of exercises meant to kick-start the writing process. She advised writers to begin writing from the “electricity” created by the “empty page and a heart unsure, a famine of thoughts, a fear of no feeling” (p. 106). Overall, writing is a hopeful activity in that it requires the writer to imagine themselves as capable of self-expression. As Penn (2001) has expressed, “to write gives us agency; we are not acted on by a situation, we are acting!” (p. 49). For the Wordsmiths, writing was a way to act, to exert artistic control, and to create representations of their lives. In this way, the group further encouraged the women’s sense of agency and hope.

### **The Hope to Leave Tracks**

**Sharing the self.** 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 they were ready. Some

stories were not shared beyond the Wordsmiths meetings, while others were intended for further circulation - to loved ones or even to still wider audiences. Margaret, Helen, and Josephine each looked forward to the possibility that at least some of their stories would have impacts extending beyond themselves and the group. The women 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).

Birren and Cochran (2001) conveyed that autobiographical writing can be an especially attractive activity to those individuals wishing to "leave a legacy for family members" (p. 10). In conversations with the women, they all discussed passing pieces of their writing on 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). Josephine expressed that every person only has "a certain window of opportunity" to know their family (Interview 2, September 2016). She felt that she had missed the opportunity to know her grandmother, and this regret fueled her writing. Josephine saw story-writing as a way to ensure that her descendants could "know" her: "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" (Josephine, Interview 1, August 2016). Some of the Wordsmiths 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” (Margaret, Interview 4, November 2016).

**Agents of continuation.** The process of creating artifacts from one’s life, to leave for future generations, has been called “legacy work” (Cadrin, 2006, p. 111). Legacy work is thought to be an especially popular and meaningful practice in older adulthood. 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 mediums, such as song-writing (Cadrin, 2006) or photography (Bolton, 2008), to express their legacies to loved ones, and may do so inside or outside of therapy. For the Wordsmiths, prose and poetry seemed to be the preferred tools of their legacy work. The women’s writing group prompted them to consider where their stories might go and who their stories might impact in the future. Although the women did not directly reference death or the afterlife in interviews, their keenness to “leave tracks,” as Josephine called it (Interview 1, August 2016), suggested that writing served as one method by which the women could render themselves more enduring, even after death. As the women wrote of their life experiences, and voiced their thoughts and feelings, their stories not only indicated who they were but may be considered actual extensions of their living persons, existing in a format perhaps more lasting than their physical selves.

The self that one may imagine persisting after death has been termed the “post-self” by Shneidman (1974). Schmitt and Leonard (1986) wrote that the “post-self” is how



an individual envisions being represented in history. They echoed Josephine's "tracks" metaphor, referring to the "post-self" as "footprints [...] on the sands of time" (p. 1089). The idea of a "post-self" is not predicated on the belief in a literal after-life (Wojtkowiak & Rutjens, 2011), but rather on the belief that a person will continue to be represented in the minds of others, after death. Researchers have demonstrated that envisioning a "post-self" has been shown to reduce anxiety about one's future and death (Wojtkowiak & Rutjens, 2011). For Margaret, Helen, and Josephine, it seems that sharing themselves, and scenes of history, with others - through their stories - may have been a way to construct their "post-selves." Indeed, writing has been suggested to hold "the possibility of a type of existence beyond our corporeal being" (Larsen et al., 2003, p. 290). Participating in the writing group provided them with the opportunity to exert some control over how they might "live" on even after death, and in this way, may have given them a greater sense of permanence and hope.

### **Discussion**

Margaret, Helen, and Josephine's writing group, the Wordsmiths, continually reminded them that they still had more of their lives to remember, write, live, and share. As they gathered together 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 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 others' lives through their writing. In short, the women of the group were prompted to see their memories as further knowable, their lives as further story-able, and themselves as further enduring. Their practice not only gave them hope that they would

continue as writers, but that they would continue on in lives that were not entirely foreseeable. 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**

The Wordsmiths 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 one's life story (the internalized understanding one has of his or her life's course and identity) is not already determined, but still imbued with possibilities for "deepening and expanding" (Randall, 2012, p. 177). 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). Thus, narrative openness is an attitude of possibility directed both at one's past (i.e. "through looking back to where I have been, I can see my life story anew") and at one's future (i.e. "not all the chapters of my life story are written").

As the Wordsmiths wrote and shared stories, they seemed resolved to holding both their pasts and futures open. As they regained memories in group meetings and reviewed their lives in the writing process, they were able to encounter themselves in new ways. 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-expression. Overall, Margaret, Helen, and Josephine's group was understood to enhance their sense of being active and capable artists, poised to create and 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.

### **Narrative Foreclosure**

The opposite of narrative openness - narrative foreclosure – has been defined as the belief that one’s life story is already determined in advance, and thus life has effectively ended, although one 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 re-interpreted. To use the metaphor of a book, “one is not only convinced about its ending and does not add new chapters anymore, but also refrains from enjoying, rewriting, and editing earlier chapters” (Bohlmeijer, Westerhof, Randall, Tromp, & Kenyon, 2011, p. 367). 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 progression. Gullette (2004) expanded on the ways in which culture “ages” individuals just as powerfully as biology ages bodies. She argued that marketing directed at older age groups perpetuates stereotypes of decline, spreading fear about the changes to health, lifestyle, and independence that age is inevitably suggested to bring.

## **The Writing Group as a Site of Agency**

Given the narrative foreclosure that may be imposed upon and internalized by individuals as they age, it is important that certain spaces promote older adults' hope for a life still open to possibility. As Snyder (2002) argued, hope is not the happy expectation that one's goals will be met, but instead the belief that one 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 necessary desire to achieve goals, to feel truly hopeful. Over the course of the present inquiry, the Wordsmiths 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 own writing practice. Thus, the Wordsmiths literally wrote stories of their lives with paper and pen, but also figuratively 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. As Thornton (2008) described, writing and sharing one's life experiences is about more than simply telling stories: "it is about creating a life as we live it against a backdrop of a life lived and one imagined" (p. 169). The group consistently served to remind women that they are still creating stories and creating lives.

## **CHAPTER 6: DISCUSSION and CONCLUSION**

This narrative inquiry was conducted to better understand the experiences of older women who belonged to a community-based writing group. The study explored how the women understood their practices of creating, sharing, and witnessing personal writing, and specifically, how these practices related to their perceptions of themselves and their lives. The study used semi-structured interviews to elicit participants' stories of experience, as well as participant observation to encounter the women's writing group in a more immediate way. This chapter includes a review of the study's findings, and reflections on how findings may be integrated with existing literature. In addition, the study's strengths, limitations, and implications for future practice and research are presented. A personal reflection on the research process concludes the chapter.

### **Summary of Findings**

The three women that participated in the inquiry – Margaret, Helen, and Josephine – belonged to a community-based writing group in which they regularly shared stories they wrote about their lives, and listened to others do the same. They each held unique relationships with writing and with their writing group. For Margaret, the impulse to story her life seemed to have partly stemmed from her interest in history - the often overlooked history of people's every-day lives, especially. Helen was attracted to join a writing class in retirement, and subsequently found her way to the group to continue writing. Josephine expressed a life-long affinity for stories, first stimulated by her parents' book collection and continuing on through her career as an English teacher. Although their reasons for belonging to a writing group differed to some extent, this inquiry identified common threads that connected their experiences, and clarified the

shared impacts of the group on their lives. In working with field texts comprised of interview transcripts, writing samples, and field notes, the group emerged as a catalyst that promoted members' ongoing identity development. Specifically, the processes that entailed group membership - writing, sharing, and listening to stories – nurtured the women's self-compassion, as well as their sense that they were individuals of agency and possibility, moving forward into a hopeful future. Overall, the writing group seemed to remind Margaret, Helen, and Josephine that neither their pasts nor their futures were already determined, thereby helping them to resist oppressive notions of aging that associate advancing age with decline. The group, although entirely non-therapeutic in nature, appeared to support the women's efforts to continue taking an active role in “composing” their lives, to use a phrase from Bateson (1989). The women wrote stories by taking pen to paper, and at the same time, composed their lives by engaging with the power of stories.

### **Integration of Results with Existing Literature**

This narrative inquiry advances understandings about how writing groups may impact individuals, and older women in particular. This section considers how the findings of this study confirm, expand, and conflict with arguments set forth in existing research. Findings are integrated with existing work on the impacts of personal writing and writing groups, weaving in literature on older adults and identity as well. When considering existing literature, attention is paid to research on personal writing, rather than professional or technical writing. Personal writing is defined as writing about one's personal lived experiences, including thoughts and emotions. This type of writing has also been referred to as “expressive writing” (Spera, Buhrfeind, & Pennebaker, 1994) and

would be considered within the genre of “life-writing” (Kadar, 1992).

### **Self-compassion in Writing Groups**

In the present inquiry, Margaret expressed that writing stories helped her see herself with more kindness. As she wrote about her family, Margaret realized how much she had done for her children and concluded that she was not “such a bad parent” (Interview 4, November 2016). Self-compassion was one shared impact of the women’s writing group and was evoked as they re-examined and wrote about their lives, shared themselves with the group through their stories, and listened to other women’s stories of personal challenges. Older age has been associated with a heightened interest in reflecting on and recording one’s life (Butler, 1963). Gibson (2004) linked this interest to self-compassion, stating that older people “seek to understand the past and make it more acceptable to themselves” (p. 133). In leading a writing group of older adults, Kazemek (1999) noted that physically writing life stories down allowed members not only to “explore their pasts but also to see them again more clearly and differently” (p. 16), just as Margaret has done. After writing stories, the women of the Wordsmiths group often chose to share them aloud with the group, and this sharing was also understood to nurture the women’s self-compassion. Participants discussed how affecting it was when the other members were attentive to their readings, and explained how sharing a story was equivalent to sharing yourself as a person. Hassert (2014) emphasized that the attention given to readers at open microphone poetry events gives the participants access to “intimacy, care, and recognition” (p. 93). Aminoff (1992) reported that participants in a guided autobiography workshop, who wrote about and then shared their life experiences in small groups, experienced the workshop as promoting their “self-acceptance” (p. 43).

Interestingly, Aminoff (1992) noted that comments about increased self-acceptance originated from participants in the oldest age group (age 61-82 years) and not from the younger age groups (age 20-60 years) (p. 45), possibly indicating that sharing writing is a more profound activity in older adulthood. In her book *Writing Down the Bones*, Goldberg (1986) spoke about sharing writing as an act of “claiming” one’s writing, and argued that such claiming does compel self-compassion:

It is very difficult for us to comprehend and value our own lives. It is much easier for us to see things outside ourselves. In the process of claiming our own good writing, we are chipping away at the blind gap between our own true nature and our conscious ability to see it. We learn to embrace ourselves as the fine creative human beings we are in the present. (p. 156)

To phrase Goldberg’s idea another way, both in writing stories and in sharing stories aloud, a writer is able to step back from the events and decisions of her life, and with artistic distance gaze upon her life with more compassion.

It is apparent from the literature that self-compassion has been linked to the art of writing and sharing stories, in multiple contexts. In addition to writing and sharing stories, Margaret, Helen, and Josephine also listened to stories told by other group members. Through the act of listening, Helen was led to feel a sense of common humanity with the other writers, an experience also noted by Germer and Neff (2013). In writing group meetings, Helen was consistently surprised to hear stories of others’ hardships – stories that revealed difficulties in lives she had considered perfect. Adkins et al. (1985) spoke precisely of Helen’s experience, stating that writing, when shared in a group setting, can be a “powerful source of connectedness and hope among group



members who formerly believed they were alone with and unique in their problems” (p. 437). In a writing group for individuals with eating disorders, participants reported that it was comforting to hear one another’s stories read aloud, as it underlined the degree to which their challenges were shared (Padfield, Tominey, & Matthews, 2017, p. 12).

### **Hopefulness in Writing Groups**

In addition to self-compassion, the writing group also fostered hopefulness in Margaret, Helen, and Josephine’s lives. As they participated in their group, the women seemed to envision a future in which they could continue to recover memories at group meetings, continue to draw from their creative wells and compose stories of their lives, and continue to affect and relate to others (primarily family) through their stories. Their hopefulness did not seem to be a detached optimism, but rather a kind of looking-forward to their active and persistent engagement with their art and their creative communities, and in that way, was intimately tied to their identities. Hopefulness, phrased as such, seems to be seldom investigated or demonstrated in existing literature on the impacts of writing and writing groups. Although the term hope may not be widely used, the literature describes impacts of writing and sharing stories that may be understood as hope-engendering.

Chapter 5 described how the Wordsmiths writing group promoted members’ hope in various ways. The group triggered the women’s memories, stimulate their writing and sharing, and give them the opportunity to exercise agency. The first source of hope – memory recollection - has been described in the literature on reminiscence. Westerhof, Bohlmeijer, and Webster (2010) reviewed research linking reminiscence, or the act of recalling one’s past, with mental health and wellbeing. Although they cited many benefits

of reminiscence, such as increased life satisfaction (Cappeliez, O'Rourke, & Chaudhury, 2005), they did not directly reference hope. Reminiscence has been associated with increased hope in older adults with dementia (Wu & Koo, 2016), but it seems that less research has examined reminiscence and hope in healthy older adults. Despite under-investigation of this topic, research does suggest that reminiscence is promoted in group settings. In Feinberg's (1996) work with a reminiscence group of older immigrants, he noticed that "the reminiscence of one [member] stimulated associations and memories in the others" (p. 48), and he supposed that memories returned more vividly in the group setting than they would have in individual interviews. Looking at writing groups in particular, Philips, Linington, and Penman (1999) stated that shared writing can "arouse emotions and memories" of great importance to those listening (p. 15). Although these works have also not linked memory-triggering to hope, literature on writing groups often does discuss how members become invested in attending their group. For example, members of an older adult writing group reported "looking forward to the group every week" (p. 443) in Chippendale and Bear-Lehman's (2012) study. The hope of recovering new memories may indeed form part of writers' anticipation and commitment to group.

Another source of hope for the Wordsmiths seemed to be the way the group sparked members' attention towards the possible stories they could generate from their every-day lives. Helen and Josephine both shared that their writing group gave them a greater awareness of the range of experiences that one could story. In listening to other members read their written work, the women were sensitized to "seeing" more stories in their own pasts, and in their present-day lives. The women were reminded that the mundane could be entertaining, engaging, or even poignant. This mindfulness was

understood to be connected to a sense of hope and possibility. Writing has often been marked as an exercise in observation; Goldberg (1986) contended that “a writer’s job is to make the ordinary come alive, to awaken ourselves to the specialness of simply being” (p. 99). Belonging to a writing group “can encourage new perceptions of the immediate surroundings” (Philips et al., 1999, p. 18), and, put more simply, give people “a new reason for looking at things” (Koch, 1977, p. 12). It seems that this kind of awakening to the world, though not specifically framed as hopeful in the literature, is a change that orients the writer to the present moment, engendering hope that something interesting is contained therein. This awareness that one’s life is worthy of storying, and that one is capable of storying it, may be of particular significance in the lives of older women. Gibson (2004) noted that younger people tend to “regard all older people as the same” (p. 30), and Draaisma (2008/2013) similarly spoke of the “flatness” associated with older adulthood, stating that “the first half of life is depicted as a time of change and variety” while the second half is characterized by “depressing uniformity” (p. 10). In a writing group, members are constantly sharing new stories and inspiring one another to continue the writer’s work of observation, thus resisting acceptance of their lives as uniform.

In addition to reminding the participants that “there’s lots of stories that still need to be told” (Helen, Interview 2, September 2016), their writing group also nurtured hope by showing the women the value of sharing stories with others. The group received writers’ stories with genuine curiosity and appreciation, and in this way conveyed that sharing stories was a worthwhile activity - not relegated to the young or the professional only. Koch (1977) led a seniors’ writing group, and remarked that reading stories aloud to the group helped members “see that what they wrote was poetry and could be talked

about seriously and admired” (p. 7). Margaret, Helen and Josephine received affirmative responses of this sort in the circle of the group, which was understood to motivate their continued sharing. Penn (2001) noted that writing, by its very nature, is a hopeful activity, that supposes there are keen audiences for our work: “when we write we construct our listener as one is who looking forward to hearing from us, not as someone waiting to withdraw” (p. 50). Valuing one’s own stories was connected to both the self-compassion discussed in Chapter 4, and the hopefulness discussed in Chapter 5. Overall, the women of the Wordsmiths saw themselves and their stories as worthy of attention. This perspective may enhance well-being in older adulthood, as older adults’ self-worth may be compromised by physical challenges, withdrawal from usual activities, and an increasing reliance on others for assistance (e.g. Ferrer, 2009; Trzesniewski, Donnellan, & Robins, 2003).

### **Writing and Agency**

The women’s writing group was understood to enhance members’ sense of hope as well as their sense of agency – a concept related and likely contributing to their overall hopefulness. Whether one looks to the writing, sharing, or listening dimensions of the women’s membership in the Wordsmiths, it seemed that the women were positioned as active agents in their creative community. They never relied on a leader or wrote to a circumscribed topic. They were not expected to bring writing to every meeting, or to participate for a set number of weeks, and the group had no end date. Rubinstein (2002) noted a tension between the Western notion of the “self” as active, having agency, and making choices, and the “cultural construction of old age” as inactive and declining (p. 154). He discussed how an older person’s sense of self is increasingly “threatened” with

age, not necessarily because of real losses, “but because of the cultural conflation of old age, decline, and death” (p. 156). In the circle of the writing group, the women engaged with their art form in a way that rejected such a simple fusing together of age and decline. On the second Saturday of every month, they chose to make their way out from their houses and apartments, traverse across the city, and gather around the large table where each meeting unfolded. In this seemingly simple act, they exercised their agency both individually and collectively. In the words of Penn (2001), through their creative practice, they were “no longer being done to,” but were “doing” (p. 50).

Wray (2004) cautioned that the idea of agency, particularly when it is touted as a component of successful aging, should be critically considered. She contended that what constitutes agency for any individual differs depending on contextual factors such as ethnic background, age, and gender. Traditionally, an important source of social significance and power for women has been physical beauty, and thus age-related changes in appearance diminish the agency of women more than men (who may derive power from other sources) (Sontag, 1979). Rice (1989) noted that the aging woman loses “freshness” while the aging man gains “maturity” (p. 246). Indeed, research has demonstrated that older women are regarded as less productive and more dependent than older men (Hawkins, 1996). Lips and Hastings (2012) built upon the idea that appearance and agency are partly fused for women, and suggested that women are pressured to use their bodies to both to uphold and to relinquish agency as they age. They described social imperatives for older women to maintain active, fit bodies, while also reducing physical activity to prevent injury. In the present inquiry, the women’s writing group drew participants’ focus towards their inner, rather than outer selves. Although writers’

participation in the group was predicated on their mobility (meetings were held at a central location downtown), the writing and sharing process brought women's inner experiences to the fore. While other leisure activities for seniors might use physical wellness as a rationale (e.g. walking groups or aerobics classes), the writing group existed so that women could explore and express what was beneath the "surface" of themselves. Women gained identities within the group based on the writings they shared, because, as all three participants expressed, group members learned about one another through their stories. In this way, the women gained a kind of agency that seemed largely separate from their physical appearance and capabilities.

### **Variant Findings**

Although some of the present findings can be traced through other research, some of the conclusions drawn in this inquiry diverge from those documented in the literature. One common finding in the literature, that was not indicated in this study, is that personal writing often causes the writer to experience a "short-term increase in distress" before benefits are experienced (K. A. Baikie & Wilhem, 2005). However, much of the research on the impacts of writing has examined individuals' responses to writing about traumatic events specifically (e.g. Pennebaker & Beall, 1986; Smyth, 1998), whereas the Wordsmiths women wrote about both positive and negative life experiences. Many researchers have supposed that writing about traumatic content is the most beneficial type of writing exercise, and less focus has been given to writing about positive events. King (2001) questioned this bias, and affirmed the conclusions drawn in the present inquiry, when she stated that "it may be possible to enjoy the benefits of writing without necessarily writing about trauma at all" (p. 805).

Another point of dissimilarity between the present study and other literature can be found in the relative importance placed on structuring a writing group's activities. One common recommendation in literature on writing groups is to have a leader give specific prompts that focus the group's writing, in presumably more therapeutic ways. Facilitators might use sentence-starters such as "I could be described as..." (Larsen et al., 2003, p. 285) or prompts like "Think back to your first day at school" (Philips et al., 1999, p. 70). The findings of the present study counter the implied necessity of pre-planning writing. Margaret, Helen, and Josephine experienced many benefits of writing while choosing their own topics – topics that were often of an "every-day" nature. For example, Margaret told me she once wrote a story focused entirely on a particular dish her mother used to cook. Blythe (1979) discussed how older adults may gravitate towards telling stories that are deceptively "small" in scope, because on some level, they may be aware that one's true nature can be found in minutiae: "they know that, when they are dead, it is not great deeds from their maturity which will recall their individual tones, but the way they described a day on the river long ago" (p. 12).

### **Strengths and Limitations of Current Study**

The present inquiry had a number of strengths and limitations. Narrative researchers acknowledge that an inquiry always proceeds in the context of a researcher-participant relationship, and that findings are inevitably shaped by that relationship. This aspect of research is not considered positive or negative. However, in the present study I developed relationships with participants as well as with their writing group at large – attending group meetings, sharing my own writing, and bearing witness to members' stories. The group members who were not research participants were still aware of my

role as a researcher, and Margaret, Helen, and Josephine may have imagined that members would be interested in reading the final research text upon publication. Thus, these three participants may have felt compelled to speak of their group more positively than if I had not met their fellow members.

Another limitation of the present study was that the three participants shared highly similar ethno-cultural, family, and professional backgrounds. The women were all born in rural or small-town settings in central Canada and learned English as a first language. None of the women were from visible minorities. The women were all raised within nuclear families, with siblings. They each completed some secondary education, pursued what may be traditionally considered “feminine” careers (nursing, administration, and teaching), and went on to marry men and raise multiple children. The participants’ experiences of their writing group may have been less homogenous if their backgrounds had been more divergent. For example, if a participant had immigrated to Canada, or never had children, her perceptions of the writing group, and the meanings attributed to her practice, may have been rather different.

A final limitation was that time constraints restricted participants’ opportunities to give feedback on the final research texts. Participant feedback was prioritized throughout data-generation; after each interview, I would prepare two- to four-page interview summaries, comprised of quotes excerpted from the interview transcripts, my reflections, and new wonders about participants’ experiences. Summaries were sent to the participants via email, and the women were invited to give feedback both over email and in-person at the outset of successive interviews. However, with regard to *final* research texts (Chapters 4 and 5 of this inquiry), the women were merely invited to give feedback



over email. Women were not invited to meet with me in person to share their thoughts, given my time constraints in completing the inquiry. In hindsight, this methodological decision may have limited the women's involvement in co-composing findings. Chapters 4 and 5 included more researcher interpretation and abstraction than the interview summaries and, thus, more personal debriefing with each woman could have better established her feelings regarding the verisimilitude of findings.

Moving from limitations to strengths, three primary strengths may be noted. First, the present study focused on a type of writing group that is relatively overlooked in the literature: a grass-roots, community-based writing group. Much of the existing literature contemplates groups that are designed and delivered by helping professionals, who do so with specific therapeutic intentions. This inquiry is one of only a few to articulate the therapeutic power of a self-sustaining group, free from professional involvement or guidance. The second strength of this study was the privileging of participants' voices. Much of the research on writing groups is written from the perspectives of group facilitators, who assume the position of expert both in the group and in the research process. In contrast, the present study's findings grew out of recursive examinations of the interview transcripts, and out of feedback participants have given on interim research texts. A large part 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. The study's third strength was a commitment to encounter writers' experiences both as told (through interviews) and as lived (through group observation). How participants spoke about their writing group was of central interest, but how they enacted their relationships with the group was also considered important. Joining the

writing group meetings allowed me to understand the women's experiences in a more immediate way, enriching the final research texts.

### **Implications for Practice**

This section proposes how the findings of this narrative inquiry might inform and advance the future practice of helping professionals such as nurses, psychologists, social workers, and counsellors, with the aim of enhancing older adult well-being.

Considerations for communities at large are also discussed.

### **Implications for Helping Professionals**

The present inquiry explored the experiences of women who led their own writing group - a group that was not directed towards any therapeutic purpose. The way that the group members shared responsibility for guiding their group seemed integral to the impact that the group had on their identities. In other words, the grass-roots nature of the group seemed to underlie its empowering and affirming influence in the women's lives. As such, this discussion will not focus on how professionals, such as counsellors or social workers, might develop or facilitate writing groups. Instead, ways that professionals might support older adults' own engagement with story-writing and sharing will be discussed.

Margaret, Helen, and Josephine's experiences converged to indicate that their writing group membership nurtured positive changes in their perceptions of themselves: a strengthened sense of self-compassion and enhanced hope for the future. 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 special knowledge or skill – this study demonstrates that

writing can have profound implications for personal identity and going on to share and receive stories in the space of a writing group may further facilitate identity development. Honouring the power of writing groups, in this context, means having curiosity about how clients may already be engaged 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 persistent self-criticism, other indicators of frail self-compassion, or a sense of hopelessness.

More than encouraging professionals to consider the significance of writing groups, 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 in order 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 Wordsmiths. Recent research seems more focused on how writing about hardships or past traumas can be impactful (e.g. van Emmerik et al., 2013), at the expense of exploring the potential of “lighter” writing, such as the childhood vignettes shared in the Wordsmiths group. This trend in the research may bias professionals towards 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.

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 support group, to have therapeutic bearing. Sharing writing in more casual group settings, like the Wordsmiths, positions the writer as an artist choosing to communicate life, rather than as a patient trying to cope with life. Furthermore, putting pen to paper (or fingers to keyboard) to story times of happiness, or even joy, in addition to times of challenge, was shown to nurture their growth. The findings presented here urge helping professionals to see writing as not only a prescription, but as a pleasurable every-day activity – therapeutic not because it is administered or engineered to be so, but because it simply is.

### **Implications for Community**

In addition to helping professionals, communities at large can also contribute to older adult wellness by supporting community-based writing groups. The Wordsmiths demonstrate that writing groups may have profound impacts on older adults’ lives with minimal cost. Generally, it seems that groups need only an adequate space that can be booked on a regular basis, the capacity to coordinate themselves, and the willingness to be vulnerable as they attempt to write and share their lives. Writing is an art form that does not require special materials and, as the present inquiry found, writing groups can thrive without a structured program or professional expertise. Given these modest needs, opportunities for older adults to write and share stories could be expanded without significant financial investment, with the return being the increased engagement and inclusion of older adults in the community. Institutions that are accessible to older adults, such as libraries, may consider supporting writing groups through an ongoing donation of

space. Institutions might also aid groups' success by helping with promotional efforts, thereby attracting new members to group rosters. In addition, funders of community arts initiatives may consider offering grants to older adults interested in starting or sustaining writing groups. Although practical and financial assistance could elevate the presence of writing groups in communities, the present work suggests that assistance should not undermine grassroots styles of group leadership.

### **Implications for Future Research**

The present findings contribute to knowledge of how writing and sharing stories enhances the lives of older women. In considering this work, a number of new research wonders emerge. First, the present research has focused exclusively on the lived experiences of older women. The participants' writing group did not limit its membership to women only, and at one point in its history, Wordsmiths membership was a relatively even mix of men and women. However, in the years that preceded this inquiry, some of the men had experienced declines in health and some had passed away. Gradually, the group became sustained by women only, and once this uniformity was established, the Wordsmiths had found it difficult to attract male members. Future research could explore the experiences of older men who belong to writing groups, as they may make different meanings of their creative circles. Such work may be particularly important considering that recent research on writing groups has often included more female than male participants (e.g. Coronel, 2011; Fagerstrom, 2013). Examining factors that discourage men from joining writing groups, as well as those that encourage their participation, may also be valuable to helping professionals.

A second query that may guide future research is how older adult writing groups

are able to sustain themselves, in spite of various challenges to group survival. These challenges might include, for example, members' limited mobility (particularly in locations with severe seasonal weather), and groups' limited capacity to advertise or otherwise promote their meetings. As discussed previously, much of the literature on older adult writing groups has studied groups that were created and facilitated by researchers, social workers, or teachers. Furthermore, many such groups ran expressly for research purposes, and thus were born and dissolved within researchers' timelines.

However, attending to grassroots groups like the Wordsmiths, and identifying how they maintain or grow their membership, could better inform community efforts to sustainably support older adult wellness through writing. For example, rather than the cross-sectional approach used in the present inquiry, researchers might use a longitudinal approach to follow older adults from the time they initially join a group to sometime after they have established relationships with other group members. Such work may further clarify aspects of the group experience that compel older adults to continue attending and contributing stories.

Third and finally, writing groups may have different impacts on older adults facing specific challenges of older adulthood, such as care-giving for a loved one. The tasks taken on by unpaid family caregivers can be physically and emotionally demanding, and caregiving work can be intensely isolating (Robison, Fortinsky, Kleppinger, Shugrue, & Porter, 2009). As such, engaging in self-care activities and connecting with social networks can be of particular importance to individuals who are strained by caregiving roles (Petty & Savik, 2012). Some research has explored how caregivers might use writing therapeutically (Holtslander & Duggleby, 2008; Holtslander et al., 2016). One

study demonstrated that the act of writing can help caregivers cope with the emotional toll of losing the loved one they had cared for (Holtlander et al., 2016). However, it seems that no studies have examined how writing and sharing stories in a group setting might enhance the well-being of individuals actively engaged in caregiving. Research with this population may be particularly practical, as the deterioration of loved ones' health may compromise caregivers' hopefulness.

### **Reflection on the Research Process**

In looking back over this inquiry, I can identify some of the realizations this work brought to me, as well as some of the challenges I encountered. Overall, I came to understand that the women's writing group was much more than a site of leisure and socialization. Although I began the inquiry with this expectation - that the group shaped the women's lives more deeply than might seem at first - its confirmation still impacted me personally and professionally. I now have a different lens through which I will view writing groups, as well as other creative communities that include older adults. This work has given me an appreciation for the important identity work that may be happening while someone is engaged in the apparently quite ordinary act of telling and listening to stories. Over the course of this inquiry, I also realized that strong threads connected the participants' experiences with my experiences attending and participating in open microphone poetry events. In particular, I drew similarities between how the women felt when they listened to fellow group members read stories, and how I feel when I listen to other poets read work. In both contexts, witnessing another person be vulnerable and share inner experience has the effect of softening the boundaries that normally estrange us. To come back to the quote used in Chapter 1, "We melt into each other with phrases.

We are edged with mist. We make an unsubstantial territory” (Woolf, 1992). Although Margaret, Helen, and Josephine are a number of decades older than me, and have lived through many different experiences, I felt a commonality with them as I understood how enriching and humanizing this softening is for all of us.

One of the most challenging parts of this inquiry was my uncertainty around how my relationships with the participants would evolve and eventually end. In my fourth and final research interview with each woman, I struggled to articulate how our relationships might come to a close. My affection for each of them had bloomed quickly. Margaret and I shared the custom of enjoying tea and home-made baking in the warmth of her kitchen after every interview. Helen always wanted to hear about how things were going in my life before we started our interviews, and once said that I was a “shining star” in the group – a compliment I will not soon forget. One of the pieces of writing that Josephine shared with me, a scathing rhyme about a woman who once fancied her husband, was one she had never shared with anyone outside her closest circle of friends. It was surprisingly acidic, pitching us both into conspiratorial giggles. I felt a tension between the intimacy of my encounters with the women and the transient nature of the research, and an uncomfortable hesitation about how to carry myself in the last interviews. Although I maintained some contact with Margaret, Helen, and Josephine through the member-checking process, and did attend a few more of the group’s meetings while composing the final research texts, I navigated a gradual stepping-away from their lives, and tried to do so with genuineness, grounded within an ethics of care (Noddings, 2010).



## **Conclusion**

The present narrative inquiry explored the lived experiences of older women who belonged to a community-based writing group, attending to the meanings that women derived from writing, sharing, and listening to stories. The writing group emerged as a non-therapeutic space that promoted members' identity development. In the process of writing and sharing stories about their lives, and listening to others do the same, members of the group came to regard themselves with more compassion and gained a forward-looking story of themselves as the creative composers of their own lives. This research advances understandings of how writing groups may impact the lives of older adults and encourages helping professionals to recognize the importance of story-telling communities in older adulthood. Spaces that engage older adults in writing and sharing life stories, without professional guidance, actively oppose social narratives that equate aging with decline, and associate aging with story beginnings rather than endings. In the circle of the writer's group, older adults forge ahead as explorers of their pasts, artists of telling, and agents of connection.

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# ***CALL FOR PARTICIPANTS***

## A Narrative Inquiry of Older Adults' Experiences Within a Writing Group

### ***Researcher:***

Kelly Mills  
Masters Student  
School and Counselling Psychology  
College of Education  
University of Saskatchewan  
(306) 716-7765  
kelly.mills@usask.ca

### ***Principal Investigator:***

Jennifer Nicol  
Associate Professor  
Ed. Psychology and Special Education  
College of Education  
University of Saskatchewan  
(306) 966-5261  
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## ***What is the purpose of this research?***

The purpose of this research is to add to current knowledge on the personal impacts experienced by older adults who belong to creative groups. I (Kelly) am interested in learning about what it has been like for you to be a member of the [Group Name]. Through one-on-one interviews, I would like to discuss the experiences you've had with the group. Your stories would be included in my graduate thesis, the independent research requirement of my Master's degree.

## ***What would I be asked to do?***

- Complete four, one hour individual interviews spaced over the course of 4 months (this schedule may be reasonably modified to accommodate your needs). Interviews will be open-ended, meaning that I will enter each interview with general questions for us to explore, but discussions will be informal and conversational in nature.
- Over the course of the interviews, select and discuss two pieces of your own creative writing with me – one piece you have shared with the [Group Name] and one piece you chose not to share with them.
- Consent to being observed during regular [Group Name] group meetings that you choose to attend. I will participate as a member in group meetings, but will also be making short notes about my impressions of interactions that you have with other group members.
- If you choose to do so, give feedback on my write-up of your experiences at various stages of drafting.

## ***When would participation begin?***

Your first interview would be scheduled once you contact me and express that you would like to participate. It would likely be scheduled as soon as possible depending on our mutual availability.

## ***Where would this research take place?***

At your choosing, individual interviews could be held in:

- A private interview room in the University of Saskatchewan Health Sciences building
- The [Group Meeting Location]
- Your place of residence

## ***What should I do if I am interested?***

If you are interested in participating in this research, please contact me, Kelly Mills, at your earliest convenience either at (306) 716-7765 (mobile cell phone) or at [kelly.mills@usask.ca](mailto:kelly.mills@usask.ca). I will be happy to answer any questions or address any concerns you

may have about this research, and schedule your first interview should you be willing to participate.

When we meet for the first interview, I will discuss all aspects of the study with you, including issues not reviewed on this flyer (e.g. benefits and risks of participation, confidentiality and privacy measures, how research results will be made available to participants). All aspects of the study will also be outlined in an informed consent agreement, which you will be asked to sign before beginning the first interview.

### ***What if I am not interested?***

You are free to decline to participate in this research, and your decision will be respected without judgement. If you are not interested in participating, please notify me by phone at (306) 716-7765 or email at [kelly.mills@usask.ca](mailto:kelly.mills@usask.ca), so that I may approach another group member with an invitation to participate. If I have not received contact from you within two weeks of your reception of this letter, I will assume you are not interested and will invite another member to participate.

***Thank you for reading!***

## Appendix B: Participant Consent Form



UNIVERSITY OF  
SASKATCHEWAN

Department of Educational Psychology & Special Education  
Education Building Room 3104  
28 Campus Drive, Saskatoon, SK, S7N 0X1  
Telephone: (306) 966-5255 Fax: (306) 966-7719

### *Participant Consent Form*

You are invited to participate in a research study entitled:

#### **A Narrative Inquiry of Older Adults' Experiences Within a Writing Group**

##### **Researcher:**

Kelly Mills  
Graduate Student, College of Education  
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### **Purpose of the Study:**

- The purpose of this study is to broaden understanding of the impact of participating in creative writing groups for older adults. The present study will invite writers to describe personal experiences with a writing group.

### **Procedures:**

- This study involves four types of participation:
  - **4 individual interviews lasting about one hour each spaced over three to four months with about three to four weeks between interviews.**
    - This schedule can be modified as mutually agreed upon (e.g., shorter interviews depending on participant energy; additional interviews if appropriate).
    - All interviews will take place within five months of the first interview, to ensure the study is completed within a reasonable period of time.
    - Interviews will be open-ended, meaning that the researcher will have general questions to explore, but discussions will be conversational in nature.
    - All interviews will be fully audio-recorded and transcribed by the researcher for analysis.
    - At the participant's choosing, interviews will take place at either:
      - a private interview room in the University of Saskatchewan Health Sciences building,
      - a private room at the Edwards Family Centre, or
      - at the participant's place of residence.
  - **Sharing personal writing samples**
    - Over the course of the interviews, participants will be asked to discuss two pieces of their original creative writing – one piece they previously shared with the [Group Name] group and one piece they chose not to share with the group.
    - Participants will select the pieces of writing they want to share.
  - **Observation**
    - The student researcher, Kelly Mills, will attend [Group Name] group meetings and group functions during data collection (until all four interviews have been completed with all participants), participate as a regular member, as well as observe interactions that participants have with the group.
    - Brief notes will be written during each meeting and expanded upon in writing after each meeting. Notes will be focused on participants, not on other members.
    - If any group member expresses discomfort being observed during a meeting or function, no observations will be made.
  - **Follow-up and feedback**
    - If wished, participants will have the opportunity to review and give feedback on:

1. each interview transcript, 2. an initial draft of their narrative, 3. a final draft of their narrative.
- Engagement in the feedback process is completely voluntary and is not required to participate in the study.
- Please feel free to ask any questions regarding the procedures and goals of the study or the participant's role.

**Funded by:** The Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC)

**Potential Risks:**

- Participation in this study carries minimal risk of harm. There is the potential risk of experiencing emotional discomfort during interviews, as participants may recollect challenging life experiences such as bereavements or health concerns. Recounting emotional and painful memories may increase a participant's risk of feeling ongoing grief.
- For participants who feel the need for formal support as a result of contact with the researcher, local counselling resources are available as well as a crisis phone line:
  - **Family Service Saskatoon**  
Individual and family counselling  
Fees assessed on a sliding scale  
506 25 St E, Saskatoon, SK, S7K 4A7  
(306) 244-0127
  - **Catholic Family Services**  
Individual and family counselling (non-denominational)  
Fees assessed on a sliding scale  
506 25 St E, Saskatoon, SK, S7K 4A7  
(306) 244-7773
  - **Community Adult Mental Health Services**  
Individual and family counselling  
Services provided free through the health region  
4th Floor - 715 Queen St., Saskatoon, SK, S7K 4X4  
(306) 655-7777
  - **Saskatoon Crisis Centre**  
24-hour crisis response service  
506 25th St East #103, Saskatoon, SK, S7K 4A7  
(306) 933-6200
- There is also a potential breach of confidentiality risk. Given the rarity of seniors writing groups in the Saskatoon community, and the relatively small number of members in the

[Group Name] group, a participant may be identifiable to others as a result of participating in this study.

- **To minimize the risk of a confidentiality breach, the following steps will be taken:**
  - Describing the location of the study as “mid-sized Western Canadian city” in the final research document.
  - Excluding the actual name of the group from the final research document.
  - Using a pseudonym (participant’s choice) in place of the participant’s name in the final research document.
  - Using pseudonyms (participant’s choice) for people and places that the participant names in interview conversations and editing to reduce identifying details.
  - Offering each participant an opportunity to review and give feedback on each of her interview transcripts, an interim draft of her narrative, and a final draft of her narrative (three different opportunities to request alterations). Participants can add, alter, or delete information from the transcripts and drafts as they see fit, and request that identifying information (e.g. age, occupation, family composition) be altered.
  
- Participants’ names will not be disclosed by the researcher to anyone during or after this study, without the participant’s written consent, except in three situations wherein a confidentiality breach may be required by law:
  - A life is in danger
  - A child has been or may be harmed
  - The researcher is subpoenaed by the court

**Potential Benefits:**

- By sharing their experiences in this study, participants may provide helping professionals (such as counsellors and social workers) with a better understanding of how creative groups, like the [Group Name], can positively affect older adults’ lives. With a greater understanding of how these groups can impact individuals’ lives, professionals may be better equipped to support older adults who might benefit from a creative outlet.
  
- Participants may also enjoy reflecting on what their membership in a writing group has meant to them.

**Compensation:** Compensation will not be provided for participation in this study.

**Confidentiality:**

- As this study involves face to face interviews, participants will not be anonymous to the student researcher, Kelly Mills.
  
- The results of this study will be published in a thesis, and potentially in peer-reviewed journals and conferences. Participants’ direct quotations will be published, but participant identities will be kept confidential through the use of pseudonyms and other editing.

- Participant names will only be recorded on consent forms and on a master list that assigns a code to each participant. The forms and list will be securely stored on the student researcher's password-protected computer. All data collected during the study will refer to participants by their codes (not their names) to maintain confidentiality.
- During the individual interviews, participants may request that the audio-recording device be turned off at any time.

### **Storage of Data:**

- Audio files, interview transcripts, writing samples, and field notes will be securely stored on the student researcher's password-protected lap top, throughout the study and for five years following publication of the study. After five years, all data will be destroyed.

### **Right to Withdraw:**

- Participation is voluntary. Participants may withdraw from the study for any reason, without explanation or penalty.
- Participants can choose to answer only those questions that they are comfortable with.
- If a participant wishes, she may withdraw any time before the final research document is submitted to the thesis committee (participants will be given two weeks' notice). If a participant chooses to withdraw, all audio-recordings, interview transcripts, writing samples, and field notes containing her data will be destroyed.

### **Follow up:**

- To obtain results from the study (a link to the online thesis or a one-page summary of study findings) participants can contact the student researcher through phone or email, provided above. Please note that if a participant sends email, message security is not guaranteed.

### **Questions or Concerns:**

- Questions or concerns about this study may be directed to the student researcher or supervisors (contact information provided above).
- This study has been approved on ethical grounds by the University of Saskatchewan Research Ethics Board. Any questions about participant rights may be addressed to that committee through the Research Ethics Office [ethics.office@usask.ca](mailto:ethics.office@usask.ca) (306) 966-2975. Out of town participants may call toll free (888) 966-2975.

**Continued or On-going Consent:**

- This study involves multiple interviews over three to four months, so participant consent is an ongoing process. At the beginning of each interview, the student researcher will ask participants to restate their consent to be audio-recorded. Interviews will only continue with consent.

**Signed Consent**

Your signature below indicates that you have read and understand the description provided; I have had an opportunity to ask questions and my/our questions have been answered. I consent to participate in the research study. A copy of this Consent Form has been given to me for my records.

_____	_____	_____
<i>Name of Participant</i>	<i>Signature</i>	<i>Date</i>
_____		_____
<i>Researcher's Signature</i>	<i>Date</i>	

***A copy of this consent will be left with you, and a copy will be taken by the researcher.***

## Appendix C: Sample Interview Probes

### Sample Interview Probes

- What is it like for you to write stories?
- What was it like for you to write and share this story (writing sample provided)?
- How does this piece (writing sample provided) relate to your experiences with the group?
- What is it like for you to write, as someone with [insert age] years of life experience?
- How does it feel to share stories with other group members?
- What is it like for you to write and share stories, as a woman?
- What is it like for you to help sustain the group over time, through your participation?
- How does your practice of writing and sharing impact your feelings and thoughts about your life?
- How does your age impact your writing?
- How has your approach to writing evolved over time?
- How has your felt experience of writing and sharing evolved over time?

**Appendix D: Notice of Research for Non-Participating Group Members**

***NOTICE OF RESEARCH***

Hello [Group Name],

This letter is to inform you that the observation of certain group members, for the purposes of a graduate research project, will be happening in today's meeting. **Observations will only be made of research participants** (women who have consented to share their stories with me in interviews outside of the group meetings). I will be observing participant's interactions with other members and making short notes. The purpose of this observation is to learn more about the ways individuals relate to one another in writing groups. **If you are not a participant, no personal information about you will be recorded.**

If you will not be comfortable with my observation during today's meeting, please let me know before we begin and I will not make any observations of the group.

Thank you

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