

Writer's Block: a reflective literature review

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Abstract

For a significant proportion of therapists, the mere thought of writing up research academically and then perhaps striving to publish any writings is anxiety provoking. These therapists may be suffering from 'Writer's Block' – a process, I suggest, that gets in the way of meaningful and relevant research being completed by practitioners which could help inform and develop our way of working. Through this review of the literature on Writer's Block, intertwined by personal reflections on my own experience, I aim to explore possible causes and offer some tentative solutions.

Introduction

Finlay and Evans (2009) suggest that there is a 'chasm' between research and clinical-practice in psychotherapy and counselling because some therapists lack the confidence to embark on enquiries which would further the skills and knowledge base of the profession. My article takes as its premise that what holds a significant proportion of therapists back is the mere thought of writing up their project, especially the production of a published piece which would allow others to benefit from what they have done (Boice and Jones, 1984). I am suggesting that they are suffering from Writer's Block and this is getting in the way of meaningful and relevant research being completed by practitioners which could help inform and develop our way of working.

Quatman (1971) describes the misery of Writer's Block:

There are many things that are important to me that I would like to express and share in writing and somehow, through the years, I have failed to do so. In my feeling, it is like a stone wall that I cannot penetrate. And this is a particularly frustrating and painful experience. (1971, p.53)

However, he too emphasises that this is not just an individual's loss, there is also:

The enormous waste of the creative experiences and energies of thousands of psychotherapists...[causing]...inestimable damage to psychotherapeutic progress in general through the failure, on the part of blocked psychotherapists, to communicate in writing their vital new ideas, developments and discoveries. (1971, p.54)

This theme is taken up by Finlay (2011 *forthcoming*) when she says that the lack of published research from certain quarters of the profession "spearheads policy with pernicious effects: cheaper, quick-fix behavioural answers are favoured rather than longer-term explorations of existential struggle."

So Writer's Block is real, it has negative consequences for the person suffering it, as well as for professional development and, ultimately, society. Through this review of the literature on Writer's Block, intertwined by reflections on my own experience, I aim to explore possible causes and offer some tentative solutions.

Personally speaking

Interesting that as I begin an article about Writer's Block, I am struck by my own version of it. That nagging voice which says, "What have I got to say?" And then adds the turn of the screw, "Will it be good enough?" Which translates neatly into, "Will I be good enough, ever?"

I am used to these lurches which sometimes set me off kilter when I sit down to write. I have grafted to diminish them and their effects and have strategies to endeavour to circumvent them. (Pause, as I notice I have actually typed 'circumvent me' at the end of the last sentence, which is perhaps equally so.) More about my tactics later, suffice to note, I am not immune to the affliction we have called Writer's Block.

I know that I am not alone. I was a writer before I ever embarked on becoming a counsellor or ever defined myself as a researcher. Many a time I have encountered people who appeared to have the desire to write a story, a memoir, a poem, and who never got going on it or who started and did not complete. During my counselling training, colleagues talked about the difficulty they had with essays. They had the content in their heads, yet were unable to transfer it onto paper. One said she had to "nail herself down" to get it done, which not only struck me as being incredibly painful, but also made me think of someone being crucified. More recently, I have heard fellow therapists talk eruditely and compellingly about the research they are doing, then witnessed them struggling with even the idea of writing an article.

While drafting and researching this piece, I found myself wearing two hats, that of counsellor and that of writer. For me, the two are complementary and rub along fine in my way of being. On the other hand, I am aware of what it took for me to 'come out' as a writer and that many of my colleagues see being a writer as something alien to them. This has led me to consider how significant is how significant the identity of being a 'writer' is within an exploration.

Some possible causes

Johnstone (1983) continues with the idea that the condition is serious in the very title of her article: 'The Writer's Hell'; stating that "...Writer's Blocks can be accompanied by agonizing feelings of incompetence, anxiety, paralysis or self-doubt" (1983, p.155). In her review of the literature she identifies four elements to the problem:

- the cognitive
- the affective
- the environmental
- the physical restrictions on the writer's hand.

She spends very little time on the fourth, except to wonder whether a corporeal seizing up may also have an emotional or psychological root.

In the cognitive approach, Johnstone is joined by Huston (1998) who describes it as a right brain-left brain conflict, where the creative need to explore, take flight and have permission to be wrong, clashes with a need for rules, logic and technique. Huston links this with the unattainable expectation to be perfect first time.

I have come across this with participants in the writing groups I facilitate, a particularly over-concern with how the words and ideas initially appear on the paper. I have described this as trying to drive forwards in reverse gear. I encourage messiness through free writing (Evans 2009; Goldberg 1986), using the image of the potter getting the clay out onto the wheel. The words we are throwing any old how onto the paper are the raw materials, the crafting comes later.

Delving into the affective sphere, Quaytman (1971, p.56) talks about the anxieties attached to the belief in the “irreversibility of the printed word”. Johnstone (1983) cites the real or perceived expectations of others; the fear; the shame; and the guilt (of getting it wrong, of putting oneself forwards, of not being good enough) especially when tackling subjects considered taboo in the writer’s childhood. She states:

Like apprehension that one’s writing is ‘never good enough,’ a guilty sense that one is appropriating an unearned authority may also diminish incentive and some confidence in some writers. ... A writing block prompted by apprehension or guilt may appear as ‘perfectionism’ or ‘premature editing,’ or it may lead to avoiding writing altogether – procrastinating. The writer who fears he sic ‘doesn’t know enough yet’ may protect himself against fear of not knowing enough or having enough to say by drawing out preparations – taking more and more notes, for example – until a research project has so grown in scope that the writer feels inadequate to taking it on. (1983, pp.159-160)

Jones (1975, p.415) also tackles procrastination caused by grandiosity and discounting.

The grandiose expectations function as a ‘Be perfect’ driver analogous to an automatic hydraulic lift which constantly raises demands. As long as the individual procrastinates, the vaguely described project grows. While the project multiplies itself, the potential writer feels smaller and smaller, i.e. he (sic) discounts his or her adequacy.

Finally, Johnstone tackles the environmental factors which may be at play. As Schiff (1985) also suggests, there is the immediate physical setting in which the writing is taking place. Is it comfortable? Does it feel safe? Can the writer make changes to it if they please? Johnstone also comments on socio-cultural conditions, for instance, considering how the demands of child-rearing, domestic roles and the a scarcity of role models sometimes lessen both aspiration and productivity. In addition, Boice and Jones (1984) observe that certain exclusionary factors in the reviewing and publishing procedure might put certain writers off, especially minority and female academicians. They note particularly the “Matthew Effect (Matt. 25:29 ‘For unto everyone that hath, more shall be given...’, or the tendency for those who are already established to reap more citations and recognition from others who publish associated work.” (1984, p.571). However, Kaufman (2002) suggests that the internal variables – the cognitive and affective as detailed above - are more important than the external, and Boice and Jones appear to back up that point of view.

Switching hats, I find story tellers and poets paralleling some of the above when they talk about Writer’s Block. Bolton (1999) lists many of the same undermining thought processes as Johnstone. She suggests ‘beginner’ writers will be hampered by downgrading and rubbishing their thoughts:

Only the big thinkers – philosophers, mystics etc. – or those with literary genius have the right to express themselves in writing, we think. You imagine that writing should have a proper form and contain only sensible, thought-out ideas in logical progression. This is what we were taught at school or college. ... The ghosts of those teachers are still at our elbows, criticising. (1999, p.34)

In an interview, novelist (the late) Beryl Bainbridge is described as having writers’ block (Taylor 2003, p.14). The article quotes Bainbridge: “I can’t go on to the next line until the previous one is perfect.” And Taylor comments, “She seems rather proud of this fact, as though such a level of perfectionism is a virtue.”

Bainbridge wrote a score or more of books, so she had obviously made this ‘method’ work for her. However, in my opinion, this level of perfectionism is far from a virtue in creative writing, more the slayer of it.

Too close for comfort

An issue involving affect, not mentioned by Johnstone, is: What if the material being considered is emotionally impactful for the writer, perhaps because it is close to them personally? Poet Penelope Shuttle (2007) talks about feeling blocked when she was bereaved. In her case,

Time and therapy got me out of it. I started to write again slowly, at first writing bad, cathartic, unpublishable poems. Now I'm writing steadily again. Poetry is a healing process. (2007, p.28)

Researchers are often drawn to subjects because of their own experiences (Finlay and Evans 2009). Furthermore, therapists turning to research, with their capacity for attunement and empathy, are surely likely to be touched by what they explore, especially if choosing a relational, qualitative methodology. And in being impacted, there is, in my experience, concerns around doing justice to our research 'subjects' and not betraying their trust (Evans, 2010).

Writing is, as Quatman (1971, p.55) suggests, a "special type of ego activity which stirs up feelings of threat at a much deeper unconscious level." So the emotional connection and, perhaps, distress, shaken up by our research is likely to be heightened in the act of writing down. Maybe, it is not so surprising many of my colleagues avoid that step.

I am a writer

Huston (1998) advises that not being able to identify oneself as a writer – what she calls the 'imposter syndrome' – is a block to getting on and doing it. On the other hand, defining oneself as a writer may also be fraught and give rise to a mass of mixed feelings.

There was something daring for me about beginning to call myself 'a writer'. There's a certain amount of arrogance in thinking that anyone might want to read what I have scrawled down, as well as the expectations of others to contend with – "oh how *many* novels have you *published*?" was the frequently received response to my tentative admission. And then there was the shame of having to admit, well, none, and the uncomprehending look which to me said, "So by what right do you say you are a writer?"

Atwood (2003, pp.13,23) describes her own conversion to what she calls the "dark art" thus:

I wrote a poem in my head and then I wrote it down, and after that writing was the only thing I wanted to do. ... I wasn't old enough to be at all self-conscious about what had just happened to me. If I'd read more about writers' lives, or indeed anything at all about them, I would have concealed the shameful transformation that had just taken place in me. Instead I announced it, much to the shock of the group of girls with whom I ate my paper-bag lunches in the high-school cafeteria. One of them has since told me that she thought I was very brave to just *come out* with something like that; she thought I had a lot of nerve. In truth I was simply ignorant. ...

A lot of people do have a book in them ... But this is not the same as "being a writer." Or, to put it in a more sinister way: everyone can dig a hole in a cemetery, but not everyone is a grave-digger. The latter takes a good deal more stamina and persistence. It is also, because of the nature of the activity, a deeply symbolic role. As a grave-digger, you are not just a person who excavates. You carry upon your shoulders the weight of other people's projections, of their fears and fantasies and anxieties and superstitions...

Accepting the mantle of "writer" is not, therefore, a straightforward process. It may, in itself, be blocking, if it is accompanied by too many expectations – our own, and those perceived in, or received from, others.

Shame

Writing, however, academic it might be, is inherently revealing of our selves, it is “exposing” (Quatman 1971, p.56). We are holding a part of who we are up for public scrutiny and giving others (who may never have put their words on the line) the power to shoot us down. This is more frightening and potentially damaging if we have a lot to lose, for instance in terms of professional reputation, or if the subject matter is close to our hearts.

To be on show, and, therefore, open to the (supposed or real) judgement of others, also increases the potential for shame.

To feel shame is to feel *seen* in a painfully diminished sense. This feeling of exposure constitutes an essential aspect of shame. Whether all eyes are upon me or only my own, I feel deficient in some vital way as a human being. And in the midst of shame, an urgent need to escape or hide may come upon us. (Kaufman, 1992, p.xxi)

Kaufman (1992) and others (such as DeYoung 2003, Yontef 1993) suggest that shame is created through a process of negative re-enforcements during childhood. This becomes so internalized that the desperately painful feeling of self-consciousness, of wanting to evaporate, feels normal. By then, an individual will expect any notice given to them to be inevitably critical. Praise is not possible. And any given will often be misinterpreted to fit with the shame imperative.

After internalization, exposure itself takes on a much more devastating meaning. Exposure now means exposure of one’s inherent defectiveness as a human being. To be seen is to be seen as irreparably and unspeakably bad. (Kaufman, 1992, p.75)

Furthermore, Kaufman (1992, p.32) describes ‘our’ (contemporary Anglo-American) culture as a “shame-based culture” created by the injunctions to succeed and be popular and conform. We have already seen how the ‘be perfect’ imperative is a block to writing and this, according to Kaufman, is ingrained in the very fabric of our culture. She goes on:

Being *different* from others becomes shameful. To avoid shame, one must avoid being different, or *seen* as different. The awareness of difference itself translates into feeling lesser, deficient.’ (1992, p.32)

As we have already said, writing something down is being seen, it is making ourselves visible, literally in black on white. And, I would want to add, writing something meaningful, something that comes from what is uniquely oneself, is risking revealing our difference.

In some ways, it is a viciously circling and self-fulfilling process. The fewer therapists who do write, the more ‘different’ are those who dare to put pen to paper - or fingertip to keyboard - and, therefore, the more potentially shaming the experience for them.

Tackling Writer’s Block

The creative process

Csikszentmihalyi (1996) identifies a number of aspects which are necessary for someone to be ‘a writer’ – talent, skills, motivation. Motivation is developed and maintained because writers are able to submerge themselves into what Csikszentmihalyi describes as ‘flow’. Flow is associated with pleasure, it

is a state of absorption in which real time has little meaning. Writers keep going by connecting with their task as an enjoyable, playful, flow activity, perhaps not words normally associated with academia. Sue Spencer (personal communication) in a personal email to me described how becoming too fixed on the end product rather than becoming thrilled by the process, had prevented her from finishing her PhD thesis.

Creative writers – perhaps unlike academic ones - are often very aware of their creativity and its rhythms. And generally there is a tide to it all, which is sometimes full and sometimes way out over the horizon.

In a letter, the writer Joseph Conrad put it rather dramatically:

I sit down religiously every morning, I sit down for eight hours, and the sitting down is all. In the course of that working day of eight hours I write three sentences which I erase before leaving the table in despair. ... After such crises of despair I doze for hours, still held conscious that there is that story that I am unable to write. Then I wake up, try again, and at last go to bed completely done up. So the days pass and nothing is done. ... I never mean to be slow. The stuff comes out at its own rate. ... The worst is that while I'm powerless to produce, my imagination is extremely active; whole paragraphs, whole pages, whole chapters pass through my mind. (cited in Olsen 1978, pp.153-154)

Unhappily for Conrad, he died some sixty years before Moustakas came up with his interrelated phases for heuristic inquiry which I relate to the creative process, especially his points (2) immersion and (3) incubation. Immersion is, “‘Living’ the question, sleeping it, dreaming it, fully engaging with it.” And incubation is, “Allowing an inner, unconscious, intuitive working of material” (Barber, 2002, p.83). Both these phases may be times when writing is impossible or possibly manifests itself in a less than coherent and logical manner.

There also seems to be the need for fallow periods following episodes of creative output. As one philosopher, Ovid, put it: “Take rest; a field that has rested gives a bountiful crop.” As a therapist, I have begun to associate this idea with the Gestalt Cycle, the moment of ‘satisfaction’ and ‘withdrawal’ which comes after experiencing ‘full contact’ and from which a new desire to create will emerge (Clarkson 1989). This also fits with my understanding of writing as a creative act which brings me more fully in contact with my self/selves and with the world around me. After this hiatus, rest and a moving away is required. As when the fire burns brightly, we enjoy the heat and then seek the coolness.

The problem is to recognise when our incapacity to write is to do with being in an immersion, incubation or withdrawal phase and when it is to do with deflection, avoidance or introjection, or any of the other ‘disturbances’ to the cycle (Clarkson 1989). I would say that this knowledge only comes from self-understanding and self-monitoring, but it is useful, or even crucial, to anyone struggling with Writer’s Block.

Cures?

Huston (1998) divides the condition into three. For “mild blockage” she suggests, for instance: “assess the appropriateness of your expectations; give yourself permission to be imperfect; break down the work into manageable tasks.” For “moderate blockage”: “address ‘imposter syndrome’; try ‘visioning’; take a ‘break, seek laughter and relaxation’” (1998, p.94). In general, she offers, in my opinion, some useful tips, though her ‘treatment’ for ‘recalcitrant blockage’ involving, “cognitive restructuring” and a “system of negative consequences” sounds quite frankly terrifying. And she does make it all appear rather too easy.

For me, it’s not about finding a ‘cure’. It’s about working with my creativity and exploring its strengths and vulnerabilities. I invite would-be writers to exercise their writing muscles little and often with free

writing; find the joy and playfulness in writing; and explore (through writing or another creative activity like art or drama) their critical voices and creative ebb and flow. And above all, not to try and get it right or be *perfect*, but allow for messiness and incoherence. I still have a persistent 'critical voice', though I am – through writing - turning it into a critical guide, there when I need it, yet not over-whelming. And actually it is tough and needs continual attention.

Most of all, writing is about keeping at it. As Balzac says (Olsen, 1978, p.151):

The solution of the problem can be found only through incessant and sustained work ... true artists, true poets, generate and give birth today, tomorrow, ever. From this habit of labor results a ceaseless comprehension of difficulties which keep them in communion with the muse and her creative forces.

Or as the more contemporary writer, Anne Enright, puts it: "The way to write a book is actually to *write* a book. A pen is useful, typing is also good. Keep putting words on the page."

It appears to me that trying to write an article (let alone a book) without tuning into your messy, unruly creative process is like trying to run a marathon without training or a warm-up. My mission is to bring the pleasure and play-fullness back into writing for therapists. This is the key, in my opinion, to being able to reach into ourselves and find the 'Words to Say It' (Cardinal 1993).

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