

DISSERTATION

WELL-BEING AND SATISFACTION WITH LIFE: A QUASI-EXPERIMENTAL MIXED-
METHODS EXAMINATION OF AN EXPRESSIVE VETERAN WRITING PROGRAM

Submitted by

Ross M. Atkinson

School of Education

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Doctoral Committee:

Advisor: Louise Jennings

Sue Doe

David Most

Ben Schrader

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ABSTRACT

WELL-BEING AND SATISFACTION WITH LIFE: A QUASI-EXPERIMENTAL MIXED-METHODS EXAMINATION OF AN EXPRESSIVE VETERAN WRITING PROGRAM

This quasi-experimental mixed-methods dissertation examines whether participation in a veteran-only expressive writing workshop supports well-being and satisfaction with life. Utilizing a three-manuscript dissertation format, this study integrated quantitative and qualitative approaches over an eight-week intervention and four-week follow-up period, for a total of twelve weeks. Nineteen (n=19) U.S. military veterans were recruited, with thirteen (n=13) completing the study. Six (n=6) attended an eight-week writing workshop, while seven (n=7) formed a control group. Quantitative data were collected using the Satisfaction with Life Scale (SWLS) (Diener et al., 1985) and the Well-Being Inventory (WBI) (Vogt et al., 2018) at four time points in the study. Qualitative data included semi-structured interviews with workshop participants, observations, and participant written stories and reflections.

The results indicated that workshop participation led to significantly greater increases in life satisfaction compared to the control, with repeated-measures ANOVA showing a significant time/condition interaction effect ($p < .05$). Additionally, veteran participants who started with lower baseline satisfaction showed the greatest improvement. While not statistically significant, WBI analyses suggested notable positive changes, particularly in the social domain of well-being for the workshop group. Thematic analysis of the interviews revealed that the workshop provided a safe, camaraderie-rich space for emotional release, identity reconnection, and peer support,

further revealing an overlap with the social well-being domain. Participants reported reframing traumatic memories into narratives and experiencing renewed purpose and social connection.

Collectively, these findings suggest that expressive writing workshops can be a low-cost and accessible intervention that yields psychological and social benefits for veterans in transition. The study's conclusions have implications for integrating narrative-based peer-writing programs into veteran support services.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

“IF I HAVE SEEN FURTHER THAN OTHERS, IT IS BY STANDING ON THE SHOULDERS OF GIANTS.”

– SIR ISAAC NEWTON

Outside of Colorado State University’s (CSU) School of Education sits a bench with Newton’s famous quote (mentioned above), originally penned in a letter to Robert Hooke in 1675, in white letters etched on black marble: “If I have seen further than others, it is by standing on the shoulders of giants.” Overhead is a large hanging sphere, held up by a three-point archway with two arrows intersecting a crossbar. The heavy sphere is free to move with the currents of the wind. I walked under this archway, named “Newton’s Corner,” every weekday I attended a class or presented a lecture. I walked beneath it countless Saturdays to work on potential publications with my advisor. It was the backdrop to my trips to CSU for every presentation, exam, defense, and lunch meeting.

Reading this quote conjured images of the great academics of the past, lifting Newton up to see just beyond the horizon of human knowledge. However, it has recently adopted a new, more personal meaning. I learned that it was not the far-off academics who supported Newton; it was his uncle, William Ayscough, who helped him gain admission to Cambridge. It was his mentor, Isaac Barrow, who recommended Newton for his own professor position after he retired, boosting his career and notoriety; and it was a friend and fellow astronomer, Edmond Haley, who encouraged and ultimately funded publication of Newton’s *Principia*. These are Newton’s giants.

The people named here and who now support me through my successes and failures have the sturdiest shoulders to stand on as I look to my future. These are the people who have been

with me over the mountains of anxiety and rivers of stress that paint the workaholic landscape of the contemporary doctoral student experience. These people not only listened, but actually tried to pay attention to my long-winded, late-night, esoteric ramblings. For years y'all put up with this version of me—thank you. You are the giants on whose shoulders I stand.

To the love of my life, my wife, Christina Atkinson: thank you for entertaining me during my jargon-filled rants, coming to all my community events, never doubting my ability to complete this program, and being my partner in creating a loving, safe, and comfortable home for us to live in. You know as much about my research as I do, and you were able to maintain both our lives and well-being, all while enduring the circumstances and sacrifices that this doctoral program demanded of us both. You have held our little family together with your boundless compassion, kindness, and love, and I am reminded every day of how lucky I am to have you as my partner in life. Standing on your shoulders has lifted me higher than I could have ever imagined.

To my closest friends, Joe Curry, Nick Huffman, Jon Doane, and Mark Cunningham—to each of you, I owe myself. You've walked with me through the winding maze of life: from the reckless joys of childhood, through the crucible of military service, and now out of the ivory halls of academia. We are still growing. We are still friends. I realize how lucky I am because of these truths, and it is more than I could ever ask for in this life. Each of you is the reason I still recognize myself when I look in the mirror. My image, reflected in your honest and humbling friendship, is devoid of the callous scars etched into me by the U.S. Military and system of higher education, some of the most powerful institutions in the modern world. While weathered and worn, I am not effaced, and I owe it to each of your enduring friendships. Without each of you, I honestly do not know who I would be.

To my biggest supporters in this life, my parents, Rich and Beth Atkinson—mom and dad—your unconditional love and support have been the bedrock of my growth and the catalyst for my educational journey. Throughout my childhood, both of you reinforced the importance of going to college, and here I am. I’ve hit the end of this long journey that started with simple conversations 25 years ago—parents telling their pre-teen that “college is important.” You both planted the seed and instilled in me the values of perseverance and intellectual curiosity that helped me grow from the kid who got voted as, “Most likely to Get Lost in his Locker” into someone capable of getting a doctorate degree from an R1 university. Your pride in my achievements, even when you were unsure of their significance, was a constant source of motivation. Thank you for always being there for me, and for always selflessly putting my well-being and needs before your own. You are my superheroes.

When it comes to scholarship, the foundation I stand on is not built solely by distant academics trapped in parentheses on the pages of old manuscripts. Although these names are important, they are only ink on paper. The true weight behind my learning—the real scaffolding of my growth—comes from the scholars who walked beside me every step of the way. These are the people who showed up day after day, month after month, not just to challenge me academically, but also to remind me of who I am and what I am capable of achieving.

To my advisor and mentor, Dr. Louise Jennings: Thank you for being a steady force throughout this journey. Your guidance has grounded me, your encouragement has lifted me, and your foresight has kept me prepared for every hurdle, both in life and in my doctoral program. You have attended the events I hosted around the community; you were there for conference presentations and award ceremonies alike and have supported my scholarship all along the way. You have been more than an academic mentor; you served as a mirror and compass when I

needed them the most. I remember one of these times vividly. I remember working on a project over Zoom before the spring semester of 2021 began. We had just made it through a summer of Covid, and ash lined the gutters in the streets from the largest fire in Colorado history, the Cameron Peak fire, which was still smoldering on the mountainside. While we worked through ash, dust, and disease, I had the news pulled up on my second monitor, and together we watched as our fellow Americans mounted a violent insurrection at our nation's capital.

It was surreal.

Horrifying.

A moment suspended in time.

I later learned that many of those who took part in the attack were military veterans, a realization and awareness that cut deeply. In the midst of that chaos, I was grateful that you were there witnessing it with me, helping me make sense of it in real time. I am also thankful that, after nearly six years of working together, we have finally realized that it is important to schedule an extra hour in our meetings so that we can catch up. I will forever appreciate your leadership, guidance, and friendship through what has been the most challenging endurance trial I have yet to experience in my life. I could not have done this without you.

To my committee members:

Sue Doe, you've watched me stumble through almost eight full years of graduate education: from my very first semester in January 2017 to my very last in December 2025. In the Spring of 2017, you not only met me but also met who would be my future wife at a prospective student meeting. She attributed that meeting as what tilted the scales in her decision, convincing her that CSU was the right place for her. Your conversation was a large part of why she walked into the History of Writing class where we first met. This event would precipitate me calling

Christina my ‘colleague’ in your autoethnography seminar. The snickering from our friends in the class prompted you to ask, “Wait, are you two dating?!” Later, Lisa Langstraat, Christina, and you conspired to bring me into the fold of a veteran writing workshop project, and the rest is history. Thank you for changing the course of my life and for being such a reliable and honest advocate and mentor to both me and the most important person I know.

Ben Schrader, from the moment you stepped into your role as the Director of the Adult Learner and Veteran Service (ALVS) office at CSU, I understood what it meant to feel supported by a student support office. From the start, you worked to build bridges with others across the university whose work aligned with the mission of the ALVS, providing us with mentorship and support. You paved the way for the growth of the military-connected writing program at CSU and helped build a comfortable and open space for non-traditional students in the ALVS Office. Perhaps most importantly, you show up. You are there at every workshop, you attend community veteran events, and you are focused on practical, justice-oriented ways of supporting your fellow veterans and adult-learner populations both at CSU and in the local community—thank you for showing me what that looks like.

David Most, my first course with you was in the spring of 2018, before I graduated from my English Master’s program. You were teaching a 600-level statistics class that covered the basics for people like me—English majors. Since then, I have taken three more courses from you and audited another. You both inspired in me a deep interest in statistical concepts, while also revealing the dark truths stashed away behind the pretty graphs, smoothers, and dichotomous hypothesis tests. The seminars you held fundamentally changed the ways in which I think about research, and I feel more grounded because of your influence on my education. I cannot thank

you enough for providing such a proactive and positive space for uninhibited dialogue around concepts that, at least for me, always felt unapproachable.

To my last-minute editors—Christina Atkinson, Mark Cunningham, and Julia Curry—and to Jared Polito for the theoretical alley-oop: thank you all for taking the time to support me and my work in the final hours. There would certainly be a few more errant articles and missing apostrophes without your diligent eyes.

To the veteran community in Northern Colorado, I am forever grateful for the opportunities you have provided. This community is filled with the best veteran supporters this nation has to offer—any success I find is evidence of your commitment to our veterans. When I send out an email about a veteran reading event to a mailing list of 90 people in our community, 65 of you show up. Where else does that happen? The people who care about veterans in this region are the kind who are willing to sacrifice their own precious time, money, and labor to create the systems of support necessary for our veterans to thrive, and I am honored to work toward that goal with each of you. I have learned so much from this community, and without it, I would not be where I am. Thank you for providing me with this opportunity; I hope I can adequately pay it forward someday.

This dissertation stands as a testament to the collective support, wisdom, and encouragement of all these individuals and communities. Thank you for lending me your shoulders to stand on and for being an instrumental part of this unforgettable adventure.

DEDICATION

We are but ink on paper; ash and dust.

Robert J. Near & B.

This is for you.

*“ . . . not to thine eternal resting-place
Shalt thou retire alone . . . Thou shalt lie down
With patriarchs of the infant world—with kings,
The powerful of the earth—the wise, the good,
Fair forms, and hoary seers of ages past,
All in one mighty sepulcher. The hills
Rock-ribbed and ancient as the sun,—the vales
Stretching in pensive quietness between;
The venerable woods—rivers that move
In majesty, and the complaining brooks
That make the meadows green; and, poured round all,
Old Ocean’s gray and melancholy waste,—
Are but the solemn decorations all
Of the great tomb of man. The golden sun,
The planets, all the infinite host of heaven,
Are shining on the sad abodes of death,
Through the still lapse of ages. All that tread
The globe are but a handful to the tribes
That slumber in its bosom.”*

Excerpt From “Thanatopsis”

By William Cullen Bryant, 1817

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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

In 2014, as a young undergraduate English education major, my writing professor, Meredith Allard, asked her students to compose a memoir. The class was journeying through various genres, discussing ways of engaging our future prospective students in writing, aimed at meeting specific genre conventions. This was the first time in my English program that I was asked to write about any significant moment in my own life with no stipulations. I was provided with just the recommendation to create boundaries in time or space to focus my story. A memoir is not an autobiography, after all. Our prompt: “Compose a comic about a significant time in your life.” Then, a follow-up prompt: “Now compose the narrative of your comic.” Upon reflection, it is obvious that the comic helped to create the (temporal, spatial, or experiential) boundary convention in the genre of memoir, while also creating a mechanism for students to visualize the setting and scenes and the small sensory details that create dense narratives.

The story I composed was of a plane ride in a C-130 military transport plane headed into Afghanistan and of the “combat landing” we endured. I wrote about how the plane dropped so quickly that I couldn’t catch my breath and about how a thick film of existential dread coated the metal interior walls and exposed steel frame. I witnessed my battle buddy, Nick, vomit into his tightly tucked undershirt. The configuration of the shirt, belt, and pants formed a kind of ineffective sieve, catching the chunky bits of his lunch while letting the rest flow down his legs. With his chest and thighs covered in his last meal and a pouch of partially digested food near his waistline, Nick had to unload and take inventory of his equipment just like the rest of us, soaking in, among other things, the beautiful April sunshine in Northern Afghanistan.

This story of my flight into Afghanistan, which I titled *Sardines at War*, was a hit in the class and additionally quite cathartic for me as someone who was still suffering from frequent panic attacks on campus. I had never before attempted to recreate a story from one of my challenging experiences. Composing this story helped me to generate a new understanding of that experience. In retrospect, this understanding turned down the volume on the fear associated with my memory. This new version included a little comedy by taking a frightening moment and reframing it into something humorous. Moreover, new connections were formed in the way I considered that specific memory, as it was now linked to the thoughtful reactions of others in the room who heard me expose a vulnerable experience.

That lesson taught me that through writing, rewriting, and sharing my stories, I could foster some form of understanding among civilian listeners about what a slice of U.S. military life can look like. Years later, while facilitating a veterans writing workshop at Colorado State University, I started to see the same stories written and rewritten, shared and reshared, from different perspectives by the same person. Each of us had a memory to process. One participant composed a memory of the moment he realized that he had taken another human being's life. He then retold that story on a prompt about feeling lost, and later again on a prompt that asked him to "write a letter to an enemy combatant." These iterations of writing work to reframe and reshape the memory. The story was composed one more time to a prompt about feeling stuck, as if being pulled by "Gravity," which is what the author, Ryan Lanham, named the piece he published in the first edition of the veteran writing workshop's journal, *Charlie Mike*. I share it here to provide an example of the kind of writing composed in the workshop:

Gravity

Run. Run away. He was running away when I caught him. I—my bullets—caught him. Up to him. Into him. Lodged in his back.

Left of spine. An upward strafe. Toward heart, home.
How many steps with me in him?
How many feet between us—my heart, his—my life, his—when they drag him back, on
his back, slide him in the truck, beneath my feet, beneath my gunner platform?
My hands still shaking. Sweat rolls down my cheek. A tear, salty. Emotionless. Pools on
chin. Holds there. Sways bulbous. Then slips, falls—
One. Two. Three. Four. Five. Six. Seven.
Me on him. In him.
Seven feet I peer down into darkness. Shadows. Black in my heart, seeping in.
It beats steady now. Fat on blood, adrenaline.
No holes pulsating red ooze.
No red shirt, red pants, red socks, red shoes, red legs, red arms, red back, red face.
No grimace or Quran. No moans or prayer beads. No Allah tonight.
Just the click of karmic debt, a handcuff locking souls. Tug of my new black moon.

(Lanham & Mahal, 2020, p.159)

Having coordinated the writing workshop at CSU for the better part of the last six years, I heard countless stories like Ryan’s “Gravity” and my flight into Afghanistan. One such story was composed by a former workshop participant, Janice Shilling, a field nurse in Vietnam War who had, by her own account, *never* told stories of her time there. She found herself on the receiving end of the hate hurled at veterans returning from Vietnam. She was spat on and called vile names. Janice kept her time there bottled up. Not until she sat in our workshop with other veterans, sharing vulnerable memories, writing, and showing each other support, was she able to release it. Her piece, “Going Home,” about trip home from Vietnam, opened the first edition of our workshop’s anthology, *Charlie Mike*.

It took me three years to write the first memoir about my experience flying into Afghanistan, but it took Janice nearly 50 years to tell her story. At a workshop reading event, Janice read a piece titled, “I am Here,” and she described her walk up to the memorial panels that

held the names of the “young boys” she tended to while overseas; Janice cried, and most of the people in the space listening to her story, joined her. It was a moment of collective healing for a veteran who had repressed her feelings about her selfless work for half a century, work that required her to mend the bodies of countless young boys fighting a terrible war, and to hold the hands of many more as they passed. I cannot imagine the fortitude it took to repress those memories for so long, but I certainly witnessed the relief she felt in sharing the burden of those memories with a supportive room of veterans and, later, a grateful civilian audience.

This is where I see the potential in writing workshops like the one at CSU to support the well-being of veterans through the telling, retelling, and revising of seminal life experiences—through the building of community, and through the sharing and validation of honest and vulnerable truths told, falling on the empathetic and supportive ears of other veterans who *understand*. Janice swore she was not a writer, but she accidentally proved herself to be one. In fact, while writing this dissertation, a local publication, *Veterans Life Magazine*, reached out to me and asked if they could use Janice’s piece in their publication. She responded, “Of course using that piece is okay. It makes me happy, honored, and proud.”

Despite the compelling evidence shared above, there is still a dearth of formal research examining the outcomes of these workshops on veteran well-being and life satisfaction, which is explored more thoroughly in the background literature review. Therefore, this study examines if and how an experiential veteran writing program supports or constrains the well-being of veteran participants. The program under examination is modeled after a veteran’s writing workshop at a Colorado State University. The following mixed-methods study is presented as a three-manuscript dissertation examining the impact and outcomes of an experience-focused expressive writing program on military veteran well-being and satisfaction with life.

Dissertation Structure

The structure of this dissertation follows the guidelines provided by the Colorado State University School of Education for three manuscript dissertations. In a three-manuscript dissertation, Chapter One describes the problem under study and outlines each of the three manuscripts to be included (see Table 1.1).

Table 1.1

Outline of 3-Manuscript Dissertation Structure

| | |
|--|---|
| Abstract | |
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| Table of Contents | |
| List of Tables and Figures | |
| Chapter 1: | Chapter One: Introduction |
| Chapter 2: | <i>Chapter Two: A Quasi-Experimental Examination of Satisfaction With Life in an Expressive Veteran Writing Program</i> |
| Chapter 3: | <i>Chapter Three: An Examination of Well-Being in an Expressive Veteran Writing Program: A Hybrid Approach to Thematic Analysis</i> |
| Chapter 4: | <i>Chapter Four: Measuring Factors of Well-Being Over Time for Participants in an Expressive Veteran Writing Program</i> |
| Chapter 5: | Chapter Five: Discussion & Conclusions |
| Appendix | |

Note: The table above shows a chapter outline of the proposed three-article dissertation with the three articles (i.e. Ch. 1, Ch. 2, and Ch. 3) to be submitted for publication emphasized in italics.

I will continue in Chapter One with the dissertation purpose and aims, and the research design, including a description of the workshop model and methods in practice. I then discuss the guiding theoretical framework in the study, the Cognitive Process Theory of Writing, and how that theory understanding of the workshop and my relationship to it. Following this, I present a

background literature review exploring U.S. military veterans, writing, and well-being. Here, I share the theory that influences my thinking and the ways in which I engage in the research process, followed by a brief section on my positionality as a researcher and a chapter summary.

Chapter Two, “A Quasi-experimental Examination of Satisfaction with Life in an Expressive Veteran Writing Program” examines the impact of workshop participation on participant satisfaction with life over time. In this chapter, the effect of workshop participation on satisfaction with life is explored using the Satisfaction with Life Scale (SWLS) (Diener, 1985), and data are analyzed using a two-way repeated measures ANOVA and individual growth modeling (IGM). These methods were selected to understand individual and group differences and variability in SWLS score initial status and rate of change over time at the participant-level.

Chapter Three, “An Examination of Well-being in an Expressive Veteran Writing Program: A Hybrid Approach to Thematic Analysis,” is an in-depth qualitative examination of participant well-being using a semi-structured interview protocol and ~60 minute in-person interviews conducted with each treatment group participant. The content of the interview questions was informed by the initial survey results and conceptually framed using the Well-Being Inventory (WBI) (Vogt. et. al., 2018). Additionally, I collected and analyzed observational notes, analytic memos, email correspondence, participant reflections, and submitted participant stories. These artifacts helped create a more holistic picture of how participation in the workshop supports or constrains veteran well-being and life satisfaction.

Chapter Four, “Measuring Factors of Well-being Over Time for Participants in an Expressive Veteran Writing Program,” is aimed at understanding how the workshop impacts the more objective life factors that predict well-being. The tool used in this chapter, the WBI (Vogt. et. al., 2018), captures data about engagement, functioning, and satisfaction across four life

domains: vocation, social relationships, health, and finances. The questions are retrospective and ask about particular experiences or feelings about parts of these domains to predict if the participant is engaged, functioning, or satisfied with these domain-specific predictors of well-being.

Chapter Five, “Discussion & Conclusions” underscores the dissertation, providing a summary of the aims, key findings across chapters, and a review and synthesis connecting the independent article findings and participant voices. Additionally, this section provides a broad picture of the implications of this research in theory, practice, and policy, and shares a detailed review of the study limitations and opportunities for future research.

Dissertation Purpose & Aims

This three-article dissertation to follow examines an in-person expressive veterans writing workshop using both semi-structured interviews with workshop participants, and two validated instruments for measuring well-being: the Satisfaction with Life Scale (Diener et al., 1985), measuring subjective (hedonic) well-being and a modified version of the Well-being Inventory (Vogt et al., 2018), mapping change over time in factors of well-being. This mixed-methods examination of both participant well-being outcomes and experiential writing workshop components associated with well-being is contributing to a growing body of theoretical and practical literature spanning topics of veteran well-being, veteran writing, and creative arts-based approaches to support military veterans.

Systematically examining both *if* and *how* experiential writing programs support well-being benefits not only veterans, but also their families, community members, and the local and national social services that support them and our communities. This study works broadly to advance the national health, prosperity, and welfare of veterans and their families. Having

markers of poor well-being has been associated with increased risk of homelessness (Johnstone et al., 2015; Henry et al., 2020), substance abuse disorders (Teeters et al., 2017), suicidality (Sokol et al., 2021), and anger and aggression (Hayes et al., 2015), all of which already disproportionately affect veterans and their families when compared to civilian peers. An overabundance of individuals facing these obstacles can overburden local mental health and social service resources that are already strained in many communities around the nation. By providing actionable data around veteran community program use, well-being, and experiential writing workshops, this research will inform practices and policies around reintegration and federal transition assistance programs, thereby reducing strain on local resources.

Study Aim 1: To identify *if* participation in an experiential veteran writing program supports or constrains participant satisfaction with life and well-being.

Study Aim 2: To understand *how* participation in an experiential veteran writing program supports or constrains participant satisfaction with life and well-being.

Study Aim 3: To model and compare trajectories of change in satisfaction with life and well-being over time for participants of an experiential veteran writing program.

Study Aim 4: To thematically examine using participant interviews what components of the workshop model participants claim support or constrain their well-being.

Dissertation Research Design

The approach of this study is framed using a quasi-experimental mixed-methods design (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011), aimed at understanding if and how an experiential writing program supports the well-being of the participants. To do this I track trajectories of change over time in well-being for participants of the writing workshop (Gliner et al., 2017).

The study took place over a twelve-week period beginning on March 1, 2024, and ending with the final questionnaire before June 30, 2024. The research was incentivized, with treatment group participants being eligible for \$250.00 in incentives and control group participants eligible for \$100 in incentives. I collected four waves of data across both a treatment and control group through a modified version of the WBI (Vogt et al., 2018), an unmodified SWLS (Diener et al., 1985). Together these two instruments take between 10 and 30 minutes to complete. The questionnaire was administered to both the control and treatment groups four times, once every four weeks for three months: at start, middle, end, and one month after workshop completion. Data collected from the SWLS and WBI was scored and compared across and within groups and over time, using a two-way ANOVA with repeated measures and by modeling trajectories of change for each participant using individual growth modeling (Gliner et al., 2017; Willet and Singer, 2005). Using four data collection points allowed for modeling trajectories of change in well-being for each individual study participant, as well as tracking mean changes in each group over time. A total of n=41 people applied for the study (see Figure 1.1).

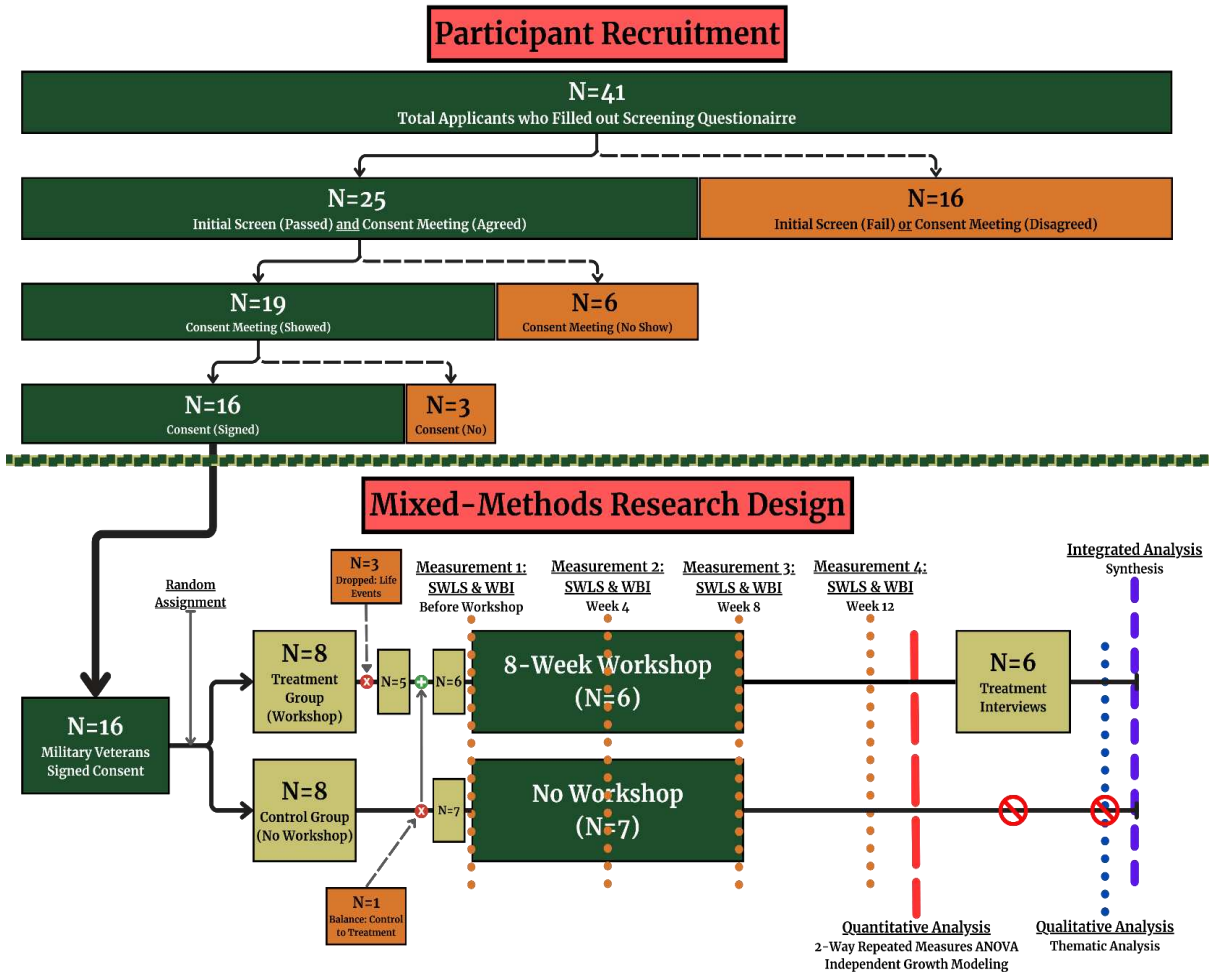


Figure 1.1. *Mixed-methods Research Design & Participant Recruitment* demonstrates the flow from initial screening to integrated analysis, capturing all mixed-methods measurement occasions and detailing the screening outcomes under the “Participant Recruitment” header and the attrition outcomes under the “Mixed-methods Research Design” header.

An initial email was sent to each prospective participant after applying, nine (n=9) did not respond, one (n=1) could not complete the required surveys, three (n=3) declined due to the 12-week time commitment, and another three (n=3) could not attend in person. Of the twenty-five (n=25) applicants remaining, six (n=6) did not show to the scheduled virtual meeting. I then met with nineteen (n=19) potential applicants both in person and virtually through Microsoft Teams. Three (n=3) verbally agreed to be in the study and did not respond to subsequent emails. The sixteen (n=16) remaining participants were randomly split into a control (n=8) and a

treatment group (n=8). Three (n=3) treatment group participants dropped out due to life events prior to week one of the study. At week one, a control group participant was randomly selected and agreed to move to the treatment group. The large attrition factor and the deviation from random selection when balancing groups are limitations in this study.

The criteria for participation in the study is as follows: 1) Must be a U.S. military veteran (DoD definition), to include prior active duty, reservists, or National Guard, as well as current reservists and national guard members who were prior active duty; 2) Must not have participated in an experiential writing program in the last 2-months; 3) Must not participate in any writing workshop except CSU's over the course of the 12-week study; 4) Must be willing and able to attend at least six of the eight workshops; and 5) Must agree to participate in a ~90-minute follow-up interview.

To keep the survey times consistent between control and treatment group participants, surveys were completed on a website portal. Each survey had a three to four-day window, allowing participants to login using a password before being directed to a Google Form with the survey questions. On the website, participants and stakeholders could view the general research methodology, design, timeline, informed consent documentation, recruitment flyers, and IRB documentation for the study. Additionally, mental health resources from CSU were added to the menu in case there was ever a need for participants to seek out mental health resources. The research team had a separate password protected portal to access participant screening data and the spreadsheets used to track recruitment.

Model and Methods: Veterans Writing Workshop

The workshop under examination has a distinct simple structure that requires very few resources to facilitate. The required materials to effectively run the workshop are a space for ~12

people, a facilitator, prompts, pen, paper, and most importantly, participants. The research workshop generally meets one weekday every week for two hours in the evening (e.g., 5:00 p.m. to 7:00 p.m.). Participants sit down around either a conference-style table or individual desks in circular formation. For the research workshop, food—pizzas, burritos, sandwiches, etc.—were also included nightly due to the workshop taking place during dinnertime.

The initial workshop always begins with introductions. I ask people to share their name, affiliation with the service, and to share their favorite spot in nature—or some other easy and quick icebreaker. After the introductions, I will explain how the workshop flows. I explain that I will share two prompts at a time and participants can choose to “jump off the prompts or not.” I let participants know that by using one of the prompts, they often create more connection across stories when we share, but not to let that dictate what they choose to write.

There are two writing sessions, and each writing session lasts about 25 minutes. After each session, the group shares what was composed. I relay that there is absolutely no expectation to share, stating “that the important part is that you get your story out.” Veterans have historically been known for being tight-lipped about their experiences; however, in every workshop I have facilitated over the past 6 years, most participants share. I cannot recall a single workshop where a participant didn’t share *something*.

One method I use to dispel anxiety around sharing, is that I share first during the initial workshop, unless a participant explicitly volunteers to go first. The piece that I share is always about my good friend PFC Robert J. Near who tragically took his own life during our deployment to Afghanistan in 2010-2011. The events surrounding his death are horrible, and it took me many years and many workshops to come to terms with not only his actions and the actions of his superiors, but also my own inability to get closure. After Robert died, I was still on

a mission in another part of the country and was unable to attend his funeral or memorial service. I had much to work through. I have found the initial vulnerability shown in sharing stories about Robert and his untimely passing helps others share their own vulnerable stories; it gives them permission to go to their own dark places.

After the first 25-minute writing session, and after I first share, we go around the room and participants respond to the piece with something they liked or something that resonated with them. The guidance I give for responding is that we should all try to respond to each piece read if possible. The way we respond follows a simple two-part rule: 1) compliments are welcome; 2) critiques are asked for by the reader. I now also inform participants that silence can and should be expected after a heavy story. This framing allows participants to get their stories out without the fear that others are going to pick apart their writing, allowing their focus to remain on the content. After compliments are given, I ask if anyone else would like to share, and we continue the process of sharing and responding. This takes, usually, about 30-45 minutes depending on the group and the topic of the conversations that follow the readings. We then do one more round of writing for ~25 minutes, and a final round of sharing.

In total, on average, two stories are composed for each participant per 2-hour workshop session. Sometimes participants will continue with one story throughout, but not often. Participants see four prompts during this time. The two rounds of writing and sharing are meant to allow writers to fall into the session, and to allow for the dialogue in the room and the other participants' stories to influence writers' second stories. This creates more opportunities for commiseration between participants as writing is more likely to center on similarly themed significant moments in life.

Background Literature Review

The following section is a review of literature forming the foundation of this dissertation. Owing to the structure of the three-article dissertation, some of the sections found in this initial review will be used across the three literature review sections for each of the standalone articles that make up Chapter Two, Three, and Four of this dissertation. These sections are adjusted to the specific focus of the article, but nonetheless use similar language, sources, and structure due to the need for each to be submitted independently of the dissertation as a whole. The review to follow, then, is a general overview of the three major constructs in the dissertation: U.S. Military Veterans, Experiential Writing, and Well-being (see Fig 1.1).

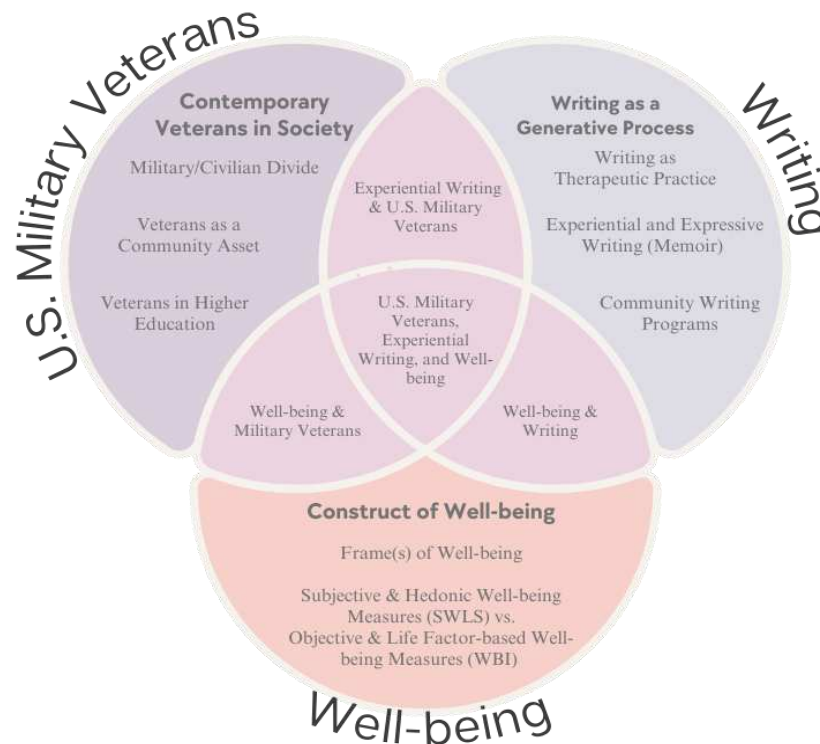


Figure 1.1. Diagram of Dissertation Literature Review Areas depicts the three overlapping areas of inquiry for the background literature review conducted for this dissertation. The three areas are, U.S. Military Veterans, Experiential Writing, and Well-being. These are focused on areas that specifically align with the purpose of the study, to show the intersections of U.S. Military Veterans, Writing, and Well-being as they pertain to the experiential writing workshop under

The review begins with a section discussing the state of U.S. military veterans with a subsection focusing on the “Civilian/Military Divide.” The next section discusses the intersection of veterans and writing, including literature examining student veterans in formal writing classrooms, as well as community and institutional programs and other creative arts initiatives. The final major review section shares literature exposing and examining the nebulous construct of well-being.

U.S. Military Veterans

It is July 1863. A Union Soldier is dying in a field; next to him, a Confederate Soldier is also taking his final breaths. They cry and moan out, but their sounds are drowned by the fog of war. Their bodies are draped in the uniforms of the cause they represent—the idea of a nation they will never realize. Together, they die alone, unaware of the outcome of the battle or war.

Four-and-a-half months later, Abraham Lincoln stands in that famous field and speaks through time to remind Americans who live today about these service members:

. . . we cannot dedicate, we cannot consecrate we cannot hallow this ground. The brave men, living and dead, who struggled here, have consecrated [this ground] far above our poor power to add or detract. The world will little note, nor long remember what we say here, but it can never forget what they did here. (1863)

The words of Lincoln reach our eyes today on screens he never dreamed of, and we know of the bravery of the men who fought to save a nation in a time difficult for us to imagine. However, there is an irony in the fact that the brave Soldiers he speaks of will never know they are revered or that their deaths held meaning. It is not the Soldiers who are remembered. Their personhood and individual lives are forgotten to time. It is just Lincoln’s linguistic brushstrokes that continue to inform us of these faceless, nameless service members who gave the ultimate sacrifice. A Union Soldier dies lying next to a Confederate Soldier in Gettysburg, without knowing the outcome of the battle. For them, nothing follows.

Before becoming a U.S. military veteran, one must first be a U.S. military service member. A service member is an instrument used to protect and press the interests of the government of the United States. As Hobbes states in *Leviathan*, “. . .covenants, without the sword, are but words and of no strength to secure a man at all” (p. 147). Next time you see a U.S. Marine, ask them what the most dangerous weapon on Earth is. The correct answer is: “a Marine and their rifle.” Service members are taught that they are effective and efficient instruments to be maintained and used for the purposes of the U.S. Government. The Soldier’s Creed reminds Soldiers to “Always maintain my arms, my equipment, and myself,” and Soldiers joke that the order of those mandates is intentional and places the most important items first in the order: weapons, equipment, and *then* Soldier. Whether the mission is to "win hearts and minds," as it was in Operation Enduring Freedom, or to "shock and awe," as the mission called for in the 2003 invasion of Iraq, service members are the active instrument.

If the service member is an instrument of the government, the veteran’s identity is an instrument of the politician. This is made clear when legislation to support veterans, such as the “Promise to Address Comprehensive Toxins” (PACT) Act, is leveraged as a political tool to sway public opinion and voter sentiment in other arenas within the political sphere. In 2022, the PACT Act, a bill with bipartisan support in Congress, aimed to expand care for military veterans. It was at first approved, and then when procedure dictated another vote, it was shot down with 42 Republican senators opting against the bill. The weeks following that vote required active effort and activism by many veteran organizations to get the proposed bill pushed through Congress. Organizations such as Veterans of Foreign Wars (VFW), the American Legion, Disabled American Veterans (DAV), and Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America (IAVA) worked

together to ensure that other veterans had the opportunity to receive the care they needed, and the bill was passed in August 2022.

This positioning of the military as a state force against a civilian population only exacerbates what Holsti calls the “cultural chasm” in understanding between current and former service members and civilians. Army combat veteran and political scientist Ben Schrader (2019) discusses the positioning of the military as a mediating force in his text, *Fight to Live, Live to Fight: Veteran Activism after War*, presenting service members and veterans as uniquely positioned as defenders of the Social Contract. As such, they agree to what Schrader calls the “Soldier’s Contract,” which is the explicit agreement between the individual Soldier and the state, positioning them between the state and the citizenry. The Soldier’s Contract involves both de jure elements, which represent the formal agreement to serve the state, and de facto elements, which represent the informal agreement of practices, ideals, and beliefs that shape the Soldier identity. Schrader argues that protest movements, such as the Vietnam Veterans Against the War and Iraq Veterans Against the War, represent a critique of both the Social Contract and Soldier’s Contract, and that these movements and the veterans involved are instrumental in challenging state authority and exposing flaws otherwise unseen by the public. Schrader’s point is considerate of the truth that combat veterans are a cultural artifact only produced at critical and dangerous times in history where violence has won out, and as such harbor a novel and politically important perspective on the culture that produced them.

As instruments crafted in dangerous times and positioned as a politically mediating force between the state and the people, the cultural image of the “war veteran” is often molded to reflect the general perception of the critical moment. Revolutionary War Soldiers are revered in the U.S. but are perceived as traitors in England. The general perception of Allied World War II

veterans is that of heroes: the brave warriors who bested tyranny. War creates veterans who can never truly know how they will be received or how time will change the collective perception of their involvement in the war. A Vietnam War veteran who was called “baby-killer” could never know that in 45-years’ time, they’d be thanked for their service before leaving on an Honor Flight back to Vietnam to hug and cry with a former North Vietnamese Soldier—the “enemy.” These are complex individual experiences intertwined with even more intricate political situations comprising their genesis.

Contemporary U.S. Military Veterans

Since the September 11, 2001, attacks on American soil that started the Global War on Terror, more than 4-million citizens have served in the armed forces (Geraci et al., 2020). More than 2.5 million of these service members have been deployed at least once to Iraq and Afghanistan (Elnitsky et al., 2017), with approximately 625,000 (25%) deployed more than once (Bilmes, 2013). After separation from the service, 25%-60% of former members of the U.S. armed forces "report difficulty adjusting to civilian life," with numbers increasing in the post-9/11 Era (Bond et al., 2022, p. 283). This finding is also supported by similar results from a Pew Research survey of (n=1284) veterans, with over 48% of post-9/11 veterans stating that they have some difficulty adjusting to civilian life (Parker et al., 2019). Furthermore, in a recent national three-year longitudinal study measuring factors of well-being for reintegrating veterans at 6-month intervals, considering indicators across four domains of well-being, only 34% were deemed “successful” in their reintegration after the two-and-a-half-year mark (Perkins et al., 2020).

Research has identified a multitude of factors that may contribute to reintegration challenges in veterans, including deployments and combat experience. Researchers have

identified correlations between deployment concerns—defined as frequent concerning combat experiences, such as engagement with enemy forces, traumatic moments, etc.—and psychological reintegration challenges such as post-traumatic stress disorder, anxiety, and depression (Etchin et al., 2022).

More recent studies in veteran research examine a ‘new’ understanding of an ‘old’ type of psychological injury called ‘Moral Injury,’ which references psychological distress following an action or inaction taken by an individual that subverts their moral values (MacLeish, 2018; Moon, 2016; Richardson, 2020). If a service member fails to save a teammate due to freezing in a moment of necessary action, this could be considered a Moral Injury. This contrasts with direct trauma, in which the service member is the victim of an event that causes post-traumatic stress. There is much overlap between these two ways of conceptualizing trauma and injury, but the differences are important for the individual experiencing the aftermath of the event. Imagine reconciling a Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder diagnosis with the knowledge that the only trauma causing your injury is perceptually self-inflicted through your own action or inaction.

In addition to the challenges veterans face during reintegration, many feel, counterintuitively, that they miss the freedom and autonomy that being in a war zone brings. As Junger (2016) states, in a catastrophic and chaotic environment, group interest subsumes individual interest because “there is no survival without group survival” (p. 66). This can create deep social bonds between group members, and the connection felt is often conflated with time and place. It can create a desire to return to those days and those places. Junger (2016) gives the example of a taxi driver who, 20-years prior, had fought in the siege of Sarajevo during the Bosnian War. On a ride home from the airport, this former Soldier told Junger that during his time in the war he was a member of a special unit selected to go behind enemy lines to support

besieged enclaves. He followed his story with, “And now look at me,” while he motioned toward his dashboard (p. 66). The loss of unimaginable purpose, meaning, and group connection felt by those in life-or-death situations and catastrophic environments can make even the most important jobs in a peaceful society seem isolating and unimportant upon returning home. This is one of the many reasons returning service members need community support and well-researched programs to help facilitate a purposeful and meaningful transition into civilian life.

Unfortunately, U.S. society and the civilians that make up its majority are often oblivious to the inner workings of the military and service member experiences.

Military/Civilian Divide

Duke University Professor Emeritus Ole Holsti (1998/1999), contributing to the discourse on contemporary veteran challenges, published a piece in *International Security* titled “A Widening Gap between the U.S. Military and Civilian Society? Some Evidence, 1976-96.” In this seminal text, Holsti discusses the difference in cultural understanding between civilians and current and former service members. He discusses a shift in policy decisions over time to favor military ideologies and the frequent positioning of the military between the people and the state as the driving factors behind this widening gap. Providing evidence, Holsti highlights that in over 90% of disagreements between U.S. military and civilian authorities prior to the Cold War, civilian leadership’s preferences took precedence; however, in the period following the Cold War, fewer than half of the policy disagreements fell in favor of civilian leadership.

Holsti also provides data showing an ideological shift in military leadership’s political leaning from 1976-1999, with a disproportionate number leaning, on average, toward a more conservative ideological perspective when compared to civilian peers. This ideological shift has been exacerbated by the historical propensity for the military to be placed between the state and

the people (Holsti, 1999; Schrader, 2019). In certain circumstances, this can be to hold the state accountable (i.e. Vietnam Veterans Against the War, Iraq Veterans Against the War, Veterans for Peace, etc.), but more often, service members are placed between the people and the state to suppress civil unrest. One such example is the “May 4 Massacre” at Kent State in 1970, where Ohio National Guard Soldiers shot and killed four university students protesting the Vietnam War. Another example, and one that Holsti shares, is the Los Angeles riots following the Rodney King killing by state authorities. Following the verdict in which four white police officers were found not guilty of killing a black motorist during a vicious public beating, military troops were deployed to cope with the unrest.

Even in political discourse today, the military is wielded by politicians as a tool to be used against anything from illegal immigration to, as President Trump announced during a Fox interview, “radical left lunatics” who want to disrupt the election, stating “they should be handled by the National Guard, or, if really necessary, by the military” (Dreisbach, 2024). A year later, on September 30, 2025, President Trump made unusually partisan remarks that framed a “war from within” and envisioned expanded domestic use of the military in cities throughout the United States, a message met by a notably silent room of top military leadership. This spectacle—widely criticized by defense analysts and observers—underscored the hazards of drawing the armed forces into domestic political conflict and crystallized the very dynamic Holsti describes: a military positioned between the state and the people.

This chasm between civilians and veterans can manifest in different ways for the individual service member, depending on context, but is often interpersonally characterized by veteran researchers as identity issues (Herman, 1996), feelings of isolation or being misunderstood (DiRamio et al., 2008), and general breakdowns in communication (Young, 2011;

Dekel, Goldblatt, & Keidar, 2005; Galovski & Lyons, 2004). This can happen as a result of friction in civilian and veteran contact zones—defined by Pratt (1991) as “social spaces where cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in contexts of highly asymmetrical relations of power” (p. 35). For many veterans, separating from the service places them in a vulnerable position. They have not only lost their careers, but also their housing, insurance, routine, friends, title, clothes, and people with whom they share their cultural language every day. Some veterans equate the feeling of separation to bereavement, even in instances when they did not particularly enjoy the service (Kaplow et al., 2013; Sherman et al., 2015; Herman & Yarwood, 2014).

The divide can also manifest as resistance to the fetishized “Veteran as Hero” or “Veteran with PTSD” tropes that permeate U.S. culture and society through entertainment media (Branham, 2016); as difficulties with authority (Lubin & Johnson, 2000); or as identity challenges as both a result of military service (Herman, 1996) and separation from military service (Clewell, 1987). For others, the civilian/military divide may manifest in the disconnectedness of vacant everyday comments that objectify individual veterans, such as “Thank you for your service” (Young, 2011). In many cases, albeit not all, these isolating actions are unintentional and even unobserved by larger civilian society, which only highlights how ubiquitous the divide is to remain transparent.

This cultural divide places veterans—especially transitioning veterans—in vulnerable and marginalized positions within certain contexts, such as work and school (DiRamio et al., 2008; DiRamio & Jarvis, 2011; Elnitsky et al., 2017; Phillips & Lincoln, 2017). This divide is further exemplified by, on average, poorer well-being outcomes for veterans in certain domains of life than their civilian counterparts in areas such as physical and psychological health (Vogt et al.,

2022) and homelessness (Henry et al., 2021), as well as higher prevalence rates of substance use disorders (SUD) and suicidality (Teeters et al., 2017; Blakey et al., 2022). With around 200,000 veterans reintegrating every year (Bond et al., 2022), it is important to understand the systems and settings in which veterans experience support and constraints to their reintegration, as well as how their well-being is affected by this process, in order to create better outcomes.

Military Veterans as a Community Asset

There is a reason that the military calls service members who are either injured or killed during a military enterprise “casualties” and not “victims.” The term “victim” implies a lack of agency, and no service member is agentless in a war, or, as Sebastian Junger stated in *Tribe: On Homecoming and Belonging*, “The one way that soldiers are never allowed to see themselves during deployment is as victims, because the passivity of victimhood can get them killed” (p. 102). The reason tying victimhood to veteran identity is problematic is that it can make reintegration a much more difficult process for veterans. Reintegration demands agency, and the victim identity challenges that agency. Victimhood, as Junger pointed out, is passive, and reintegrating back into a society that views veterans as victims only reinforces that passivity—it becomes a part of the process of becoming a veteran.

The divide between civilians and veterans can be exacerbated by the victimization or even infantilization of military veterans by their communities. The assumption that veterans are inherently damaged or that most veterans have PTSD is false. A meta-analysis of PTSD prevalence among post-9/11 deployed populations showed rates ranging from 4.7% to 19.9%” (Magruder & Yeager, 2009), and a 2015 study conducted by researchers at the VA placed that number at 16.2% (Dursa et al., 2014). Less than one in six post-9/11 military veterans *who have been deployed* struggle with PTSD. Fighting through the prevalent societal assumptions that

every veteran needs extra support due to mental challenges can make the process of reintegrating into the community more challenging. This is why many who support military veteran transitions take an asset-based view of this population. In a recent conversation I had with the directors of the Adult Learner and Veteran Services office at Colorado State University, Dr. Ben Schrader and Lisa Chandler, this concept of asset-based veteran framing and engagement was reinforced through a detailed description of why their office is consistently rated as one of the best in the nation (Military Times). Their model is asset-based and aims to transform their space into an office that invites inclusive and asset-based engagement opportunities.

This transformation required a shift in perspective on what a veteran-friendly space looks and feels like to visitors. It also required consistent reinforcement of their asset-based model. It required moving away from the tropes portrayed in popular media of the broken hero (Martin, 2017) and prominent research that frames veterans as a population in constant need of additional support (Blaauw-Hara, 2016; Pacheco, 2017). Instead, their approach demanded a more individualistic and holistic perspective of the veterans and other military-connected students they serve as capable, intelligent, and motivated humans with talents to leverage, and a need to integrate into the community. Through consistent and careful curation and strict enforcement of asset-based, justice-oriented expectations in their space, they created an inclusive and welcoming office that values the individual veteran and meets them where they are without tolerating insensitivity toward others.

The asset-based model of thinking about military service and veterans starts with the understanding that former service members often carry a wealth of experience and knowledge from their time in the service. Some researchers point out that military veterans on campus often show high academic determination, levels of maturity, and have had prior leadership experiences

that can be leveraged (Brawner et al., 2015; Brawner et al., 2016; Mobley et al., 2019). When leveraged effectively, military knowledge, skills, and dispositions can help bridge the transition from service member to veteran. In fact, a majority of transitioning veterans make it through institutions of higher education using their benefits with no issue and transition into a career field where they excel. For example, currently there are nearly two million veteran owned businesses in the United States, which employ over five million Americans (SBA, 2018, p. 1). In fact, according to the Small Business Association (SBA), veterans are 45% more likely to start their own business than someone in the general civilian population (SBA, 2018, p. 1).

The writing workshop in this study is constructed from an asset-based foundation. In essence, the model of the workshop presents the veteran participants as agentic actors. Each participant shapes the room with the stories they tell, and an effort is made to ensure the facilitator is, in practice, just another participant. This creates a feeling in the space of pals sitting around telling stories and promotes more equitable power sharing within the environment, adding comfort. Additionally, unlike other supportive spaces for veterans, the workshop is not attempting to “fix veteran deficiencies” or “help struggling veterans.” At its core, the workshop is a creative writing space for military veterans that is predicated on their unique memories and experiences. The workshop is a space that asks, “What stories can you conjure up to add to this space?” The workshop is not a passive space. It is active, demanding, and often pressured—It is a challenge to produce a story in 20 minutes “good enough” to share with a room of strangers.

Military Veterans in Higher Education

In higher education, Student Veterans of America (SVA), a national organization supporting student-veterans through advocacy, research and networking, conducted a study alongside the “Institute for Veterans and American Families” (IVAF), a research organization

out of Syracuse University, and found military veterans on average perform better in college than civilian peers (Lyon et al., 2017). They were on par with their civilian peers in completion of undergraduate degree programs (IVMF, 2017) and had higher GPA's (3.34) on average than traditionally aged students (2.94). Student-veterans also graduate at much higher rates (53%) than other similarly aged adult-learners (39%). This is perhaps because as a group, veterans tend to be dedicated and goal oriented when considering careers and education upon exiting the service (IVMF, 2017). This form of community engagement in intentional and thoughtful activities—opening a business, joining a community group, getting a degree, starting or volunteering for non-profit work—has been shown to improve the well-being of veterans (Vogt et al., 2018; Perkins et al., 2020).

Since the passing of the Serviceman's Readjustment Act of 1944—aka the GI Bill® of Rights—military veterans have been a large contributor to institutions of higher learning in the United States. At one point in 1947, over half of all college students were military veterans (Suberman, 2012). Today, 6.1% of all higher education students are veterans or current service members (IVMF, 2017). Over half (54%) of all eligible veterans have used their GI Bill® benefits from 2009-2019, and that number increases to 62% when factoring in those veterans who transferred their benefits to a spouse or dependent (AIR, 2024). Additionally, 62% of all military veterans attending college are first-generation, and yet veterans still complete some degree (associate, bachelor's, or graduate degree) at double the rate (47%) of financially independent college students (23%) within six years (AIR, 2024).

Institutionally, student-veterans in academia have reported feelings of isolation due to a perceived “gap in age, maturity, and experience” when compared to academic peers (DiRamio & Jarvis, 2011). Furthermore, the actions of professors have also been highlighted as contributing

to cultural misunderstandings around veterans and the veteran identity in academia. For example, in a study performed by DiRamio et al. (2008), 25 student-veterans who served in the Iraq and Afghanistan conflicts were interviewed in a multi-site study, and “a consistent message from the participants was that they hoped faculty members would acknowledge their veteran status and attempt to understand them as a student population” (p. 89). To combat the integration challenges in the academic system, many offices are beginning to move away from “Veteran Only” models of support services and are instead looking at integrated models that place transitioning military veterans with other non-traditional students. Colorado State University’s Adult Learner and Veterans Services asset-based model is a prime example of this integrated approach where military veterans and other military-connected students have a dedicated space alongside similarly positioned non-traditional students to help with the challenges of isolation.

Writing: Military & Veterans

Military members and veterans have historically been prolific writers, composing personal and experiential narratives in journals and diaries overseas, writing poems and memoirs, and sharing intimate moments through detailed letters home. In World War I, American service members were encouraged to compose letters, often by leaders who knew the importance of keeping in touch with loved ones in trying times (Cross, Harris, & Moloney, 2022). One senator, John Weeks of Massachusetts, whose son was serving in the war, famously sent a pamphlet with the following excerpt to military families, encouraging them to send correspondence to their loved ones in theatre (Cross, Harris, & Moloney, 2022):

A letter from home to a boy at the front will make the muddy walls of the trenches seem less bleak, the routine of camp life less tedious, will cheer him when he is lonesome and homesick, make him a more courageous Soldier, and although in a foreign land many miles from home he will know he is in the thoughts of the folks back home for whom he has gone 'over there' to fight. (p. 1)

Historically, writing has been a lifeline for many service members and military families. As the grandchildren of World War I veterans and the children of World War II veterans, the Baby Boomers, a generation named for the surge of births following World War II, are inheriting much of this writing in the form of letters. *Their Letters* (2020) a poem composed by a writing workshop participant, Kathleen Willard, recounts the letters her parents sent back and forth to one another during World War II. She alternates between perspectives, line by line, to exemplify the dense contrast in experience between her mother and father:

He tells of his first night in Saigon, a bomb exploding a fuel depot, the fire
and sometimes she described pill box hats, the white gloves
flooding his quarters, an instant inferno
she wore to Mass or out eating okra and peach pie at Morrison's Cafeteria
Someone shouting run, the city charring
while she watches their children practicing backstroke
he runs nude into the dark streets, seconds in front of the flames
and can their daughter and two sons take horseback riding lessons,
could they afford it

(p. 73)

This excerpt of Willard's poem does a fantastic job juxtaposing the two perspectives, making obvious the stark contrast in experience between the two partners. Letters were a necessary form of communication, and, while the world was on fire, a hopeful reminder that there was a familiar place out there where people were thinking of summer swimming and horseback riding lessons.

In addition to curated collections and preserved letters, the ubiquity of written correspondence among service members is also reflected in popular media. A 1987 documentary, *Dear America: Letters Home from Vietnam*, features actual letters written by American Soldiers, and utilizes historical photos and video to further elucidate the stories of individual service members. Primetime shows like *M*A*S*H*, a Korean War comedy drama about a Mobile Army Surgical Unit, and Blockbuster films like *Jarhead*, psychological war drama following a Marine sniper in the Gulf War, show many scenes depicting letter writing and “mail call”—a time when letters are disseminated to service members (Mendes, 2005). They frame these moments as important parts of a deployment, and indeed they are. These letters open dialogue between deployed Marines about the stories they hold. They pass around pictures of each other’s families and children, give each other updates on sports, share the exciting news of the birth of a child, or pensively read aloud a *Dear John* letter—correspondence received by a service member from a significant other that ends the relationship, typically due to another partner.

To focus on a specific example, one major theme of *Jarhead* is the anxiety and turmoil of receiving a *Dear John* letter. In this film, the anxiety over these pieces of written correspondence is represented through a “Jodie (Jody) Wall.” The term “Jody” is slang used on a deployment to represent a kind of caricature of the person who is sleeping with your (i.e. everyone’s) partner. The Jody Wall in *Jarhead* was filled with racy photographs of unfaithful partners, many of which were sent in love letters scrawled with broken promises. In a similar vein, the film *Dear John* (2010) is a romance that uses letters sent during a deployment as a plot device to tell the tumultuous love story of a young Soldier and a college student, ultimately ending in the service member receiving a Dear John letter. These examples in pop-culture highlight the ubiquity of the

letter writing trope in media but are also reflective of the frequency and importance of writing for service members, and the power they can hold over one's emotions.

Veteran authors like Tim O'Brien attempt to capture the stark truth of war, undermining the often-glamorized Hollywood depictions of its truthful horrors. O'Brien portrays these culturally romanticized depictions of violence and death, with plain, somber descriptions. Here he recounts the death of a teammate, Ted Lavender (1990):

There was no twitching or flopping. Kiowa, who saw it happen, said it was like watching a rock fall, or a big sandbag or something—just boom, then down—not like the movies where the dead guy rolls around and does fancy spins and goes ass over teakettle—not like that, Kiowa said, the poor bastard just flat-fuck fell. Boom. Down. Nothing else.
(p.6)

There is no signal in this text to Lavender's virtuousness or heroism, no purpose or retroactive justification for his death. O'Brien goes on to describe the extra ammo Lavender carried due to his "unweighed fear," pointing out that now "He was dead weight." Like O'Brien does, the job of portraying the difference between reality and fiction in war unfortunately must fall on the lap of the military veteran.

Vietnamese Thiền Buddhist monk Thich Nhat Hanh, often cited as the "father of mindfulness," famously made this point at an event he attended in 2003 for military veterans, quoted by Vietnam Veteran and author Michael Orange as saying (2021/2022):

Veterans are the light at the tip of the candle, illuminating the way for the whole nation. If veterans can achieve awareness, transformation, understanding, and peace, they can share with the rest of society the realities of war. And they can teach us how to make peace with ourselves and each other, so we never have to use violence to resolve conflicts again. (p. 12)

As Thich Nhat Hanh states so eloquently here, it not only takes a war veteran, but it also takes more from within them— "awareness, transformation, understanding, and peace"—to share the realities of war. Thich Nhat Hanh is claiming that exposure to the truth of war is something that

is not experienced by everyone, and that those who go through its reality are given access to a light that others do not have access to—a candle to illuminate the dark reality of war. A military veteran with awareness, understanding, and peace can be a teacher who speaks from experience. This perspective supports the need to preserve and promote the writing of military veterans as experienced educators on the truth of militarism and war.

Understanding the importance of preserving service members’ prolific writing, the U.S. Library of Congress started the “Veteran History Project” (VHP), a curated collection of over 120,000 individual service members’ personal narrative collections. These collections store personal narratives in written, audio, and video format “[making] accessible the firsthand narratives of U.S. military veterans who served from World War I through more recent conflicts and peacekeeping missions” (Library of Congress, 2024, p.1). These narratives include general correspondence between loved ones, powerful reflections of war, and creative expressions of service, all working to create a detailed image of the diverse experiences of service members throughout history.

Within the Library of Congress archive, there are countless stories of loss and of triumph, but the most telling are the warnings shared through simple, reflective experiential narratives. One such narrative, composed by Morris Albert Martin (1918), a World War I veteran, details his time in the trenches and paints a vivid picture of the realities of war. Writing his narrative from the comfort of an infirmary bed after being injured and sent to the rear, Martin reorganizes his thoughts, attempting to reconcile what he witnessed:

Lying there in the nice clean bed, I gave myself over to some reflections. . . . Those boys up there were still in that Hell, and the end wasn’t in sight yet. Closing my eyes I could still see those mangled and bloody bodies of my buddies, and I began to wonder what it was all about. (p. 28)

The final reflection that Martin shares in this excerpt, “I began to wonder what it was all about,” is a simple yet powerful statement of critical reflection. He is beginning to question the war effort. Like Martin, most veterans who entered the veteran writing program under examination in this study find themselves asking the same question in different ways (e.g. What was I doing there? What was the purpose? Why were we fighting? etc.). These are critical questions that begin to deconstruct the complex web of sociopolitical processes that drive the military machine and a service member’s purpose and role in it—as well as their purpose after it.

Military & Veteran Writing Programs

Military and veteran writing programs operate across the nation, many mirroring the format of the workshop under investigation. For example, the Syracuse Veterans’ Writing Group (SVWG), established in 2010, convenes monthly writing workshops, often preceded by mindfulness sessions, and emphasizes techniques in nonfiction writing, story drafting, peer feedback, encouragement, and publication preparation (Syracuse Veterans’ Writing Group, n.d.). Likewise, the Veterans Writing Project, founded by Ron Capps in 2011, offers no-cost creative writing programs including two-day intensive seminars, genre-specific workshops (nonfiction, fiction, poetry, playwriting), and songwriting seminars, thereby providing veterans and their families with diverse outlets for literary expression (Veterans Writing Project, 2025). Similarly, the NYU Veterans Writing Workshop, inaugurated in 2008 by former Ambassador Jean Kennedy Smith, is a free, non-partisan outreach program serving veterans in New York City. It has played a significant role in the literary development of veteran writers, with alumni who have gone on to receive prestigious honors such as the National Book Award (NYU Veterans Writing Workshop, 2017).

In an autoethnography, Nancy Taber (2025) reflects on her experiences planning, co-facilitating, participating in, and reflecting upon expressive writing workshops specifically designed for women-identifying Canadians who have served in the military. Methodologically, Taber combines autoethnography with expressive writing praxis, examining how narrative writing—both as facilitator and fellow writer—functions within a feminist transformative learning approach rooted in feminist antimilitarism. This theoretical lens critiques militaristic norms (e.g., obedience, stoicism, gendered binaries) and situates writing as a tool for narrative reclamation, identity transformation, and collective meaning-making within a marginalized veteran community context.

Her analysis highlights two overarching thematic dimensions: 1) Reclaiming military identity, memory, and story through imagination: through the act of writing, participants re-authored personal and military experiences in ways that challenged institutional narratives and helped them reclaim agency over their life stories; and 2) Building community through storytelling inspired by shared gendered military experiences—writing groups emerged not just as creative spaces but as collective sites of solidarity and mutual recognition, where fragmented or muted voices could cohere in a feminist communal learning context.

In keeping with the genre, Taber includes a found poem drawn from her own workshop writing, illustrating how creative expression bridges personal reflection with collective resonance. Her conclusion emphasizes expressive writing's transformational potential—not only for individual well-being but as a pedagogical strategy for cultural change within military contexts. Furthermore, Buckley's (2021) study of women student-veterans established that peer-group writing fostered belonging and engagement, helping bridge military to civilian transitions.

As far as alignment to federal pushes for creative programs and well-being support for military veterans, every year the VA hosts local creative arts festivals in cities around the United States. These festivals culminate in a national competition that sees winners from each local festival in each art genre: music, writing, performance, sculpture, etc. compete nationally to get a chance to attend the VA's "National Creative Arts Festival." The national competition includes submissions from veterans across 20 different creative writing categories. The week-long festival is held in a different U.S. city every year. Thousands of veterans get together and share their art, read their stories, and perform for one another.

Understanding that veterans make up a significant portion of their population, colleges and universities have similarly implemented various programs to support transitioning veterans in their effort to feel successful in finding and building community, learning the university systems, and engaging effectively in academic work. "New Start," at Colorado State University, is one such program, aimed at supporting student-veterans during their time in school by providing community connections to on and off campus resources, and community reintegration support through, "Purposeful recreational, volunteer, and leadership opportunities" (CHHS-NS, 2023). Additionally, numerous colleges host academic preparation programs for incoming veterans, to include one of the top ranked schools for veteran programs, Cornell, which hosts an academic preparation program for veterans that is supported by a curriculum created by doctoral student and veteran Trevor Foote, and doctoral students Emily Moser and Sarah Cantu at Texas A&M (Friedlander, 2021).

Some researchers in veteran composition studies believe aligning pedagogy with ways the student-veterans already know how to learn, such as the ways in which they were taught in the service, creates a more familiar and understandable way for student-veterans to transition

(Mallory & Downs, 2014; Hart & Thompson, 2016). In this model, having a well-structured environment, lessons, expectations, and a product for the veteran to produce are key to ensuring comfortability when it comes to writing classroom expectations. Establishing comfortable classroom (or workshop) expectations can mean many things depending on who the classroom is geared toward. Two researchers in particular, Angie Mallory and Doug Downs (2014), propose that essentially everything in the military relies on scripts that service members must follow, whereas in composition classrooms, instructors “seek self-directed learning” (p. 61). This difference in expectation in traditional writing classrooms can cause unease for student-veterans who view self-directed learning as running counter to strong instructor leadership.

According to Mallory and Downs (2014), while serving, the best service members are the ones who understand that to be excellent in the military one must dutifully and strictly “follow scripts for appearance, obedience, timeliness, knowing-without-learning, and script following” (p. 60). They use the example that even simple human interaction—greetings and salutations—in the military is scripted in a 20-page chapter on “Courtesies,” which also includes ten pages on how, when, and who to salute. At The United States Military Academy at West Point, cadets are given a detailed breakdown of the proper way to cut a pie, and many first years often carry a stencil of the proper pattern around in their hats to ensure they do not deviate from the script (Mullaney, 2010). While the authors detail the reliance on these scripts for veterans, they also do not propose trying to teach using scripts but instead propose ways to transition from a script-based understanding to a means of understanding with more autonomy. Well structured, clear directions, detailed feedback, and strong campus support structures are methods used to help support student-veterans in this type of writing classroom. Additionally, Mallory and Downs

argue against placating to the demands of student-veterans to have everything spelled out for them—an expectation they view as being carried over from their military training.

Other researchers focus more on teacher training for supporting veterans in the writing classroom, such as Thomas Sura (2016), who grounds his ideas in preparing educators for veteran students in his article, “Preparing First-Year Writing Instructors to Work with Veterans.” Here Sura (2016) examines “Veteran-friendly” education in the writing classroom and considers the shortfalls of prior methods, specifically citing Mallory & Downs (2014) as an example of a limited way of providing veteran-friendly education due to the translation of these practices to administrative structures outside the classroom (p. 188). Sura also discusses the limitations of cohort veteran-only models of classroom instruction and veteran-focused classes for both veterans and civilians. Sura (2016) claims that the cohort model, veteran only classes, struggle to succeed and often leave veterans panicking to find last minute classes due to the course being dropped for low enrollment.

One researcher Darren Keast (2013) describes his veteran-focused course as having good enrollment, but only a handful of student-veterans each semester. Additionally, Keast claims to have had to battle faculty who saw the veteran identity as a “flavor” of composition course that would set a precedent for such “topics-based courses” (p. 2-3). Keast (2013) was quick to point out that it is his contention the veteran identity is no more a “flavor” than any other courses “that targeted particular student identities—women, gays and lesbians, food service workers, African Americans, Latinos, and Asian Americans,” and even goes on to argue that military service “can be as much of a universally influencing and transforming experience as gender, ethnic or racial identity, or even sexual identity” (p.3). It is important to note that Keast is not arguing here that the plight of these various groups, or the contexts in which they arose, are similar. Just that the

experiences can be equally as influencing on the individual given the strong ties to the identity and the marginalization within the academy.

From examinations of various writing spaces, many of which were discussed above, Hart & Thompson (2020) developed a simple model of understanding the types of spaces that veterans engaging in the writing process find themselves in. This general stratified model of veteran writing spaces is comprised of a hierarchy of writing courses, those that are “Veteran-friendly,” “Veteran-focused,” and “Veteran-only” (Hart & Thompson, 2020). The model was initially created to examine higher education classrooms that cater to student-veterans, but the model works well to also capture various writing spaces. Despite its simplicity, “this delineation among veteran-included classrooms is important because it reveals the range in which veterans engage with and are invited into the educational process” (Herman, 2020). The writing workshop under examination in this study is a “Veteran-only” space.

Well-being: Military, Veterans, & Writing

Well-being is defined in this study as a multi-dimensional construct capturing a holistic view of an individual’s propensity to engage, participate, and find satisfaction in the critical life domains of vocation, health, finances, and social relationships (Bauer et al., 2018; Matthieu et al., 2018; Vogt et al., 2018). However, this is a narrow definition of the concept of well-being constructed from a scoping review of veteran well-being research. In fact, there is not a single consensus on what the construct of “well-being” entails and for whom. Tellegen et al. (1988), have proposed conceptual models that link personality to subjective well-being, proposing that some people have a genetic predisposition to happiness while others have a predisposition to unhappiness. By conducting a study on twins with specific markers being raised in the same and separate households, Tellegen et al. (1988) found that up to 40% of the variability in an

individual's propensity to feel happiness could be genetic. However, while happiness may be associated with positive well-being, some researchers believe the need to maximize happiness in western society has the potential to inhibit subjective well-being.

The maximization of happiness as a moderating factor of well-being is often criticized in non-western well-being research as a WEIRD (Western, Educated, Industrialized, Rich, Democratic) conceptual focus (Armstrong, 2024). This maximization principle relies on an intuitive understanding of the fundamental human desires to survive and thrive—to be happy (Kesebir & Diener, 2008) and secure (Maslow, 1943). The maximization principle—a hedonic perspective of happiness—has been described by Howard (2000), as the “most basic, unexamined assumption about human nature” (p. 511). The idea that happiness does not have a ceiling—that more happiness is always better—is something that certain western cultures assume and proliferate.

Hornsey et al. (2018) conducted two studies examining this maximization principle (Ns = 2,392 & 6,239), asking the same questions of people from twenty-seven nations aimed at understanding, “If participants could choose their ideal level of happiness, pleasure, freedom, health, self-esteem, longevity, and intelligence, what level would they choose?” (p. 1393). The cultures that subscribe less to the maximization principle are generally “holistic cultures,” defined as being predominantly influenced by Buddhism, Confucianism, Hinduism, Jainism, or Taoism—ideologies that center the concept of balance instead of maximization (Grossmann, Huynh, & Ellsworth, 2016). Holistic cultures tended toward more of a moderation principle, where people “impose mindful ceilings on how much of a good thing they aspire to in a perfect world” (p. 1395). One thought is that holistic cultures' *ideal* levels of happiness, IQ, pleasure, self-esteem, health, and freedom are lower and perhaps therefore more often achievable.

Hedonic well-being then is aimed at maximization of pleasure and minimizing pain, which can also be measured by one's general satisfaction with life. In this study, I selected to measure satisfaction with life, a hedonic well-being factor, using the Satisfaction with Life Scale (SWLS). I also chose to measure objective life factors that predict well-being using the Well-being Inventory (WBI) (Vogt et al., 2018), with the hypothesis that change over time could be seen in both the subjective measures of general life satisfaction (SWLS) and the more objective life factors (WBI).

The theoretical grounding of the WBI comes from past research into the construct of well-being. Researchers Gladis et al. (2000), examine well-being through a "Quality of Life" framework encompassing the constructs of satisfaction, functioning, and objective life circumstances (p. 14). The WBI uses these same constructs for understanding how one engages, functions, and finds satisfaction in life's arenas, with slight modifications (e.g. the "objective life circumstances" construct is now called "status"). Consequently, the WBI—and the research that conceptually grounds it—provides a way of understanding not only the domains of well-being, but also the individual and contextual circumstances around those domains. For example, in an intimate relationship, an individual can be engaged (status) and feel supported and stable (functioning) but not feel fulfillment or enjoyment (satisfaction). Likewise, individuals can feel enjoyment or fulfillment (satisfaction) without being in a healthy (functioning) relationship. Each provides a different outcome for one's well-being, and making these distinctions is important when considering the ways in which an individual engages with these life domains.

In addition to Gladis et al.'s Quality of Life framework (2000), other well-being frameworks have been used historically by researchers examining both veteran and civilian populations (Berglass & Harrell, 2012; Bishop, Miller, & Chapin, 2008; Cummins, 1996).

Together, these additional frameworks present four life domains that are applicable to the construct of well-being, “Vocation, Finances, Health, and Social Relationships.” The intersection of Gladis et al.’s (2000) quality of life constructs and the four life domains presented here (Berglass & Harrell, 2012; Cummins, 1996) make for the conceptual grounding of the Well-being Inventory (WBI).

Well-being & (Veteran) Writing

In 2014, “Veterans in Society” held a conference in Virginia on “Humanizing the Discourse” around veterans in academia. At this conference, a Northern Kentucky University composition researcher, Merideth Singleton (2017), presented on “Writing and Preserving Veterans’ Words.” In this presentation, Singleton made the point that “Research on military veteran writing and the transition to the classroom reveals that students often struggle with similar repatriation issues both inside and outside academia. For some, these issues are addressed through therapeutic writing opportunities” (p. 3). Once such type of therapeutic writing opportunity was examined by Sayer et al., (2015), who investigated an *online* expressive writing program through a randomized controlled trial of (n=1292) veterans. They examined whether online expressive writing could address readjustment difficulties for military veterans and found that “Expressive writing was more effective than no writing in reducing PTSD symptoms, anger, distress, reintegration problems, and physical complaints, and more effective than no writing in improving social support” (p. 387). The results of this are not too surprising given the long history of writing as a therapeutic intervention.

Writing interventions have been used formally as therapeutic treatments since the 1980’s (Brand, 1980). According to Mugerwa & Holden (2014), early experiments in writing therapy had participants writing about “stressful events” for up to 20-minute increments over three to

four meetings. A control group generally wrote about “superficial non-emotive topics.” The findings of these early studies showed, the experimental groups “observed better health, improved immune system functioning, and took fewer days off work due to illness” (p. 661). From this research, another study (Klapow et al., 2001) took up examining writing as a method of general medical practice, looking to see if writing could “reduce the somatic and distress symptoms in older patients” and found that short 20-minute writing sessions “reduced the use of outpatient services and associated costs to half that of the control group” (p. 134; Mugerwa & Holden, 2012).

In 1999 Psychotherapist and researcher Kathleen Adams composed an article titled, “Writing as Therapy” published in the journal *Counseling and Human Development* about the efficacy of writing as a therapeutic practice. In discussing the tie between therapy and writing, Adams (1999) quotes a client of hers who states, “A new pen and notebook do not a journal make” (p. 5). Adams uses this quote to discuss the fact that the simple act of writing itself, having the tools, sitting down, and writing words, is not formal therapy—it takes intention, effort, and ideally guidance from a trained professional.

In the field of English, writing has long been informally viewed as therapeutic through the act of journaling (Adams, 2013). The journal is a way for people to speak to a trusted friend about their life and their troubles, to *reflect* and grow. It is this act of reflection that is often presented as an informal therapeutic practice in creative circles (DaPra, 2013), and as a formal practice in clinical practices, such as Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT) (Gale & Schröder, 2014). In fact, unlike many other therapeutic practices, there is even evidence to show that reflection is even effective for therapists to “self-practice,” referring to the act of using the same reflective strategies they use on their clients on themselves (Gale & Schröder, 2014). John

Dewey (1997), commenting on the importance and power of reflective practice once said, “reflective thinking alone is educative” (p. 2).

Singleton (2017) discusses the movement of smaller university workshops to large national writing projects, and the propensity for the evolution to be similar among large national projects, stating, “Large-scale national projects like [Veterans’ Voices, Warrior Writers, and Veterans Writing Project] begin at the college level and are the results of initially small military veteran student writing projects” (p. 4). According to Singleton (2017), these initially small writing groups have grown into national projects that are capable of sharing the writing of countless veterans to a national audience and have been actively supporting veterans during their transition. In fact, she speaks, like many do about writing and veterans, indirectly about the perceived therapeutic outcomes of writing workshops. For example, Singleton (2017) goes on to state that “Projects including Warrior Writers, Veterans Writing Project, and Veterans’ Voices create environments for veterans to write about their personal, traumatic experiences as a way to cognitively process post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and its complications” (p.4).

The therapeutic value of writing workshops is also often discussed within the workshops themselves, between participants. For example, one of the participants of CSU’s veterans writing workshop, a licensed therapist in the area, Mark Cunningham, spoke to the therapeutic value of the space in an interview published on the workshop’s website, and he states, “When I tell people about the workshop, I say ‘I am the only therapist there and I am not operating as a therapist, but boy does it *feel* like there is therapy going on’” (MCCW, 2019). Jim Smith, another participant of CSU’s workshop and a Vietnam war veteran, echoed Cunningham’s sentiment years later in an article published by CSU’s *Source*. When asked what he thought about the workshop, he said “This [workshop] gives you an opportunity to express your feelings about things that you don’t

with other people. I felt very comfortable doing that here. What I like most is being able to put it down on paper, and then let it go. Which maybe I've never done for 50 years since Vietnam” (Leonard, 2022).

Testaments like this blanket the first page of Warrior Writers' book as well, *Warrior Writers: A Collection of Writing & Artwork by Veterans*. with one Iraq veteran and author, Patrick Doherty, saying within Warrior Writers he “found a fellowship of understanding and a sense of community. It has been a supportive space for me to express my creativity and find my voice” (Calica & Basl, 2014, p. i). Another veteran author who served in Somalia, Sarah Mess, called Warrior Writers “a lifeline that stands in the way of avoidance, isolation, depression, and suicidal ideation” (p. i).

Collectively, this scholarship and practice-based testimony point to writing as a deliberate, socially supported activity that can yield therapeutic benefits (Adams, 1999; Gale & Schröder, 2014; Singleton, 2017). What remains less explicit is *how* writing produces those effects. To articulate the mechanism, I ground the present study in the Cognitive Process Theory of Writing (Flower & Hayes, 1981), which models writing as goal-directed problem solving—planning, translating, and reviewing—in ways that plausibly mediate changes in well-being.

Guiding Theoretical Framework

This dissertation examines experiential writing workshops as a structured, community-based practice for contemporary veterans and investigates whether guided writing is associated with measurable changes in well-being. Consistent with a critical constructivist perspective, the project treats knowledge as co-constructed in social contexts and positions veterans as meaning-makers whose narratives are shaped through reflective practice. The guiding framework that supports this research is the Cognitive Process Theory of Writing (CPTW; Flower & Hayes,

1981), which provides the conceptual architecture for why and how writing—in the presence of peers and within a scaffolded process—has the potential to support veteran well-being.

The Cognitive Process Theory of Writing

Alongside the rise of formal therapeutic writing treatments in the 1980s was a novel way of viewing the writing as not just a mechanism of archiving, storing, or organizing information, but a generative cognitive and meta-cognitive process. The Cognitive Process Theory of Writing, first proposed by Flower & Hayes (1981), establishes the guiding theory of this research and provides a cognitive structure to the process of writing that rests on four key points:

1. The process of writing is best understood as a set of distinctive thinking processes which writers orchestrate or organize during the act of composing.
2. These processes have a hierarchical, highly embedded organization in which any given process can be embedded within any other.
3. The act of composing itself is a goal-directed thinking process, guided by the writer's own growing network of goals.
4. Writers create their own goals in two key ways: by generating both high-level goals and supporting sub-goals which embody the writer's developing sense of purpose, and then, at times, by changing major goals or even establishing entirely new ones based on what has been learned in the act of writing.

The final point highlights the generative nature of writing through the establishment of new goals based on what has been “learned in the act of writing.” This theory paints writing as not only a means to produce a product, but a process in itself that requires distinct cognitive and meta-cognitive ways of thinking (Tinberg, 2015; Carillo, 2015).

Flower and Hayes (1981) propose that writing is not a linear series of steps but a set of interacting, recursive processes governed by a goal-directed author, influenced by one’s memory and task environment (see Fig. 1.2).

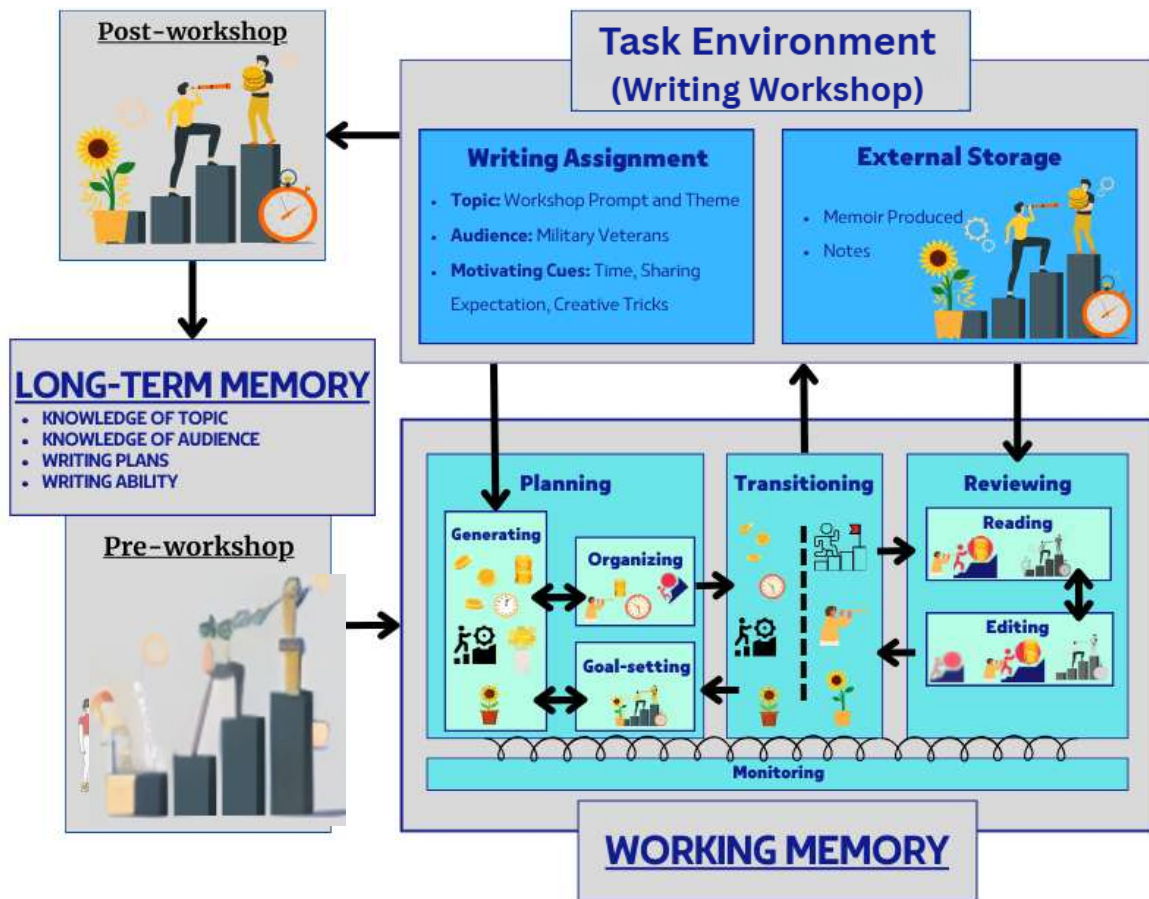


Figure 1.2. *Cognitive Process Theory of Writing in an Expressive Writing Workshop* theorizes how long-term memory interacts with the working memory and the task environment, oscillating between the planning, transitioning, and reviewing phases of the model. The item produced is not the memory as it was, but a reimagined memory that is molded, shaped, and generated by the process.

Cognitively, writers juggle planning, translating, and reviewing while maintaining a representation of audience, purpose, and genre constraints. Planning encompasses idea generation, retrieval from episodic and semantic memory, and organization into an internal outline; translating converts this evolving plan into sentences and paragraphs; reviewing evaluates coherence, style, and alignment with rhetorical goals, triggering revisions at both local and global levels. Executive functions (working memory, attentional shifting, and inhibition) coordinate these subprocesses and manage interference—why time limits, concrete prompts, and

clear task goals often increase fluency by constraining the search space (Hayes, 1996; Kellogg, 2008).

Meta-cognitively, writers monitor progress (i.e. “Is this serving my purpose?”), appraise fit to audience and genre, and regulate strategy use (e.g., adjust the plan, set sub-goals, pause to reread, or solicit feedback). This monitoring loop is recursive and evaluation of the emerging text feeds back into goal revision, sometimes changing the writer’s aims altogether—what Flower and Hayes identify as learning “in the act of writing” (Flower & Hayes, 1981). Expert performance is marked less by effortless transcription than by strategic shifts from knowledge-telling (reporting what is known) to knowledge-transforming (restructuring ideas to solve rhetorical problems and make new meaning) (Bereiter & Scardamalia, 1987). In this sense, writing is not merely expressive; it is generative, reorganizing memory and insight as the text grows.

Within the context of the workshop and this research, CPTW presents writing as a generative process that can support transformative outcomes through proper scaffolding. The workshop (the task environment) is comprised of components that affect how participants select and mold their writing. The prompts, topic cues, veteran audience, feedback/response norms, and physical/social setting all have the potential to constrain or enable the writer’s planning, translating, and reviewing processes—as well as their confidence in sharing their composition in the task environment with the other participants.

The workshop task environment conform to CPTW through 1) prompted writing, which cues planning, goal setting, and idea generation; 2) timed writing, which are a motivating factor to promote quick engagement in transitioning from planning and generating to composing (external storage) and reviewing (editing & reading); and 3) opportunities to share, which allows

participants opportunities to revise and build from the responses of other participant stories, generating new material to shape the final product. The result is a metacognitively rich practice in which veterans articulate purpose, retrieve and restructure experience, and redefine new meaning through old stories, potentially reshaping those stories and making them more accessible in the future.

In parallel, cognitive research on memory has provided insight into how writing processes may be strengthened by interventions that enhance episodic recall. Madore et al. (2016) demonstrated that episodic specificity—the ability to retrieve detailed autobiographical memories—can be systematically improved through a brief induction procedure. Following this induction, participants generated a significantly greater number of internal (episodic) details when recalling past events and imagining future scenarios, though no comparable increase was observed in external (semantic) details or in performance on a control word-definition task. These findings highlight that prompting autobiographical narratives with sensory detail not only enriches memory but also facilitates future-oriented thinking and goal construction.

In the context of the workshop task environment, writing prompts that call for reconstruction of lived-experienced can elicit vivid, emotionally nuanced recollections, while the recursive cycles of planning, translating, and reviewing described by Flower and Hayes (1981) support deeper elaboration and refinement of these memories. In turn, such enriched recall can presumably improve well-being outcomes by fostering clarity, meaning, and accessibility of personal stories (Madore et al., 2016).

Having established CPTW—and related work on episodic specificity—as the analytic lens for how guided, veteran-only writing can generate new meanings, it follows that the workshop is also a socially co-constructed task environment whose dynamics are shaped by

everyone in the room. Because my insider status as a veteran inevitably mediates how prompts are framed, how stories are received, and how evidence is interpreted, I now make that stance explicit by turning to my researcher positionality.

Researcher Positionality

In the following section, I reflect on my positionality as a researcher in this study, to include an analysis of the identities that intersect with the population under study. I also present the ways in which I engage with the research process given my positionality, while providing justification for these choices. To do this, I dive into my own theory of knowledge—my own epistemology—and how I think about the research process. Educator and researcher Egon Guba (1990) presents the concept of epistemology through a question: “What is the nature of the relationship between the knower (the inquirer) and the known (or knowable)?” (p.18). Subsequently, I share the nature of my own relationship with the research process and the topic under examination as a means of making transparent the foundation of understanding this project is built upon.

I contend that bias is inescapable, and much of the ideological *and* methodological assumptions of research objectivity in the social sciences are founded in colonial epistemologies inextricably linked to Eurocentric views of social structures and norms. Maxwell Owusu (1978), a researcher at the Chicago School, discusses this through the concept of structural-functional empiricism in early ethnographic studies. Structural-functional empiricism here refers to the contemporary ill-regarded theory that led researchers into “primitive” societies to gain insight into the “complex” social structures in Western society—assumptions that are no longer supported in the field. Owusu (1978), in his text “Ethnography in Africa: The Usefulness of the Useless,” critiques this perspective in traditional ethnographic fieldwork, stating:

Critics point to inherent deficiencies in structural-functional empiricism, with its assumptions of cultural homogeneity, the “tribal” isolate, and tendencies toward equilibrium of the social order; a-, anti-, or nonhistorical biases; normative focus; data-theory tautologies; and, above all, Eurocentric or racist perspectives that have failed to provide a genuine and total critique of colonial society. (p. 311)

Similar to Dr. Owusu, I view believing oneself to actually be a disinterested, objective researcher—or as Ralph Waldo Emerson might call it, a “transparent eyeball” (1836)—creates gaps in understanding that are inevitably filled with the assumptions of the researcher. The structural-functional ethnographer could not see the imposed bias and, through half-open eyes, claimed clarity and objectivity.

As Owusu (1978) later pointed out, structural-functional empiricism disallows centering any other cultural view, and as such does not genuinely interrogate the colonial views from which these supposedly ahistorical assumptions sprout (p. 311). This limiting interpretation can be seen in the famous ethnographic example of the difference between a blink, a biological human action, and a wink, a socially constructed symbol that carries meaning (Geertz, 1973). For someone who is oblivious to the cultural nuances required to understand the difference between a wink and a blink, the meaning is lost, and an accurate interpretation of any social situation in which a wink is used is not accessible.

Researcher curiosity and interest in a field ultimately motivate research. I am a military veteran researching a phenomenon that has impacted me. As humans, we seek out professions that call to us, and as researchers, we answer questions that matter to us. This positionality as an insider imposes an element of bias on the study; however, it also provides distinct advantages to the research. This insider positionality provides participants with a greater sense of comfort, as they may feel more at ease sharing sensitive or personal experiences with someone who has navigated similar circumstances as them. The shared background allowed me to recognize

cultural nuances (e.g., blink or wink) that might otherwise be overlooked. Additionally, I can draw on my lived experience to connect with the participants during the workshop.

In this study, these elements turned out to be important. The veterans in the study highlighted the veteran-only space as a positive and freeing context in which they could speak plainly, be understood without translation, and risk vulnerability without fear of misrecognition. My presence as a veteran participant-researcher helped secure that context: it signaled cultural connection, reduced participants' explanatory labor, and enabled an ethically attuned interpretation of meanings embedded in shared idioms and practices. Simultaneously, this insider stance demanded disciplined reflexivity to monitor how my assumptions might shape what was asked, heard, and reported. Acknowledging both the affordances and limits of this position, I situate the study within critical and constructivist research paradigms that understand knowledge as co-constructed in situated interaction while explicitly attending to the power, history, and institutional narratives shaping veterans' lives.

Paradigm: Critical Constructivism

Paradigmatically, I would situate myself as a critical constructivist. I view existential knowledge and understanding as constructed by humans through discursive means. Within the constructivist paradigm, "reality is not an object that can be discovered and measured but rather a construction of the human mind" (Merriam, 1991, p. 48). This manner of thinking is often attributed to the symbolic interactionism school of thought, a concept illuminated by sociological researchers from the Chicago School, Mead, Cooley, and Blumer (Denzin, 2010).

Symbolic interactionism claims that society is a product of the actions and interactions of people. Humans create symbolic meaning through shared verbal and non-verbal languages, and these shared symbolic interactions construct society, shaping the social and cultural ways in

which humans understand and react. Blumer (1981) called this the “Social Life of Human Society,” where “meanings are defined by the mass media, including advertising, cinema and television, and identities are represented in terms of salient cultural categories” (Denzin, 2010). In Blumer’s view, a society consists of collaborative social acts and agreements formed and carried out by its members. An example I share with my students to describe this constructivist philosophy is explained through color and social expectation: a light that is green has no meaning in a vacuum, but ask a friend while driving around any street in the United States, “What does a green light mean?” and the response will be something like “A green light means go.” This is a shared cultural understanding constructed to help people travel safely in vehicles.

It is a collaborative agreement, and it is so ubiquitous that it can be difficult to separate the meaning “Go” from the symbol “Green light,” especially in a situation that carries contextual connection to the social agreement. Green does not mean “Go”—It is just a description, “green,” as blue is blue; however, humans can never truly separate themselves from their socially and culturally instituted biases. Biases construct our understanding of the world around us and, in many ways, dictate how we interact with it. When I approach a green light, I continue through without thinking about the meaning of the “green light.” Social constructions can be, and often are, as real as physical constructions. If someone runs a red light, serious physical consequences in deviating from that socially constructed system are very possible.

I also view these constructions as systems that should be critically examined and thoughtfully transformed for the benefit of the humans who participate in them. This is a critical perspective that I borrow from Brazilian education theorist and researcher, Paulo Freire (1993) and his notion of *Critical Consciousness* or *conscientização*. Critical Consciousness is a transformative, self-reflexive process—a liberation of the soul. It is the ability to intervene in

one's own life to create change within it. This process first relies on a critical interrogation of the social, political, and economic forms of oppression that shape one's life, followed by collective action to deconstruct and transform the systems and structures that reinforce those forms of oppression. In this way, Critical Consciousness is more than a reflective process; it is also strategic, dialogic, and self-reflexive. It requires both individual and collective reflection on process and positionality.

The participants of the writing workshop under examination interrogated their stations within military and civilian culture by processing any forms of oppression, both individually and collectively, that shaped their culturally constructed identity as U.S. service members and military veterans. They do this through prompts that ask them to examine significant moments in their lives as they pertain to the service and share them in a room of other veterans at various distances in time and spirit to military culture.

Chapter Summary

Chapter One introduces the foundation and scope of the study, situating it within the broader field of veteran well-being and expressive writing research. The chapter begins by outlining the context and rationale for examining experiential writing workshops as structured, low-cost interventions designed to foster community, connection, and improved well-being for U.S. military veterans. The chapter grounds the study in the view that experiential writing in a community setting is a generative and therapeutic process that can support veteran well-being through accessing and reshaping past-experiences through workshop participation. The overall aims of the study are to identify *if* and *how* participation in an experiential veteran writing workshop supports or constrains participant satisfaction with life and well-being, and to explore

the ways in which changes occur both independently over time and thematically, according to participants.

Well-being in this case focuses on subjective hedonic measures such as life satisfaction—assessed here through the SWLS (Diener et al., 1985). The study’s conceptualization of well-being also includes eudaimonic and objective life domains through the WBI (Vogt et al., 2018). Each of these well-being measures are aimed at capturing changes in participant well-being, predicated on the guiding theoretical framework: CPTW which presents writing as a reflective, recursive, and generative process with the potential to help veteran participants reconnect with and reshape the memory of past experiences. Following this theoretical foundation, the chapter situates researcher positionality, explicitly aligning the work within a critical constructivist paradigm, and presents the research structure as a quasi-experimental, explanatory mixed-methods design.

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CHAPTER TWO: A QUASI-EXPERIMENTAL EXAMINATION OF SATISFACTION WITH LIFE IN AN EXPRESSIVE VETERAN WRITING PROGRAM

Abstract

Using a quasi-experimental design, this study examines the effects of an in-person experiential writing program on military veteran life satisfaction using a subjective measure of hedonic well-being, the Satisfaction with Life Scale (SWLS) (Diener, 1985). Nineteen (n=19) U.S. military veterans who met the study criteria agreed to participate. After attrition, thirteen (n=13) were included in the final analysis. The treatment group (n=6) participated in an experiential writing workshop once a week for two hours for eight weeks. The control group (n=7) refrained from experiential writing for the duration of the twelve-week study. The SWLS was administered to all participants four times during the twelve weeks, once per month, measuring changes in subjective well-being. A two-way mixed ANOVA with repeated measures showed the veteran workshop participants' life satisfaction scores increased more over the 12-week period than those of the control group. In fact, by the end of the program the mean treatment group's average Satisfaction with Life Scale (SWLS) score rose from a "Below Average" to an "Average" category of life satisfaction, whereas the control group's average remained nearly unchanged. Individual growth modeling (IGM) also highlighted that on average, participants with a lower initial status in satisfaction with life—lower general life satisfaction—saw the largest increase, highlighting the efficacy of the model as an intervention for veterans with lower average life satisfaction scores on the SWLS.

Keywords: veteran, well-being, experiential, expressive writing, satisfaction with life.

Introduction

The transition from military to civilian life is a multidimensional process that touches every aspect of a veteran's well-being. While some veterans thrive after separation, successfully pursuing careers, education, and entrepreneurship, many face challenges that stem from the abrupt shift in identity, community, and daily structure that military service provides.

Reintegration is not simply a logistical adjustment but a deeply personal process that involves renegotiating purpose, belonging, and stability at various levels of the veteran's system (Elnitsky et al., 2017). Scholars have noted that these difficulties often emerge at the intersection of psychological health, social connectedness, and vocational adjustment, underscoring the need for supportive interventions that are both accessible and holistic (Etchin et al., 2022; J. K. Morgan et al., 2017; N. R. Morgan et al., 2020; Sherman et al., 2015).

Writing workshops for veterans, like this one under examination, exist around the country offering therapeutic writing opportunities and community support. One nationally recognized writing workshop for veterans, Warrior Writers, is a veteran-focused creative arts organization that offers writing workshops designed to help military veterans express themselves, providing a supportive environment to explore themes of grief and healing through personal creative narratives (Lovella, 2022). Similarly, the NYU Veterans Writing Workshop, inaugurated in 2008 by former Ambassador Jean Kennedy Smith, is a free, non-partisan outreach program serving veterans in New York City. Over the years, it has supported the literary development of veteran writers, with alumni who have gone on to achieve significant recognition, including prestigious awards such as the National Book Award (NYU Veterans Writing Workshop, 2017). Also in New York, the Syracuse Veterans' Writing Group (SVWG), established in 2010, meets monthly and often begins with mindfulness exercises before transitioning into workshop activities. Its

programming emphasizes nonfiction writing, story drafting, peer feedback, encouragement, and preparation for publication (Syracuse Veterans' Writing Group, n.d.). Finally, the Veterans Writing Project, founded by Ron Capps in 2011, provides no-cost creative writing opportunities through two-day intensive seminars, genre-specific workshops (covering nonfiction, fiction, poetry, playwriting), and even songwriting seminars. The organization's mission extends beyond individual expression by offering veterans and their families multiple avenues for literary and creative engagement (Veterans Writing Project, 2025).

The popularity of these workshops should not come as a surprise considering that historically military personnel and veterans have been prolific writers. During World War I, American military leaders actively encouraged service members to maintain frequent letter writing and journaling, recognizing how vital for morale it was to maintain communication with loved ones while in the trenches (Cross, Harris, & Moloney, 2022). Many of these important documents are archived in the U.S. Library of Congress' "Veteran History Project," a curated collection of over 120,000 service members' personal memoirs and letters, "[making] accessible the firsthand narratives of U.S. military veterans who served from World War I through more recent conflicts. . ." (Library of Congress, 2024, p.1). These narratives include general correspondence between loved ones, powerful reflections of war, and creative expressions of service, all working to create a detailed image of the diverse experiences of service members throughout history. One such narrative, composed by World War I veteran Morris Albert Martin (1918), details his time in the trenches from the comfort of an infirmary bed, painting a vivid picture of the stark realities of war:

Lying there in [a] nice clean bed, I gave myself over to some reflections. . . . Those boys up there were still in that Hell, and the end wasn't in sight yet. Closing my eyes I could still see those mangled and bloody bodies of my buddies, and I began to wonder what it was all about. (p. 28)

The final thought that Martin shares in this excerpt, “I began to wonder what it was all about,” is a simple yet powerful statement of critical reflection, and a sign that Martin is questioning the war effort.

Like Martin, many of the veterans who enter the experiential writing workshop under examination in this study find themselves asking similar questions in different ways (e.g. What was I doing there? What was my purpose? Why were we fighting? Why them and not me? etc.). These are critical questions that begin to deconstruct the complex web of sociopolitical processes that drive the military machine and the service member’s role in it. The act of writing is a prominent self-selected method used by many military members and veterans to explore and share complex and novel experiences of war and trauma. It is an accessible, reliable, and low-resource option that has the potential to support literacy, reflective practice, and provides a safe and therapeutic outlet to explore challenging moments.

Purpose & Aims

The purpose of this research, then, is to better understand *if* and *how* an experiential writing program for military veterans supports or constrains well-being. U.S. military veterans often seek out support from community programming to supplement their transition back into civilian society (Morgan et al., 2020), and those who do seek out supplementary transition assistance from community programs show better well-being outcomes than veterans who do not (Morgan et al., 2020). This study aims to examine subjective well-being outcomes associated with satisfaction with life over the course of a community veteran writing program. The veteran writing program is held in a group setting where participants compose and share experiential narratives of military life, composed around curated prompts.

Aim 1: To identify *if* and *how* experiential military veteran writing program supports or constrains participant satisfaction with life as a measure of subjective well-being.

Aim 2: To track and compare trajectories of change over time in satisfaction with life for participants of an experiential veteran writing program.

Theoretical Frameworks

This study is theoretically grounded using Flower & Hayes Cognitive Process Theory of Writing (CPTW) (1981) working in tandem with two frames for conceptualizing the complex construct of well-being. The first well-being framework is borrowed from Diener et al., (1985), who present satisfaction with life as a subjective, hedonic measure of well-being where more satisfaction with life is associated with positive well-being. The second well-being frame, Well-being Inventory (WBI), is borrowed from Vogt et al. (2018), and is aimed at measuring more objective life factors associated with well-being. In this instance, the WBI provides a conceptual framework for a round of a priori coding used to help identify which domains and types of well-being are affected by the experiential writing program.

Cognitive Process Theory of Writing (CPTW)

Around the same time writing started to be used formally in clinical and therapeutic practice, Carnegie Mellon researchers Linda Flower and John Hayes published their paper framing CPTW (1981), portraying the act of writing as not simply archival or descriptive, and not just “as a series of decisions and choices,” but as a generative action and skill requiring both cognitive and meta-cognitive processes (p. 365). Flower and Hayes (1981) viewed the writing process as having three main components: planning, translating, and reviewing. Within the writing process, these three components are framed as part of the writer’s working memory. When reviewing, writers must read, reread, and edit their work. They also must plan and

organize their thoughts, considering their impact on their intended and unintended audiences. Finally, writers must then contend with the translation of those thoughts onto the page. The translation process takes the abstract and makes it concrete, requiring decisions be made by the writer while considering the overall text’s purpose, audience, and genre. Writers oscillate back and forth between these three components, but not necessarily in a fixed order.

According to Flower & Hayes (1981), this process has the capacity to generate new meaning, allowing for the formulation of novel concepts and ideas. New meaning is generated when the retrieval of information from one’s long-term memory interacts with the information presented in the task environment (see Fig 2.1).

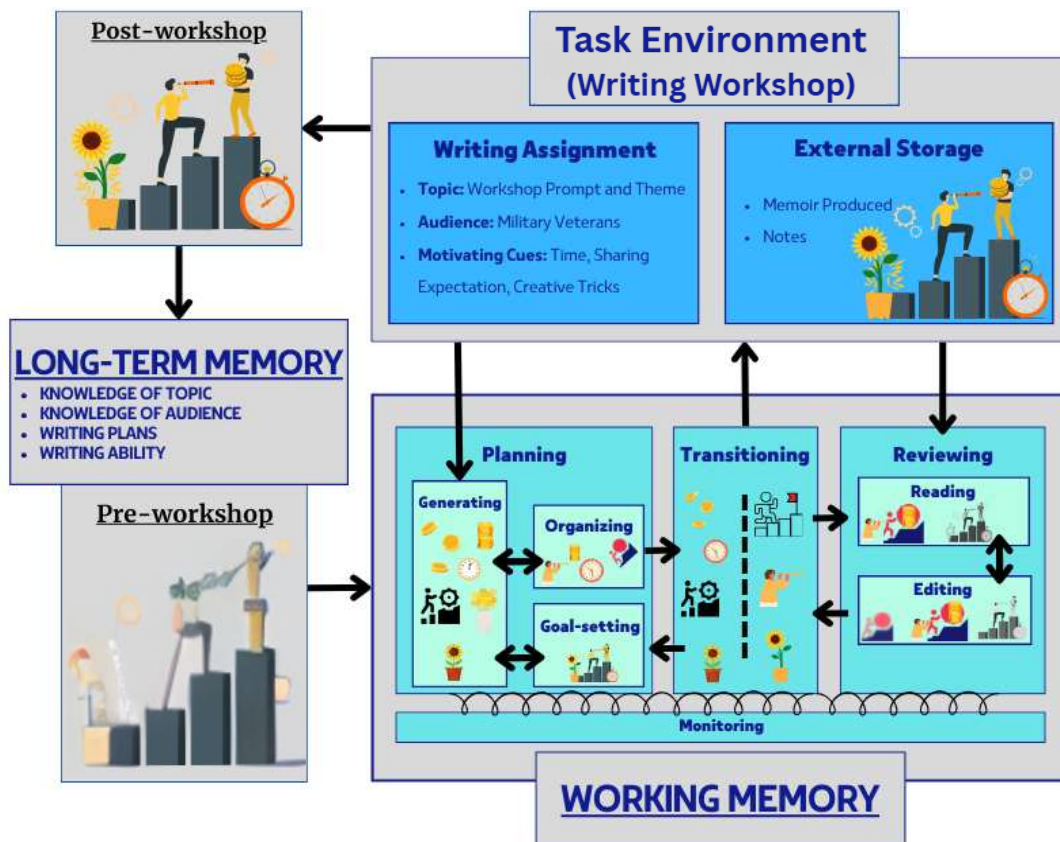


Figure 2.1. *Cognitive Process Theory of Writing in an Experiential Writing Workshop* models how long-term memory interacts with the working memory and the task environment, oscillating between the planning, transitioning, and reviewing phases of the model. The item produced is not the memory as it was, but a reimagined memory that is molded, shaped, and generated by the process.

This theoretical grounding reinforces the idea that the process of writing, as it relates to our own experiences, can be a therapeutic tool and can help reshape and reframe past traumas. The

Cognitive Process Theory of Writing poses four key points (Flower & Hayes, 1981):

1. The process of writing is best understood as a set of distinctive thinking processes which writers orchestrate or organize during the act of composing.
2. These processes have a hierarchical, highly embedded organization in which any given process can be embedded within any other.
3. The act of composing itself is a goal-directed thinking process, guided by the writer's own growing network of goals.
4. Writers create their own goals in two important ways: by generating both high-level goals and supporting sub-goals which embody the writer's developing sense of purpose, and then, at times, by changing major goals or even establishing entirely new ones based on what has been learned in the act of writing.

The first point highlights that writing is not just putting words on paper. It is a complex mental activity that involves a series of processes that writers must manage and coordinate to complete the composition they are after. This leads into the second point that suggests that parts of the writing process are interconnected and overlap with one another. For example, while composing a paragraph, a writer might take a pause to brainstorm more ideas for a specific phrase or sentence. A writer might then go back and edit a previous part of the paper to better align with the new content. This point highlights how each of the different writing processes are interwoven and inextricably linked with one another.

Point three of the CPTW suggests that writing is purposeful. Writers come to the page with specific goals in mind, such as informing or persuading an audience, or even for

entertainment. As writers compose their paper, these goals are adjusted, and new strategies are used to achieve the desired outcome of the text. The final point highlights the generative nature of writing through the establishment of new goals based on what has been “learned in the act of writing.” This theory paints writing as not only a means to produce a product, but a process in itself that requires distinct cognitive and meta-cognitive ways of thinking (Tinberg, 2015; Carillo, 2015).

Ultimately, within the context of this study, the CPTW framework lends support to the idea that when prompting writing within an experiential genre like memoir, writers are given an opportunity to plan, set goals, generate ideas, and translate their own memories which make for the foundation of the content they produce. They then read, re-read, and edit those memories in real time. They deeply and consciously consider the qualities and components of the story—of their memory—and how it is translated and visually represented on the page.

Within a veteran-only community writing space using the model under examination, veteran participants are also able to share and have dialogue about their writing and the memories tied to their story. In certain circumstances, tragic memories of war or loss are composed and recomposed from various perspectives, generating new ways of understanding both the person who composed the memory, as well as the memory itself. For example, prior to this study, one program participant composed a tragic story of taking another’s life, and the memory was conjured from a prompt about extreme circumstances in military life. Later, this same participant wrote about that same moment on a prompt about feeling lost—as if in a dense fog or jungle—and again on a prompt that asked him to write a letter to an enemy combatant. Finally, that same story was composed off a prompt about feeling stuck, as if being pulled by

“Gravity,” which is what the author, Ryan Lanham (2020), named the piece he chose to publish about that moment in the first edition of the veteran writing workshop’s journal, *Charlie Mike*:

Gravity

Run. Run away. He was running away when I caught him. I—my bullets—caught him.

Up to him. Into him. Lodged in his back.

Left of spine. An upward strafe. Toward heart, home.

How many steps with me in him?

How many feet between us—my heart, his—my life, his—when they drag him back, on his back, slide him in the truck, beneath my feet, beneath my gunner platform?

My hands still shaking. Sweat rolls down my cheek. A tear, salty. Emotionless. Pools on chin. Holds there. Sways bulbous. Then slips, falls—

One. Two. Three. Four. Five. Six. Seven.

Me on him. In him.

Seven feet I peer down into darkness. Shadows. Black in my heart, seeping in.

It beats steady now. Fat on blood, adrenaline.

No holes pulsating red ooze.

No red shirt, red pants, red socks, red shoes, red legs, red arms, red back, red face.

No grimace or Quran. No moans or prayer beads. No Allah tonight.

Just the click of karmic debt, a handcuff locking souls. Tug of my new black moon.

(p.159)

This memory is being reconciled, reframed, reflected, and rewritten over and over. With each new story, Lanham has to translate his memory, plan his composition, and review his work to compare it with his truth, asking if it accurately captures not just the memory, but the feeling and knowledge of this experience as it transcends the battlefield. With the aim of capturing or emphasizing the feelings the memory causes, participants must oscillate from planning, composing and translating, creating new ways of understanding and new ways of accessing the memory. Retelling the story from various prompts creates more opportunity to rework and remap the way that memory is understood and reconciled.

The Cognitive Process Theory of Writing (CPTW) has previously been applied as a theoretical framework to examine writing practices among military veterans. Jim Ott (2020), for example, explored the use of expressive writing as a transitional support for student-veterans and found that structured prompts in academic settings promoted community belonging, the development of narrative identity, and ultimately enhanced well-being through both social and academic integration. Taken together, these composing cycles and communal dialogues offer plausible mechanisms through which writing may reshape veterans' moment-to-moment emotions and their broader appraisals of life. Accordingly, the next section specifies the well-being constructs under study, with an emphasis on hedonic well-being—operationalized here as life satisfaction

Hedonic Well-being: Life Satisfaction

This study particularly focuses on the construct of “hedonic” subjective well-being and borrows from the Subjective Well-being Framework (Diener et al., 2015). Hedonic well-being represents the maximization of pleasure and minimizing pain and emphasizes constructs such as happiness (Lyubomirsky & Lepper, 1999), positive affect and low negative affect (Kahneman, Diener, & Schwarz, 1999), and satisfaction with life (Diener, 1984;).

This Hedonic perspective contrasts with Eudaimonic well-being, which refers to a model of psychological health grounded in the pursuit of meaning, purpose and the realization of one's potential. Unlike Hedonic well-being which emphasizes happiness and pleasure, eudaimonic well-being is concerned with living in alignment with one's true self and values (Ryan & Deci, 2001). Rooted in Aristotelian philosophy, this approach emphasizes human flourishing (*eudaimonia*) as a result of engaging in intrinsically meaningful activities, cultivating personal growth, and contributing to something beyond the self (Ryff, 1989). Key dimensions include

autonomy, personal growth, purpose in life, environmental mastery, positive relations with others, and self-acceptance (Ryff & Keyes, 1995). Measures of eudemonic well-being are captured in the “function” measures of the Well-being Inventory in this study and frame a longer-term outcome of domain specific questions of ability to function within the specific subscales of those domains.

Hedonic well-being in this research study is measured by one’s general satisfaction with life using the Satisfaction with Life Scale (SWLS) (Diener, 1985). The SWLS, a Likert-scale survey, is a subjective measure of general life satisfaction, allowing participants the opportunity to weigh the importance of the various domains of well-being as they consider the questions in the survey.

Review of Background Literature

In the field of English, writing has long been informally viewed as therapeutic through the act of journaling (Adams, 2013). The journal is a way for people to speak to a trusted friend about their life and their troubles, and to reflect on their experiences. It is this act of reflection that is often presented as an informal therapeutic practice in creative circles (DaPra, 2013), and as a formal practice in clinical practices, such as Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT) (Gale & Schröder, 2014). Commenting on the importance and power of reflective practice in education, John Dewey famously claimed, “reflective thinking alone is educative” (1997, p. 2). In fact, unlike many other therapeutic practices, there is even evidence to show that reflection is even effective for therapists to “self-practice,” referring to the act of using the same reflective strategies they use on their clients on themselves (Gale & Schröder, 2014).

Since the 1980’s, writing has been used as a formal therapeutic tool by mental health professionals (Brand, 1980). Researchers Pennebaker and Beall (1986) have explored the

benefits of writing about traumatic events over the last few decades, highlighting the capabilities of writing to support quicker recovery from trauma and improve overall mental health. Their initial study recruited 46 undergraduate students to write about either personal traumatic experiences or trivial life events, depending on their group assignment. They discovered that writing about emotional and factual memories of a traumatic event led to fewer health center visits in the six months following the experiment. When participants were asked during their interview, “Looking back on the experiment, do you feel as if it has had any long-lasting effects?” the responses were “uniformly positive,” with one participant commenting, “Although I have not talked with anyone about what I wrote, I was finally able to deal with it, work through the pain instead of trying to block it out. Now it doesn’t hurt to think about it” (p. 279). Many other participants shared similar sentiments, stating that the writing helped them confront, process, or reflect on their past trauma (Pennebaker & Beall, 1986). Both historical practice and current literature support the idea that, when used appropriately, reflecting on and writing about significant past experiences can be an effective therapeutic method for supporting well-being.

There is also some evidence to show that expressive writing can reduce the symptom expression of certain physical ailments. Smyth et al., (1999) examined whether writing about stressful experiences impacts “objective measures of disease status in patients with chronic asthma or rheumatoid arthritis (RA)” (p. 1305). The results of both the asthma and RA treatment groups showed better outcomes on objective measures of health related to the respective diseases. Clinically significant differences were also observed in the health status of the treatment group when compared to the control, with 47% of treatment group participants vs 24% of control group participants meeting the designation for “clinically relevant improvement” (p. 1306).

More recent studies highlight the acumen of *online* expressive writing to shape how military veterans perceive their past experiences, positively affecting symptoms of hyperarousal in veterans with PTSD (Krupnick et al., 2017). Additionally, Sayer et al. (2015) conducted a randomized controlled trial with (n=1292) military veterans to investigate the effects of an online expressive writing program on readjustment difficulties. Their study examined whether such a program could mitigate common post-service challenges, and the results were compelling. They found that “expressive writing was more effective than no writing in reducing PTSD symptoms, anger, distress, reintegration problems, and physical complaints, and more effective than no writing in improving social support” (p. 387). These findings align with the long-standing recognition of writing as a therapeutic intervention, underscoring its potential as a scalable and accessible tool for supporting veteran well-being.

Similarly, Lange et al, (2003) conducted a study to evaluate the effectiveness of internet-based writing interventions for individuals experiencing mild to severe post-traumatic stress and grief symptoms. The study compared a treatment group (n=69) to a waitlist control group (n=32). Results indicated that participants in the treatment group experienced significantly greater improvement in trauma-related symptoms and overall mental health compared to the control group. Moreover, over half of the treated participants showed significant clinical improvement, particularly in areas of depression and avoidance behaviors.

It is important to note here that the field of writing studies carefully distances itself from the therapeutic functions of writing.

Building on this body of literature examining writing, well-being, and military veterans, and evidence of community practice, this study investigates the potential of an in-person expressive writing workshop as a novel approach to support veteran well-being, addressing a

critical gap in research. To address this gap in research, the study uses a cognitive process theory of writing, first proposed by Flower & Hayes (1981), to conceptualize the connections between workshop participation and shifts in participant well-being measured by the SWLS (Diener et al., 1985).

Methods

The research workshop is a low-resource, weekly intervention designed to support military veterans in composing experiential narratives. Participants meet weekly in a small group setting of generally no more than 12 people, and each workshop lasts for around two hours. The workshop structure is simple (see Table 2.1).

Table 2.1

Structure of Workshop Model

| Phase | Purpose |
|--------------------------|--|
| 1. Icebreaker | Build connection, ease tension in the room |
| 2. Facilitator Framing | Set tone, share vulnerable story, normalize silence |
| 3. Prompted Solo Writing | Prompted 20-25 min writing session |
| 4. Group Share | Share stories on a volunteer basis |
| 5. Response to Stories | Listeners respond to stories with the understanding that compliments are welcome and critiques are solicited |
| 6. Free Dialogue | Allow time for free dialogue between stories—this can create opportunity for organic connections |
| 7. Closure | After final workshop flow, close out the session |

Note. This table outlines the standard sequence and purpose of each phase within the veteran writing workshop model implemented in the study. Phases 4 and 5 oscillate back and forth based on the number of participants who want to read. After each reader reads during phase 4, allow participant responses (phase 5) and repeat until all volunteer readers have gone. 3 through 6 are repeated after Phase 6 completes the first time through. This format enhances opportunities for participant sharing and increases the potential for participants to mirror one another.

It consists of two 20 to 25-minute writing sessions followed by group sharing, feedback, and dialogue. During the sharing phase, the way we respond follows a simple two-part rule: 1) compliments are welcome; 2) critiques are asked for by the reader. It is also important to inform

participants that silence can and should be expected after a heavy story. This framing allows participants to compose stories without the fear others are going to pick apart their writing, allowing the focus to remain on the content.

The first workshop always begins with a brief icebreaker (e.g. tell everyone your name, military affiliation, and favorite spot in nature), followed by a facilitator-led explanation of the prompt-based writing structure. Participants are encouraged to use the prompts as a springboard for their own narratives but are not obligated to adhere strictly to them. I explain that the prompts can help us focus and can create moments of connection across participants. A key aspect of the workshop is the emphasis on shared vulnerability, and it is up to the facilitator to “set the tone” during the initial workshop (and subsequent workshops if necessary) by sharing a personal and vulnerable narrative, creating a safe space for participants to explore their own experiences. The goal in the structure is to foster a sense of community and to create a safe, welcoming environment that does not have too many strict rules or restrictions.

Research Design

This study follows a quasi-experimental design (Creswell & Clark, 2018). A sample of U.S. military veterans were randomly placed into one of two groups. Data collection spanned twelve weeks, beginning on March 1, 2024, and concluding with the final questionnaire administered before June 30, 2024. The study was incentivized: treatment-group participants were eligible for \$250.00 in incentives, and control-group participants for \$100.

Four waves of data were gathered from both groups using a modified Well-Being Inventory (WBI; Vogt et al., 2018) and an unmodified Satisfaction with Life Scale (SWLS; Diener et al., 1985); together, these instruments required approximately 10–30 minutes to complete. Questionnaires were administered at four time points—baseline, mid-point, end of the 12-week workshop, and one-month post-completion—on a four-week cycle (see Fig 2.2).

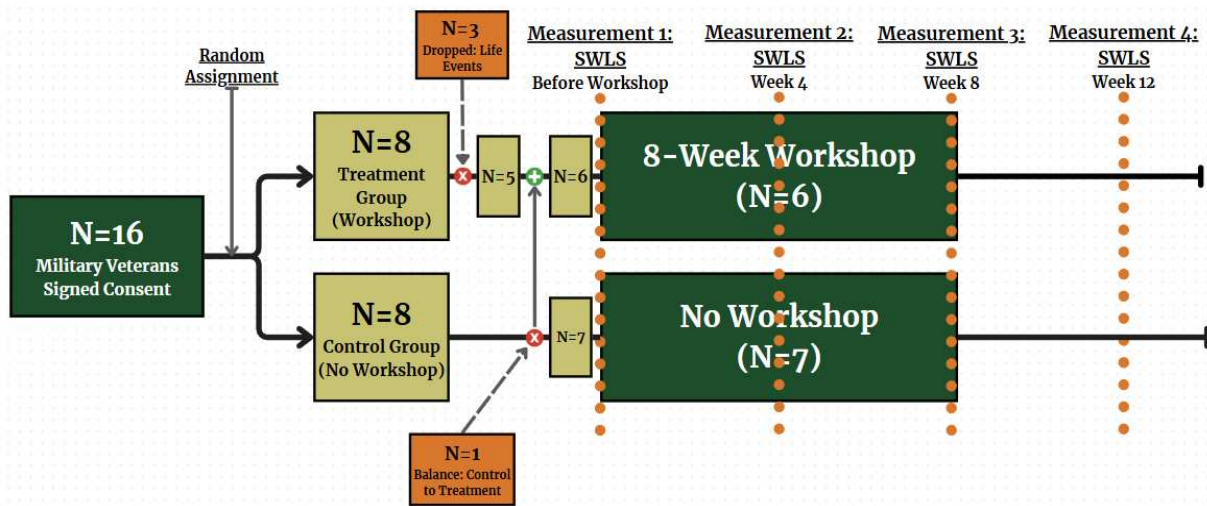


Figure 2.2. *Quasi-experimental Research Design* demonstrates the overall quasi-experimental design as well as instances of participant attrition after groups were formed. The orange dotted lines represent the four measurement occasions using the SWLS.

SWLS data was scored and analyzed across and within groups over time using a two-way ANOVA with repeated measures (Gliner et al., 2017) and individual growth modeling (Willet and Singer, 2005). Collecting four time points enabled both person-specific trajectory estimation and tracking of group mean changes over time.

Participants

Participants were recruited through various means, all of which are “typical” methods of recruiting for the veteran writing program under examination. For example, booths were set up with flyers promoting the workshop at two veteran-oriented events in the local community, a holiday celebration and a public reading event. Furthermore, on four local college campuses,

flyers were disseminated in free speech zones and on open bulletin boards. Local libraries and the local VA clinic were also given flyers to disseminate or conspicuously place. Two local therapist offices sent the research workshop flyer to their email contacts. Additionally, these same flyers were also disseminated through email lists of local veteran non-profits and college veteran service offices. Finally, I presented at a handful of local veteran-themed conferences and shared the research purpose and aims with local veteran and first-responder focused therapist groups. Organizations providing email lists and booth access approved of the recruiting goals and provided letters of support before recruiting efforts began.

The research was incentivized, with treatment group participants being eligible for \$250.00 in incentives. Treatment group participants received a \$100 gift card after the second survey, another \$100 gift card after the final survey, and an extra \$50 gift card for participation in the follow-up interview. Control group participants received a \$50 gift card after the second survey and another \$50 gift card after the final survey.

Potential participants were given a link (email) or QR code (flyer) that brought them to a Google Form where they answered screening questions to ensure they met the inclusion criteria for the study. The inclusion criteria were:

1. Must be a U.S. military veteran (DoD definition), to include prior active duty, reservists, or National Guard, as well as current reservists and national guard members who were prior active duty. *Prior service members separated due to repealed policies (i.e. "Don't ask Don't Tell") are eligible.
2. Must not have participated in any experiential writing programs in the three months prior to the start date of the research workshop.

3. Must not participate in any other experiential writing workshop over the course of the twelve-week study.
4. Must be willing and able to attend at least six of the eight scheduled workshops.
5. Must be willing to complete four surveys on Well-being and Life Satisfaction.
6. Must agree to participate in a ~90-minute follow-up interview

A total of n=41 people applied for the study using the screening questionnaire. Prospective participants were contacted by email and, if selected for inclusion, offered an interview time to go over the informed consent document for the study (see Fig 2.3).

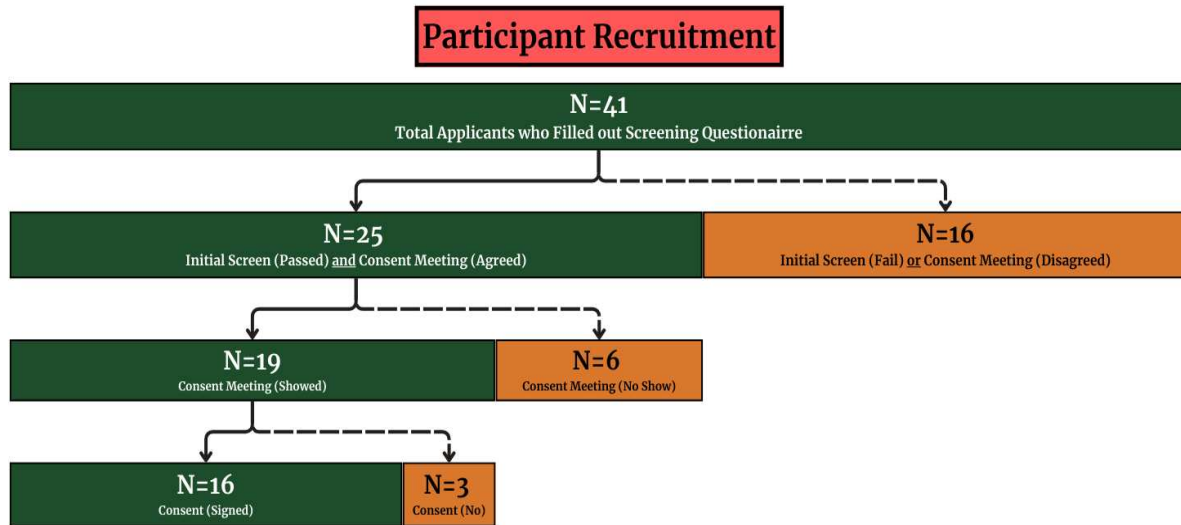


Figure 2.3. *Participant Recruitment & Attrition Flowchart* demonstrates the participant recruitment process starting with the total applicants who filled out the screening questionnaire. The figure shows the attrition of n=25 participants prior to the random selection process for groups.

Of the n=41 applicants, n=39 made it through the initial screen. Of those, one applicant could not complete the surveys, three more declined due to the time commitment, and another three could not attend in person. Of the n=25 applicants remaining, n=6 did not show to the scheduled virtual meeting to sign consent documents. Interviews were completed with n=19

potential applicants, all of which agreed to sign consent documents; however, n=3 did not respond to subsequent emails and ultimately dropped out.

The n=16 remaining participants were then randomly selected to be in either the treatment (n=8) or control (n=8) group using a random number generator. One more participant dropped out during week one due to a death in the family, and two were excluded due to the attendance criteria after missing the first three workshops. Due to this, one participant was randomly selected and moved from treatment to control after week one, leaving, after screening and attrition, n=13 veteran participants split into treatment (n=6) and control (n=7) groups.

Measures

Two measures were used to understand the experiential writing program's impact on the veteran participant's satisfaction with life over time, 1) the Satisfaction with Life Scale (SWLS) (Diener, 1985), and 2) a semi-structured interview protocol that transformed as data were collected. The information gathered using the SWLS helped shape and inform the semi-structured interview protocol. The SWLS aims at understanding *if* the writing workshop supports or constrains participant well-being, while the semi-structured interview protocol was developed to understand *how* the program model supports or constrains participant well-being. Both the artifacts collected during the workshop and the interviews conducted after were used to help contextualize the results of the SWLS. Particular attention was paid to interview questions about life satisfaction, as well as the life factors participants stated aligned with their life satisfaction.

Satisfaction with Life Scale (SWLS)

The SWLS was selected as a tool to measure "hedonic" or subjective well-being and is used in this study to capture changes in general life satisfaction for study participants. The SWLS has five Likert scale questions that are measured on a 7-point scale (see Table 2.2).

Table 2.2*Satisfaction With Life Scale (SWLS)*

| Scale Questions | Scale Levels | | | | | | |
|---|--------------------------|--------------|--------------------------|--------------------------------------|-----------------------------|-----------------|-----------------------------|
| | Strongly <u>Agree</u> | <u>Agree</u> | Somewhat <u>Agree</u> | Neither Agree nor <u>Disagree</u> | Somewhat <u>Disagree</u> | <u>Disagree</u> | Strongly <u>Disagree</u> |
| In most ways my life is close to ideal | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 |
| The conditions of my life are excellent | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 |
| I am satisfied with my life | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 |
| So far, I have gotten the important things I want in life | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 |
| If I could live my life over, I would change almost nothing | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 |

Note: The Satisfaction with Life Scale was constructed and validated by the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign researchers Ed Diener, Robert A. Emmons, Randy J. Larsen, & Sharon Griffin (1985).

The scores are then added to compute a single satisfaction with life score on a 5 to 35 scale. As can be surmised from the SWLS questions, the scale does not assess satisfaction within specific well-being domains (i.e. health, finance, social relationships, or vocation), but instead allows participants to assign their own weight to these domains and then integrate them into their responses (Diener, 1985). The computed SWLS score is organized by categories corresponding to a level of satisfaction ranging from *Extremely Dissatisfied* (5-9) to *Extremely Satisfied* (30-35) (see Table 2.3).

Table 2.3*Categories of Life Satisfaction: SWLS Aggregated Scores*

| Score | Satisfaction with Life Category | SWLS Meaning |
|-------|---------------------------------|---|
| 30-35 | Extremely Satisfied | Life is enjoyable, things are good, and the major life domains are going very well. Opportunities for growth and challenge exist. |

| | | |
|-------|----------------------------|--|
| 25-29 | Above Average Satisfaction | Life is enjoyable, things are mostly good, and the major life domains are going well. Motivation may be drawn from areas of dissatisfaction. |
| 20-24 | Average Satisfaction | Generally satisfied with most areas of life, while also having some areas that need improvement. This represents the typical life satisfaction score in economically developed nations. |
| 15-19 | Below Average Satisfaction | Small but significant problems in several areas of life, or one area that represents a substantial problem. There may be room for improvement and development in various life domains. |
| 10-14 | Dissatisfied | Substantial dissatisfaction with multiple areas of life. May indicate significant challenges in major life domains such as work, relationships, or personal growth. Professional support might be beneficial. |
| 5-9 | Extremely Dissatisfied | Extreme dissatisfaction with most aspects of life. This level of dissatisfaction may indicate serious challenges requiring immediate attention and possibly professional intervention. Multiple areas of life are not going well, and changes may be needed. |

Note: The levels of life satisfaction above are paraphrased from definitions by Diener et al., (1985).

To test if the scale items are measuring something similar to some of the other items (Gardner, 1995), I ran a Cronbach's α statistic which showed $\alpha = .93$, indicating a high internal reliability. Additionally, to ensure reliability across survey instances, I ran a bi-variate Pearson correlation matrix examining the test-retest reliability of the SWLS under these conditions (see Table 2.4).

Table 2.4

Pearson Correlation Matrix: SWLS Test/Re-test Reliability

| | | <u>Treatment Group (n=6)</u> | | | | <u>Control Group (n=7)</u> | | | |
|------------------|---------------------|------------------------------|---------------|---------------|---------------|----------------------------|---------------|---------------|---------------|
| | | <u>Wave 1</u> | <u>Wave 2</u> | <u>Wave 3</u> | <u>Wave 4</u> | <u>Wave 1</u> | <u>Wave 2</u> | <u>Wave 3</u> | <u>Wave 4</u> |
| Treatment Wave 1 | Pearson Correlation | 1 | .974* | .948* | .959* | .772* | .716 | .669 | .515 |
| | Sig. (1-tailed) | | <.001 | .002 | .001 | .036 | .055 | .073 | .148 |
| Treatment Wave 2 | Pearson Correlation | .974* | 1 | .964* | .925* | .783* | .795* | .699 | .576 |
| | Sig. (1-tailed) | <.001 | | <.001 | .004 | .033 | .029 | .061 | .116 |
| Treatment Wave 3 | Pearson Correlation | .948* | .964* | 1 | .840* | .676 | .709 | .628 | .449 |
| | Sig. (1-tailed) | .002 | <.001 | | .018 | .070 | .057 | .091 | .186 |

| | | | | | | | | | |
|---------------------|------------------------|--------|--------|-------|-------|-------|-------|--------|-------|
| Treatment Wave 4 | Pearson Correlation | .959** | .925** | .840* | 1 | .881* | .790* | .780* | .676 |
| | Sig. (1-tailed) | .001 | .004 | .018 | | .010 | .031 | .034 | .070 |
| Control Wave 1 | Pearson Correlation | .772* | .783* | .676 | .881* | 1 | .954* | .956** | .894* |
| | Sig. (1-tailed) | .036 | .033 | .070 | .010 | | <.001 | <.001 | .003 |
| Control Wave 2 | Pearson Correlation | .716 | .795* | .709 | .790* | .954* | 1 | .965* | .927* |
| | Sig. (1-tailed) | .055 | .029 | .057 | .031 | <.001 | | <.001 | .001 |
| Control Wave 3 | Pearson Correlation | .669 | .699 | .628 | .780* | .956* | .965* | 1 | .937* |
| | Sig. (1-tailed) | .073 | .061 | .091 | .034 | <.001 | <.001 | | <.001 |
| Control Wave 4 | Pearson Correlation | .515 | .576 | .449 | .676 | .894* | .927* | .937* | 1 |
| | Sig. (1-tailed) | .148 | .116 | .186 | .070 | .003 | .001 | <.001 | |

Note: Wave 1 is a baseline measurement that occurred before workshop participation. Wave 2 is measured at one month. Wave 3 is measured at two months. Wave 4 is measured one month after workshop participation.

*Significant at $p < .05$

The bivariate correlation matrix shows that the SWLS does have test-retest reliability within both the control condition and the treatment condition. Moving from wave to wave within the control group, each correlation is statistically significant at the $p < .05$ level. In the control group, the correlation between responses in Wave 1 and Wave 2 shows a Pearson statistic of .954 and a $p < .001$; Wave 2 and Wave 3 show a Pearson correlation of .965 and $p < .001$; and Wave 3 and Wave 4 show a Pearson correlation of .937 and a $p < .001$. For the treatment group, there are similar significant correlations between Wave 1 and Wave 2 (.974, $p = .018$), Wave 2 and Wave 3 (.964, $p = .003$), and Wave 3 and Wave 4 (.840, $p = .018$). Overall, the Alpha statistic and the test-retest correlations highlight a high internal reliability for the SWLS under research conditions.

Data Collection

Data collection was conducted over the twelve-week study, and interviews were conducted in the two weeks following the final measurement occasion. SWLS data were collected over four waves, with each wave of data collection spaced four weeks apart over the twelve-week study period. Both the treatment and control groups completed the same

questionnaires, which consisted of an unmodified version of the SWLS provided to them on a Google Form (Diener et al., 1985). The questionnaires were administered through a website portal, where participants had a four-day window to complete each survey. They logged in using a password, which directed them to the Google Form with the survey questions. The surveys were made available after the workshop for that week was completed. The survey windows were timed to allow for consistency across groups, ensuring that both control and treatment group participants were completing the surveys in the same window of time.

The SWLS took participants just a few minutes to complete. These surveys were administered four times during the study: at the beginning, middle, and end of the twelve-week period, and one month after the workshop's completion. This allowed for the tracking of individual trajectories of change in well-being and comparing group-level changes over time. Data collected from the SWLS was scored and analyzed using a two-way ANOVA with repeated measures, while individual growth modeling was used to examine the trajectories of change in satisfaction with life. Throughout the data collection process, a research website was maintained, where participants could view study-related materials, informed consent forms, and mental health resources. Additionally, the research team used a separate password-protected portal to manage participant screening data and track recruitment progress. The SWLS was used to help answer *if* the workshop has some impact on participant well-being over time, while the interview data was used to answer *how* the workshop impacted well-being.

Data Analysis

The following section discusses the methods of analysis and the tests of violations of assumptions. All quantitative data were analyzed using SPSS. Tables and figures were created using SPSS, Canva, and Tableau. Two methods of analysis were selected to support the research

aims. For the first aim, to understand if the workshop has an effect on participant satisfaction with life, a two-way repeated measures ANOVA was conducted to examine within- and between-person variability in SWLS scores. Then individual growth modeling was conducted to examine each participant's initial status and rate of change in SWLS over time.

Descriptives on the SWLS scores across waves showed a normal distribution with a skewness of -.195 kurtosis of -1.1. I also used a box and whisker plot to get an idea of the difference in group means across waves (see Fig. 2.4).

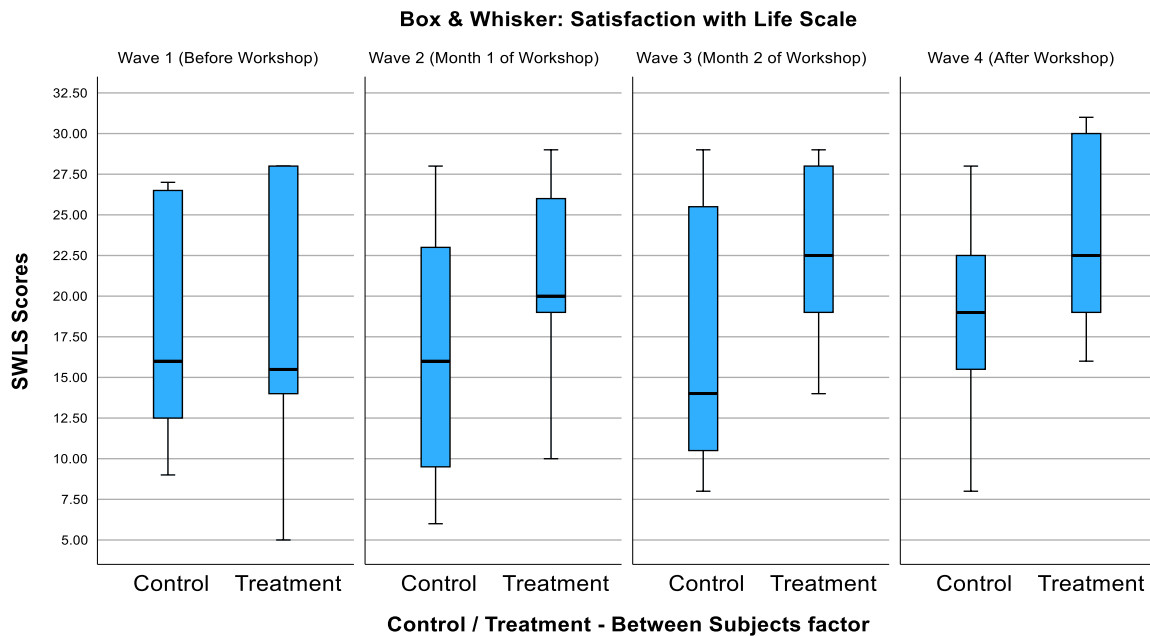


Figure 2.4. *Box & Whisker Plots: SWLS Scores by Group across all Measurement Occasions* highlights a mean increase in SWLS scores for the treatment group when compared to the control group. The variability within both groups as indicated by the whiskers and box is substantial, but not unexpected given the small sample (n=13).

The treatment group's median SWLS scores trend upward from Wave 1 to Wave 4, suggesting a potential positive effect of workshop participation on satisfaction with life. Mean satisfaction with life scores were about even at wave one for both groups, before workshop participation. Wave 2 sees a larger mean difference after one month of workshop participation,

and this trend continues in Wave 3 after a second month of workshop participation. We then see the gap close some in Wave 4, one month after workshop participation ends.

To test for violations of the two-way repeated measures ANOVA, a sphericity assumption is required for univariate main effects tests and interaction tests (O'Brien & Kaiser, 1985). Mauchly's test of sphericity was not significant ($p = .667$) meaning the assumption of sphericity was not violated. In testing the assumptions of the between-subjects factor, "Time," Box's test of the assumption of equality of variance-covariance matrices showed a non-significant result ($p = .386$), indicating that there is no evidence of a violation of multivariate non-normality (Weinfurt, 2000). Additionally, due to the small difference between group n 's ($n < 1.5$), Box's test is robust, allowing for the interpretation of the multivariate test output. However, given the small sample size ($n=13$), these results should be interpreted cautiously, as the limited sample may increase the potential of both Type 1 and Type II errors. Additionally, while Box's test is robust to small differences in group sizes ($n < 1.5$), the small overall sample limits the generalizability of these findings.

Individual Growth Modeling requires assumptions of normality and homogeneity of variance are not violated. These factors were tested for using participant SWLS scores across time and condition. All groups and time points showed non-significant results, indicating no meaningful violation of normality. Additionally, Levene's test also indicated no violation of homogeneity of variance across groups and time points.

Results

The results section is organized into two main sections, the first of which presents growth modeling and individual participant plots, modeling trajectories of change in SWLS scores for each individual participant over time. This section discusses the variability in initial status and

rate of change in SWLS scores for each participant and group. The second section presents the findings of a two-way repeated measures ANOVA to highlight mean group differences in SWLS scores across the 12-week study. In interpreting the findings, this study privileges the pattern and magnitude of change over whether a p value crosses an arbitrary threshold. Contemporary statistical guidance cautions that scientific conclusions should not hinge solely on passing a specific p-value cutoff and urges attention to the size and context of effects (Wasserstein & Lazar, 2016; Wasserstein, Schirm, & Lazar, 2019). Consistent with Meehl's (1978) critique of dichotomous "significant/nonsignificant" thinking, the analysis emphasizes magnitude of effect sizes and their precision, alongside significance tests, to appraise what the observed differences mean in practice. In line with APA reporting standards, the study therefore pairs statistical evidence with estimates of practical significance to clarify the real-world implications of observed gains in veterans' life satisfaction (American Psychological Association, 2020).

Tracking Trajectories of Change in Satisfaction with Life

Estimating the level one fixed effect in the model highlights an average initial status (baseline score) in SWLS of 17.43 for the control group and 16.25 for the treatment group. The estimated coefficient for the condition is -1.179. This indicates an average initial status in SWLS 1.179 points lower for those in the treatment group than those in the control group. On average, participants did not change much over time when we ignore group differences—the overall time trend was near zero—nor was there a consistent overall difference between the two groups at baseline as the groups started at nearly the same SWLS level. In other words, time by itself and group by itself had minimal effects on life satisfaction without the workshop intervention, and no large inherent gap between groups initially. The model's fixed-effect estimates were a +0.16

point per month change in SWLS overall, and a –1.2 point baseline difference for the treatment vs. control—both very small magnitudes of effect (see Table 2.5).

Table 2.5

Estimates of Fixed Effects: Time and Workshop Participation

| Parameter | Estimate | Std. Error | df | t | Sig. | 95% Confidence Interval | |
|------------------|----------|------------|----|-------|-------|-------------------------|-------------|
| | | | | | | Lower Bound | Upper Bound |
| Intercept | 17.429 | 3.316 | 13 | 5.256 | <.001 | 10.265 | 24.592 |
| Time | .157 | .464 | 13 | .339 | .740 | -.845 | 1.160 |
| Condition | -1.179 | 4.881 | 13 | -.241 | .813 | -11.723 | 9.366 |
| Time * Condition | 1.776 | .683 | 13 | 2.601 | .022* | .301 | 3.252 |

Note. Dependent Variable SWLS Scores: Condition is coded 0 = control and 1 = treatment - 30-35 Extremely Satisfied; 25-29 Above Average Satisfaction; 20-24 Average Satisfaction; 15-19 Below Average Satisfaction; 10-14 Dissatisfied; 5-9 Extremely Dissatisfied.

The model estimates suggest that workshop participation boosted the monthly improvement rate by about 1.8 SWLS points compared to no workshop. In practical terms, a veteran in the writing workshop gained roughly 3–4 extra points on the SWLS over the two-month workshop period relative to a similar veteran in the control group (see Table 2.7). This effect was unlikely due to chance ($p=.022$). The rate of change in SWLS scores is 1.776 points higher per month of workshop participation for veteran participants in the treatment group compared to those in the control group, indicating a faster increase in SWLS scores for treatment group participants with a 95% CI of ± 1.476 . The key point is that life satisfaction increased much faster in the workshop group—nearly two points per month faster—which is a considerable growth rate on a 35-point scale.

Individual Growth Modeling

Plotting the individual trajectories of change over time provides evidence that individual participants in the treatment group generally experienced an increase in life satisfaction. It is important to note that baseline scores varied widely, and there is variability in trajectories of change in life satisfaction. This suggests that the workshop generally had a positive effect on participants' life satisfaction, but that the effect varied widely from participant to participant. (see Fig. 2.5).

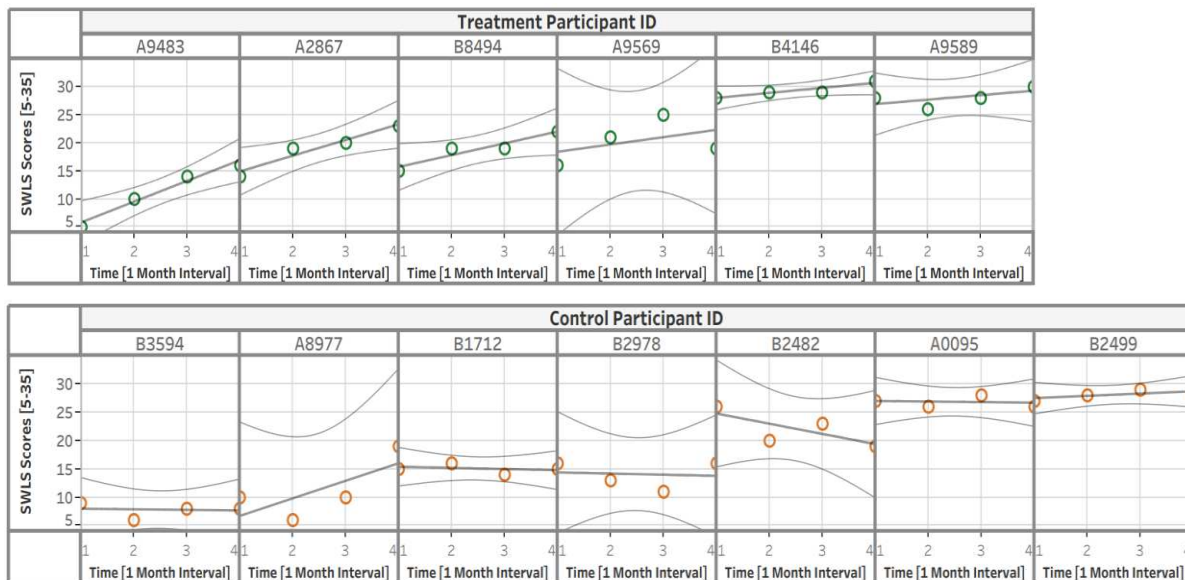


Figure 2.5. *Individual Trajectories of Change in SWLS: Treatment & Control Group* shows individual trajectories of change for participants in both the treatment group (top), who participated in the workshop condition, and the control group (bottom), who did not participate in the workshop condition. Each subplot represents a participant, with their SWLS scores plotted over time. The x-axis is the measurement occasion (time variable), and the y-axis represents SWLS scores.

Additionally, the findings indicate that there is a greater impact of the writing workshop for participants with a lower initial status at baseline. Participants in the control group, by contrast, had relatively flat trajectories of change, suggesting life satisfaction remained generally stable without the intervention.

Covariance parameter estimates show the variance components for level 2, between-subjects effects, in the model. The large point estimate (69.336) and standard error (30.264) for UN (1,1) indicates that participants' baseline SWLS scores varied widely, with some veteran participants starting the study with very low life satisfaction, while others started much higher. Likewise, not everyone improved to the same degree during the workshop; some individuals' life satisfaction jumped considerably, while others remained more stable. The negative covariance (-5.66) highlights participants with a higher initial status in SWLS scores tended to have a smaller increase in scores over time—or those with a lower initial status saw a greater increases over time. However, given the small sample, it's hard to tell how meaningful these person-to-person differences in improvement truly are. The statistical model's uncertainty was large, meaning we can't rule out the possibility that variation in improvement rates was mostly due to chance, which is evidenced by the 95% CI for the variance in slopes including zero. (see Table 2.6).

Table 2.6

Estimates of Covariance Parameters

| Parameter | Estimate | Std. Err | 95% CI | |
|--|----------|----------|-------------|-------------|
| | | | Lower Bound | Upper Bound |
| Residual | 5.088 | 1.411 | 2.040 | 8.136 |
| <u>Intercept + Time [subject = Participant ID]</u> | | | | |
| Unstructured (UN) (1,1) | 69.336 | 30.264 | 3.955 | 134.717 |
| Unstructured (UN) (2,1) | -5.661 | 3.821 | -13.916, | 2.594 |
| Unstructured (UN) (2,2) | 0.489 | 0.655 | -0.926, | 1.904 |

Note. The model assumes an unstructured (UN) covariance matrix, meaning variances and covariances are estimated separately without constraints. Dependent Variable SWLS Scores: 30-35 Extremely Satisfied; 25-29 Above Average Satisfaction; 20-24 Average Satisfaction; 15-19 Below Average Satisfaction; 10-14 Dissatisfied; 5-9 Extremely Dissatisfied.

When looking at the condition variable, figure 2.6 illustrates the divergence in SWLS scores between groups: it shows life satisfaction rising over time for each workshop participant (top panel) while staying mostly flat for control participants (bottom panel), mirroring the pattern of a greater increase in the workshop group (see Figure 2.6).

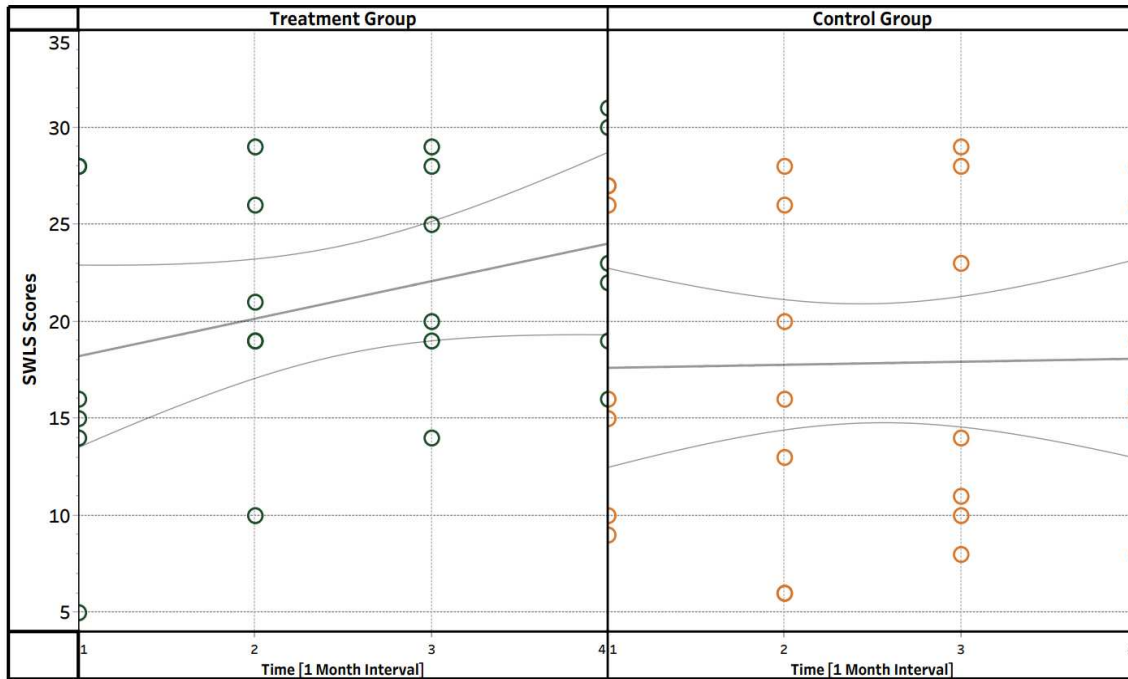


Figure 2.6. *Growth Modeling Plots: Between-subjects Factor.* The box on the left is the treatment group SWLS scores over time plotted together. The box on the right is the control group SWLS scores plotted together. The x-axis is the time variable with one-month intervals between measurement occasions. The y-axis represents SWLS scores by participant.

In sum, the analyses suggest that, although not all treatment participants improved in similar rates, the average growth trend clearly shows participating in the workshop was associated with increases in life satisfaction for the treatment group, whereas not participating was associated with stability for the control group. Figure 2.6 illustrates the divergence: it shows life satisfaction rising over time for each workshop participants (left panel) while staying mostly flat for control participants (right panel).

Satisfaction with Life: Two way Repeated Measures ANOVA

The within-subjects effects of the two-way repeated measures ANOVA showed “The condition (workshop participation) by time interaction indicates that SWLS scores diverged between the groups across the study: the workshop group’s life satisfaction climbed steadily over the 8-week program, whereas the control group’s scores remained flat. By the 12-week follow-up, workshop participants had gained roughly 5–6 points on the SWLS on average, compared to little change (under 1 point) in the control group. This was a relatively large difference in improvement (partial $\eta^2 \approx 0.34$); however, the confidence interval for that effect was wide 95% CI [.005, .208]. This means the workshop’s effect on life satisfaction likely corresponds to an improvement between 2 and nearly 14 SWLS points. While the data highlighted a large effect ($\eta^2_p = .344$), the wide confidence interval (95% CI [.005, .208]) and small sample ($n=13$) indicate a lot of uncertainty (see Table 2.7).

Table 2.7

Tests of Within-Subjects Effects: Workshop Participation & SWLS Scores

| Source | | Type III Sum of Squares | df | Mean Square | F | Sig. | Partial Eta Squared |
|-----------|------------------------|----------------------------|-------|----------------|-------|------|------------------------|
| Time | Sphericity | 58.873 | 3 | 19.624 | 4.235 | .012 | .278 |
| | Assumed | | | | | | |
| | Greenhouse- Geisser | 58.873 | 2.568 | 22.928 | 4.235 | .017 | .278 |
| Time * | Sphericity | 80.027 | 3 | 26.676 | 5.756 | .003 | .344 |
| | Assumed | | | | | | |
| Condition | Greenhouse- Geisser | 80.027 | 2.568 | 31.166 | 5.756 | .005 | .344 |

Note: Measure: Satisfaction with Life Scores; Condition: Workshop Participation

Additionally, a multivariate test confirmed this group difference in change over time, reinforcing that the workshop participants’ satisfaction trajectories differed from the control

group's ($F(3,9) = 4.06, p = .044$), reinforcing that workshop participation in this instance predicts differential changes in SWLS scores over time (see Table 2.8).

Table 2.8

Multivariate Tests: Satisfaction with Life Scale

| Effect | | Value | F | Hypothesis df | Error df | Sig. |
|------------------|---------------|-------|--------------------|---------------|----------|------|
| Time | Wilks' Lambda | .451 | 3.658 ^b | 3.000 | 9.000 | .057 |
| Time * Condition | Wilks' Lambda | .425 | 4.063 ^b | 3.000 | 9.000 | .044 |

Note: Intercept + Condition (Workshop Participation); Within Subjects Design: Time

Plotting these points using the estimated marginal means of each group shows the difference between treatment and control group participants at each of the four measurement occasions (see Fig. 2.7).

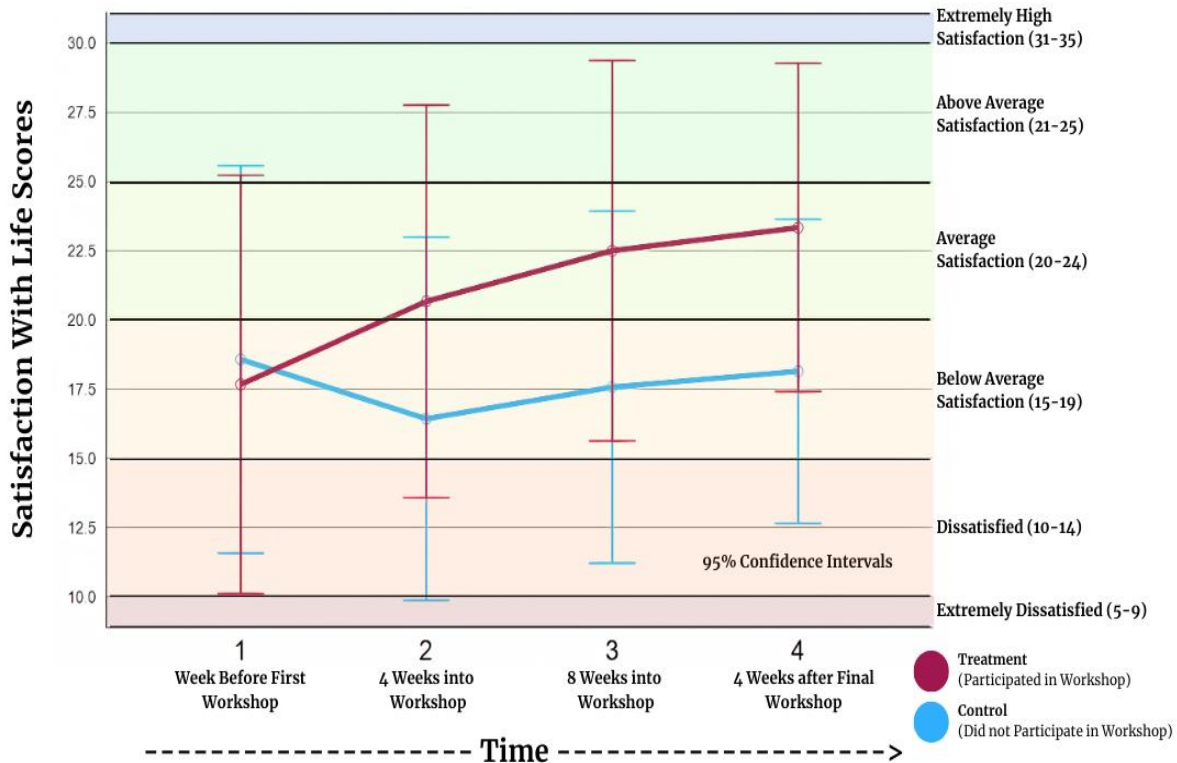


Figure 2.7. *Estimated Marginal Means of Participant SWLS Scores Over Time* highlights the difference in estimated marginal means between the treatment and control groups. The y-axis shows SWLS score scale with SWLS categorical terms on the right side. The x-axis is the time axis showing SWLS measurements taken one month apart. The bars represent a 95% confidence interval.

As illustrated in Figure 2.7, Measurement Occasion 1 took place immediately before the first workshop. At baseline, the treatment group’s average SWLS score was 16.3 and the control group’s was 17.4, a difference of just about 1 point on the 35-point scale, indicating the two groups started at essentially the same level of general life satisfaction—which is expected with a random sample. The 95% CI at measurement one for both groups is between 10 and 26, spanning from dissatisfied to above average satisfaction on the categorical scale of the SWLS.

At Measurement Occasion 2, after four weeks in the workshop, the group means deviate from one another with the treatment group showing an increase from the “slightly dissatisfied” category to the “slightly satisfied” category. This trend continues through Occasion 3 and 4. The large range in the 95% CI highlights the high uncertainty due to the smaller sample size across all measurement occasions. There is a small magnitude of difference at the baseline level and a larger, but still highly uncertain, magnitude of difference in SWLS as the participants engage in the workshop.

Discussion

The results of this study tentatively highlight the efficacy of this study’s writing workshop model as a low-resource well-being intervention for military veterans. The influence of the workshop on life satisfaction may be particularly effective for veterans with initially low satisfaction with life at baseline. Prior research has shown that forms of expressive writing can help individuals reframe and make sense of their experiences, leading to positive outcomes in well-being (Pennebaker and Beall, 1986/2013). This finding not only underscores the effectiveness of the experiential writing program as a low-resource intervention for enhancing subjective well-being but also aligns with the CPTW’s model of the writing process as a generative and recursive cognitive activity through which meaning is made (and remade) (Flower & Hayes, 1981).

When we consider the results of this study in conjunction with findings from Chapter Three (Atkinson, 2025), comments like Fernando’s highlight how engaging in the process of iterative acts of reflecting, composing, sharing, and active listening facilitated not just social connection but also emotional processing through the release of challenging memories:

I saw the look of empathy on some people’s faces that was-- I think I wanted that. Like, I wanted to be witnessed being hurting. I would've just gone home and, like, not talked to

anybody. So to bare my soul to a room of new friends, you know, and have some support was nice.

In this statement, Fernando is drawing from the other participants' reactions, mirroring their emotions, and emotionally processing his trauma through alongside the group. This finding aligns with prior veteran research using the CPTW in similar ways to examine veterans and expressive writing in online (Sayer et al. 2015) and classroom environments (Ott, 2020; Tabor, 2025). The cognitive demands of the process of writing, coupled with the shared cultural environment of the veteran-only space, created conditions under which participants could re-author difficult life experiences, ultimately improving subjective well-being through increased life satisfaction.

Regarding the first aim of the study, to identify *if* and *how* an experiential military veteran writing program supports or constrains satisfaction with life, the study's findings align with existing literature on the therapeutic benefits of expressive writing, particularly for processing trauma and enhancing subjective well-being. The two-way repeated measures ANOVA revealed a significant interaction effect, indicating that veterans in the treatment group experienced a greater increase in satisfaction with life scores over time compared to the control group. The analysis also presented that having lower life satisfaction predicts a larger impact in life satisfaction. This finding tentatively underscores the effectiveness of the experiential writing program as a low-resource option for supporting the subjective well-being of military veterans.

Concerning the second aim of the study, to track and compare trajectories of change over time in satisfaction with life, individual growth modeling demonstrated that the treatment group exhibited a significantly higher rate of improvement in life satisfaction scores compared to the control group. Moreover, the results showed that those participants with a lower initial life satisfaction saw the largest positive effect. For most participants, the writing workshop had an

impact on life satisfaction within the first four weeks (4 sessions), while also facilitating sustained growth in well-being up to one month after the study ended. The results of the covariance parameters indicated that while average levels of life satisfaction are relatively stable, there is significant individual difference. Moreover, the strong negative intercept-slope correlation suggests a ceiling effect where individuals near the top of the scale have less room for improvement, and those starting lower may improve more noticeably.

Overall, the results of the study tentatively suggest that an in-person, experiential writing workshop model can have a positive impact on the life satisfaction of military veteran participants. The results also showed that this effect seems to be greater for veterans with already low life satisfaction, highlighting the potential for this workshop model to be utilized as a low-resource option for colleges and universities, the VA, and other veteran-serving organizations supporting military veteran well-being through fostering social connectedness and providing a safe space for vulnerability and emotional release through storytelling.

Limitations & Future Research

The quasi-experimental design was limited by the small sample size ($n=13$), which greatly restricts the generalizability of the findings. The sample was too small to meaningfully make inferences about any specific population of veterans as well. The results should be interpreted with caution due to these limitations generally, but especially when applying them to veteran groups that were not well-represented in the study. It is also important to note that research shows notably high attrition rates in veteran-serving contexts, particularly within trauma-focused mental health treatments—often ranging between 27% and over 60% (Edwards-Stewart et al., 2021; Eftekhari et al., 2020; Kehle-Forbes et al., 2016; Garcia et al., 2011).

One of the challenges when researching an intimate workshop environment like this is the small number of participants. Workshops generally cap out at 12 participants. Losing even one or two to attrition can be detrimental when working with such small groups, so future studies should plan for attrition by running concurrent workshops to bolster sample size. Furthermore, additional groups would allow for more information about *what* components are supporting well-being. (i.e. community, writing, sharing).

Additionally, this study does not isolate whether the observed improvements in life satisfaction are primarily driven by the act of expressive writing itself, by meeting with group of culturally aligned peers, or by the synergistic effect of both. While the data clearly indicate a significant positive impact, the design of the study makes it difficult to understand the effects of a single component. Expressive writing, as demonstrated in Pennebaker's (1997) foundational research, has been shown to yield psychological and emotional benefits even in the absence of an audience. On the other hand, a rich body of literature in social psychology and veteran well-being points to the powerful role of community, connection, and being heard in fostering well-being and life satisfaction (Haslam et al., 2009; Ryff & Singer, 2008). Future studies could separate participants into writing-only, community-only, and integrated groups to empirically examine the effects of each component. This would advance both theoretical understanding and practical application in designing effective veteran well-being interventions.

Finally, time is a large factor. While the study provides promising initial evidence, its short duration also limits the understanding of long-term effects. The 12-week intervention period, while sufficient for initial assessment, may not capture long-term effects of the writing program. Due to the time limitations of my program and the grant I received, I was only able to run the study for one cycle. In future research, running across two semesters starting in the spring

would allow for further insight into periods of non-workshop participation and how reinitiating the workshop affects participant well-being. Future research should incorporate a more longitudinal design to assess the changes and sustainability of improvements in life satisfaction.

Conclusions

This study provides initial evidence that a brief, in-person, veteran-only expressive writing workshop can potentially improve participant life satisfaction, with the largest gains among participants who begin with lower baseline satisfaction. Empirically, this study strengthens a limited quantitative evidence base by pairing repeated-measures ANOVA with individual growth modeling to capture both group change and individual heterogeneity. Practically, the workshop is a clear, reproducible intervention framework that can be iterated, scaled, and adapted while remaining sensitive to veteran context and needs. As a low-resource option for veteran programming with clear potential to support well-being and life satisfaction, it is feasible for individual college departments, VA peer-support programs, and community organizations to start their own.

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CHAPTER THREE: AN EXAMINATION OF WELL-BEING IN AN EXPRESSIVE VETERAN WRITING PROGRAM: A HYBRID APPROACH TO THEMATIC ANALYSIS

Abstract

This study examines an experiential writing workshop for military veterans using a hybrid approach to thematic analysis to understand how participation supports or constrains participant well-being. More specifically, the following research explores various independent parts of a writing workshop for military veterans dialogically with participants. The data were examined inductively first, using the language and ideas of the participants to identify and define themes. Then the data were examined deductively, using a priori domains and definitions from the Well-being Inventory (WBI) (Vogt et al., 2018). Juxtaposing inductive and deductive codes allows for a flexible way of understanding the data and for capturing the scope of the impact of the workshop model on conventional factors of well-being (Swain, 2018). The findings showed that the writing workshop process and the veteran-only space facilitated 1) a strong sense of camaraderie and connection, which participants framed as having a positive overall impact on their social well-being; and 2) emotional release and relief, which participants reported had a positive overall impact on their mental health.

Keywords: WBI, well-being, veteran, composition, experiential, expressive writing

Introduction

Grounded in a holistic definition of well-being that includes psychological, social, vocational, and financial dimensions (Vogt et al., 2018), this study investigates how structured opportunities for narrative expression can serve as mechanisms for mental support, social connection, and personal growth, particularly among military veteran communities. As part of a larger research project, it builds on prior research that identified a significant positive correlation between writing workshop participation and increased life satisfaction, as measured by the Satisfaction with Life Scale (SWLS) (Atkinson, 2025). While previous findings in Chapter 2 emphasized general gains in subjective well-being, this chapter thematically examines participant voices and what aspects of the writing workshop they claim supported or constrained their well-being.

The chapter begins by situating the historical and cultural role of writing within military life, discussing how it has long served as a means of recording, preserving, and making sense of experiences shaped by the extremes of military service. Drawing from both the Cognitive Process Theory of Writing (Flower & Hayes, 1981) and the four domains of the Well-Being Inventory (WBI) (Vogt et al., 2018), this chapter illustrates how the act of composing and sharing experiential narratives within a veteran-only writing workshop has the potential to support both cognitive restructuring of challenging memories and social connection between veteran participants.

Next, the chapter outlines the study's design and methods. A veteran-only expressive writing workshop ran once a week for eight weeks, followed by a four-week post-workshop follow-up period, constituting a total study duration of twelve weeks. As part of the larger project, quantitative measures, including the SWLS and WBI, were administered to all

participants at multiple time points to assess changes in life satisfaction (SWLS) and multi-dimensional well-being (WBI) over the course of the study. These two measures inform the theoretical foundations of this study. However, this study focuses on the qualitative data collected through semi-structured interviews with the workshop participants (treatment group), capturing in-depth reflections on their experiences and the perceived impact of the workshop on their well-being.

Using a hybrid analytical approach, the qualitative data were first coded inductively—allowing construction of key themes from the participants’ own narratives—and then examined deductively by mapping these themes onto the WBI’s established well-being domains (psychological, social, vocational, and financial). The findings are presented across the major themes identified through this combined inductive–deductive thematic analysis, highlighting how the workshop experience supported or, in some instances, constrained various facets of the participants’ well-being. Ultimately, this research seeks to demonstrate whether and how writing in an experiential veteran writing workshop can serve as both a reflective and agentive process that supports veteran well-being.

Writing and the Well-being of Service Members & Veterans

Writing has long been considered a therapeutic practice both in the personal act of journaling (Adams, 1999) and in more formal therapeutic treatments like Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT) (Gale & Schröder, 2014). Military members and veterans have historically been prolific writers and storytellers, creating personal and experiential narratives through journals and diaries while overseas, writing poems and memoirs, and sharing intimate moments via detailed letters home. During World War I, American servicemembers were often encouraged by leaders to write letters regularly, recognizing the importance of maintaining contact with loved

ones during difficult times (Cross, Harris, & Moloney, 2022). One senator, John Weeks of Massachusetts, whose son was serving in the war, notably sent a pamphlet with the following message to military families, urging them to write to their loved ones in the field (Cross, Harris, & Moloney, 2022):

A letter from home to a boy at the front will make the muddy walls of the trenches seem less bleak, the routine of camp life less tedious, will cheer him when he is lonesome and homesick, make him a more courageous soldier, and although in a foreign land many miles from home he will know he is in the thoughts of the folks back home for whom he has gone 'over there' to fight. (p. 1)

In times of conflict and turmoil, writing serves as a vital connection for many service members and military families. The Baby Boomers, the grandchildren of World War I veterans and the children of World War II veterans, a generation named for the spike in births following the Second World War, inherit much of this written history in the form of letters.

Their Letters, a poem by Kathleen Willard—composed in a workshop similar to the one under examination—recounts the correspondence her parents sent back and forth to one another during World War II. She oscillates between her parents’ perspectives, line by line, to exemplify the dense contrast in experience between her mother and father:

He tells of his first night in Saigon, a bomb exploding a fuel depot, the fire
and sometimes she described pill box hats, the white gloves
flooding his quarters, an instant inferno
she wore to Mass or out eating okra and peach pie at Morrison’s Cafeteria
Someone shouting run, the city charring
while she watches their children practicing backstroke
he runs nude into the dark streets, seconds in front of the flames
and can their daughter and two sons take horseback riding lessons,

could they afford it

(Atkinson & Mahal, 2023, p. 73)

This passage from Willard's poem effectively contrasts the two perspectives, clearly highlighting the significant differences in the experiences of the two partners. Letters served as an essential means of communication and, amidst the chaos of the war, they offered a hopeful reminder of a familiar place where people still had thoughts of swimming pools and horseback riding lessons.

Written correspondence continues to be an important part of military life. From basic training to deployment, Soldiers write to loved ones either virtually or through good old-fashioned pen and paper. In fact, in the modern U.S. Army, a pen and notepad are considered part of the Army uniform. Current Army uniforms have pen holders on the sleeve and two shoulder pouches that are the perfect size for a field notebook. To be without either of these items is to be "out of regs" (i.e. not abiding by U.S. Army regulations). For example, 1st Infantry Division came out with a "Standards Book" in 2024 that details this expectation, stating:

Duty Uniform. The uniform of the day is prescribed by the commander and is normally the Army Combat Uniform (ACU), Improved Hot Weather Combat Uniform (IHWCU), or Garrison Culinary Uniform. On occasion, other uniforms may be prescribed by the commander (i.e. Nomex coveralls or field uniform, etc.). Regardless of the uniform, it will be worn IAW (in accordance with) AR/DA PAM 670-1.

a) **Paper and Pen.** Soldiers will always be prepared to take notes by always having paper and pen available (except during physical readiness training).

This little fact was so well known in Afghanistan by the time I arrived there in 2010 that children in the villages would hold their hands out saying, "notepad, pen, please, for school."

Interestingly, I composed a story about this experience during the research workshop under examination, and I shared about how the children would say "For school. Pen *baksheesh*"

or “notepad *baksheesh*,” holding out their hands. For the past fifteen-years, I had just assumed that word meant “pen *gift*” or “notepad *gift*.” I assumed the children wanted a gift from an American Soldier. By happenstance, one of the research participants was a linguist in the Army, his time in the service overlapping with mine, and he informed me I was a little off in my assumption. In fact, *baksheesh* colloquially meant “bribe.” The children were saying, “pen bribe” and “notebook bribe.” A bribe implies a return on investment. Oxford Dictionary defines bribe as “persuading [someone] to act in one’s favor, typically illegally or dishonestly, by a gift or money or other inducement” (Oxford English Dictionary, 2025). What I gleaned from this revelation is that there exists inherent value in a pen and a notebook. In a place like the rural mountains of Afghanistan, processed items like a G2 pen or a rain-resistant notebook are not as ubiquitous as they are in the United States. In fact, for many, in particular women and girls, pens and notebooks are “illegal” to carry or use outside of specific contexts. I can reflect now on the pen and paper as dangerous, powerful, and valuable tools, worthy of being leveraged in a mid-afternoon bribe from a local child to a foreign Soldier—“pen *baksheesh*.”

Understanding the importance of preserving the narratives of service members, the U.S. Library of Congress’ “Veteran History Project,” a curated collection of over 120,000 service members’ personal memoirs and letters, “[making] accessible the firsthand narratives of U.S. military veterans who served from World War I through more recent conflicts. . .” (Library of Congress, 2024, p.1). These narratives include general correspondence between loved ones, powerful reflections of war, and creative expressions of service, all working to create a detailed image of the diverse experiences of service members throughout history. One such narrative, composed by World War I veteran Morris Albert Martin (1918), details his time in the trenches from the comfort of an infirmary bed, painting a vivid picture of the stark realities of war:

Lying there in [a] nice clean bed, I gave myself over to some reflections. . . . Those boys up there were still in that Hell, and the end wasn't in sight yet. Closing my eyes I could still see those mangled and bloody bodies of my buddies, and I began to wonder what it was all about. (p. 28)

The final thought that Martin shares in this excerpt, "I began to wonder what it was all about," is a simple yet powerful statement of critical reflection, and a sign that Martin is questioning the war effort. Many veterans participating in the experiential writing workshop under examination discussed these same questions phrased in various ways (e.g., What was my purpose? What was I doing there? Why were we fighting? Why them and not me?). These types of critical questions serve to unravel the intricate web of sociopolitical forces connected to the war machine and attempt to define the service member's role within it.

Across the country, both small local and large national writing workshops are available for military veterans, providing writing opportunities that honor the craft's historical significance in military life. Each year, the VA hosts a National Creative Arts Festival featuring over thirty individual writing categories for veterans. I was fortunate enough to facilitate these workshops in Denver, Colorado, in 2024 and Indianapolis, Indiana, in 2025. These workshops are organized by the VA, coordinated by recreational and art therapists, and include content-specific facilitators to guide veterans through creative avenues of self-expression. Another prominent writing workshop for veterans, Warrior Writers, is a veteran-focused creative arts organization that provides workshops aimed at helping military veterans articulate their thoughts, fostering a supportive environment for exploring themes of grief and healing through personal narratives (Lovella, 2022). One workshop attendee, Jim Smith, a veteran of the Vietnam War, shared, "This [workshop] gives you an opportunity to express your feelings about things that you don't with other people. I felt very comfortable doing that here. What I like most is being able to put it down on paper and then let it go. Which maybe I've never done for 50 years since Vietnam"

(Leonard, 2022). Such workshops create a space and purpose for veterans like Jim to share their stories, express themselves, and engage with others who have had similar experiences.

Purpose & Aims

The purpose of this research, then, is to better understand *how* an experiential writing program for military veterans supports or constrains well-being, and to understand the components of the workshop that participants' claim were supportive. The veteran writing program was held in a group setting where participants composed and shared experiential narratives of military life using curated prompts. U.S. Military veterans often seek out support from community programming to supplement their transition back into civilian society (Morgan et al., 2020), and those who do seek out supplementary transition assistance from community programs show better well-being outcomes than veterans who do not (Morgan et al., 2020). This study aims to qualitatively examine an experiential writing workshop for military veterans to assess outcomes associated with well-being.

Aim 1: To examine the ways in which an experiential veteran writing workshop model supported or constrained participant well-being using a hybrid process of thematic analysis.

Aim 2: To explore the scope of the workshop's impact through identifying associations between the inductive themes and deductive domains of well-being framed by the WBI (Social Relationships, Vocation, Health, and Finance) (Vogt et al., 2018).

Review of Literature: Expressive Writing and Veteran Well-being

For the general population, writing interventions have been used as formal therapeutic treatments since the 1980's (Pennbaker & Beall, 1986). Early experiments in writing therapy had participants writing about "stressful events" for up to 20-minute increments over three to four meetings, and a control group who generally wrote about "superficial non-emotive topics" (Pennbaker & Beall, 1986). As Mugerwa & Holden discuss (2014), the findings of these early studies showed that the experimental groups "observed better health, improved immune system functioning, and took fewer days off work due to illness" (p. 661). Klapow et al., (2001) later examined writing as a method of general medical practice, investigating if writing could "reduce the somatic and distress symptoms in older patients" and found that short 20-minute writing sessions "reduced the use of outpatient services and associated costs to half that of the control group" (p. 134). These early studies promoted benefits in well-being from short, 20-minute timed writing sessions underscoring the workshop's practice of asking participants to write in 20–25-minute increments.

Testing the potential of expressive writing interventions on military veteran well-being, Sayer et al., (2015), completed a randomized controlled trial of (n=1292) veterans in an *online* environment. They wanted to examine if an expressive writing intervention could improve readjustment difficulties and found that "Expressive writing was more effective than no writing in reducing PTSD symptoms, anger, distress, reintegration problems, and physical complaints, and more effective than no writing in improving social support" (p. 387). While this study specifically examines online expressive writing, it provides a practical foundation for research examining in-person expressive writing for veterans as a well-being intervention.

Current literature does show a need for effective interventions that support veteran well-being, especially during periods of transition (Morgan et al., 2020). After separation from the service, between 25% and 60% of former members of the U.S. armed forces, "report difficulty adjusting to civilian life" (Bond et al., 2022, p. 283). This finding is also supported by similar results from a Pew Research survey of (n=1284) veterans, with over 48% stating that they have some difficulty adjusting to civilian life (Parker et al., 2019). Furthermore, in a recent national three-year longitudinal study measuring factors of well-being for reintegrating veterans at three-month intervals, considering indicators across four domains of well-being, only 34% were deemed "successful" in their reintegration after the two-and-a-half-year mark (Perkins et al., 2020).

Research identifies a multitude of factors that may contribute to reintegration challenges in veterans, to include deployments and combat experience. Over the last couple of decades, veterans deployed more and served in more combat zones than veterans serving prior to September 11, 2001 (Parker et al., 2019). Additionally, researchers have identified correlations between deployment concerns—defined as frequent concerning combat experiences (engagement with enemy forces, traumatic moments, etc.) and psychological reintegration challenges such as post-traumatic stress disorder, anxiety, and depression (Etchin et al., 2022).

Within the field of psychology and memory, researchers Madore et al. (2016) examined how episodic (memory) specificity—the ability to recall vivid, detailed personal memories—plays a role in well-being and future thinking. Their research examined 47 young adult participants who were randomly assigned to receive either an episodic specificity induction, which is a process that prompts detailed recall of a recently viewed video, or a control induction, which elicited only general impressions of a similar video. Right after the induction, participants

completed three tasks: recalling past events, imagining future events, and a word-comparison task requiring generation of creative definitions from semantically related words. The analyses revealed that the specificity induction significantly increased the number of internal (episodic) details in both memory and imagination tasks, whereas it had no effect on external (semantic) details, nor on performance in the control word-comparison.

Madore et al.'s findings suggest that when individuals can access richer autobiographical memories, they are better able to imagine and plan for the future, which in turn supports adaptive coping and goal pursuit. This connection is particularly relevant to writing-based interventions for veterans, as expressive or autobiographical writing often requires participants to reconstruct personal experiences with heightened detail and emotional depth. In this way, writing may enhance episodic recall, which not only aids in meaning-making but can also foster improved well-being outcomes by providing individuals with a more coherent and resourceful personal narrative.

Using autoethnographic methods to examine an expressive writing workshop for Canadian women veterans, Taber (2025) combined autoethnography with expressive writing praxis, examining how narrative writing—both as facilitator and fellow writer—functions within a feminist transformative learning approach. This theoretical lens critiques militaristic norms and situates writing as a tool for narrative reclamation, identity transformation, and collective meaning-making within a marginalized veteran community context. Her analysis highlights two overarching thematic dimensions:

1. Reclaiming military identity, memory, and story through imagination: through the act of writing, participants re-authored personal and military experiences in ways that challenged institutional narratives and helped them reclaim agency over their life stories.

2. Building community through storytelling inspired by shared gendered military experiences: writing groups emerged not just as creative spaces but as collective sites of solidarity and mutual recognition, where fragmented or muted voices could cohere in a feminist communal learning context.

In keeping with the genre, Taber includes a found poem drawn from her own workshop writing, illustrating how creative expression bridges personal reflection with collective resonance. Her conclusion emphasizes expressive writing's transformational potential—not only for individual well-being but as a pedagogical strategy for cultural change within military contexts.

These studies together serve to highlight expressive writing as a powerful mechanism for releasing previously suppressed emotions, facilitating cognitive and emotional processing of difficult experiences (Pennebaker & Segal, 1999). Through the construction of coherent personal narratives, individuals can integrate disruptive or traumatic life events into a meaningful storyline—one that aligns their past, present, and anticipated future selves (Adler, 2012). This narrative integration is associated with enhanced psychological and physiological health outcomes, supporting the view that narrative identity construction potentially impacts emotional well-being and life satisfaction (Adler, 2012, McAdams & McLean, 2013; Pennebaker & Segal, 1999; Taber, 2025). Contributing to this growing body of theoretical and practical literature spanning topics of veteran writing, well-being, and asset-based programming, the proposed study examines the ways in which an in-person, veteran-only, expressive writing workshop impacts well-being and life satisfaction.

Theoretical Frameworks

This research is theoretically grounded using Flower & Hayes' Cognitive Process Theory of Writing (CPTW) (1981), as it interacts with the complex construct of well-being. The initial

well-being framework is drawn from Vogt et al.'s (2018) Well-being Inventory (WBI), designed to measure more objective life factors related to well-being. The WBI offers a conceptual structure for a priori coding, which helps identify the domains and levels of well-being impacted by an experiential writing program.

Cognitive Process Theory of Writing (CPTW)

Around the same time writing started to be used formally in clinical and therapeutic practice, Carnegie Mellon researchers Linda Flower and John Hayes (1981) published their paper framing CPTW, portraying the act of writing as not simply archival or descriptive, and not just “as a series of decisions and choices,” but as a generative action and skill requiring both cognitive and meta-cognitive processes (p. 365). Flower and Hayes viewed the writing process as having three main components: planning, translating, and reviewing. Within the writing process, these three components are framed as part of the writer’s working memory. When reviewing, writers must read, reread, and edit their work. They also must plan and organize their thoughts, considering their impact on their intended and unintended audiences. Finally, writers must then contend with the translation of those thoughts onto the page. The translation process takes the abstract and makes it concrete, requiring decisions be made by the writer while considering the overall text’s purpose, audience, and genre. Writers oscillate back and forth between these three components, but not necessarily in a fixed order.

The Cognitive Process Theory of Writing (CPTW) has previously been applied in other research as a theoretical framework to examine writing practices among military veterans. Jim Ott (2020) explored expressive writing as a transitional tool for student-veterans entering college. Over three consecutive semesters in academic years 2015, 2016, 2017, he embedded structured expressive-writing assignments into a first-year English composition and reading

course at a California community college, a class composed exclusively of between 10 and 30 student-veterans. He analyzed writing assignments, and, grounding his research in CPTW, qualitatively examined how guided personal writing tasks enabled veterans to articulate their military experiences within an academic narrative framework. The results indicated that these writing exercises fostered a strong sense of classroom belonging and helped participants integrate their veteran and student identities into a coherent personal narrative, which in turn enhanced social connection, academic engagement, and overall well-being during the college transition.

According to Flower & Hayes (1981), the writing process has the capacity to generate new meaning, allowing for the formulation of novel concepts and ideas. This happens when the retrieval of information from long-term memory interacts with the information presented in the task environment. The expectations of fitting within genre conventions alone can demand new ways of considering or organizing memories to express them in the desired way. This theoretical grounding reinforces the idea that the process of writing, as it relates to our own experiences, can be a therapeutic tool and can help reshape and reframe past traumas (see Fig 3.1).

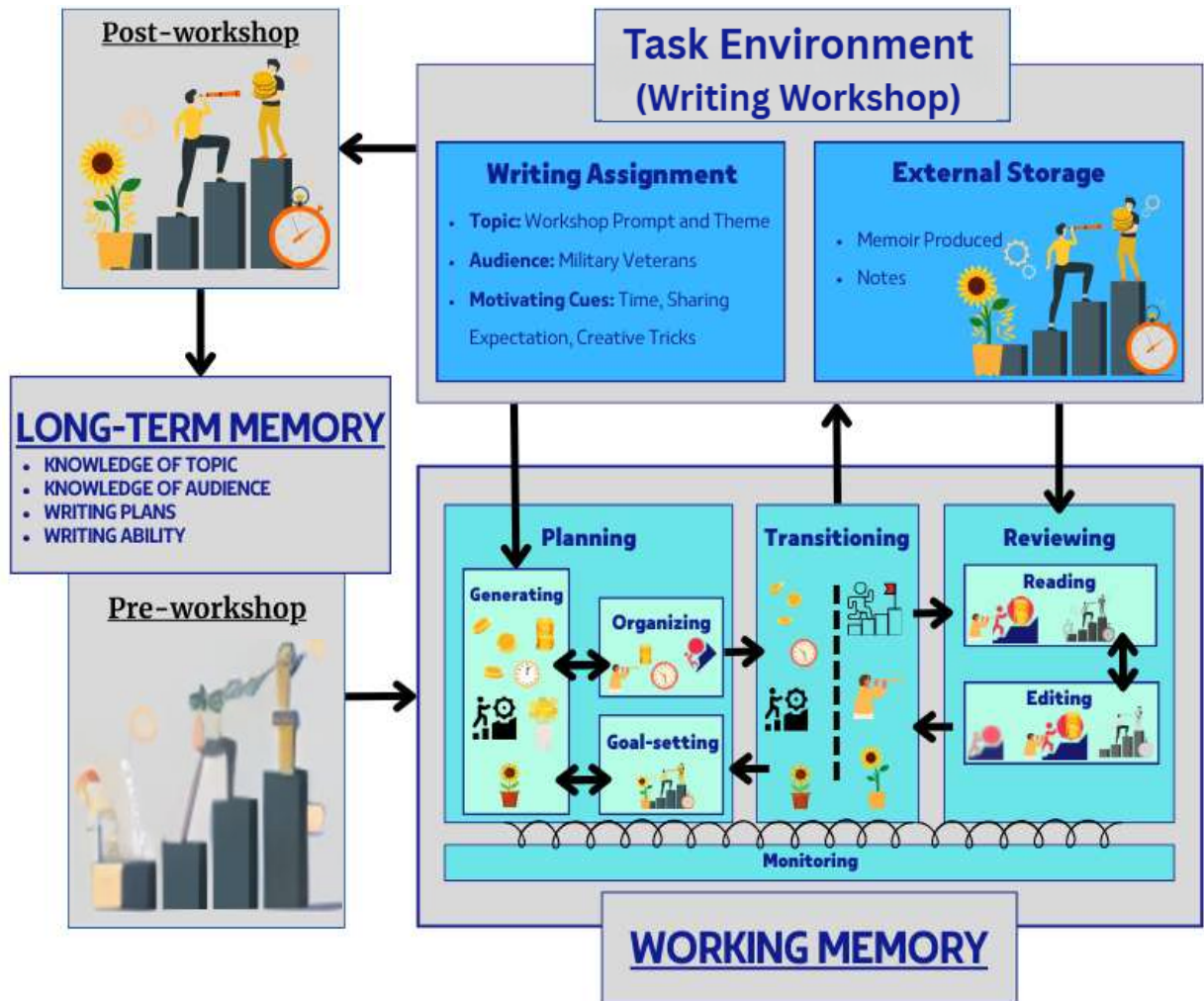


Figure 3.1. *Cognitive Process Theory of Writing in an Experiential Writing Workshop* depicts the Cognitive Process Theory of Writing as it is theorized working to support well-being in an experiential writing program. Memories are fuzzy, pulled from long term memory and enter into the working memory where they oscilate back and forth between the writing phases and the task enviornment. The produced memoir is different than the memory, reshaped and reworked with new additions generated with the help of catalysts in the task enviornment (e.g. prompts, dialogue, and other motivating cues).

The Cognitive Process Theory of Writing outlines four key points (Flower & Hayes, 1981):

- 1) **Writing is a complex mental activity.** Writing involves managing and coordinating a “set of distinctive thinking processes.” Cognitively, writers juggle planning, translating, and reviewing while maintaining a representation of audience, purpose, and genre constraints. Meta-cognitively, writers monitor progress (i.e. “Is this serving my

purpose?”), appraise fit to audience and genre, and regulate strategy use (e.g., adjust the plan, set sub-goals, pause to reread, or solicit feedback).

2) **Writing processes are interconnected and often overlap.** For instance, while writing a paragraph, a writer might pause to brainstorm more ideas for a specific phrase or sentence and then revisit earlier parts of the text to ensure consistency with the new content. This illustrates how different writing processes are intertwined.

3) **Writing is purposeful.** Writers approach the page with specific goals, such as informing, persuading, or entertaining an audience. As they write, these goals evolve, and new strategies emerge to achieve the desired outcome.

4) **Writing is generative.** The final point emphasizes the generative aspect of writing, where new goals arise based on what is learned throughout the writing process. This theory presents writing not just as a way to produce a product but as a dynamic process that through distinct cognitive and meta-cognitive thinking, new knowledge can be generated.

In the context of this study, the CPTW framework supports the idea that prompting writing within an experiential genre like memoir provides writers with the chance to plan, set goals, generate ideas, and transform their memories into the content they create. They then read, re-read, and edit those memories in real time, carefully considering the qualities and components of their story—and how it is conveyed and represented on the page. In a veteran-only writing space using this model, participants also have the opportunity to share their writing and engage in discussions about the memories tied to their stories with an identity aligned-group.

In some cases, painful memories of war or loss are written and rewritten from various perspectives, leading to new ways of understanding both the individual who wrote the memory

and the memory itself. For instance, in a workshop at Colorado State University, prior to the workshop under examination, one veteran participant wrote a tragic story about taking another's life, which was sparked by a prompt about extreme circumstances in the military. Later, the same participant revisited this moment in response to a prompt about feeling lost, as if trapped in a dense fog or jungle, and again when asked to write a letter to an enemy combatant. Ultimately, the participant wrote about the same experience four times, the final time in response to a prompt about feeling stuck, as though being pulled by "Gravity"—which is the title Ryan Lanham (2020) chose for the piece. He published "Gravity" in the first edition of the veteran writing workshop's journal, *Charlie Mike*.

Gravity

Run. Run away. He was running away when I caught him. I—my bullets—caught him.

Up to him. Into him. Lodged in his back.

Left of spine. An upward strafe. Toward heart, home.

How many steps with me in him?

How many feet between us—my heart, his—my life, his—when they drag him back, on his back, slide him in the truck, beneath my feet, beneath my gunner platform?

My hands still shaking. Sweat rolls down my cheek. A tear, salty. Emotionless. Pools on chin. Holds there. Sways bulbous. Then slips, falls—

One. Two. Three. Four. Five. Six. Seven.

Me on him. In him.

Seven feet I peer down into darkness. Shadows. Black in my heart, seeping in.

It beats steady now. Fat on blood, adrenaline.

No holes pulsating red ooze.

No red shirt, red pants, red socks, red shoes, red legs, red arms, red back, red face.

No grimace or Quran. No moans or prayer beads. No Allah tonight.

Just the click of karmic debt, a handcuff locking souls. Tug of my new black moon.

(p.159)

This memory was being continuously reconciled, reframed, reflected upon, and rewritten. With each new version, Lanham translated his memory, planned his composition, and reviewed his work to see if it aligned with his truth. He had to ensure it captured not only the memory of war, but the emotions and insights from the experience that go beyond the battlefield. Aiming to express the feelings the memory evokes and continues to evoke daily, participants must move between planning, composing, and translating, developing new ways to understand and access the memory. Retelling the story through various prompts allows for more opportunities to reshape and redefine how that memory is understood and reconciled.

Well-being Inventory: Quality of Life Framework

In this study, the WBI is used as a conceptual framework to deductively analyze the data (Vogt et al., 2018). The WBI is a veteran-specific model that was constructed from Gladis et al.'s (2000) Quality of Life Framework, which encompasses the constructs of satisfaction, functioning, and life circumstances (p. 14), in order to assess veterans' well-being as they returned and adjusted to civilian life. The WBI uses these same constructs for understanding how one engages, functions, and finds satisfaction in life's arenas, with slight modifications (e.g. the "objective life circumstances" construct is now called "status"). Consequently, the WBI—and the research that conceptually grounds it—provides a way of understanding not only the domains of well-being, but also the individual and contextual circumstances around those domains. For example, in an intimate relationship, an individual can be engaged (status) and feel supported and stable (functioning) but not feel fulfillment or enjoyment (satisfaction). Likewise, individuals can feel enjoyment or fulfillment (satisfaction) without being in a healthy (functioning) relationship. Each provides a different outcome for one's well-being, and making these distinctions is important when considering the ways in which an individual engages with

these life domains. In addition to Gladis et al.'s (2000) framework, the WBI adapted elements of other well-being frameworks that have been used by researchers examining both veteran and civilian populations (Berglass & Harrell, 2012; Bishop, Miller, & Chapin, 2008; Cummins, 1996).

The WBI model used in this study presents four life domains that make up the construct of well-being: vocation, finances, health, and social relationships. These four domains of well-being are used as a deductive conceptual model to better situate the qualitative findings in a contemporary well-being framework (see Table 3.1).

Table 3.1

Well-Being Inventory Domains and Subdomains

| WBI Domains | WBI Subdomains |
|-----------------------------|--|
| Vocation | Work Functioning, Work Satisfaction, Education Functioning, Education Satisfaction |
| Finances | Financial Status, Financial Functioning, Financial Satisfaction |
| Health | Health Status, Health Functioning, Health Satisfaction |
| Social Relationships | Intimate Relationships, Parenting, Broader Social Relationships |

Note. Domains and subdomains are drawn from the Well-Being Inventory (Vogt et al., 2018).

In this study, I analyze the participants' narratives both deductively, applying a priori codes drawn from the WBI, and also by constructing meaning of veterans' understanding of their well-being from examining the data inductively, without imposing an a priori framework of well-being.

Methods

A qualitative approach to the research design was employed to examine veterans' experiences in the writing workshop. Data collection consisted primarily of semi-structured

interviews with six veteran participants, conducted after completion of the 8-week writing workshop series. Semi-structured interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim, and supplemented by workshop observations and participants’ written stories. I adopted a hybrid thematic analysis framework (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Swain, 2018) to identify patterns in the data, combining inductive (data-driven) and deductive (theory-driven) coding techniques. This approach is well-suited to the aims of the study, as it offers flexibility and allows emergent themes to be grounded in participants’ voices while also connecting back to a key veteran well-being framework (Vogt et al., 2018).

Workshop Setting

The workshop setting was designed to be low-stakes, informal, and welcoming, with careful attention paid to creating a space where the veteran participants could feel safe and comfortable enough to share. Workshops were held in-person at Colorado State University, in a newly constructed conference room adjoining an adult learner and veteran student space. The room layout encouraged conversation, with chairs arranged around a large table promote face-to-face interaction and communal energy. A large screen in the back of the room displayed the prompts, which were released two at a time (see Table 3.2).

Table 3.2

Writing Prompt Titles and Descriptions

| Prompt Title | Writing Prompt |
|---------------------|--|
| Lost | Write about a time when you were lost or felt lost. This can be literal, in a city or jungle or dense fog. Maybe relocating or moving. Or, it could be metaphorical or psychological: in war or returning home; some existential moment. |
| Extremes | Write about extremes you experienced in military life: weather, emotions, locations, terrain, personalities, physical challenges, food, sleep. It could be funny or serious or anything in between. |

| | |
|--------------------------------|--|
| A Change in Perspective | How has your perspective or view of the military changed or deepened over time? Write about a concrete experience, conversation, or encounter that led to that change. Or write a scene from that younger perspective, maybe adding moments of reflection from the wiser writer today. |
| Religion or Spirituality | Any experiences with how military life or war changed your spiritual views? A deepening of religious conviction, or a distancing. Any struggles or white-light moments? |
| Pulled in Different Directions | Write about a time when you felt pulled in multiple different directions. Maybe you had a job offer and a love interest in another location, or perhaps an order conflicted with your moral code. How did you respond? |

Note. Table 3.2 provides an example of the prompts that were used during the workshop. Each workshop presented participants with four prompts (two per writing session). There were 32 individual prompts used throughout the 8-week workshop.

A light dinner was provided every evening for the participants due to the workshop taking place during dinnertime. As participants filtered in, they grabbed some food, caught up, and settled in. The idea is to create a calm environment without obviously manufacturing it. This setting contributed to the broader sense of trust and camaraderie. The facilitation approach, which was centered on the facilitator vulnerability, flexible pacing, voluntary sharing, and complementary feedback, was intentionally structured to support connection and mitigate the clinical or “therapy-like” feelings that can intrude on group writing settings. These elements of the workshop’s physical and social environment reinforced its identity as a non-clinical, yet therapeutic, space.

Participants

Participants were recruited at two veteran-focused community events, a holiday celebration, and a public reading event where flyers promoting the workshop were distributed. Additionally, flyers were posted on open bulletin boards and in free speech zones across four local college campuses around Northern Colorado. Flyers were also placed in local libraries and the VA clinic for distribution or prominent display. Two local therapy offices also shared the workshop flyer with their email contacts. Moreover, these flyers were sent through email lists

belonging to local veteran non-profits and college veteran service offices. I also presented at several local veteran-themed conferences and shared the study's purpose and goals with groups of veteran and first-responder therapists. Organizations that provided email lists and booth access approved the recruitment objectives and issued letters of support before recruitment began.

Potential participants accessed a Google Form via a link (email) or QR code (flyer) to complete screening questions ensuring they met the study's inclusion criteria. The criteria were as follows:

1. Must be a U.S. military veteran (as defined by the DoD), including prior active duty, reservists, or National Guard members, as well as current reservists and National Guard members with prior active duty. *Former service members separated under repealed policies (e.g., "Don't Ask, Don't Tell") were also eligible.*
2. Must not have participated in any experiential writing programs within three months prior to the study's start date.
3. Must refrain from participating in other experiential writing workshops during the twelve-week study.
4. Must commit to attending at least six of the eight scheduled workshops.
5. Must agree to complete four surveys on Well-being and Life Satisfaction.
6. Must consent to a ~90-minute follow-up interview.

A total of n=41 individuals applied for the study by completing the screening questionnaire.

Eligible participants were contacted via email and, if selected, scheduled an interview to review the informed consent document (see Fig 3.2).

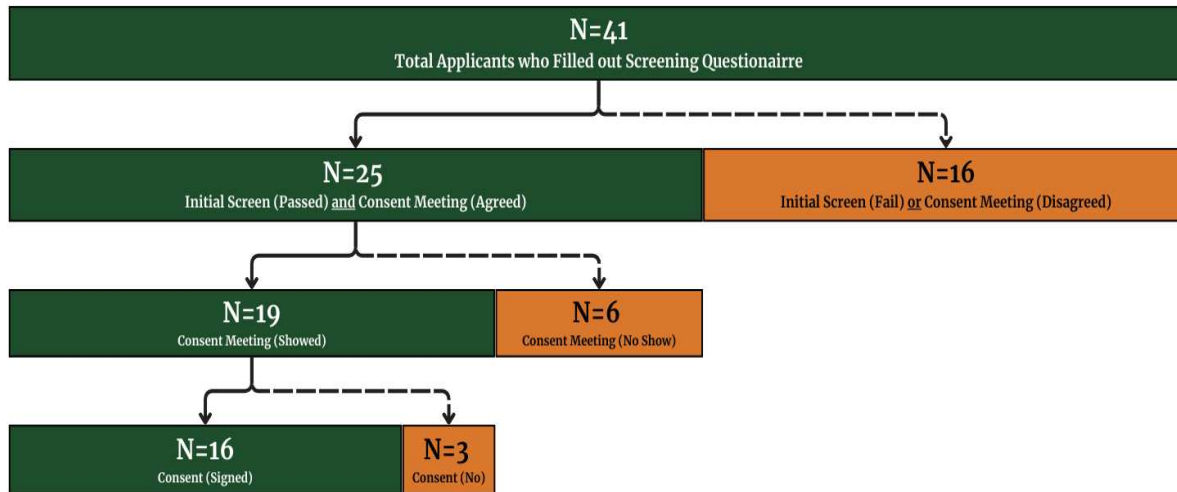


Figure 3.2. *Participant Recruitment: Stages and Attrition* demonstrates the stages of recruitment after a participant applied and the attrition at each stage: 1) Total applicants (n=41); 2) Initial Screen (n=25), 3) Consent Meeting (n=19), 4) Consent Signed (n=16).

Of the n=41 applicants, one applicant could not complete the surveys, three more declined due to the time commitment, and another three could not attend in person. Of the n=25 applicants remaining, n=6 did not show to the scheduled virtual meeting to sign consent documents. Interviews were completed with n=19 potential applicants, all of which agreed to sign consent documents; however, n=3 did not respond to subsequent emails and ultimately dropped out.

The n=16 remaining participants were then randomly selected to be in either the treatment (n=8) or control (n=8) group using a random number generator. One more participant dropped out during week one due to a death in the family, and two were excluded due to the attendance criteria after missing the first three workshops. Due to this, one participant was randomly selected and moved from treatment to control after week one, leaving, after screening and attrition, n=13 veteran participants split into treatment (n=6) and control (n=7) groups.

Data Collection

Various forms of qualitative data were collected over the course of the study. First, interview data were collected following the final workshop session using a semi-structured interview protocol designed to elicit responses from participants about the effects of the workshop on their well-being, as well as identifying the impactful components of the workshop model. The initial questions for the semi-structured interview protocol were conceptually framed using the Well-being Inventory (WBI) (Vogt et al., 2018). The definitions for each of the domains and subdomains were borrowed directly from the WBI manual and adapted for the deductive analysis portion of the data analysis procedures.

Artifacts of participant writing were also collected from the workshop with each participant submitting one selection of writing from the workshop via email. The participants were also asked to submit a reflective piece on what they thought about the workshop as a whole. This was meant to be open-ended and capture the participants' feelings immediately after the final meeting.

Furthermore, observational data were collected throughout the workshop in the form of observational notes using methods of participant-observation. Participant-observation is a method borrowed initially from the field of cultural anthropology, acting as a key means of data collection in ethnographic studies (Harrison, 2018; Hammersley & Atkinson, 1995). This method relies on the researcher being both an observer, collecting notes on interactions and dialogue within the workshop, while also being an active participant in the observed environment. The observational notes were later consolidated into memos and included in analysis.

Semi-Structured Interview Protocol

Semi-structured interviews were chosen as the method for qualitative data collection due to their open-ended nature. Semi-structured interviews strike a balance between a structured interview protocol and an unstructured dialogic protocol, allowing flexibility to explore emerging topics while also maintaining consistency across interviews. This method was selected because it enables researchers to gain in-depth insight into participants' experiences, perspectives, and meaning-making (Galletta, 2013). For this study, the semi-structured interview protocol used to conduct ex post facto interviews with treatment group participants was constructed with a set of nine initial questions. These questions evolved over the course of data collection to include more focused questions and some predetermined probing questions aimed at eliciting deeper narratives about the workshop experience. Interviews were conducted after the final survey to ensure that participants had completed the workshop and could provide comprehensive feedback.

Interviews took place in public places (libraries, coffee shops, breweries, etc.) and each interview lasted between 60 and 90 minutes. Participants were informed about the study's purpose, methodology, and the intended use of their information. They were then asked to sign a consent form for audio recording prior to the interview (see Appendix J & K). Additionally, participants were informed the interview could be terminated at any time for any reason with no penalty to them.

The initial nine interview questions were based on well-being domains aligned with the Well-being Inventory (Vogt et al., 2018) but were adapted during data collection. These adjustments were methodologically necessary in the context of an explanatory sequential mixed-methods research design, as the goal of the interviews was to understand how the workshop

supported participants' well-being and to identify which components were most or less impactful (see Table 3.3).

Table 3.3

Semi-Structured Interview Protocol

| Type | Topic | Interview Questions |
|--------------|----------------------|--|
| Reflection* | Military Experiences | What effect, if any, has the workshop had on your perspective of your time in the military? |
| Reflection | Veteran Experiences | What effect, if any, has the workshop had on your perspective of your time after the service? |
| Reflection** | Listening | What effect, if any, did hearing the stories of other veterans have on you? |
| Reflection | Listening | Were there any stories that stood out as especially impactful that you remember from the workshop that somebody else wrote? |
| Reflection | Sharing | What effect, if any, did sharing your own personal stories in a room full of other veterans have on you? |
| Reflection | Sharing | Were there any stories you told that stood out to you as especially impactful? |
| Assessment** | Life Satisfaction | The first five questions on the survey are. . . When assessing your general life satisfaction, what aspects of your life come to mind? |
| Impact* | Well-being | Well-being in this study is defined as. . . In what ways has the workshop supported or constrained your well-being? |
| Impact* | Social | Has the workshop affected the satisfaction you feel with your social or relational parts of life? |
| Impact** | Social | Did you find yourself more or less inclined to tell stories about your military experiences after the workshop? |
| Impact* | Vocational | What effect, if any, has the workshop had on how you think about or engage with your career or schooling? |
| Impact | Financial | What effect, if any, has the workshop had on how you think about or engage with your finances or financial situation? |

| | | |
|----------------|---------------|--|
| Impact | Health | Do you find yourself more or less satisfied with your health over the last few months? |
| Impact* | Mental Health | What effect, if any, has the workshop had on your mental health? |
| Component* | General | What parts of the workshop specifically support better well-being? |
| Component** | Timing | Do you think the timing of the workshop matters, as in evening vs. afternoon? |
| Component | Environment | Do you think the veteran-only space is important? And what are your thoughts on space? |
| Component | Facilitation | Do you think the facilitator being a veteran is an important component of the workshop? |
| Component | Content | Do you think the content and prompts play an important role in shaping the workshop experience? |
| Component | Challenges | Were there any situations that made you uncomfortable enough to question your attendance? |
| Component* | General | If any, what other workshop components do you feel are important to support your experience in the workshop? |
| Open Feedback* | General | Is there anything else you would like to share that we have not discussed? |
| Follow-up | General | Do you have any questions for me? |

Note: The interview questions above were asked in each interview with additional probing and follow-up questions based on participant responses. The asterisk (*) indicates the initial nine questions. Rows marked with a double asterisk (**) indicate questions that were asked in a follow-up interview with the first and second interviewees as they were added following their initial interviews.

The modified protocol in table 3.3 incorporated specific questions regarding workshop components, personal reflections, the impact on well-being, and a question about life satisfaction. Some questions included brief introductions to provide context for the participants. For example, when asking about health, I prefaced the questions with: “Consider your mental and physical health over the last few months in areas like your ability to complete tasks or feel ‘successful’ in meeting life’s mental and physical expectations...”

The interviews were conversational in nature to some extent as well, which led to participants touching on topics not directly associated with the initial questions. These were also followed up on and helped shape what topics participants got excited about or strayed away from. For example, while it wasn't a topic everyone broached, one participant discussed their experience with race in the workshop, another discussed gender expectations and perceptions as an inhibitor to open sharing in veteran-only spaces. Different than the majority participant experience, these responses contribute to an ongoing discussion on how identity characteristics like race and gender can impact group dynamics.

Data Analysis

I used qualitative data analysis software, NVivo, to support systematic analysis and coding of the interview data and workshop artifacts, as well as organize my observations and memos. Semi-structured interview data was transcribed using a third-party, "TranscribeMe!" The recordings were transcribed "verbatim" and included all filled pauses such as "um" and "uh." During the first complete initial read-through, I used audio recordings to check the quality of the verbatim transcription and made edits where necessary to accurately reflect the participant's language and meaning. This created a holistic sense of the meaning in the data and created an initial sense of content familiarity.

I analyzed the data using a rigorous multi-phase approach that incorporated both posteriori (inductive) and a priori (deductive) coding methods. Initially, all data sources, which included participant interviews, reflections, artifacts from the workshop, observations, and analytic memos were imported into NVivo. I constructed inductive codes and applied them to the data in NVivo first, and then I included the WBI subscale and domain definitions, which were applied after the inductive analysis was completed. Participant cases were used to organize the

data, with each case containing the participants' interview transcripts, reflection documents, and associated memos. This organization supported a comprehensive review of individual participant data while allowing for the ability to analyze themes across the dataset (see Table 3.4).

Table 3.4

Hybrid Thematic Analysis Process

| Phase | Description | Purpose |
|-------------------------------|--|--|
| Data Organization | Interview transcripts, workshop artifacts, and observational memos were organized by participant cases. | Establish a structured and accessible dataset. |
| Initial Reading | Immersive reading of all materials for content familiarity. | Gain a holistic sense of the data before coding. |
| Initial Coding (Inductive) | Codes developed inductively from participant responses; no predetermined categories were used. | Identify emergent themes grounded in participant language. |
| Inductive Code Refinement | Themes refined with definitions, subtypes, and examples. Earlier codes revisited for consistency. | Clarify and organize codes for systematic application. |
| Final Coding | Fully developed coding scheme applied across all materials, including earlier participants. | Ensure consistency and completeness in data coding. |
| A Priori Coding | Applied the Well-being Inventory (WBI) framework to the data: Health, Social Relationships, Vocation, and Finance (Vogt et al., 2018). | Introduce a theory-driven lens for analyzing participant responses. |
| Matrix Coding Analysis | Used NVivo matrix coding to examine intersections between emergent themes and WBI framework domains. | Identify patterns and cross-domain relationships. |
| Final Integration & Synthesis | Integrated a priori and a posteriori findings to create a comprehensive understanding of participant experiences. | Merge insights from both inductive and deductive coding for richer interpretation. |

Note. The following outlines the data analysis process utilized in this study, structured around Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis framework and supported by NVivo 14 & 15. This hybrid approach to thematic analysis integrates both inductive (a posteriori) and deductive (a priori) coding strategies to achieve a comprehensive synthesis of participant responses.

All materials, including artifacts, reflections, memos, and the six interview transcripts were given a thorough read-through to create a deep familiarization with the data collected as a whole. Then, the interviews were coded inductively, meaning codes were generated directly

from the data without imposing prior categories. Each transcript was read closely initially, while I noted significant phrases or ideas that reflected participants’ experiences of the workshop and its impact on their well-being. This open coding phase yielded a rich list of in vivo codes capturing participants’ own words and concepts (e.g., “shared understanding,” “getting it out,” “emotional relief,” “healing through story,” etc.). The focus in this phase was to construct emergent themes from the ground up, ensuring they were rooted in veterans lived experiences.

Next, I organized and refined the initial codes by looking for patterns and relationships. Related codes were grouped into categories and subthemes, and their meanings were discussed in analytical memos. Through constant comparison and iterative review of the coded excerpts, a preliminary thematic map was constructed. At this stage, several provisional themes began to take shape — notably, recurring clusters around concepts of community connection, therapeutic expression, personal change, and purpose. For example, codes such as “safe to share,” “no judgment,” and “veteran-only space” clustered together, suggesting a theme of Trust & Vulnerability centered on the supportive social environment. This data-driven refinement ensured that themes closely reflected participant voices (see Table 3.5).

Table 3.5

Inductive Subcodes with Definitions: Grouped by Major Codes and Codes

| Major codes | Codes | Subcode | Definition |
|----------------------------|--------------|----------------------|---|
| Emotional Release & Relief | Writing | Writing is cathartic | Writing catharsis refers to the therapeutic release or relief of emotional tension that occurs through the act of expressive writing. |
| | | Identity shift | A transformation in how participants see themselves in relation to service or civilian life—purpose, meaning, etc. |
| | | Getting it out | Letting go of an emotional burden; freeing oneself from a story. |

| | | | |
|--|----------------------------------|---|---|
| Camaraderie, Connection & The Veteran- only Writing Space | Active Listening & Sharing | Listening helped too | Expressly mentioning listening to others’ stories and experiencing positive personal outcomes. |
| | Trust & Vulnerability | Veteran-only space | Referencing the veteran-only space or expressing positive or negative association with being surrounded exclusively by other veterans. |
| | | Safe to share | The perceived safety in disclosing personal experiences or emotions in a nonjudgmental environment. |
| | | No judgment | Freedom to express oneself without fear of criticism or invalidation. |
| | Shared Understanding | Emotional relief | Expressing a reduction in emotional burden or stress. |
| | | Shared Understanding of Military BS | Reference to implicit understanding or using shorthand from common military backgrounds as a way of connecting or feeling included. |
| | | Healing through story | Mentioning healing or feeling mentally or physically more able or better due to the composition, sharing, or listening to workshop narratives. |

Note. Inductive subcodes and working definitions were generated from the interview data. Subcodes were clustered into “Codes” (Active Listening & Sharing; Writing; Trust & Vulnerability; Shared Understanding) and “Major Codes” (Emotional Release & Relief; Camaraderie, Connection & the Veteran-only Writing Space). Categories are not mutually exclusive—individual excerpts may carry multiple subcodes across codes/major codes.

Following the completion of the posteriori analysis, a theoretical framework was applied using the WBI as an a priori coding structure (Vogt et al., 2018). These a priori categories were applied to the interview transcripts by coding any text that indicated changes or effects in those areas. The definitions of these subdomains used to code the interview data were borrowed from the WBI Manual (Vogt et al., 2018) (see Table 3.6).

Table 3.6

Domains and Subscale Definitions for Core WBI Measures

| Domain | Subscale | Definition |
|----------|------------------|---|
| Vocation | Status | Labor force participation, paid employment, full vs. part-time employment, and full-time involvement in unpaid vocations (schooling/training, volunteer work, caregiving/homemaking). |
| | Work Functioning | Reliability and quality of work; effective management of interpersonal relationships in work settings. |

| | | |
|-----------------------------|------------------------------------|--|
| | Educational Functioning | Reliability and quality of work; effective management of interpersonal relationships in educational or training settings. |
| | Paid and Unpaid Work Satisfaction | Satisfaction with the nature of work, recognition of contributions, ability to apply skills and knowledge, and ability to advance vocational goals. For paid employment: also satisfaction with pay, benefits, and work environment. |
| | Educational Satisfaction | Satisfaction with educational/training experience, advancement of career goals, and learning environment. |
| Finances | Status | Current financial stability (e.g., maintaining housing, managing debt, affording expenses) and financial preparedness (e.g., emergency savings, retirement savings, insurance coverage). |
| | Functioning | Financial behavior related to cash management (budgeting), credit management (paying bills on time), and savings (contributing to savings account). |
| | Satisfaction | Satisfaction with ability to afford essential and non-essential expenses, as well as savings and debt accumulation. |
| | Status | Presence of chronic physical or mental health conditions, illnesses, or disabilities. |
| Health | Functioning | Engagement in health-promoting behaviors, risky health behaviors, and self-care related to mental and physical wellness. |
| | Satisfaction | Satisfaction with physical health, mental health, and health care. |
| | Status (all subdomains) | Involvement in intimate relationships, parenting, and the broader community. |
| Social Relationships | Intimate Relationship Functioning | Supportive and collaborative behaviors (e.g., emotional and practical support, willingness to engage in sexual/physical closeness). |
| | Parental Functioning | Supportive and effective parenting strategies (e.g., meeting children's basic needs, involvement in children's activities). |
| | Broader Social Functioning | Behaviors that support positive relationships with friends, extended family, and community (e.g., getting along with others, providing help/support). |
| | Intimate Relationship Satisfaction | Satisfaction with partner's contributions in terms of support and collaboration (e.g., emotional support, intimacy). |
| | Parental Satisfaction | Satisfaction with relationship with children, parenting experience, and children's well-being. |
| | Broader Social Satisfaction | Satisfaction and sense of belonging in relationships with friends, extended family, and community. |

Note. Constructs are organized by domain and subdomain, with definitions provided for status, functioning, and satisfaction dimensions. This table is adapted from the WBI Manual (Vogt et al., 2018).

This deductive pass overlaid an interpretive structure to see how participants' experiences aligned with or diverged from expected well-being domains. Notably, most participants

described impacts in the social and mental health domains of well-being. References to vocational or financial well-being changes were less frequent. In fact, a few participants explicitly stated the workshop had no direct effect on their job or finances, which was an anticipated outcome given the short-term, part-time nature of the intervention. Using the WBI framework in this manner provided a systematic check on the inductive themes and their alignment with established well-being domains.

The final analytical phase utilized NVivo's matrix coding capabilities to examine the intersection between the emergent posteriori codes and the WBI framework domains. This analysis revealed patterns in how the workshop influenced different aspects of participant well-being, with particular attention to which domains and levels emerged as most salient in participants' narratives. It also revealed overlaps between themes, prompting further refinement for the coding structure. In some cases, initial codes were merged or re-scoped to better fit the developing thematic definitions. I revisited earlier transcripts with the finalized codebook to ensure consistency and coherence across the data set. This iterative refinement resulted in a set of clearly defined core themes (each with sub-components) that reflect veterans' experiences of the workshop and its impact on various dimensions of well-being. Throughout the analysis process, reflective memos were kept to document coding decisions, theme definitions, and analytical insights.

Results

After analyzing each of the treatment group interviews and written reflections, two major themes were identified: 1) "Camaraderie, Connection, & the Veteran-only Writing Space" and 2) "Emotional Release and Relief." These two themes were constructed close to the data and provide a means of understanding *how* the workshop model supports participant well-being. The

qualitative findings ultimately illustrate the writing workshop as a kind of non-clinical therapeutic group that supported participant social and emotional well-being through quickly formed feelings of camaraderie with other group members and the emotional relief of “shooting the shit.”

The first major theme, “Camaraderie, Connection, & the Veteran-only Writing Space,” encapsulates how the workshop cultivated a sense of belonging and mutual understanding among participants through shared cultural language and experience. This theme is divided into two interrelated subthemes that illuminate the mechanisms through which trust and understanding were established: (1) “Trust & Vulnerability: The Veteran-only Writing Space,” and (2) “Shared Understanding: Cultural Connection through ‘Military Bullshit.’” Together, these subthemes demonstrate how the workshop’s veteran-only environment fostered rapid rapport, comfort, and safety—conditions that allowed participants to speak freely, take narrative risks, and engage thoughtfully with their stories and one another. Each theme and subtheme are defined and discussed in relation to key elements of the workshop illustrating how camaraderie and cultural connection served as the foundation upon which later emotional release and healing were made possible.

The second major theme, “Emotional Release and Relief,” captures the psychological and affective dimensions of participant experience, reflecting how the workshop functioned as a safe outlet for emotional processing and personal catharsis. This theme is divided into two subthemes that articulate its primary mechanisms of action: 1) “Writing: Cathartic and Transformative,” and 2) “Sharing and Active Listening: Getting It Out and Feeling Heard.” Together, these subthemes illustrate how the workshop’s iterative cycle of writing and sharing generated both private and collective forms of emotional relief. Writing served as an introspective process through which

participants reflected and reframed difficult emotions and memories, while the sharing and active listening phases fostered mutual empathy, validation, and recognition among peers. In combination, these processes transformed the workshop into a dynamic and reciprocal environment of emotional exchange where veterans could “get things off [their] chest,” feel lighter through expression, and experience the relief of being genuinely heard.

The final section, “Synthesis: Artifact Analysis,” integrates the qualitative findings with observations and participant-submitted artifacts—including compositions and reflective writings—to illustrate how the workshop process operates in practice. Drawing on the narratives of three participants in particular, this section highlights the dynamic interplay of storytelling and trust that characterize the workshop environment. The subsequent subsection, “Workshop Reflection Synthesis,” juxtaposes participants’ end-of-workshop reflections to further contextualize and reinforce the major themes. Together, these analyses foreground the participants’ own voices, demonstrating how their words and experiences construct the study’s central findings.

Camaraderie, Connection & the Veteran-only Writing Space

The theme “Camaraderie, Connection & the Veteran-only Writing Space” is defined here as “a mutual trust, safety, and friendship among veteran participants through shared identity, culture, rhetoric, and clear reciprocal support during the workshop process.” As one memo I composed noted,

The camaraderie is the ‘glue’ enabling everything else in the workshop to work so well—participants generally assume good intentions in the story even through some ideological differences. It is the foundation that lets the participants open up and feel safe and understood.

This major theme was inductively constructed from numerous initial codes revolving around elements of social connection and safety. For example, participants’ transcripts were coded with

in-vivo language like “veteran-only space,” “shared experiences,” “feeling heard,” “old buddies,” and “no judgment.” These open codes were grouped into two salient sub-categories during analysis: “Shared Understanding” and “Trust & Vulnerability.” Notably, this theme was strongly supported by deductive coding as well: every participant explicitly or implicitly touched on social well-being benefits from the workshop. Using NVivo matrix queries, I found a high degree of overlap between segments coded under the “Camaraderie” theme and those tagged for the “Social Relationships” domain of well-being (WBI), underscoring the possibility that improved social well-being was a key outcome of the workshop. No other WBI domain had any meaningful degree of overlap with the “Camaraderie” theme.

The code “Trust & Vulnerability” encompassed the emotional safety participants felt, evidenced through participant statements about comfort in sharing personal stories and confidence that others in the space “have your back.” Initially, I coded segments simply as “Safe Space” or “Community.” Upon deeper review, I realized these codes were describing facets of the same broader phenomenon. I chose to merge these codes and refine them under the “veteran-only space,” which is reflected in participant interviews as a meaningful factor in supporting trust and vulnerability.

The code “Shared Understanding” captured when participants expressed or referenced some form of implicit cultural knowledge as a support or constraint related to their workshop participation or well-being. Army combat veteran, Charlie, discussed this phenomenon, claiming that despite any differences, “[Veterans] have shared experiences. And so, you can tell the story, and you can get the true point of the story across.” This idea of shared experience that Charlie touches on is profound as the connection formed in the workshop is presented as crossing the generational and cultural boundaries that existed between the participants. The thread of shared

understanding expressed in the interviews was further expanded to include what half of the treatment group participants explicitly titled, “Military Bullshit”—a nuanced intergenerational thread of cultural and rhetorical understanding tied to military service.

Trust & Vulnerability: The Veteran-only Writing Space

Overwhelmingly, the consensus among every participant was that the veteran-only writing space was important to the atmosphere of trust and camaraderie formed in the workshop. One participant, Charlie, stressed that having only veterans in the room was “fundamentally important” to create an intimate setting where no background explanations were needed due to shared understanding: “I think that’s important... limiting it that way or keeping it that intimate, where you don’t have to explain anything... it doesn’t feel like you need to [give] a preamble . . .” Parker, a Navy Physician, also felt that the space provided “camaraderie and... a shared sense of identity. . . a shared history with other veterans,” illustrating how the veteran-only space supported participant connection, even across generations, through a recognition of commonality in military service and “a shared history.” This generational bridge in cultural connection was also iterated by another participant, Blake, a former Army communications specialist, who stated, “it feels like some of these people could have been in your unit and you could have been in the smoke pit with them, and you could have been telling these same stories . . .” Jordan, who had a quick but tumultuous time in the military, said of telling his story, “. . .even when it was ugly, it felt okay to share it, you know? It wasn't viewed as negative, and I didn't walk away from it looking through a lens of, how am I gonna to be judged for this?” Jordan did not know anyone in the workshop prior to joining the study but felt safe enough to share even the “ugly” parts of his story. The retrieval of stories from participants’ long-term memory was facilitated by hearing others’ stories. As Parker, stated, “someone would tell a story and you’d think, ‘I have one like

that,” indicating that shared cultural cues in the environment unlocked memories they “[hadn’t] thought about in years.”

A few of the participants expounded further on why the space felt safe and secure with other veterans only. One Navy participant, Avery, focused on the likelihood of veterans being tighter lipped with non-veteran writers in the room, stating, “I think the veteran-only is more powerful... If [veterans] know they’re getting in there with people who really haven’t experienced what they’ve experienced, they’re probably not going to open up as much.” This idea was reinforced when Charlie echoed, “Yeah. Just because of the—whether it’s real or not—the perceived expectation that you can say whatever the fuck you want. I think it’s very, very important.” Charlie went on to contrast the workshop with speaking in civilian work or school settings, stating that “in a college environment, a lot of times you have to put the filter on,” implying that in the workshop environment “the filter” can come off.

The veteran-only space silently encouraged participants to drop their guard and express themselves openly, confident that others wouldn’t get “offended” or “pity” them for what they said. These outcomes even extended outside of the workshop for one veteran, an Army infantryman, Fernando, who felt that connecting with other veterans in the workshop helped him realize that he would avoid “vets on the street” with their “ribbon hats on,” stating, “I think I would put up a wall...where now I wanna build a bridge...to connect.” It is evident from this shift in perspective and the overwhelming evidence in the interviews that these veterans appreciated and felt that the veteran-only space was a key component of feeling comfortable enough to share their stories freely and to feel understood. Participants emphasized that how stories were received by others in the workshop was as consequential as the act of writing. The

veteran-only environment fostered psychological safety and a sense of shorthand, allowing forthright disclosure without fear of misinterpretation.

Shared Understanding: Cultural Connection through “Military Bullshit”

One of the key reasons the workshop space was seen as safe and valued by veterans of various ideological, political, and cultural backgrounds is because of the shared understanding that exists between most people in this population. Not fearing judgment for being ‘vulgar’—using curse words and gallows humor—due to perceived impropriety is the reason the workshop space felt safe and comfortable for many veterans. This is not meant to excuse actions or statements that are personally offensive, and it is standard practice within the workshop to address insensitive behaviors. Instead, I mean to highlight that comfortability in the workshop space is not exclusionary of what some unfamiliar civilians might deem inappropriate language or topics.

Due to the context of their experiences, many military veterans describe civilian environments as inhibiting spaces for communication. Research shows that the contrast between the direct, jargon-laden, and hierarchical communication style of the military and the more informal civilian style leads to misunderstandings, frustration, and even relational breakdowns (Howe & Shpeer, 2019). Moreover, studies on veterans in academic settings found they “feel systematically silenced by the norms, practices, and members of the predominant university culture,” illustrating a broader pattern of communicative constraint (Howe & Shpeer, 2019). In contrast, participants in the workshop share experiences that are unheard of *anywhere* else: Fernando shared about the emotional gravity of taking another human being’s life; Charlie about watching a U.S. missile land in the lap of a father on a video call with his child; and Parker vividly described the moment he was stuck with an HIV contaminated needle while trying to

save the life of a child. These stories are raw and real and are woven with the cultural and rhetorical thread of military service. That thread is what allows for shared understanding and fast feelings of camaraderie.

When asked why there is a thread of camaraderie in the workshop, three participants mentioned “the *bullshit*” that service members experience. The difference in life experience between an Army physician in his 70’s and an Navy computer network technician in his 40’s are vast; however, when asked in the interview what the thread was connecting them—why there was a feeling of camaraderie—Blake answered, “Maybe it’s just *the bullshit* of the military. Yeah, it’s *the bullshit*. We’ve all gone through *the bullshit*. And we feel the same sense of, I don’t know. . .” He then went on to reference a story as an example, told by Parker about his shore leave being ruined after a long deployment on the ship. Once again, highlighting story as a means of connection.

The story Parker told entailed a young, drunk, Sailor in a southeast Asian country who died after getting into a brawl at a local bar that was made clear it was off-limits. Everyone in the workshop knew the story was not about the dead Sailor—perhaps, as it would be in a room full of civilians. In this space, the story was about dealing with *the bullshit* that followed the deceased Sailor’s actions. Parker and the thousands of other Sailors on the ship did not get to go to shore after being at sea for months because a young Sailor could not follow the single directive relayed to him before exiting the ship. The Sailor’s death was tragic, but ultimately not the point of the story. In this room of military veterans, it is okay to tell a story about the death of a young man where the main point is “the deceased is an idiot who caused me to miss my shore leave.” No one gets upset. It is okay to laugh.

Behind every commercial of a Marine swinging a sword at a digital dragon is a new recruit counting all of the 9mm bolts in a service bay for the second time in a month. The military is this way, at least in part, because it mirrors combat expectations: do not question the [bullshit] order, just do what needs to be done. It is the same cultural thread that ties the Fernando's story about taking a life, to the Charlie's story about watching a missile land in someone's lap, to Parker's story about being stuck on a ship for shore leave because some idiot Sailor got himself killed at a bar he was specifically ordered not to enter. Some military veterans have a positive outlook on their experience in the service, while others do not. The participants in this study highlight that, regardless of a veteran's perspective of the service or their place in it, no one dodges *the bullshit*.

Because no one escapes the "bullshit," naming it together through story becomes more than gallows humor—it becomes a shared frame that legitimizes frustration, grief, and the absurdities of service without requiring translation or apology. In a room where this idiom is understood, defensiveness is lowered. That cultural understanding enables the condition for the workshop's core practices—prompted writing, volunteer sharing, and active listening—to do their work. Once the language of service sets the stage, stories that have stayed "in a box" can be put into words and told as a story to old buddies "in the smoke pit." Participants described leaving workshop sessions feeling lighter not because the "bullshit" disappeared, but because it had been named, narrated, and heard by others who have a shared understanding and reciprocal respect for what it means. In what follows, I trace how these conditions translate into moments of emotional release and relief.

Emotional Release & Relief

Camaraderie and connection within the workshop space allowed many participants to “speak freely,” which, when coupled with curated prompts, created an environment supporting unabashed storytelling. The stories shared filled the workshop with laughter and tears in equal parts. The workshop can manifest a range of emotions—participants get angry about their role in the military machine, cry when telling the story of a lost friend, and laugh as they share about a prank they played on their lieutenant while in garrison. The participants often spoke of the workshop as an emotional outlet, creating a space for them to “get things off my chest” and articulate feelings or memories that they had long kept inside.

The theme of “Emotional Release & Relief” captures the cathartic relief and therapeutic “letting it go” feeling that participants expressed experiencing through the processes of writing and sharing their stories in the workshop. For instance, Fernando was hesitant to join the workshop due to the possibility of revisiting and reviving past trauma but later acknowledged that “writing and sharing about a different slice of life was healing.” This major theme captures the workshop’s role as an emotional pressure valve, facilitating psychological relief through narrative expression and empathetic exchange. This theme is built from participant narratives about both the private catharsis of writing in the workshop space, and the public catharsis of sharing and actively listening in a trusted group. Notably, this theme also encapsulates the idea of active listening: veterans felt release not only when expressing their own stories but also when listening to others and realizing they were not alone in certain struggles. The reciprocal nature of the workshop, with everyone alternating as both a writer and listener, created a collective sense of emotional release and relief.

The theme “Emotional Release & Relief” was identified by clustering codes related to therapeutic outcomes and emotional processes. Initial inductive codes feeding into this major theme included: “cathartic writing,” “getting it out,” “emotional relief,” “feeling lighter,” “therapeutic benefit,” “healing through story,” and “listening helped too.” Additionally, observations of participants laughing, crying, or feeling anger were included. In vivo phrases like “let it go,” when referring to composing and sharing their stories, which two participants used to describe the function of the workshop, were especially telling. During analysis, I noticed these codes tended to co-occur with references to specific workshop components, namely the writing process and the sharing/reading process.

The two subthemes for this overarching theme were the following: “Writing: Cathartic and Transformative” and “Sharing & Active Listening: Getting it out & Feeling Heard.” The “Writing” subtheme encompasses the solitary, internal act of putting words on paper, which participants often found challenging but cathartic, with a few noting they were surprised by how emotional they felt while writing to certain prompts. The “Sharing & Active Listening” subtheme captured the interpersonal dynamic of the workshop session, such as reading one’s story aloud, hearing others respond supportively and listening to peers’ stories. As I explore next, the theme was refined to explicitly include both writing and sharing aspects, since participants consistently cited both as key to their emotional experience.

Writing: Cathartic and Transformative

Across interviews, participants characterized the act of writing itself as a catalyst for relief and reappraisal, reinforcing theoretical ties to the Cognitive Process Theory of Writing (CPTW). For example, Parker described how “writing was the only time during the week I slowed down and actually sat with my thoughts,” later explaining that composing to certain

prompts helped him “see [difficult] memories a little more clearly,” highlighting how the writing process within the workshop task environment can facilitate accessing and refining memory.

Fernando similarly reflected that “the writing was cathartic” and emphasized that both the writing and sharing components supported his mental health and sense of emotional release.

Avery also underscored the role of writing in creating clarity and generating new understandings, noting, “I didn’t realize how much I needed to say some of that until I started writing.” For Avery, composing did not merely document what was already known but instead expanded what could be known, opening space for reflection, reframing, and reappraisal of difficult experiences. For Fernando, the writing was also transformative and facilitated a shift in his identity: “I kinda forged an identity up here at CSU as, like, the angry veteran... Writing through a bunch of that stuff—writing and then sharing—it, like, there’s an alchemical shift in the energy.” Fernando’s “alchemical shift” is best understood as a renegotiation of identity precipitated by the composing and sharing process: moving from a constricted self-story tied to a caricature— “the angry veteran”—toward a fuller, more workable narrative that makes room for complexity, agency, and connection. This change in self-image reflects how translating experience into language within the workshop task environment and then reviewing it—reflecting on it in context—exerts reciprocal pressure on the writer’s internal representations. This suggests that writing within the workshop task environment functions as a generative process through which new insights can emerge, aligning closely with CPTW’s emphasis on writing as a recursive, meaning-making act.

Taken together, these participant accounts present the workshop’s writing process as both cathartic and transformative, facilitating emotional release while generating new ways for participants to access, interpret, and reframe their own stories. Within the veteran-only task

environment, lowered social risk and heightened audience relevance created conditions in which participants could compose difficult material with genuine intent to share. As Charlie expressed earlier, the ability to “say whatever the fuck you want” was not merely about freedom of speech—it represents the psychological safety required to write (and share) honestly. The act of composing, then, became a form of controlled exposure and meaning-making, allowing writers to confront lived-experiences and register empathetic responses from peers, revising both the text and the self in real time.

While the act of composing served as an introspective process through which participants accessed, articulated, and reappraised difficult experiences, the sharing and active listening phases extended that process to interpersonal. Writing initiated emotional release through solitary reflection, but sharing transformed that release into a collective act of meaning-making. Reading one’s story aloud, hearing empathetic responses from others, and listening to peers’ narratives deepened the sense of mutual recognition and relief. In this way, the workshop became more than a private exercise in self-expression—it evolved into a reciprocal space where emotional validation was both offered and received, reinforcing the therapeutic and communal dimensions of the writing model that underpin the next subtheme, “Sharing and Active Listening: Getting it Out & Feeling Heard.”

Sharing and Active Listening: Getting it Out & Feeling Heard

Veterans in the workshop described sharing as a key component of the workshop’s impact on their well-being during interviews; moreover, every participant mentioned in some manner “feeling heard” by the other participants. Fernando stated after a particularly raw story he “needed to be seen hurting.” Jordan emphasized that during the discussion phases of the workshop, “people were listening” and peers offered “specific responses” that showed they had

truly heard the piece. Avery noted that active listening and “hearing others’ [stories]” was one of the most valuable parts of the workshop, “almost as impactful as sharing [myself].” This reciprocal process of sharing and active listening is not easy, but the participant voices show the value. The participant responses to hearing a shared story were often validating and empathetic, crossing into the social domain of well-being, and turning a solitary writing experience into a shared exchange.

Participants also described listening as a way of widening recognition of the challenges other veterans faced while in the service, shifting the ways veteran participants thought about their own service. As Avery put it, hearing “different stories” from the group “opened my eyes to the perspectives and things that I feel like I’ve kind of been sheltered from.” Jordan similarly described “liv[ing] vicariously” through others’ experiences and relationships he “didn’t get,” underscoring how peer narratives broadened his sense of what military service and life after the service can look like. Blake captured the cross-generational common ground succinctly, calling it “the bullshit of the military.” “Military Bullshit” functioned as a shared frame that made different experiences—regardless of branch, job, or time in service—recognizable and relatable. Together, these participant statements suggest that active listening supports mutual recognition and social connection in the workshop task environment.

Participants expressed in interviews that active listening also worked as a retrieval cue for memories they had forgotten about. Through a CPTW lens, the intentionally structured task environment—prompted, timed writing and sharing to a veteran-only audience—not only shaped the composition and expression of participants stories, but also helped participants (re)access forgotten stories. As Blake explained when asked about the role of the workshop prompts: “[They] brought [the memories] back... it’s very emotional... but it’s part of your life,” and that

the conversational—"feels like you're shooting the shit"—tenor in the room after reading lowered risk and increased participant access to vulnerable stories and willingness to share.

Participants also connected the relief they felt to the sharing process, while also noting sharing was, at first, an obstacle for some. Avery, for instance, recalled the physical jolt of reading—"made me sick to my stomach"—preceded by growing efficacy in the process: "the more you do it, the more comfortable you get with it." Later, she described the workshop as providing "permission... to actually speak your truth," with comfort extending even to conversations "outside of the workshop." Similarly, Blake underscored the value of the sharing process, stating, "just to put any story... out there... it was a good thing for me," linking expression to a positive outcome. Taken together, these accounts suggest sharing within the workshop task environment can potentially spark relief through the release and reframing of memory through a prompted writing process and structured sharing process. Moreover, attentive listening on behalf of other veteran participants seems to reinforce and expand the relief, leaving people feeling lighter and more ready to engage with others.

As an illustrative anchor for these dynamics, two participants singled out a searing story set in the Middle East as especially impactful during their interviews. The story was about a father with a language barrier who misunderstood a medical situation that led him to believe his daughter would walk again, when the opposite was true: his daughter had completely lost her leg in a bombing. It was the responsibility of this veteran workshop participant to inform the father of the misunderstanding through his elated tears—to watch the father's demeanor shift and to watch him crumble. Afterward, this author was asked by a small boy, "Why doesn't America help us?" The author then shared that many of the younger generation where he was located saw America like it is portrayed in the movies, filled with heroes that always come to the rescue.

While he told the boy a story to calm him, he knew the honest answer was America “doesn’t give a shit about that boy and his family.” It was a terrible, powerful, dispassionate, and well-composed story, built from a memory, that left everyone in the room in a stunned silence. Avery, referencing this story in the interview phase, remarked on the focus of the story and the humbleness of the positionality of the author, observing, “[They] could have been shot at any time... all of that was really impactful to me.” This comment highlights how the narrator’s decentered stance and ever-present risk amplified the moral gravity of the scene without self-aggrandizement, exemplifying the workshop’s ethic of honesty, restraint, and cultural fluency that participants found so compelling.

The next subsection turns to participant artifacts and end-of-workshop reflections to show these same dynamics at work in specific compositions and closing reflections directly from participant voices.

Synthesis: Artifact and Reflection Analysis

In a synthesis of the two themes, I share an analysis of participant artifacts, reflections, and observations from Week 3 of the workshop. The artifacts were submitted by Fernando, Blake, and Jordan, who together had an interaction in the workshop that works to highlight both the reciprocal, supportive nature of the space and also how camaraderie and vulnerability can be a catalyst for emotional release and relief. I then share each participant’s end of workshop reflection in the section “Workshop Reflection Synthesis,” and integrate their reflections into the larger findings.

Fernando started out sharing a composition that was a bit dark, sad, and had very little to do with military service. Fernando’s piece was about a recent breakup and the challenges in facing his new daily reality. It was framed off the same prompt as Jordan’s and was similarly

riveting and raw (although not shared as an artifact). Fernando's piece inspired another participant to read, Avery. Avery had not read in the workshop yet and was not planning on sharing because the piece they composed was "personal and vulnerable," and "had nothing to do with the service." However, Avery's mind was changed after hearing Fernando and Jordan's pieces. Just a couple weeks in, the connection, safety, and vulnerability in the task environment provided the support for Avery to share their piece titled, *Hole*:

Hole

A hole? I guess you could call it that. It's been here with me for so long that it's as familiar to me as the face in the mirror. A sort of blind spot because it's just become a part of who I am. What once filled that hole was damaged and torn away from me almost twenty years ago, and even still, nothing fills it. It feels like I've tried it all... drinking, drugs, retail-therapy, and of course warm bodies to sleep next to from time to time. In the same way a black hole swallows up even the most beautiful and vibrant elements of the cosmos, unapologetic and all-consuming, my emptiness is never sated. The void just leaves echoes of bad decisions and pointless efforting.

Most of the time the thought of this void is out of the spotlight, but every once in a while, someone asks "do you have kids" or they'll say "don't worry, you'll find someone" when I say I am no longer married. Then later at home, I'll dwell in the certainty of my circumstances, and I start daydreaming about the comfort of a familiar vice, or the excitement of bringing a new one into existence. Shiny objects – they're my best friends, after all.

When I feel the stickiness of depression pulling on me to stay under the covers, like being paved into my bed sheets with a thick layer of tar, or when I want to fold up into the darkness and embrace the solidarity like a hermit, I'll look for something to get excited about. Sometimes it's as glorious and unsettling as a cross-country move, sometimes it's as innocuous as starting a new dating profile... In any which way, peeling my eyes from the past and focusing on a new adventure in front of me is my only sanity.

You may be thinking that's where my problem lies... Ignoring the pain, redirecting when the overwhelm gets to be too much, and never focusing on fixing that part of me that went missing so long ago. Well, you're probably right, and I'll get there. In the meantime, I just saw a news article clipping about starting a flower farm – how interesting!!

After the workshop was over, Avery shared this powerful piece in an email to the facilitator to be used in the study, knowing it would be published. What went from challenging thoughts tied to

painful memories shifted into a curated story shared in a room full of friends who share understanding. That process, and the trust built in a short time, led Avery to send that vulnerable piece off to be published, stating, “Here's the bit I shared with the group after Fernando’s reading made me feel like I could get vulnerable with everyone...” In this instance, the writing process encourage deep trust and connection between participants, and through actively listening to other participant’s stories, precipitated the sharing of raw, vulnerable, and passionate stories by others in the group. Interestingly, this round of prompts saw few military stories and was marked by Avery as a kind of turning point. Avery saw this interaction as permission to write about whatever came up and share it, military themed or otherwise.

Following Fernando and Avery, Jordan shared a piece that starts with a divorce and a death in the family and tells a kind of episodic story of a series of unfortunate events. This story builds off a prompt about being stuck in a hole, which Jordan titled, *My Shovel is Sharp*:

My Shovel is Sharp

I am in this hole, and all I have is a shovel.

2018 was a bad year to be getting my 2nd divorce, having my grandmother die after a 6-year battle with Alzheimer’s, and having my identity compromised and my wallet stolen from the Costco I worked at as a temp employee.

My employers are in this hole, and all I have is a shovel

As two [local] PD detectives interrupt a sale and loudly announce: “[Jordan], let’s go speak in private about your ‘alleged activities’” and all I can see is the \$300 commission walk away and a supervisor give me the type of look that says, *you know this is the last straw, (innocent or not) you’re fired.*

My friends are in this hole, and all I have is a shovel.

I field a call from a number I’ve only given to close friends and family, the voice says, “hey man, Kay jewelers called me saying they couldn’t get a hold of you and you’ve missed the two payments and they need to know this balance will be paid.”

My children are in this hole, and all I have is a shovel.

When Five County Sheriff's surrounded the home I was renting and pounded on the door, scaring the LITERAL shit out of one of my children, I was on the journey to discovering just how deep this hole was.

My dignity is in this hole, and all I have is a shovel.

While private investigators shine lights in my window, crawl over the fence looking for evidence that they aren't going to find regarding crimes I did not commit, I think about how I've gone from working three jobs to having to sheepishly bow my head and ask for a place for myself and one of my children to stay.

All I have is a shovel.

Now it's starting to rain...

Here, Jordan shares memories over time—episodes—of a messy divorce, a lost job, a stolen identity, and the shame of being associated with this unfortunate situation. Jordan used elements of the workshop “tips” in his writing by focusing on an object throughout and using repetition—the shovel and the hole. Through this retelling of memory, Jordan is fitting his narrative into the workshop expectations in the task environment, shaping his story into scenes that fit the pattern he has selected. He generates a new way of looking at this time in his life.

In the next subsection, I provide evidence of a shift in perspective in Jordan through his full workshop reflection, and I share each of the participant's final thoughts on the workshop, tying the results together through participant voices.

Workshop Reflection Synthesis

This section shares a synthesis of reflections from the workshop participants. Each participant answered a series of reflective questions in the form of a prompt in the final weeks of the workshop, and they submitted these reflections to the research team through email after the workshop ended. The reflections in the section to follow were responding to the following prompt:

Tell me about your experience in this workshop—openly reflect and use the following questions as guidance: What did you gain? What did you lose? What was your overall impression of the kind of container created? How did you feel entering and how do you feel now that we are wrapping up? Were there any specific parts or interactions that you think were especially beneficial or detrimental you while participating? Would you ever do something like this again? Why or why not?

Reflecting on the workshop experience overall, Jordan captured a transformative shift in perspective from his workshop experience, discussing what was gained through the workshop process, beautifully tying together the various themes identified earlier in the results, stating:

What I gained here was perspective. Perspective that I sorely needed to pull my head out of my ass and realize I'm not the only one who has been hurt or struggled or dealt with some heavy stuff.

I wasn't sure how open or frank everyone would be, but it was a relief to hear others be so outright honest about some of the lowest points in their lives, along with challenges and triumphs they've seen.

There were some nights where I came in confident that I'd be sharing but some of the prompts pulled out so much that I just felt overwhelmed and didn't have anything left after writing it out.

The composing, sharing, and active listening broke down barriers and facilitated “Emotional Release and Relief” for participants. The “heavy stuff” everyone shared was met with cultural fluency and empathy, leaving people feeling both “lighter” and more connected.

As Jordan points out, there is also weight to the topics and in the cognitive process of writing those memories into the world after being buried. Fernando also discusses this in his reflection, calling out his hesitancy to dive back into the “heavy stuff,” especially after trying to put the service behind:

Seems like I've been trying to put the military behind me since raising my right hand at MEPS (Military Entry Processing Station). I ETS'd (End of Time in Service) from my unit without saying goodbye to anyone. I haven't stayed in contact with any of my squadmates. I don't really care to attend veteran functions or talk about my time in the service. But every once in a while a workshop like this comes up and I say, oh, what the hell. And I'm always glad I do. There's a bond military folk have that's incomparable, unique. And it's the workshop container that creates the right conditions for *me* to open

up. It's a safe space. A shared space. A creative space. And anything goes on the page. There's pain and laughter and the occasional tears. And it's all real, vulnerable, honest.

I was a little hesitant to join this workshop in the beginning because it takes some effort to open up the book of life back to this chapter, to thumb through the memories of my time in uniform. But each time I do – including this time – it feels a bit more healing. So I'm grateful for the experience.

This reflection by Fernando exemplifies both major themes, “Camaraderie, Connection and the Veteran-only Writing Space” and “Emotional Release & Relief.” Fernando’s reflection speaks to the theme of Camaraderie by naming the “incomparable, unique” bond that emerges in a veteran-only task environment. Going on, he notes that while it “takes some effort” to reopen the “book of life,” each return “feels a bit more healing.” Fernando frames the workshop as bonding and healing, not by erasing the past, but by allowing it to be composed, shared, and actively listened to in a room of other veterans.

These patterns were echoed by Charlie and Parker. Charlie describes how the task environment facilitated the retrieval and release of once-unsayable or “unreal” experiences.

I also had not really talked about my time in the military since I got out. The nature of my job in the military was secret so I got used to just saying [my general career] in the military and I would leave it at that.

So it was nice to share some stories about what it was like. It also reminded me how different my life is now. It sometimes feels unreal that I did those things and I was that person.

Parker also felt that the workshop was an overall positive experience, sharing the insight and relief gained by “baring [his] soul a bit” in a setting he judged as safe:

I kind of bared my soul a bit and so it helped me to come to grips with areas that have been festering. I never did combat or drugs but have experienced many problems [during my time] in the Navy that were worth writing about. I gained some insight into those problems. Don't think I lost anything [by participating]. It seemed a safe environment for sharing difficult issues, so that helped. . . . And, yes, I would do it again because of the company of fellow veterans, it being a safe environment, and getting a bit of psych therapy in writing.

When synthesized, Fernando's, Jordan's, Avery's, Charlie's, and Parker's reflections depict a non-clinical, identity-aligned group where composing and being witnessed work in tandem toward a healing or therapeutic outcome. Stories move from being "kept in a box" to being retrieved and composed in text and shared; peers respond with empathy; and writers report relief, clarity, and reappraisal/transformation of identity (e.g., Fernando's "alchemical shift," Charlie's accessing of "unreal" memories). The social foundation of camaraderie and trust enables deeper, more vulnerable storytelling, and that vulnerable storytelling, in turn, strengthens the social foundation of the group.

In the discussion to follow, I interpret these patterns through CPTW and contemporary well-being frameworks, arguing that the veteran-only psychological safety and shared understanding of "military bullshit," coupled with audience-aware composing and attentive listening, operate as mechanisms that produce emotional relief and rapid social connection. I also map these mechanisms onto relevant WBI domains—most notably the Social Relationships domain—and consider the meaning and transferability in light of study limitations.

Discussion

The findings highlight how a deep connection through shared understanding emerged quickly within the writing workshop space among military veteran participants. The workshop prompts provided an intentional pathway for participants to access and articulate the stories that most meaningfully connected them to the group. Often, a single story or exchange sparked long conversations that inspired future stories or conversation topics. The cultural familiarity and shared understanding of military experiences, composed and shared with the group, seemed to rapidly build camaraderie between participants early in the workshop process. Within the first

few weeks, participants reported feeling a growing sense of trust and connection, which created space for vulnerability and deeper storytelling.

This is further evidenced by the exchange between Jordan, Fernando, and Avery where vulnerability on behalf of Jordan catalyzed vulnerability on behalf of Fernando and likewise for Avery. This trust enabled participants to share personal narratives that they described as helping them to “let it go” or “get it all off your chest.” The result was a sense of emotional unburdening that participants associated with both therapeutic relief and the comfort of “shooting the shit” with old buddies. Notably, this process did not necessarily provoke a desire to revisit or share the story further with people outside of the workshop for a majority of participants. It did, however, create more opportunities for connection with other veterans outside of the workshop for a couple of the participants. One of these participants started getting involved with the local veteran community and now works for a veteran non-profit following the workshop. Another no longer has an aversion to the “vet in the combat veteran hat” on the street. Instead, this participant is more inclined to approach and ask questions—to make an attempt to connect.

Well-being & CPTW: Camaraderie & Emotional Release

In this workshop, participant camaraderie functioned as a state of connection that transcended generational and context-specific differences, grounded instead in a shared cultural repertoire of military service. Knowing that others would actively listen and understand enabled quick, meaningful bonds formed over stories molded by the workshop task environment. As Fernando put it, “It’s the being witnessed without any agenda... no one’s trying to fix you... there’s a camaraderie and a brother- or sisterhood.” Blake echoed this, noting “a shared sense of identity in the room,” and the feeling that telling stories was like “shooting the shit.”

The artifacts in the synthesis further highlight both the salience of the themes and the connection to the CPTW as a theoretical framework. *My Shovel is Sharp* exemplifies both the major themes and illustrates CPTW's recursive processes: planning around a prompt, approaching a series of challenging and vulnerable stories, trying out a creative writing "tip," translating episodic memories through a repetitive writing structure, and reviewing the written material, editing along the way for a specific audience of identity-aligned veteran peers. For many in the group, the veteran-only workshop task environment reduced the need for storytellers to, as Charlie stated in the results, "put the filter on," lowering social risk factors and allowing each piece to carry more emotional weight without self-censorship.

In Week 3, this dynamic was especially visible when Fernando's non-military piece prompted Avery—who had planned not to read—to share *Hole*, a deeply personal composition. That reciprocal risk-taking and vulnerability functioned like a permission slip: the veteran-only container normalized vulnerable material, and the sharing and active listening transformed hesitation and uncertainty from Avery into participation.

In Flower & Hayes' model, the "Task Environment" includes the social context and physical setting in which writing occurs. Here, the veteran-only workshop environment was a critical enabler of camaraderie. This supportive identity-based environment functioned as a catalyst for writing and sharing. Several veterans noted that knowing their audience were fellow veterans changed how they wrote and what they were willing to share, an effect consistent with literature showing that culturally aligned or veteran-only audiences facilitate greater emotional disclosure, trust, and psychological safety in writing groups (Schell, Kleinbart, & Jeffery et al., 2023). Because participants felt safe among other veterans, they were willing to engage and be shaped by workshop writing process. In planning what to say, translating memories into words,

and sharing those words without their typical inhibitions, participants were able to generate new perspectives and share vulnerable and emotionally charged stories.

Coding highlighted overlap between the qualitative interview data and the “Social Relationships” domain of the WBI. Participants did not expect lifelong friendships, yet described belonging, recognition, and “being witnessed,” all associated in veteran research with improved adjustment (e.g., reduced anxiety/depression and increased social integration and quality of life; Ramchand et al., 2022; Grant, 2021). Two participants also linked the workshop to vocational growth suggesting potential indirect and context dependent ties to the Vocation domain.

Framed through hedonic/eudaimonic lenses, the workshop appeared to produce hedonic relief through a sense of release— “feeling lighter”—and in some circumstances supports eudaimonic growth through reappraisal of identity as evidenced by Fernando’s account of an “alchemical shift” and transformation from “the angry vet on campus,” capturing a movement beyond short-term relief toward re-narrating self-understanding.

Additionally, shared memories or common timeless military experiences often resonated across the group. Experiences like basic training/boot camp antics, unique punishments, funny cadences, receiving absurd orders, or experiencing loss—suicide in particular—often resonated with each of the participants in some way. Through these similar themes threaded through others’ stories, participants could retrieve long forgotten memories of service. As one veteran, Parker, stated, “someone would tell a story and you’d think, ‘I have one like that,’” indicating that shared cultural cues in the environment unlocked memories they “[hadn’t] thought about in years.” This reflects how long-term memory and environment interact in CPTW: the social context (task environment) prompted retrieval of information that might otherwise remain dormant.

In terms of well-being, “Camaraderie” and “Emotional Relief” overlap with the WBI’s “Social Relationships” domain. All participants reported an increase in social well-being—feeling less isolated, more understood, and part of a community—as a result of participating in the workshop. Interviews showed that the participants were not expecting the workshop to facilitate lifelong friendships; however, the data highlight that despite this, the workshop did instigate feelings of belonging and peer support, which are known contributors to improved outcomes for veterans, including reduced anxiety, depression, and isolation, and increased social integration and quality of life (Ramchand et al., 2022; Grant, 2021).

The “Camaraderie and Connection” theme did not explicitly link to financial or vocational domains, except inasmuch as improved social confidence might indirectly help someone network or feel better at work. Two participants, Avery and Parker, did express that the workshop helped with personal growth in their vocation. In Avery’s case, this meant a new perspective on how to engage military-veterans in their career path, and in Parker’s case, it meant attempting to publish new material due to feeling motivated to write after the workshop. These indirect links to vocation warrant further exploration.

Limitations & Future Research

While this study offers valuable insight into how veteran-only writing workshops may support participant well-being, several limitations inherent to the qualitative design must be acknowledged. The first is that participants self-selected into the study and many places where veterans were recruited were in pre-existing writing spaces. This means that many of the participants may have already held favorable attitudes toward writing or group engagement, potentially excluding veterans who were more isolated, skeptical, or dealing with more acute psychological distress. As such, the thematic findings may not be representative of the broader

veteran population, particularly across dimensions such as race, gender, service era, or disability status (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Moreover, the researcher's dual role as both facilitator and analyst introduces potential bias. Although reflexivity was practiced throughout the data collection and analysis process, the researcher's presence and perceived authority may have influenced participants' willingness to disclose sensitive material or shaped how certain narratives were interpreted.

Another limitation that can be addressed by future research was the duration of the intervention. Eight weeks could be considered relatively short for the tools used and scope of the project, and for the narrative development of the participants. While participants engaged meaningfully with the writing prompts and group dialogue, longer-term engagement might have fostered deeper trust, more complex narrative development, and richer data. In studies addressing trauma, identity, and reintegration, prolonged exposure often results in more nuanced findings and increased depth of analysis (Charmaz, 2014). Furthermore, the group setting may have encouraged social desirability bias. Given the influence of military culture, which often emphasizes stoicism, resilience, and peer judgment, some participants may have withheld personal disclosures or tailored their narratives to align with perceived group norms.

Future work should 1) increase the total sample of participants and include multiple workshops to accommodate, 2) extend the intervention duration to examine trajectories of change in satisfaction effects and well-being domains; 3) include diverse veteran populations across gender, race/ethnicity, service era, and disability status; and 4) distribute facilitation/analysis across team members to mitigate bias.

Conclusion

Overall, the study provides a foundation for understanding how writing within a peer-veteran community can influence social and mental well-being. In concert, composing prompted stories, sharing, and feeling heard, while in a structured space with other veterans, appears to operate as a low-cost, non-clinical support for participant social and emotional well-being.

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CHAPTER FOUR: MEASURING FACTORS OF WELL-BEING OVER TIME FOR PARTICIPANTS IN AN EXPRESSIVE VETERAN WRITING PROGRAM

Abstract

Chapter Four reports a quantitative analysis of specific well-being domains among workshop participants versus controls, using the Well-Being Inventory (WBI) (Vogt et al., 2018). This study examined whether workshop participants showed greater positive change in these domains over time compared to a control group. Results indicated that there were no significant differences on any of the WBI subscales. However, some observational trends were identified in the data. The social domain of well-being improved slightly for the treatment group pre/post. Health domain scores showed a slight improvement trend for the workshop group, but differences were not statistically significant. Overall, the workshop's measurable impact was small non-significant trend concentrated in the social well-being domain, corroborating qualitative reports of camaraderie and connection from Chapter Three being a key supportive component of well-being. These quantitative domain findings, though exploratory and non-generalizable, provide possibilities for future research to explore the impact of expressive writing programs on certain facets of veteran well-being.

Keywords: WBI, ANOVA, well-being, veteran, expressive writing, social relationships

Introduction

This research examines expressive writing as an agentic process that has the potential to rework and reshape how veterans consider significant moments in their past. Perhaps in its ubiquity in a literate society, it is understandable that writing can be overlooked as simply an archival or communicative tool. However, writing can also be a generative and agentic process (Flower & Hayes, 1981), allowing memories of moments in one's life to be reshaped by new experiences and inputs from both one's memory and environment.

Military members and veterans have historically been prolific writers, with a long history of composing personal and experiential narratives in journals and diaries overseas, writing poems and memoirs, and sharing intimate moments through detailed letters home. Many of these compositions are stored in the Library of Congress' "Veterans History Project," a curated collection of over 120,000 individual service members' personal narrative collections. These collections store personal narratives in written, audio, and video format "[making] accessible the firsthand narratives of U.S. military veterans who served from World War I through more recent conflicts and peacekeeping missions" (Library of Congress, 2024, p.1). These narratives include general correspondence between loved ones, powerful reflections of war, and creative expressions of service, all working to create a detailed image of the diverse experiences of service members throughout history. One such narrative, composed by Morris Albert Martin (1918), a World War I veteran, details his time in the trenches and paints a vivid picture of the realities of war. Writing his narrative from the comfort of an infirmary bed after being injured and sent to the rear, Martin reorganizes his thoughts, attempting to reconcile what he witnessed:

Lying there in the nice clean bed, I gave myself over to some reflections. . . . Those boys up there were still in that Hell, and the end wasn't in sight yet. Closing my eyes I could

still see those mangled and bloody bodies of my buddies, and I began to wonder what it was all about. (p. 28)

The final reflection that Martin shares in this excerpt, “I began to wonder what it was all about,” is a simple yet powerful statement of critical reflection. He is beginning to question the war effort. Like Martin, most veterans who enter the veteran writing program under examination in this study find themselves asking the same question in different ways (e.g. What was I doing there? What was the purpose? Why were we fighting? etc.). These are critical questions that begin to deconstruct the complex web of sociopolitical processes that drive the U.S. Military and a service member’s purpose and role in it and after it.

Purpose & Aims

The purpose of this study is to examine the impact of an experiential veteran writing workshop on the well-being of military veterans using a modified version of the Well-being Inventory (Vogt et al., 2018). Grounded in theories of cognitive writing processes (Flower & Hayes, 1981), subjective well-being frameworks, and life factors of well-being, this research explores how reflective, narrative-based writing interventions may support veteran identity development, reintegration, and multidimensional well-being over time.

Specifically, this study aims to:

Aim 1: Evaluate *if* participation in an expressive veteran writing program supports or constrains well-being using the subscales and domains of the Well-being Inventory (WBI).

Aim 2: Describe and interpret trends in group differences in well-being across the WBI subscales and domains.

Review of Literature

Writing, particularly in the form of journaling, has long been regarded as a reflective and therapeutic practice. Journals are often described as a private confidant, allowing individuals to process life experiences and emotional struggles through self-expression (Adams, 2013; DaPra, 2013). The power of reflection in education has deep philosophical roots; Dewey (1997) argued that “reflective thinking alone is educative” (p. 2). In clinical contexts, reflective writing is often integrated into structured practices such as cognitive behavioral therapy, and research shows it can also be beneficial when used by therapists as a form of “self-practice” (Gale & Schröder, 2014). Together, these perspectives illustrate writing’s potential as a meaning-making practice across both informal and formal contexts.

The therapeutic function of expressive writing became a focus of empirical research in the 1980s. In their landmark study, Pennebaker and Beall (1986) randomly assigned 46 undergraduates to write about either personal trauma or trivial events. Students in the trauma-writing condition later demonstrated fewer health-center visits over the following six months, and many reported cathartic benefits from confronting painful experiences rather than suppressing them. Subsequent studies confirmed expressive writing’s influence on physical health. For example, Smyth et al. (1999) found that patients with chronic asthma or rheumatoid arthritis assigned to four days of expressive writing showed significantly greater improvements in disease-related health outcomes than controls, with 47% achieving clinically relevant improvements compared to 24% in the control group. These findings reinforced the view that expressive writing not only supports psychological well-being but can also generate measurable improvements in physical health.

More recently, research has examined expressive writing in military and veteran populations. Krupnick et al. (2017) found that online expressive writing interventions reduced hyperarousal symptoms among veterans with PTSD. Sayer et al. (2015) conducted one of the largest trials to date, enrolling 1,292 U.S. veterans in an online expressive writing program. Compared to a control group, veterans in the treatment condition reported significant reductions in PTSD symptoms, anger, distress, reintegration challenges, and physical complaints, along with improved social support. Similarly, Lange et al. (2003) tested an Internet-based writing intervention for participants with trauma and grief (n=69 treatment; n=32 control). Results showed greater reductions in PTSD symptoms and depression in the treatment group, with over half achieving clinically significant improvement. These studies suggest that expressive writing can be an accessible, scalable intervention for supporting reintegration and well-being in veteran populations.

In educational contexts, expressive writing has also been tested as a means of social and academic integration for veterans. Ott (2020) embedded expressive writing assignments into three semester-long freshman-level English composition and reading courses between 2015 and 2017. Using a practitioner action research framework grounded in constructivist epistemology, Ott worked with cohorts of approximately 10–30 student-veterans each semester. Structured prompts encouraged veterans to narrate their military and academic experiences, which fostered community belonging, narrative identity development, and greater academic engagement. Later, Taber (2025) extended this line of inquiry through a feminist pedagogical lens, examining writing workshops designed for marginalized veterans, particularly women. Using autoethnographic and qualitative methods, Taber showed how expressive writing groups created spaces of solidarity, collective meaning-making, and narrative reclamation, enabling participants

to challenge militarized cultural norms and reconstruct their identities. Together, these studies highlight the potential of identity-based expressive writing to support well-being in certain contexts.

Building on this foundation, the present study investigates the effects of an in-person, veteran-only expressive writing workshop. Guided by the Cognitive Process Theory of Writing (Flower & Hayes, 1981), the workshop was conceptualized as a structured space where participants could engage in recursive processes of planning, composing, and revising to reconstruct experiences and generate new meaning. By examining changes in life satisfaction (SWLS; Diener et al., 1985) and domain-specific well-being (WBI; Vogt et al., 2018), this study extends the literature on expressive writing as a therapeutic and integrative practice by testing its effects in a veteran-centered, community-based setting.

Theoretical Frameworks

The theoretical grounding of the WBI comes from past research into the construct of well-being. Researchers Gladis et al. (2000), examine well-being through a “Quality of Life” framework encompassing the constructs of satisfaction, functioning, and objective life circumstances (p. 14). The WBI uses these same constructs for understanding how one engages, functions, and finds satisfaction in life’s arenas, with slight modifications (e.g. the “objective life circumstances” construct is now called “status”). Consequently, the WBI—and the research that conceptually grounds it—provides a way of understanding not only the domains of well-being, but also the individual and contextual circumstances around those domains. For example, in an intimate relationship, an individual can be engaged (status) and feel supported and stable (functioning), but not feel fulfillment or enjoyment (satisfaction). Likewise, individuals can feel enjoyment or fulfillment (satisfaction) without being in a healthy (functioning) relationship. Each provides a

different outcome for one's well-being, and making these distinctions is important when considering the ways in which an individual engages with these life domains.

In addition to Gladis et al.'s (2000) framework, other well-being frameworks have been used historically by researchers examining both veteran and civilian populations (Berglass & Harrell, 2012; Bishop, Miller, & Chapin, 2008; Cummins, 1996). Together, these additional frameworks present four life domains that are applicable to the construct of well-being, "Vocation, Finances, Health, and Social Relationships." The intersection of Gladis et al.'s (2000) quality of life constructs and the four life domains presented here (Berglass & Harrell, 2012; Cummins, 1996) make for the conceptual grounding of the Well-being Inventory (WBI). Some researchers also discuss "subjective" measures of well-being outcomes, such as direct measures of happiness (Morgan et al., 2017) or purpose in life (Ryff & Keyes, 1995; Seligman, 2012). These were not included in the WBI as the authors stated they were only looking to "assess factors that set the stage for well-being" (Vogt et al., 2020).

Quality of Life Framework & Well-being Inventory

The theoretical framing of this study is borrowed from the Well-being Inventory, which has a foundation in Gladis et al.'s (2000) "Quality of Life" framework, encompassing the constructs of satisfaction, functioning, and objective life circumstances (p. 14). The WBI uses these same constructs for understanding how one engages, functions, and finds satisfaction in life's arenas, with slight modifications. Consequently, the WBI—and the research that conceptually grounds it—provides a way of understanding not only the domains of well-being, but also the individual and contextual circumstances around those domains.

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The Well-being Inventory (WBI) was developed to longitudinally measure the well-being outcomes of reintegrating military veterans. It offers a multidimensional model of well-being that spans four life domains: Vocation (education and work), Finances, Health (mental and physical), and Social Relationships (including intimate partners, parenting, and broader community involvement).

Each domain is examined across three distinct but interrelated levels:

1. Status – The individual’s engagement, involvement, or circumstances in a given domain (e.g., Is the participant enrolled in school? Employed?).
2. Functioning – The quality of the individual’s engagement (e.g., How effectively does the participant perform in educational or work settings?).
3. Satisfaction – The individual’s subjective sense of fulfillment or achievement related to their involvement in the domain (e.g., Does the participant find their job or education meaningful or rewarding?).

These levels provide a nuanced framework to assess how veterans experience and evaluate their reintegration across critical life arenas. Notably, the WBI does not include purely subjective or eudaimonic well-being constructs—such as happiness or purpose—as the authors clarified that their goal was to assess the conditions and contextual factors that "set the stage for well-being"

(Vogt et al., 2020), rather than well-being itself as an outcome. In this way, the WBI measures more “objective” life factors of well-being that can predict the status, function, and satisfaction of well-being domains of a participant over time (see Table 4.1).

Table 4.1

Well-being Inventory Domain and Subgroups

| Domain | Status | Functioning | Satisfaction |
|-----------------------------|--|--|---|
| Vocation | <u>Work:</u> engagement in paid work, caregiving/homemaking, and volunteer work | <u>Work:</u> reliability, quality of work, and management of interpersonal relationships in work setting | <u>Work:</u> Satisfaction with key aspects of work (e.g., nature of work, recognition of work contributions). |
| | <u>Education:</u> involvement in school or training. | <u>Education:</u> reliability, quality of work, and management of interpersonal relationships in an educational setting. | <u>Education:</u> Satisfaction with key aspects of educational or training experience. |
| Finances | Current financial circumstances and preparedness for future financial needs. | Management of cash, credit, and savings. | Satisfaction with ability to afford essential and nonessential expenses, accumulation of savings, and debt. |
| Health | Presence of chronic physical and mental health conditions, illnesses, or disabilities. | Engagement in health promoting behaviors, risky health behaviors, and self-care. | Satisfaction with mental and physical health, as well as health care. |
| Social Relationships | Involvement in intimate relationships, parenting, and within one’s broader community. | <u>Intimate:</u> Demonstrates supportive, collaborative behaviors in intimate relationships. | <u>Intimate:</u> Satisfaction with partner’s contributions to relationship in terms of support and collaboration. |
| | | <u>Parenting:</u> Demonstrates | <u>Parenting:</u> Satisfaction with |

| | |
|--|---|
| supportive, effective parenting strategies. | relationships with children, parenting experience, children's well-being. |
| <u>Broader Social Relationships:</u> Engages in behaviors that support positive relationships within broader community. | <u>Broader Social Relationships:</u> Satisfaction and belonging within broader community |

Note: This table has been adapted from the table in the Well-being Inventory Manual (Vogt et al., 2018).

By framing well-being into status, functioning, and satisfaction across life domains, the WBI allows researchers to identify not only whether a veteran is engaged in a particular domain, but also how well they are functioning within it and how meaningful or satisfying that engagement is. For example, a veteran may be attending school (status), meeting academic expectations (functioning), but still feel unfulfilled (low satisfaction). Conversely, someone might find deep satisfaction in work despite modest functional performance. This layered perspective helps to uncover more complex realities of veteran reintegration.

Cognitive Process Theory of Writing (CPTW)

The Cognitive Process Theory of Writing, first proposed by Flower and Hayes (1981), emphasized the generative nature of the writing process, enabling writers to create new meaning through their compositional process. When writers draw on their long-term memories and interact with constraints from the writing task—such as genre expectations—they can reassemble

their experiences in original ways. This ability to generate fresh perspectives highlights writing’s potential for aiding in healing and reinterpretation of past traumas (see Fig. 4.1).

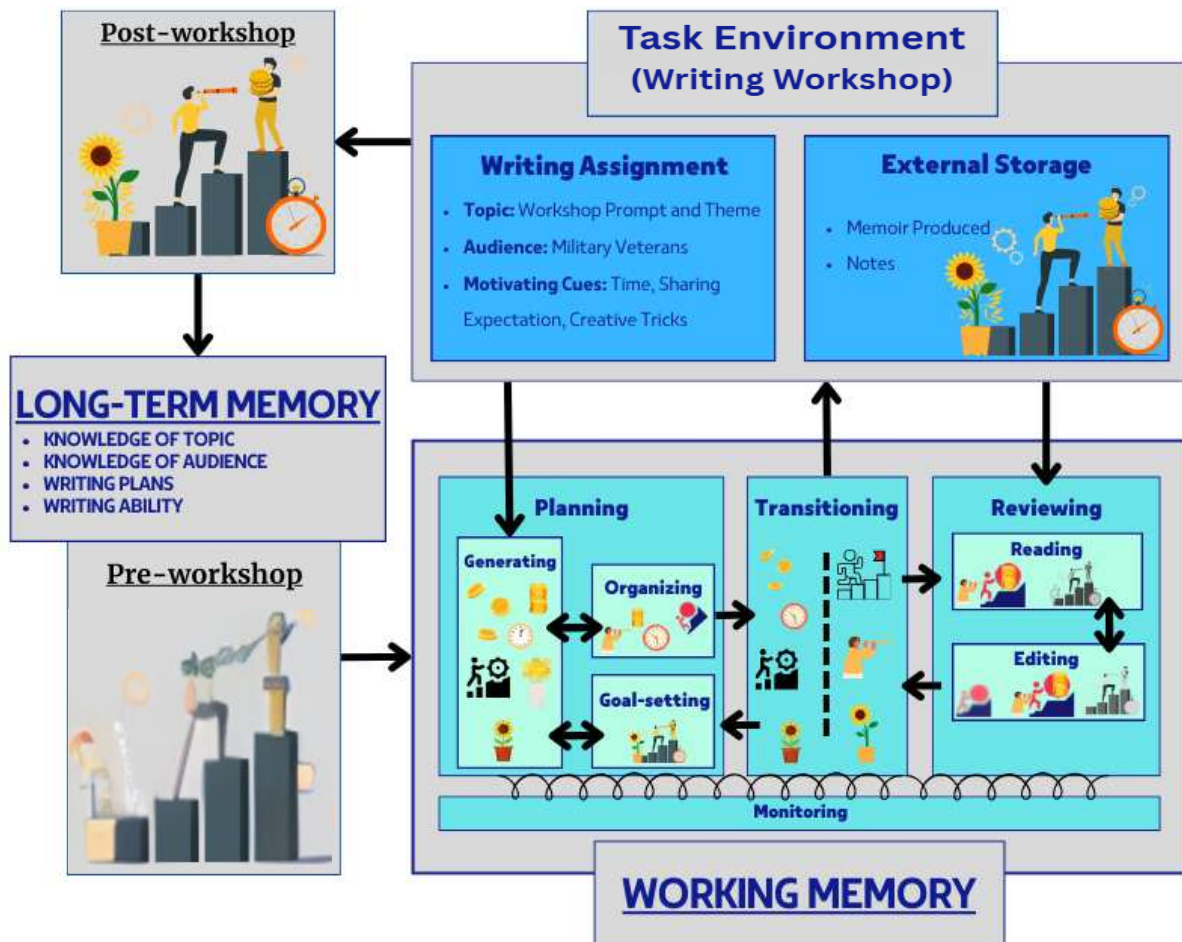


Figure 4.1. *Cognitive Process Theory of Writing in an Experiential Writing Workshop* models how the long-term memory interacts with the working memory and the task environment, oscillating between the planning, transitioning, and reviewing phases of the model. The item produced is not the memory as it was, but a reimagined memory that is molded, shaped, and generated by the process.

The Cognitive Process Theory of Writing underscores four central principles (Flower & Hayes, 1981):

1. Writing is a multifaceted mental process requiring the integration and coordination of distinct cognitive operations to produce a piece of text.

2. These operations—planning, translating, reviewing—intersect and often overlap (e.g., while writing a sentence, a writer may pause to brainstorm or revise an earlier section for consistency).
3. Writing is inherently goal-oriented; writers approach their text with intentions—such as informing, persuading, or entertaining—and adapt their strategies as the work evolves.
4. Writing is generative: as writers proceed, new objectives and insights emerge from the unfolding process.

Within the context of this study, CPTW validates the value of using memoir-based writing prompts. Such prompts encourage writers to engage in planning, goal setting, and idea generation, drawing upon autobiographical memories as source material. In fact, Research Jim Ott (2020) uses the CPTW as a framework to examine “Expressive Writing for Veterans in Transition” in a classroom setting at a community college, and he found that structured writing prompts in classroom setting foster community belonging, narrative identity, and predict improved well-being through community integration. The process demands writers draft, review, and refine the recollections generated from the prompt in real time, deliberately examining how their story is constructed and represented on the page.

In a veteran-only writing workshop using this framework, participants are not only writing but also discussing and sharing narratives connected to their memories. Often, this involves revisiting painful combat memories through different prompts—say, reflections on feeling lost, writing to an adversary, or exploring a sense of entrapment. One veteran, Ryan Lanham (2020), explored the same traumatic event—taking another life—across several prompts. The final version, titled *Gravity*, centers on the physical, emotional, and moral weight of that moment:

Gravity

Run. Run away. He was running away when I caught him. I—my bullets—caught him.

Up to him. Into him. Lodged in his back.

Left of spine. An upward strafe. Toward heart, home.

How many steps with me in him?

How many feet between us—my heart, his—my life, his—when they drag him back, on his back, slide him in the truck, beneath my feet, beneath my gunner platform?

My hands still shaking. Sweat rolls down my cheek. A tear, salty. Emotionless. Pools on chin. Holds there. Sways bulbous. Then slips, falls—

One. Two. Three. Four. Five. Six. Seven.

Me on him. In him.

Seven feet I peer down into darkness. Shadows. Black in my heart, seeping in.

It beats steady now. Fat on blood, adrenaline.

No holes pulsating red ooze.

No red shirt, red pants, red socks, red shoes, red legs, red arms, red back, red face.

No grimace or Quran. No moans or prayer beads. No Allah tonight.

Just the click of karmic debt, a handcuff locking souls. Tug of my new black moon.

(p.159)

This act of revisitation—planning how to depict the memory, translating it into concrete language, and reviewing for authenticity—enables the writer to continuously reframe and reconcile the experience. Each prompt encourages new perspectives and deeper understanding, offering multiple avenues for emotional processing and meaning making.

Within the field of psychology and memory, researchers Madore et al. (2016) examined how episodic specificity—the ability to recall vivid, detailed personal memories—plays a role in well-being and future thinking. Right after the induction, participants completed three tasks: recalling past events, imagining future events, and a word-comparison task requiring generation of creative definitions from semantically related words. Analyses revealed that the specificity induction significantly increased the number of internal (episodic) details in both memory and

imagination tasks, whereas it had no effect on external (semantic) details, nor on performance in the control word-comparison.

Their findings suggest that when individuals can access richer autobiographical memories, they are better able to imagine and plan for the future, which in turn supports adaptive coping and goal pursuit. This connection is particularly relevant to writing-based interventions, as expressive or autobiographical writing often requires participants to reconstruct personal experiences with heightened detail and emotional depth. In this way, the writing process, as proposed by Flower & Hayes (1981), may enhance episodic recall, which not only aids in meaning-making but can also foster improved well-being outcomes by providing individuals with a more coherent, resourceful, and accessible personal narrative (Madore et al., 2016).

Methods

Data collection spanned twelve weeks, beginning on March 1, 2024, and concluding with the final questionnaire administered before June 30, 2024. The study was incentivized: treatment-group participants were eligible for \$250.00 in incentives, and control-group participants for \$100. Four waves of data were gathered from both groups using a modified Well-Being Inventory (WBI; Vogt et al., 2018). Questionnaires were administered at four time points—baseline, mid-point, end of the 12-week workshop, and one-month post-completion—on a four-week cycle. WBI data were scored and analyzed across and within groups over time using a mixed ANOVA with repeated measures (Gliner et al., 2017).

Participants

Participants were U.S. military veterans recruited for an 8-week expressive writing workshop study using a quasi-experimental design. Recruitment was conducted via university and community veteran networks, flyers, and a dedicated research website, with interested

individuals completing an initial screening application. Inclusion criteria required that participants be U.S. veterans (including former active-duty, reservists, or National Guard) and commit to the workshop schedule and study procedures. A total of n=41 people applied to be in the study. After initial screening, n=19, were selected and agreed to be in the study, but high attrition during screening and enrollment left n=13 participants who completed the study.

Participants were randomly assigned to the workshop or control conditions; however, several dropped out prior to the first session. Workshop participants attended a weekly two-hour veteran-only writing session for eight weeks, whereas control participants did not engage in any expressive writing during the 12-week study period. All participants provided informed consent under an IRB-approved protocol. To encourage participation and retention, workshop group members received up to \$250 in incentives and control group members up to \$100 over the course of the study. Given the small sample size, detailed demographic information is not reported both to protect participant privacy and due to the limitations of a small sample.

Measures

The instrument used in this study was the Well-Being Inventory (WBI), a multidimensional survey developed for veterans that assesses key contributors to well-being across four life domains: Vocation, Social Relationships, Health, and Finances. This measure was administered as an online questionnaire via Google Forms. Each survey wave was accessed through a secure web portal using individualized passwords, which directed participants to the Google Form. The instrument provides multiple subscale scores that fall under each of the four WBI domains. Two domain-specific subscales, Parental Functioning & Parental Satisfaction, were omitted from analyses due to low applicability—only a few participants had dependent children, resulting in an insufficient subsample for that measure.

Well-being Inventory (WBI)

The primary quantitative instrument was the Well-Being Inventory (WBI), a multidimensional survey developed for veterans that assesses key contributors to well-being across four life domains: Vocation, Social Relationships, Health, and Finances. Within each domain, the WBI includes items evaluating one’s engagement in that area, functioning or performance in that area, and satisfaction with that aspect of life (see Table 4.2)

Table 4.2

Domains and Subscale Definitions for Core WBI Measures

| Domain | Subscale | Definition |
|-----------------|-----------------------------------|--|
| Vocation | Status | Labor force participation, paid employment, full vs. part-time employment, and full-time involvement in unpaid vocations (schooling/training, volunteer work, caregiving/homemaking). |
| | Work Functioning | Reliability and quality of work; effective management of interpersonal relationships in work settings. |
| | Educational Functioning | Reliability and quality of work; effective management of interpersonal relationships in educational or training settings. |
| | Paid and Unpaid Work Satisfaction | Satisfaction with the nature of work, recognition of contributions, ability to apply skills and knowledge, and ability to advance vocational goals. For paid employment: also satisfaction with pay, benefits, and work environment. |
| | Educational Satisfaction | Satisfaction with educational/training experience, advancement of career goals, and learning environment. |
| Finances | Status | Current financial stability (e.g., maintaining housing, managing debt, affording expenses) and financial preparedness (e.g., emergency savings, retirement savings, insurance coverage). |
| | Functioning | Financial behavior related to cash management (budgeting), credit management (paying bills on time), and savings (contributing to savings account). |
| | Satisfaction | Satisfaction with ability to afford essential and non-essential expenses, as well as savings and debt accumulation. |

| | | |
|-----------------------------|------------------------------------|---|
| Health | Status | Presence of chronic physical or mental health conditions, illnesses, or disabilities. |
| | Functioning | Engagement in health-promoting behaviors, risky health behaviors, and self-care related to mental and physical wellness. |
| | Satisfaction | Satisfaction with physical health, mental health, and health care. |
| Social Relationships | Status (all subdomains) | Involvement in intimate relationships, parenting, and the broader community. |
| | Intimate Relationship Functioning | Supportive and collaborative behaviors (e.g., emotional and practical support, willingness to engage in sexual/physical closeness). |
| | Parental Functioning | Supportive and effective parenting strategies (e.g., meeting children’s basic needs, involvement in children’s activities). |
| | Broader Social Functioning | Behaviors that support positive relationships with friends, extended family, and community (e.g., getting along with others, providing help/support). |
| | Intimate Relationship Satisfaction | Satisfaction with partner’s contributions in terms of support and collaboration (e.g., emotional support, intimacy). |
| | Parental Satisfaction | Satisfaction with relationship with children, parenting experience, and children’s well-being. |
| | Broader Social Satisfaction | Satisfaction and sense of belonging in relationships with friends, extended family, and community. |

Note. Constructs are organized by domain and subdomain, with definitions provided for status, functioning, and satisfaction dimensions. This table is adapted from the WBI Manual (Vogt et al., 2018).

The questions are retrospective, asking participants to consider their experiences and feelings “over the last month” (modified from the original 3-month reference period to a 1-month period in this study) (See Appendix C). This modification was made to align the instrument with the four-week interval between survey administrations. To ensure the WBI’s internal consistency was acceptable after modifying the recall period, Cronbach’s alpha coefficients were calculated from the subscales of each domain (see Table 4.2).

Table 4.3

Cronbach's Alpha Coefficients by Subscale

| Domain | Variable | Alpha |
|--------------------------|---------------------------|--------------|
| WBI Vocation | Vocation Functioning | 0.75 |
| | Vocation Satisfaction | 0.79 |
| WBI Finance | Financial Functioning | 0.98 |
| | Financial Satisfaction | 0.99 |
| WBI Health | Health Functioning | 0.90 |
| | Health Promotion | 0.94 |
| | Health Risk Avoidance | 0.87 |
| | Health Self-care | 0.88 |
| | Health Satisfaction | 0.85 |
| WBI Social Relationships | Broad Social Functioning | 0.90 |
| | Broad Social Satisfaction | 0.81 |

Note. The table shows the Cronbach's alpha coefficients for each of the subscales that make up the various WBI domains across all measurement occasions. SWLS scores were also used to calculate an alpha coefficient for the SWLS.

All alpha coefficients fall within a generally acceptable range for human subjects' social science research, highlighting good internal reliability of the measures being used.

Data Collection

Data were collected at four points over a 12-week period: Week 0 (pre-workshop), Week 4 (mid-workshop), Week 8 (end of workshop), and Week 12 (follow-up). Control group participants were instructed to complete the surveys on the same schedule, refraining from any expressive writing intervention during the study period. All surveys were delivered online using Google Forms, accessible through a secure study website. Each survey wave was open for a

three to four day defined window during which participants received email reminders and used their assigned login to access and submit the questionnaires. The WBI and SWLS were combined in a single Google Forms survey at each time point, taking roughly 10–30 minutes to complete in total. This online administration ensured consistency in timing and format for both groups and facilitated automated data capture.

Data Analysis

All data were analyzed using IBM SPSS Statistics. The data were cleaned and examined through descriptive statistics and assumption checks. Basic descriptives were computed for all WBI subscale scores at each measurement point with one exception. Only about one-third of the participants are parents, so the “Parental” subscale, which included “Parental Functioning” and “Parental Satisfaction,” was removed so as not to skew the results (see Table 4.3).

Table 4.4

Descriptive Statistics for WBI & SWLS Subscales

| Domain | Variable | N | Min | Max | Std. | | Skew | | Kurt | |
|-------------|-------------------------|----|------|------|------|------|-------|------|-------|------|
| | | | | | Mean | Dev. | Skew | SE | Kurt | SE |
| WBI | Vocation | | | | | | | | | |
| | Functioning* | 52 | 1.50 | 5.00 | 3.99 | 0.73 | -0.56 | 0.37 | 2.52 | 0.73 |
| Vocation | Vocation | | | | | | | | | |
| | Satisfaction* | 52 | 1.00 | 4.92 | 3.69 | 0.83 | -1.03 | 0.37 | 1.31 | 0.73 |
| WBI Finance | Financial | | | | | | | | | |
| | Functioning | 52 | 2.13 | 4.88 | 3.50 | 0.72 | 0.24 | 0.34 | -0.90 | 0.68 |
| | Financial Satisfaction* | 52 | 1.00 | 5.00 | 3.22 | 1.38 | -0.16 | 0.34 | -1.40 | 0.68 |
| WBI Health | Health | | | | | | | | | |
| | Functioning | 52 | 2.66 | 4.75 | 3.75 | 0.48 | 0.24 | 0.34 | -0.21 | 0.68 |
| | Health Promotion | 52 | 1.00 | 5.00 | 3.38 | 1.10 | -0.18 | 0.33 | -1.09 | 0.65 |

| | | | | | | | | | | |
|----------------------------|----|------|------|------|------|-------|------|-------|------|--|
| Health Risk | | | | | | | | | | |
| Avoidance* | 52 | 2.25 | 5.00 | 4.54 | 0.74 | -1.65 | 0.33 | 1.79 | 0.65 | |
| Health Self-care | | | | | | | | | | |
| | 52 | 2.40 | 4.80 | 3.40 | 0.67 | 0.61 | 0.33 | -0.56 | 0.65 | |
| Health | | | | | | | | | | |
| Satisfaction | 52 | 1.66 | 4.33 | 3.03 | 0.68 | -0.42 | 0.34 | -0.61 | 0.68 | |
| Broad Social | | | | | | | | | | |
| WBI Social Functioning | 52 | 1.56 | 4.50 | 3.34 | 0.68 | -0.85 | 0.34 | 0.64 | 0.68 | |
| Relationships Broad Social | | | | | | | | | | |
| Satisfaction* | 52 | 1.25 | 4.50 | 3.45 | 0.75 | -1.17 | 0.34 | 1.50 | 0.68 | |

Note. This table shows the dependent variables used in the analysis. Variables marked with an asterisk are non-normally distributed (Skewness and Kurtosis less than -1.0 or greater than +1.0).

The table above highlights five variables that have non-normal distributions: Vocational Functioning, Vocational Satisfaction, Financial Satisfaction, Health Risk Avoidance, and Broad Social Satisfaction. While the study uses a mixed-ANOVA, differences in conditional means across the dependent variables are interpreted with an emphasis on trends and patterns instead of dichotomous declarations of statistical significance. The findings are not treated as generalizable but still work to provide an informative foundation for future research, as well as provide support for prior research associated with expressive veteran writing workshops and improvements with general satisfaction with life (Atkinson, 2025; in preparation).

In addition to mean-level changes, the study examined correlational relationships between the objective well-being domains and overall life satisfaction. Pearson product-moment correlation analyses were conducted to assess the associations between participants' WBI scores and their SWLS scores. Specifically, I was interested in whether improvements in certain domains of well-being correlated to higher life satisfaction. To examine this, I ran correlations between change scores on the SWLS and change scores on each WBI domain from baseline (Week 0) to post-workshop (Week 12). These analyses helped identify which domains of well-

being were most strongly related to participants’ subjective life satisfaction while participating in the study.

Results

The results of the WBI Mixed-ANOVA and examination of group means across subscales did not show any statistically significant results, indicating the workshop had no direct effect on the life factors measured in the WBI across all domains of well-being. Effect sizes were medium (0.5) to low (<0.2) on average across the dependent variables. The section below shares these results starting with the results from the mixed-ANOVA performed on the WBI subscales, and then highlights cautiously interpreted and non-significant trends in the data across the WBI function and satisfaction scores and across additional measures that either had a lower n (i.e. parental and intimate partner satisfaction and function) or did not align with a function or satisfaction measure (i.e. Risk Avoidance, Self Care, and Health Promotion).

Mixed-ANOVA WBI Subscales

A Mixed-ANOVA with repeated measures was conducted to identify differences between treatment and control group WBI functioning and satisfaction scores across the ten function and satisfaction subscales in the WBI. No significant main effects of workshop participation were found for any well-being domain at the $p < 0.5$ level. Where sphericity was violated, Greenhouse–Geisser corrections were used; conclusions remained the same post-correction (see Table 4.5).

Table 4.5

Mixed-ANOVA Subscale Results

| WBI Domain | DV | Effect | F(df1, Df2) | p | Part. Eta ² |
|------------|--------------|-----------|-----------------|----------|------------------------|
| | Broad Social | Condition | F(1, 11) = 0.00 | p = .994 | 0 |
| | Functioning | Time | F(3, 33) = 1.46 | p = .243 | 0.117 |

| | | | | | |
|----------------------|----------------------------|-------------|------------------|----------|-------|
| | | Interaction | F(3, 33) = 2.08 | p = .122 | 0.159 |
| | | Condition | F(1, 11) = 0.49 | p = .496 | 0.043 |
| | Broad Social Satisfaction | Time | F(3, 33) = 0.92 | p = .442 | 0.077 |
| | | Interaction | F(3, 33) = 1.17 | p = .335 | 0.096 |
| | | Condition | F(1, 5) = 0.09 | p = .774 | 0.018 |
| | Intimate Rel. Functioning | Time | F(3, 15) = 0.70 | p = .568 | 0.123 |
| Social Relationships | | Interaction | F(3, 15) = 0.23 | p = .873 | 0.044 |
| | | Condition | F(1, 5) = 0.06 | p = .810 | 0.013 |
| | Intimate Rel. Satisfaction | Time | F(3, 15) = 10.72 | p < .001 | 0.682 |
| | | Interaction | F(3, 15) = 1.53 | p = .247 | 0.235 |
| | | Condition | F(1, 11) = 0.11 | p = .743 | 0.01 |
| | Financial Functioning | Time | F(3, 33) = 1.42 | p = .254 | 0.114 |
| Finances | | Interaction | F(3, 33) = 0.24 | p = .865 | 0.022 |
| | | Condition | F(1, 11) = 0.92 | p = .359 | 0.077 |
| | Financial Satisfaction | Time | F(3, 33) = 3.82 | p = .068 | 0.258 |
| | | Interaction | F(3, 33) = 1.81 | p = .164 | 0.142 |
| | | Condition | F(1, 11) = 0.47 | p = .505 | 0.041 |
| | Health Functioning | Time | F(3, 33) = 1.81 | p = .164 | 0.142 |
| Health | | Interaction | F(3, 33) = 0.67 | p = .575 | 0.058 |
| | | Condition | F(1, 11) = 0.18 | p = .684 | 0.016 |
| | Health Satisfaction | Time | F(3, 33) = 0.94 | p = .432 | 0.079 |
| | | Interaction | F(3, 33) = 0.77 | p = .518 | 0.066 |
| | | Condition | F(1, 8) = 1.47 | p = .260 | 0.155 |
| | Vocational Functioning | Time | F(3, 24) = 0.67 | p = .578 | 0.077 |
| Vocation | | Interaction | F(3, 24) = 0.62 | p = .608 | 0.072 |
| | | Condition | F(1, 8) = 2.86 | p = .129 | 0.263 |
| | Vocational Satisfaction | Time | F(3, 24) = 0.66 | p = .466 | 0.076 |
| | | Interaction | F(3, 24) = 0.11 | p = .951 | 0.014 |

Note. Table 4.5 demonstrates the Mixed-ANOVA results for each of the satisfaction and functioning subscales of each of the four WBI domains.

Additionally, no significant interactions were found for any variable, suggesting that the pattern of change over time did not differ between groups. These results point to temporal or contextual influences on satisfaction domains and suggest that, under the current workshop parameters, the expressive writing intervention was not sufficient to shift WBI trajectories beyond what would be expected without the workshop intervention.

Trends in Mean Changes in WBI Domains: Function and Satisfaction

While there were no statistically significant intervention effects detected on any of the well-being measures in this pilot study, there were some observable mean changes at both the subject and group levels. Scores revealed consistent positive trends favoring the workshop group across several domains of well-being. In particular, the Social Relationships domain of the WBI, especially the social satisfaction subscale, showed the clearest divergence between groups. Workshop participants' average satisfaction with their social connections increased modestly from pre- to post-program (week 0 to week 8) but did fall off a month after the end of the workshop (week 12). The control group's social satisfaction declined slightly over the same period. Similarly, participants of the treatment group saw a slight increase in their Health domain, while the control group saw a slight decrease. Despite starting at a lower baseline in two

of the four domains, the treatment group ended up with a higher average across all domains of the WBI by week 12 (see Fig 4.2).

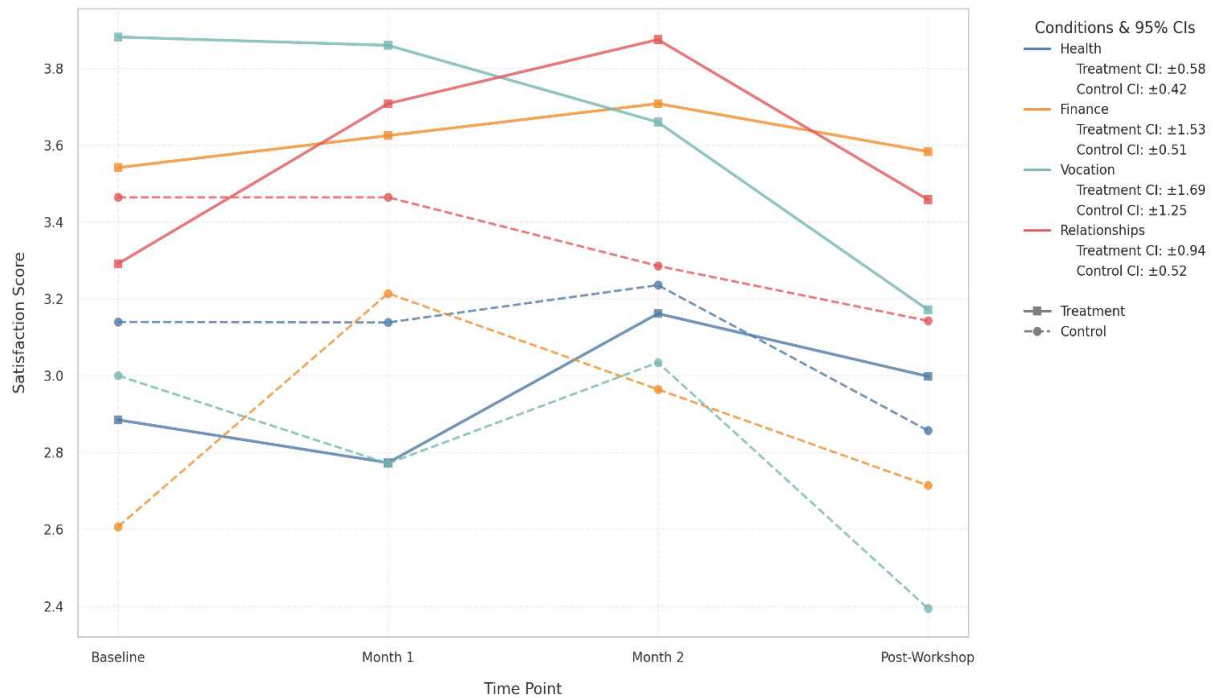


Figure 4.2. *WBI Mean Domain Satisfaction Scores by Time & Condition* presents a comprehensive visualization of satisfaction measures across four key well-being domains (health, finance, vocation, and broader social relationships) in both treatment and control groups over the course of the 8-week intervention. The time dimension is each measurement occasion over the course of the study.

Social Relationship functioning, which measures engagement with friends and community, similarly trended upward for participants in the workshop condition relative to the control group while in the workshop, but participants reported an average decrease in social well-being four weeks after the end of the workshop. Financial functioning showed minimal change over time for both groups, and there was a decrease in vocational functioning over the 12 weeks for both groups as well. In the Health domain, small improvements were observed in the treatment while a small decrease was observed in the control group (see Fig. 4.3).

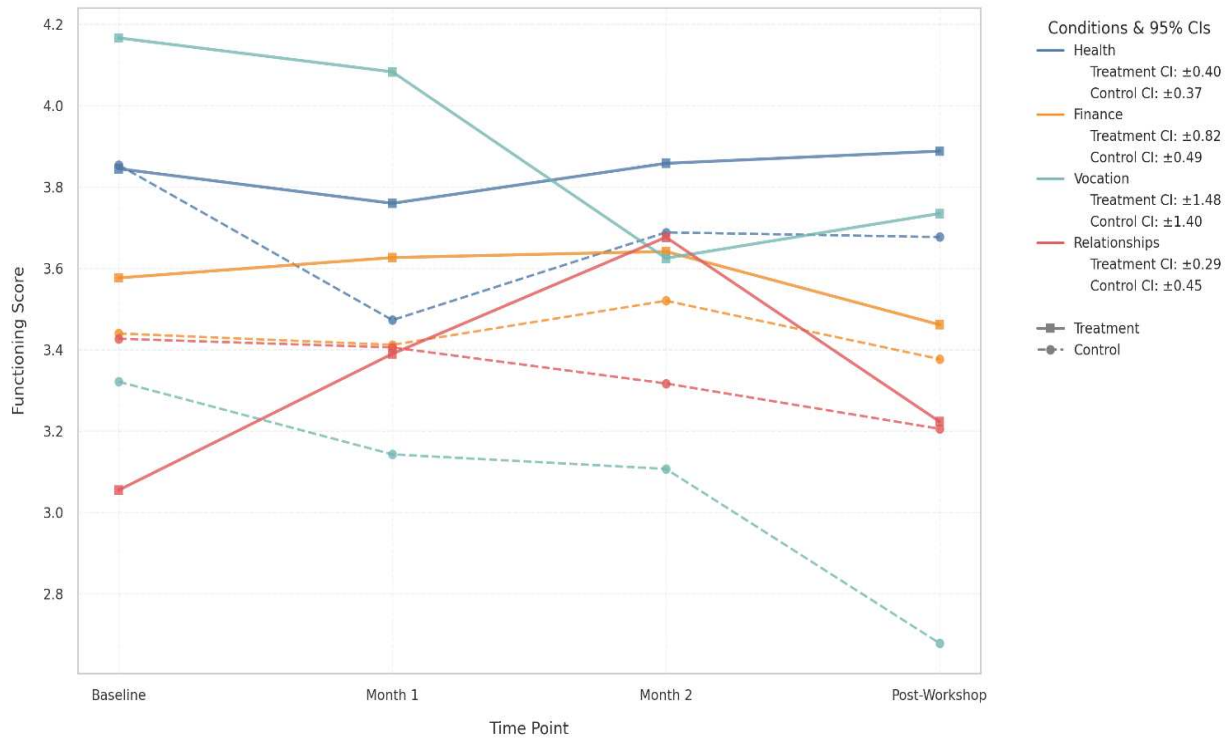


Figure 4.3. *WBI Mean Domain Function Scores by Time & Condition* presents a comprehensive visualization of satisfaction measures across four key well-being domains (health, finance, vocation, and broader social relationships) in both treatment and control groups over the course of the intervention. The time dimension is each measurement occasion over the course of the study.

Overall, the functioning scores had much less variation over time across both groups, which is expected as domain function in well-being is generally more stable than satisfaction due to the hedonic nature of the latter category of well-being.

Trends in Mean Changes in WBI: Additional Measures

Additional Social Relationships measures were more underpowered than the other variables due to the lower n of participants actively in an intimate partner relationship (n=7) and parents with dependent children (n=4) due to an already low study population (n=13). The trends in the Parental Functioning and Parental Satisfaction variables highlight only small fluctuations over the course of the 12-week study, with very little changes even when looking at pre/post

data. Intimate Partner Functioning, and Intimate Partner Satisfaction follow similar trajectories with mean scores remaining relatively stable over time (see Table 4.4).

The shaded 95% confidence intervals are wide and overlap at all time points, indicating no statistically meaningful differences between groups. No consistent or sustained separation

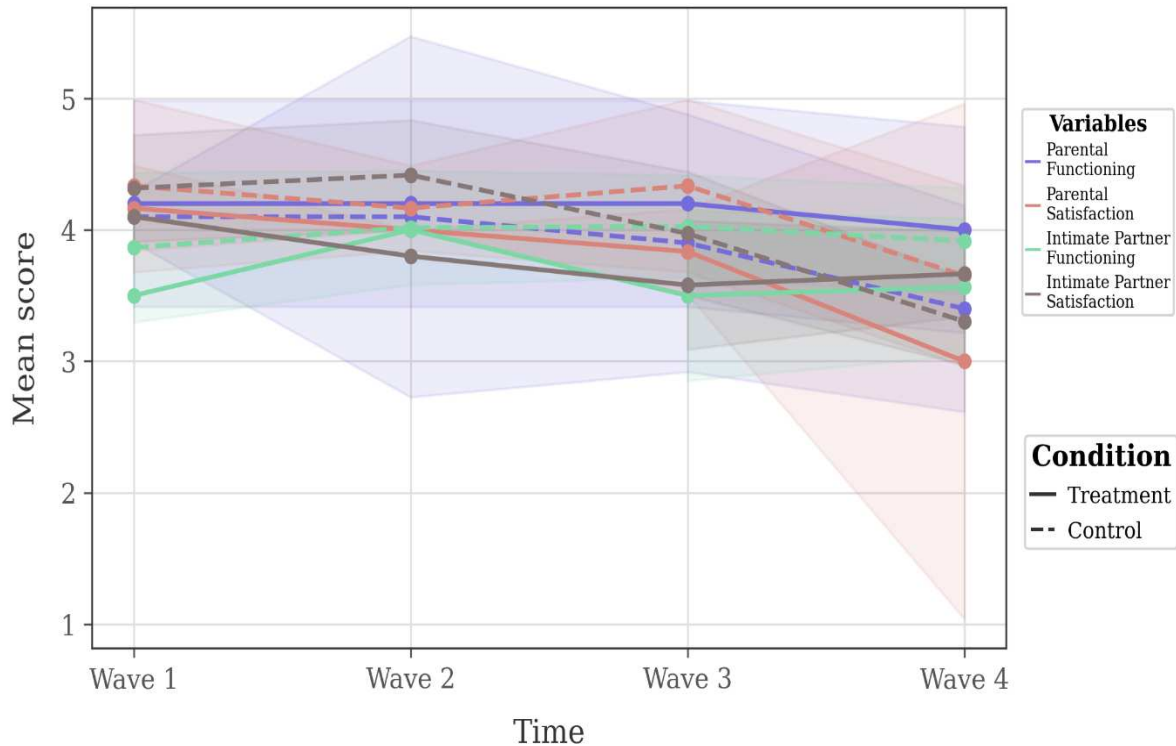


Figure 4.4. *WBI Mean Parental & Intimate Partner Scores by Time & Condition* highlights mean differences for the treatment and control conditions across four subscales that fall under the Social relationships domain of well-being (Vogt et al., 2018). The shaded areas represent a 95% CIs for each of the variables.

between treatment and control is observed, and any apparent changes are small and within the margin of error.

When examining the additional health variables: Health Promotion, Risk Avoidance, and Self-care mean scores across four measurement occasions show minimal change over time, and the trajectories for treatment and control groups are nearly parallel. Additionally, the trajectories of the mean scores are relatively close in mean WBI scores across groups and timepoints (see Fig. 4.5).

WBI

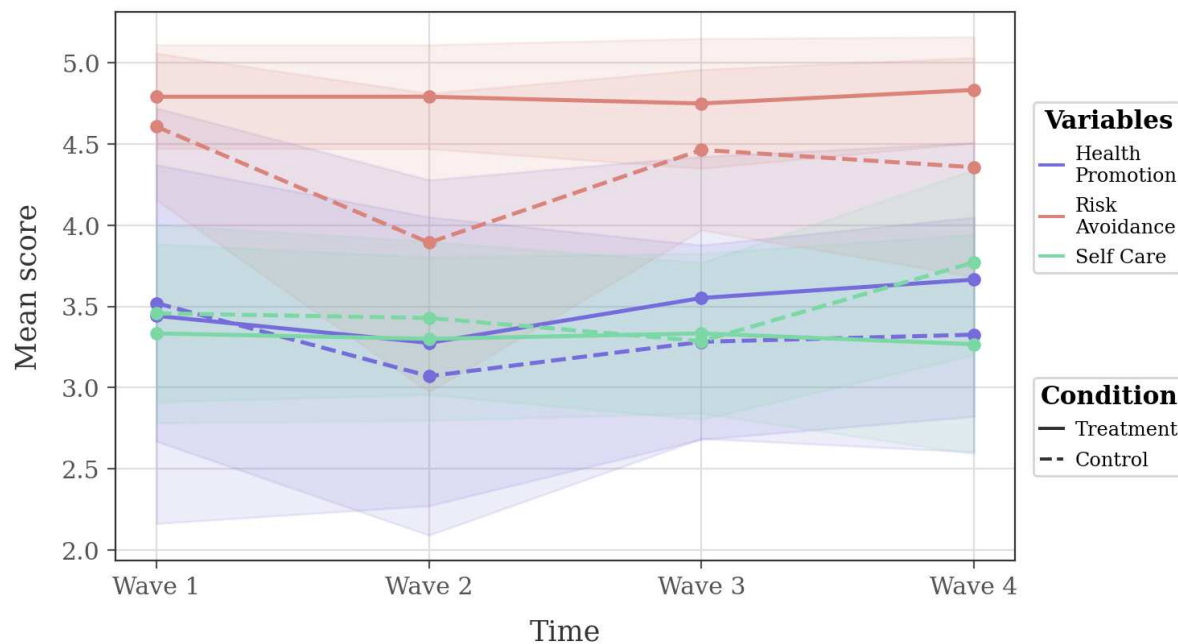


Figure 4.5. Mean WBI Additional Health Scores by Time & Condition highlights mean differences for the treatment and control conditions across three additional subscales that fall under the Health domain of well-being (Vogt et al., 2018). The shaded areas represent 95% CIs for each of the variables.

The 95% confidence intervals are broad and overlap throughout, suggesting no significant differences between groups at any time point. There are no clear trends indicating improvement or decline in either group.

Discussion

This chapter examined how participation in the veteran-only writing workshop affected broad well-being factors as measured by the Well-Being Inventory (WBI) over time. Its purpose was to track whether the intervention led to changes in engagement, functioning, or satisfaction across life domains (vocation, finances, health, and social relationships), thereby aligning with the study's aim of examining expressive writing as a support for veteran well-being. The Mixed-ANOVA results revealed no statistically significant condition or interaction effects from workshop participation on any WBI subscale or domain. This lack of significant differences was

consistent across domains and was reflected in the longitudinal trajectories: treatment and control group means tracked in parallel with broad overlap. Furthermore, pre/post comparisons were flat or changed only minimally.

The parental and intimate partner subscales showed only negligible fluctuations across the 12-week study, with mean scores essentially constant before and after the intervention. Similarly, treatment-group participants started slightly lower on some domains (e.g. health & social relationships) but finished with only modest gains relative to controls, while the financial and vocational domains changed very little in either group. In sum, the principal finding is that participation in the workshop did not produce significant improvements in the objective life-factor measures captured by the WBI during the 8-week program and 4-week follow-up period.

Several theoretical perspectives may help explain why these null effects emerged. First, although expressive writing is often framed as a reflective meaning-making practice, the kinds of changes it produces may not align neatly with the WBI's outcome measures. The workshop was intended to prompt reflection and narrative reconstruction, informed by Flower & Hayes' cognitive writing theory, potentially fostering new personal meaning. However, such internal cognitive and emotional shifts may not immediately translate into objective life changes like new job status or improved health behaviors over the short term. In other words, veterans may indeed engage in deep reflection, but the WBI domains may be too stable to capture those shifts within the study timeframe. For example, participants described cognitive and emotional reframing in interviews during Chapter Three, even when the WBI showed little change. In this view, the meaning-making effects of writing could be subtle and long-term, building narrative coherence or coping skills that emerge slowly rather than moving domain satisfaction scores sharply in eight weeks.

In conclusion, the null findings for Chapter Four highlight both theoretical and practical considerations. Theoretically, they suggest that an expressive writing workshop may have effects that are not captured by broad well-being factor scales over a short period, even if participants subjectively benefit. This raises questions about how expressive interventions improve well-being—whether through immediate emotional relief, identity work, social processes, or gradual life changes. Practically, future interventions might be adjusted to enhance impact: for example, integrating more explicit cognitive or behavioral components, extending the duration or frequency of writing practice to build habits, or adding follow-up measures to provide more longitudinal data. Future research should build on these insights with larger samples and optimized designs to fully realize the potential of expressive writing workshops on veteran well-being.

Limitations and Future Research

The study used a quasi-experimental mixed-methods design with a small, localized veteran sample in one workshop model, which limits external validity to other settings, formats, or veteran populations. After screening and attrition, only $n=13$ participants remained in the study. With only 13 participants, the study may not have been able to reliably detect smaller changes in the objective well-being domains. It's possible that modest improvements were present—especially in social connectedness—but the sample was too limited to confirm them statistically. Subgroup analyses in certain domains were especially underpowered (e.g., intimate-partner & parental models), limiting inference. Some of the variables were not normally distributed, further limiting any inferential power due to violations of the assumptions of the statistical models used. Future research could improve upon this study by including a larger and more diverse group of military veterans, and by holding the study over the course of a year. This

would allow for the WBI to remain unmodified and would provide more comprehensive data and a fuller view of the impact of the workshop on veteran well-being.

Although internal consistency was generally acceptable, the instrument's recall period was shortened from three months to one month to match study cadence, potentially affecting comparability with prior WBI applications. Furthermore, data were collected over 12 weeks, and such a window may be insufficient for expressive writing to translate into measurable shifts in domain-level functioning and satisfaction factors. These tend to be comparatively stable and may not be measurably influenced within the study time frame by the cognitive and emotional shifts fostered by expressive writing in this context.

Conclusions

In sum, this chapter narrows the scope of what an expressive, veteran-only writing workshop can be expected to change in twelve weeks, while clarifying *how* it may matter: by creating the conditions for relief, connection, and meaning-making that plausibly set the stage for later life-domain improvement. The quantitative picture in this pilot is one of stability on broad life-domain outcomes over an 8-week workshop with a 4-week follow-up. Mixed-ANOVA tests showed no condition or interaction effects on WBI subscales, and group means largely tracked in parallel across time. Where small, non-significant trends appeared (e.g., modest gains for the treatment group in social satisfaction and health), they were short-lived and within wide confidence intervals. These findings suggest that, under the present parameters, an expressive writing workshop is unlikely to shift domain-level functioning or satisfaction in the short term.

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CHAPTER FIVE: DISCUSSION & CONCLUSIONS

Overarching Study Aims

This chapter serves as both a synthesis of the information gathered and reflection on the process and outcomes of the mixed-methods study presented in the preceding three articles. The aims of this dissertation were to explore the complex intersections between military veteran identity, writing, and well-being through participation in a veteran-only experiential writing workshop. This fifth and final chapter will revisit the purpose and aims of the study, summarize the key findings, and synthesize the articles in an extended discussion of the study's implications for theory, policy, and practice surrounding veteran writing workshops. This chapter also acknowledges the limitations inherent in the study and proposes avenues for future research.

The aims of this study were to explore *if* and *how* participation in an experiential veteran writing workshop supports or constrains military veteran well-being and satisfaction with life. Well-being is defined in this study as a multi-dimensional construct capturing a holistic view of an individual's propensity to engage, participate, and find satisfaction in the critical life domains of vocation, health, finances, and social relationships (Bauer et al., 2018; Matthieu et al., 2018; Vogt et al., 2018). The Aims of the study and how they were addressed across the three studies are represented in Table 5.1.

Table 5.1*Study Aims and Findings*

| Chapter 1 Aim | Aim | Findings |
|----------------------|---|--|
| Overarching Aim 1 | Identify if participation in an experiential veteran writing program supports or constrains participant life satisfaction and well-being. | Addressed in Chapter Two, which showed a significant interaction effect in SWLS, and growth modeling suggested participants with lower baseline SWLS benefited most. Chapter 5 synthesizes this and Chapter Three’s findings as tentative overall evidence of improved life satisfaction due to workshop participation, while also noting constraints. |
| Overarching Aim 2 | Understand how participation supports or constrains life satisfaction and well-being (mechanisms/process). | Addressed in Chapter Three’s qualitative themes that captured the workshop as therapeutic and socially supportive with writing, sharing, and active listening facilitating camaraderie and emotional relief—veteran-only space was important. Chapter 4 provided a helpful framework for considering well-being, but due to the limitations of the study, there were no clear conclusions on impact. |
| Overarching Aim 3 | Model and compare trajectories of change in life satisfaction and well-being over time for participants. | Addressed in Chapter Two using Individual growth modeling, which indicated participants with lower baseline life satisfaction benefited most, showing steeper positive change while the control group remained relatively stable. |
| Overarching Aim 4 | Thematically examine, via interviews, which workshop components participants claim support or constrain well-being. | Addressed in Chapter Three’s results: Camaraderie/connection in a veteran-only space; Emotional Release & Relief; Writing/Sharing/Active Listening as catalysts for trust, vulnerability, and meaning-making; workshop experienced as non-clinical feeling therapeutic group. |

Note. Findings are synthesized from Chapters 2–5. See dissertation text for statistical details and thematic evidence.

Review and Synthesis of Key Article Findings

Five key findings related to the study aims are shared below from across the three articles. The full study highlighted that through the process of writing about relatable cultural memories using targeted prompts in a veteran-only space, military veterans may see positive outcomes in general life satisfaction (SWLS). The positive outcomes in satisfaction were reflected in the voices of the veteran participants, rooting much of their increased well-being to the connections and camaraderie formed in the room. The writing process, coupled with the act of sharing and listening in the group setting, were identified as key elements in the ability to form quick and meaningful connections and camaraderie in the veteran-only space. The workshop was viewed as a non-clinical, but therapeutic space that provided veteran participants camaraderie and connection and emotional relief through the “letting go” or “release” of challenging or forgotten stories.

Findings 1 through 4 below expand upon these findings, synthesizing each independent article, and Finding 5 highlights both the ways in which the workshop can constrain participant well-being and as well as some challenges with the model that the participants voiced throughout the workshop and in their interviews.

1. Evidence of Improved Satisfaction with Life

In Chapter Two, results from the SWLS survey highlighted that workshop participants’ life satisfaction increased more over time than that of the control group (i.e., a group by time interaction on SWLS). Growth modeling revealed that veterans who started with lower life satisfaction gained the most from the workshop, showcasing a statistically significant increase in SWLS scores over the eight-week intervention and the 12-week follow-up, whereas the control group’s scores remained relatively unchanged. Specifically, a repeated-measures ANOVA

revealed a significant interaction effect confirming that changes in life satisfaction differed by group over the duration of the study. Additionally, linear growth modeling adds another layer of nuance, showing that those with the lowest baseline satisfaction benefited the most from the workshop. This trend reinforces the idea that low satisfaction with life is not static, but dynamic, changing with one's life choices and circumstances.

Additionally, this trend adds evidence to the Cognitive Process Theory of Writing (CPTW) (Flower & Hayes, 1981) as a means of understanding the writing process as a recursive, goal-directed cognitive activity capable of reshaping and reframing memory. These narrative acts, when coupled with a shared cultural context of the veteran-only space, provided both a personal and social task environment that actively shaped the workshop and the stories told within it. The feeling of being able to “speak freely,” coupled with the strong camaraderie and frequent vulnerability shown by participants, helped curate stories and reshape the foundational memories accessed to compose those stories.

Moreover, this finding resonates with positive psychology literature, particularly theories around post-traumatic growth and resilience. The workshop may have served as a low-cost, high-impact environment where participants could actively construct more coherent and hopeful life stories by reframing past experiences. This form of experiential expressive writing intervention seems particularly beneficial for those struggling with life satisfaction tied to social challenges. In line with research by Pennebaker & Chung (2011), who emphasize the role of structured narrative in promoting psychological well-being, this study extends that framework by demonstrating that veterans with lower life satisfaction measures on the SWLS stand to gain the most benefit from workshop participation.

Practically, these results suggest that experiential writing interventions may be especially well-suited for at-risk veteran populations, offering a low-cost, non-clinical, culturally resonant means of supporting subjective well-being through improvements to life satisfaction and social connectedness. These findings should inform future program design and future research by creating a profile for the recruitment of veterans with lower SWLS scores and lower scores in the social domain of the WBI may maximize the utility and impact of the intervention.

2. Writing, Sharing, & Active Listening: Catalysts for Camaraderie and Release

One of the key themes synthesized from the findings in Chapter Three illuminated that through the workshop's expectations of writing, sharing, & actively listening, veteran participants quickly formed a sense of camaraderie, allowing vulnerability and emotional release. This outcome is predicated on a willingness to be vulnerable and a sense of shared cultural understanding from others in the room. The writing helped transform and reframe their memory, as Fernando stated: "Writing gave me a way to look at things I had pushed down. I could finally make sense of it," calling the writing, "therapeutic." Veterans consistently described both in the workshop and interviews how the process of writing, sharing, and actively listening to others' stories created a profound sense of connection, as summed up by Fernando: "The writing was cathartic... The sharing though—that does something even more, I don't know what that is. It is good [for] the mental health." Likewise, Jordan echoed him, when he claimed that, "...even when [my story] was ugly, it felt okay to share it, you know? It wasn't viewed as negative, and I didn't walk away... wondering how I'm gonna be judged for this." In a population that often reports feeling isolated or culturally alienated from civilian life (Morin, 2011; Smith et al., 2014), this co-constructed identity-focused writing space offered the participants an opportunity to share without needing to justify or fear judgment.

These findings are aligned with research on peer support programs, which have been consistently associated with improved life satisfaction and social functioning across diverse populations (Cabassa et al., 2021; Kousoulis et al., 2021; Santini et al., 2022). Additionally, participants shared that the sharing and active listening were key elements that supported their well-being. This is also aligned with current research on the act of feeling heard, which finds that having a voice, receiving empathy and attention, and feeling a shared sense of mutual identity promote positive psychological health and enhanced well-being (Itzchakov et al., 2023).

The writing helped to organize and make meaning of difficult experiences, and the sharing and listening were also critical elements of the process. Participants remarked that they felt relief in hearing others articulate thoughts or memories similar to their own, with one participant, Blake, claimed listening to the stories and participating in the workshop process made them “feel lighter” and “feel more at peace after sessions.” This finding aligns with and extends the Cognitive Process Theory of Writing (CPTW) by illustrating how the writing process is not insular or isolated. It is impacted by the environment, the perceived audience, and the goals of the author. Writing in the workshop is explicitly reinforced through its communal dimensions, which participants claim, and the data show, supported their social well-being. While CPTW (Flower & Hayes, 1981) emphasizes the recursive and goal-directed nature of composition, this study adds to the model by suggesting that the audience, particularly when composed of culturally aligned peers, can shape the writer’s process and outcomes in meaningful ways that, under the right circumstances, have the potential to support well-being.

Moreover, the environment of the workshop was instrumental in enabling this dynamic. Participants cited the veteran-only nature of the group as crucial to their sense of safety. This shared background allowed for emotionally charged or morally complex material to be shared

without fear of judgment or misinterpretation. The veteran participants could speak freely in the “shorthand” of their experience and in return received empathetic or at least attentive ears. Within this workshop, writing, sharing, and actively listening functioned as catalysts for trust, empathy, vulnerability and ultimately emotional release of past memories related to military experience. What a few participants described as the feeling of “letting it go.” I address this finding more fully in the next section on the Veteran-only space.

3. Veteran-only Spaces Offer a Way to Support Well-being

Also in Chapter Three, a dominant qualitative theme identified was “Camaraderie.” Participants emphasized that simply being among fellow veterans made the experience markedly different from other groups. They felt “understood,” “safe,” and “vulnerable” together. One veteran said it felt like “being witnessed without any agenda... these are people who can sympathize and empathize.” Another called it a “kinship.” In short, the participants perceived the workshop as a unique peer support community.

Much of the veteran literature is split on the topic of veteran-only spaces, with some studies citing their value in fostering safety, cultural fluency, and therapeutic trust (DiRamio et al., 2008; Jones, 2013; Smith et al., 2020), while others caution that such spaces may reinforce social isolation or inhibit broader reintegration (Grossbard et al., 2013; Kirchner et al., 2007; Stecker et al., 2013). I tend to lean on the side of those who value integrated spaces for veterans, particularly for reintegrating veterans in educational spaces; however, like many other groups who share a strong cultural bond, many veterans do value the comfortability felt in veteran-only spaces. Accessibility to these spaces can be beneficial. In this study, participants valued the relief of not having to explain the details of what they were writing and not having to censor their stories due to the fear of misunderstanding and judgment. Due to these factors, participants

overwhelmingly attributed the safety and effectiveness of the workshop to the veteran-only context. Shared cultural norms and language facilitated deeper levels of trust, authenticity, and mutual understanding—conditions not easily replicated in mixed groups (DiRamio et al., 2008). Perhaps surprisingly, most also agreed that a non-veteran could run the workshop, but that it is probably better if the person had at least some connection with the service.

Furthermore, this finding is consistent with other research on veteran writing groups. Community writing groups explicitly marketed to veterans often build social bridges and belonging, especially for subgroups who may feel excluded from mainstream Veteran Service Organizations (Buckly, 2021). For example, Buckley (2021) found that veteran-only writing circles gave women veterans “a much-desired sense of comradery [and] increased social connectivity” (p. 44). Likewise, Schell et al. (2023) note that “across the U.S., veterans’ writing groups have provided spaces to write, reflect, heal, [and] release stress” (p. 115). Participation in these spaces can reduce isolation and offer a chance to “release” feelings that had been bottled up, and the shared identity of fellow veteran participants forms quick and deep connections that allow for this release to take place.

4. Evidence of Positive Impact to Social domain of Well-being

Participants in the veteran writing workshop consistently described it as a uniquely supportive space. Evidence of the positive impact to the social domain of well-being is portrayed through participant descriptions of the camaraderie of being “among fellow veterans,” where they felt quickly “understood,” “safe,” and free to be vulnerable. As one former infantryman, Fernando, put it, the workshop provided a space to be “witnessed without any agenda... these are people who can sympathize and empathize.” Another, Blake, spoke of a “shared sense of identity” and remarked that telling stories there “feels like you’re shooting the shit” with old

battle buddies. These accounts make clear that the shared military culture and veteran-only context fostered peer support and trust, quickly creating a family-like bond among participants, facilitating vulnerability, and supporting social well-being.

Throughout Chapters Two and Three, it became evident that engaging in repeated storytelling practices allowed veteran writing workshop participants to retrieve, reprocess, and respond to challenging memories. Within the first two weeks of writing together, participants were already sharing stories with striking candor—one participant described the experience as being like “we were shooting the shit in the smoke pit.” Smoking in the smoke pit in the military is indicative of taking a break and is used here as a way to reference just “hanging out” or “passing the time” with friends. These observed storytelling processes align with established theories of narrative identity (McAdams, 1993) and expressive writing (Pennebaker & Chung, 2011). Both frameworks highlight the therapeutic potential of constructing personal narratives and processing emotional experiences through writing. This alignment provides further evidence supporting the use of the Cognitive Process Theory of Writing (Flower & Hayes, 1981) as the study’s guiding theoretical framework.

These findings were further supported by participant interviews. Participants saw the writing workshop as a non-clinical therapeutic group that supported social and emotional well-being by providing a sense of renewed purpose, a place for emotional release, and an opportunity for social connectedness. All participants agreed that one major reason the workshop was so effective is that the prompts allowed connections across stories. As everyone in the room composed narratives from the same or similar prompts, threads of connection emerged clearly, even across generational gaps. Most participants described this sense of connection as the ability to “understand the military bullshit.” This theme of “military bullshit” was reinforced in vivo by

about half of the participants, who described it as a concept spanning generations of veterans—a shared understanding that most veterans experience in the company of other veterans. Using the phrase, “military bullshit” to describe this phenomenon was a decision that keeps the language as close to the cultural understanding as possible—to ensure the meaning was not diluted by any need bend the phrase due to perceived sensitivities, which is one concept brought up by participants in the workshop. To the participants, many of the stories accessed and shared felt like “the same old bullshit.”

Furthermore, the quantitative analysis in Chapter Four aligns with these patterns. Although WBI results did not yield statistically significant differences between the treatment and control groups, the treatment group exhibited a modest upward trajectory in mean score in the Social Relationships domain across the study period, whereas the control group’s mean scores declined over the same 12 weeks. While these changes fall below conventional thresholds for statistical significance, they converge with qualitative evidence to indicate that the workshop’s most immediate and discernible effects were social in nature. Notably, Chapter Two documented a measurable improvement in global life satisfaction on the SWLS attributable to the intervention, and Chapter Three demonstrated robust qualitative evidence of social support and thematic overlap with the WBI’s Social Relationships domain. Taken together, these findings suggest a coherent pattern, helping triangulate how the workshop functions to cultivate social connectedness and camaraderie among participants.

5. Constraints: Writing Time, Writing Ability, and Social Identity

The workshop participants, throughout the workshop, voiced some constraints to their well-being as well, though these were fewer in frequency and narrower in scope. One of the key constraints was the challenge of writing in the structure and pacing of the writing exercises, or as

one participant called it, “it is a pressure cooker situation.” Having 20 minutes to field a prompt, retrieve a story from memory, compose and revise the story to a coherent state, and then read that story to a full room of people can be overwhelming. I was reminded of the challenge by one participant who shared on multiple occasions that they had no idea “this is what the workshop would be like,” with the implication being they expected more instruction and less writing.

In addition to time pressure, several participants noted a perceived lack of writing ability as a barrier to fully engaging with the workshop’s model. While the workshop was intentionally non-evaluative and emphasized a free writing style and storytelling over academic or technical skill, the vulnerability required to write and read aloud, coupled with self-doubt about writing skill, caused some participants to feel inadequate. These constraints, time pressure and ability, may have inhibited some participants’ willingness to take narrative risks or share stories at the depth they desired, which in turn may have moderated the extent of their emotional or social benefit.

While time pressure and varying writing abilities may have limited some participants’ willingness to take narrative risks or share stories at the depth they desired, several strategies may help address these concerns in future iterations. Providing optional pre-workshop prompts, offering a brief warm-up exercise, or increasing opportunities for low-stakes sharing (e.g., verbal free-writes, partner reads) could ease initial discomfort and help participants find their voice. At the same time, it is important to note that the 20–25-minute timed writing structure is intentional and serves three critical purposes that support the workshop’s overall function. First, this duration is grounded in research on expressive writing, which identifies brief, time-bound sessions as optimal for generating psychological (and physiological) benefits without overwhelming the participant (Pennbaker & Beall, 1986; Kaplow 2006; Mugerwa & Holden,

2014). Second, it allows for two full writing-and-sharing cycles per workshop, which not only doubles the expressive and reflective opportunities but also enhances peer influence. In interviews, participants often cited how hearing others' writing shaped their own narratives, but this cannot functionally happen without two rounds of writing and sharing. Third, the structure of a timed writing session mirrors familiar pressures from military contexts, which many veterans found motivating or even comforting. Thus, while accommodation may help increase comfort or access, the timed writing component remains a key feature of the workshop's therapeutic and communal rhythm.

Beyond these structural and skill-based constraints, a few participants voiced concerns tied to social identity, particularly related to race and gender. One participant expressed discomfort at being seen as a kind of voice of approval for another participant's racialized experiences as a black man in a predominantly white group. At times certain participants would make obvious eye contact and seek non-verbal approval when race entered their own story, making this participant feel subtly pressured and tokenized. In another instance, a female veteran described the challenge of being the only woman in the room. Although not overtly excluded, she remarked that the gender dynamics at play made it harder to contribute authentically, and she sometimes felt she should not share certain stories and had to filter certain parts of other stories.

These experiences suggest intersectional dynamics of identity can introduce both supports and constraints in the veteran writing workshop space. Future studies should expand upon how intersectional identities shape experiences within veteran-only writing spaces. For example, researchers might explore how women veterans navigate group dynamics in veteran writing spaces that are predominantly male, or how veterans of color interpret their participation in these spaces where their perspectives may be underrepresented or overemphasized. Employing

Intersectional Theory (Crenshaw, 1989) in future veteran writing workshop research could help researchers and facilitators design more responsive, inclusive workshop environments.

Discussion

This discussion situates the findings of the 8-week veteran writing workshop within broader scope of theory, policy, and practice. Drawing on the Cognitive Process Theory of Writing (Flower & Hayes, 1981), the results demonstrate how the recursive processes of planning, composing, and revising supported veterans in reconstructing personal experiences and generating new meaning through story writing and telling. These outcomes connect directly to improvements in well-being, particularly in general Life Satisfaction as measured by the SWLS (Diener et al., 1985). Additionally, the veteran participants reported feeling validation, relief— "getting it off my chest"—and strengthened connections through both writing and group sharing. Taken together, the findings highlight not only the theoretical significance of writing and sharing in the workshop as a meaning-making process, but also the potential for policy and practice to embrace culturally aligned, low-cost, and non-clinical interventions, like the writing workshop model in this dissertation, that expand the landscape of veteran support.

Implications for Theory

This results of this study reinforce and extend the Cognitive Process Theory of Writing (CPTW) as articulated by Flower and Hayes (1981), who argued that writing is not merely an expressive act but a recursive and generative cognitive process involving goal setting, reflection, and problem solving. In the context of the veteran writing workshop, participants engaged in precisely these processes by retrieving and evaluating memories, re-authoring difficult experiences, and constructing coherent, thoughtful narratives for social sharing all in a small window of time. This research further exposes the potential of the writing process, including

influences from the group workshop environment, to improve broader social connection and life satisfaction in veterans.

In their interviews, participants linked elements of their task environment—prompts and other participants—as elements that shaped the composition of their stories. There were scratches and scribbles observed on handwritten pages of participants as they participated in the editing process of the framework, and participants explained how the writing workshop allowed them to access and let go of challenging stories—and to access them again. In the workshop, this meant that veterans who began with fragmented or troubling memories could, over time, organize them into narratives that made more sense. Fernando commented on the feeling in the room after writing and tentatively telling a raw story, stating, “I saw the look of empathy on some people’s faces... I think I wanted that. I wanted to be witnessed being hurting... So to bare my soul to a room of new friends... and have some support was nice.” The act of composing the story in such a way to receive an equally raw reaction—empathy—in a supportive group context allowed Fernando to feel heard and validated.

As veterans wrote and shared, they were effectively reconstituting their narrative identities in a more positive light alongside others who understand. The CPTW framework proposes just this: by cycling through planning, composing, and revising, and by considering audience feedback, participants can create new meaning from old events, a known catalyst for psychological growth. These qualitative observations dovetail with findings in cognitive psychology on memory specificity. Focusing on concrete, specific details of personal events can enhance emotional processing and problem-solving (Madore, Addis, & Schacter, 2015). One of the key elements of composing memoir is the emphasis on sensory detail—to remember the smell, taste, sight, feeling, and sounds of the moment being pulled from long-term memory. In

fact, Madore and Schacter (2014) demonstrated that a brief training in recalling detailed episodic memories significantly increased the richness of personal narratives and improved means–end problem-solving performance in both young and older adults. The memoir exercises in our workshop functioned similarly to a specificity induction, prompting veterans to retrieve vivid details of their experiences rather than speaking in generalities. This has likely helped reduce over-generalized autobiographical memories and encouraged more nuanced self-reflection. The result was not only deeper personal insight but also a shared understanding among group members when those detailed stories were shared with the group, further building the propensity for shared vulnerability.

These findings indicate that expressive writing-based interventions rooted in CPTW have the potential to interact meaningfully with global assessments of well-being (SWLS). Future theoretical models might integrate these frameworks more explicitly to capture the complex and recursive relationship between narrative construction, cultural and social connection, and perceived life satisfaction.

Implications for Policy

These findings support policy initiatives to invest in creative writing programs as part of veteran care. In particular, the results align with recent VA and public health calls to prioritize veterans’ social well-being (Britch et al., 2024). By demonstrating tangible improvements in life satisfaction and meaningful engagement within the social domain of well-being, this study reinforces the importance of addressing reintegration not solely through clinical or employment services, but through community-based, peer-driven, creative arts-based interventions. The findings present the workshop as a non-clinical, but still therapeutic space for peer support. The writing workshop model offers a scalable, low-cost option that can be implemented across VA

facilities, community colleges, and veteran service organizations, expanding access to culturally responsive care all while reinforcing literacy among military veterans.

Additionally, the workshop's ability to foster trust, vulnerability, and emotional response suggests that writing programs such as these have the potential to contribute to protective factors associated with long-term mental health stability. It is perhaps unsurprising then that these findings echo recommendations from the Department of Veterans Affairs' Whole Health Initiative (VA, 2023), which emphasizes integrative approaches that prioritize meaning-making, creativity, and personal storytelling in veterans' health care plans.

Policymakers may also consider adapting funding structures to support these types of non-clinical, arts-based interventions, particularly in underserved rural communities where access to traditional mental health services may be limited. For example, the VA has recently adopted equine therapy as a part of "Whole Health" offerings for veterans has started an equine-assisted therapy program, "Taking the Reins" (*Taking the Reins*, 2022). Therapeutic retreats, like "Project Sanctuary" a week-long wellness retreat showed positive long-term outcomes on mental health, family functioning, and veteran well-being (Townsend, 2018). Moreover, Piehl (2025) describes how recreation therapy is now embedded in VA services, which includes adaptive and creative arts modalities, aimed at enhancing quality of life for military veterans.

Ultimately, these results highlight the potential of writing workshops to support military veterans with low life satisfaction. These low-resource workshops offer a non-stigmatizing approach that can complement clinical treatment. Providing the option for such workshops in transitional support programs, community reintegration efforts, or higher education initiatives could meaningfully support veterans' holistic well-being and long-term adjustment to post-service life.

Implications for Practice

The results of the study underscore that creative writing programs can serve as effective, low-cost interventions for enhancing veterans' subjective well-being. Practitioners working in veteran-serving organizations, higher education, or mental health settings should consider integrating writing workshops as a core component of their programming, or potentially as an elective component for populations hesitant to engage in traditional or group therapy.

Additionally, the study found that, overwhelmingly, the veteran participants attributed their positive experiences to the shared understanding present in the veteran-only space. Practitioners should consider this finding when attempting to construct a workshop for a cultural- or identity- aligned group. While the qualitative data highlighted that it is not necessary for facilitators to be veterans themselves, cultural fluency through lived experience, service-connected roles, or deep familiarity with military life almost certainly enhances trust-building and participation. One of the expectations is for the facilitator to share a vulnerable story to set-the-tone of the space to show one's positionality and relatability through shared understanding, and to model a willingness to be vulnerable.

Another point for practitioners to consider is that participants responded positively to the generative writing process but also voiced concerns around time pressure and writing aptitude. Facilitators should aim to balance structure with flexibility with the goal of producing writing without overwhelming participants. Incorporating optional scaffolds, such as brief mini lessons on things like using sensory details, capturing feeling instead of words in dialogue, starting *in medias res* (in the middle of the narrative), or replacing adverbs with metaphors, may help those with less writing experience engage more fully, and may help those with more writing experience add an additional layer to their story. Similarly, allowing for varied forms of

expression such as poetry, prose, or dialogue can open space for veterans to find the medium most resonant with their voice and story.

Limitations and Future Research

In the sections that follow, I outline key limitations to this study. Since the methods of the study were identical from article to article, this section synthesizes them under the same headings. I also offer a discussion of how these limitations inform new directions for future research under each heading.

Small Sample & High Attrition

One large limitation inherent in this study was the final sample after attrition was small ($n=13$), severely limiting statistical power. Attrition was a major factor with 37.5% of the participants who agreed to the study parameters in the consent meeting dropping out by the end of the second workshop. When working with military veterans in this type of setting it is important to consider that veterans are shown to have “distressingly high dropout rates . . . (mean 42%, range 36–68%)” when engaging with therapeutic outpatient care (Amsalem & Morgan, 2021). Ultimately, with only six participants in the workshop and seven in the control group, the study’s findings cannot be generalized broadly. Future studies should identify ways to adopt larger and more diverse samples. I propose hosting multiple concurrent workshops, perhaps in different cities, to allow for a more robust research design with adequate power and the potential for subgroup analysis. (e.g. by gender, race, service era, etc.).

Short Measurement Duration

Another limitation of the study was the duration that the participants were tracked (12 weeks) was relatively short. While participants received a baseline score on the SWLS and WBI prior to the workshop, and while the research design gathered data one month after participation,

there were no measurements gathered in anticipation of the workshop and there were no long-term follow-up measurements. Due to this, it remains unclear whether the alignment of the baseline measurements across the treatment and control group was incidental and if the measured changes in life satisfaction endure. Creating a longitudinal study design would also provide some insight into whether the positive shift in life satisfaction observed in this study endures, and whether new social connections formed in the workshop remain active or inspire other social connections. Follow-ups of 6 to 12 months post-intervention could support these findings. Additionally, including eudaimonic measures such as Ryff's Purpose in Life Scale (Ryff, 1989) or the Meaning in Life Questionnaire (Steger et al., 2006) could test whether this type of narrative writing fosters deeper meaning and growth beyond momentary happiness or satisfaction.

Isolation of Effects: Writing vs. Community Connection

One other limitation was that the design of the study did not allow for the isolation of writing and community connection effects. The theoretical framework used (Flower & Hayes, 1981) proposes the "task environment" impacts the writing process and the generation of new knowledge—in this case, new ways of identifying with old memories. This research found that the tool, a prompted social writing process, facilitated social connection and quickly bonded the participants through cultural recognition in the shared narratives. When it comes to experience and impact on well-being, I contend the veteran writing workshop is likely greater than the sum of its parts (i.e. writing or community connection). However more evidence is needed to make any definitive claim. Future research should include additional groups to compare (e.g. a veteran social group without writing tasks, an independent veteran writing group etc.), further isolating the primary factor supporting the positive life satisfaction effects.

Facilitator Effects

Finally, facilitator effects were not measured or explicitly considered in this study. Anecdotally, I have observed that some facilitators have the capacity to help foster deeper reflection and group cohesion, while others led sessions that felt more didactic or rushed. In fact, the first model of this workshop was structured to be more didactic, but this method was not found to be effective at retaining veteran participants – they didn't want to learn from some university professor, they wanted support in telling their story. Obviously, these variations could influence both the depth of narrative work, and the degree of social support participants experience within the workshop space, ultimately impacting their well-being. To address facilitator effects in future research, especially while running multiple concurrent workshops, researchers could include a guidebook or standard operating procedure (SOP) to use in training facilitators.

An SOP might include an outline of the workshop model, methods, and expectations to support the workshop facilitator in familiarizing themselves with the flow of the workshop. This could include providing a graphic of the model, highlighting each of the steps and average time spent on each activity; providing example session scripts that include language for introducing prompts, guidelines for sharing, and transitional cues for moving the session along. It could also include audio or video of example workshops with experienced facilitators. Something as simple as a list of creative writing “tips and tricks” or effective prompts in a well curated order can support organic connections between participant stories and would be a relatively simple resource to create. Implementing such a protocol would help provide consistency and isolate the effects of the writing intervention itself, rather than the personal style of individual facilitators, thereby strengthening the validity of future studies.

Cognitive Process Theory of Writing vs Social Cognitive Theory

The dissertation explicitly grounds the veteran writing workshop in Flower and Hayes' Cognitive Process Theory of Writing, which treats writing as an individual cognitive-metacognitive activity. In this view the benefits of the program are attributed to inner processes (planning, goal-setting, idea generation) stimulated by writing prompts. But this singular cognitive focus overlooks the fact that the workshop was a community-based group activity. Qualitative findings in the dissertation itself underscore this gap: participants spoke of sharing experiences, feeling safe and understood, and building connections. CPTW alone cannot explain how these social dynamics affect well-being. By attributing changes only to individual writing processes, the study risks ignoring how peer feedback, mutual support, and belonging in the veteran community may have driven improvements in life satisfaction. In short, the cognitive model accounts for how veterans wrote, but not how the social workshop context helped them heal and grow. Using a more socially situated theory would illuminate those unexamined mechanisms.

For instance, Bandura's Social Cognitive Theory highlights self-efficacy and observational learning: veterans who witnessed peers articulating struggles—and who were themselves applauded—would have gained confidence through vicarious success and encouragement. Self-efficacy, which Bandura defines as belief in one's capabilities, grows via mastery experiences and vicarious experiences—exactly what occurs when one veteran hears another succeed in expressing trauma, thereby boosting each other's motivation.

Conclusion

Despite the limitations, this study provides a strong foundation for future research to build from in the areas of veteran writing programs and well-being. It demonstrates the

feasibility of combining quantitative measures of life satisfaction and well-being domains with qualitative insights from participant narratives, highlighting a mixed-methods approach that future studies can refine and expand. Larger samples, longitudinal tracking, and comparative analyses across different veteran populations would allow for more robust statistical power and generalizability. Additionally, exploring how writing interventions intersect with broader psychosocial supports—such as peer networks, clinical services, or academic programs—could help clarify the unique and complementary contributions of writing to veterans’ well-being. In this way, this study both underscores the promise of expressive writing as a tool for veteran support and calls for more comprehensive research to deepen our understanding of its impact.

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APPENDIX

Appendix A: WBI Measures: Construct, Sample Items, and Response Format

| Construct | Section | Sample Items | Response Format |
|------------------|-------------------------------------|--|---|
| Vocation | Status – Paid and Unpaid Work (A) | What is your current employment status? Do you do any of the following types of unpaid work? | <i>Polytomous items</i> Paid work: 0 = Not working & not looking; 1 = Not working but looking; 2 = Working for pay Unpaid work: 0 = None; 1 = Care of children (<18); 2 = Care of adult; 3 = Homemaker (no care duties); 4 = Volunteer work |
| | Work Functioning (B) | Over the last 3 months, how often: You completed your work when expected. The quality of your work was excellent. | <i>5-point Likert scale</i> (1 = Never; 5 = Most or all of the time) |
| | Work Satisfaction (C) | Over the last 3 months, how satisfied have you been with: Your pay and benefits. How much your contributions are valued. | <i>5-point Likert scale</i> (1 = Very dissatisfied; 5 = Very satisfied) |
| | Status – Education and Training (D) | Are you currently pursuing additional education or vocational training? | <i>Polytomous items</i> 0 = No; 1 = Yes, part-time (<12 credits); 2 = Yes, full-time (≥12 credits) |
| | Educational Functioning (E) | Over the last 3 months, how often: You completed coursework/training activities. You contributed to a positive learning environment. | <i>5-point Likert scale</i> (1 = Never; 5 = Most or all of the time) |
| | Educational Satisfaction (F) | Over the last 3 months, how satisfied have you been with: Advancement toward career goals. Your learning environment. | <i>5-point Likert scale</i> (1 = Very dissatisfied; 5 = Very satisfied) |
| Finances | Status (G) | Does your household have ≥3 months of income saved? Are you able to pay for necessary expenses? | <i>Dichotomous (G1–G4, G6):</i> 0 = No; 1 = Yes <i>Polytomous (G5):</i> 0 = No; 1 = Yes; 9 = Not applicable |
| | Functioning (H) | Over the last 3 months, how often have you: Compared | <i>5-point Likert scale</i> (1 = Never; 5 = Most or all of the time) |

| | | | |
|-----------------------------|----------------------------------|---|---|
| | | prices when shopping. Had unpaid credit card debt. | |
| Health | Satisfaction (I) | Over the last 3 months, how satisfied have you been with: Ability to pay for necessities. The amount of savings you have. | <i>5-point Likert scale</i> (1 = Very dissatisfied; 5 = Very satisfied) |
| | Status (J) | Do you have an ongoing physical or mental/emotional health condition, illness, or disability? | <i>Dichotomous items</i> (0 = No; 1 = Yes) |
| | Functioning (K) | Over the last 3 months, how often have you: Eaten a healthy diet. Gotten recommended physical activity. | <i>5-point Likert scale</i> (1 = Never; 5 = Most or all of the time) |
| | Satisfaction (L) | Over the last 3 months, how satisfied have you been with: Your emotional/mental health. Your health care. | <i>5-point Likert scale</i> (1 = Very dissatisfied; 5 = Very satisfied) |
| Social Relationships | Intimate Relationship Status (M) | What is your current marital status? | <i>Polytomous items</i> 1 = Never married; 2 = Married (first); 3 = Married (second/later); 4 = Separated; 5 = Divorced; 6 = Widowed |
| | Intimate Functioning (N) | Over the last 3 months, how often have you: Provided emotional support to your partner. Initiated enjoyable activities together. | <i>5-point Likert scale</i> (1 = Never; 5 = Most or all of the time) |
| | Intimate Satisfaction (O) | Over the last 3 months, how satisfied have you been with your partner's contribution to: Emotional closeness. Security/trust. | <i>5-point Likert scale</i> (1 = Very dissatisfied; 5 = Very satisfied) |
| | Parental Status (P) | Are you a parent or in a parenting role in the past 3 months? | <i>Dichotomous items</i> (0 = No; 1 = Yes) |
| | Parental Functioning (Q) | Over the last 3 months, how often have you: Provided a healthy environment for your children. Managed your child(ren)'s challenges effectively. | <i>5-point Likert scale</i> (1 = Never; 5 = Most or all of the time) |

| | | |
|---------------------------------|---|---|
| Parental Satisfaction (R) | Over the last 3 months, how satisfied have you been with: Your closeness with your child(ren). The enjoyment you get from parenting. | <i>5-point Likert scale</i> (1 = Very dissatisfied; 5 = Very satisfied) |
| Broader Social Involvement (S) | Over the last 3 months, have you regularly: Participated in a religious/spiritual community. Volunteered for a local group. | <i>Dichotomous items</i> (0 = No; 1 = Yes) |
| Broader Social Functioning (T) | Over the last 3 months, how often have you: Gotten along with community members. Supported/helped relatives outside household. | <i>5-point Likert scale</i> (1 = Never; 5 = Most or all of the time) |
| Broader Social Satisfaction (U) | Over the last 3 months, how satisfied have you been with: Your sense of belonging in your community. Relationships with extended relatives. | <i>5-point Likert scale</i> (1 = Very dissatisfied; 5 = Very satisfied) |

Note. Constructs are grouped by domain (Vocation, Finances, Health, Social Relationships). Response formats vary across dichotomous, polytomous, and Likert-type items.

Appendix B: WBI Measures: Domain and Subscale Definitions

| Domain | Subscale | Definition |
|-----------------------------|-----------------------------------|--|
| Vocation | Status | Labor force participation, paid employment, full vs. part-time employment, and full-time involvement in unpaid vocations (schooling/training, volunteer work, caregiving/homemaking). |
| | Work Functioning | Reliability and quality of work; effective management of interpersonal relationships in work settings. |
| | Educational Functioning | Reliability and quality of work; effective management of interpersonal relationships in educational or training settings. |
| | Paid and Unpaid Work Satisfaction | Satisfaction with the nature of work, recognition of contributions, ability to apply skills and knowledge, and ability to advance vocational goals. For paid employment: also satisfaction with pay, benefits, and work environment. |
| | Educational Satisfaction | Satisfaction with educational/training experience, advancement of career goals, and learning environment. |
| Finances | Status | Current financial stability (e.g., maintaining housing, managing debt, affording expenses) and financial preparedness (e.g., emergency savings, retirement savings, insurance coverage). |
| | Functioning | Financial behavior related to cash management (budgeting), credit management (paying bills on time), and savings (contributing to savings account). |
| | Satisfaction | Satisfaction with ability to afford essential and non-essential expenses, as well as savings and debt accumulation. |
| Health | Status | Presence of chronic physical or mental health conditions, illnesses, or disabilities. |
| | Functioning | Engagement in health-promoting behaviors, risky health behaviors, and self-care related to mental and physical wellness. |
| | Satisfaction | Satisfaction with physical health, mental health, and health care. |
| Social Relationships | Status (all subdomains) | Involvement in intimate relationships, parenting, and the broader community. |
| | Intimate Relationship Functioning | Supportive and collaborative behaviors (e.g., emotional and practical support, willingness to engage in sexual/physical closeness). |

| Domain | Subscale | Definition |
|--------|------------------------------------|---|
| | Parental Functioning | Supportive and effective parenting strategies (e.g., meeting children's basic needs, involvement in children's activities). |
| | Broader Social Functioning | Behaviors that support positive relationships with friends, extended family, and community (e.g., getting along with others, providing help/support). |
| | Intimate Relationship Satisfaction | Satisfaction with partner's contributions in terms of support and collaboration (e.g., emotional support, intimacy). |
| | Parental Satisfaction | Satisfaction with relationship with children, parenting experience, and children's well-being. |
| | Broader Social Satisfaction | Satisfaction and sense of belonging in relationships with friends, extended family, and community. |

Note. Constructs are organized by domain and subdomain, with definitions provided for status, functioning, and satisfaction dimensions.

Appendix C: WBI Measures – Full Modified Questionnaire

WBI & SWLS - CSU Veteran Writing Research

Thank you for your consent in completing the following survey. This inventory contains questions regarding your experiences in the key life domains of vocation (work and education), health, and social relationships. **Please follow the instructions that are provided at the beginning of each section and select the most appropriate response. Please be open and honest in your responses. There are no right or wrong answers, and this inventory is both anonymous and confidential. Additionally, you may choose to skip any (*non-directional*) question or stop the questionnaire at any time with no penalty.**

* Indicates required question

Please enter your assigned 5-digit participant ID number. *

Section 0B: Satisfaction Questions (SWLS)

Instructions: Below are five statements that you may agree or disagree with. Using the 1 - 7 scale below, indicate your agreement with each item by placing the appropriate number on the line preceding that item. Please be open and honest in your responding.

In most ways my life is close to my ideal.

Mark only one oval.

- 7 Strongly agree
- 6 Agree
- 5 Slightly Agree
- 4 Neither Agree nor Disagree
- 3 Slightly Disagree
- 2 Disagree
- 1 Strongly Disagree

The conditions of my life are excellent.

Mark only one oval.

- 7 Strongly agree
- 6 Agree
- 5 Slightly Agree
- 4 Neither Agree nor Disagree
- 3 Slightly Disagree
- 2 Disagree
- 1 Strongly Disagree
- 0 Prefer Not to Answer

I am satisfied with my life.

Mark only one oval.

- 7 Strongly agree
- 6 Agree
- 5 Slightly Agree
- 4 Neither Agree nor Disagree
- 3 Slightly Disagree
- 2 Disagree
- 1 Strongly Disagree

So far I have gotten the important things I want in life.

Mark only one oval.

- 7 Strongly agree
- 6 Agree
- 5 Slightly Agree
- 4 Neither Agree nor Disagree
- 3 Slightly Disagree
- 2 Disagree
- 1 Strongly Disagree

If I could live my life over, I would change almost nothing.

Mark only one oval.

- 7 Strongly agree
- 6 Agree
- 5 Slightly Agree
- 4 Neither Agree nor Disagree
- 3 Slightly Disagree
- 2 Disagree
- 1 Strongly Disagree

SECTION 1: VOCATION (WORK AND EDUCATION)

Please answer the next questions with respect to the **PRIMARY WORK** you have done over the last **MONTH**.

For fulltime homemakers and/or unpaid caregivers, meal preparation, household maintenance, and/or child-rearing may be considered your work. For volunteers without paid employment, volunteer work is considered your work.

Section 1A

In this section, you will be asked about your work experiences.

A1. What is your current employment status? *

Mark only one oval.

- Working for pay *Skip to question 8*
- Not working for pay but actively looking for paid work *Skip to question 9*
- Not working for pay and not looking for paid work *Skip to question 9*

A2. In a typical week how many hours do you work for pay?

Skip to question 9

A8. Do you do any of the following types of unpaid work? Mark all that apply. *

Check all that apply.

- I do not do any of this unpaid work
- Full-time care of children under the age of 18
- Full-time care of an adult (for example, spouse/parent/disabled child 18 or over) Full-time homemaker without full-time child or elder care responsibilities

A8(1/2). Do you do any unpaid volunteer work? *

Mark only one oval.

- Yes *Skip to question 11*
- No *Skip to question 12*

A11. In a typical week, how many hours of unpaid volunteer work do you do?

Directional Question - Please Choose Correctly

Answer YES below if: *

You're currently employed (part or full-time). Or

You work as a full-time caregiver for a dependent.

Mark only one oval.

- Yes *Skip to question 13*
- No - I am not employed *Skip to question 23*

Section 1B - Working, Volunteering, or Caregiving/Homemaking

Please answer the next questions with respect to the **PRIMARY WORK** you have done over the last **MONTH**. For fulltime homemakers and/or unpaid caregivers, meal preparation, household maintenance, and/or child-rearing may be considered your work. For volunteers without paid employment, volunteer work is considered your work.

B1: Over the past **MONTH**, please indicate how often. . .

You completed your work when expected. (for example, attending work regularly, completing tasks on time)

Mark only one oval.

- 1 - Never
- 2 - Rarely

- 3 - Sometimes
- 4 - Often
- 5 - Most or All of the Time

B2: Over the past **MONTH**, please indicate how often. . .

You went above and beyond in your work. (for example, completing required tasks ahead of schedule, taking on extra responsibilities)

Mark only one oval.

- 1 - Never
- 2 - Rarely
- 3 - Sometimes
- 4 - Often
- 5 - Most or All of the Time

B3: Over the past **MONTH**, please indicate how often. . .

You maintained positive relationships with others in your work setting. (for example, avoiding conflict when possible, being patient with coworkers)

Mark only one oval.

- 1 - Never
- 2 - Rarely
- 3 - Sometimes
- 4 - Often
- 5 - Most or All of the Time

B4: Over the past **MONTH**, please indicate how often. . .

The quality of your work was excellent.

Mark only one oval.

- 1 - Never
- 2 - Rarely
- 3 - Sometimes
- 4 - Often
- 5 - Most or All of the Time

Section 1C - Working, Volunteering, Caregiving/Homemaking

C1: Over the last **MONTH**, how satisfied have you been with:
Your Pay and Benefits

Mark only one oval.

- 1 - Very dissatisfied
- 2 - Somewhat Dissatisfied
- 3 - Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied
- 4 - Somewhat Satisfied
- 5 - Very Satisfied

C2: Over the last **MONTH**, how satisfied have you been with:

Your Work Environment (for example, the people you work with and setting you are in)

Mark only one oval.

- 1 - Very Dissatisfied
- 2 - Somewhat Dissatisfied
- 3 - Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied
- 4 - Somewhat Satisfied
- 5 - Very Satisfied

C3: Over the last **MONTH**, how satisfied have you been with:
The kind of work you do
(including if you work for pay, volunteer, or are a fulltime homemaker and/or unpaid caregiver)

Mark only one oval.

- 1 - Very Dissatisfied
- 2 - Somewhat Dissatisfied
- 3 - Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied
- 4 - Somewhat Satisfied
- 5 - Very Satisfied

C4: Over the last **MONTH**, how satisfied have you been with:
How much your work contributions are valued
(including if you work for pay, volunteer, or are a fulltime homemaker and/or unpaid caregiver)

Mark only one oval.

- 1 - Very Dissatisfied
- 2 - Somewhat Dissatisfied
- 3 - Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied
- 4 - Somewhat Satisfied
- 5 - Very Satisfied

C5: Over the last **MONTH**, how satisfied have you been with:
Your ability to advance your vocational goals in your current role

Mark only one oval.

- 1 - Very Dissatisfied
- 2 - Somewhat Dissatisfied
- 3 - Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied
- 4 - Somewhat Satisfied
- 5 - Very Satisfied

C6: Over the last **MONTH**, how satisfied have you been with:
Your ability to apply your skills and knowledge to your work

Mark only one oval.

- 1 - Very Dissatisfied
- 2 - Somewhat Dissatisfied
- 3 - Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied
- 4 - Somewhat Satisfied
- 5 - Very Satisfied

Section 1D - Educational Training and Experience

In this next section, you will be asked about your educational and training experiences.

D1. Are you currently pursuing additional education or attending a trade or technical/vocational school (excluding on-the-job-training)?

Mark only one oval.

- Yes, Full-time (12 or more credits of undergrad coursework or 9 or more graduate credits)
Skip to question 24
- Yes, Part-time (Less than 12 credits of undergrad or 9 graduate credits) *Skip to question 24*
- No *Skip to section 13 (Section 2: Finances)*

Indicated Student

E1. Over the last **MONTH** of your education or training, please indicate how often:
You completed all required coursework/training activities?

Mark only one oval.

- 1 - Never
- 2 - Rarely
- 3 - Sometimes
- 4 - Often
- 5 - Most or all of the Time

E2. Over the last **MONTH** of your education or training, please indicate how often:
You went above and beyond in your educational activities. (for example, completing assignments ahead of schedule, participating in educational activities outside of class)

Mark only one oval.

- 1 - Never
- 2 - Rarely
- 3 - Sometimes
- 4 - Often
- 5 - Most or all of the Time

E3. Over the last **MONTH** of your education or training, please indicate how often:
You did your part to create a positive learning environment. (for example, contributing to discussions, showing appreciation for others' viewpoints)

Mark only one oval.

- 1 - Never

- 2 - Rarely
- 3 - Sometimes
- 4 - Often
- 5 - Most or all of the Time

E4. Over the last **MONTH** of your education or training, please indicate how often:
The quality of your coursework/training activities was excellent

Mark only one oval.

- 1 - Never
- 2 - Rarely
- 3 - Sometimes
- 4 - Often
- 5 - Most or all of the Time

Section 1F - Indicated Student

Over the last MONTH of your education or training, how satisfied have you been with:

F1: Over the last **MONTH**, how satisfied have you been with:
The quality of your education or training experience

Mark only one oval.

- 1 - Very Dissatisfied
- 2 - Somewhat Dissatisfied
- 3 - Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied
- 4 - Somewhat Satisfied
- 5 - Very Satisfied

F2: Over the last **MONTH**, how satisfied have you been with:
The extent to which your education or training is advancing your career goals

Mark only one oval.

- 1 - Very Dissatisfied
- 2 - Somewhat Dissatisfied
- 3 - Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied
- 4 - Somewhat Satisfied
- 5 - Very Satisfied

F3: Over the last **MONTH**, how satisfied have you been with:
Your learning environment. (for example, teachers and students, and your educational setting)

Mark only one oval.

- 1 - Very Dissatisfied
- 2 - Somewhat Dissatisfied

- 3 - Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied
 4 - Somewhat Satisfied
 5 - Very Satisfied

Section 2: Finances

In the next section we ask about your financial circumstances. Please remember that all information you provide is completely confidential and will be used to better understand your financial well-being. Also, if you are not sure how to answer some of these questions, please provide your best guess.

In this set of questions, your **household refers to you, other earners who share the majority of expenses, and those who depend on this income** (for example, children or elders).

Section 2G:

Financial Well-being

G1. Are you able to pay for all necessary expenses each month, such as mortgage/rent, debt payments, and groceries?

Mark only one oval.

Yes No

G2. Does your household have at least 3 months of your typical income set aside in case of an unexpected financial event?

Mark only one oval.

Yes No

G3. Does your household have the insurance coverage you and/or your family would need if an unexpected financial event were to occur (for example, disability insurance, property insurance, and/ or life insurance)?

Mark only one oval.

Yes No

G4. Has your household begun to set aside money for retirement?

Mark only one oval.

Yes No

G5. Is your household more than one month behind on your debt payments (for example, mortgage or credit card)?

Mark only one oval.

Yes No

G6. Are you currently concerned that you will lose your housing and be unable to find stable alternative housing?

Mark only one oval.

Yes No

Section 2H

H1. Over the last **MONTH**, how often have you:
Followed a budget?

Mark only one oval.

- 1 - Never
- 2 - Rarely
- 3 - Sometimes
- 4 - Often
- 5 - Most or All of the Time

H2. Over the last **MONTH**, how often have you:
Compared Prices when purchasing a product or service

Mark only one oval.

- 1 - Never
- 2 - Rarely
- 3 - Sometimes
- 4 - Often
- 5 - Most or All of the Time

H3. Over the last **MONTH**, how often have you:
Kept a written or electronic record of your spending

Mark only one oval.

- 1 - Never
- 2 - Rarely
- 3 - Sometimes
- 4 - Often
- 5 - Most or All of the Time

H4. Over the last **MONTH**, how often have you:
Been late in paying a bill

Mark only one oval.

- 1 - Never
- 2 - Rarely
- 3 - Sometimes
- 4 - Often
- 5 - Most or All of the Time

H5. Over the last **MONTH**, how often have you:
Had credit card debt that you did not pay off each month

Mark only one oval.

- 1 - Never

- 2 - Rarely
- 3 - Sometimes
- 4 - Often
- 5 - Most or All of the Time

H6. Over the last **MONTH**, how often have you:
Spent more than you could afford on clothing, entertainment, and other extras

Mark only one oval.

- 1 - Never
- 2 - Rarely
- 3 - Sometimes
- 4 - Often
- 5 - Most or All of the Time

H7. Over the last **MONTH**, how often have you:
Contributed part of each paycheck (or other income) to a retirement account such as a 401k or IRA

Mark only one oval.

- 1 - Never
- 2 - Rarely
- 3 - Sometimes
- 4 - Often
- 5 - Most or All of the Time

H8. Over the last **MONTH**, how often have you:
Contributed part of each paycheck (or other income) to a personal savings account

Mark only one oval.

- 1 - Never
- 2 - Rarely
- 3 - Sometimes
- 4 - Often
- 5 - Most or All of the Time

Section 2I:

I1: Over the last **MONTH**, how satisfied have you been with:
Your ability to pay for necessities

Mark only one oval.

- 1 - Very dissatisfied
- 2 - Somewhat dissatisfied
- 3 - Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied
- 4 - Somewhat satisfied 5 - Very satisfied

I2: Over the last **MONTH**, how satisfied have you been with:
Your ability to afford extras (vacation, dinner out, etc.)

Mark only one oval.

- 1 - Very dissatisfied
 2 - Somewhat dissatisfied
 3 - Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied
 4 - Somewhat satisfied 5- Very satisfied

I3: Over the last **MONTH**, how satisfied have you been with:
The amount of savings you have

Mark only one oval.

- 1 - Very dissatisfied
 2 - Somewhat dissatisfied
 3 - Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied
 4 - Somewhat satisfied 5- Very satisfied

I1: Over the last **MONTH**, how satisfied have you been with:
The amount of debt you have

Mark only one oval.

- 1 - Very dissatisfied
 2 - Somewhat dissatisfied
 3 - Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied
 4 - Somewhat satisfied 5- Very satisfied

Section 3 - Current Health

In this section, you will be asked about your current physical and emotional/mental health.

J4. Do you have healthcare coverage (for example, employer-provided health insurance, *
Medicaid)?

Mark only one oval.

- Yes No

J1. Do you have an ongoing physical health condition, illness, or disability (for example, high *
blood pressure, pain)?

Mark only one oval.

- Yes No

J2. Do you have an ongoing mental/emotional health condition, illness or disability (for *
example, depression, anxiety, PTSD, etc.)

Mark only one oval.

Yes No

Section 3K

In this next section, you will be asked about your current physical and emotional/mental health.

K1. Over the past **MONTH**, how often have you
Eaten a generally healthy diet. (for example, low fat, limited sugar, adequate servings of fruits and vegetables)
Mark only one oval.

- 1 - Never
- 2 - Rarely
- 3 - Sometimes
- 4 - Often
- 5 - Most or all of the time

K2. Over the past **MONTH**, how often have you
Gotten at least 2 hours and 30 minutes of moderate physical activity OR 1 hour and 15 minutes of vigorous activity
each week
Mark only one oval.

- 1 - Never
- 2 - Rarely
- 3 - Sometimes
- 4 - Often
- 5 - Most or All of the time

K3. Over the past **MONTH**, how often have you
Done muscle strengthening exercises at least two days per week

Mark only one oval.

- 1 - Never
- 2 - Rarely
- 3 - Sometimes
- 4 - Often
- 5 - Most or All of the time

K4. Over the past **MONTH**, how often have you
Gotten quality sleep

Mark only one oval.

- 1 - Never
- 2 - Rarely
- 3 - Sometimes
- 4 - Often
- 5 - Most or All of the time

K5. Over the past **MONTH**, how often have you
Had sexual intercourse without a condom with more than one person or with a person you did not know
Mark only one oval.

- 1 - Never
- 2 - Rarely
- 3 - Sometimes
- 4 - Often
- 5 - Most or All of the time

K6. Over the past **MONTH**, how often have you
Used tobacco and/or nicotine products. (for example, cigarettes, cigars, vape)

Mark only one oval.

- 1 - Never
- 2 - Rarely
- 3 - Sometimes
- 4 - Often
- 5 - Most or All of the time

K7. Over the past **MONTH**, how often have you
Used alcohol in a way that put your health at risk. (for example, blacking out, driving drunk)

Mark only one oval.

- 1 - Never
- 2 - Rarely
- 3 - Sometimes
- 4 - Often
- 5 - Most or All of the time

K8. Over the past **MONTH**, how often have you
Used drugs (including prescription drugs) in a way that put your health at risk. (for example, losing memory or consciousness, driving under the influence)

Mark only one oval.

- 1 - Never
- 2 - Rarely
- 3 - Sometimes
- 4 - Often
- 5 - Most or All of the time

K9. Over the past **MONTH**, how often have you
Completed recommended medical care. (for example, physical exams)

Mark only one oval.

- 1 - Never

- 2 - Rarely
- 3 - Sometimes
- 4 - Often
- 5 - Most or All of the time

K10. Over the past **MONTH**, how often have you
Maintained personal cleanliness. (for example, personal care, household chores)

Mark only one oval.

- 1 - Never
- 2 - Rarely
- 3 - Sometimes
- 4 - Often
- 5 - Most or All of the time

K11. Over the past **MONTH**, how often have you
Spent time doing things that you enjoy

Mark only one oval.

- 1 - Never
- 2 - Rarely
- 3 - Sometimes
- 4 - Often
- 5 - Most or All of the time

K12. Over the past **MONTH**, how often have you
Spent time doing things that you find personally meaningful

Mark only one oval.

- 1 - Never
- 2 - Rarely
- 3 - Sometimes
- 4 - Often
- 5 - Most or All of the time

Section 3L - Physical & Mental Health

L1. Over the last **MONTH** how satisfied have you been with:
Your physical health

Mark only one oval.

- 1 - Very Dissatisfied
- 2 - Somewhat Dissatisfied
- 3 - Neither Satisfied nor Dissatisfied
- 4 - Somewhat Satisfied
- 5 - Very Satisfied

L2. Over the last **MONTH** how satisfied have you been with:
Your emotional/mental health

Mark only one oval.

- 1 - Very Dissatisfied
- 2 - Somewhat Dissatisfied
- 3 - Neither Satisfied nor Dissatisfied
- 4 - Somewhat Satisfied
- 5 - Very Satisfied

L3. Over the last **MONTH** how satisfied have you been with:
Your health care

Mark only one oval.

- 1 - Very Dissatisfied
- 2 - Somewhat Dissatisfied
- 3 - Neither Satisfied nor Dissatisfied
- 4 - Somewhat Satisfied
- 5 - Very Satisfied

Section 4: Social & Intimate Relationships

In this next section, you will be asked about your platonic and intimate relationship involvement.

M1. What is your current marital status?

Mark only one oval.

Never married
Married - first and only marriage Married - second or later marriage Separated
Divorced Widowed
Other:

M2. Are you currently in a romantic relationship? *

Mark only one oval.

Currently in a relationship and living as a couple *Skip to question 69* Currently in a relationship but not living as a couple *Skip to question 69* Not currently in a relationship *Skip to question 81*

Section 4N: Romantic Relationships

In this next section, you will be asked about your romantic relationship involvement.

N1. Over the last **MONTH** how often have you done the following in your romantic relationship:
Provided your significant other with the emotional support they sought.

Mark only one oval.

- 1 - Never
- 2 - Rarely
- 3 - Sometimes
- 4 - Often
- 5 - Most or All of the Time

N2. Over the last **MONTH** how often have you done the following in your romantic relationship:
Shared your intimate thoughts and feelings.

Mark only one oval.

- 1 - Never
- 2 - Rarely
- 3 - Sometimes
- 4 - Often
- 5 - Most or All of the Time

N3. Over the last **MONTH** how often have you done the following in your romantic relationship:
Done your fair share of day-to-day tasks. (for example, grocery shopping, errands, planning activities)

Mark only one oval.

- 1 - Never
- 2 - Rarely
- 3 - Sometimes
- 4 - Often
- 5 - Most or All of the Time

N4. Over the last **MONTH** how often have you done the following in your romantic relationship:
Initiated leisure time activities that both you and your significant other enjoy.

Mark only one oval.

- 1 - Never
- 2 - Rarely
- 3 - Sometimes
- 4 - Often
- 5 - Most or All of the Time

N5. Over the last **MONTH** how often have you done the following in your romantic relationship:
Made effort to work through disagreements respectfully.

Mark only one oval.

- 1 - Never
- 2 - Rarely

- 3 - Sometimes
- 4 - Often
- 5 - Most or All of the Time

N6. Over the last **MONTH** how often have you done the following in your romantic relationship:
Expressed interest and/or willingness to engage in regular sexual or physical intimacy.

Mark only one oval.

- 1 - Never
- 2 - Rarely
- 3 - Sometimes
- 4 - Often
- 5 - Most or All of the Time

Section 40: Romantic Relationship

Everybody has aspects of their relationship that make them more or less happy. Over the last **MONTH**, how satisfied have you been with your significant other's contribution to the following aspects of your romantic relationship?

O1. Over the last **MONTH**, how satisfied have you been with your significant other's contribution to the following aspects of your romantic relationship:

Emotional closeness (for example, sharing personal thoughts and feelings)

Mark only one oval.

- 1 - Very Dissatisfied
- 2 - Somewhat Dissatisfied
- 3 - Neither Satisfied nor Dissatisfied
- 4 - Somewhat Satisfied
- 5 - Very Satisfied

O2. Over the last **MONTH**, how satisfied have you been with your significant other's contribution to the following aspects of your romantic relationship:

Companionship (for example, doing enjoyable activities together)

Mark only one oval.

- 1 - Very Dissatisfied
- 2 - Somewhat Dissatisfied
- 3 - Neither Satisfied nor Dissatisfied
- 4 - Somewhat Satisfied
- 5 - Very Satisfied

O3. Over the last **MONTH**, how satisfied have you been with your significant other's contribution to the following aspects of your romantic relationship:

Sexual and physical intimacy (for example, holding hands or having sex)

Mark only one oval.

- 1 - Very Dissatisfied
- 2 - Somewhat Dissatisfied
- 3 - Neither Satisfied nor Dissatisfied
- 4 - Somewhat Satisfied
- 5 - Very Satisfied

O4. Over the last **MONTH**, how satisfied have you been with your significant other's contribution to the following aspects of your romantic relationship:
Intellectual connection (for example, having many things to talk about)

Mark only one oval.

- 1 - Very Dissatisfied
- 2 - Somewhat Dissatisfied
- 3 - Neither Satisfied nor Dissatisfied
- 4 - Somewhat Satisfied
- 5 - Very Satisfied

O5. Over the last **MONTH**, how satisfied have you been with your significant other's contribution to the following aspects of your romantic relationship:
Security (for example, being able to trust and depend on partner)

Mark only one oval.

- 1 - Very Dissatisfied
- 2 - Somewhat Dissatisfied
- 3 - Neither Satisfied nor Dissatisfied
- 4 - Somewhat Satisfied
- 5 - Very Satisfied

O6. Over the last **MONTH**, how satisfied have you been with your significant other's contribution to the following aspects of your romantic relationship:
Division of day-to-day tasks (for example, your partner's contribution to chores and planning activities)

Mark only one oval.

- 1 - Very Dissatisfied
- 2 - Somewhat Dissatisfied
- 3 - Neither Satisfied nor Dissatisfied
- 4 - Somewhat Satisfied
- 5 - Very Satisfied

Section 4P: Parenting Experiences

In this next section, you will be asked about your parenting experiences

P2. Do you have children who are younger than 18?

Mark only one oval.

- Yes No

P1. Are you a parent or have you served in a parenting role during the past month?

Mark only one oval.

- Yes *Skip to question 83*
 No *Skip to question 91*

4Q - Indicated Children

Please answer the following questions with regard to children under 18 for whom you have parenting responsibilities.

Q1. All parents have strengths and weaknesses. Over the last **MONTH**, how often have you:
Provided a healthy environment for your child(ren). (for example, preparing healthy meals, caring for their health, keeping them safe)

Mark only one oval.

- 1 - Never
 2 - Rarely
 3 - Sometimes
 4 - Often
 5 - Most or All of the Time

Q2. All parents have strengths and weaknesses. Over the last **MONTH**, how often have you:
Been a good example for your child(ren). (for example, being respectful during disagreements with others, taking good care of your own health)

Mark only one oval.

- 1 - Never
 2 - Rarely
 3 - Sometimes
 4 - Often
 5 - Most or All of the Time

Q3. All parents have strengths and weaknesses. Over the last **MONTH**, how often have you:
Been actively involved in your child(ren)'s activities. (for example, regularly attending sporting and school events, giving your full attention during time together)

Mark only one oval.

- 1 - Never
 2 - Rarely
 3 - Sometimes
 4 - Often
 5 - Most or All of the Time

Q4. All parents have strengths and weaknesses. Over the last **MONTH**, how often have you:
Met your child(ren)'s needs for physical affection and emotional support. (for example, giving them hugs, being sympathetic to their problems)

Mark only one oval.

- 1 – Never
- 2 – Rarely
- 3 – Sometimes
- 4 – Often
- 5 - Most or All of the Time

Q5. All parents have strengths and weaknesses. Over the last **MONTH**, how often have you:
Been able to successfully manage your child(ren)'s unique challenges. (for example, effectively disciplining children)

Mark only one oval.

- 1 – Never
- 2 – Rarely
- 3 – Sometimes
- 4 – Often
- 5 - Most or All of the Time

4R - Parenting Satisfaction

Parenting can be both rewarding and challenging. How satisfied have you been with the following aspects of your parenting experiences over the last **MONTH**:

R1. Parenting can be both rewarding and challenging. How satisfied have you been with the following aspects of your parenting experiences over the last **MONTH**:

How close you are with your child(ren).

Mark only one oval.

- 1 - Very Dissatisfied
- 2 – Somewhat Dissatisfied
- 3 – Neither Satisfied nor Dissatisfied
- 4 – Somewhat Satisfied
- 5 – Very Satisfied

R2. Parenting can be both rewarding and challenging. How satisfied have you been with the following aspects of your parenting experiences over the last **MONTH**:

How much enjoyment you get from parenting.

Mark only one oval.

- 1 - Very Dissatisfied
- 2 – Somewhat Dissatisfied
- 3 – Neither Satisfied nor Dissatisfied
- 4 – Somewhat Satisfied
- 5 – Very Satisfied

R3. Parenting can be both rewarding and challenging. How satisfied have you been with the following aspects of your parenting experiences over the last **MONTH**:

How your child(ren) are doing in life.

Mark only one oval.

- 1 - Very Dissatisfied
- 2 - Somewhat Dissatisfied
- 3 - Neither Satisfied nor Dissatisfied
- 4 - Somewhat Satisfied
- 5 - Very Satisfied

Section 4S: Broader Social Involvement

In this next section, you will be asked about your experiences in your broader community, as well as your relationships with relatives and friends.

S1. Over the last **MONTH**, have you regularly done the following:
Participated in a religious or spiritual community

Mark only one oval.

- 0 - No
- 1 - Yes

S2. Over the last **MONTH**, have you regularly done the following:
Volunteered for a charity, political group, or other local organization (for example, a service organization, a political campaign)

Mark only one oval.

- 0 - No
- 1 - Yes

S3. Over the last **MONTH**, have you regularly done the following:
Participated in a community group that shares similar hobbies (for example, a sports team, a book club)

Mark only one oval.

- 0 - No
- 1 - Yes

S4. Over the last **MONTH**, have you regularly done the following:
Participated in a community group with shared background characteristics (for example, a Veterans organization, mom's group)

Mark only one oval.

- 0 - No
- 1 - Yes

S5. Over the last **MONTH**, have you regularly done the following:
Attended broader community social events (for example, show, music festival, public reading, non- profit event, etc.)

Mark only one oval.

- 0 - No
- 1 - Yes

S6. Over the last **MONTH**, have you regularly done the following:
Spent time with relatives other than your significant other or children (for example, getting together, catching up by telephone or email)
Mark only one oval.

- 0 - No
 1 - Yes

S7. Over the last **MONTH**, have you regularly done the following:
Spent time with close friends (for example, getting together, catching up by telephone or email)

Mark only one oval.

- 0 - No
 1 - Yes

Section 4T: Broader Social Involvement

In this section, please indicate on the scale how often in the last **MONTH** you have done the following:

T1. Over the last **MONTH** how often have you:
Gotten along well with members of your community

Mark only one oval.

- 1 - Never
 2 - Rarely
 3 - Sometimes
 4 - Often
 5 - Most or All of the Time

T2. Over the last **MONTH** how often have you:
Followed the rules and expectations of your community (for example, driving the speed limit, being quiet in the evening and early morning hours)

Mark only one oval.

- 1 - Never
 2 - Rarely
 3 - Sometimes
 4 - Often
 5 - Most or All of the Time

T3. Over the last **MONTH** how often have you:
Helped out with your community's needs (for example, assisting neighbors in need, volunteering for community projects)

Mark only one oval.

- 1 - Never
 2 - Rarely
 3 - Sometimes
 4 - Often
 5 - Most or All of the Time

T4. Over the last **MONTH** how often have you:
Provided support or help to friends when needed

Mark only one oval.

- 1 - Never
- 2 - Rarely
- 3 - Sometimes
- 4 - Often
- 5 - Most or All of the Time

T5. Over the last **MONTH** how often have you:
Been available when friends wanted to spend time together

Mark only one oval.

- 1 - Never
- 2 - Rarely
- 3 - Sometimes
- 4 - Often
- 5 - Most or All of the Time

T6. Over the last **MONTH** how often have you:
Gotten along well with friends

Mark only one oval.

- 1 - Never
- 2 - Rarely
- 3 - Sometimes
- 4 - Often
- 5 - Most or All of the Time

T7. Over the last **MONTH** how often have you:
Provided support or help to relatives other than your significant other or children when needed

Mark only one oval.

- 1 - Never
- 2 - Rarely
- 3 - Sometimes
- 4 - Often
- 5 - Most or All of the Time

T8. Over the last **MONTH** how often have you:
Been available when relatives other than your significant other or children wanted to spend time together

Mark only one oval.

- 1 - Never

- 2 - Rarely
- 3 - Sometimes
- 4 - Often
- 5 - Most or All of the Time

T9. Over the last **MONTH** how often have you:
Gotten along well with relatives other than your significant other or children

Mark only one oval.

- 1 - Never
- 2 - Rarely
- 3 - Sometimes
- 4 - Often
- 5 - Most or All of the Time

Section 4U: Broader Social Involvement

In this section, consider the last **MONTH** and how satisfied you have been with the following:

U1. Over the last **MONTH**, how satisfied have you been with:
The area where you live (for example, available resources, safety)

Mark only one oval.

- 1 - Very Dissatisfied
- 2 - Somewhat Dissatisfied
- 3 - Neither Satisfied nor Dissatisfied
- 4 - Somewhat Satisfied
- 5 - Very Satisfied

U2. Over the last **MONTH**, how satisfied have you been with:
Your sense of belonging in your community

Mark only one oval.

- 1 - Very Dissatisfied
- 2 - Somewhat Dissatisfied
- 3 - Neither Satisfied nor Dissatisfied
- 4 - Somewhat Satisfied
- 5 - Very Satisfied

U3. Over the last **MONTH**, how satisfied have you been with:
Your relationships with relatives other than your significant other or children

Mark only one oval.

- 1 - Very Dissatisfied
- 2 - Somewhat Dissatisfied
- 3 - Neither Satisfied nor Dissatisfied
- 4 - Somewhat Satisfied

5 - Very Satisfied

U4. Over the last **MONTH**, how satisfied have you been with:
Your relationships with friends

Mark only one oval.

1 - Very Dissatisfied

2 - Somewhat Dissatisfied

3 - Neither Satisfied nor Dissatisfied

4 - Somewhat Satisfied

5 - Very Satisfied

Appendix D: Screening Questionnaire

Screening Questionnaire – Veterans Writing & Well-being Research Study

Thanks for your interest in participating in this research study examining Veteran Writing Workshops and Well-being. Please answer the following questions as accurately as possible to ensure you are eligible to participate.

If you are eligible, you will be given a randomly selected Participant ID number sent to the email you provide. Write this number down and save the email somewhere safe as this Participant ID will be your identifier throughout the study. This number will stand in for identifying material during any other future questionnaires to ensure your identity and data are kept separate.

Required Questions:

1. **Email ***
2. **Are you a United States Military Veteran? * Definition: A “Veteran” is someone who served in the U.S. Armed Forces after training, including prior active duty, reservists, or National Guard. Must have received any discharge other than “dishonorable,” unless dishonorably discharged due to repealed policies like “Don’t Ask; Don’t Tell.”**
 - Yes
 - No
 - I don't know
3. **Are you willing to not participate in any other experiential writing workshops for the 12-week duration of this study?**
 - Yes
 - No
 - Other: _____

4. **Are you willing and able to attend at least 6 of the 8 workshops in this study? ***

Workshops will meet for 2 hours starting around 5 PM on a weekday yet to be selected.

- Yes
- No
- Other: _____

5. **Are you willing and able to complete four 30-minute surveys about your state of being—one survey per month—for the 12-week duration of the study?**

- Yes
- No
- Other: _____

6. **If placed in the control group, are you okay with refraining from ALL writing workshops for the duration of the study (including CSU's writing workshop)?**

- Yes
- No
- Other: _____

7. **If placed in the treatment group and participate in the workshops, are you willing to be interviewed after the study for up to ~90 minutes about your experiences?**

(Includes an additional \$25.00 incentive.)

- Yes
- No
- Other: _____

8. **In the coming months (Dec, Jan, Feb), do you plan on participating in another veteran-oriented writing workshop or group?**

- Yes
- No
- Other: _____

9. **If you have any questions or concerns about participating in the study, please express them below.** *Ross Atkinson will be in touch to answer any questions you may have.*

Appendix E: Workshop Prompts & Slides by Week



Veterans Writing Workshop

Week 1

Letter Writing:

Write a letter to an important person: to a former military team member, or perhaps to an enemy combatant. Tell this person whatever feels important or relevant to say in this moment. Tell them how much of an impact they've had on your life. Or any lessons learned. Or reminisce about old experiences. Whatever feels right.

Powerless to Change:

Tell me about a time when your world started to change and you were powerless to stop it. This could be a parental divorce, command change, death, policy change or an impending transition of some sort—leaving the service, starting school, etc. What did you do? How did you handle yourself?

Tip: Sensory Details

*As you write, focus on a moment in time, what do you remember?
What did you smell?
What did you taste?
What did you hear?
What did you see?
What did you touch?*

What did this make you and others feel?

Stuck:

Tell me about a time you felt stuck. This can be taken literally or metaphorically, mentally or physically. Perhaps you got yourself into a situation you couldn't get out of; maybe you **feel** trapped in a feeling or experience—what does it **look** and **feel** like to be stuck like you are or were?

Serendipity:

Write about a moment of universal serendipity in your life. It could be a single event or a series of events that seemed to come together for your benefit. Were you late to a party and on your way ran into the love of your life? Did you get put on a shit detail to end up meeting the president?



Veterans Writing Workshop

Week 2

Time Travel Tips:

Imagine you've encountered a time travelling younger version of yourself. What tips, advice, reassurances, or grief would you give them? What would you warn them about?

Inside your Mind:

Pick a significant moment or time in your life—maybe this is the birth of your child, the death of a friend or loved one, a marriage, or an experience in boot camp/overseas—and imagine in that moment your mind is a tangible, physical place, what would it be like to be there? What would the landscape, sky, ground, air, and weather look like, smell like, feel like, etc.? Are there inhabitants? Etc.

Tip: Dialogue

Sometimes, words are what ground our story. A specific phrase spoken and remembered.

Other times, it is a feeling or an image we are relying on to remember.

You do not need to try and remember exactly what was said in dialogue, try to remember what you felt and capture that in the voice and words of your characters.

Lean on what you do know and fill in the rest.

Labels:

Write about your experience with being labeled, whether in military, in civilian life, as a veteran, even medical diagnosis. Explore how it felt or feels to be labeled. What would you want people to know about you or your duty or your condition? Any specific scenes?

Tripped and Fell:

Write about a time you tripped and fell. This could be metaphorical, a bad decision or mistake that made you fall from grace; or literal, a stubbed toe and a broken collarbone, what happened, how did you recover?



Veterans Writing Workshop

Week 3

Hole:

There's a huge hole. Maybe you're in it, maybe someone you know is in it, maybe it is lying in wait for you to fall in. It can be a metaphorical hole or literal hole. Something you have to climb out of, or something you're stuck in. How did this hole come to be? What is your relationship with it?

It's a Process:

Describe a systematic process you are an expert at. Break it down, step by step, and tie it into a larger life meaning. What did you learn from the process of cleaning a rifle, or the process of changing your name after marriage, of becoming a service member, or the process of building a new computer—anything really. You can list these steps and expound upon them: step 1: speak to a recruiter... I remember walking into the office...; step 2: raise my right hand... etc. Or you can choose to compose this in prose, whatever comes naturally.

Tip: Free-write & Worry Not

All it takes to start writing, is putting the words on the page. Sometimes, I start my stories with an easy catch phrase, and just get rid of it later.

Ex. So this one time... or Before I knew it... or So there I was...

And do not worry about grammar or punctuation while you are writing. Put in what feels natural and if it is 'wrong' correct it later. Don't let anything break your thought.

Pulled in Different Directions:

Write about a time when you felt pulled in multiple different directions. Maybe you had a job offer and a love interest in another location, or perhaps an order conflicted with your moral code. How did you respond?

A Change of Heart:

Did you ever feel like you knew your life path only to have it change without warning? Tell me about a time when you thought you had it all figured out, only to have your understanding ripped out from under you. Were you certain this next job would be the one? Your next relationship? What event happened to change your mind?



Veterans Writing Workshop

Week 4

Lost:

Write about a time when you were lost or felt lost. This can be literal, in a city or jungle or dense fog. Maybe relocating or moving. Or, it could be metaphorical or psychological: in war or returning home; some existential moment you felt completely lost.

Extremes:

Write about extremes you experienced in military life: weather, emotions, locations, terrain, personalities, physical challenges, food, sleep. Whatever comes to mind. Could be funny or serious or anything in between.

Tip: Find and Replace Adverbs

Not all adverbs need to go, but if you find yourself using words that end in -ly a lot, replace some with a metaphor or simile.

Ex. Instead of, "I quickly ran to the store," you could say something like, "I ran to the store as if being chased by my childhood fear."

Or...

"I to the store like a bat out of hell"

Slow Motion:

Share a story about a time in your life that seemed to go in slow motion.

From Mundane to Insane:

Compose a story about a mundane event or experience—eating dinner with family, going on a morning walk with your dog, cleaning your boots, etc.—goes completely awry.

NOTE: If you feel happy about any of your pieces, please consider submitting them to me for the research. Small excerpts of submitted pieces will be used anonymously to provide evidence of what is produced. While not expected, it would be great if each of you could select one piece to submit. Our final write in our final week, I will ask you compose a reflection piece on the workshop for this purpose as well.



Veterans Writing Workshop

Week 5

Funny or not?:

Write about a time when something may have seemed frightening in the moment, but now you find funny. This can be 'haha' funny, or satirically funny.

Words and Impact

Write about a time when someone's words or actions, without them knowing, made a big impact on who you are as a person. They could be a friend, parent, coach, teammate, etc.

Try This:

Try to focus on an object in your story. Describe it in great detail, and then zoom out to show us the entire scene.

Example: Describing a single bullet, the markings and weight, the power and fear it instills, the cold brass like the cold death it brings; then zoom out to it being loaded into a weapon, describe this action, the pulling of the charging handle; zoom out again to see it being fired at a military funeral, describe this scene.

Winning and Triumph:

Have you ever won something? A competition, event, promotion, a large sum of money? Perhaps you *won* someone's hand in marriage. Tell me a story of personal triumph—a story of winning.

Change in Belief

What is a prejudice or assumption you held that has changed? What was the catalyst for that change, and what do you believe now?

NOTE: If you feel happy about any of your pieces, please consider submitting them to me for the research. Small pieces will be used anonymously to provide evidence of what is produced. While not expected, it would be great if each of you could select one piece to submit. Our final write in our final week, I will ask you compose a reflection piece on the workshop for this purpose as well.



Veterans Writing Workshop

Week 6

Opposite Perspective

Write a story or scene from the perspective of someone on the other side, perhaps a so-called enemy, or adversary. Try to get inside their head for a few moments and describe how they might see the world or the events unfolding.

Military Language:

Tell me a story using the most military jargon you can muster—acronyms, labels, sayings, analogies, rhetoric—don't be shy. We all know what the military sounds like.

Tip: Bring it Back

Try to Create a circular narrative that comes back to the same place it started. Have the story travel a great distance only to end up right where you started.

Or

Introduce an item or idea that is significant within a larger narrative and bring it back in the end.

Betrayal:

Write about a betrayal you experienced. This could be a secular or spiritual betrayal. A betrayal of trust by a friend or family, or religion, or perhaps you betrayed yourself.

Rant:

Rant about something bothering you. This can be personal, public, at work or home or school; it can be about someone or something: a challenge or compromise or acquiescence. Let it out.

NOTE: If you feel happy about any of your pieces, please consider submitting them to me for the research. Small pieces will be used anonymously to provide evidence of what is produced. While not expected, it would be great if each of you could select one piece to submit. Our final write in our final week, I will ask you compose a reflection piece on the workshop for this purpose as well.



Veterans Writing Workshop

Week 7

Play the Fool

Describe a moment when you made a fool of yourself. What did you say, think, hear, feel? What was going on when this happened? And what it cost you?

Crossing the Threshold:

Write about a time you crossed a threshold. This could be a bar mitzva, a quinceanera, or the moment you finished your capstone in basic training or boot camp. This could be your transition out of the service, or in, or a time you got a degree, or got married, or got divorced. Any threshold crossing moment is free game.

Workshop Reflection: This week and next week, there will be a prompt here asking you to reflect on the workshop. I ask that you use one of the last four writing times to compose a little reflection to submit for the research. Pick a time when the prompts above don't speak to you.

Workshop Reflection (to submit):

Tell me about your experience in this workshop. What did you gain? What did you lose? What was the overall feeling for you? How did you feel entering and how do you feel now that we are wrapping up? Were there any specific elements that you think were especially beneficial or detrimental to your well-being? Would you ever do something like this again? Why or why not?

Tip: In Medias Res

Start a story in the "middle of things"—in medias res. Want to tell a story about basic training? Place us in the mud, crawling under barbed wire first, before explaining the setting.

Tell me about the time you broke your arm but start with landing.

List it:

Create a list. Plain and simple. Maybe it is themed—a list of every location you've been on deployment, or a list of experiences tied by a thread of similarity. Maybe you just want to list all of the birthdays you can remember. Create your list.

Tell No Lies:

Compose a story that is truly unbelievable. Exaggerate it to ensure it is truly unbelievable. Feel free to take creative liberties—push what CREATIVE non-fiction can mean.



Veterans Writing Workshop

Week 8

Whole Life Story

Try to recount your whole life story in one writing session. Start from the moment you were born, focus on key moments throughout your life and write them down. Don't linger on any single moment too long. The moments and memories do not have to transition effectively. Just name and describe them and move on. See what moments arise as significant enough to fit your life's narrative.

Yelling and Screaming:

Write about a time you had to yell—maybe you are at a bar and can't easily be heard, or perhaps your ears are ringing from firing a weapon without earpro. Why did you have to yell, and what was the outcome?

Workshop Reflection: This week and next week, there will be a prompt here asking you to reflect on the workshop. I ask that you use one of the last four writing times to compose a little reflection to submit for the research. Pick a time when the prompts above don't speak to you.

Workshop Reflection (to submit):

Tell me about your experience in this workshop. What did you gain? What did you lose? What was the overall feeling for you? How did you feel entering and how do you feel now that we are wrapping up? Were there any specific elements that you think were especially beneficial or detrimental to your well-being? Would you ever do something like this again? Why or why not?

Tip: Repeat Words and Phrases

A simple trick that can be beneficial for our stories is to pick a powerful phrase or word and repeat it. Or repeat a beat, like a cadence.

Ex. . . on my chamber door, Nevermore, Nevermore.

Ex. One. Two. Three. Four. Ten.

Ask and Answer

Start a story with a question. Ask a question and answer it or analyze it or rant about it—whatever feels right. Perhaps it is a rhetorical question with an obvious answer or no answer at all: where else would you go besides Paris to see the Eiffel Tower? Maybe it is something you have been asking yourself your whole life: why am I so scattered? Perhaps you do not understand some societal fad: Why do people wear crocs? Dig in.

Existential Rendezvous

Describe your relationship with or contemplations on some existential concept—grief, anger, love, pain, dread, courage, life, or perhaps death. How have you grappled or come to terms with this concept? What experiences have helped you understand it better? Or perhaps less?

Appendix F: Recruitment Email

Attention U.S. Military Veterans:

Do you have a story to tell? Would you like to write down some of your experiences in an open and controlled setting with other veterans? You could help researchers at Colorado State University learn about the impact of veteran-only writing workshops on the well-being of military veterans (IRB Protocol #4993).

U.S. Army veteran and CSU School of Education doctoral candidate, Ross M. Atkinson, and his doctoral advisor, Louise Jennings Ph.D., are seeking veteran participants to better understand how writing in a community space with other veterans supports or constricts social, financial, vocational, physical, or mental well-being over time.

Who may be eligible?

- U.S. Military Veterans who have not been dishonorably discharged from the service (except those who were dishonorably discharged for repealed policy).
- This includes all prior service members, active, reserve, and national guard, from any of the six branches: Army, Navy, Air Force, Marines, Coast Guard, or Space Force.

Who is not eligible?

- Service members who were dishonorably discharged from the U.S. military.
- Anyone who has not completed military training or been assigned to a unit.

Study Expectations:

- Once a week for 2-hours, attend a workshop that provides prompts and tools to help write about past experiences alongside a small group of local military veterans.
- Attend 8 workshop meetings on CSU's campus in the Lory Student Center. Each workshop will run from 5PM-7PM every Tuesday, starting March 5, 2024, and ending April 26, 2024.
- Once a month for the 12-week study duration (4 times), take a 20–45-minute survey on well-being.
- Agree to a 60–90-minute interview following the workshop (extra incentive).

Study Incentive:

- Treatment group study incentive is \$125.00 (+\$25.00 for interview).
- Treatment control group study compensation is \$50.00.

Interested individuals should contact Ross Atkinson at ross.atkinson@colostate.edu or visit the study's website at: www.Veteranwwr.com

Screening Survey:

To take a screening survey to see if you qualify, click this link:

<https://forms.gle/TzgMqLX45UvjS7X28>

Upon completion of the survey above, Ross Atkinson will be in contact within 72 hours with your results and more information.

ATTENTION: U.S. MILITARY VETERANS

Want to tell your story?
Want some motivation to do so?

Consider joining this new study examining
military veteran writing and well-being!

U.S. Army Veteran & CSU
Doctoral Candidate, Ross
Atkinson, wants to understand
how writing about military
experience can impact your
well-being.

Who Can Join?

Any U.S. military veteran without a dishonorable discharge.**

If you fit that description, consider joining the study.

Must also be willing and able to attend an in-person
workshop once a week for 8-weeks on CSU's campus.

Tuesdays, 5PM-7PM - March 5 - April 26.

Study Expectations:

- Once a week for 2-hours, participants in the study will follow prompts that help them write about past experiences alongside a small group of local veterans.
- Once a month for the 12-week study duration, participants will take a survey on their well-being.
- Participants will be expected to attend 8 workshop meetings, take 4 surveys, and sit through a 60-90 minute interview about their time in the workshop.

Incentive:

- Workshop participants will receive \$150.00 Visa card.
- Control group participants will receive a \$50.00 Visa card.

Scan here for more info



www.veteranwwr.com

Scan here to see if you qualify.



3-minute Survey

Once complete, someone will reach out to you within 72-hours with more information.

Head to the website: www.veteranwwr.com or reach out to Ross.Atkinson@colostate.edu for more info.

**Excluding dishonorable discharges due to repealed policy. Open to ALL U.S. Military veterans, to include former Active Duty, Reservists and National Guard.

Study PI is School of Education Professor Louise Jennings Ph.D. & Co-PI is Ross Atkinson M.A. (IRB #4993)

ATTENTION: U.S. MILITARY VETERANS

Want to get paid to tell your story?

Consider joining this new study examining military veteran writing and well-being!



Who Can Join?

Any U.S. military veteran without a dishonorable discharge.**

[Scan here for more info](#)

Study Expectations:

- Once a week for 8-weeks, join a veteran-only 2-hour writing workshop with other local veterans.
- Once a month for the 12-week study duration, take a 25-45 minute survey on your well-being.



www.veteranwwr.com

Incentive:

- Workshop participants will receive \$150.00 Visa card for full study participation
- Control group participants will receive a \$50.00 Visa card.

**Excluding dishonorable discharges due to repealed policy. Open to ALL U.S. Military veterans, to include former Active Duty, Reservists and National Guard.

Study PI is CSU Professor Louise Jennings Ph.D. & Co-PI is Ph.D. Candidate Ross Atkinson.

Reach out to Ross.Atkinson@colostate.edu for more information. (IRB#4993)

Appendix H: IRB Approval Documents

PROTOCOLS

kuali



**COLORADO STATE
UNIVERSITY**

The protocol listed below has been approved by the CSU IRB SBER Fort Collins on Tuesday, November 14th 2023.

PI: Jennings, Louise

Submission Type and ID: Initial 4993

Title: Tracking Trajectories of Change in Well-being of Participants in a Veterans Writing Workshop: A Mixed Methods Design

Approval Date: Tuesday, November 14th 2023

Expiration Date: Saturday, November 14th 2026

The CSU IRB (FWA0000647) has completed its review of protocol 4993 Tracking Trajectories of Change in Well-being of Participants in a Veterans Writing Workshop: A Mixed Methods Design . In accordance with federal and state requirements, and policies established by the CSU IRB, the committee has approved this protocol under Expedited review.

Any additional comments regarding this approval are included below. If you have additional questions about this please contact IRB Staff.

Initial review and approval of this research study was conducted via expedited procedures on November 14, 2023. After review, this study is Approved to recruit 30 military veterans to participate, utilizing the recruitment and informed consent procedures as they are detailed in the protocol. The review was conducted under expedited review categories # 5, 6, and 7.

To keep the protocol in active status, continuing review is required within 3 years of the study approval date. The study was assessed as being in accordance with the criteria for approval at 45 CFR 46.111.

Additional modifications, if any, to the protocol, consent process, or other protocol-related documents must be reviewed and approved prior to implementation unless initiated to eliminate apparent immediate hazards to research subjects. To request modifications, please submit an Amendment request through Kualii Protocols.

Unanticipated problems involving risks to subjects or others, incidents of non-compliance, protocol violations, and sponsor or investigator-initiated suspensions of research must be reported to the IRB following IRB SOPs.

Risk Level: Minimal Risk
 Expedited Categories: # 6 & 7
 Funding: None

Please note:

Any additional changes to this approved protocol must be obtained prior to implementation of those changes, by submitting an amendment request to the CSU IRB for review/approval.

Good luck in your research endeavors!

Attachments

| | | |
|---------------------------------|--|--|
| Consent | IRB Written Protocol_Consent_VVWR.pdf | Participant Informed Consent Form - updated |
| Consent | Informed Consent_AudioRecordedInterview_VVWR.pdf | Semi-structured Interview Consent Form - Audio Recording - Updated For Consistency |
| Grant or Contract | Fellowship Requirements_VVWR (2).docx | College of Health and Human Science's Deans Fellowship: Funding Expectations |
| Interview/Focus Group Questions | SSI Questions - VVWR (1).docx | Semi-Structured Interview Questions |
| Recruitment Materials | Recruitment Information_VVWR_Fin.pdf | Email Language and Study Info with Links to Screen and Website |
| Recruitment Materials | Website Link_VVWR.docx | Website Link - https://veteranwwr.wordpress.com/ |
| Recruitment Materials | Recruitment Flyer_VVWR.pdf | Updated Recruitment Flyer |

Appendix I: Research Consent Form

Tracking Trajectories of Change in Well-being of Participants in a Veterans Writing Workshop: A Quasi-experimental Mixed-methods Design

I am asking you to participate in a research study titled “*Tracking Trajectories of Change in Well-being of Participants in a Veterans Writing Workshop.*” I will describe this study to you and answer any of your questions. The primary investigator (PI) of this study is Professor Louise Jennings in the School of Education at Colorado State University. The doctoral student conducting this study is Ross M. Atkinson, who is also in the School of Education at Colorado State University. This study received funding from the College of Health and Human Sciences’ Dean’s Fellowship.

What the study is about:

This research is meant to help understand if participation in an experiential veterans writing workshop supports veterans' well-being. Also, this study seeks to better understand how the well-being of writing workshop participants is affected over time and what “parts” of the workshop participants claim best support them.

What we will ask you to do in the study:

- Attend at least eight weekly writing workshops on CSU’s campus that are two hours each.
- Complete a thirty-minute survey on social, vocational, mental, and physical well-being four times throughout the study’s twelve week run time.
- Participate in a 60-to-90-minute interview on what ‘parts’ of the workshop you felt supported or constrained your well-being. *Only some participants in the treatment group will be expected to give an interview.*
- Half of the selected participants will be randomly assigned to a control group that **does not participate in the workshop**, but still completes the survey mentioned above.

What we will ask you to do in the Workshop:

- Participate in the writing and sharing of life and military experiences.
- Listen and respond to other participants sharing stories.
- If compelled, share your own writing with others. Although, sharing is not an expectation.

Estimated total time commitment:

- **Workshop Series:** 2 hours per meeting, 1 meeting per week, 8-weeks.

Total Time Commitment: 16 hours

- **Four Questionnaires:** 30 minutes each

Total Time Commitment: 2 hours

- ***Follow-up Interview:*** 60-90 minutes

Total Time Commitment: 1.5 Hours

- ***Total Study Time Commitment:***

19.5 hours over 12-weeks

Risks and discomforts

- ***Confidentiality of Sensitive Information:*** While all data will be anonymized through the use of participant ID's, private information will be shared with the researchers in this study, and there is always a risk of a breach of anonymity.
- ***Emotional Risk:*** This study does carry some emotional risk because the topics discussed in the workshop may touch on intense or traumatic past experiences. As a participant, you will be exposed to the sharing of other's personal experiences of military life and war and may also share stories yourself. Both of these activities involve the risk of triggering an emotional response.

Benefits to Participants

Direct: This research has some probable benefits from participation, to include possible positive shifts in mental, social and vocational well-being over the course of the workshop.

Indirect: This research has some possible indirect benefits to participants, such as those that come from the process of introspection and self-reflection, to include a better understanding of yourself and how your past experiences may shape how you see and interact with the world around you.

Societal: This research has wide ranging societal benefits, to include providing actionable data around veteran community program use, well-being, and experiential writing workshops. This actionable data may then inform practices and policies around reintegration and federal transition assistance programs, thereby reducing strain on local resources. Additionally, the possible benefit to 'veterans' as a population comes in the form of more information on community-based programs, and specifically writing programs, supporting well-being during and after reintegration.

Incentives for participation

- **Participants in the *treatment group* who complete the workshop series and four surveys will receive a \$125.00 visa gift card.**
- **Participants in the *control group* do not participate in the workshop, but complete the 4 required surveys will receive a \$50.00 visa gift card**

- **Participants in the *treatment group* who agree to and complete the 60–90-minute semi-structured interview will receive an additional \$25.00 visa gift card.**
- ***All participants* will receive a swag bag that will include a writing utensil and notebook.**

Treatment Group Incentives (10-14 participants): up to \$150.00 and a swag bag

Treatment Group Participants: Attendance in at least 6 of the 8 scheduled workshops, along with the completion of 3 of 4 surveys, is required to receive the \$125.00 incentive. And participation in the follow-up interview is required for the additional \$25.00.

Control Incentives (10-14 participants): up to \$50.00 and a swag bag

Control Group Participants: Completion of all 4 surveys is required for the \$50.00.

Your name and contact information may need to be shared with Colorado State University finance staff to process your payment, but they will not receive any research data or other details about the study.

Payment for participation in research may be considered taxable income. The University requires tracking for compensation that is paid to you; this may include your name and contact information. If you receive \$600 or more in a calendar year, you may be contacted to provide additional information (e.g., Social Security Number) for tax reporting purposes. This information is stored confidentially and separate from research data.

Audio Recording

During this study, participants in the treatment group who participate in the workshop series will be expected to also participate in a follow-up 60–90-minute interview about their experience. This interview will be audio recorded and transcribed. The audio recordings will be deleted in January of 2025, upon completion of the study. The transcriptions will be anonymized and stored for future analysis.

Privacy/Confidentiality/Data Security

Identifying information in data will be de-identified. Any forms or information that has identifying information, such as signed consent forms, will be kept physically separate from the survey data and the two will not be connected. The physical security of data files will be carefully considered. All participant data will be kept on a computer only accessible by the PI, Dr. Louise Jennings and Co-PI, doctoral candidate Ross Atkinson. One backup will be kept on a physical hard drive stored in a container also only accessible by to the PI and Co-PI.

We will do our best to keep your participation in this research study confidential to the extent permitted by law; however, it is possible that other people may need to review the

research records and may find out about your participation in this study. For example, the following people/groups may check and copy records about this research:

- The Office for Human Research Protections in the U. S. Department of Health and Human Services
- The research study sponsor, *CSU's College of Health and Human Sciences*
- Colorado State University's Institutional Review Board (a committee that reviews and approves research studies)

Survey Data Collection: Please note that the survey(s) are being conducted with the help of Google's "Google Forms." Google is a company not affiliated with Colorado State University and has its own privacy and security policies that you can find on Google's website. We anticipate that your participation in this survey presents no greater risk than everyday use of the Internet.

Please note that email communication is neither private nor secure. Though we are taking precautions to protect your privacy, you should be aware that information sent by e-mail could be read by a third party.

Your confidentiality will be kept to the degree permitted by the technology being used. We cannot guarantee against interception of data sent via the internet by third parties.

Sharing De-identified Data Collected in this Research

De-identified data from this study may be shared with the research community at large to advance science and health. We will remove or code any personal information that could identify you before files are shared with other researchers to ensure that, by current scientific standards and known methods, no one will be able to identify you from the information we share. Despite these measures, we cannot guarantee the anonymity of your personal data.

Future use of Identifiable Data or Specimens Collected in this Research

Identifiable data will be de-identified and may be used for future research without additional consent.

Taking Part is Voluntary

Your involvement in this study as a participant is completely voluntary, **you as the participant may refuse to participate before the study begins, discontinue at any time, or skip any questions/procedures that may make you feel uncomfortable, with no penalty to you**, and no effect on the compensation earned before withdrawing, or

their academic standing, record, or relationship with the university or other organization or service that may be involved with the research.

If you have questions

The main researchers conducting this study are Ross Atkinson, a doctoral candidate, and Louise Jennings a professor at Colorado State University. Please ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, you may contact *Ross Atkinson* at ross.atkinson@colostate.edu or at (970) 286-0083; you may also contact Louise Jennings at louise.jennings@colostate.edu. If you have any questions or concerns regarding your rights as a subject in this study, you may contact the Institutional Review Board (IRB) for Social and Behavioral research with Human Participants at (970) 491-6624 or at CSU_IRB@colostate.edu. You may also access their website here: <https://www.research.colostate.edu/safety-and-compliance/irb/>

You will be given a copy of this form for your records.

Statement of Consent

I have read the above information and have received answers to any questions I asked. I consent to take part in the study.

Your Signature

Date

Your Name (printed)

Signature of person obtaining consent

Date

Printed name of person obtaining consent

This consent form will be kept by the researcher for five years beyond the end of the study.

Appendix J: Audio Consent Form

Informed Consent for Interview & Audio Recording

TITLE OF STUDY

Veteran Writing Workshop & Well-being Research Study

PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR

Louise Jennings Ph.D.

School of Education

(970) 491-5425

Louise.jennings@colostate.edu

CO-PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR – Primary Study Contact

Ross Atkinson

School of Education

(970) 286-0083

Ross.Atkinson@colostate.edu

PURPOSE OF INTERVIEW

You are being asked to take part in a formal 60-to-90-minute interview. The purpose of this interview is to better understand what “Parts” or “Elements” of the writing workshop you felt best supported your mental, social, and vocational well-being.

INTERVIEW PROCEDURES

For this interview, you will be asked to sit and answer 10 formal questions, and a handful of follow-up questions based on context. The interview will be audio recorded.

Once the interview is complete, the data will be sent to a transcription service to be transcribed in full. Once the transcription is complete, it will be de-identified of any

Participant's Initials: _____

personal identifying information. The audio files will be stored separate from the deidentified transcripts in a secure hard drive for up to one year after the study completion.

RISKS

There is always a risk that participants can be identified using the information from the interview. While this risk is limited by the de-identification process and aggregating the data, there is always a chance a quote can be used to identify the individual it comes from. Additionally, the topics discussed in the could be distressing as they will revolve around military experience and will ask about situations that arose during the study.

BENEFITS

There will be no direct benefit to you for your participation in this part of the study. However, we hope that the information obtained from this study may be used to create and reinforce quality methods in future iterations of CSU's veterans writing workshop, as well as other workshops and their veteran participants around the country.

CONFIDENTIALITY

For the purposes of this research study, your comments will not be anonymous. Every effort will be made by the researcher to preserve your confidentiality including the following:

Informed Consent for Interview & Audio Recording

Participant's Initials: _____

- Assigning code names/numbers for participants that will be used on all research notes and documents.
- Keeping notes, interview transcriptions, and any other identifying participant information in a locked file cabinet in the personal possession of the researcher.

Participant data will be kept confidential except in cases where the researcher is legally obligated to report specific incidents. These incidents include, but may not be limited to, incidents of abuse and suicide risk.

COMPENSATION

Participants will be compensated with a \$25.00 Visa Gift Card for their participation in this 60-to-90-minute interview, following workshop completion.

CONTACT INFORMATION

If you have questions at any time about this study, or you experience adverse effects as the result of participating in this study, you may contact the researcher whose contact information is provided on the first page. If you have questions regarding your rights as a research participant, or if problems arise which you do not feel you can discuss with the Primary Investigator, please contact the Institutional Review Board at CSU_IRB@colostate.edu.

VOLUNTARY PARTICIPATION

Your participation in this interview is voluntary. It is up to you to decide whether or not to take part in the interview. If you decide to take part, you will be asked to sign a consent form. After you sign the consent form, you are still free to withdraw at any time

and without giving a reason. Withdrawing from this study will not affect the relationship you have, if any, with the researcher. If you withdraw from the study before data collection is completed, your data will be returned to you or destroyed.

CONSENT

I have read, and I understand the provided information and have had the opportunity to ask questions. I understand that my participation in the interview is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time, without giving a reason and without cost. I understand that I will be recorded during this interview and that my words will be transcribed using an outside service. I understand that I will be given a copy of this consent form. I voluntarily agree to take part in this interview portion of the study.

Participant's signature _____ Date _____

Investigator's signature _____ Date _____