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Iterative Practice in Action: The Women In Conflict Expressive Life Writing Project

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

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

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

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

Background

Through our joint work as mentors for the John Smith Memorial Trust (JSMT), a UK non-governmental organisation that supports human rights in developing democracies, we began working with young leaders from the Middle East and North Africa in 2010, helping them develop strategies for rights campaigning using the power of life-story telling. More recently, we were asked to mentor fellows of the *Women in Conflict Peace Initiative* developed by *Beyond Borders Scotland* and launched by First Minister of Scotland Nicola Sturgeon in 2015. These women, working to support civil society and rights defense in Syria, Yemen and Iraq, spoke with us about their desire to run life story-telling projects with women in their regions, particularly with those who were victims of sexual violence. Campbell had recently completed a number of projects in which she developed and successfully tested a set of creative life writing methodologies to support UK combat veterans who suffered from stress-related disorders (REF case study 40629, The Military Writing Network). Subsequently she had adapted these materials for use with settled refugee groups in Jordan. The initial research question for our joint project therefore, was: *would it would be possible for these materials to be further adapted for use by the Women in Conflict fellows in their local communities?*

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

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

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

The International Protocol

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

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

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

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

The interviewers are given a template requiring more than twenty elements of information to be collected from the survivor/witness before the process of documenting rights violations can begin.(See appendix 1). And those twenty-plus questions are just the start. The interviewers are given a further set of advice and warnings about the questions that can and should be raised in determining the facts of the case:

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

As those of us who have studied the complex relations between trauma and life narratives will know, a survivor/witness will likely encounter many difficulties when trying to respond to questions

presented in this form. While the pursuit of linear, chronological collection of data as outlined here might suit legal purposes, research has long demonstrated that traumatic experience disrupts normal memory processes, leaving victims with a fractured sense of their past. The reasons for this narrative disruption in post-trauma are complex and continue to be an area of intense debate among scholars in both bio-medical and psychological arenas.¹ But the felt effect on survivors of trauma is clear.

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

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

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

Best Practice in Interviewing

In a recent extensive overview of all published research on psychosocial interventions over the past two decades, Duncan Pedersen and his colleagues reached the following conclusions in determining the best practices in 'medical and humanitarian assistance programmes' dealing with traumatised people in conflict and post conflict settings:

- (a) a primary concern in identifying those persons at risk (screening)
- b) an implicit commitment to avoid inflicting further damage[...]
- (c) gaining in-depth insight, identifying specific cultural resources at the local level [...]
- d) building on the existing endogenous

resources [...] and e) promoting empowerment [...] where the community of actors and survivors is involved from the early stages. (18)

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

INMAA travels to mainly rural, traditional communities in Northern Iraq, holding informal, informative town meetings, usually attended by the men of the community in the first instance. In this context, where there is a cultural assumption of men's responsibility for 'vulnerable' dependents, INMAA uses local knowledge and sensitivities to foster an atmosphere of empowerment among key stakeholders. These visits also serve another purpose, however. As the INMAA pamphlets are taken home, they begin to circulate among community members. . Sometimes these initial visits elicit a flurry of phone calls to INMAA—women calling in, often secretly on a borrowed phone, to report a range of difficulties, criminal and civil, domestic and conflict-related.

The staff of INMAA have, over the past several years, logged over two thousand such cases, all of them beginning with a phone call or visit and all leading to a crucial initial interview.

The *Expressive Life Writing Project* intervenes at the point of the initial interview with prospective clients, by utilising an 'implicit commitment to avoid inflicting further damage to those at risk' to use Pedersen's phrase. We have done so by developing materials and training interviewers in the relationship between life narratives and traumatic experience and in the use of expressive writing and telling methodologies in the collection of those rights violation narratives.

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

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

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

This imperative is echoed in a related recent study of ‘capability gaps’ in the implementation of post-conflict reform initiatives (Andrews et al. 2012). That research argues that such reforms often fail when those implementing them aim to reproduce *external* top-down solutions considered ‘best practice in dominant agendas’ using predetermined ‘linear’ processes (9). The study further posits that ‘capability traps’ can be avoided by aiming to solve ‘particular problems in local contexts’; creating an ‘authorising’ local environment that enables ‘experimentation’; involving the ‘iterative feedback’ of lessons into ‘new solutions’ and creating sustainable programmes that are ‘politically supportable and practically implementable’ (10).

What we found in our project, working closely with local stakeholders, was precisely the necessity of challenging conventional wisdom, the need to listen as well as speak. Perhaps most importantly we realised the necessity of ongoing reiterative feedback of lessons learned into new solutions, collaboratively developed through a problem-driven-iterative-adaptation—or what might more helpfully be called listening, learning, and reacting by adapting.

Challenges, Solutions and Opportunities

In developing the set of expressive writing exercises with reference to how they would be used by the INMAA human rights defence teams, we encountered several challenges. It was the continual reiterative approach that allowed solutions and opportunities to be discovered. The resulting adapted exercises bear direct relationship to descriptions of good practice outlined by Pedersen, especially flexibility, agility, and the cultivation of local capacity and agency.

Practical questions we faced when drafting the expressive life writing exercises for the Kirkuk pilot included:

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

Writing or Telling

The first meeting between an INMAA team member and a client is used to record the details of an incident or incidents which might lead to a juridical process. This initial interview was to now be used to fulfil a second aim of offering an expressive telling or writing option to that client. The move to include ‘telling’ as well as possibly ‘writing’ was indicated as essential by INMAA to reflect the diversity

of their clients. Whereas many women would be educated, literate and articulate, others would not and, moreover, some would feel more comfortable giving their stories orally rather than in writing. This new information necessitated the adaptation of a set of exercises into a complete unit for 'expressive telling'. The application of 'telling' or 'writing' is now designed as interchangeable, depending on the situation and the timing. We were grateful for the understandings that led to the development of this other set of expressive narrative options.

Justice or Healing?

INMAA's own intake form had a section that already asked for a narrative of sorts, headed 'Briefly describe the background to the case'. The presence of this descriptive 'background' question allowed us, in training the interviewer/facilitators directly, to suggest they make the links between their clients' 'telling' and the potential for going beyond the aim of creating solely a record of incident at this point.

In discussion, it became clear that the option for expressive telling/writing could be seen as potentially useful even in relation to the juridical. If this adapted form of interview had the effect of helping an interviewee to understand herself as the expert in her own case as well helping her to feel more at ease, it might be less likely for her to drop out of the process (something that is always a concern due to family and other pressures). A developed ability in expressive telling might help the process at a later stage as a plaintiff could *inter alia* be enabled to tell their story more fully for court appearance. Our partners agreed that the exposure to expressive telling or writing might enable a sense of agency or of self-worth among those who pursued this option. There was also the hope that in the same way INMAA knows that word of mouth from woman to woman is how many people hear of their services, these expressive elements could also enhance this onward telling, leading INMAA to more fully fulfil their aims.

Flexibility and Contingency Guidelines

In answering B above, we built in a flexibility of approach that allowed for shorter and longer versions of exercises, depending on the time available. We provided a number of paths through the exercises, dependent on how the opening section has been received.

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

Resilience in Support of Justice

In addition to the potential therapeutic benefits associated with the elicitation of narrative or story, it became clear that by acknowledging the expressive as having a relationship toward the juridical, our work brought certain linkages clearly into focus. By building in adaptability to every stage of the story gathering, these approaches—while born out of necessity and reflecting the pressures on the ground—are actually in line with research that shows the potential for resilience-building and the development of ‘hardiness’ (including an ability to draw on support), among participants in research interventions that elicit story. Here, we use ‘hardiness’ as described by Leah East et al in ‘Storytelling: an approach that can help to develop resilience.’ (17:3:17-25).

Such hardiness, as a support for the capacity to draw on their services, was acknowledged as necessary and desirable by INMAA as part of the set of enabling factors empowering women to pursue the juridical. These rights defenders hope that by participating in these exercises, their clients might be enabled to exhibit that ‘hardiness’ that could support the often fraught and time-consuming process of pursuing legal justice.

Adaptations in action

In our project, both approaches (telling or writing) allow for ‘starter exercises.’ These are designed to show that there is no wrong way to respond to this work and that everyone can do it. Starter exercises also have the effect of establishing a rapport between the facilitator/interviewer and the participants/client. Such exercises encourage associative thinking, which happens when one word or phrase stimulates another in the mind.

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

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

These exercises are broken into three ‘Units’. Each Unit has a focus of operation while allowing flexibility of application. Unit 1 presents exercises designed to systematically induct the participant into ways of approaching expressive writing/telling. Unit 2 encourages writing that bridges the past into the present while Unit 3 moves more explicitly towards identity and feelings, and allows for a

fuller whole-life narrative to be expressed. *The Expressive Life Writing Handbook* outlines the full set of approaches and pathways, characterised by in-built adaptability.

The development of exercises to reflect the situation on the ground ensured we remained realistic in our aims for the project. Perhaps most importantly it helped us to understand that the best case scenario (several weeks of either one-to-one meetings or group workshops) might not be readily applicable. We felt, however, that it was important to still build in a progression of approach through the exercise units, allowing for future use or use in other environments by those who had undertaken the training. To maximise effectiveness however, while we retained the cyclical ‘return’ of certain motifs and exercise riffs that we hoped would have incrementally been built upon during a writing or telling process, we designed the exercises to have identifiable outcomes whether attempted sequentially or in single repetitions.

Conclusion

If James Dawes is right about the central relationship between ‘human rights work’ and ‘storytelling,’ our work with INMAA and *Beyond Borders Scotland* has demonstrated the importance of flexibility and problem-driven iterative adaptation in collecting those stories. Our project adopted malleable approaches to achieving solutions that are in several ways akin to those outlined by Pedersen, while also fashioning expressive exercises for use among a culturally diverse population (including Kurd, Arab and Turkmen, city dwellers and rural communities, the highly educated and the minimally so). The key generative factor in all such adaptations of course was the ongoing dialogue with our partners.

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

As noted, the exercises are currently being developed for use in multiple and disparate settings. Likewise, the participants in our project will need to continue to develop their own narratives—life stories flexible enough to accommodate a myriad of possible future stories. The exercises allow for capstone work with the umbrella title of ‘*Looking at Future Selves*’. The final exercise, a ‘*Letter to Your Future Self*’ invites the participant to address that future autobiographical self. Our own hope is

that those who participate in the *Expressive Life Writing Project* may be enabled to approach that future with an increased sense of agency, an enhanced resilience, and a sense of how life story narratives can begin to help them find their own, flexible answers to the question 'why'?

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Appendix 1: From: The International Protocol on the Documentation and Investigation of Sexual Violence in Conflict

https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/319054/PSVI_protocol_web.pdf accessed October 1 2018)

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

1. Code [for security purposes].
2. Name of survivor/witness (first and last, and any previous or alternative names by which the survivor/witness is known).
3. Sex of survivor/witness.
4. Date of birth of survivor/witness.
5. Place of birth of survivor/witness.
6. Name of father of survivor/witness.
7. Name of mother of survivor/witness.
8. Languages spoken by survivor/witness (Including the survivor's/witness's preferred language).
9. Language of Interview.
10. Current residence/address of survivor/witness.
11. Permanent residence/address of survivor/witness.
12. Phone number(s)/email(s) of survivor/witness.
13. Occupation/work of survivor/witness – current or former.
14. Family status (names, age and location, if known, of any stated family members).
15. Nationality of survivor/witness.
16. Religion of survivor/witness (If relevant and contextually appropriate).
17. Ethnicity/tribal origins of survivor/witness (If relevant and contextually appropriate).
18. Date, place and time of Interview.
19. Persons present during interview and positions/roles.
20. Additional evidence provided by the survivor/witness in the context of the Interview (e.g. photographs, diagrams, maps, videos, medical reports, other documents, etc.) and coding of same.
21. Information regarding whether the survivor/witness agrees to be contacted again.
22. Information regarding whether the survivor/witness requires psychosocial support.
23. Information regarding whether the survivor/witness agrees to have her/his evidence shared with national judicial authorities (specify which)
24. Information regarding whether the survivor/witness agrees to have her/his evidence shared with international judicial authorities (specify which). (Protocol 118).

¹ A number of recent works outline the complex relationship traumatic experience and life narrative disruption including, among the neurochemists, Katy Robjant and Mina Fazel (2010) among the psychologists and narrative therapists Maggie Schaeuer et al (2011) and among the scholars of therapeutic writing , Celia Hunt (2013).