

The affective resonance processes in creative writing-groups Retroaffective restructuring of the self in creative writing for people suffering from schizophrenia-spectrum disorder

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ABSTRACT: Scientific findings have shown that therapeutic writing for persons with both somatic and psychiatric diseases have health promoting outcome, but more investigations are needed to account for the positive effects as not just cognitive, but also accounting for pre-reflective unconscious factors. Here it can be fruitful to draw on current debates in phenomenology and psychiatry that acknowledge non-cartesian, embodied models of selfhood. Findings from a Danish research-programme, REWRITIMIZE provides basis for further reflections on the topic. The creative writing groups are considered hybrids between an art workshop and a group-therapy intervention with focus on playful participation and artistic expression. Like in therapeutic groups a playful interaction in a holding-environment is central for positive outcome, but the writing group differs from group therapy by its attitude towards the written texts that are considered aesthetic material and narrative more than discursive content. The texts can be considered to be *transitional objects* opening an intermediate space between the subject and the objectively perceived facilitating symbolization-processes and improving recovery-parameters for people suffering from mental illness. The mechanisms behind the positive findings may be understood as retroaffective restructuring of the self in renewing the relationship between the minimal and narrative self.

KEYWORDS: Participatory arts, therapeutic writing, resonance, group dynamics, phenomenological psychiatry, retroactivity, minimal self, narrative self, Nachträglichkeit

I. Introduction

There is increasing international interest in the field of arts and mental health resulting in WHO's scoping report in 2019 recommending more art-based interventions in mental health care, but also revealing a lacuna in the understanding of the working mechanisms of art on mental health (Fancourt et al. 2019). Participatory art has shown positive effects on what has been summed up by recovery-oriented psychiatry as CHIME factors (Connectedness, Hope, Identity, Meaning in life and Empowerment; see Leamy et al. 2011), especially by stimulating interconnectedness and the installation of hope (Stickley et al. 2018) suggesting that a combination of an accepting environment and the opportunity to engage in playful, creative expression helps to build confidence in self and others, and to facilitate hope. The repeatedly coded factor of connectedness is among other factors associated with: 1) the participatory art is led by a professional artist, 2) it is not directed at the illness or the diagnosis of the person, and 3) it promotes social engagement. Writing for promoting mental health has shown a wide range of effects on psychiatric as well as somatic markers ranging from boosting immune markers, reduction of hypertension, reduction of stress, depression, substance abuse and anxiety-disorders. It includes different techniques, concepts, and methodologies, such as 'expressive writing', 'narrative therapy', 'creative writing', 'poetry writing' and 'life story writing'; some performed alone while others take place in facilitated group settings (Costa and Abreu 2018; Pennebaker 2000). A substantial review made by the British NHS including 284 studies showed that it is facilitated writing interventions, rather than solo-writing interventions, that have health-promoting effects. Despite this vast amount of research, the mechanisms of how writing produces

positive changes in mental health has not been properly conceptualized (Nyssen et al. 2016). In mental health care, specialized interventions for anti-stigmatization in schizophrenia has been developed focusing on “narrative enhancement and cognitive therapy writing” (Yanos, Roe, and Lysaker 2011), but the conceptualization of why, how and with whom writing intervention can have positive effects is still missing.

Phenomenological psychiatrists have defined schizophrenia-spectrum disorders as interpersonal disorders (Stanghellini and Ballerini 2002; Fuchs 2015; Sass and Pienkos 2015) and recommendations have been made for therapeutic interventions targeting interpersonal difficulties helping to facilitate the reintegration of a fragile sense of self and secure attachment to the shared world (Nilsson et al. 2019; Rosenbaum, Henriksen, and Škodlar 2019). In this connection, participatory writing groups may be beneficial for improving recovery-variables and social inclusion.

Participatory art in creative writing groups, focusing on the art of forming and transforming poetic and literary texts, and facilitating the participants’ experiences of expressive and listening processes in the exchange of textual products in the group, may be a new adjuvant form of treatment for people suffering from schizophrenia-spectrum disorders. The writing groups are considered hybrids between an artistic workshop (Hölscher 2020) and a short-term psychodynamic group-intervention integrating concepts of phenomenology and psychoanalysis (Rosenbaum et al. 2019). They also offer shared, structural spaces which, for people suffering from schizophrenia, can be helpful for strengthening interpersonal difficulties connected with the illness (Henriksen and Nilsson 2017) in a non-stigmatizing way and securing attachment to the shared world through the creative engagement with texts.

The research-programme REWRITALIZE provides basis for further reflections on the processes of the transformations patients undergo (for a detailed description, see Bundesen et al. 2020). The empirical material consists of the patients’ subjective experiences of the intervention (both interviews and quantitative psychometric scales are used). Theoretically it applies phenomenology and psychodynamic thinking to the understanding of how the exercising of poetic and literary expressions in different ways can change feelings of self-esteem, transform the basic trust in oneself, and alter the reflections upon oneself in different social situations. Theoretically, these transforming processes may be understood as re-introducing to the subject the possibility of creating a third position in psychological communication, a generalized Other position (Mead, 1934; Lacan, 2008; Winnicott 1953) from where communication with others is structured and may be observed.

In addition to these theoretical perspectives, the project engages in the discussion of the relation between the *minimal Self* – functioning on the ground of ipseity (a pre-reflective, pre-noetic, embodied relating to the world – and the *narrative Self* (Zahavi 2010; 2015; Parnas and Zandersen 2018; Gallagher 2005; 2012; 2015; Hutto 2016; Belt 2019). The hypothesis is that creative writing activity, performed in a holding-environment among peers and conducted by a professional fiction writer, can renew the relationship between the two aspects of self exemplified by participants suffering from schizophrenia-spectrum disorders that have been explained as a disturbance of the minimal self. This article will present the project and its preliminary findings and try to suggest a conceptual understanding of what might be mechanisms behind the positive effects of the writing group. This will be done by drawing on theoretical frameworks from psychodynamic thinking, phenomenology and narratology regarding, play, psychodynamic group therapy, resonance and retroaffectivity. These concepts may explain the beneficial effects for especially people suffering from schizophrenia of the work with creative texts as “transitional objects” that can stimulate intrapsychic and interpersonal recovery-processes mediated as resonance-processes.

II. Hypothesis

An overarching hypothesis of the investigation is that participatory art as creative writing groups, led by professional artists in collaboration with mental health care professionals, enables people suffering from schizophrenia to renew the relationship between core affective self and the narrative self, resulting in improved recovery processes, manifested in positive feelings of interconnectedness, empowerment, and hope.

III. Material and method

The sample included 21 patients with schizophrenia-spectrum diagnoses aged 21 to 63, who have suffered from their particular illness for 4 to 29 years. They were offered 15 weeks of group-based creative writing workshop. They signed informed consent forms and were only excluded if their command of the Danish language was insufficient for participation, if they suffered from organic brain disease, if they abused drugs or suffered from another severe co-morbid condition.

Before the creative writing intervention, the patients participated in a clinical interview to clarify their social and personal developmental background. After the intervention, the patients participated in a semi-structured phenomenological interview (EASE and EAWL language domain; see Parnas et al. 2005; Sass et al. 2017) to clarify the impact of participating in the writing workshop in relation to their psychopathological gestalts with special emphasis on their experience of language, but also an assessment of their experience of the group dynamics. The interviews were transcribed and analysed qualitatively by two senior psychiatrists identifying themes until the material was saturated. The principal investigator is certified for the use of the phenomenological interviews for research-purpose.

IV. The minimal self and the affective unconscious: the status of retroactivity in the self

In our qualitative analysis of retrospective interviews, we identified several themes that can be divided into factors at the group and the individual level. At the group level, participants consistently reported that the group felt as a safe, yet also structured space with clear rules and roles where the sharing of creative texts was an intense and inspiring way to get to know other group-members in a non-stigmatizing way, where the focus was not on illness, but on the creative activity. This also allowed participants to build an identity as reader and writer of texts instead of being “patient”, which facilitated a more positive conception of themselves. At a personal level, participants reported that poetic techniques such as “*Verfremdung*” was beneficial in sharing a sense of being radically estranged in a positive way. They also highlighted the non-judgmental approach of the author towards the reality-status of the texts and that literary fiction could be used to verbalize the experience of a disturbed sense of self, such as through metaphors that to some extent allowed sharing of ineffable phenomena stemming from schizophrenic psychopathology with others.

For further understanding and a more detailed conceptualization of these identified themes and their status in consciousness, it seems relevant to draw on aetiological models of phenomenological psychopathology based on subjectivity-models operating with different aspects or levels of self.

The problem of the self and its connection to psychopathology has recently attracted much attention in philosophical, psychiatric, and neuroscientific investigations (Zahavi 2005; 2010; 2015; Strawson 2000; Henriksen and Parnas 2012). Even though multiple versions of the self are in play (Strawson lists 29 different notions of self), there seems to be a consensus

that there exists a basic distinction between two aspects or modalities of self, namely the minimal and the narrative self (Zahavi, 2005; 2010; Gallagher 2011; Hutto 2016; Belt 2019). There are still many open questions about the status, relationship and functioning of the different notions. One line of thought draws on a hierarchical model to explain the aetiology of psychopathological disorders as rooted in, respectively, the minimal and the narrative self, highlighting schizophrenia as a disturbance of the minimal or core self, showing this as the most basic layer from which all other layers, including the narrative self, radiates (Sass et al. 2011; Nelson et al. 2014). Other theories place the narrative, dialogical process of different entities of the self at a more central place in the structuring of the self (Ricoeur 1991; Hutto 2016). Another notion suggests that the different aspects, instead of creating a hierarchy, constitute a dynamic pattern where all parts are interdependent (Gallagher 2007; 2012; Gallagher and Daly 2018). The question of how minimal to consider the minimal self is still debated. In a recent paper, Zahavi makes a conceptual distinction between a “(more) minimal self of an infant” and the (less) minimal self of an adult” that is “[...] open to the processes of organization and schematization and it can be widened to comprise the problems of personal identity and narrative self-understanding.” (Zahavi, 2017, 198).

From an embodiment approach which considers the person as embedded in an ecology, but with the body as the unifying base and background, it seems necessary to integrate more body-based views of subjectivity (Gallagher 2005; Damasio 2010, Fuchs 2005; 2018). Neuroscientist Antonio Damasio suggests a hierarchy of a core followed by an autobiographical notion of self (Damasio, 2010, 17-18), taking affectively primed image schemas as the first subjectivized layers of subjective experience. More phenomenologically informed theories highlight the importance of the lived body and its qualia (Fuchs 2005; Merleau-Ponty 2004). Here an important point is that of the *reciprocal* influence of the brain-mind-body-culture ecology in terms of *resonance* on several levels that can be investigated with respect to its expressive and impressive functions on the individual, interactional and extended levels (Fuchs 2019).

V. Resonance in group dynamics

Resonance might account for some of the positive findings in the writing groups by highlighting multiple resonance relationships in the group: intrapsychic, horizontal (between the patient and the text), interpersonal (between the members of the group), but also the more vertical resonance-processes (the sociologist Rosa describes these as being active in the modus of prayer or in engagement with art; Rosa 2017, 472-500¹).

One of the participants described the positive influence of the group like this:

For me it has had a tremendous impact on my life to have a practice of writing fiction. It has become clear that it does not work for me to ‘write for the drawer’, I need to have an idea that my text will be read by others, that it will be part of some kind of communication. It is very rewarding to be able to share in the fictive form with the others.

She stressed the importance of the work with the creative text as part of an interpersonal process and that it made her feel “less lonely” and “a relieve from despair”.

¹ Rosa 2017, 481f: “Solche Berichte über Bücher, Filme, Gemälde oder Musikstücke, die *mein Leben veränderten*, gehören zum semantischen Grundarsenal moderner Subjektivität; sie bezeugen, dass ästhetische Resonanzen untrennbar zur Struktur dieser Subjektivität gehören. [...] *Was wir als Schönheit erfahren*, so meine These, *ist vielmehr das zum Ausdruck gebrachte Möglichkeit einer resonanten Weltbeziehung, die Möglichkeit einer Art des In-der-Welt-Seins, in der Subjekt und Welt einander antworten*“.

The term resonance originates in the field of music and physical science. It has been used by sociologists to describe the relationship of self and world (Rosa, 2017, 36), and by phenomenological psychiatrists to describe the attuned interplay between brain, body, cognition and world (Fuchs 2018). On a group level, the English-American group-analyst Foulkes uses the concept of resonance to describe the non-verbal and non-linear group dynamics in group therapy, emphasizing the generative influence one group participant has on another participant that encompasses the dyadic level, thus the dynamics of a group becoming more than the sum of its participants. In art therapy, group-processes have been explained by the concept as resonance, where the group can be seen as an ensemble of string instruments: Each human theme has a unique sound. When a string produces sound, the strings of other instruments that are tuned to the same frequency also vibrate, in various possible responses (Schwartz 2015, 320). In his early writings, the psychoanalyst Foulkes maintained that resonance was essentially instinctive and therefore unconscious: "Resonance is a good example of communication which can take place without any particular active interaction, without any particular message sent and received, and which need not be telepathic but is in fact purely instinctive" (Foulkes and Pines 1990, 214). The process of group resonance helps to establish themes and couple each individual's life-story and meaning-making, including psychopathological markings to the evolving reality of the group.

According to psychodynamic thinking, the writing group may be seen as a 'working group' gathering around the creative activity of writing fiction texts conducted by a professional fiction author. One of the advantages of the participatory art group - in comparison to psychotherapeutic groups - is that it is not directly aimed at solving psychological problems. It is offered as part of a treatment programme but is first of all an invitation to participate in artistic practice, not having to share personal problems or listen to the problems of others. Yet the group has secondary therapeutic effects but without explicitly applying psychotherapeutic techniques. It also offers the participant an alternative to the identity of being 'patient' or 'mentally ill' and giving the group members the opportunity to identify with the role of art-practitioner, which some participants highlight as positive. One female participant expressed it like this:

The group offered me a break away from being the 'ill person'. Also we did not have to talk about ourselves, but had to focus on something outside ourselves. It was something else than just me, me, me. It was such a relief.

Being present as an art-group-participant in the group with the presence of the double expertise of a professional artist and a trusted mental health caretaker create a solid holding-environment (Applegate 1997) with clear roles and rules allowing positive resonance-processes to occur in the modus of play.

Freud put emphasis on playfulness in a talk he gave in 1908 called "Creative writers and daydreaming" where he drew a parallel between fantasy-driven activity and play in highlighting 3 central elements: 1) The creation of an imaginary world, 2) A world of thought that is taken seriously, 3) A world of thought that is made alive with material from the outer world, but that is still kept separate from the outer world. He also makes three distinctions in the concept of fantasizing: the conscious, the unconscious and primal fantasizing (Freud 2014, 3-13).

VI. Creative texts as aesthetic constructs and not lived experience

In the creative writing group all three aspects of the playful fantasizing that according to Freud was at the core of the creative process of the poet are at play. The writing process in the group has two phases: first the individual writing process, where elements of an imaginary world are narrativized and put into words. In this phase intrapsychic material is organized and externalized in a narrative way in a text. In the second phase, the text is read aloud and shared with the

group and taken seriously as a product of a world of thought by the writer and by the rest of the group thus being part of an interpersonal exchange.

The English psychoanalyst Winnicott also pointed to playfulness as a crucial part of the development of authentic selfhood, but also as an important part of successful psychotherapy, where patient and therapist engage in a playful modus² that may also include what he coined as “transitional objects”, that are the child’s first possessions like a teddy bear or toy. According to Winnicott it offers a “transitional status between the child’s imagination and the real world outside” (Winnicott 1989, p. 2). I will later argue that the creative texts written in the groups can be seen as such transitional phenomena, which can serve as a bridge between aspects of self and thus between self and other. First I will draw on narratological concepts of literary consciousness to account for the status of the written text and its distance to lived experience to account for the therapeutic advantages of the format of the artistic workshop (Hölscher 2020).

Written texts are always externalizations of inner phenomena (Vygotsky 1962, 99-100) and as significant-constructs they are intermediate phenomena between subject and objectively perceived and can play a role in establishing a position in the subject of the “generalized other” (Mead 1972)³. What the text does in providing a third, intermediate space, is the dissociation of the subjectively perceived by separating the text as aesthetic construct from lived experience. Already Aristotle in his Poetics emphasized narrative (*diegesis*) as one of two modes of poetic imitation that is marked by different kinds of distance (temporal, spatial, relational, affective). This was formulated in contrast to the direct representation outlined by Plato as *mimesis* (in the third book of the Republic), who favoured the direct enacting of an event as showing instead of telling (Andringa 1996, 433, Genette and Levonas, 1976, 3-6). For Aristotle, narratives are characterized by elements structured in a temporal order with a beginning, a middle, and an end. Gerard Genette later pointed to what he calls the ‘main elements of literary consciousness’ as the distinction between the act of mental representation and the act of verbal representation - *logos* and *lexis* (ibid., 5). He concludes that “the only mode that literature knows is narrative, the verbal equivalent of nonverbal and (...) of verbal events” (ibid., 4). The American narratologist Wayne Booth sums up the variations in narrative distance as *aesthetic distance*: “The elements usually discussed under ‘aesthetic distance’ enter in of course; distance in time and space, differences of social class or conventions of speech or dress – these and many others serve to control our sense that we are dealing with an aesthetic object” (Booth 1983, 156). In other words, the text is a construct, different from lived experience, reminding us that “[n]arration is art, not a science” (ibid., 155f.), and that the ‘who’ of the text is only tenuously related to the ‘who’ of the experience. There is thus a distinction to be made between the-I-of-the-text and the-I-of-experience. Where the writing group addresses the first, the psychotherapeutic group addresses the latter.

Yet, the major difference between the two is to be found in the primary focus of attention, what in psychotherapy is the lived experience, the ‘who’ and ‘where’ and ‘why’ of the verbal utterances of the patients. In contrast, the attention in the writing group is on the crafted texts that are considered as narratives, i.e. aesthetic construct and not as discourse, i.e. lived experience. It does not address the *content*, but rather the *form* of the text. The participants are not encouraged to introduce autobiographical material, but if it comes up as a theme in a text, it is treated as aesthetic material, as form. Genette paraphrases Benveniste pointing out, that “In narrative [...] no one speaks, in the sense that at no moment do we have to ask ourselves ‘Who

2 “Psychotherapy takes place in the overlap of two areas of playing, that of the patient and that of the therapist. Psychotherapy has to do with two people playing together” (Winnicott 1971, 51.).

3 “The very universality and impersonality of thought and reason is from the behavioristic standpoint the result of the given individual taking the attitudes of others toward himself, and of his finally crystalizing all these particular attitudes into a single attitude or standpoint which may be called that of the ‘generalized other’” (Mead 1972, 90).

is speaking?', 'Where?', 'When?' etc. in order to receive fully the meaning of the text." (Ibid p.10).

VII. The text as transitional phenomena

To return to the perspective of developmental psychology, the texts can be seen as "transitional objects" or "transitional phenomena"⁴. According to Winnicott, a child's first me-but-not-me-possessions opens the intermediate area "between the subjective and that which is objectively perceived" (Winnicott 1989, 3) where Winnicott claims that there is a "third part of human being, a part that we cannot ignore, that is an intermediate area of experiencing, to which inner reality and external life both contribute" (ibid., 2). Transitional phenomena can have the form of a teddy bear or toy and display the rich pattern of the baby's first not-me possession, which enables direct observation. Transitional phenomena thus have an imaginary character displaying the infant's capacity to create, think up, originate or produce an object, but also the ability to initiate an affectionate type of object-relationship that can be the focus for psychotherapeutic interventions (Winnicott 1989). Working creatively with texts as transitional objects may be a way to improve affective bonding, using the texts as a third position between the subjectively experienced and the objectively crafted that open an intermediate area. This still has an imaginative character but is objectivized enough to make it possible to investigate and play with and – importantly – it has reality-status in the shared world with others and can thus be part of an interpersonal exchange.

Another important feature of the writing groups is the establishment of a safe atmosphere, a holding environment, where the participants can allow themselves to play. The playful modus, that also for psychotherapy is important, depend on a safe and intimate atmosphere for a positive outcome, but a problem in psychotherapy groups can be the invitation to share problematic and conflicted experiences that very often leads to activation of defense-mechanisms resulting in high anxiety levels and resistance towards being part of the group.

A female participant put emphasis on the indirect workings in the creative writing with these words:

I would never have come if it had been a psychotherapy-group because it is so difficult for me to just sit in a room with others, even my close relatives. In the creative writing group, the therapeutic process happens without one talking about problems and we gather around the creative activity. But the creative writing has made it easier for me to communicate and be intimate with my partner.

Another female participant said that she had participated in many psychotherapeutic groups, but she felt that the bonding with the other participants happened much faster in the writing-group.

In his developmental studies, Winnicott couples the ability to play with the presence of a good-enough caregiver that enables the child to surrender in playful investigation of objects and surroundings (Winnicott 1989, 10-11). In the retrospective interviews, the participants all highlighted their initial anxiety in the group and the importance of the presence of the mental health care person for securing a safe environment that allowed them to engage in the creative exercise in a playful modus. One explanation for the positive, but also often also unexpected effects reported by the participants, may be accounted for by Winnicott's idea of playfulness

⁴ According to Winnicott, the transitional object and transitional phenomena may be conceived of in three ways: as a typifying phase in the child's emotional development, as a defense mechanism against separation, but also as a neutral sphere in which experiences are not challenged and create an area of play and imagination (Winnicott 1953).

as being part of healthy development. In the playful modus, defense-mechanisms may be bypassed, allowing unexpected new experiences as coupling of new chains of signifier. In the writing groups, the playing takes place around the written texts demanding to some extent a dissociation between the Who-where-when of experience as addressed in psychotherapy and the Who-where-when of the text, that is addressed in the writing group. The text as transitional object, or toy opens up the intermediate space between I and the generalized Other, but in a renewing way. A female participant expressed it like this:

“The text [...] becomes more like a toy, but a kind of toy that you can play with when you feel bad. It makes it somehow more concrete”.

In the writing group you produce a text, while also becoming a reader of your own text requesting some distancing, which may be beneficial as part of a symbolization-process. A vignette can be used to illustrate the importance of playfulness and aesthetic distance in the writing groups:

A 64-year old woman, who had an academic background, suffering from trauma-related psychopathology and problems with emotional regulation, displaying a very intellectual, defensive interpersonal style. In the follow-up interview she explained her positive experiences in the group as she took the creative exercises in the group as a form of play:

I have written a lot of academic texts and also diaries throughout the years, but I have never written creative texts. I considered such texts rather useless. But my doctor, who was our co-therapist, convinced me that I should take part in this group, and at that time I was very isolated and suffered immensely and was in despair, and since I did not know what to do to get better, I accepted the invitation. In the beginning, I was very skeptical about the writing, but as I began to accept it as a form of play, I started to think “why not, I will allow myself to play for a while”, and being with the group felt like a 3 hour pause every week, away from the hellish suffering that was my life at that point.

The woman articulates her initial skepticism and attitude towards the creative writing as “useless”, but she accepted the invitation by the doctor with whom she had a trusting relationship and had known for many years. In her academic carrier, she had always been a high-achiever with very high demands on herself. And her approach to any kind of treatment had always been very intellectual by seeking scientific information and looking at statistics. In her treatment she invariably insisted on academic discussions with her doctor about the form of treatment she was subjected to, thus avoiding entering the painful emotional states that caused her psychopathology. In the writing-group, which she considered a harmless way of passing time, she allowed herself to play instead of intellectually controlling the situation, and in this modus she reactivated painful dissociated memories by writing a fiction text about a vividly described rape-scene; an experience she had had at age 15 and never told anyone but her doctor about. During the reading aloud of her text, she was very emotionally moved, and it was clear to the group that she had autobiographical material invested in the story. But the focus of the following discussion was not on her emotional investment in the text, or whether it was true or not, but on how to create a horror-text and discussions on the characteristics of the genre. In an indirect way, all the other participants and the author were emotionally supportive, not via direct comments on the content of the story (I-of-experience), but by commenting positively about the *formal* elements of the text (The Who-why-where-of-the-text). The aesthetic distance of what might or might not be a lived trauma was treated in the group as aesthetic *form* that made it possible for her to share it with others in a very vivid, yet more gentle way, than if it had been treated directly as lived experience or as the *theme* in a psychotherapeutic session. It allowed her to distance herself from a traumatic past experience, while still sharing it as aesthetic construct and receiving the careful listening, attention and supportive comments from the writer and the rest of the group.

In the retrospective interview, she underscored how surprisingly relieving it was to write the text and share this with the group without having to talk about it as her own experience.

[...] the discovery of creative language has been so important for me as well as listening to the texts written by others. And the group always made me see much more in my own text than what I thought I had written. For the first time I have been able to share my traumatic experiences - in a fictive form - which was somehow very relieving, maybe because I did not have to talk about the feelings and the actual situation but could speak instead of the experience as a fiction-text that I shared with the group. Later I used the text to share with my partner, whom I had not previously told about the event. It somehow made it easier.

By dealing with traumatic experiences in a playful manner and accepting their phantasmatic nature treating them as fictional material, the shaping of these experiences in a fictive narrative discourse gives it somehow symbolic power, thus enabling the subject to chain signifiers in a new way in the creative process stimulating symbolization. In this way, the subject becomes able to reintegrate conflicted content in a reflective process that enables the sharing of the I-as-text leading to relief strengthening both intrapsychic and interpersonal competences.

VIII. Resonance as retrospective affective restructuring of the self

In the vignette, the 62-year old woman somehow bypassed her usual intellectual defense mechanisms which allowed her to access dissociated painful memories in a playful atmosphere. This may have caused an affective restructuring of the traumatic rape of which she had only dim memories and by allowing the narrative distancing she was able to shape it into a fictive text, which as a me-but-yet-not-me transitional phenomena allowed her the gentle attention of the group on sharing the text, while not having to confront the trauma directly. More specific to schizophrenia another participant who had suffered from psychotic experiences since the age of 10, reported that she had tried to tell about her experiences, but peoples response to that would always be ways of “reality-testing”, by trying to convince her about the unlikelihood of her experiences. Such as when she experienced her husband transforming into an alien. In the writing group she wrote a text about a woman whose husband transformed into an alien and the writer and the rest of the group did not question the reality-status of the experience, but treated it as a fable, as a narrative and the discussion was centered around the stylistic means of the text, which gave her the feeling of being able to share the experience without being regarded as ‘mad’.

The claim of this article is that the creative writer can indirectly activate aspects of invisible affective horizons or schemas, thereby bringing about a resonant restructuring of the self, and that the explicit learning of literary techniques may be helpful in this regard.

In the creative writing process the writer can unexpectedly fall into ‘blind spots’ and trigger affective schemas. Here it becomes important that the safe holding-environment of the group with the playful modus in the creative participatory act, might allow new schematization/transformation of affective unconscious horizons and narrativization of painful phenomena.

Apart from the resonance effects at the group-level, resonance has also been described in phenomenological psychiatry as the rhythmic, embodied interaction establishing an ecology of brain, mind, body, and others in the circular establishment of personhood and worldliness as described by Fuchs and others. In Fuchs’s description of emotions, they involve “circular interactions” or “feedback cycles between affection, perception and movement” (Fuchs 2018, 124). Conscious experience thus depends on the integrative work of perceptions, emotions, cognition and movement in the ongoing, sensemaking process that is described as a resonance.

In this embodied perspective working with the text as narrative it seems relevant to raise the question of the relationship between the minimal and the narrative self. Or rather: how minimal should we consider the minimal self? And is there a feed-back loop between them, where disturbances in the minimal self can somehow be compensated by working narratively? To shed light on this question we can draw on current discussions regarding the timeliness of the self and the function of a retro-affective restructuring of the self, what recent research has suggested to be a constant constitutive function of consciousness (Horvath 2018). This corresponds with other current discussions in phenomenology about the problem of the status of the

unconscious (Legrand and Trigg 2017), which is in the phenomenological tradition termed the *pre-noetic or pre-intentional* (Gallagher 2000). Unconscious, non-symbolized phenomena are closely related to body memory and the retroactive awakening of past events that presupposes a not-so-minimal self as Zahavi suggest. Horvath argues for a malleable affective core self introduced by Husserl's notion of retroactivity or "affective awakening" that refers to the retroactive understanding and re-schematization of past experiences as a more general notion of retroactivity. Kozyreva speaks of "non-representational past relation" on the basis of the lived body, emphasizing the close relation, but also difference between affective awakening, that is "blind" and unconscious, and explicit recollection that is conscious in the form of remembrance (Kozyreva 2018, 221; Horvath 2019, 36).

The Freudian notion of 'Nachträglichkeit' is a more specific term closely related to the vicissitudes of Freud's seduction theory. In his early hysteria studies, Freud describes 'Nachträglichkeit' as an active process that bridges the gap between past affective vicissitudes and the cognitive present by way of meaning (Freud 1912). Symbolization is thereby subsequently ('nachträglich') conferred on early traumatic events, which have become susceptible to omnipotent control. It is significant that there are two time-vectors at play: the first is a causal process operating in the forward direction of time against the background of a factual reality, while the second is a backward movement that permits an understanding of unconscious scenes and phantasies taking place at primary process level. This facilitates constantly new interpretations of past events that is constituting for the ego.

Another important feature, apart from dual temporality, is the latency period and its non-linear dynamics which makes it unpredictable. But because of the narrative nature of the restructuring and symbolization of significant events in the past, it seems reasonable to assume that developing explicit narrative competences and creative writing skills in a positive group environment among peers and a professional can be beneficial to the facilitation of such processes.

Horvath, speaking from a phenomenological point of view, highlights the dependence of the core self on an affective unconscious closely related to retroactive sense-making processes. As quoted from Zahavi's notion of "the (less) minimal self", this is open to pre-reflective processes. Horvath turns to Freudian thinking to highlight that these have a defensive character in underlying and maintaining the minimal self. But Horvath also makes clear that this notion differs from the Freudian connotation to early sexual development and is phenomenologically a more general dynamic concept where the self is *constantly* living through multiple disintegration and reintegration processes due to emotional traumas.

Horvath suggests retroactivity as a homeostatic function playing a crucial role in trauma-processing and overall well-being: "furthermore, it can determine the ways of self-integration and self-narration" he writes, continuing: "According to my thesis, a pre-reflective sense-making process restabilizes the bodily-homeostatic and affective balance of the minimal self" (Horvath 2019, 28). He speaks against the interpretation of very abstract readings of the minimal self by pointing to discussions of auto-affectivity as anchoring the diachronic unity of the self in the living present⁵. Horvath argues by referring to Ullmann that affective well-being is schematized by the fleeting moods and emotions due to our worldly and embodied situatedness, suggesting a pre-reflective affective unconscious aspect of the self. He points to our everyday thinking and behavior as often defined by blind spots and argues by referring to Ullmann that affectivity has an invisible or implicit meaning-structure, "the invisible innervation of the visible behavior" (Ullmann 2013, 35f.). Horvath points to Ullmann and Fuchs as thinkers who define affectivity "as a network of emotions and moods, which are dimly present in our being-in-the-world.

5 Horvath quotes Zahavi, who argues that: "We will never encounter the minimal self in its purity. It will always already be embedded in an environmental and temporal horizon. It will be intertwined with, shaped and contextualized by memories, expressive behavior and social interaction, by passively acquired habits, inclinations, associations etc." (Horvath 2001, 6).

Affectivity has a horizon, a space of possibilities that can be identified as the secondary unconscious affectivity of our mental life” (Horvath 2018, 30). It is important to highlight the idea that retroactive affective restructuring (as in Freud’s original conception of ‘Nachträglichkeit’) is not just a process activated in traumatic events, but also in everyday thinking, such as when we are to solve a task, write a text or speak in unfamiliar contexts. In my answering historic, pre-conscious material (both resonant *and* dissonant elements) will determine the outcome and it can manifest itself in minor pathology as when I get nervous, stop in the middle of my talk, or become anxious in everyday situations. The same is the case in the creative writing process where the writer can unexpectedly fall into such ‘blind spots’ and trigger affective schemas. Here it becomes important that the safe holding-environment of the group with the playful modus in the creative participatory act, might allow new schematization/transformation of affective unconscious horizons and narrativization of painful phenomena.

From the point of psychiatry, Fuchs argues that vaguely felt emotions or bodily impulses are often the “reverberations of forgotten or repressed contents as well as forebodings and anticipations of a possible problem” (Fuchs 2012, 20). In the context of the creative writing group, it seems important to notice when Horvath puts emphasis on Fuchs’s focus on psychotherapy, where techniques of focusing come to crystalize a “meaning core” from the bodily “felt sense”. These meaning cores are often autobiographical events that reside in the past. He quotes Fuchs for claiming that body memory is not only the disposition of perception and behavior, “but also the carrier of life-history as well. Body memory serves as an umbrella concept for explaining the complexity of affective life” (Horvath 2018, 33). Horvath also quotes Kozyreva for introducing “the notion of affective memory that invisibly schematizes the self” (Horvath 2018, 31). The claim of this article is that the creative writer can indirectly activate aspects of these invisible affective horizons or schemas, thereby bringing about a resonant restructuring of the self, and that the explicit learning of literary techniques may be helpful as tools to handle pre-reflective phenomena.

A 27-year old Woman suffering from schizophrenia formulated it in this way:

Writing is for me a very physical act, when I write it is like when I am dancing [...]. Writing is different from speaking, it is like there is something that there is not room for in spoken language, that finds a place in written language. It becomes part of something bigger, it is a way for me to put my perceptions and thoughts together. And it would have been more chaotic, if I didn’t have the group. I don’t feel so amputated anymore.

The writing activity can thus be considered an indirect collection of affective schematized structures and recalled perceptions, but not as explicit representation of inner phenomena, but as aesthetically distanced form, that can be part of a symbolization-process. In the beginning of the manualized writing group intervention the writing exercises are designed to address perceptions progressively moving towards more shaped narratives. One exercise could be: “Write about a neutral space in your childhood home. You must include a minimum of three sense-modalities, such as smell, sounds, colors, or shape.” According to the theory of unconscious structuring of the unconscious levels of self, foregrounding sensed autobiographical material can draw more neutral, but still significant materials from the past, which may relativize the psychopathological phenomena in a restructuring of traumatic or negative life-events.

One example of this was a 38-year-old woman suffering from schizophrenia who had remembrance of suicidal impulses since the age of five. She wrote a text about a class-room experience from when she was nine years old, where she was very unhappy and had an at that time incomprehensible urge to run out in front of the cars on a highway nearby. But the main theme of the text she wrote was a pink commode in the classroom as a comforting object reminding her of the bond with her sister and the games they played together. She described very vividly its perceptible qualities: the pink lacquer, the way it would smell, and the atmosphere surrounding it. In the group, the structuring of the text was discussed, and she described that as very relieving.

In the retrospective interview six months after the intervention, the woman told about her experience of writing the text, which may be described as a retroactive affective restructuring of past experiences:

The writing group has helped me to express my difficulties in a fictive form alongside peers in a group. This came as a surprise to me. It has somehow rearranged unconscious parts within me so that now I feel more as a comprehensive whole. Pieces from the past, memories that were full of sorrow and experiences from my childhood that I tried to run away from, were arranged and verbalized in a fictive universe. And this took place in a safe space, where I dared share my texts with others, but without having to talk about my personal problems.

For the first time I have an episodic feeling inside me. I feel that things are now in some kind of order. Previously I seemed to have invisible jigsaw puzzle pieces rambling around inside of me, because I could not put them into words with ordinary language. But in creative writing they suddenly became visible and concrete so that I could put them together into a whole picture, a whole person, a person I could relate to, that became able to relate to others in a more intimate way.

The quote illustrates the affective reawakening of pre-reflective material triggered as resonance-processes in the playful engagement in the writing group. By the explicit work with the experienced as text by promoting literary competencies and use of literary techniques traumatic “invisible” experiences were re-arranged in resulted in a conscious experience of relief and a feeling of temporal ordering of the self.

IX. Conclusion

The purpose of this paper was to present the positive findings of a manualized creative writing group-concept conducted by fiction authors in collaboration with mental health care professionals for people in psychiatric treatment. For the purpose of understanding the mechanisms behind the positive effects, I have drawn on a theoretical framework from phenomenology and psychodynamic thinking to investigate the empirical findings as processes of resonance and retroaffective restructuring with the texts as transitional objects, resulting in the improvement of mental health. This line of thinking suggests a feed-back loop between the minimal and the narrative self as retroactive affective restructuring that can be externalized and reflected upon in fiction texts as a form of transitional phenomena. The texts are crafted in a holding environment in a playful modus that to some extent allows bypassing defense-mechanisms and thus accessing recalled perceptual schemas, allowing the chaining of new signifiers and leading to re-schematization which can reduce personal suffering for people suffering from schizophrenia by directly strengthening narrative competences, but also invisibly via the possibility for retroaffective reschematization supporting a positive feed-back loop between the narrative self and thus strengthening the core-affective minimal self.

This suggests that participatory art groups involving skilled artists can be an effective adjuvant intervention for people suffering from schizophrenia and other severe mental illness, also because of the writing groups as a structured space offering non-stigmatizing interpersonal interaction with peers, a professional writer and a mental health care professional centered around the playful participation in creative writing. It may provide a promising, cost-efficient contribution to the global problem of a growing population of people suffering from mental health problems, but more research is required.

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