

***Putting poetry back into the mind:  
How can therapeutic writing benefit clients of  
psychodynamic psychotherapy?***

**Bron Deed**

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Auckland University of Technology  
in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of  
Master of Health Science – Psychotherapy**

**Primary Supervisor: Brigitte Puls**

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## **ATTESTATION OF AUTHORSHIP**

I hereby declare that this submission is my own work and that, to the best of my knowledge and belief, it contains no material previously published or written by another person (except where explicitly defined in the acknowledgements), nor material which to a substantial extent has been submitted for the award of any other degree or diploma of a university or other institution of higher learning.

Signed:

Bron Deed

Date:

## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

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*The task of psychoanalysis is not so much to undo forgetting,  
but to put poetry back into the mind.*

- Jacqueline Rose.

*Writing can be a pretty desperate endeavour, because it is about some of  
our deepest needs: our need to be visible, to be heard, our need to make  
sense of our lives, to wake up and grow and belong.*

– Anne Lamott.

## **ABSTRACT**

This work aims to explore how therapeutic writing can benefit clients of psychodynamic psychotherapy. The role of writing in developing the self is reviewed and discussed in the context of the therapeutic relationship. Therapeutic writing is then explored from the theoretical perspectives of attachment theory, and object Relations. In particular, Winnicott's notion of transitional space is compared with writers' experiences of poetic space, and writing as a transitional object is discussed.

This dissertation found, through reviewing the existing literature, that there is little research directly addressing therapeutic writing in relation to psychodynamic psychotherapy. However, a small body of authors in the emerging field of *writing as therapy* does provide a psychodynamic context and interpretation of writing as a therapeutic practice. These authors make use of psychodynamic processes, understandings and interpretations in their research, for example, by valuing notions of the unconscious and transference, use of free association, and attention to the therapeutic frame in relation to the therapeutic relationship. Accordingly, these authors are given prominence throughout this study, supported by the other research currently available.

The dissertation concludes that therapeutic writing can contribute significant benefits for clients. It may facilitate purposeful self-reflective work which supports or augments the therapeutic process between or beyond sessions. It may contribute to development of insight, self-regulation and complex perspectives of past events, and can be a useful bridge for strengthening the self and the therapeutic relationship. The paucity of research literature on the clinical implications of writing and the therapeutic relationship within psychodynamic psychotherapy suggests that further research is indicated in this area.

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## **CHAPTER ONE: HOW CAN THERAPEUTIC WRITING BENEFIT CLIENTS OF PSYCHODYNAMIC PSYCHOTHERAPY?**

### ***Introduction***

Writing is a frequently undertaken self-directed therapeutic activity. There are a wealth of books, groups and courses available to encourage potential writers to understand themselves through writing. Most focus on unleashing creative potential with self development as a potential side effect (Cameron 1995, 1998; Goldberg, 1991). However, there is a developing body of published research in the field of *writing as therapy* which combines literary and psychological theories to support the notion of writing as a valuable therapeutic process. Most of these works emphasise the benefits gained from writing, whether the aim is to improve creative writing skills or to express inner life.

I have valued writing as a therapeutic tool in a number of forms and contexts. As writer, creative writing teacher and psychotherapist, I have used writing as a self-reflective practice for creative and self-development; experienced its value for others in writing groups; and used writing therapeutically alongside my own psychotherapy. Therefore, I began to wonder why I felt reticent and uncertain about writing as a therapeutic intervention with my clients. I also felt that clients who write could benefit more if I was clearer about how therapeutic writing could be beneficial. With my interest in writing, it seemed odd to ignore the potential of this intervention if it could be used sensitively and appropriately with clients.

Irvin Yalom (2001) for example, writes of his extensive positive experience using writing as part of the therapeutic encounter.

Consequently I began to formulate questions that led to this dissertation topic: How might therapeutic writing benefit clients of psychodynamic psychotherapy? Rose (2004), quoted at the beginning of this work, began the process of my thinking. I envisioned the concept of putting poetry back into the mind as opening a potential space for imagination to flourish. This led me towards the exploration of Winnicott's (1971) transitional phenomena as a theme of this dissertation, which soon linked up with ideas about the relationship of language with early attachment relationships and development of the self.

A number of meta-analyses of the literature (Frattaroli, 2006; Frisina, Borod & Lepore, 2004; Smyth, 1998) have established there are clear improvements in health, wellbeing, behavioural change, physical symptoms, even immune system functioning, from writing. However, much of the literature is based on structured writing experiments with specific client groups. Whilst the benefits of writing as a therapeutic tool have been researched and developed by a number of different theorists and therapeutic approaches, there appears to be a gap in the research in terms of the direct application of these findings in psychotherapy (Kerner & Fitzpatrick, 2007). My question therefore focuses on research applicable to psychodynamic psychotherapy.

Psychotherapy seeks to be therapeutic through fostering beneficial psychological change indicated by an increased sense of inner freedom, psychic flexibility, ability to relate to others, live creatively and develop a clearer and richer sense of personal identity (Hunt, 2000). In order to consider how therapeutic writing can benefit clients of psychodynamic psychotherapy it is necessary to ask what it is that clients gain from writing. What do they use writing for and how can this be compared to and contrasted with the process of psychodynamic psychotherapy?

Therapeutic writing involves several beneficial components: written self-expression, and subsequent reflection on what is written, may help clients to develop the capacity to reflect, understand, find compassion for and strengthen the self by giving voice to inner truths, build complex perspectives, and give shape to experiences and life (Hunt, 2000). Like psychotherapy, writing is a process. However, writing is more self-directed than psychotherapy: the pace, depth and intensity of the process are more completely in the client's control, contributing to a sense of safety for self-expression, which may increase a sense of personal agency (Wright, 2004). Like therapy, writing also requires active engagement and develops capacity for curiosity, reflection, creativity and discovery (ibid).

Writing and verbalising in therapy are similar processes (Bolton, 1999; Wright, 2004). Freud (1959) claimed the client's capacity for free association of ideas was an essential component of successful psychoanalysis. Freely associative thinking resulting from the creation of a

safely contained environment is the intent of both therapeutic writing and psychodynamic psychotherapy, and is most eloquently expressed in Winnicott's (1971) notion of transitional space. However, whilst writing and speaking are similar processes, writing is generally a private process. This difference can be beneficial: for example, inhibited or shamed clients may be able to write about feelings or experiences that they are unwilling to disclose to another person (Bolton, 1999; Wright, 2004). It may also be seen as a limitation, as when clients use writing as a defence against relating in therapy (Domash, 1976).

Because writing is primarily self-directed an essential concern is how therapeutic writing by clients is held within the therapeutic relationship. In order for writing to be a beneficial aspect of psychotherapy it may be assumed it becomes part of the therapeutic process. Lamott (1994), quoted at the beginning of this work, reminds us that writing expresses deep needs to be seen, heard, understood, grow into our potential and belong in relationship. I aim to explore how therapeutic writing and psychodynamic therapy both provide a means for self experiences to be voiced, attended to, shared and made sense of together. While there is no doubt that writing which is not shared within the therapeutic relationship may still be of benefit to clients, I would suggest writing is most useful when it supports the therapeutic relationship.

### *Dissertation outline*

This dissertation contributes to the literature by offering some insights on therapeutic writing in relation to psychodynamic theory. A psychodynamic approach to therapeutic writing allows exploration of unconscious and intra-psychic processes, encouraging a deeper searching into the client's inner world than a narrative or cognitively oriented approach. This dissertation reviews and discusses the literature through the two psychodynamic lenses of attachment theory and object relations theory as representing two major streams of psychodynamic thought with which to interpret the process and benefits of therapeutic writing.

Chapter one introduces the rationale and aims of the research topic and provides an overview of the subject area, introducing the themes that will unfold in the following chapters.

Chapter two outlines the methodology employed and provides a rationale for the modified systematic literature review and its application to the dissertation.

Chapter three reviews the literature on the nature of therapeutic writing, developing the themes of language, speaking and writing in the context of self-growth and the ability to relate to others. *Writing as therapy* experts (Bolton, 1999; Hunt, 2000; Hunt & Sampson, 1998, 2006) contend writing both strengthens the self and reconnects the writer to an authentic self, freeing access to the "true self" (Winnicott, 1971) and bringing more

complex parts of the self into conscious awareness (Bollas, 1995). The writing process is compared and contrasted with the aims of psychodynamic psychotherapy, and the benefits and limitations of therapeutic writing are explored.

Chapter four discusses therapeutic writing from the two theoretical perspectives of attachment theory and object relations theory.

Section one explores a central idea in attachment theory: that the ability to create coherent narratives and make meaning from life experience is influenced by early attachment patterns. In discussing *writing as therapy* literature through the lens of attachment theory, I aim to demonstrate how therapeutic writing positively influences the capacity to create coherent and relevant stories in order to make sense of self experiences and relationships with others.

Section two discusses writing from the perspective of Winnicott's (1971) notion of transitional phenomena. Both writing and psychotherapy aim for the individual to be able to find that creative place Winnicott (1991) described as potential space, a transitional place in which psychic reality and the external world are both present. In this section I aim to demonstrate how the creative processes involved in therapeutic writing foster the ability to use potential space and transitional phenomena in ways that enhance psychotherapy. Bollas's (1987) notion of the transformational

object and Bion's (1997) ideas on containment add to the discussion of writing from an object relations perspective.

Chapter five evaluates the themes of the previous chapters, identifying significant findings, strengths and limitations of the research. The benefits of therapeutic writing and the clinical implications for psychotherapy practice are synthesised, and avenues for further research are identified.



## **CHAPTER TWO: METHODOLOGY**

### ***Research Question***

The guiding research question for this review is: how can therapeutic writing benefit clients of psychodynamic psychotherapy? The aim of this dissertation is to contribute to an understanding of how therapeutic writing might benefit clients and how this can inform clinical practice. It should be clarified that the research question refers to therapeutic writing by clients. Although it may be therapeutically indicated at times for psychotherapists to write to their clients this is not the focus of my research question. The research on the benefits of writing as a therapeutic intervention is outlined and discussed below.

### ***Methods***

This study is in the form of a modified systematic literature review of the literature relating to therapeutic writing and its implications for the practice of psychodynamic psychotherapy. Currently quality systematic reviews are considered the gold standard of evidence-based research, providing information which, combined with clinical judgment, can be used to make decisions for delivery of best practice and care for clients (Dickson, 2005). Originally designed for medical practice, and using mainly quantitative data, the systematic literature review has been modified to include qualitative research, which is better suited to psychotherapy (Fonagy, 2003). A modified systematic literature review enables a broad range of research to be gathered in relation to the topic and

is a cost-effective and time-effective alternative to clinical research (Parry, 2000).

### ***Ethics Approval***

There are a number of potential ethical issues to consider when exploring clinical practice. This study is based on reviews of current literature and debate. Ethics approval was not sought as neither clinical nor participant material was required for this research.

### ***Selection and synthesis of material***

The research on writing is not always in the realm of therapy (Kerner & Fitzpatrick, 2007). Initial searches found there is limited literature available specifically applicable to the research question so it was necessary to research more broadly. The study therefore includes and synthesises psychodynamic and psychoanalytic literature, literary theory, creative writing theory and *writing as therapy* literature. In particular, *writing as therapy* literature has provided a useful overlap in psychodynamic and creative writing research. Hypothetical clinical examples and excerpts from published writers are used to illustrate the themes of this research. Although other disciplines are referred to, the focus of this study is how psychodynamic understandings of the benefits of therapeutic writing may inform clinical practice.

Research material was primarily sourced from the major electronic databases including PsychInfo, Psychoanalytic Electronic Publishing

Archive (PEP), Scopus and ABSCO. The AUT dissertation databases were searched for any previous research in this area. The AUT library catalogue, web engines such as Google Scholar, and the publishing lists of publishers of the *writing as therapy* genre were also explored. A number of relevant books otherwise, unavailable except through inter-loan, were purchased on the basis that they were valuable resources for this research. Reference lists and citations of articles, essays and book chapters were explored for further literature. Finally, key authors in the *writing as therapy* genre were contacted by email in an effort to find the most recent research available. New Zealand based research relevant to the topic is almost non-existent, though there is New Zealand based research into writing from more cognitive and narrative based perspectives which were excluded from this dissertation. Exclusion criteria will be discussed below.

Search terms and results are illustrated in Table 1 in Appendix One.

### ***Inclusion criteria***

Although many articles came up in the initial broad searches it quickly became apparent that most were not about therapeutic writing as defined by the research question, or referred to modalities that were not psychodynamic. Meta-analyses of the current literature revealed a broad conclusion that therapeutic writing is beneficial to the lives, wellbeing and health outcomes of a range of clinical populations (Frattaroli, 2006; Frisina, Borod & Lepore, 2004; Smyth, 1998). There is little specific research focused on psychodynamic psychotherapy. However, *writing as*

*therapy* experts (Bolton, 1999, 2005; Hunt, 2000; Hunt & Sampson, 1998, 2006) have applied psychodynamic theory to demonstrate the benefits of writing for writers. This dissertation aims to accomplish something similar but original: to draw on writing theory to demonstrate the benefits of writing for clients in psychodynamic psychotherapy. Inclusion material therefore incorporated research that values psychodynamic processes, understandings and interpretations: notions of the unconscious and transference, free association, concepts of self, and attention to the therapeutic relationship.

This study includes the following material: psychodynamic and psychoanalytic literature on the development of self, creativity and the imagination, emphasising concepts of transitional space and phenomena, and referring to attachment, mentalisation and object relations theories; literature on writing practices that incorporate a method similar in structure and intent to the process of psychodynamic psychotherapy, for example, reflective, freely associative, self-expressive and self-directed writing that encourages connection with the self; literature on language theories in the context of development of self and relationship; material describing transference and counter transference; literary theory and creative writing research that incorporates psychodynamic theory in its understandings, constructs and/or analysis; published literary examples included to illustrate and give life to the research, providing a means to consider what some published, and consequently, self-selected writers have to say about the therapeutic value of writing for themselves [Pennebaker (2002) has

suggested that, unlike controlled studies, real world projects evaluating how writing works with a group of self-selected people naturally drawn to a writing intervention would be more useful in understanding how writing benefits writers]; and hypothetical clinical examples of how clients use therapeutic writing in clinical practice.

### ***Exclusion criteria***

Research based on cognitive behavioural therapy, narrative therapy, online, email and texting-based therapies were excluded either because they use prescribed and directive writing techniques to address cognitive functioning, or they do not recognise psychodynamic processes, understandings and interpretations in their research. Cognitive analytic therapy literature was screened individually for relevance as this modality straddles both cognitive and analytic methods.

Although Jung's theories have brought a wealth of ideas relevant to writing, the unconscious, and ways metaphor and myth are used to understand psychic processes, Jung's theories were considered to be a separate theoretical framework from psychodynamic theory, with unique concepts of the unconscious and the self, and were therefore excluded. Jung's approach, amongst others, seems worthy of a research topic in its own right.

### *Definitions and terminology*

Please refer to appendix four for definitions and discussion of terminology used in this dissertation before reading the main text.

## **CHAPTER THREE: TRANSLATION OF THE SELF ONTO THE PAGE**

### ***Introduction***

Psychoanalysis has been known from its beginning as the “talking cure” yet poets, writers and novelists over centuries have acknowledged the therapeutic value of writing (Berman, 2003). This chapter reviews the literature on therapeutic writing and summarises the findings of this research. The relationship of language to the development of the self and the ability to relate to others is discussed and the benefits and limitations of therapeutic writing explored.

### ***The nature of therapeutic writing***

In order to assess the benefits for clients, the nature of therapeutic writing must be understood. Therapeutic writing is the writing of self experiences expressed in forms which may include diaries, journals, fiction, autobiography and poetry. Kerner & Fitzpatrick (2007) propose the use of a matrix of writing forms on a continuum from highly structured through to abstract thought processes as a means to effective writing interventions tailored to strengthening identified client deficits. However, the research indicates it does not appear to be the *form* of writing that is relevant for benefits to occur. Rather, as with psychotherapy, it seems to be the *process* itself that is therapeutic.

Writing and speaking both use words as the means for self-expression. Both represent a form of communication to an other (which may include another part of the self). Pennebaker (2000; 2002) suggests that if people will talk or write about their problems their health improves. *Writing as therapy* authors (Bolton 1999; Hunt, 2000; Hunt & Sampson, 2006) claim it is the combination of spontaneous uncensored writing followed by redrafting and reworking of the material that has the most psychological benefits. Writers themselves make the link between self-expression and symptomatic or emotional relief. Virginia Woolf for example wrote of her relief from her obsession with her dead mother after she wrote *To The Lighthouse*:

I suppose that I did for myself what psycho-analysts do for their patients. I expressed some very long felt and deeply felt emotion. And in expressing it I explained it and then laid it to rest (Woolf, 1976, p. 81).

For Woolf, the process was a combination of expression of feeling and the shaping and analysis of the experience similar to the working through of material in the therapeutic relationship. According to Hunt (2000) one aspect of the process of therapeutic writing is that it enables the development of an authentically felt writing identity which enhances access to and understanding of aspects of the self.

### ***Concepts of the self***

Before considering how writing benefits development of the self there must first be an acceptance of the idea of a basic self or personality which



can be developed (Kerner & Fitzpatrick, 2007). Writing theorists (Abbs, 1998; Hunt, 2000; Hunt & Sampson, 2006) place theories of writing and the development of the self within a Western historical context which has valued notions of individuation, personal reflection and introspective enquiry, and a basic principle of “the essential historicity of the self” (Abbs, 1998, p.117). Ways of envisaging the self are therefore culturally influenced. Abbs (1998) claims that writing as a means for understanding, developing and expressing the self was shaped by the confessional tradition of Christianity, in particular by the written confessions of St Augustine (1961), brought into the psychological domain through Rousseau’s (1953) self-analytical writings in the 18th century. This Western cultural and historical context is also the basis for the development of psychoanalysis (Abbs, 1998; Hunt and Sampson, 2006).

While humanism and modernism are based on a notion of a fixed singular self which can be developed into an ideal unitary whole, post-modern and deconstructionist theories have more complex views of the self as encompassing multiple aspects, identities or selves, with self development focussed on awareness, acceptance and integration of multiple facets of the self (Hunt & Sampson, 2006). In psychoanalysis, Freud (1916) proposed that the self is not singular but contained three different aspects: id, ego and superego. This has extended in contemporary psychotherapy to an understanding of the self as richly complex, and able to be accessed and integrated for greater psychological awareness and wellbeing (Bollas, 1987, 1995). Kohut (1977) claimed we can learn a lot about self-

experience through reading the experiences of others. Therapeutic writing research (Hunt, 2000; Hunt & Sampson, 2006) suggests that writing about different aspects of our selves can benefit clients' awareness and experience of the self.

***The writing identity: development and integration of the self***

Bolton (1999) and Hunt (2000) both suggest that developing a writing identity gets us in touch with our selves and our experience at a deeply felt level, externalising material so that it can be worked with freely and creatively. They claim exploring our selves imaginatively through writing can bring insights and develop our ability to feel comfortable with inner processes; increase grounding through engaging with a felt, sensed and embodied experience; enhance the development of an observing self to explore material; and offer more flexibility between freedom and control.

Writing, like psychotherapy, involves the development of a strong enough sense of self to facilitate the shelving of the inner critic/ego and to allow regression into the unconscious (Hunt 2000). Both involve the holding open of an internal space where imagination transforms unconscious material into creative expression (Pateman, 1997, 1998; Winnicott, 1971). Through engaging with feelings and emotions, both writing and psychotherapy help clients deepen their connection with an internal world, and therefore develop a stronger sense of self. This can enable the suspension of the critical faculty in order to become immersed in imaginative processes. The ego is then able to be reinstated as needed to

shape the resultant material. This flexibility between creative and critical faculties provides a solid foundation for developing and accepting multiple perspectives of self (Hunt, 2000). Both psychotherapy and writing involve a practice of revising and re-visioning life stories. This revision, through talking or writing and rewriting of self experiences over time has the ability to change perceptions and create new versions and understandings of our selves and experiences (Hunt, 2000; Hunt & Sampson, 2006). Day Sclater (2005) suggests writing about self experiences enables the development our capacity to view the world from complex perspectives, developing the ability for empathy. It could be argued that therapeutic writing may develop the capacity for empathy with the self and with others, which suggests writing may be of benefit in working with transference in the therapeutic relationship.

Hunt (2000) suggests the development of a writing voice or identity leads to growth and integration of the self by clarifying personal identity and freeing inhibitions to expression. Expressing feelings in our own words and style makes the voice of what Winnicott (1965a) calls the “true self” more accessible. Bolton (1999) and Hunt (2000) claim it is the unique style or voice of the writing which contains the sense of self: putting authentically felt words together to narrate experience revives aspects of the self through bringing to life a felt and sensed emotional world. For Goldberg (1991) evocative writing encourages both embodiment and mindful awareness that brings experience alive. Neuroscience research (Damasio (1994, 1999) is increasingly demonstrating the embodied nature

of thinking and language. Perhaps future research in this area will show writing strengthens neural pathways or creates new ones. Areas of further research will be discussed in the concluding chapter.

The benefit of developing an authentic voice, as Zempler (2003) suggests, is that it can be incorporated into the therapeutic dialogue, aiding the growth and expression of an authentic self within and beyond therapy. Zempler (ibid) proposes that writing encourages the shift from intrapersonal to interpersonal dialogue which is important because it facilitates the development of the therapeutic relationship. A significant aspect of this process of authenticity for both therapeutic writing and psychotherapy is free association.

### ***Free association and accessing the unconscious***

Freud (1916) claimed the client's capacity for free association of ideas was an essential component of successful psychoanalysis. By this he meant freely expressing thoughts or associations as they came to mind. Bollas (1995) refines this, determining it is the *process* of free association rather than interpretation which is essential:

All along, what has seemed to be the means to truth – free association – is the truth itself, which psychoanalysis can bring to its patients. In this moving expression of unbound ideas, the patient not only finds self-expression but, more tellingly, finds or rediscovers the route to unconscious freedom and personal creativity (Bollas 1995, p. 69).

Both writing and psychotherapy provide a secure environment in which to engage in the spontaneous expression of ideas that rise from the unconscious. The process of free-association within a secure environment is explored further in chapter four through the theoretical perspective of Winnicott's (1971) notion of potential space.

In freely associative writing there develops a relationship between the self as author and the roles inhabited by the writer on the page, similar to the development of an observing self in therapy who is able to consider and reflect on other parts of the self. Writing can trigger the imagination, revealing the themes and preoccupations of our experience. Spontaneous writing without censorship or correction opens up new areas of thinking and understanding, and enables contact with unexamined thoughts, ideas and forgotten memories. Writing also helps to express and explore issues which may not otherwise be in awareness due to their unconscious or repressed nature (Bolton, 2005).

Both writing and psychotherapy consider the accessing of memories as representing the personal meaning of past experience. Both consider memories to be subjective and highly self-referenced rather than being literally true. *Writing as therapy* experts Bolton (1999), Hunt (2000) and Hunt & Sampson (2006) suggest writing about memories combines our interpretation of the past from the perspective of the present and provides a great deal of information about complex aspects of ourselves. Perspectives are capable of change as we gain insight, so rewriting the same event may

show our capacity for change. For example, Virginia Woolf (1976) wrote several essays covering the same childhood material as well as fictional versions of her childhood. Her viewpoint can be seen to change, becoming more complex over time, though the events she writes about are the same.

In contrast, King (2002) argues the benefits of writing are less to do with developing insight and more to do with developing self-regulatory processes and habits which enable a person to set and pursue goals, assess feedback and adjust process accordingly. Affective response is one of the key features of self-regulation. Self regulation supports the ability to use emotions as information, enabling direction and clarification. This is significant as it explains how writing might benefit clients whose insecure early attachments contributed to an inability to regulate affect or to mentalise accurately (Bateman & Fonagy, 2006; Holmes, 2001). This would indicate therapeutic writing may benefit clients with borderline personality disorders or complex traumas. Affect regulation and attachment are discussed in chapter four.

### ***Language and words: selves in translation***

The development of an authentic writing identity has been discussed in terms of the use of unique style and word choice. This section explores why language reveals so much about our selves, and the potential this offers for both writing and psychotherapy.

For Steinberg (2002) words extend beyond the medium of language into the fundamental qualities of being human. He suggests symbols and imagery shape us as much as we shape them; they are complex communications encompassing ambiguity, unconscious meanings and emotional resonances (ibid). In the process of writing or speaking, meaning is created and shaped through choice of words. There is increasing support for the view that words are part of an embodied experience of life; that language itself is embodied in the metaphors and images which make up thoughts, expression, and our sense of self and of others (Booth, 2007; Shengold, 1989; Steinberg, 2002). The perception that we *are* language (Steinberg, 2002) suggests that the ability to use symbols, imagery and words to make sense of one's self and environment is vital to human development.

Neuroscience research supports the view that language and meaning making are an embodied experience: Damasio (1994; 1999) claims that memory, fantasy, language, symbol and image formation are integral to human consciousness and a necessary part of human functioning. An example of how language translates embodied experience is Sontag's (1977) exploration of the aggressive battle metaphors used to describe the experience and treatment of cancer and AIDS. Language can also be used to disembody or dehumanise, as in war terminology which describes people in language that refers to targets or merchandise, thus enabling large scale killing to occur (Peat, 2000).

For Peat (ibid) language is directly entwined with relationships with others and with external environment. He links capacity for language with both culture and world view. Our earliest relationships are the medium in which we develop language, and through this, the ability to translate ourselves and others. Attachment theory (Bowlby, 1988) and mentalisation research (Bateman & Fonagy, 2006) supports the idea that we need to be able to read and express complex and ambiguous emotional states in ourselves and others. Words, as Winnicott suggested, represent a paradox of complex possibilities of thought, feeling and language in which it becomes possible to play (1971). For Bollas (2002) language is an experience, originally created in the facilitating environment between mother and child, capable of, and necessary for, transforming the self and experience. These theories are important for understanding the relevance of language in explaining our selves and our relationship with others and will be discussed further in chapter four.

### ***Evaluating the benefits and limitations of speaking and writing***

Although writing and speaking both use the same medium (language) and process, it is useful to evaluate their similarities and differences in order to consider the benefits and limitations of writing in therapy. Historically, psychoanalysis considered that speaking about experience stayed closer to the speaker's meaning than writing about it (Bolton, 1999; Day Sclater, 2005). Freud, and consequently traditional psychoanalysis, considered writing was a defence used to obfuscate the truth (Day Sclater, 2005). However, the notion of an objective truth or objective self which the



therapist must vigilantly uncover has given way to an acceptance of the complexities of subjective experience, which both therapeutic writing and psychotherapy are interested in. It may still be argued that the writing of life stories is designed as much to conceal as to reveal (Craib, 2000) and therefore psychotherapists need to listen for what is unsaid as well as what is emphasised, in order for new and personal (as opposed to objective) truths to be discovered.

Speaking, in contrast to writing, is a communication held within a relationship, unlike writing which may have an audience in mind but is usually done privately. In the therapeutic relationship the therapist provides an empathic context for the words, providing accurate attunement and mirroring which may not be present in therapeutic writing which is held outside the relationship. Speaking includes the quality of conversation as a communication that flows simultaneously between two people. Conversation, according to Hobson (1985) is a “talking with” (p. 10), distinguishing a relationship between “*persons* from an attitude towards, and a manipulation of, *things*.” (p.10), suggesting a clear distinction between the processes of speaking and writing. Yet it can be proposed that writing can provide a relationship with the self and with an imagined other. Hobson (ibid) emphasises dialogue as an everchanging medium of mutual adjustment. It could be argued that writing could disturb the possibility of establishing this medium, or even be used as a defence against relating.

However, there are therapeutic situations where speaking becomes impossible or is perceived as dangerous by the client. If it is not acceptable to speak about feelings and experiences within the family, words may come to feel useless or dangerous and thinking and feeling become split. Then the language of character, expression of the true self, is not possible (Bollas, 2002). Because things that are said cannot be taken back or erased, talking is more likely to be censored by clients for whom it has not been safe to speak out. Compared with speaking, writing is more private and more within the control of the writer and therefore more contained. Writing may therefore help clients express issues which are otherwise unable to be articulated or communicated, either due to their traumatic nature, or to the client's inability for expression (Bolton, 2005; Wright, 2004). This may benefit clients by opening the therapeutic space for conversation and mutuality and where transference dynamics may be more safely explored. Domash (1976) provides a clinical example:

*A six year old child had withdrawn from attachment and was not communicating verbally with the therapist. A written dialogue passed between client and therapist within the session enabled the expression of the child's abandonment fury to be expressed playfully and safely. The writing supported and maintained links with the therapist and enabled the client to work through her abandonment fury at a time when speaking was impossible. As a result writing prevented regression to an earlier state and enabled the client to maintain her ground and move forward into more positive relationship.*

This example demonstrates how writing may benefit the therapeutic relationship, in particular indicating how writing enabled the working through of the transference at times when speaking was problematic. I shall turn next to a review of the benefits and limitations of therapeutic writing and how these may be assessed and applied within the therapeutic relationship.

### ***Benefits of therapeutic writing***

Generally, the research indicates the aims and benefits of psychotherapy and therapeutic writing are similar. They include increased ability to make meaning from experience, enhanced sense of wellbeing, better relationships, sense of personal strength, greater appreciation of life, and ability to imagine future possibilities (Kerner & Fitzpatrick, 2007; Ullrich & Lutgendorf, 2002). This is significant as it indicates why therapeutic writing benefits clients and how it may enhance or accelerate the therapy process. It also provides some means for how the benefits of therapeutic writing may be assessed. For example, clients in Ire's (2008) study using autobiographical writing as an intervention stated that they had benefited through enhanced self-revelation and self-reflection which had the effect of facilitating deeply focused therapeutic work which was ongoing between and beyond therapy sessions.

Wright (2004) suggests those who benefit most from therapeutic writing are people who are naturally self-motivated or inclined to write. This group experiences benefit when the process of writing has been helpful in

expressing and clarifying life experiences. Kohanyi (2005), studying factors that influence the development of creative writers, found that people who become creative writers tend to have a unique combination of high verbal ability and a rich imaginative life, suggesting this is the resilience factor that enables creative writers to negotiate effects of early stress. Applying these criteria to therapeutic writing might suggest writing as a natural intervention for clients with good verbal ability and capacity for imagination. Further, it might also suggest that developing a therapeutic writing practice could support and strengthen these skills in clients with deficits in their ability to think in complex and imaginative ways. This is important as it provides an explanation for how therapeutic writing may develop the capacity to think complexly and empathically, and suggests this may be a beneficial approach for developing these strengths in clients whose early attachments have restricted these capacities.

Wright (2004) suggests circumstances in which writing may be beneficial include therapies where material may be worked through in writing between sessions; with people who perceive themselves as powerless; with people expressing themselves in a language which is not their original language; when clients are silenced or unable to speak about experiences and feelings, either through shame, cultural barriers or other reasons; with people who need to externalise and organise internal chaos; for disclosing trauma or stressful experiences; and during life experiences associated with strong feelings. How writing is beneficial is discussed below.

A significant advantage of writing for some clients is its concreteness. Writing supports the development of a cohesive, structured and continuous self reflected back through the external and consistent evidence of the written word (Bolton, 1999; Hunt, 2000; Hunt & Sampson, 1998, 2006). Written words have their own power, status and autonomy. They are visible, accessible and can be revisited (; Bolton, 1999; Steinberg, 2002). Where speech or thought can be interrupted, forgotten or altered, writing “leaves clear footprints on the page” (Bolton, 2005, p. 142). It keeps its form to come back to as required. For clients whose experience of others has been unreliable, the constancy of writing may help build trust, stability and continuity of experience.

For chaotic or overwhelmed clients, externalising the internalised chaos on the page can provide cathartic relief and an ability to work with the issues with greater clarity. For example, poet Sylvia Plath experienced writing as a cathartic relief as she externalised and contained her overwhelming feelings on the page. She wrote in her *Journals*: “Fury jams the gullet and spreads poison, but, as soon as I start to write, dissipates, flows into the figure of the letters: writing as therapy?” (1982, p.225). However, Domash (1976) makes the point that catharsis onto the page may benefit clients through releasing inhibited emotions, but it may not be effective for self-understanding, strengthening of ego resources and facilitating change, whereas writing that attempts to work through and make sense of difficult life stories is more able to strengthen fragile personalities.

As an externalised object writing can be dealt with creatively and symbolically, it can be torn up, burned, shared or unshared, or kept somewhere safe (Bolton, 1999). For traumatised clients in particular it may be very freeing to symbolically deal to traumatic experiences through ritualised acts of destruction. For other clients, the writing on the page becomes an important way of sharing the most intimate parts of the self with a trusted other, such as the therapist. In this case writing has the qualities of a transitional object (Winnicott, 1971): it occupies an intermediate position between the imagination and reality and is a useful container for the transition between therapy sessions (Steinberg, 2002). Writing as a transitional object will be discussed in depth in the next chapter.

Writing may be therapeutic for clients in that it literally creates a body of work, which in itself may give an empowering sense of agency and accomplishment (Hunt, 2000; Wright, 2002). By externalising internal experience it can create a sense of existence. Writing which evokes experiences in sensory ways helps ground them as real feelings or experiences for clients who may doubt them, thereby benefiting clients whose experience has been unheard, minimised or disbelieved, as in the case of childhood trauma. Both writing and therapy are therefore capable of attending to our basic needs to be seen, heard and to feel we exist (Lamott, 1994).

Writing may be a pleasurable activity, giving confidence in the ability to express ourselves. Because writing is slower than speaking and takes longer, it may allow space for deeper and more complex thought to develop (Bolton, 2005). The role of potential space (Winnicott, 1971) as a container for imaginative life, which is the domain of the true self, is discussed in the next chapter. The process of writing requires and creates sustained attention, mindfulness, purposefulness and preparation which are all conducive to concentrated expression. Writing promotes curiosity and can facilitate joint exploration when facts are provisional, leading to more questions. This may complement the psychotherapy process. As Steinberg writes:

...when the focus for therapist and client is a piece of writing, there is the possibility of a more equally shared relationship which is appropriate for the purpose of therapy: for example to enhance the autonomy and responsibility of the client (2002, p.49).

Because it is externalised, writing has its own authority or identity. In a fixed form it becomes open to review, consideration and discussion. As a definite statement, writing becomes negotiable, its fixedness provides a base around which discussion and development can occur (Steinberg, 2002). This is important because the benefits of writing for the therapeutic relationship can be understood as providing the secure base or facilitating environment discussed in the next chapter in terms of attachment theory object relations theory.

Some types of writing may be particularly beneficial in gaining access to and deeper understanding of the self. Use of images and metaphors provide indirect access to areas of thought, feeling, knowledge, ideas and memories that are not accessible through non-image contact (Modell, 1997; Pennebaker, 2000). Shengold (1989) and Booth (2007), describing language as a transitional object between embodied and internal experience, claim metaphoric language is the key to our capacity for both insight and outlook – an external and internal representation on experience. Pizer (1998) claims in creating metaphor clients become able to link and tolerate experience and develop more complex understandings of self. This would suggest that metaphoric forms of writing, such as poetry are particularly beneficial. Poetry will be discussed later in this work.

*Writing as therapy* research suggests that fictionalised writing may be particularly beneficial for accessing complex aspects of self because it is less exposing, opens up more potential for ambiguity and complexity and the exploration of relationships from multiple viewpoints, and can therefore be more dynamic than objectively biographical writing (Bolton, 1999; Hunt, 2000; Hunt & Sampson, 1996, 2006). Fiction encourages writing as a sensory experience (Goldberg, 1991) developing re-experiencing as an embodied and therefore connected experience, and allows exploration of experience rather than facts. Pennebaker (2000) claims writing fiction provides the same health benefits as writing directly about trauma. It is possible that fictionalised writing may be safer and



more beneficial than autobiographical writing for clients who experience the written word as dangerous.

### *Limitations of writing*

As an imaginative process, writing can invoke considerable anxiety and inhibition, and requires the risk of letting go. This is most evident in clients who are restricted in their ability to play and whose defences are rigid. In particular, clients who are unable to suspend their critical faculty tend to be resistant to the idea of writing as a form of expression (Bolton, 1999; Hunt, 2000). This is significant as it demonstrates the potential for writing to heighten transference dynamics. For narcissistically wounded clients who judge their abilities by perfectionist standards that cripple the creative process, writing may bring out resistance as it becomes associated with authority, criticism, evaluation and an expectation of judgment from the therapist (Hunt, 2000). These transference issues can be worked through by exploring the ideas behind the resistance rather than by encouraging writing. Often a hidden longing for writing appears beneath the resistance: journals are collected, unable to be written in; an admiration and facility for words shows itself in the client's verbal ability. However, in contrast to exploring the resistance, Ewen (2009) found anorexic clients benefited from using diary writing to provide opportunities to test out what they had learned about themselves, facilitating the relationship with the therapist, indicating writing can also be a useful method of working with transference dynamics.

Transference is also evident with clients who fear the power of written words: their visibility and external concreteness can be experienced as creating evidence which make internal experiences more real in a negative way, as proofs that are fixed, objective and cannot be reconsidered. Instead of writing providing an opportunity for experiences to be thought about differently, in this instance writing could limit the client from further exploration.

Writing may also become a transference issue with clients who use it defensively to end the possibility for conversation and relationship, by taking writing outside the relationship, or by restricting writing to a finite statement which cannot be explored. Particularly with borderline level clients there may be a desire for the other to be able to read their thoughts without elaboration from the client (Bateman & Fonagy, 2006), and writing could be expected to translate inner experience without discussion (Domash, 1976).

The absence of the therapist may be limiting when clients write between therapy sessions. It could be argued that the lack of the holding presence of the therapist may leave some clients vulnerable to feeling overwhelmed by writing themselves into places they are unable to deal with emotionally by themselves. For example there is some concern that writing about trauma may reactivate it. While Bolton (1999) maintains that writing proceeds at a slower, gentler, pace than speaking, and does not overwhelm the writer's capacity to process what becomes conscious, it is recommended that the

therapeutic relationship is essential for creating a secure environment for the writing to be therapeutic with highly traumatised clients. The following example demonstrates how the therapeutic relationship can provide the secure holding necessary for the client to use the transitional space (Winnicott, 1971).

### ***Illustration***

*During therapy a dissociative client with a complex trauma history began writing a fairy story. Whilst she did not offer the story to be read by the therapist, she explored the parallels her story began to have with her 'real life'. It became clear that the themes which preoccupied her story were enacted in her own life, and she had the sense of her writing predicting her future. Through discussing the themes and events that emerged, the client was able to deal with significant traumas she had been unable to address without the disguise of fiction. Through creating a fairy story, the client was able to name, process and control events, and to use fictional characters to represent different parts of her self and to enact more safely and with more awareness the traumas she held within her. She was also able to offer her fictional selves alternative outcomes. Over a long period of time, rereading and rewriting the story brought about a resolution of enactments in the client's life and a sense of empowerment and empathy as a result of her different perspectives. She gained a deeper sense of herself and found it particularly useful to be able to reread and appreciate her psychological development which she had been unable to experience during the process of writing. The therapist's role was to hold the client's*

*own self-directed process, providing the safety and containment of witnessing the client's journey. From a theoretical perspective, the client was able to make creative use of her experience by accessing selves in an unstructured and free-associative process, emotionally processing traumas and developing richer and more empowered perspectives of herself and her experiences. She was able to use writing to complement therapy as a facilitating environment in which she could use the potential space imaginatively and therefore was able to grow and find new possibilities and perspectives.*

### **Summary**

The nature of therapeutic writing exists within a context of the development of self-analysis in the Western world. The concepts of writing “identity”, free associative writing and the development of multiple perspectives as discussed by authors in the *writing as therapy* genre are comparable to the processes and aims of psychotherapy. The benefits and limitations of writing are related to the role of language in articulating and creating coherent stories of our internal and external experiences. The themes of language, self, attachment and relating that are identified in this chapter will be developed and discussed in chapter four through the psychodynamic theoretical lenses of attachment theory and object relations, in particular Winnicott's notions of transitional phenomena.

**CHAPTER FOUR: DISCUSSION.**

**THERAPEUTIC WRITING FROM THE PERSPECTIVES OF ATTACHMENT THEORY AND OBJECT RELATIONS**

*Introduction*

This chapter discusses therapeutic writing through two significant psychodynamic theoretical lenses: attachment theory and object relations. These two theories represent main strands of psychodynamic thinking and lend themselves to discussion of both the relational and imaginative aspects of therapeutic writing, both of which emerged as important themes in chapter three.

Section one discusses attachment theory as the basis for developing the theme that the ability to create coherent narratives and make meaning from life experience is influenced by early attachment patterns. In discussing *writing as therapy* literature along with attachment and mentalisation research, I aim to demonstrate how therapeutic writing positively influences the development of complex thinking and relationships with others.

In section two a discussion of Winnicott's (1971) notions of transitional space and transitional phenomena aim to support the idea of writing as a transitional object linking internal and external experience, a requirement of creative authentic experience of living. These notions are extended by other object relations theorists, Bion (1967, 1997) and Bollas (2002).

Both sections provide a hypothetical case example to illustrate the themes discussed. A brief summary concludes the chapter.

### ***Section one: Attachment theory***

In the previous chapter, literary and psychoanalytic theorists linked capacity for language with development of the self, and the acquiring of a reflective use of language, as being dependent on early relationships with others. Attachment theory is based on research which explains how we form relationships with others and how we make sense of our experience. Secure attachment enables the formation of trusting relationships, whereas insecure attachment falls into several styles: avoidant, ambivalent and disorganised, reflecting the patterns of early relationships and marked by recognisable narrative tendencies. These will be discussed in detail later in this chapter. In order for a person to form trusting relationships, they must experience a sense of an externally secure base and an internalised sense of security (Bowlby, 1988; Holmes, 2001).

Clients often enter therapy because of insecure attachments which prevent them from relating well to themselves or others. Based on Ainsworth's (1989) strange situation experiment (which observed infants' response while their mothers left the room and on their return) and on Bowlby's (1988) evidence-based research, attachment theory emphasises the search for security as the primary psychological motivator, arguing that the attachment bond between self and other is a precondition for all human interactions and necessary for the survival of physically dependent

offspring (Holmes, 2001). This is important because clients can form attachment bonds with therapeutic writing which may facilitate or hinder the therapeutic relationship. This idea will be discussed in the following section as the relationship between writing and attachment is explored in more detail.

***Writing and attachment: the development of an internal secure base***

A secure base implies that it can be trusted to be stable, reliable and consistent. Secure attachment describes the ability to trust these attributes in relationship with others and to seek them out in times of fear or danger. Experts in the *writing as therapy* genre have demonstrated that for clients who don't have enough internal security to form any trusting attachment to another person, writing may provide the consistency, stability and reliability to begin reaching out to others, and strengthen the ability to be curious and hold complex perspectives (Bolton, 1999; Bolton, Field, & Thompson, 2006; Hunt, 2000; Hunt & Sampson, 2006). This attachment bond that develops between a client and their writing may eventually help facilitate an attachment bond with the therapist as the sense of an internally and externally secure base develops (Holmes, 2001). It may become easier to risk sharing vulnerable experiences and feelings with a therapist once they have already been written down somewhere safe and contained. The reparative experience of risking disclosure and feeling secure is significant as it can strengthen clients' sense of others as safe to approach.

Therapeutic writing offers more than an attachment bond which might preclude risking attachment to others. Bateman & Fonagy's mentalisation research (2006) proposes that healthy attachment and psychological health include the capacity to focus on mental states in self and other as explanations for behaviour, 'to conceive of oneself and others as having a mind' (p.1). Shengold (1989) demonstrates links between language, insight and aliveness which are impoverished in the destruction of the true self that occurs in childhood abuse.

Without the ability to contain and think about complex perspectives and ambiguities in the self and others, relationships are unable to be negotiated satisfactorily. *Writing as therapy* authors suggest writing develops the ability to develop and tolerate complex perspectives and to empathise with others (Bolton, 1999; Hunt, 2000; Hunt & Sampson, 2006) thus facilitating the creation of coherent life stories, a feature of secure attachment (Holmes, 2001).

***The therapeutic relationship: benefits and limitations of writing from an attachment perspective.***

Both psychotherapy and writing help people to express themselves, make sense of their experiences, and create new narratives and meanings for their lives. Meaning making is consistently linked with theories of self in response to relationships (Neimayer, 2002). In psychotherapy the creating, selecting and organising of experience (Schafer, 1992) is attended to in the relationship, the attachment bond, which forms between client and therapist (Holmes, 2001) whereas in writing this is generally a private



process during which writers become attached to the journal as if it were a trusted confidant (Bolton, 1999; Hunt, 2000; Hunt & Sampson, 2006). In therapy this may be seen as a resistance to relationship or as a necessary growth toward attachment.

### ***Benefits***

The therapist's role, according to Holmes (2001) is to help the client to tell and shape their story in a similar way to the attuned parent who contains, makes sense of and shapes a child's experiences without intrusion. In therapeutic writing part of the self interacts creatively, and is then available to be reconsidered by a more reflective part of the self, something referred to by Bolton (1999) and Hunt (2000) as creator and editor parts of the writing self. In this way, writing helps the discovery and strengthening of the self through an external medium which originally required the presence of another person. In terms of attachment theory, the writer becomes attached to writing as though it was a person and is able to engage safely with a relationship that has both a life of its own and is completely under the writer's control (Holmes, 2001). This study proposes that therapeutic writing can therefore strengthen clients' ability to attach through the positive experience of attachment with writing which may then be reinforced by sharing writing in therapy, or by maintaining links with the therapist.

According to Holmes (2001) the process of writing is itself containing of feelings, something that may have been lacking in early relationships, and

helps the client develop a relationship with the self and the world. Writing can be a bridge toward attachment and relationship with others by creating and containing within a secure frame the relationship with the self. Clients may use writing as a container for feelings between therapy sessions, strengthening a sense of an internally secure base alongside the developing externally secure base. Turning to writing may be a comforting attachment-seeking response to distress which leads to development of the ability to self-soothe and trust the safety of self-expression. Writing, as a physical (external) object with the ability to provide meaning and soothing, can therefore be both an internal and external secure base (Holmes, 2001). Writing can also provide a safe place for the other to be created and destroyed in the imagination in ways which may not have been possible in early relationships (Bolton, 1999; Holmes, 2001; Winnicott, 1971).

Attachment theory emphasises the constant balancing between loss and connection (Holmes, 2001). Both writing and therapy can provide a containing presence and internalised representation of a safe 'other' that help create and maintain links and connectedness. An example of writing to maintain attachment links is Anne Sexton's (1981) sequence of poems "Eighteen days without you": poems written daily while her lover was absent, a creative response for managing her sense of abandonment. Sexton (ibid) is an excellent example of writing from an attachment perspective as her poems are frequently designed as letters or conversations to important others in her life.

### *Limitations*

Writing may sometimes be used defensively to protect the client from risking attachment if previous early attachments have been too damaging. Domash (1976) suggests it is for the therapist to decide whether writing has become a resistance to therapy based on whether it is used to foster therapeutic attachment or withdrawal. She claims clients generally stop using writing in relation to therapy sessions as they develop a stronger and more cohesive sense of identity. However, when writing prevents attachment with the therapist, it becomes necessary (as with any defence) to explore the fears that may prevent a therapeutic relationship from developing.

### *Writing and attachment styles*

An awareness of attachment style may help the therapist to assess whether writing is being used to support or resist therapy and how to make sense of writing and attachment with the client. As discussed earlier, securely attached individuals are able to tell coherent stories about their experiences, with a coherent structure and meaning. Insecurely attached individuals either provide over-elaborated and enmeshed stories which need shaping or dismissively vague stories lacking in detail and specificity (Holmes, 2001). Understanding attachment and narrative styles can therefore guide the therapist in supporting the client to develop more coherent stories. For example, research suggests that avoidantly attached individuals are too contained and may therefore use the safe containment of a private journal as a secure base from which to safely explore and

access deeper feelings. The task is to support the development of the self enough to risk attachment with the therapist (Holmes, 2001). Kerner & Fitzpatrick (2007) argue that writing can encourage clients to become less distant from their emotional world. The possible disadvantage for avoidant clients is they may use writing to avoid attachment to people. However, Ewen (2009), exploring the integration of writing into treatment of eating disordered clients proposed writing was a useful bridge toward a greater sense of self and consequently in relationship with the therapist.

For ambivalently attached individuals the issue is enmeshment and lack of containment. Here by externalising experience and feelings writing may be used to bring coherence to what may be felt as overwhelming and chaotic experience. The ambivalent individual may cling to the therapist, using writing as a way of holding onto or merging with the therapist between sessions. This may be beneficial if it creates the security to develop an autonomous self, or it may contribute to a defensive clinging to the therapist in attempts to stay merged and dependent rather than risk individuation (Holmes, 2001).

The disorganised individual is inclined to write in more fragmented and chaotic ways reflecting the characteristic push-pull dynamic of this attachment style. Here writing may be of use to establish continuity and provide stability and gradual connections between fragmented memories and associations. For example, both Kluft (1984) and Putnam (1989) describe the beneficial use of writing for clients with multiple personality

disorder (now classified as Dissociative Identity Disorder). Stone (2004; 2006) analysing the fragmented style of psychotic or otherwise fragile clients concludes that while the writing may appear incoherently fragmented to the average reader, it can nevertheless have a beneficial effect by establishing a record of experience and continuity voicing and externalising inner experiences that are unspeakable in terms of 'normal' syntax and logical thought.

In comparison, to insecure attachment styles, it must be considered whether a securely attached individual will use and/or benefit from therapeutic writing. First, it must be acknowledged that few securely attached people seek out therapy. Domash (1976) proposes that as clients become more securely attached in therapy they naturally use writing less as a defence or communication with the therapist, transferring to a verbal communication and more real relationship. However, there may be times when a securely attached individual may benefit from writing – at times when secure attachment, through trauma or loss, becomes more tenuous it may be useful to intensify links with the therapist through writing, or to process feelings between sessions using writing. It could be argued that both insecure and securely attached individuals may benefit from, and become more able to, process their own material and experiences, and to get to know themselves in more deep and complex ways through regular use of therapeutic writing (Bolton, 1999).

### ***Illustration***

*A client, having experienced early and profound losses which affect her ability to trust relationships, has difficulty with breaks in therapy. These are experienced as intense losses which disrupt the continuity of the relationship and the maintenance of trust. It is as if the therapist no longer exists and cannot be kept in mind by the client. The client seems unable to exist herself in these absences. Exploring ways to work through these breaks the client decides she will write unsent letters to the therapist while she is away, writing in her journal as if speaking directly to the therapist. This has the effect of maintaining tenuous links with the therapist during the break, and creates a way for both the client and the idea of the therapist to continue to exist, to have a presence during the absence of therapy. Writing these letters seems to continue the work of therapy during the break, with the client identifying and reflecting on experiences and feelings associated with the break which were able to be explored in therapy. The new experience of being able to 'create' the therapist during her absence strengthens the client's sense of an internally secure base in the sense that she is able to experience the break without being completely 'left' and that she has the resources to externalise, contain and work through early experiences of loss. Explored in sessions following the break, it becomes clear that writing has offered an effective and reparative working through of abandonment issues, enabling the strengthening of the therapeutic relationship and a growing sense of an externally secure base. In this case, writing processed abandonment through providing a soothing*

*transitional object that maintained links with the therapist and with the self.*

## *Section two: Object relations theories*

### *Winnicott and transitional space*

Psychotherapy and therapeutic writing both aim to make sense of the self and create meaning through exploration of subjective internal experience rather than objective factual reality (Hunt, 2000). In order to do this there must be some way of negotiating the space between internal and external reality. When Virginia Woolf (1957) made her famous statement that women needed money and a room of their own in order to write, perhaps she was not only making a plea for women's rights, she was also vocalising the writer's need for that private space in which to feel secure and contained enough from which to leap into the place of the imagination. Writing and psychotherapy both aim for the individual to loosen up enough to find that creative place Winnicott (1971) described as transitional space, a place in which psychic reality and the external world are both present.

Winnicott (ibid) described our earliest negotiations with reality as the perception of external and internal realities and the process of how we negotiate the transitional space between them. This transitional space is part of the relationship between self and other, an inter-subjective space that becomes co-created in the interactions between subject and object. According to Winnicott (1993) cultural experience and play are located in the potential space between the individual and the environment (originally the object), and the use of this space is determined by our earliest



experiences of self and other. For potential space to be open the subject must have confidence based on the environment being experienced as dependable; play and culture relate directly to the potential space between the infant and mother, in particular her ability to adapt to her infant rather than become intrusive or impinging (ibid). Winnicott's premise is that creative living develops out of early play, an experience he locates in the highly subjective potential space between the individual and their environment. This potential space between self and other depends on experiences that lead to trust. Experiences that damage trust reduce capacity to play and to live creatively. This is significant because it demonstrates why therapeutic writing is beneficial in terms of potential space.

Therapeutic writing also provides space for a negotiation between internal and external experience. Writers have valued the idea of a poetic space in which there is room for creativity to flourish. Coleridge (1983) described this negotiable space as "that willing suspension of disbelief which establishes poetic faith" (p.6). For Keats it was "negative capability" (cited in Holmes, 1999, p. 130). Writing offers the writer a reflective space in which to allow descriptive expressions to emerge from a felt situation (Bolton, 1999; Hunt, 2000). Clearing or creating space appears to be an essential aspect of the process in which the writing parameters provide a structure for new aspects of self and experience and new understandings to emerge (Kerner & Fitzpatrick, 2007)

Pateman (1997; 1988), theorising on the imagination, uses Winnicott's (1971) theory to explain the ability to explore space as a result of healthy early developmental spatial explorations. The child must feel safe enough to explore by knowing it can return to the secure base of the "good enough" mother (Winnicott, 1971, p.10). The secure child is able to see and engage with the world, and therefore becomes able to play. Pateman (1997) discusses methods, including writing, which create facsimiles of the "safe havens and potential spaces of childhood" (p.4) enabling the freeing up of imagination. These methods are intended to create the "good enough" environment for holding the imagination, for the writer to feel safe enough to engage with internal space or chaos within which the unconscious may be accessed (Pateman, 1997; Winnicott, 1971).

The potential space created by the structure of a regular writing practice and the clearing or creation of an external space, along with the containing aspect of an external object such as the journal, may provide the security from which to engage with the interior self. Most writing guides (Cameron, 1995, 1998; Goldberg 1991; Bolton et al, 2006) encourage the establishment of a regular writing space that is both external and internal. The choosing of a regular writing time and the choice of a space in which to write (a favourite chair or room), the setting aside of distractions to focus on writing, and the development of an internal clearing in which distractions are able to be tuned out for a structured period of time are all methods of creating a secure frame in which one can be alone with one's self even while in the company of others. The habitual writer frequently

carries a journal everywhere and is able to enter this safe place at any moment – the journal becoming the portal to an inner world accessible at any time. This has a valuable role in helping the writer negotiate the transitional space between external and internal experience, between self and other, and between complex aspects of self (Hunt, 2000). The role of the journal as a transitional object that enables the negotiation of transition of internal and internal experiences is explored in the following section on transitional phenomena.

### ***Transitional phenomena and writing***

Winnicott (1971) describes the transitional object as neutral territory between subjective and objective reality. Generally treated both brutally and with loving attention, transitional objects are of vital importance as intermediate objects standing between the self and the external world. Their purpose is to enable the child to withstand frustrations, deprivations and new situations by bridging shifts in reality and between internal and external reality through their use as a soothing symbolic reminder of care. The transitional object and its tactile soothing qualities symbolise a part of the self in connection with a part of the environment (ibid). Transitional objects are therefore neither part of the self nor part of the world and yet they are both. They are created by the infant yet exist in their own right, and are therefore simultaneously objective and subjective. They represent the borders between inside and outside, dream and reality. Winnicott (ibid) described transitional phenomena as representing the border between

personal reality and actual shared reality. Shengold (1989), discussing insight as metaphor, describes metaphor and language as “basic transitional phenomena, mediating and providing links in both directions between the inner and outer worlds” (p.299). This is significant as it directly links language with transitional phenomena, supporting the arguments of the previous chapter that writing holds a beneficial transitional role for clients.

Winnicott (1971) claims that the progression from object relating to object usage depends on the object becoming real in the sense of a shared reality. He suggests this change doesn't occur simply by maturational development but that there must first be “a *capacity* to use objects”, and this is dependent on the “facilitating environment” (p.89). The movement from “object relating” to “object use” involves the repeated fantasy destruction of the object along with its survival of this fantasised destruction (ibid). Artists are constantly creating new forms and destroying them in order to break through to new ones. Winnicott wrote:

Artists enable us to keep alive, when the experiences of real life threaten to destroy our sense of being alive and real in a living way. Artists best of all people remind us that the struggle between our impulses and the sense of security (both of which are vital to us) is an eternal struggle and one that goes on inside each one of us as long as our life lasts (1965a, p. 33).

Writing materials as transitional objects represent a space between me and not-me perceptions, between the subjective and objective experiences of the world (Winnicott, 1971). The writer's journal is an external objective object with its own reality that contains the symbols of the subjective internal experience and is therefore something with meaning and existence that is created by the writer. The journal becomes the transitional object that negotiates between inner and outer reality and frequently takes on the battered appearance of a loved transitional object. The words are externally evident on the page, evidence of their survival and existence. The battered dog-eared journal carried around in a purse or a pocket and kept in a drawer or on a shelf is an example of those early objects Winnicott (1971) described as transitional: the objects that symbolise an imaginative understanding of not-me and part of me. The journal is able to contain and survive the experiences that are written within. It is both inanimate and a link to the inner life of the writer. It provides a constant and secure object which accompanies the writer on their inner journey.

Likewise writing materials and a writing space may take on the soothing qualities of transitional objects. It can be comforting to have the routine of writing and to use familiar treasured objects that have a tactile sensual quality. The portability of the journal corresponds with that of the loved teddy or blanket which is carried around everywhere. Writing materials can become an important object providing security just by knowing they are available in pocket, briefcase, or bag. The soothing qualities of transitional objects could be explored further in terms of writing: for

example, the tactile symbolism of sucking the pencil while thinking or stroking the cover of the journal may have a similar soothing function to that of the infant sucking and stroking a piece of blanket; chewing a pencil might represent the desire to destroy the object, which nevertheless survives. Some clients need to attach to an intermediary transitional object such as the writing process before they feel safe enough to be able to relate to another person. For example Ewen (2009) explores the use of writing as a transitional object in anorexic clients who have difficulty attaching to the therapist. For Bollas (2002) as discussed in the next section, the object becomes not just transitional but transformational.

### *The transformational object*

Bollas (2002) describes the development of language as a transformational object or experience capable of transforming the self. He claims (ibid) it is in the forming of words to transform and process self emotions that the personal aesthetic or identity is framed. The mirroring and handling of the mother in the facilitating environment eventually gives way to the aesthetic of language and begins to integrate the experience of thinking. In the tradition of language as embodied, Bollas claims “we learn the grammar of our being before we grasp the rules of our language” (p.44.). Creativity includes both the aesthetic and thematic: themes show the subject’s fantasies and reflect the use of the aesthetic frame, which Bollas (2002) links to self and identity, and becomes a subjective internal discourse. He also links language and embodiment: “...in literature, the aesthetic frame is the poetic of the text; in life it is the aesthetics of being”

(p.48). For Bollas (ibid) the word is both transformational of form and content and transitional in the sense of Winnicott's (1971) facilitating of the infant's transition from the mother-child relationship to the social world in which living can be symbolised by text.

Bollas (ibid) describes the value of a transformational object (an aesthetic experience such as the reading or writing of a poem, with its accompanying sense of becoming more than the self) in its potential for development of the self through accessing material previously un-thought. Writing as a transformational phenomena encourages the capacity for play and creativity through developing the use of the transitional space, maintaining links with the external object (therapist) and enlarging access to the inner experience (internal object). As we become more able to play with previously unknown thoughts about ourselves we become more complexly aware of ourselves in relationship with our selves and others.

Therapy and writing both support the development of the self by emulating the "good enough" process that occurs between mother and child. The good enough mother provides holding through her capacity to identify with the infant's needs; through good enough handling she provides a sense of what is real and unreal through the capacity to enjoy body experience, which leads to a sense of being; through object-presenting or realising she makes real the infant's creative impulse, initiating the capacity to feel real in relating to the actual world (Winnicott, 1965a). In both the therapeutic process and the writing process there exists the

potential for the development of the client through “good enough” holding and sensitive attunement to the client, an allowed state of dependency (on writing process or therapist) in which there is at first a letting go of false selves and the beginning of a true self with a strong ego which has been supported (by therapist or writing process). There emerges then an individual capable of organising their own defences against anxieties of impulse and experience and capable of independent life and continuity of being (Winnicott, 1965a). The experience of security also leads to the development of trust in one’s internal self-control which in turn reinforces an experience of security. According to Hunt (2000) and King (2000) writing may provide a containing experience which facilitates a capacity for self-regulation and security.

There are parallels between the experience of writing and of psychotherapy. Both support the client or writer to find a voice, through expression, whether verbal or written, in a holding environment where exposure to events is contained and safe, enabling experience to be explored, analysed, reflected on, shaped and acknowledged by the writer. This holding and secure environment protects the participant from overwhelming affect or impingements, potentially providing a reparative experience. However, therapeutic writing differs from therapy in that the subject (client) is not relating to a human object (therapist) but to an inanimate one (journal). Perhaps writing might be an appropriate therapeutic intervention to support those early parts of ourselves that may not have object constancy or the capacity to make object use of the



therapist. The developing of these capacities through writing practice may strengthen and support the ego enough to be able to both find and make use of the therapist as object. It is therefore important to find a way for therapeutic writing to come into the relationship between client and therapist, through acknowledgment of its existence and the opening of a space in therapy for it to be alive.

***Bion: Containing and contained***

Winnicott's (1971) notion of holding brings to mind the idea of sanctuary or refuge. A sanctuary can be a safe place from which we venture forth into the external or internal world, knowing there is a fixed point to return to. Bion (1967) used the concept of the container as sanctuary, the container and the contained being the structure and meaning that provide internal coherence. What is contained becomes an organising central idea and gives meaning to the context which contains it. The container gives shape and boundaries to that which it contains. Therapeutic writing also provides a container, giving shape and boundaries to internal material that might otherwise feel chaotic and overwhelming (Bolton, 1999; Hunt, 2000; Hunt & Sampson, 2006). The containing of a chaotic inner world through the use of structured timeframes, writing practice and the actual containment of inner experience within the externalised pages of a journal may create coherence and enable the making of meaning of inner experience.

Perhaps writing itself can also become an organising principle which contains and enables processing of previously chaotic material. For example, inexpressible, abstract or incoherent experiences and feelings are often able to find coherence and clarity through the structure and purpose of a poem. Poetic form has been found to be a particularly useful and powerful medium in helping clients to express deep inner experiences that seem inexpressible (Bolton, 1999; Bolton, Field & Thompson, 2006; Stone, 2004, 2006). A poem is able to contain what I have termed trans-literal or non-narrative, providing a container for abstract ideas, metaphors and images in which a voice is established, and meaning made, but which holds its own essence and remains open to interpretation.

Bion (1962) uses the idea of the container and contained to explore the idea of projective identification, a process in which one evokes in the other one's intolerable experiences in order to contain them. If the mother is receptive to allowing the child's feeling to be evoked in her self and can process it and attend to the infant there is an experience of empathic mirroring (Britton, 1992). Metaphoric writing, especially poetry, is highly charged and able to evoke an experience in the reader, perhaps a form of projective identification by distance. The experience of being able to project our inner reality in writing with enough intensity to evoke others to feel *with* us may provide an empathic experience, both from others and in ourselves as we read and become powerfully moved by our own written experience. I suggest writing may be a way of projecting out, containing and processing internal experience in a reparative way through projective

identification on an intended audience and can develop the capacity for empathy and compassion towards others and the self. Bion (1962) also claims that elements of potential experience that remain unprocessed can't be treated as ordinary thoughts but need to be physically removed. This can be thought about in terms of writing as the externalising of inner experience (Britton, 1992). Writing can be a way of projecting things outside the self so they can be kept in mind. Writers often say they write to find out what they know (Bolton, 1999; Hunt, 2000; Hunt & Sampson, 2006). It is as if, in accordance with Bion's (1962) theory, some things are unable to be kept in mind, to be thought about, until they have been externalised. How therapeutic writing enables the writer to think about themselves is considered in the next section.

### ***Writing as self-exploration***

Bollas (1989) discusses the development of the self in terms of the core self not being fixed but rather as a potential self which exists prior to object relating. This prior form of knowledge he claims has not yet been thought and can be described as the "unthought known" (1987, p 277). For Bollas (1993) we enact our true self in a kind of fluid dreaming through a process of merging and emerging with and from subjective objects, including aesthetic experiences. These experiences of temporarily losing the self re-evolve experiences of fusion with the mother and change us, so that our potentiality is expanded (1993). Hunt (2000) suggests that when we write about ourselves we use language to give shape to our knowledge which may be felt but not known until it is enacted symbolically or

metaphorically in the text. She argues writing involves a confrontation with the self in which inner conflicts can be worked with and resolved on the page instead of happening internally, providing a stronger sense of self and stability for people who are internally conflicted. This expanded awareness of parts of the self is an ongoing process of self-development, and writing in this way can enhance the ability to work with difficult material, develop a stronger sense of identity, and greater security in which to hold open a space for imagination. Both psychotherapy and therapeutic writing therefore have a similar goal of developing psychic flexibility between critical and creative faculties.

### ***Therapeutic implications***

In terms of object relations theory therapeutic writing may establish links with the therapist, facilitating internalisation of the object and a growing capacity for object constancy. Writing between sessions develops this sense of the continuity and consistency of the therapist's presence. Writing may bridge subjective and external reality, enabling clients to negotiate reality and develop that sense of security that comes from an internalised sense of self-control rather than feeling controlled by an impinging external environment. Therapeutic writing may be a way of developing the capacity to use the object.

### ***Summary***

In section one attachment theory explained how therapeutic writing may provide the sense of a secure base which is a requirement for forming

trusting relationships. Ambivalent, avoidant and disorganised attachment patterns each have their own narrative styles which reveal the deficits in the ability to relate to others. Therapeutic writing may address the difficulties in relationship expressed in these unique story-making styles. The research suggests therapeutic writing can be beneficial in establishing the ability to trust and to form attachment bonds necessary for developing psychological health.

Section two explained, through the perspective of Winnicott's (1971) notions of transitional space and phenomena, the importance of creativity and the capacity to play with representations of reality. Therapeutic writing facilitates an environment in which potential space can open up. Writing may become a soothing transitional object with the potential for developing the capacity for object usage. Bollas (1993) extends this metaphor to include the capacity of writing to transform the self. Writing and the therapeutic process can be usefully discussed in terms of containers, containment and projective identification Bion (1997). These notions all support the proposal that therapeutic writing directly benefits therapy.

## CHAPTER FIVE: SYNTHESIS AND CONCLUSION

### *Introduction*

In this chapter the themes of the previous chapters are reviewed, and integrated. Writing theory, viewed through the lenses of language, self, attachment and transitional phenomena, is synthesised within the context of the therapeutic relationship. The strengths and limitations of the study are evaluated and areas of further research identified. The chapter concludes with a discussion of clinical implications and some concluding thoughts.

### *Theoretical synthesis*

Returning to Rose's (2004) quotation from which this work takes its title, my concept of putting poetry back into the mind was one of envisioning an opening of potential space for imagination and play. This study suggests that writing is capable of bridging the potential space between inner and outer reality: a transitional space in which the client may safely explore, create, play, and become more present to an authentic sense of self (Winnicott, 1971).

The therapeutic relationship aims to provide holding (a secure frame), sharing (making meaning together), witnessing (an audience), containing, development of attachment bonds, a transitional space for the client to play with representations of reality, externalising of internal chaos, attention (attending through mirroring and empathy) and the opportunity to work

safely through old patterns in the transference. Because of its similar processes and aims, therapeutic writing may enhance and accelerate the work of therapy (Ire, 2008; Scogin, F, 2003). This study demonstrated that both psychotherapy and therapeutic writing can enable clients to develop the capacity for self-expression and disclosure; reflection; enhanced curiosity and discovery; strengthening of the self leading to greater sense of autonomy; and greater capacity for meaning making and developing of complex perspectives, including the ability to empathise and relate with others (Bolton, 1999; Holmes, 2001; Hunt, 2000; Hunt & Sampson, 2006). The psychodynamic theorists discussed in this research all emphasised language, in particular the use of metaphor, as the link between inner and outer realities (Winnicott, 1971), insight and outlook (Shengold, 1989), observed and embodied experience (Booth, 2007) and in attachment experiences and the capacity to reflect on inward and outward relationship (Bateman & Fonagy, 2006; Holmes, 2001). Therefore it was proposed that writing may support the development of these attributes in therapy. This section synthesises the evidence for the benefits of therapeutic writing from a psychodynamic perspective.

Both psychotherapy and therapeutic writing answer to Lamott's (1994) reference to the self's need to be seen, heard, made sense of, grow and belong. In therapy this is provided by the mirroring of an empathic other (Kohut, 1977), or in Winnicott's (1971) terms, through the facilitating environment of a sufficiently attuned mother who reflects the child to itself, thus creating an authentic sense of self. Without this vital mirroring,

the true self is incapable of feeling alive and a false self is organised (ibid). This study demonstrated how therapeutic writing develops an embodied and sensory recall which revives and strengthens aspects of the real self that have been hidden, facilitating an enriched sense of 'real' felt experience (Bolton, 1999; Hunt, 2000). Perhaps for clients whose early mirroring needs weren't sufficiently met, therapeutic writing may provide the stability of external evidence of their inner selves and experiences mirrored on the page. Both *writing as therapy* experts (ibid) and attachment theorists (Homes, 2001) argue this may be the first step toward risking relationship for clients whose early attachment traumas damaged the self and the ability to relate with others and external experience. For Winnicott (1971) this lack of facilitating environment damages the ability to use both the object (external other or experience) and transitional space (inner creative potential). Current attachment and neuroscience research, for example Damasio (1994, 1999) and Booth (2007) both support the notion that language is the transitional event between internal and embodied experience. Therefore it can be argued that, as a transitional object, writing acts as a bridge between external and internal realities. In this case words become the link for imagination and play to be expressed, to convey experience and ideas through to the external world and to receive and process what comes in. The bridge has the magical qualities of being neither real nor fantasy but containing elements of both (Winnicott, 1971). This transitional place where both inner and outer reality is accepted opens the space within therapy for play to occur in the presence of the other.



Winnicott (ibid) saw psychotherapy as a specialised form of play, meaning the capacity to play with reality as a symbolic representation (Bateman & Fonagy, 2006). Winnicott (ibid) stressed the need for some clients to be taught to play before they are able to use therapy. I propose that therapeutic writing can support the development of this capacity to play through the use of written symbols to express inner experience within the safely contained environment of the page. Winnicott (ibid) described potential space as a place where reality is able to be created, allowing for spontaneity, creativity, imagining and the capacity for symbol use. Writing encourages the capacity for play and creativity through the use of the transitional space, maintaining links with the external object (therapist) and enlarging access to the inner experience (Winnicott, 1971). As we become more able to play with previously unknown thoughts about ourselves we become more complexly aware of ourselves in relationship with self and others. Writing can therefore facilitate the development of a richer, and more authentically felt inner and outer life (Bollas, 2002; Bolton, 1999; Hunt, 2000).

According to attachment theory (Bowlby, 1988) the self develops in the context of the ability for early relationships to mirror and thus regulate affect. Bateman & Fonagy (2006) support the idea that language has a role in developing the capacity to perceive and interpret our selves and the behaviours of others. Without this capacity, clients have an impaired ability to interpret their world, regulate affect and relate to others. Bateman & Fonagy (ibid) explain how the projection of feelings of incoherence

within the self are reduced through externalisation. This is important as it suggests there is potential for therapeutic writing interventions to be developed for addressing the effects of disorganised attachment, such as in borderline personality disorder. Guiding clients to project their unbearable feelings onto the page where they can be helped to make sense of them in therapy may well be a therapeutic use of projective identification which is safely contained and can be regulated through the mirroring of the therapist. This suggestion could well be considered for use with trauma clients generally. Perhaps in the writing-reflecting process clients become able to alter the potential for mis-reading themselves and others.

#### ***Evaluation of study: strengths and limitations***

This dissertation reviewed and discussed the findings of a modified systematic review of the literature pertaining to the topic: How can therapeutic writing benefit clients of psychodynamic psychotherapy. It was already established that therapeutic writing contributes significant benefits for clients (Pennebaker, 2002). This dissertation therefore aimed to understand and explain how benefits occur from a psychodynamic theoretical perspective. In order to evaluate the significance of the dissertation findings the strengths and limitations of the study are considered below.

The dissertation was limited to a small research project based on a modified systematic literature review. There was little research directly within the area of psychodynamic psychotherapy, as noted by Kerner &

Fitzpatrick (2007), so literature from other fields was searched to contribute findings applicable to psychodynamic psychotherapy.

The strength of this study was the relevance of the significantly research-based *writing as therapy* field, primarily based at Sussex University, England; particularly the works of Hunt (2000) and Hunt & Sampson (1998; 2006), which have a strong psychodynamic theoretical basis and were therefore applicable where there was a paucity of research in the psychodynamic literature.

However the lack of research literature concerning the clinical implications of therapeutic writing and the therapeutic relationship within psychodynamic psychotherapy limited the contrasting perspectives or counter-arguments available for evaluating the findings. Little New Zealand research was available, thereby limiting the cultural context of the study in application to clinical practice in this country. While it is suggested that many of the findings are applicable generally in psychodynamic psychotherapy practice, this lack of New Zealand research would need to be considered when working with Maori. These limitations suggested areas for further research.

### ***Implications for future research***

It is recommended that further research should continue to explore the processes underlying the benefits of therapeutic writing. Specifically, a need for further research on therapeutic writing in psychodynamic

psychotherapy was identified by this study. Pennebaker (2002) has recommended further research addressing the benefits of writing for particular client groups and emotional states. This study identified a lack of research exploring the contraindications to therapeutic writing compared to that on the positive aspects of writing, an aspect that merits further research.

This study also raised questions about the effects of writing on affect changes and neuropsychology in terms of the links between body and mind and the influence of the bodily act of writing the mind onto the page. Booth (2007) has published research on the effects of writing on physical and psychosocial selves, linking embodied and relational experience with early attachments. Further research in this area is recommended.

Finally this study concluded there is a need for further understanding of therapeutic writing in the context of the relationship between client and therapist in psychodynamic psychotherapy. I have also suggested in the preceding section, a proposal for research into use of therapeutic writing to support people with complex attachment trauma, such as borderline personality states. This might be a fruitful and relevant research project that would extend the scope of knowledge and use of therapeutic writing for specific client groups who are presently considered difficult to treat.

### *Clinical synthesis*

The key features of writing as a therapeutic intervention from a psychodynamic perspective are to promote therapeutic attachment and prevent withdrawal; to support expression of the true self (Winnicott, 1971); to contain overwhelming and destructive emotions; to mobilise emotion into creative living (ibid); and to support the progression from the separation-individuation issues towards autonomy (Domash, 1976; Mahler, 1968; Winnicott, 1971). According to Ire (2008) writing may facilitate purposeful self-reflective work which supports or augments the therapeutic process between or beyond sessions. In terms of psychodynamic psychotherapy there is not yet enough research to make clear recommendations on which client groups and which writing practices are most beneficial. Studies which have made findings on the indications and contraindications for the use of therapeutic writing with particular client groups are almost entirely based on cognitive approaches which were excluded in this research project. While it may be possible to speculate based on the research of these groups, further research is recommended into the use of therapeutic writing with specific client groups from a psychodynamic perspective.

However, a general summary of what can be applied to psychodynamic therapy follows, with the hope that further research will clarify and extend guidelines for the use of therapeutic writing with particular client groups. Bolton (1999) and Hunt (2000) claimed that, similar to therapy, it is the process rather than the form of writing that is therapeutic. Kerner &

Fitzpatrick (2007) proposed a matrix of forms for use with particular client groups, stating that some writing forms (eg. objective biography) are highly structured whereas others, (eg. poetry) make use of abstract thought forms. They suggested subjective writing forms (eg. fiction) combine both structured cognitive processing and symbolic abstract thinking, and therefore provide the most useful interventions. This is supported by Hunt (2000) who proposed that fictionalised writing in any form is the most therapeutic because its process allows safer access to unconscious material than cognitively based writing exercises. This would suggest there may be a vast potential in the use of fictional writing for traumatised or fragmented clients, as discussed earlier in the recommendation of writing for borderline level clients.

Whilst the evidence suggests that writing is beneficial for most client groups, almost without caveat (Bolton, 1999; Pennebaker, 2002), there is evidence both for and against the use of therapeutic writing with some client groups, namely for clients with depression, trauma, repressive coping styles or alexithymia. These studies are primarily cognitive based, using formulaic writing homework, and were therefore excluded from this work as non-applicable to psychodynamic approaches. The concerns with each group however, were that writing may trigger an aggravation of symptoms (in the case of depression or trauma), or that writing may be an inaccessible intervention in clients who do not readily use words or who avoid feeling (repressive coping styles, alexithymia). In support of these contraindications is Kohanyi (2005) who claimed clients most likely to

benefit from therapeutic writing are those who are naturally inclined to write. However, this does not imply that clients with deficits in these skills cannot benefit from writing which may help them develop in these areas. In contrast, Bolton (2005) argues that writing taken at its own pace and well supported, for example by the therapeutic relationship, is a beneficial and gentle process, capable of developing a sense of empowerment, agency, self-control and self-regulation and providing a needed voice, even for severely traumatised or fragmented clients. I propose that writing about trauma may be therapeutic if the *process* is conducted similarly to psychotherapy: at a pace that does not overwhelm the client, emphasising client choice and control, well held in the therapy, and encouraging openness and collaboration rather than the continuing of secrets.

Although process is emphasised here, it appears some forms of writing may benefit trauma clients more than others. Poetry seems particularly containing for the expression of overwhelming affect, painful experience and for giving voice to what has been incomprehensible or unspeakable, as evidenced by Stone's (2004, 2006) studies of severely fragmented clients who benefited through poetically abstract writing. Phillips (1994) has argued that whereas psychotherapy aims at a controlled fragmentation which can be interpreted, writing seeks to impose order on this fragmentation. This might signal how writing may be useful in therapy to support clients during regression and to enable strengthening of the self during moments of therapy with fragile or chaotic clients (Domash, 1976; Stone, 2004, 2006).

### *Concluding thoughts*

The aim of this research was to contribute to an understanding of how therapeutic writing might be used and thought about in psychodynamic psychotherapy for the benefit of clients, and how this could inform psychodynamic theory and practice. While writing this dissertation I increasingly found myself working with the metaphor of writing as a bridge, each bridge constructed as uniquely as the individual who enters psychotherapy. Some bridges seemed sturdily made, materially solid and concrete. Sometimes they were fragile and tenuous, spanning a vast space and easily broken. These bridges seemed to work in subtle almost intangible ways. Some bridges were plain arches humped over a stream, simply doing the job; others seemed constructed of complicated wires, pulleys, buttresses, and problematical pathways for multi-traffic. Therapeutic writing brings its own range of forms for construction, some of which may seem better indicated for specific purposes or with particular client groups. Yet they are simply designs of bridges yet to be constructed, and I suggest it is the unique creativity of each client that provides the poetic shape that forms in the writing process to bridge a communication gap. A bridge links two previously unconnected places. It frees up the movement between things and places. It is therefore a place of transition, a link between client and therapist enabling movement and change to occur. As such, I suggest therapists can enhance the potential benefits of therapeutic writing by acknowledging it as an invitation offered by the client as a means of communication access through which they hope to be



understood, and in turn hope to gain greater understanding of themselves and others.

As a result I have a clearer rationale for introducing therapeutic writing in clinical practice: writing as a therapeutic intervention invites playful communication (although it may concern very serious matters). Bolton (2005) suggests there is a synthetic process that occurs in writing – between cognitive and intuitive processes, facts and feelings, rational discourses and sensibilities. This synthesis of ideas, feelings and experience can enhance the process of shared exploration in the potential space of the therapy session.

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## APPENDIX ONE

**Table 1: Results of Electronic Database Search.**

Initial searches were undertaken using PsychInfo, then extended to multisearch, having selected the PsychInfo, PEP, Scopus, ABSCO, and Dissertations International databases. Google Scholar was also searched.

Search Criteria	Results	Database
Therap*adj5writ*	1131	PsychInfo
Reflectiveadj5writ*	187	PsychInfo
Therapeutic writing	42	PsychInfo/multisearch
Expressive writing	227	PsychInfo/multisearch
Creative writing	876	PsychInfo
Creativewritingadj10psych*	45	Multisearch
Expressive writing and psych*	115	Multisearch
Creative writing and psych*	93	Multisearch

“Writing and transference”, and “autobiography and writing” were also searched using the multisearch function in order to find any literature on these specific topics. However, no articles were discovered from these searches.



## APPENDIX TWO

Email sent to Gillie Bolton, Jeannie Wright and Celia Hunt: key authors in the genre *writing as therapy*, published in the United Kingdom through Jessica Kingsley publishers.

Dear.....

I am a psychotherapist and writer researching a Masters dissertation on how writing can benefit clients of psychodynamic psychotherapy. Having formerly taught creative writing, my passion is to bring together reflective writing and therapy informed by a sound theoretical basis. I have found your books inspiring and useful and wonder if you are able to direct me to any very recent or upcoming publications or articles in this area. Or indeed anything else that may be useful.

Kind regards,

Bron Deed

### **APPENDIX THREE**

Email sent to Associate Professor Roger Booth, University of Auckland.

Hello Associate Professor Booth,

I am researching a Masters dissertation on the topic of how therapeutic writing can benefit clients of psychodynamic psychotherapy. Whilst searching for NZ content in this area I came across your research interest in the effects of emotional disclosure.

I wonder if you could let me know whether your research explores written emotional disclosure that would be relevant to my topic or whether you know of any other NZ research being done in this area.

I appreciate any time you may put toward responding to this query.

With thanks

Bron Deed

## APPENDIX FOUR

### *Definitions and terminology*

As the focus of the topic began to crystallise into an exploration of writing in relation to psychodynamic process, it became clear that the way the terms “therapeutic writing”, and “psychodynamic” are used in this research needed to be defined.

Therapeutic writing in the context of psychodynamic psychotherapy refers to writing which aims to enhance awareness and understanding of the self through engaging with unconscious material and intrapsychic processes. The research includes the terms “therapeutic”, “reflective”, “creative” and “expressive” when discussing writing in therapy. For consistency, the term “therapeutic” has been used in this study to encompass all the above terms.

Psychodynamic psychotherapy, a broadened application of psychoanalysis, privileges the notion of the unconscious as an important aspect of the self which, when explored and made conscious, opens up the capacity of the self for increased awareness, freedom, creativity and development (Freud, 1916).

*Writing as therapy* is a genre of writing practice influenced by psychodynamic and narrative theory. It refers to writing for the purpose of

self development, insight and integration. Its intent is therapeutic, whereas creative writing considers the benefits of writing as secondary to the creative process.

Throughout this study the terms “client” and “therapist” have been used when referring to the partners in the therapeutic relationship unless quoting material where other terms are used. The preference for the term “patient” or “client” to describe the non-therapist partner in a therapeutic relationship is an ongoing debate amongst psychotherapists which would be interesting to consider here but is outside the scope of the current study.

Again for consistency, the term “journal” has been used to indicate a material container for written words. The reader is encouraged to recognise that a journal may contain any form of writing. The term was chosen for its association with personal or self-process writing although in this study it may represent fiction, biography, poetry or any other form of writing.