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Expressive writing and telling and participatory action research: developing a relational ethics of practice for story-based interventions in crisis settings

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ABSTRACT

Recent work in Expressive Telling, an oral form of Expressive Writing, has demonstrated the usefulness of a Participatory Action Research (PAR) approach in the design of narrative therapeutic interventions in post-conflict and crisis settings. This paper outlines how a combined PAR/relational ethics approach informed a recent Expressive Telling project supporting vulnerable families in the Akkar region of Lebanon (2020–21) enabling the development of strong relational bonds among stakeholders that sustained the project in the face of Lebanon's social and economic upheaval and the COVID-19 crisis. This collaborative, iterative methodology enabled the development of thics in practice forged by attending to relationships and valuing the voices of all stakeholders, UK and Lebanon-based, through life storytelling practice, generating new knowledge and practices to meet the challenges of the crisis. This approach enabled stakeholders to jointly consider the effects of crisis settings on ethical research practice principles in wider creative narrative interventions.

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Introduction

Expressive writing is a narrative therapeutic methodology in which individuals are guided in writing out their thoughts and feelings about a stressful or troubling experience (Pennebaker & Seagall, 1999). Research with victims of traumatic events in post-conflict settings and with combat veterans has demonstrated that the process of writing down these reflections empowers survivors to detach from negative experiences by turning them into tangible, shareable stories, thus increasing their sense of well-being (Nicholls, 2009).

Since 2016, the authors have created a programme of training and materials drawing on and adapting this methodology to support fragile communities and often traumatised individuals and communities in the UK, Iraq and Lebanon (Jensen & Campbell, 2016;

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Jensen & Campbell, 2019). These projects have demonstrated the further benefits of this methodology and allied approaches such as Expressive Telling (oral life-storytelling) and interactive online Expressive Writing platforms. Participants, including survivors of sexual violence, refugee women and adolescents, patients in end-of-life care and social workers in crisis settings have reported improved coping skills, reduction in negative feelings such as anger and hopelessness, a stronger sense of well-being, and the ability to envision a better future (Jensen & Campbell, 2019).

At base, Expressive Writing and Telling (EWT) recognises the primacy of personal individual experience and provides pathways for the sharing of that experience as a form of knowledge. The ethical recognition of inequalities and power imbalances is therefore built into this project which draws upon a Participatory Action Research (PAR) model emphasising the contributions of, and action by, members of the community affected by that research. As Marja Liisa Swantz has observed, "participation and action" make "research contextual" (2008, p. 33). As such, she notes, when the "roles of the researchers and the researched" interchange across the life of a research project, "a mutual development of knowledge, and learning to understand people's problems," can take place (p. 38). Expressive Writing happens most often in a "workshop" situation, where that configuration is understood as emerging from its most established context: that of creative writing. Workshops in the creative writing arena, whether within the academy or within all sorts of community situations, have consolidated approaches to writing, and by extension *thinking* "together", with agreed ways of sharing and of in-workshop behaviours (Campbell, 2012). It's our contention that the radical levelling of such "workshops", with all voices acknowledged to be of equal importance, is mirrored in the development of our Expressive Writing programmes, where we now observe the happenings and outcomes discussed here.

This paper offers a case study of the ways in which a combined PAR/relational ethics approach has informed a recent Expressive Telling project supporting vulnerable families in the Akkar region of Lebanon across 2020 and 2021, enabling the development of strong relational bonds among all stakeholders that sustained the project in the face of Lebanon's intense social and economic upheaval and the global emergency of COVID-19. As crises escalated and pressure mounted on decision making, training and delivery, all the project stakeholders, which comprised UK based academic researchers and Lebanon-based human rights defenders, social workers and volunteer participants, asked how we could be sure that the choices we made were not only effective but ethical? Only by "Attending to relationships," to employ the term used by Field and McCloskey (2015), were we able to share expertise and generate new knowledge and new practices that met the challenges we faced. This relational ethical practice, developed via a PAR approach, enabled these stakeholders to regularly reflect on the effects of the crisis on the development of, and adherence to, ethical research and practice principles.

Ethics in practice

Mary Brydon-Miller argues that a PAR approach to the development of ethical research practice "addresses some of the ethical challenges inherent in more traditional approaches to research" as it "engages real issues and involves community partners" (2008, p. 203). Nevertheless, she observes, this approach also "generates a unique set

of concerns" as a "complex, intersecting system in which multiple stakeholders operate with sometimes competing sets of interest and moral convictions" (p. 203). One important way to mitigate these concerns is the development of a collaborative "Ethics in Practice," which, as a recent report by the British Educational Research Journal (BERJ) notes, requires "anticipating, attending to, and learning from the experience of conducting research, in parallel with following guidance articulated by institutional ethics review boards/committees (IRBs) and funders prior to research commencing" (Fox et al., 2020, p. 830). One important model for designing a collaborative, iterative approach to research ethics for our therapeutic storytelling intervention comes from the field of science.

In 1997, Celia Fisher published a paper entitled "A Relational Perspective on Ethics-In-Science Decision making for Research with Vulnerable Populations." In it, Fisher argues that "guidelines designed to protect vulnerable children and adults" can "inadvertently create institutional obstacles that limit participants' autonomy" (p. 1). In Fisher's view, therefore, it was vital to "facilitate collaborations" between researchers and their (often vulnerable) subjects to construct "the best ethical procedures possible within each unique research context" (p. 1). This "Justice-Care" perspective draws on a relational ethics model aligned with the Aristotelian concept of Phronesis – the practical wisdom that comes with direct experience (Hodgetts et al., 2022, p. 1981) and is in keeping with a "tradition of thought" exemplified in the works of Martin Buber and Emmanuel Kant concerning the "quality of the connections that people form with one another" (Frosh, 2011, p. 225). As Fisher explains, such an approach "emphasizes moral agency" by drawing on "principles of mutual respect, beneficence, and fairness," and the "duty to interact with research participants on their own terms" (p. 3). Indeed, as Hopner and Liu have shown, this ethical-relational perspective brings all stakeholders into meaningful and generative dialogue in which knowledge is collaboratively produced and thus "requires scholars to strive to ensure that persons, communities and agencies with whom they work benefit from their scholarly activities" (2021, p. 180). By paying close attention to how and why knowledge is produced and how it is acted upon through a relational ethic of respect and responsibility, researchers can also learn about research participants' own moral perspectives and guidelines, thus adding a further dimension to the researcher-subject relationship and to the ethical frameworks of the research itself (Fisher, 1997).

Many contemporary institutional ethical guidelines for working with vulnerable subjects draw on precisely this kind of relational ethics perspective. British Educational Research Association (BERA) for example, notes that researchers should "operate within an ethic of respect for any persons – including themselves – involved in or touched by the research they are undertaking" (2018, p. 8). They further remind researchers to "be mindful of the ways in which structural inequalities – those, for example, associated with 'race', gender, LBGT + issues and socio-economic status – affect all social relationships, including those that are formed in the course of research" (2018, p. 8). Researchers, they conclude, should also reflect on how best to "balance maximising the benefits" of their work while "minimising any risk or harm" (2018, p. 8). The International Association for the Study of Forced Migration's (IASFM) own Code of Ethics was of particular interest to the development of our project that aimed to support both impoverished Lebanese and Syrian refugee women in Lebanon. These IASFM guidelines suggest that attention be paid to avoid directly or indirectly retraumatizing or contributing to

"racism, xenophobia and the criminalization" against potentially vulnerable people (2019, p. 2). The need for such advice highlights "the importance of attending to relationships" (Field & McCloskey, 2015) and listening to participants as we attempted to respond to challenges and opportunities in a fast-moving crisis environment.

Ethics in crisis

Recent research on the ethics of humanitarian interventions in crisis settings illustrates that such initiatives are not only more vulnerable to the challenges of all work involving human subjects (difficulty obtaining informed consent, safety concerns, confidentiality breaches, systemic power imbalances, etc) but are also confronted with risks specific to the context of crisis itself. A 2017 study examined the specific anticipatable ethical challenges that may attend crisis settings, while also noting that many risks will, by definition, remain unforeseeable (Sandvik et al., 2017). The pressure to act in such environments, this report argues, may result in "insufficient training, development or dissemination of materials, weak or insufficient translation, incomplete or not fully understood rights of beneficiaries to consent, right to withdraw and self-determination" (2017, p. 237). By appearing to demand immediate, decisive action, crisis settings and emergency contexts may exacerbate unpredictability and weaken adherence to time-consuming risk-limiting processes and procedures.

The fragile and often resource-poor contexts in which humanitarian interventions take place, can also give rise to cost-effective innovation and experimental approaches. These may, however, compound the risks of insecurity in both environment and methodology. Experimental approaches require more structured monitoring processes, including the production of a thorough risk matrix. Researchers and practitioners must ask themselves if their innovations conform fully to humanitarian principles. The IASFM Code of Ethics urges that careful ethical planning take place before any intervention is undertaken in fragile contexts (2019, p. 1) while BERA recommends that researchers develop a risk-benefit analysis, beginning at the earliest stage of research planning (2018, p. 5). In these ways and others, the ideas of "emergency" and "crisis" impose a particular moral orientation to a given context, shaping the speed and scope of actions while also affecting ideas of acceptable risk (Buckley & Decter, 2006, p. 6). Emergency and crisis emphasise unpredictability and seem to necessitate and therefore justify immediate response and intervention (Buckley & Decter, 2006). In such environments, therefore, the physical and emotional safety of all participants – from researchers to rights practitioners to beneficiaries, must be weighed carefully against any proposed gains or potential knowledge: in a pressure-filled context all stakeholders must guard against the implicit license to use short cuts, to bypass so-called red-tape or rely on lesser standards during the project's development, deployment and post-delivery evaluation. To illustrate the ways in which crisis and emergency settings impacted on the authors' own story-telling based therapeutic interventions, and how a PAR approach highlighting a relational ethic of respect and collaboration mitigated those impacts, the next section sets out the materials and methods used in the AHRC-GCRF funded research project: *Expressive Life Writing and Telling (ELW) During Crisis: Addressing Urgent Needs in the Akkar Valley, Lebanon* across 2020 and 2021.

Materials and methods

Expressive writing and telling (EWT)

Previous EWT projects have demonstrated that one important route to supporting agency for individuals is to enable them to construct life narratives that can help make narrative meaning out of painful events, rather than simply recounting them for the purposes of documentation, data collection or research (Jensen & Campbell, 2016; Jensen & Campbell, 2019). As that research has shown, the construction of such meaningful life narratives allows for the restructuring of traumatic memories and desensitisation to trauma triggers, thus supporting recovery and future growth. The EWT methodology uses a range of story-telling exercises designed to encourage participants to reflect on their life experiences. The starting exercises establish a rapport between the facilitator and the participants while encouraging associative thinking, and later ones develop trust with both facilitator and process and enable participants to begin constructing, and thereby, valuing, their own story.

Typically, participants are led through a series of between 8 and 10 face to face workshops completing sequential exercises across three Units, designed to increase their ability to identify and describe feelings and experiences. Unit 1 systematically inducts the participant into ways of approaching Expressive Writing/Telling. Unit 2 encourages writing that bridges the past into the present and Unit 3 moves more explicitly towards identity and feelings, allowing for a fuller whole-life narrative to be expressed (Jensen & Campbell, 2016). It is important to note however, that the precise wording, sequencing and delivery of these exercises, as well as the training protocols for facilitators, have been jointly designed and adapted in each of our previous research projects. This collaborative, iterative approach to the production of bespoke EWT materials ensures all stakeholders, from the academic researchers to the social workers to the volunteer participants, provide valuable input. Our most recent project in Lebanon likewise began with a collaborative analysis of the needs of all stakeholders that set out an ethics of mutual respect to increase the potential benefits of our joint research and to reduce any potential risks.

Expressive life writing and telling (ELW) during crisis

This EWT project was led by Siobhan Campbell of the Open University (PI) and Meg Jensen of Kingston University (Co-I) in collaboration with a team of social workers, psychologists, and rights defenders from two NGOs – Akkar Network for Development (AND) and, later, SHiFT International, both based in Lebanon. AND offers a range of free to access programmes to support vulnerable Lebanese and Syrian refugee individuals and families they refer to as their "clients." SHiFT is a social innovation hub for social transformation in the North of Lebanon, currently concentrating on soft skills and vocational training for young people at risk in this region. The EWT project itself drew on previous research by Jensen and Campbell that demonstrated how Expressive Life Writing and Telling (EWT) can support vulnerable communities during periods of relative stability (Jensen & Campbell, 2016; Jensen & Campbell, 2019). During the COVID-19 pandemic, however, we set out to test this methodology in a fast-evolving crisis situation in which access to support and services for vulnerable individuals was likely restricted by quarantine or

security considerations. Further local concerns were outlined in the Plan International Lebanon Needs Assessment of April 2020, which found 63% of caregivers (Lebanese and Syrian) did not have enough food to last two weeks, 36% of Syrian caregivers had housing debt with 25% in danger of eviction, 53% of female respondents and 66% of adolescent girls did not have the means to buy menstrual pads, and 65% of Syrian and 27% of Lebanese respondents did not have hygiene and disinfection supplies at home (Plan, 2020).

Together, Campbell, Jensen and representatives of both AND and SHiFT designed a programme to capture our decision-making processes and create an operational model of EWT that could be deployed effectively within other vulnerable communities in the future. We set out to reflect on logistical and communication difficulties necessitated by worldwide pandemic travel restrictions and infrastructure breakdown in Lebanon, track our responses to the foreseeable negative impacts the crisis setting might have on our adherence to standard institutional codes of ethics in practice, and record our PAR-based collaborative responses to any impacts we did not anticipate.

Practice-Based research ethics approach

Many researchers view PAR as the best way to mitigate the challenges of working in so-called "fragile contexts" with inherently complex, vulnerable communities (Fox et al., 2020, p. 830). Contexts of fragility tend to arise from three key conditions: the unequal distribution of resources and social goods; systemic and interpersonal discrimination and a lack of self-determination (Fox et al., 2020, p. 830). Research and humanitarian interventions undertaken in such contexts risk exacerbating pre-existing inequalities: unequal power relations may arise between the researchers, practitioner-social workers and members of vulnerable populations. In our project, the precarity of the situation for the NGOs' clients would make it difficult to obtain their fully informed and free consent to participating in a research project, or lead clients to see the social workers/researchers as "gatekeepers" to other urgently required services. To help address and ameliorate these imbalances to some extent, our project aimed to forefront the PAR approach inherent in the relational underpinnings of EWT.

PAR may be understood as not only an effective research methodology, but also a "form of morally committed action" (McNiff et al., 1996, p. 3). As Grant, Nelson and Mitchell have suggested, this implicit relationship between PAR and ethics arises because at base, PAR is "concerned with oppressed communities and attempts to create action as a catalyst for social change" (2008, p. 589). This methodology sets out to "address power imbalances and oppressive social structures" so that "the 'researched' community" is "a vital part of the research project and its members experts of their own experiences" (p. 589). The key goal of PAR is to enable capacity-building within the researched community through "a cyclical" and "iterative" process of "research, learning and action," in which the foundation is "relationships of mutual trust" (Grant et al., 2008, pp. 590–591). Those reflections and actions, moreover, must themselves be informed by a collaboratively developed ethics in practice. Within these processes, it's possible to see the connection between participation and in-workshop action (embedded in writing, thinking and sharing together), and onward "action" where the outcomes of working in these ways are inflected by the workshop experience and the ethics in practice which it develops.

Three elements of ethical practice

Institutionally funded research projects involving human subjects undergo scrutiny by research and/or practice-based ethics committees, national ethics guidelines and/or funders ethics review boards. In terms of humanitarian interventions, the guiding principles of ethical practice shared by such groups are articulated in many ways, but cluster around three basic concerns (adapted from Sandvik et al., 2017).

- That the form of humanitarian assistance provided may not further expose people to physical hazards, violence or other rights abuse (do no harm)
- That assistance and protection efforts may not undermine the affected population's capacity for self-protection (self-determination, informed consent)
- That humanitarian agencies manage sensitive information in a way that does not jeopardise the security of the informants or those who may be identifiable from the information (confidentiality and privacy)

The first of these, "do no harm," is derived from the arena of bio-medical ethics. In humanitarian interventions, this principle compels researchers and practitioners to define and evaluate explicitly the potential risks of a proposed intervention and provide mechanisms for accountability (Sandvik et al., 2017, p. 343). Moreover, as scholarship in vulnerable communities often disproportionately benefits researchers rather than the researched, doing no harm also requires "proactively prioritizing the dignity, safety and well-being" of participants (Sandvik et al., 2017, p. 343).

The second key principle: self-determination and *informed consent* should guide the process by which a potential research participant receives information on the potential risks and benefits of participation. Guidelines from BERA suggest that "researchers and participants should negotiate consent within relationships of mutual trust," that rely upon "the integrity and trustworthiness of the researcher" (2018, p. 10). That reliance can itself bring about imbalances, misunderstandings and risks. As the IASFM Code of Ethics warns, for example, "voluntary, informed consent can be challenging to obtain" in humanitarian contexts precisely because of "unequal power relations and dependence on service providers" and the complex and legalistic language of consent forms (2019, p. 2). These standardised and often lengthy documents can, the IASFM argues, wrongly "evoke hope as well as fears and anxiety among participants" who may inadvertently connect research consent requests with legal procedures such as asylum claims or access to services or shelter (2019, p. 2). A well-intentioned researcher can explain that the two are not connected, but the participant may believe that failing to consent will lead them to deportation, or being turned away from vital services.

Once consent is granted, moreover, researchers also need to ensure that participants are adequately informed about how the data they have helped to generate will be used and stored when the research period is completed. Our team, for example, decided to produce a post-research toolkit to be shared with the NGOs and their client-participants that will update them on the project's outcomes and related research projects. The BERA guidelines offer further suggestions for researchers engaged in interventions that involve story-telling and/or working in translation – both of which were factors in our 2021 project in Lebanon. Such researchers they note, should "consider the effects of translation

and/or interpretation on participants' understandings of what is involved in the research" and, if using "auto/biographical approaches and autoethnography" reflect on "how their work implicates other people, and what the consequences" of such implications might be (2018, p. 11, 14).

The final key ethical principle for humanitarian interventions is that of *confidentiality and privacy* – which, as the IASFM argues, is "particularly important where the immigration status, liberty and safety of participants" might be "jeopardized by research findings" (2019, p. 2). Methods for data collection, digitised or otherwise, must be scrupulously monitored to ensure sufficient confidentiality. For our project, confidential disclosure and informed consent were to be directly affected by the pandemic: the necessity of on-phone rather than face to face delivery lead to potential privacy issues if participants were overheard, and consent recorded orally rather than written down. Further, AND case workers found it difficult to determine whether or not a client/participant was safe, alone, and in no distress when working with them via WhatsApp/phone. And as the project developed, we all found that the setting of economic and pandemic crisis further exacerbated the ethical challenges of an already fragile context. We also discovered, however, that the PAR underpinnings of Expressive Writing and Telling (EWT) methodology provided a basis from which to meet those challenges.

Results

As noted, the 2021 EWT project was developed via a PAR approach that relied on ongoing discussions between the co-researchers and practitioners in Lebanon and the UK, engaging in an iterative process of regular online "Joint Analysis Workshops," or JAW. These were conducted using the key workshop principle of all attendees' voices being equally valued, and practically, conveyed via simultaneous translation. The JAW meetings enabled all members of the team to debate research questions and propose methods, to raise concerns, challenges and opportunities, and offer potential solutions. The initial three-day JAW established the parameters of the crisis and the potential to adapt the previously tested face-to-face provision of Expressive Writing and Telling (EWT) as a psychosocial support in this crisis context. Our NGO partners AND and SHiFT participated in a risk-benefit analysis and together we discussed our various national, institutional and professional guidelines for ethical best practice in humanitarian interventions, alongside recent research ethics findings regarding such work in crisis contexts. The aim was to ensure that all collaborators kept potential ethical concerns and safety risks at the forefront of their thinking. Following this discussion, we jointly established a mutually agreed set of protocols – an Ethics in Practice for addressing and mitigating risk of physical or moral injury.

Further JAW sessions were held across the sixteen-month project, continuing this process of knowledge generation via debate, discussion and analysis of iterative practice. Research-practitioners from AND and later SHiFT regularly updated the academic researchers with real-time findings on the effectiveness of new crisis-necessitated forms of delivery of EWT. As the NGO teams were no longer able to deliver EWT in person, Campbell and Jensen needed to quickly adapt materials for telephone and WhatsApp delivery while still adhering to our Ethics in Practice guidelines. To ensure this adherence, we relied on regular discussion and feedback with the NGO social workers, and soon the adapted

EWT curriculum led to the training of more social workers at AND and SHiFT in these new forms of EWT and a complete set of ethical working practices delivery EWT in crisis settings. Twelve of those trained at AND then delivered the adapted EWT to 50 beneficiary groups of impoverished Lebanese and Syrian refugee women across Northern Lebanon. When a further JAW discussion identified an urgent need for an adapted curriculum for vulnerable adolescents, that material was also collaboratively developed and four social workers at SHiFT were trained and consequently delivered a pilot of EWT Youth Curriculum to sixty-five vulnerable adolescents in Tripoli. The regularity of our discussions and ongoing feedback enabled the academic researchers to make immediate adjustments to EWT materials where necessary, and for all involved to jointly assess and find solutions to ethical challenges in a time-sensitive manner.

In response to questionnaires completed by AND social workers drawing on their client reports both before and after the delivery of EWT, remotely delivered Expressive Telling in Crisis elicited the following impacts.

ANDs' clients:

- spoke more about actual difficulties, staying longer with the social worker, therefore enabling better provision of care
- offered more detail about their day-to-day challenges, enabling social workers to identify possible Gender Based Violence issues, and other issues of safety within the home
- made further follow-on appointments more readily. 80% of clients reported that they enjoyed the Expressive Telling, saying that they would like to "do it again" and that they "felt calmer", or "felt more supported" and "felt more able to cope."

Questionnaires completed by the adolescents participating in the SHiFT Youth Curriculum pilot reported the following:

- 19% improvement in beneficiaries' ability to feel confident in talking and expressing their opinion
- 27% improvement in their ability to "determine what to do in their spare time"
- 35% improvement in their self-worth
- 27% improvement in their feelings of helplessness; and a marked improvement in ability to regulate feelings
- 34% improvement in their anger/temper
- 24% improvement in their feelings of sadness. (Impact project site)

These results indicate the effectiveness of adapted EWT in increasing well-being and supporting engagement with further vital services for these vulnerable populations in the crisis context. The authors posit that these positive outcomes are not solely based on the training and evidence-based EWT materials delivered. While the PAR-informed JAW methodology used in this project was time-consuming, at times digressive, repetitive, or inconclusive, and often beset with technical difficulties, such issues, we found, were a vital part of the successful overall outcomes in this crisis setting. Attending to our relationships by avoiding pre-agreed agendas led by the needs of the academic researchers allowed for the building of trust within a context of mutual respect. This PAR approach enabled the development of our Ethics in Practice framework for responding to practical

concerns as they arose. One valuable and unexpected insight emerging from a JAW in 2021, for example, was the potential usefulness of EWT for a population that the AND programme director identified as particularly vulnerable during the pandemic: front line social workers. One of the AND team outlined to the JAW the difficulty of their day-to-day work and the hazards of regularly listening to the hardships of their clients. Those encounters could be deeply unsettling, she noted, creating "some tension, some anxiety". Although "we like our work," another social worker added, "we think of those problems, even after the sessions". While the NGO social workers had always seen themselves as "experts working in a state of emergency," new difficulties arose when the pandemic brought about not only new "professional pressures," but also "pressures in our own homes, dealing with our own problems with our own children". These working women often found it "difficult to find spare time for ourselves". An adapted form of the EWT method, they believed, would be a great support to staff affected by such concerns.

Several recent studies have corroborated aspects of those findings. One paper published in 2019 looked at the mental health outcomes of health care workers exposed to COVID-19 in China and recorded a marked increase in feelings of isolation and despair among this group (Jianbo et al., 2020), while an earlier study of caregivers in cancer wards demonstrated that Expressive Writing supported their mental well-being (Leung et al., 2018). That earlier study also found, however, that while the caregivers began Expressive Writing programmes enthusiastically, lack of time meant their overall completion rate was low. The study concluded that future interventions should offer Expressive Writing online (Leung et al., 2018). As the COVID-19 crisis worsened and the economic and social situation in Lebanon grew more urgent, the team discussed these findings and suggested potential solutions, including the need to quickly develop a shortened, online/telephone/digitally accessible format of the EWT exercises for use by those caseworkers and, perhaps, their clients too. And while the AND social workers agreed that EWT "should be implemented in their team," they were equally adamant that for ethical reasons any such undertaking should be managed "from outside AND" so that the staff members would be able to express themselves in confidence. Interactions like these further highlight the value of relationship-building to support ethical practice within and across all stakeholders working in fragile contexts.

Establishing trust, moving forward

Much of the project's approach to ensuring adherence to our collaboratively devised Ethics in Practice and successfully adapting the delivery of the EWT curriculum in the crisis context has to do with thoughtful flexibility. "At first," as one social worker noted, "the pandemic faced us with a lot of challenges, but it was also an opportunity to boost the level of communication in other ways" (Quotations are from the Joint Analysis Workshop or JAW, of 2021). The key Expressive Writing and Telling methodology of intentional listening was useful not only as a supportive technique for delivering the EWT curriculum, but also as a way to build trust with clients more generally. Previously, one social worker said, some clients struggled to accept "what led them to their situation," but EWT helped them contextualise and express both the good and bad moments in the past and "as a

result" were able to move towards "safety and action plans," crafting "life plans" via their storytelling, for the future.

For some clients, EWT allowed for the release of "psychological pressure" allowing them to "talk to us and relieve what they have inside of them". We heard of one women's disappointment at having to cancel a session because she had previously found the curriculum so beneficial and another who at first "didn't see anything positive in her life" but after EWT was able to identify people to support her in "hard times". The specific value of the Expressive *Telling* approach rather than Expressive *Writing* which the academic researchers and the AND team had used in previous research projects was also discussed. Expressive Telling, as one social worker explained, supports people "who cannot write, are illiterate or for whatever reason, prefer to orally tell their story". As the client speaks, the social worker writes down their stories and gives those clients "a chance to tell us everything and have it read back to them, after which they begin to feel relaxed. They feel very good". This observation supports earlier findings which demonstrated that the expression and repetition of difficult memories and emotions using the imaginative storytelling approaches of EWT helps individuals to usefully detach from those memories and emotions (Hunt, 2010; Hunt, 2020; Nicholls, 2009; Pennebaker & Seagall, 1999). EWT, the social workers reported, not only aids with this detachment, it also enables clients to establish targets and goals for the future. As one AND staff member put it, she is "not going to be there forever," so her clients "have to have the power to be able to cope and live and continue," and EWT has enabled the development of precisely that power.

Discussion

Crisis and emergency contexts can convince us that we are solely responsible for the health and well-being of others and that we must, therefore, prioritise urgent response over careful planning. In our JAW discussions all the members of our project team acknowledged having just such feelings from time to time. In the context of crisis, however, it is ethically vital to reflect on the ways in which such pressures can affect our methodologies and safety procedures, and the potential ramifications on all involved. As we have also seen, however, it is precisely by "attending to relationships" with fellow researchers, practitioners and client/beneficiaries that experimental, innovative humanitarian interventions can be safely structured, adapted and delivered (Fox et al., 2020). Ways forward to ensure such collaboration in the future might include co-designing initiatives with beneficiaries that can then be used to support others in similarly fragile contexts, and researchers and collaborators actively seeking to share experiences via writing and telling, and finally, sharing data, monitoring and evaluation in order to avoid over-researching an already at-risk population (Fox et al., 2020, p. 849).

The first and most pressing of these relationship-building activities, we found, is what one 2020 study described as a bottom-up approach to "developing ethical guidelines which advocate flexible, collaborative and informed ethical appraisal" (Fox et al., 2020, p. 849). As our NGO collaborators' post-project reporting demonstrated, our joint adaptations of the EWT curriculum for crisis settings helped client/beneficiaries in the ways we have observed before crisis: to effectively reflect upon (via shared writing or

telling), and to thereby detach from, painful experiences in the past and present. The ongoing testing of adapted materials for the social workers themselves will, we hope, help cascade EWTs benefits to this newly vulnerable group. This combination of support through storytelling and the strengthening of self-reliance conducted within an ethical context that pays attention to very real imbalances of power, is aimed at allowing all beneficiaries to develop new understandings of themselves as powerful agents in the healing of themselves and their communities.

In the context of crisis, the adapted methodology of Expressive Telling via Whatsapp, telephone and other web-based means has offered flexible solutions. It has also provided a practical example of how researchers and practitioners can design and adhere to key ethical principles, by supporting trust-building among collaborators that leads to the development and deployment of more effective forms of ethical practice. This iterative collaboration-informed methodology further helps in the development of risk matrices and needs assessments as improved lines of communication lead to information being more readily accessed and shared among all stakeholders, thus lessening the potential for harmful outcomes. Valuing the needs of all stakeholders, our project aimed for each individual involved to benefit from a positive humanitarian intervention in a crisis. And while information sharing is central to our collaborative practice, our ongoing discussions of ethical principles helped to repeatedly emphasise the importance of ethical best practice in fragile contexts. By "attending to relationships" in ways informed by Expressive Writing practice, we have developed and adhered to our Ethics in Practice in a crisis setting, and identified flexibility, respect and collaboration as its core principles.

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