Title: Experiences of creative writing as a serious leisure occupation: an interpretative phenomenological analysis

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Introduction

Many leisure occupations such as painting, music, crafts and creative writing are linked to the arts and can involve an individual in a creative process (Perruzza and Kinsella 2010, p. 261). Engagement in creative occupations such as these appears to contribute to health and wellbeing in diverse ways (Schmid 2005; Creek, 2008). Creek (2008) summarised these contributions as including pleasure, motivation, learning new skills, agency, control and self-esteem. Leckey (2011) reviewed a number of studies suggesting that the creative arts provide not only valuable media for self-expression, but also physical health benefits such as improving blood pressure and immunity. As with other valued occupations, creative occupations also appear to have transformative potential, with the capacity to promote doing, being, becoming and belonging (Wilcock, 1999). Occupations such as weaving (Riley, 2008), arts and crafts (Howie, Coulter and Feldman, 2004) and music-making (Kokotsaki and Hallam, 2011) have been considered at length within the literature of creative leisure occupations. However, very limited consideration of creative writing is available to date within the field of occupational science.

Creative occupations can often take on prominent roles in an individual's life and contribute to their sense of identity (Reynolds, 2003; Howie et al. 2004). Stebbins (2001) poses that an activity engaged in outside of a formal "work" context can take on the role of a "serious leisure" occupation in a person's life. "Serious leisure" has been defined as "the steady pursuit of an amateur, hobbyist, or career volunteer activity that captivates its participants with its complexity and many challenges" (Stebbins, 2001, p. 54). Stebbins indicates that serious leisure pursuits enable individuals to fulfil their human potential, develop their skills and gain a valued identity. Using Stebbins' work, Taylor and Kay (2013) synthesised findings across interviews with seventeen people engaged in a variety of serious leisure occupations, a number of which could also be considered creative occupations. The findings give weight to the idea that creative occupations can have a central role in shaping both a personal, internalised sense of self and a socially situated identity.

Within literature, journalistic enquiry and autobiography, there is an anecdotal association between creative writing, particular personality types and behaviours. The pursuit of creative writing is frequently attached to the stereotype of the "tortured soul", with the writer perceived as suffering for their art (Flaherty, 2005). Within popular culture, there are also associations between creative writing and poor mental health; indeed, in his novel *Wonder Boys*, Chabon has termed the compulsive need to write and the psychological trappings of this process as "the midnight disease" (Chabon, 1995, p. 20). Consideration has also been given to the relationship between creative writing and manic depression, suggesting that writers are as much as ten times more likely to be manic-depressive than the rest of the population (Jamison, 1996; Sharples, 2002). An article on published authors' feelings towards their craft revealed mixed emotions (The Guardian, 2009). Enjoyable experiences recounted by the writers included the achievement of public acclaim and an adrenaline rush, whilst concerns about unhealthy levels of isolation, entrapment within a fictional world and feelings of self-doubt were cited as more challenging elements of being a writer. All writers profiled were professional and therefore paid for their work; however, more intrinsic motivations for persevering with writing when faced with adverse experiences were also suggested beyond financial remuneration. However, as first person narrative reflections on experiences offered within a journalistic context rather than academic research, there is a need for further evidence to substantiate or formally consider these anecdotal viewpoints.

Within the field of occupational science, scant literature exists regarding creative writing as a leisure occupation or where the participants' end goal is the writing 'product' rather than 'process'. Where studies exist, they largely focus on participant groups with particular health conditions. Using a qualitative methodology, Hilse, Griffiths and Corr (2007) considered the meanings of poetry writing for two participants with histories of mental health problems. They identified the enjoyment of having a "spark" moment that fired their imagination, and regarded poetry as enabling a deep connection with self and with others. Certain negative influences on mental health were also identified, in line with the cautionary observation by Patterson (2004) that writing poetry or prose does not necessarily offer comfortable or straightforward ways of improving mental health. Supporting this argument, some of the participants affected by depression who engaged in a creative writing group struggled with the identity of being a writer and felt emotionally stuck (Cooper, 2013), al-

though some appreciated the positive feedback of others and their sense of belonging to the writers' group.

Alvarez and Mearns (2014) conducted interviews with ten poets from a community of performance poets who took part in regular spoken word events, with the aim of identifying the "driving force" (p. 264) behind their work. Catharsis, a sense of vocation and reliance on writing to prevent "going crazy" (p. 267) were identified as important elements of the poetry writing experience. This study did consider participants outside the content of health conditions. However, performing poetry in front of an audience altered the experience from a purely solitary endeavour to an occupation engaged in within a supportive community that provided the opportunity to affirm self-worth.

Stebbins (2001) has suggested that people engaging in a serious leisure occupation tend to join communities of like-minded practitioners, sharing skills and confirming identity . Culturally, writers are often seen as solitary figures, leading a cloistered existence that could potentially be detrimental to mental health; as the writer Alvarez states, "it is easy, in your lighthouse keeper's isolation, to be taken in by your own propaganda and begin to believe the myth you yourself have created" (Alvarez, 2004, p. 114). Nonetheless, the impact of social isolation on creative writing was not found to be reflected in research literature. Similarly, any challenges or changes to this solitary set up, such as receiving feedback or becoming a member of an online writing community such as National Novel Writing Month (NaNoWriMo) have not been considered at length (Coker, 2010).

Despite the variety of domains in which creative writing has been considered, Marsden (2018) has posited that there is little synthesis of the literature across disciplines. Marsden advocates that an interdisciplinary approach be applied to the study of writers and their experiences of writing, in order to further our understanding of writers' inspirations, motivations and work practices. Insights into the writing process gained through popular culture and autobiographical or profile pieces suggest a complex relationship between writing, wellbeing and identity that is not reflected in academic research. Marsden advocates that further contributions to the study of writers from ethnographic and social sciences approaches would be particularly beneficial to enhance the knowledge we currently have available. An occupational science perspective is well placed to offer relevant insights.

This study sought to critically examine, from an occupational science perspective, the writing experiences of individuals for whom creative writing is a form of serious leisure. Methodologically, such insights are facilitated by taking a phenomenological approach which seeks to understand, in rich detail, the ways in which meaningful experiences are understood by participants.

Method

As a methodology, interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) seeks to understand individuals' own sense-making (Cronin-Davis, Butler & Mayers, 2009). It takes an idiographic approach, meaning that it investigates what an experience is like for an individual and the sense they make of what they have experienced (Smith et al., 2009). Unlike some other hermeneutic approaches which also consider the mechanics of interpretation, IPA focuses specifically on the individual and the way in which they make sense of their own experiences (Finlay, 2011). It was felt that IPA would be an appropriate methodology with which to approach the little researched topic of creative writing as a serious leisure occupation, enabling in-depth consideration of individuals' viewpoints. Without a precedent of other similar research, it was identified that IPA would enable understanding of shared experiences among a small group of participants whilst also providing space for the nuance of divergent viewpoints to be fully appreciated. IPA accepts the value of small samples for enabling more in-depth analysis than is possible with large datasets and therefore sensitisation to themes. However, generalisation is made with caution. Smith et al (2009) argue that understandings developed through IPA may be tested and elaborated through subsequent studies. Findings may also be generalised through "theoretical transferability", with the reader making links between a study's findings and their own professional experience and theoretical framework (Smith et al., 2009, p. 51).

Unlike methodologies influenced by objectivist thinking, IPA does not see the role of the researcher as neutral in the process of interpretation. The notion of a double hermeneutic acknowledges the way in which the researcher is engaged in trying to make sense of a participant's own sense-making, resulting in two-layers of the interpretative process (Smith et al., 2009). Indeed, it has also been suggested that a third hermeneutic occurs when this double-layered sense-making is then

interpreted by the end reader of a piece of research, with the reader bringing their own experiences and theoretical understanding to the subject (Smith et al., 2009).

Ethics

Ethical approval for this study was obtained from the host university Ethics Committee before recruitment for potential participants commenced. No potential conflicts of interest were identified. In order to protect confidentiality, participants were given the opportunity to choose their own pseudonym for the study and all identifiable details were omitted or adjusted to maintain anonymity. A small risk of harm was identified, should the interview prompt discussion of emotional or personal issues in relation to writing; participants were invited to bring a friend or partner to the interview if they wished, and were also provided with contact details for both the researchers and the Ethics Committee at the host university should they have any queries or concerns during the process. Contact with participants was made via email with the first author. All participants were informed about the remit of the study, and informed consent was obtained via a consent form sent to participants ahead of the interview, and was signed in person on the day. An outline of the topic areas for discussion was also sent to participants ahead of time in order to allow participants to consider any relevant experiences prior to the interview, and to foster deeper thought and meaningful engagement in the topic (Smith et al., 2009). Research material was stored securely and access to a summary of the research results was offered to all participants.

Participants

Participation was open to anyone over the age of 18 living in the Greater London area who valued creative writing as a leisure activity, who wrote in English, and did not derive their principal source of income from this activity. The term "valued activity" was used in recruitment material and the participant information sheet rather than "serious leisure" to ensure that meaning was clear and did not require off-putting levels of definition. Reasons and motivations for writing as well as interactions between writing, lifestyle and sense of self were all referred to in the recruitment material to provide potential participants with insight into the scope of the study. For the purposes of recruitment, the definition of creative writing was left open to be interpreted at the participants' choosing and was not restricted to particular creative forms such as fiction or poetry. The purpose of not defining creative writing was to open the study to the widest potential field of participants, and to

acknowledge multiple and individual different forms of creativity.

The study was advertised via two Facebook groups for writers living in London. The purpose of the first Facebook group was to advertise writing competitions and publishing opportunities, whilst the purpose of the second was for sharing ideas and providing a forum for writers to provide support and feedback on each other's work. A sample of five writers was recruited, two of whom were members of the Facebook groups and three of whom were recruited through "snowballing" from the first two participants. Although uptake for the study was limited, between three and six participants is a recommended sample size for IPA studies so a total of five was felt to be an appropriate number of participants (Smith et al., 2009). All participants were male and, whilst gender was not one of the recruitment criteria, this provided a small and relatively homogenous sample (see Table 1), as valued by IPA research (Smith et al., 2009).

Insert Table 1 about here…

Data collection

Participants took part in single semi-structured interviews with the range of interview times being between fifty and ninety minutes. The interviews took place at either the host University or in a private space at a London library and were audio-recorded. The participants were consulted on their preferred choice of location and appointments were made accordingly, to ensure a safe comfortable environment for participants (Smith et al., 2009). As well as receiving the topic guide (see table 2) to consider ahead of the interview, participants were invited to bring along an extract of their creative writing to illuminate a particular instance of creative writing and its meanings to them. The topics were presented flexibly to encourage a free-flowing conversation. Assurance was given to writers that extracts of their creative writing would not be used when reporting findings, in order to respect copyright.

The development of the schedule (see Table 2) was informed by gaps in knowledge identified in the literature review. The interview schedule was sent to participants prior to the interview, as recommended by Smith et al., and opened with questions requesting factual information (e.g. creative

forms used) in order to put the participant at ease and establish rapport with the researcher (2009). The schedule then considered more complex questions regarding the participants' experiences of writing and their reflections on how writing influences their wellbeing. Prompt questions were used to encourage more detailed responses, and further questions were used to clarify and check understanding where necessary. The topics were presented flexibly to encourage a free-flowing conversation. The first interview was used as a pilot to test the appropriateness of the interview schedule. On reflection after the pilot interview, the first researcher deemed that the schedule had been effective and no changes to the questions were required.

Insert Table 2 about here…

Data analysis

Analysis followed the recommended steps for IPA (Smith et al., 2009), with several readings of the transcripts being completed accompanied with exploratory note-taking. Each transcript was then approached idiographically to note emergent meanings, and then subsequently points of divergence as well as convergence were examined across the five transcripts. In line with IPA recommendations, a suitable quotation was identified to tag each of the themes and sub-themes. The researchers sought to deepen and sensitise the analysis through their engagement in this process, rather than checking in any quantitative sense for agreement.

Whilst it is recognised that it is not possible to obtain a pure knowledge of another person's experience and that interpretations may be influenced by one's own fore- conceptions, it is also important to strive to make IPA research as "experience close" as possible (Smith et al., 2009, p. 33). As such the researcher should remain reflexive, being alert to their own fore-conceptions as they emerge, given that it may not be possible to identify all one's fore-conceptions at the outset. Reflexivity ensures that the researcher maintains self-awareness about how their fore-conceptions are interacting with the data analysis (Finlay, 2008). A reflexive journal was kept throughout the research process to aid understanding of fore-conceptions and the potential influence of personal experiences (Smith et al., 2009). The first author had completed postgraduate study in the field of creative writing whilst the second and third authors had research interests in creative arts and oc-

cupation but no personal experience of creative writing. The reflexive journal enabled the researchers to remain self-aware of how any personal and professional views may have influenced interaction with the data, thereby striving for the analysis to be as "experience close" as possible (Smith, 2011, p. 10).

<u>Findings</u>

Five main themes were inferred from the data, as shown in Table 3. These revealed both the positive meanings of creative writing, but also a pervasive vulnerability to feeling judged (by self and others) as inadequate writers.

Insert Table 3 about here…

1. <u>Creative and communicative freedom</u>: *"It's just pure communication"* (Matthew)

An appreciation of the unique freedom for self-expression allowed by creative writing was the most broadly shared facet of the writing experience. Providing the space for genuine self-exploration, writing enabled participants to communicate their thoughts with total freedom, navigating ideas and content too sensitive or extreme for discussion elsewhere.

Writing gave an opportunity to clarify thoughts and experiences. Aware of his own *"neuroses"*, Matthew explained that writing was for him a form of *"pure communication"*: an unbridled form of expression, writing provided an *"unclouded"* way of being able to address his innermost thoughts without having to consider the opinions of others. Growing up, he had found that "*stuff makes more sense in a book than it does in real life"* and had discovered writing to be a meaningful way of understanding his own experiences.

With increased freedom to communicate, participants felt able to be more open about their emotions. Adam found that with writing, *"you talk about emotional things, that you wouldn't readily talk about in the course of normal conversation",* suggesting a willingness to open up about things to himself that he might have been more cautious about expressing elsewhere. Pedro stated that "*You're deliberately not censoring in order to get it out"*, hinting that in order to achieve a creative flow it is necessary to unleash one's deepest thoughts.

Similarly for Matthew, addressing emotionally sensitive topics through writing provided opportunities to "*expel a lot of negative emotions*". Writing was also "*massively cathartic*" for Alex during a time of personal difficulty:

> "*[When my relationship ended]…I was really struggling to come to terms with what I felt like… It just felt like the only way… I had to write it down*" (Alex)

Gaining emotional clarity and freedom of expression was also at times an uplifting experience. For Matthew, writing could make his "*heart sing*", whilst for Pedro the joy of writing could feel infectious, allowing him to carry a positive attitude into other areas of life:

> "*People say about the universe lighting up…you have a bit of a warm glow for a little bit… [and that] energy can spill over into other things*" (Pedro)

Referring to the unleashing of emotions, both Alex and Pedro used the phrase "*it poured out of me*", suggesting limited conscious agency over writing, as though the process took on a self-perpetuating momentum.

2. <u>Writing as an escape from reality</u>: "*You've switched into a different world*" (Adam)

All participants expressed to some degree a process of entering into the imaginative landscape of their own fictional creation whilst writing, an activity which appeared to function as an escape from the challenges and constraints of daily life. Writing afforded participants the opportunity to occupy the inner world of another person, or at least to become less inhibited by the social norms that usually limit emotional expression.

Participants described the experience of becoming absorbed in their writing and escaping to a different mental reality, expressed by Adam as "*losing yourself in that world [of the text] and believing it's happening around you*". For Adam, this absorption extended to taking on a different persona through the act of writing, living vicariously through a "*dodgy criminal*" character. Adam's desire to leave his own reality for that of his character's appeared to be motivated by how fully his character was "*enjoying life*"; Adam felt that he "*was absolutely him when I was writing*", sometimes drinking alcohol whilst writing to more fully immerse himself in the character's imagined lifestyle. Other participants also recounted examples of escaping reality by exploring alternate versions of themselves

through writing, expressing thoughts and feelings that they perhaps regarded as too emotive or difficult to be addressed in day-to-day conversations.

Although aspects of residing in a fictional reality were pleasurable, all participants described how they paid a price for this immersion by spending extended periods of time alone:

> "*I went a bit mad in that two weeks writing that novel on my own. I didn't talk to anyone for like two weeks.*" (Alex)

This social isolation could be coupled with reduced orientation to reality. Adam described this phenomenon of total immersion as positive, describing how "*time just flies by*" in a pleasant way. Pedro, however, appeared more troubled by the experience which he termed "*a flow state*", an experience that seemed slightly unsettling and almost trance-like:

> "*[I'd] sit there almost like a vegetable. Sometimes it can be 15, 20 minutes but you don't realise because you're just running these scenes, stories, scenarios….and then I'd suddenly "come to" almost and it's…the weirdest feeling.*"

The insistent sibilance of *"scenes, stories, scenarios"* conveys a feeling of pressure or a perpetual motion that could be hard to derail. Pedro referred to "*living inside [his] own head*", which he believed had led him to behave in "*dangerous*" ways. When preoccupied with his writing projects, he experienced a "*disconnect*" or a feeling of being "*spaced out*" which once led him to unwittingly walk out in front of moving traffic and, on another occasion, misjudge distance and hit his head on the bottom of a swimming pool.

Three participants also described how at times their "writing world" could bleed over into their ordinary world, influencing the structure of their routine. Adam wrote the majority of his novel late at night, meaning he would go to work the following day feeling tired. Matthew, whose day job was based at a desk, would "*try and steal a bit of time at work to [write]*" on the computer if a project wasn't going well. Alex and Matthew also admitted to resenting social plans to some degree when they were engrossed in a writing project. Matthew described offering excuses to avoid social gatherings ("*I've last minute got a cold for so many parties*") whilst Alex described social plans as *"intruding on [my] time...it does break up that momentum"*. Contrastingly, Jacob recalled how after a particularly intense period of writing he *"had to stop, because I was literally just sitting there most*

of the day writing", with the declarative *"had to"* suggesting the strength of his concern about the influence on his routine and how his awareness of this moderated the impact of writing on his routine.

These experiences suggest that the pleasure of an escape from reality has limitations; although participants did not explicitly identify writing as jeopardising work performance or relationships, the drive to write would appear to have the potential to make a dent in other areas of life if not kept in check.

3. **Writing as intrinsic to sense of self:** *"It's...almost second nature to me"* (Jacob)

For four of the participants, writing was portrayed as a means of reflecting and reinforcing a core sense of self, integral to their routines and lifestyle. As well as setting aside regular time to write, participants described this occupation as influencing their thoughts and observations throughout the day. For example, Jacob described *"always carrying notebooks...just in case I see something interesting".* The phrase *"just in case"* here suggests how Jacob appeared to view the world through a writing 'lens', constantly seeking ideas and being always ready to write, even placing a notebook under his pillow at night. Adam also described how writing became a key element of his daily routine, leading him to feel perhaps a sense of loss when he finished his novel: *"I thought, 'it's done!' What do I do now?"* Adam's focus on the goal of completing his novel culminated in a sense of bathos: in the process of dedicating himself to his novel, the act of writing appeared to become a central part of his routine, leaving an emptiness when the goal was reached.

In Matthew's case, his need for writing within his weekly routine indicated a sense of dependence:

> *I can be a bit moody if there's whatever reason I can't have a day of the weekend [to write], I feel like it's a bit of a wasted weekend and I feel a bit funny the rest of that week until I can get a long stint of...writing something.* (Matthew)

A delicate equilibrium is apparent for Matthew, which would seem to be easily disrupted if the required "dosage" of writing is not achieved. Writing at three set points throughout his day, Pedro also identified a need for a daily writing "fix" which, coupled with elements of mindfulness and meditation he found *"just so positive for me".* Indeed, the experience appeared so invigorating that Pe-

dro stated *"In a way I'm laughing to myself like this is a curse…I can't conceive why wouldn't I do this for the rest of my life?"* For Pedro the experience of daily writing is almost like a secret elixir that he is amazed more people have not discovered.

Matthew identified more strongly than other participants the downsides of a quasi-addictive relationship with writing. When asked how he would feel if he could never write again, he stated:

> *If it was through no fault of my known, like if I lost my hands or something like that, I kind of feel like it would be a good excuse… There have been moments in my life, particularly with the last book I finished which I sent out to...sixty agents, [where I'd] feel like I was pushing a boulder up a hill and it was rolling back down. I felt like "I wish I didn't want to do this, I wish I wanted to do something simpler".*

Matthew's repetition of "*I wish*" here seems to connote a sense of writing as a kind of burden, so much so that an "*excuse*" not to write anymore could almost be seen as a blessing. Experiencing such a profound need for writing links closely to the next theme of vulnerability, making oneself open to criticism and rejection from others.

Conversely to other participants, Alex did not demonstrate an intrinsic commitment to writing, stating that "*[writing's] not my main thing, it comes and goes*". As a professional musician and videographer, Alex clarified that he felt writing was one of many "*creative outlets*" for him, which gives a possible explanation as to why it felt less intrinsic to his routine and sense of identity than for other participants.

4. **The vulnerable identity of "writer":** "a Schrödinger's cat purgatory … where I'm both a writer and not a writer" (Matthew)

The identity of "writer" was revealed as a knotty concept and something that all participants perceived as being dependent on others' judgements as well as inner values. Unable to know whether he was a writer or not without "external confirmation" from the agents to whom he has sent his novel manuscript, Matthew expressed a sense of being unsettled:

> *I'm in a sort of Schrödinger's cat purgatory...where I'm both a writer and not a writer…[the publishers are] not telling me that I'm bad, they're not telling me 'you can't write', but they're not telling me I can write either. (Matthew)*

Conversely to other participants, Pedro felt he experienced being a writer as "*more of an internal thing*"; his identity as a writer was confirmed by his own self-belief and did not rely solely on the opinions of others. Nonetheless, Pedro appeared very aware of others' judgements on the occasions he chose to "*play that card*" and introduce himself as a *"writer"* rather than as *"someone who works in IT"*:

> *The first question is always "oh, what have you had published?'" because that's what they can see and then when you say "oh, I haven't had anything published yet'" their interest begins to wane a bit. I guess that's the extrinsic, the external measure of the product. (Pedro)*

Framing this experience through a mock-conversation seems to reveal this as a familiar frustration for Pedro: despite an internal belief that he is a writer, he cannot escape the blunt judgements of others. Pedro's decision to introduce himself as a writer on some occasions suggests a playful awareness of the prevailing judgement criteria regarding creative identities, and insight enough not to rely on this as an evaluation of his creative worth.

Alex also found third party criticism demotivating. He described an instance where he had received crushing feedback from members of his mother's book club on an extract of his writing he can given them to critique:

> *[The feedback] was a complete buzz kill. You lose motivation. All that excitement you had from this idea goes because someone's just like pretty much poo pooed your whole energy for it. So I've made a decision never to show anyone anything again until it's finished. At least 'til I feel like the first draft's done… It was the worst thing I could have done. (Alex)*

Measuring the self against external judgements, either real or anticipated, seemed to be a particular cause of anxiety for Matthew and, to a lesser extent, Adam. Both used the word *"fraud"* to describe their fear of not being regarded as legitimate writers by others. Adam did however experience an "incredible buzz" when he received positive feedback on his self-published e-book. The

confidence Adam experienced from receiving positive feedback replaced his need for alcohol when writing:

> "People like it, so actually, it must be alright. So I must be able to do this. So I think [positive feedback] can have the same effect [as alcohol]".

Although all participants expressed concerns about others' feedback, Matthew appeared particularly burdened by his fears, alluding to suicidal thoughts at times:

> [I have a] fear that I'm wasting my time, or that I'm going to look back on this and be completely embarrassed by myself … where I think "'I'm going to do something stupid, if I ever realise that". I've shown my work to friends and colleagues and I kind of feel like what if I look back on this and...all my friends know I'm trying to be a writer and what if I suddenly fail, I mean what would I do then? Would I see those people again? (Matthew)

Whilst writing brought joy and opportunities for self-knowledge and authentic communication, participants also revealed the vulnerability of having an identity that needs confirmation by others. This revealed a darker side to the occupation of creative writing where a strong inner sense of vocation was continually threatened by the actual and feared opinions of others. Methods used by the participants to cope with these affronts to their sense of self are discussed in the final theme.

5. **Strategies for coping with the vulnerability of a writer's identity:** *"If I lost the confidence to...sit down for three hours and write...I don't think I'd do it again"* (Matthew)

The status of being a writer was something identified as being core to several of the participants' sense of identity but needing reinforcement at least in part by an objective third party. All of the participants discussed attitudes and techniques towards writing which enabled them to either reduce or remove the need for a third party opinion or to deal with the ongoing pursuit of seeking publication/production.

Having been writing on and off for twenty five years, Pedro described going through a number of different stages with his writing, eventually deciding to focus on process, rather than the goal or end-product, and to enjoy being *"in the moment"*:

> *If you have a goal, then when you're trying to get there then you haven't got there... it's actually about the payback that every time you're doing something which improves you. (Pedro)*

Pedro's notion of *"payback"* seemed to be linked to his ideas about energy and focusing on positive experiences in the moment of writing, rather than being driven towards the goal of achieving a finished, externally acclaimed product.

A number of participants appeared to see the value in working on projects that could be self-produced, in order to be less dependent on external feedback. Alex had decided to write about less personal issues, or shorter, less intense pieces, as a strategy of self-protection:

> *[The extreme focus of a novel] is quite an exhausting and intense way to be... probably a reason why the shorter projects suit me better because I can just get it done and then just leave them and do something else, recover. (Alex)*

Vulnerability was not only associated with the feedback of others but with a fear that the inner impetus for creative writing might be lost. Matthew discussed feelings of writer's block and how he used 'positive reinforcement steps' in order to help himself find a way to overcome his fears:

> *I always try to remind myself that you've felt like this before and you've got past it and you're back. You've written stuff previously before and you can get this to work.(Matthew)*

Matthew's repeated use of the second person creates a sense of the other part of his self that is experienced and confident speaking to his current, blocked self and giving him reassurance that he is able to continue.

Matthew, Jacob and Alex all sought to maintain momentum with their writing, all using the word "prolific" to describe this impetus.

> *"Just try and be as prolific as I can. Because if I lost the confidence to say sit down and write for three hours...I don't think I'd do it again" (Matthew).*

Jacob encapsulated his need to write as much and as frequently as possible in a mantra-like statement:

> *"Don't stop writing, keep doing it, keep practising… You've always got to think that there's always room for improvement, otherwise you sort of get to a standstill." (Jacob)*

For this group of committed creative writers, maintaining conviction and self-belief against the tide of impending criticism, both self-imposed and externally received, appeared to a key ingredient for persevering with writing ambitions.

Discussion

The aim of this study was to critically examine the writing experiences of individuals for whom creative writing is a form of "serious leisure", particularly with regard to experience, wellbeing and identity. The experiences considered illustrate that creative writing was valued by participants as a way to express their feelings and to obtain emotional clarity. With respect to wellbeing, creative writing brought joy, excitement, escapism and a sense of intensity to participants' lives that sometimes made them reluctant to stop writing, with consequent implications on their routines and contact with others. Writing also provided a strong sense of identity, although this identity was vulnerable to whether or not the writing received external critical affirmation.

Insights were gained that suggest creative writing can be understood as a "serious leisure" pursuit. As for many other "serious leisure" practitioners, this occupation had some characteristics of a career for participants, albeit for no significant remuneration (Stebbins, 2001). Although creative writing was a way of participants forging an identity, it did not afford "unalloyed joy" (Stebbins, 1992, p. 44); as the findings show, participants sacrificed other elements of routine, and could face periods of social isolation, negative feedback, and challenges to their sense of worth. Stebbins has suggested that people engaging in a serious leisure occupation tend to join communities of like-minded practitioners, sharing skills and confirming identity. However, the experience of acceptance and

affirmation seemed problematic to the participants in this study, perhaps because these occurrences of affirmation were only fleeting.

Certain benefits of creative writing as a leisure occupation were identified by participants that have been documented before in evaluations of other creative occupations. The intrinsic and pressing need to write that was revealed by several participants resonates with practitioners of other creative occupations such as weaving (Riley, 2008), and performance poetry (Alvarez & Mearns, 2010). In contrast to performance poetry, which was seen by some participants as "less individualistic and more generous" (Alvarez & Merans, 2010, p. 265), creative writing was often a more solitary experience with less opportunity for sharing, although when positive feedback was received this was felt to be rewarding. Similarly, Riley's study also demonstrated that being part of a community of other weavers enhanced a sense of belonging and perceptions of wellbeing, a feature that was missing for the writers in this study (Riley, 2008).

Despite its centrality to several participants' lives, this study revealed that creative writing as a serious leisure occupation does not enhance wellbeing in any straightforward way, echoing the observation of Patterson (2004). As reflected in Wilcock and Hocking (2015), the relationship between occupation, mental health and wellbeing can involve instances when health and wellbeing are potentially harmed. In particular, participants in this study expressed some dependence upon external feedback and "gatekeepers" accepting their work for publication or performance. Contrary to Wilcock and Hocking's assertion that time spent with others enhances health and wellbeing, participants in this research sometimes perceived that their creative writing skills and abilities were brought into question by others. Such vulnerability has rarely been seen in previous studies of other creative occupations such as painting or textile art, although expressed concerns with achieving an authentic writer identity have been previously noted in a writing intervention by Cooper (2013).

The term "flow" was coined by Csikszentmihalyi to describe a state entered into by a person engaged in an activity that poses a "just right" challenge which enables them to become completely absorbed in what they are doing (Csikszentmihalyi, 2008). Csikszentmihalyi posited that a person may be so absorbed in an activity that they will not be aware of their emotions, but that the completion of the activity or end of the flow experience would be greeted with a "rush of wellbeing...of satisfaction" (Csikszentmihalyi, 2008, p. 64). Flow has been associated with creative engagement in

previous studies (e.g. Borges da Costa & Cox, 2016; Griffiths, 2009). However, in the current study, flow experiences during creative writing were not universally pleasant. Becoming somewhat disconnected from the "real" world when absorbed in writing (or planning a piece of writing) and needing to pull oneself back to reality was a common experience. The conditions required for optimal flow and occupational balance have been explored by Jonsson and Persson, who suggest that a state of "bad flow" can occur if an individual concentrates solely on a chosen activity at the expense of attending to everyday activities (Jonsson & Persson, 2006). Within the context of the current study, it may be considered that generating this type of intense flow experience could place people in a vulnerable situation. Occupational experience, linked to flow, offers another way to understand the creative writing experience.

The interaction of the three dimensions of pleasure, productivity and restoration as components of occupational experience provides a way of understanding the subjective nature of occupation (Atler, 2015, Pierce, 2001, Pierce, 2003). The occupational experience of creative writing can be considered according to these three dimensions. Writing was an "in-the-moment" experience, enabling pleasure and enjoyment through a sense of creative and communicative freedom (Pierce, 2003). Productivity, and its sense of accomplishment (Pierce, 2003), was linked to the development of self-knowledge with writing often becoming intrinsic to sense of self. As a creative outlet, writing also has an inherently implied end-product (Pierce, 2001), fulfilled through participants' successful draft of or completion of a piece of writing. The writing experiences of being immersed and endeavouring to be prolific are forms of promised satisfaction gained from productivity (Pierce, 2001). Restoration, when energy is renewed (Pierce, 2003), was on occasion experienced where writing was uplifting and energising, especially through the process of receiving positive feedback. The occupational experience of creative writing can therefore be seen as incorporating all three dimensions of pleasure, productivity and restoration. There is also shared territory with Atler's (2014) position that as an occupational experience, creative writing can differ in degrees individually and between the participants, happening at various times and across different contexts. Thus, as Atler (2015) contends of occupational experience, creative writing is an idiosyncratic, interrelated and dynamic experience. Atler (2015) does however highlight that harmful aspects of occupational experience have not been explored, a potentially neglected phenomenon as indicated by the experiences of creative writing as explored in this study.

Wilcock has posited that achieving a sense of balance between doing, being, becoming and belonging through occupational participation is required in order to attain health and wellbeing (Wilcock and Hocking, 2015). The status of being a writer was deemed to be elusive and difficult to attain by some participants, resulting in a vulnerable sense of identity as a writer. Being a writer was perceived by participants as something to strive for but which may remain unachievable. As a result of this mindset, participants were placed in an awkward state of constant becoming without any certainty of being a writer, in terms of receiving acclaim from an esteemed third party. This constant becoming was sometimes manifested in patterns and routines of doing, often with the sense that the more prolific the doing the more committed and deserved the becoming.

The notion of belonging was a loaded idea for the participants. The formation of like-minded leisure communities posited by Stebbins (1992) was an experience that was not apparent for participants of this study. Indeed, the sense of isolation that could be part of the participants' creative writing was the antithesis of belonging. It may be possible to see belonging as related to a group wider than the writers, such as those with whom the writers choose to share their work. However, this was not so for the participants interviewed, despite some participants being members of a Facebook group. Belonging would suggest a relationship of being allied, akin and associated to each other as creative writers (Wilcock and Hocking, 2015). It could thus be considered that the writers' sense of being in a constant state of becoming undermined the opportunity to feel a sense of belonging; belonging to a group of writers is predicated on a confident sense of identity and feeling able to consider oneself a writer in the first place. The creative writing experience of the participants exemplifies the complex interaction of the four dimensions of doing, being, becoming and belonging and the impacts that their uneven weighting can have on an occupational experience.

Engaging in creative writing can concurrently enhance health and wellbeing and yet foster self-doubt. Sampson (2004) describes creative writing as a "celebration of individual voice, character and identity" (p. 14), but such celebration could be muted for participants unless they experienced external affirmation. This concurs with occupational science perspectives that emphasise that meaning results from transactions between person, occupation and context (Dickie, Cutchin, & Humphry, 2006). Wilcock and Hocking (2015) discuss the potential harmful effects on social health and wellbeing where the love of engaging in an occupation with compatible people is not part of the experience. For participants of this study, the love of creative writing was not shared with com-

patible people which facilitated periods of self-imposed isolation and a sense of disconnection from others. As such, it may be appreciated that creative writing as a serious leisure occupation has the potential to contain something of a "dark side" if not shared with other likeminded people and allowed to engender extended solipsistic experiences (Twinley & Addidle, 2012).

Critical evaluation

Although recruitment of an all male sample was not initially intended, the homogeneity of the group potentially enabled a more detailed analysis of convergence and divergence within the themes (Smith et al., 2009). Findings may not resonate with female creative writers; as Sudjic has posed, creative anxieties can be particularly pressing for female writers who may find value judgements placed on their work related to their gender (Sudjic, 2018). The use of Facebook as the primary source of recruitment may also have limited the possible demographics of interested participants, and the role of being part of an online group was not explored in the interview which may be considered an oversight, although was not spontaneously discussed by any of the participants. Additionally, recruitment criteria did not specify a particular level of commitment to writing or years' experience, with regard to dedication to writing as a serious leisure occupation. Overall this did not appear to be a hindrance as participants all demonstrated high levels of commitment to writing, however during data analysis Jacob's transcript was less content-rich than that of other participants, which perhaps may have been linked to less time having been spent writing.

As the first author had previously studied creative writing and engaged in this as a meaningful occupation, the research topic had personal salience. On occasion, issues raised by participants linked to the first author's previous experiences of writing and so evoked some personal responses which may have influenced the analysis. For example, the concept of the writer's identity and feedback experiences chimed with the first author's own experiences. This was advantageous in that it enabled greater natural empathy with participants, however care had to be taken not to over-identify with participants or allow these experiences to influence interpretation of the data. A reflexive journal was kept throughout in order to help separate the experiences of participants and interviewer.

Further research

Both harm and enhancements to health and wellbeing from creative writing were suggested in the current findings. The degree and impact over time, of those impacts on health and wellbeing from creative writing as an occupational experience, warrants further research. More generally, a consideration of other creative occupations as an occupational experience and impact upon health and wellbeing together with their interaction with a person's sense of identity might be conducted. Although relationships between creative occupations and identity have been considered in other studies (Howie, Coulter & Feldman, 2004; Riley, 2008; Taylor & Kay, 2013), further exploration into whether the sense of vulnerability and dependence on third party opinion is something peculiar to creative writing could be valuable. In order to obtain a fuller picture of creative writing as a serious leisure occupation, research into the experiences of female writers also deserves further study. A more detailed exploration of both the positive and negative aspects of flow in relation to creative occupations could be beneficial to consider the complexities of this type of experience. Additionally, further enquiry into the creative writing through the lens of alternative theories such as occupational balance and "dark occupations" could be beneficial (Jonsson & Persson, 2006; Twinley, 2012).

Conclusion

This study has suggested that creative writing can be a highly valued serious leisure occupation that facilitates a sense of escape from the real world and presents the opportunity to enjoy self-expression without having to comply to social constraints. Although most participants identified the importance of writing to their sense of self, doubts arose about the quality of their writing and whether they ought to call themselves a "writer". Although coping strategies were described to manage this vulnerability, participants remained sensitive to the judgments of external critics. Thus, creative writing as a serious leisure occupation manifested a "dark side" (Twinley & Addidle, 2012). Although the concept of the "dark side" of occupation has previously been used to refer to occupations felt to be meaningful to a person but socially frowned upon (e.g. hooliganism), creative writing as a serious leisure occupation carries some risks to wellbeing, given the potential for social isolation, punishing writing routines and crushing feedback. The combination of seeing creative writing as an occupational experience (Atler, 2015) and using the concepts of doing, being, becoming and belonging (Wilcock and Hocking, 2015) to identify both the enhancements to, and potential harm to, health and wellbeing through creative writing are significant and original findings.

Clearly, previous evidence suggests that creative writing offers much as a therapeutic process, but this study has offered nuanced insights into creative writing as a leisure occupation and its complex interaction with wellbeing.