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Caring as temporal turns in life through creative writing

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Abstract

Aim: A person's experience of time in life is assumed to change through suffering. This assumption developed an interest in investigating the connection between creative writing and caring, as caring may ease suffering and promote health as wholeness. The study aims to deepen the understanding of how creative writing may facilitate caring by investigating the time experience included in creative writing and its significance in relation to caring.

Method: Seven hobby writers were asked to describe the meaning of creative writing in their lives. These accounts were analysed hermeneutically to gain an in-depth understanding through a dialogic process.

Findings: The result show six themes: Acknowledging a childhood's powerlessness, dealing with losses in life, capturing memories and revisiting them, building a new relationship to one's past, living in the here and now, and being in between the past and the future. Findings suggest that caring may be viewed as temporal turns in life through creative writing, thus promoting experiences of wholeness in connection to time in life.

Value: This study shows that creative writing can provide caring experiences through both the freedom of movement of the mind and by enabling a foothold in life's temporality.

Keywords

caring, creative writing, temporality, written accounts

Introduction

This study has an interest in caring and creative writing with a focus on time in human life. Creative writing has been utilised as a tool or way for individual change on a continuum between developmental and therapeutic aims (Wall et al., 2019). Creative writing, where the focus is mainly on the produced writing as art, is often separated in the literature from this continuum. Hunt (2000), on the other hand, sees writing in the artistic sense and writing in the therapeutic sense as so interrelated that an attempt to separate them will risk compromising them both.

In this study, creative writing is viewed to entail caring, thus spanning over therapeutic and developmental issues, and these may intertwine at times. There may be times for a writer when the product is of importance and at other times the process of writing is of greater value. This stance means that creative writing is not isolated from the daily lives

of individuals. Also, Williams (2013) views creative writing as part of everyday life, where everyday activities can enable thinking about writing and, at the same time, freeing a person from the writing desk. Peary (2022), on the other hand, emphasises the importance of being present in the “now” in a concrete sense, as it relaxes and lessens focus on the product or outcome of the writing. Aiming for an outcome may still be beneficial, as Stickley et al. (2021) have noticed that elderly people experience pride through the completion of a product. The individual can gain a deepened understanding through creative writing. Cosmelli and Preiss (2014) describe this as creative insight, where the phenomenological experience can bring forth the polarity of future and past, entailing something very new and greatly familiar at the same time. Thus, the temporal nuances of life may become more prominent.

A diary itself can be a sanctuary from contemporary life, according to Rak (2018), in the sense that it is free from the influence of other people. On the other hand, Sääskilahti (2011) views time in autobiographical writing as social and cultural, rather than the content of an inwardly directed individual’s consciousness. Also, Riessman (2015) describes time in writing as social time, because the writers’ social world and imagined audiences enter into the writing. To write creatively is not a straightforward, willed process – imagination and memory bring an element of surprise into it, according to Neale (2011).

Gibbons (2012) describes creative writing as bringing things to awareness and enabling a person to come in contact with oneself. According to Rampley et al. (2019), creative writing enables emotional expression and, somewhat similarly, Sandbäck Forsell et al. (2021) have found it to be an act of emotional reactions and release. In adult education, Karpiak (2000) has found autobiographical writing to be a process of self-exploration and meaning-making that can further the development of a larger view of oneself and the surrounding world. In a similar vein, Sandbäck Forsell et al. (2019) state that caring in creative writing initially exists in relation to oneself for the writer, after which it is also viewed in relation to both time and the world that the writing person lives in. Karpiak (2010) describes creative writing as promoting growth and development for adult learners, as writing of one’s life story can bring new light on the past and deepens the sense of self and others.

When dealing with hardship and challenges in life, Nordbø and Thorød (2014) describe creative processes as enabling breaking out from daily life and trying new expressions that can eventually open up new views on one’s own life situation. Karpiak (2000) describes creative writing as increasing appreciation for the personal and the uniqueness in one’s own life. In a mental healthcare context, creative writing is described by Mundy et al. (2022) as connected to constructs related to personal recovery by promoting connectedness, empowerment and identity. For people who have experienced mental health problems in the past, Hilse et al. (2007) have found that poetry writing integrates thoughts and emotions, thus creating new insights with personal meaning. Writing goes beyond the mere written – it is a process of making sense of one’s own life, and this has a personal dimension.

When looking at writing about one’s life, Karpiak (2003) has found life story writing to be a process of personal reflection and meaning-making. Furthermore, some narratives detail life events, some go further and associate feelings and emotions, and some even uncover unspoken experiences and emotional states. The author has found reflective writing and exploration of the uncanny aspects of one’s life to be the most beneficial in enabling a transformative learning experience. It is an interesting complexity of life that is possible to link to the ambiguous nature of temporality, put forth by Riessman (2015). The author states that writing according to a clear categorisation of time erases the continuing and

durative nature of life and illness. In a somewhat similar vein, Sääskilähti (2011) writes that for a writer, time is not just forward moving time, but it is a multi-layered web of time that is being unravelled and re-formed in every moment.

Previous research shows that creative writing can aid development and enable a larger view of oneself and life. It can aid in developing personal meaning and understanding about one's life. Imagination can bring unexpected events into the process of writing. The previous research also highlights creative writing's connection to the temporal complexity of an individual's life. These are issues of importance in caring contexts, where people may struggle in understanding life and lose touch with time in the face of suffering. There is a need for understanding ways to enable caring that counteracts individuals' experiences of shattered time and can aid a sense of wholeness for the person. Previous research motivates further research on caring in creative writing with a focus on time in human life. The research contributes with knowledge that enriches the understanding for caring from a caring science point of view.

Theoretical perspective

The theoretical perspective of this study is grounded in caring science research in relation to time. The individual is viewed as an entity of body, soul and spirit, fundamentally an indivisible whole (Lindström et al., 2018). The essence of time forms an individual's approach to life, with an existence that is formed through the three temporal forms: the past, the present and the future (Nurminen, 2009). Thus, existence has a temporality. As we live life in the presence of time, understanding temporality is of importance because it can be related to suffering. There are varying degrees of experience of suffering associated with human life (Eriksson, 2018) and suffering can alter the experienced movement of time. Nurminen (2009) connects time to a person's life flow and creative force. Whereas health implies wholeness (Eriksson, 2018), suffering can divide a person's time perspective, causing an outer time with a pace of its own and an inner experience of a frozen time that lacks the flow of "now" (Nurminen, 2009). Caring can alleviate suffering and promote health as a deep experience of wholeness; Nurminen (2009) links time's capacity to renew the present to possibilities for caring. From a caring science perspective, caring is an active part of creative writing that can further such an outcome.

Method

Participant selection and data collection

The participants in this study are amateur or hobby writers. They are retired elderly women living at home in Finland, who write creatively for themselves, and have rarely or never published any of their texts. The choice to focus on hobby writers is inspired by Bolton's (1999) theory that writing for oneself instead of publication first and foremost can create vivid material that offers the writer most personal benefit.

People who write for themselves are a somewhat hidden group and hard to get in touch with. Problems associated with sampling concealed populations can be overcome by convenience sampling (Phua, 2004) and snowball sampling (Atkinson & Flint, 2001). Both were used in this study. Convenience sampling was used to recruit a local group of four hobby writers to take part in the study. The verbal and written invitations to participants instructed to describe the meaning of creative writing in their lives when dealing with their past and the meaningful events, experiences and encounters that have affected their life. Furthermore, the participants were instructed to describe the importance of writing in everyday life, whether and how writing helps to live and look forward in life. Snowball

sampling functioned as a method of contact to invite more participants by starting a chain of referral as an invited participant passed forward the invitation letter. This subsequently yielded a total of seven written accounts from seven people who consented to participate in the study. Pseudonyms were assigned to the participants. They were all women between the ages of 63 to 77. The study's data material was collected as written accounts created by the study participants. Written accounts limit personal contact, can make it easier to communicate sensitive information (Handy & Ross, 2005), and suit people well experienced in writing. The collected written accounts were, in total, 17 pages in length. The texts convey the participants' personal and unique experiences and views about their creative writing.

Data analysis

The written accounts were analysed following the description of Fleming et al. (2003) about gaining understanding through dialogue with text. This consists of a four-step cycle. The four steps were: (1) reading the text through to find an expression that reflects the basic meaning of the whole; (2) investigating the sentences to expose their meaning and understand the subject matter, and to identify themes accordingly; (3) relating sentences to the meaning of the whole text; and (4) identifying passages representative of new understanding.

The first step was done to identify expressions that convey the fundamental meaning of each participant's text. An example of such an expression is the quote from the text of one participant: "writing is the sedan chair in my life where I put on paper everything that has passed, and I plan future life". The next steps in the cycle were to examine the writing from different perspectives by searching the text for answers to the questions posed in the invitation letter. As the question changed, so did the perspective of the evaluation on the text too. By changing the perspective, the understanding of the text expanded compared to the previous perspective, as it was deepened by the broader vision just gained. In practice, the four-step cycle meant dialogue with the text using questions about the meaning of creative writing in dealing with past experiences, daily living, and looking ahead in life. Pieces of text that seemed to answer the questions were extracted from the written accounts and formed themes. With the understanding about each participant whole written account in mind, the texts in the themes were read, and the themes were interpreted. Additionally, the work sometimes involved going back to the whole text and re-reading the themes. The repetition of these steps with the repeated alternation of perspectives combined with the interpretation of the answers derived from the texts and the themes that emerged from them, led finally to the stage where no new insights occurred. Thus, the process led to six different final themes.

Ethics

This research follows the guidelines of the Finnish Advisory Board on Research Integrity (2012) and has been approved by the Board for Research Ethics at Åbo Akademi University. The participants of the study received information about the study in writing and gave written informed consent prior to participation.

Findings

The result of the study consists of six themes: (1) Acknowledging a childhood's powerlessness, (2) dealing with losses in life, (3) capturing memories and revisiting them, (4) building a new relationship to one's past, (5) living in the here and now, and (6) being in between the past and the future.

Acknowledging a childhood's powerlessness

Most participants describe their childhood to entail experiences of both joy and insecurity. Vera states that "it is important for me to write about my childhood home, I cannot visit it anymore". Several of the participants describe themselves as coming from a childhood home where the atmosphere was characterised by poverty and destitution yet entailing spiritual wealth. This is described, for instance, as the making of music together in the family: "We played the fiddle and guitar and sang together, moments that brought joy into life" (Stella). The way of life today is understood to differ from one's own childhood.

I am already an older person, I can think back on the past and compare it to this time now and the life of children today, there is a great difference, but a child is always the same, no matter what the time is. (Belle)

The way of life is described by the participants as changing over time, but what it entails to be a child is, on the other hand, viewed as immutable. To be a child entails a dependency on other people. Stella writes that "the part of a little child is only to receive what is given and keep one's head above water – alone or supported by others."

Dealing with losses in life

This theme shows creative writing to be a way of dealing with loss in life. The writings describe loss of what one loves, like close people, animals, or possibilities in life. To write about loved ones is described as caring amidst sorrow and to ease the feelings of missing someone. There is a sense of unfinishedness that is connected to the writing, as Sue writes that "I feel in my heart that so much was left unsaid to them." Siri explains her way of writing as having a focus on what is meaningful when remembering loved ones who have passed away. Through writing, the people from the past are revered. It concerns what in ordinary life was valuable and moving, so the writing is a tribute to the people who were close to the participants during their lifetime. Sue writes that "from the writings I leave out all human incompleteness that we all have, and that is present amidst challenges, I want to remember all the good and appreciation that manifested itself in them during life."

Some participants describe a loss of possibilities in life. The pain of missed possibilities for self-fulfilment is handled through the creative writing, thus widening the view of the matter. Sue defines the self-directed writing as having opened up new perspectives for her on missed possibilities in life caused by the family's poverty and thus it increased her understanding of her parents' situation. Somewhat similarly, Stella writes that "they too have suffered. My father wanted to study. War, and the poverty that it brought on limited my parent's aims to move forward, despite their hard labour. To acknowledge this stuff is liberating in connection to my pain."

Capturing memories and revisiting them

The theme of capturing memories and revisiting them describes that the participants write about what has happened in the past to preserve memories throughout life. Vera expresses that "I have written about memories from a lived life." Eve describes her hobby of writing as an opportunity to remember old things and later moments of reading her own text. The memories that the participants capture through writing are important things that they do not want to vanish from memory. The written texts can be returned to, as Belle describes: "As I read my texts, they light up the past, all that I have experienced. Writing is of great importance to me; it is a memory image of the life I have lived."

The lived life is mapped through writing, where the writer can learn from oneself and from the effect of different decisions. A lot of the experiences of life and their meaning are described as being left in the mind of the participants. These are both good and bad memories that are compared to the life as it is lived at this moment. Writing finalises events in life. This is described by Belle in the following way: “This writing, it is life’s content, it is supplementing and verifying everything that has happened in my past life and what I have experienced.”

Building a new relationship to one’s past

The theme of building a new relationship to one’s past describes both the experiential past of the participant and the reshaping of this relationship through writing. It is not the past itself, but the relationship to the past that is seen to be strongly connected to the present and the future, how one reacts to similar experiences as in the past or functions in relation to their own future. Betty describes creative writing as building a pleasant and positive bond to her own past. Many of the participants revealed that they have lived through difficult experiences in the past. By writing about a painful experience encountered during childhood, from an adult point of view, a new, meaningful relationship to the experience is built up through creative writing. Stella writes that “when rewriting pain spots of the past, I return to these moments, but now as a strong adult, and open up a positive angle of view on events, thus building a new relation to them”.

In relation to building a new relationship to the past through creative writing, Stella uses the metaphorical description of a hand rake by saying that “I weed my past, from all the negative, that otherwise would have a harmful effect on the present and my future.” The negative grip on life that the difficult experience has is loosened and weakens through creative writing. Betty states that “today I express gratitude despite the many challenges that have come into my life”. A difficult experience may not completely disappear – it can come forth at times in the writer’s everyday life. Stella writes that “even if the past experience, in my memories, is connected to negatively tinted now-moments that bubble up, it still does not control my life on an emotional level anymore”.

Living in the here and now

This theme illustrates use of creative writing to manage difficulties in life, and through the managing of hardship, it is possible to live in the here and now. Having order in life by writing creatively increases the possibility for being in the here and now. Betty states that creative writing limits chaos and promotes serenity and order in this moment. Another participant, Stella, describes creative writing to be “a way to cope with difficult stages in my presentness, to become the master of the situation and in that way strengthen my life management in my present moment”.

The theme of *Living in the here and now* shows that creative writing is connected to an awareness of one’s experiences, on an emotional or rational level. To write creatively can strengthen a person’s capability to live in the present. Stella writes that: “My writing hobby has had a remarkable consequence for me: a strong and realistic ability to live in the now – for me, this is a prerequisite for a well-balanced living in the present.” Some participants write that the benefit of their creative writing also affects other people, as it awakens a sense of responsibility towards oneself and others. Belle describes her writing as having clarified what her responsibility is now. Furthermore, she wanted to take responsibility for supporting the growth of self-confidence in her grandchildren and support them in gaining a positive outlook on the future. Vera also views writing as helpful in taking responsibility for

oneself as well as others. Somewhat similarly Stella describes that “with the help of writing, I also enhance the wellbeing of my loved ones and people around me, as it promotes my experience of control in life and a responsible attitude towards it where I take responsibility for my actions.”

Being in between the past and the future

When writing creatively, the writers are at times seated in between the past and the future. To write creates calming moments, where the writer has the possibility to think about the past and make plans. When describing this, Belle uses the metaphor of a sedan chair and writes that “writing is like the sedan chair in my life where I can put on paper everything that has passed, and I plan future life”. Other participants also write that it is possible to reflect on things in life through creative writing. Eve states that “my writing is amateurish, but I structure experiences, change, and it gives me joy and pieces to build my life with”. Writing enables learning about the meaning of things and dividing them into their right places, as Belle describes her writing to concern “what I will carry out here and now, what I will leave for later and what is very important”.

Opportunities open in life when the experienced past broadens perspectives, and the future brings new choices. This progress advances in stages that fulfil one another: for Stella, writing is good for comparing the different stages of life’s course by bringing past things to mind, and aid to plan anew. She uses planning to guide life and seek fulfilment in the everyday life. The participants view creative writing as having an impact on the future, through life management and the attitude to life acquired through writing, guiding decision-making about one’s future. Belle explains that “by writing I can see the fulfilment of the course of life, what is important in the future and what I yet want to experience in my life”.

Discussion

The results show that caring in creative writing can be viewed as the possibility of being in movement. It is a movement of the mind that also entails stillness. This movement is shown in Figure 1, where each bubble entails caring in a movement in relation to time, and they are viewed as temporal turns in life that people may make through creative writing. Depending on the situation, a person can look at things that have happened in the past, turn to the future to anticipate things to come, or stay in the present. For instance, a person may have a past that consists of circumstances one did not have the possibility of influencing, as a child. A new relationship to experiences from past time can be formed through writing. Furthermore, creative writing may enable someone to return to memories and embrace what one cherishes. There is an attentiveness towards the course of life, as people keep track of and follow up on their lives.

The analysis of the texts can be understood as a reframing of the past, concerning early experiences of powerlessness, handling shattered dreams and losing loved ones, preserving and revisiting memories, and focusing on forming a new kind of relationship to one’s past. Furthermore, it appears to involve a framing of the future, enabling living in the present moment through a sense of order in life, and at times temporarily stopping and being in a space in between the past and the future. The reframing of the past and framing of the future in the creative writing may be caring for the writer, as this may give a personal sense of continuity and wholeness as a person.

The framing of the future, through decision-making and a following up on decisions made, indicates that the future may be graspable through practical planning, where creative writing can serve as an aid. It is possible that a person at a mature age may come to realise

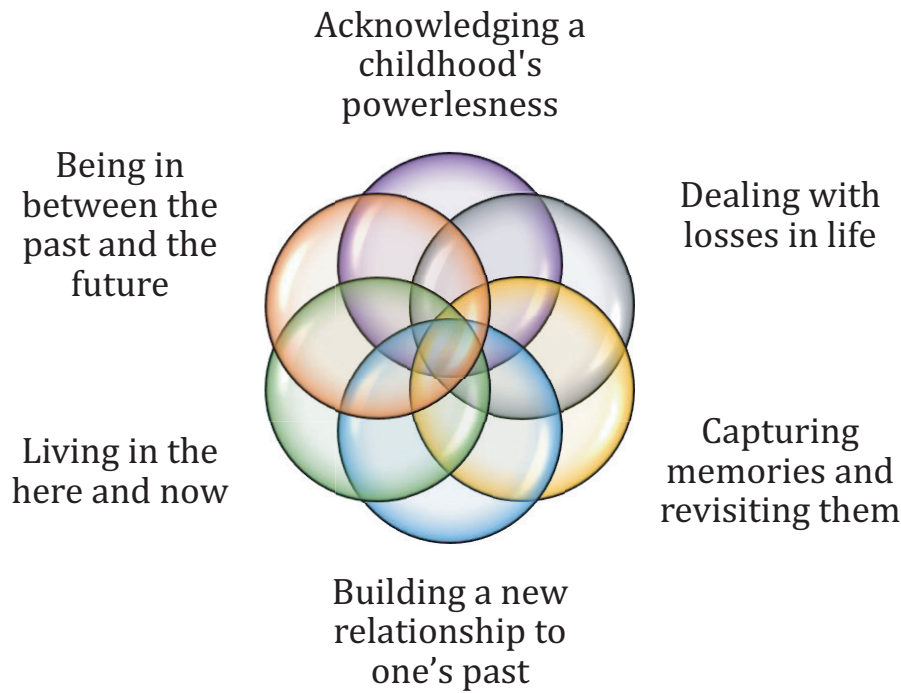


Figure 1. Temporal turns in life

what one can influence and what one cannot, thus approaching the future through practical planning perceived as being under one's control.

Nurminen (2009) views our existence as formed by the temporal forms of past, present, and future, and describes time as having the potential for caring, through the ability to renew "now". The study suggests that creative writing can aid in the renewing of "now" as the creative writing seems to support people in making agile movements between these temporal forms. Thus, there can be caring in a person's experienced flow of "now". This can also be related to Sääskilahti's (2011) description of diary writing, where time is constantly unravelled and re-formed in creative writing. Karpiak (2010) describes creative writing as deepening the sense of self and others. The study also shows that writing enhances responsibility for one's actions and for other people. The sense of responsibility appears to be connected to an experience of being in the present. Interestingly, Peary (2022) has put forth the importance of being in the present moment when writing, in a concrete sense, as a way to honour one's writing body and emotions.

The findings show that writing creates a personal meaning out of past experiences of powerlessness and loss, which Hilse et al. (2007) has described in connection to poetry writing. Creative expressions can, according to Nordbø and Thorød (2014), create a new outlook on one's own life situation. In this study, creative writing appears to explore the past, give guidance in the present and aid in finding new perspectives on one's life, resembling creative insight as described by Cosmelli and Preiss (2014) as a blend of something both new and familiar. Caring can form both a life-giving movement and a biding stillness, which expresses both time and timelessness (Nurminen, 2009). The result of this study shows that a writer may, metaphorically described, seat oneself in between the past and the future in creative writing. Caring is thus seen to involve a calming withdrawal combined with writing of the past and planning of the future.

The possibility of being mentally agile with the help of creative writing can enable movements in life that may be considered as temporal turns that are caring through a sense of

freedom in relation to time in one's life, but also a connection to it. Through creative writing, one may have an unconditional connection to time in one's life – it is a temporal footing that can ease suffering in life and aid wholeness for a person in connection to time in life.

Study limitations

Study limitations include the homogeneity of the participants – they are all elderly women. This is most probably a consequence of the partial use of snowball sampling as a method for contacting the participants. However, the chosen method made it possible to collect data of depth, as the written stories are very personal. The cooperation of three researchers also strengthens the interpretations made from the material. The study is small with a total of seven participants, but this has enabled a thorough analysis of the collected material. The lengths of the participants' written accounts differ, and with a small data material like this, it has been challenging to present a well-balanced report concerning the process of analysis and interpretations made from the texts. Therefore, some participants' voices are more prominent than others. The used method of analysis could perhaps have been more beneficial in a larger study. Despite the limitations, the research brings valuable new information about the way creative writing can be caring. The results of the study indicate that time can be viewed as linear, like the participants' writing instruction, but also as cyclical. For instance, the participants describe stages in life that fulfil one another. Pinpointing exactly the ways they experience time does not fall within the scope of this research, as it is caring that has been in focus. Still the results of this study show the writers handling different temporalities. Thus, they can be mentally agile and in touch with time in their lives through creative writing, and that is what we understand to be caring that promotes health. This is knowledge of value that can benefit many: both people who write in general, and professional carers. The future perspective in life may be demanding at times to grasp for anyone. This could probably be aided with a practical approach in creative writing that may help explore one's values in life and presumably aid in the process of handling change and maturing: one's development as a whole person.

Conclusion

Creative writing seems to provide freedom of movement and a connection to time for the participants in this study. The findings presented suggest that being both mentally agile and having a foothold in life's temporality can be viewed as temporal turns in life, and aid experiences of wholeness and health. The temporal turns are viewed as caring for a person. These temporal turns enable the writer to be in movement in relation to time. Thus, with the help of creative writing, a new personal continuity as wholeness in connection to time can be formed. This has probably been created and re-created many times, as life and illness can cause suffering that shatters a person's connection to time on several occasions during a person's lifetime. In this study, the future seemed to be the most graspable for the participants through practical planning. The possibilities of creative writing as an aid when dealing with challenges in daily life could be an interesting topic to explore further. It could also be fruitful to pursue further research from a future perspective, and gain insight into the possibilities of creative writing for influencing situations where a vision of the future in life can be challenging to find. The potential of creative writing is thus fascinating to explore further from a caring point of view.

Conflict of interest

All authors declare no conflict of interest in connection with this article.

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