

The power of writing – how working-class academics experienced writing their autoethnography and the impact on their well-being

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Abstract

Purpose: The aim for this small-scale research project is to explore authors' experiences of writing their autoethnography and if this had an impact on their well-being. I recently edited a collection of autoethnographies, each one written by a working-class academic. The autoethnographies are compelling and personal accounts of the working-class academics' lives and provide extraordinary insight into their subjective realities, personal experiences, and their journeys into and through higher education.

Design/methodology/approach: Interviews were conducted with six participants who had written and published their autoethnography. The theory-driven deductive approach to Thematic Analysis was utilised in order to analyse the interview data and allow for the emergence of a range of emotions and effects on well-being. Data from the interviews are framed within positive autoethnography and positive psychology theories.

Findings: Data from the interviews are presented here along with an exploration and discussion of the well-being benefits of writing one's story. The authors provide honest, heartfelt and at times intense reflections. Many of the authors recounted the well-being benefits they felt through structuring and ordering their work, as well as addressing and making meaning of their experiences. The writing has led to important insights and enabled the authors to process their experiences in a meaningful way.

Originality: The originality of this research lies in the follow up interviews where the authors shared their experiences of writing their autoethnography and the positive emotions and enhanced well-being that emerged from the process.

Key words: positive autoethnography; working-class academics; higher education; autoethnography; positive psychology; well-being.

Paper type: research article

Introduction

My interest in the lives and experiences of academics who identify as working-class stems from my own working-class background and journey into academia. Having undergone my own experience, I was curious about the experiences of other working-class academics, what their journeys have been like, as they navigated their way into their professional roles. I wanted to find out how they have become who they are in an education system imbued with classism. I enlisted fifteen working class academics to provide their stories, using the autoethnographic approach, as this serves as an effective tool to challenge elitism and the

dominant discourses that maintain and perpetuate exclusion within higher education, not just in support of the working class but for all underrepresented and marginalized groups.

The sector of higher education in the UK is steeped in historical elitism and exclusion, making the journey of a working-class academic challenging and interesting (Crew, 2024). Unlike the middle class, who have a long and established history in higher education, the working class do not have a long history in this sector of education to identify with - there are few role models and very little culture or class history to identify with. According to Crozier, *et al.*, 'Universities traditionally have not been places for the working class' (cited in David, 2010, p.74) This creates an uneven playing field and for some, will feel like they are starting on the back foot. These are some of the problematic factors that make the lives of working-class academics unique and interesting - their stories are rich and powerful and, in some cases, quite profound.

The Lives of Working Class Academics: getting ideas above your station (Burnell Reilly, 2023) is a collection of individual chapters, each one authored and/or co-authored using an autoethnographic approach to the writing (Hughes and Pennington, 2017). The autoethnographies are unique and personal stories of the working-class academics' lives and they make a significant contribution to the field of research in higher education by providing insights into the personal and lived experiences of some academics.

Writing is one of the positive psychology (PP) interventions that can be used to enhance well-being and mental health. Ruini and Mortara discuss 'Writing Therapy' as a 'process of investigation about personal thoughts and feelings using the act of writing as an instrument, with the aim of promoting self-healing and personal growth' (2021, p. 23). Using writing interventions, such as journaling, expressive writing and positive reminiscence encourages reflection, builds self-awareness, helps to find meaning in experiences, and process emotions that may be difficult and/or have become stuck. The act of writing can enable experiences to be processed, and difficult emotions released.

Gonot-Schoupinsky, *et al.* (2023) introduced a new approach to autoethnographic writing - "positive autoethnography" (PosAE). They support this as one that 'provides a positive approach to narrating autoethnographic experiences of recovery, empowerment, rehabilitation, self-management and peer support' (2023, p.380). Although it was not my original intention to implement this approach, there are strong features of it in the authors' writing and subsequent interviews. Some of the authors shared that they found the writing cathartic; they reported that writing about their journey and experience of becoming an academic, and producing and publishing their autoethnography, allowed them to return to an experience in their past that was unpleasant, unexplained, and in some cases, unfinished. Den Elzen and Lengelle report that the act of writing often allows for the processing of experiences and may generate a range of emotions (2023). I previously stated that the autoethnographies demonstrate 'how the working-class academics have shown incredible determination and have arrived at where they are by overcoming and managing difficult and, for some, adverse experiences that are associated with their social class' (Burnell Reilly, 2024, p.1199). Gonot-Schoupinsky, *et al.* assert that their PosAE approach 'encourages autoethnographers to reflect on their own positive experiences, and positive future

projections' (2023, p.383), and there is certainly evidence of this in the authors' interviews, data from which will be explored further on in this article.

Methods

My methodological approach to this research consisted of unstructured interviews and a thematic analysis (TA) approach to analysing the data. Having acquired ethical clearance, I conducted interviews with six authors who had self-selected to take part. The interviews took place online using an app that transcribes speech. During the interviews, I enquired into how the participants had experienced the writing and if they were aware of any positive and/or negative emotions during the process and/or as after-effects.

The type of TA that I decided to deploy was that of deductive, theory driven, and 'top down' (Braun and Clarke, 2006). This approach allows for the analysis to start with pre-existing codes. Given that I had prior knowledge of positive psychology and how writing as a PP intervention can produce well-being benefits, this seemed appropriate. What I intended to deduce from this research was whether the autoethnographic approach to writing had helped or hindered the participants' sense of well-being as they worked through their life story, charting their subjective experiences.

The transcribed interviews were manually analysed. This article explores the interview data that centres around the well-being theme of 'finishing the unfinished business'. The authors are not anonymised and are represented by their initials.

The Positive Psychology of Writing

Positive psychology is a growth model that analysis what action people take in their lives to build and maintain happiness and well-being. According to Tang, *et al.*, PP 'explores the optimal functions of human beings to promote healthy and harmonious development' (2023, p. 2). Writing is well used as an intervention in positive psychology. Murray explains that 'therapeutic writing can help the writer find meaning in their experiences, view things from a new perspective, and see the silver linings in their most stressful or negative experiences' (2002, p. 60). Marlo and Wagner (1999) conducted their own research into the effects of writing about positive life events on health and found that 'The greatest increase in psychological health was among participants who wrote about positive events while those who wrote about negative events showed the least increase in psychological health' (p.193). Writing can be used as a therapeutic intervention as it allows for the investigation of personal thoughts and feelings in a structured and ordered approach. Ruini and Mortara found that writing therapy can lessen the effects on symptoms and distress, while also promoting psychological well-being (2021).

In a previous publication I stated that 'Autoethnography is a fascinating method of research that allows the author to reflect on their own lived reality and explore their personal, professional and cultural experiences' (Burnell Reilly, 2024, p.1192). The autoethnographic writing process also connects the writer's self-narrative to a wider social, cultural and political context. In the case of this collection, the writers' social class is not the only aspect

of their lives that informed their experiences: many also explored the intersections of other aspects of their identity, for example, gender and ethnicity, to thoroughly explore their journey and experience of becoming an academic in higher education. Ellis and Bochner define this type of writing as: 'An autobiographical genre of writing and research that displays multiple layers of consciousness, connecting the personal to the cultural' (2000, p.739). I would argue that the participant data cited here also connects to the political - social class inequalities are political.

Using the positive psychology approach will aid in identifying the effects of writing one's autoethnography, as an intervention for improving well-being. Tang *et al.* comment on the writing process as having 'good effects on well-being and psychological resilience, particularly among people who suffer from unfair treatment' (2023, p.2). Data from interviews with some of the academics demonstrates that engaging in life narrative writing such as autoethnography, which connects personal experiences with cultural and social contexts, can generate positive emotions and aid catharsis.

Positive psychologists (Marlo and Wagner, 1999; Ruini and Mortara, 2021; Den Elzen and Lengelle, 2023; Tang, *et al.*, 2023), have researched and published on the topic of writing as an intervention to improve well-being. In addition, Pennebaker and Smyth (2016), in their book *Opening Up by Writing it Down*, argue that writing about difficult experiences can be beneficial to one's mental and physical health. Discussing their own research participants, they explain that 'The effects were not due to simple catharsis or the venting of pent-up emotions... explaining that it felt good to get negative emotions off their chests, the respondents noted how they understood themselves better' (pp. 20-21). Writing can be utilised as a way of learning about and coping with the world. Pennebaker and Smyth (2016) advocate for writing as an intervention that can promote mental and physical health, thereby improving the quality of life for many of us. They discuss the process of 'disclosure' as something that reduces the effects of holding secrets. Often secrets are being kept, not because the information cannot be known, but because the information evokes feelings of shame. Pennebaker and Smyth explain that 'The act of disclosing a trauma reduces the physiological work of secrets. During disclosure, the biological stress of holding back is immediately reduced. Over time, if we continue to confront and thereby resolve our emotional upheavals, there will be a lowering of our overall stress level' (2016, p.11). Disclosure can take the forms of writing and talking. Madsen discusses the benefits of narrative therapy, and how this creates change by having a person's story and experience understood (2014). Madsen explains that 'our ability to create a somewhat systematic, coherent and not least meaningful biography of our lives is of great significance to our mental health' (2014, p.129).

The concept of 'unfinished business' originates from gestalt psychotherapy and often refers to unresolved past situations which are causing disturbances later in adult life. In other words, if somebody has had an adverse childhood experience, the experience, rather than being processed and resolved, gets 'stuck' and becomes unfinished. According to gestalt therapists the need to complete unfinished business is rudimentary; a fact of human nature is that human beings will find a way to complete whatever is unfinished. Pennebaker and Smyth have studied the 'expressive writing paradigm' (2016, p. 16) as an alternative to talking and how it has allowed people to express themselves and write about their

upheavals. They stress that 'the letting-go experience is just as obvious when participants write as when they talk about upsetting events' (2016, p.31). They also posit that as a self-reflective exercise, it is beneficial to acknowledge our deepest emotions and thoughts. According to Pennebaker, when the writer 'openly acknowledges and accepts their emotions, they become able to give voice to his/her blocked feelings and to construct a meaningful story' and this is what yields therapeutic benefits (cited in Ruini and Mortara, 2021, p.24).

Results: The authors and their experiences of the writing process

Some authors who wrote their autoethnography reported, in subsequent interviews, how the act of writing had enabled them to tackle unfinished business and better integrate their past experiences. Mann cites an early German Psychologist, Bluma Zeigarnik (1938), who found that 'unfinished business results in tension that in turn tends to motivate us towards completion and that incomplete tasks take up more psychological space than completed tasks' (Mann, 2021, p. 84). This premise continues to be used in therapeutic contexts, particularly in gestalt, where completion of unfinished business is central to integration and growth.

During interviews with the authors, they reported how they had experienced telling their story, setting the record straight and of having it understood in the contexts of their working-class lives. KA and SB told me that the act of writing generated emotions such as sadness and anger as they recalled their histories and their stories, and connected those experiences to their family and background:

KA: *'It was triggering, and it was very emotional, because I do recount a lot of the issues that my parents went through with issues of racism, and, and Islamophobia, and that was upsetting, because actually, there was a realisation that actually, whatever my father and my parents went through, those themes seem to have recurred in my own life, even though I was born here'.*

SB: *'It was really emotional and kind of even now I think about it with emotion. Sad like a combination of being kind of proud, grateful and sad...so I'm proud of my working-class background. There's no doubt about it, I wouldn't swap it. Really proud of it... when I retire I'm probably gonna go back to my working class community and be very working class because I'll be with my friends that are working class and in my street that is working class'.*

On the topic of her parents, SB recalls how she felt: *'They tried to make our environment as positive as they could, so really grateful and then really sad because I feel like I never acknowledged that. And my father's passed away now, and I've had this realization, it's come too late for him, so I feel very sad that I didn't realise how much they've done for me actually. Perhaps it's good that I feel sad. You know even though it's a, it's a negative emotion. It's an emotion I need to feel, you know? I mean, I need to recognize what they did for me because it's part of our working-class culture, isn't it - I need to recognize that so'.*

CM explained that writing his autoethnography was a cathartic exercise. He recalled that his working-class background had been disassociated from the academic work he does, and the

writing enabled him to unify those two aspects of himself, something that he found satisfying. CM: *'I always wanted to have a rage about the rigged game, elitism, and how it suits the elites to control access and denigrate people from different backgrounds... It brought together my back story with the stuff I've been writing about'*.

CM's role as an academic is an educational policy researcher and this is what he had been writing about. CM explains how writing his autoethnography helped to bring together the personal and the professional, fusing his past working-class life, and his present position as an academic. He explained that *'it was cathartic in that sense of the first time being able to link those two things... First time I've ever brought in my home background ... most of my published work is a critique of the market and the way that institutions play out, it's all about policy for me, it was brilliant coz it brought together my backstory with the stuff I've been writing about'*.

Some of the authors recounted how the process of writing enabled them to revisit some unpleasant past experiences and 'set the record straight' in the words of one. JF has a regional Thames Estuary accent; this is a variation of Cockney found in the wider suburbs of East London. In her chapter she wrote about her experience of being a student in an elite university, the snobbery and accentism she encountered, and how this affected her confidence, both personally and academically.

JF: *I had a story to tell. And this thing about accent had preoccupied me on and off over the years. I feel like by having the opportunity to write it down, then it's addressing some of those wrongs. Because whether those people read it or not, actually rather than just telling them to f*ck off in a very public way, I have told them to f*ck off'*.

JF also alludes to the importance of supporting others who may undergo similar unpleasant encounters with snobbery and elitism: *'It might then help others who might have, you know, from different walks of life who may have had similar... because it goes on all the time, doesn't it... accent [discrimination]'*.

Asked why this is important to her, she explained: *'So it's kind of linked to how unwelcome I felt when I went to university that kind of linked to the work we were doing and some of the conversations I was having with students. Yeah, so students say, I don't feel like I belong here, and I'm saying, yes, you do, and why shouldn't you belong here? It was acknowledging to students that academia is middle class white men... it was accent and the sorts of students we had with accents from particular parts of Africa or students questioning their own confidence and abilities to be there'*.

KA talked about the unpleasant experiences that he encountered during his journey into academia, as a British Pakistani Muslim, and his reflections as part of the writing process. *'For me, it was about reliving and recounting my own story, in order to share some of the experiences, both positive and negative. I kept coming back to the issues of race, Islamophobia, microaggressions, stereotypes, judgments, comments that have been made, no matter how much I've tried to deviate away from this, to pretend that these things didn't exist, I kept coming back to the same themes again and again'*.

Asked how KA experienced the writing, he shared: *'It was an opportunity to let off some steam and talk about these issues in a very safe environment. Yes, in a book that is well needed. It was very important to write about, and I hope, that the people that I have encountered throughout my career, who were very problematic, I hope they read it, because it's important for them to understand the behaviour that they have displayed. I hope that they read it, and they learn from it - that actually, you can impact lives for the negative if you're not careful. I'm glad it's out there. There definitely will be people who will read it and feel very uncomfortable. Writing it down and finishing it allowed me to see me and my entire journey in a very small chapter'.*

Asked how he felt about the writing, KA replied: *'it was a nice feeling to know that actually, there was something worthy of sharing here, for the greater good, having something to contribute ... just sitting down and writing it, from my own personal perspective, was a feelgood factor because actually, this is about me. This is from my lived experience. It made me feel good. I felt the happiness, happiness that I was able to share something of myself from an academic but also as a human being'.*

Asked if he experienced any benefits, KA explained: *'While I was writing it, I realised that a big part of my driving force was some of the experiences that I've had to go through, but didn't give up. I didn't allow it, I wasn't defeated by them. They hurt and they affected me and they've impacted me but they didn't let me give up. I continued and I journeyed through it so it was great now writing about it'.*

TC wrote about a previous encounter where she became aware of class difference and prejudice towards her at an event that she had attended as an academic. TC wrote about this experience in her autoethnography. In her reflection of the incident TC comments how she felt about the unfairness and injustice of the incident: *I just thought she should know, and to the point where I know that when I eventually see her again, I will bring this up to her because it has angered me. I think because I'm not normally somebody who would take that, I can defend myself quite well... she got me in a vulnerable place where I was waiting for a taxi and anyone who knows me when I'm waiting for a taxi, I bl**dy shit myself that it's not gonna turn up and I'm not gonna be able to get the train. So that's where I was vulnerable'.*

In the interview TC explained the effect of writing: *'so it did feel cathartic. I would definitely say that it felt cathartic realizing this is class based. This isn't about you. This isn't because you're like rubbish. It's just because you're not from the social class that is supposed to be in this space, and for me to be accepted in this space, not only do I have to be good, I have to be exceptional'.*

TC goes on to explain *'when I read it back, I can see how far I've come. And I've had quite a few barriers, and those barriers haven't gone away. So, yeah, I would definitely say write. It makes me feel immense pride because I know the barriers that I've had to overcome and those barriers are still there'.*

PS talked about the importance of sharing a story that *'fits both worlds'.* Many working-class academics struggle with situating their identities in a middle-class profession, having come

from a working-class background. In my own chapter I explain how 'I have learnt to re-negotiate my identity from where I was to where I am now, and that re-negotiation includes inhabiting two worlds simultaneously, something that very many working-class academics do' (Burnell Reilly, 2023, p.118). SB commented on the hidden aspect of class identities in academia: *'I think being working class, you don't really talk about it in your workplace. Well, it's not a protected characteristic, is it?'*

PS expressed his dissatisfaction with his previous educational experience and the shame associated with school exclusion: *'It was a waste of time (choosing sport as a subject). They let me do it. Yeah, let me choose that. But yeah, they let me choose topics that didn't have any exams at the end. And so I feel that yeah, you're completely let down, you know, you're completely let down. And it's taken me till now - I'm in my 50s now - and all that time, I felt that pain and I felt that exclusion - an imposter. Imposter syndrome is just the beginning. When you look back, yeah, it's being let down'.*

PS also confronted the pain of the past in his writing: *'very often, we let things linger in our heads that are there as pain, what was that you used - 'hidden injuries of class' (Sennet and Cobb wrote about this and I had previously referenced them in the book) and never do anything about it. Even if I've journaled stuff in the past, I've still left it there as a series of pains or outburst or whatever. But this meant I had to return to it and use those skills I have as an academic as well to kind of find some logic to it and that helped'.* When asked about the pain of the past, PS explained: *'It's not working class we're talking about ****. We're talking about poverty. And actually, it's an incredibly painful place poverty. I'm in my 50s, still got it and it won't ever go, I'm confident of that (me: still got?) anxiety. The sense of outside, non-belonging, worthlessness ... on your good days you turn them into strengths, and on the bad days they crush you, that's always there I think...'*

Asked about his experience of writing on these topics of shame and poverty, PS responded: *'But what did the book mean? It was like an opportunity to put things that are constantly in your life, that form who you are, especially when you become an academic, and put them somewhere that fits both worlds; it's like a personal reflection. Having somewhere to write all these ideas, these experiences, to do something with them was really, really important. So writing for the book was a chance to own it. Put it out there. I'd say that's out there, that's a done thing'.*

PS added his reason for writing: *'And what books like this do is give people voice and give people another take. You need to breathe life into class, and not have it defined by all the people who are not of that class, which is historically what we've had for decades, generations, centuries. And I think it's really important for that. So yes, I did it so that I was represented and I had a voice and I could be heard and seen and be part of this. Another one is so that other people could find this not just mine, especially not mine, but others, that there's a place to come and find that other people have experienced this and succeeded'.*

Discussion

According to Bruner (2004) writing one's life story allows people to recognize themselves as the authors of their experiences and achieve a sense of personal agency, leading to

improved well-being. A sense of identity can be acquired through life narratives by identifying and giving meaning to significant personal changes. JF recalled her memories of being a working-class student in an elite university and how she struggled to locate herself and her sense of belonging. In her interview, she alluded to her accent and although she may not have spoken out at the time about the accentism she experienced, writing her autoethnography allowed her to revisit, confront and call out the snobbery and accent discrimination.

Fredrickson's 'Broaden and Build Theory of Positive Emotions' (2001) posits that writing fosters positive emotions by putting feelings and thoughts into text. KA explained the difficult and challenging journey that he had undergone through his education and into becoming an academic. The act of writing about this journey enabled KA to realise how much he had grown, developed and integrated. King (2001) asserts that writing widens one's scope of attention, allowing the mind to be more flexible. While reflecting on his writing in the interview, I sensed that KA had undergone a transformational journey that had provided him with clarity and insight. KA was able to see just how far he had come, and this equipped him with a sense of empowerment.

SB recalls how while writing her own chapter the gratitude she realized that she felt for her parents who worked hard to provide a comfortable environment whilst also nurturing the artist that she was to become. Ruini and Mortara discuss gratitude in writing and comment that 'Many studies showed that thinking about memories of gratitude in a written form promotes well-being and increases positive mood because writing allows one to give shape to positive experiences' (2021, p.28). Although SB experienced sadness, which is not a positive emotion, she does comment in the interview that recognising what her parents did for her enabled her to feel grateful and that she needed to recognise that. Making sense of an emotional event is one of the benefits of writing, according to Ruini and Mortara who argue that 'the acquisition of insight about the event, the organization and integration of the upheaval in one's life path' is what enables that clarity and sense-making (2021, p.25).

Writing can also be experienced as a process of building resilience. Writing about unpleasant past experiences and putting negative feelings into writing can bring about clarity and positive attitude with regards to the situation that is being written about. Gonot-Schoupsinsky, *et al.* state that one of the aims of PosAE is 'to potentially benefit writers themselves by stimulating positive perspectives and events in their own narratives' (2023, p.381). TC's experience is an example of PosAE; she describes a sense of clarity while recalling a very uncomfortable encounter with another academic who perpetrated classism and snobbery towards her. Writing about this experience enabled TC to look back and realize that her encounter was connected to her social class. McAdams (2008) writes about the use of autobiography in the construction of self-identity. Ruini and Mortara comment that 'narrative identities allow one to reenact the past, become aware of the present and have a future perspective' (2021, p.26). The consequence of writing can often result in a positive attitude towards life challenges, as well as self-development and personal growth.

PS alluded to the 'hidden injuries of class', a text written by Sennett and Cobb (1972), two American psychologists, who examined and explored class difference as an internal conflict. The conflict, according to Sennett and Cobb (1972), occurs among people who measure

their own value against occupations that are held in high esteem and to which our society gives superiority. The phrase has stayed with us because it has resonance for so many people who identify as working class. PS used the writing to confront the pain of his past and said that it did help. PS felt so let down by the education system that he was carrying a hidden injury. Pennebaker and Smyth explain that 'The act of disclosing a trauma reduces the physiological work of secrets. During disclosure, the biological stress of holding back is immediately reduced. Over time, if we continue to confront and thereby resolve our emotional upheavals, there will be a lowering of our overall stress level' (2016, p.11).

PS discussed in the interview the negative past experiences that left him carrying shame and pain, and that writing about this as a working-class academic enabled him to publish his story, to put it out there as a 'done thing'. PS had achieved a sense of completion. I have asserted in previous sections that finishing the unfinished business, a technique from gestalt therapy (Perls, *et al.*, 1951), enables people to resolve past situations that might lead to feelings of discontentment later in life. During the interview PS referred to his work as a personal reflection. He commented that 'having somewhere to write all these ideas, these experiences, to do something with them was really, really important', and that the writing was a chance to own those experiences. Gordon *et al.* cite evidence from their own research that demonstrates how writing about interpersonal conflicts can decrease the negative effects that might be felt as a result of them (2004). Gordon *et al.*'s theory concurs with the 'unfinished business' concept from gestalt therapy.

CM explained in his interview how writing about the rigged game in higher education enabled him to 'have a rage' which he found cathartic. He explained in the interview how writing the autoethnography enabled him to bring together two worlds - his personal life and his professional life and write about inequalities in higher education from a personal perspective as well as from his working class background. CM's working-class background may have been an influence in his choice to write about and critique HE policy. As academics/researchers/writers, we often do research and write about what has influenced us in our own personal lives and backgrounds. Two such scholars, Paulo Freire (1970) and bell hooks (1994), wrote prolifically about inequalities in education, a topic that they both had deep and personal experiences of. Freire and hooks both experienced discriminations based on class, gender and race. This became their motivation to produce the work that they published. That work has revolutionized education for marginalized groups, and heightened our awareness with regards to class, race and gender inequalities and discrimination, and the affect that these have on learners who are from under-represented groups in higher education.

Writing about personal experiences that you are passionate about and that you feel are important gives those concerns legitimacy and authenticity. Once written about they are no longer our experiences, they become phenomena in the social world, phenomena that other people can often relate to, empathise with and understand. This means that our writing is more than mere personal and subjective experiences, they are social phenomenon, observable patterns of events and interactions, and so deserve to be written about and are empowering for others to read.

Conclusion and implications for practice

There are several implications for practice and future research that have potential for exploration. All of the participants demonstrated that the act of revisiting an unpleasant event where one may have suffered unfairness, and writing about the experience, can enable that person to process and integrate their experience. Pennebaker and Smyth note that 'a prime value of writing is that it forces us to ask how and why we feel the ways we do' (2016, p.71). Using ethnography in practice can enable clients to acquire an awareness and integration from the writing. Gonot-Schoupsky, *et al.* allude to PosAE as a pragmatic approach and point out that PosAE allows 'authors to integrate evidence-based positive psychology while writing, or collaborating on, their narratives and where appropriate to reframe their narratives to include positive psychology thinking that may shift their perspectives positively' (p.283).

Many of my authors had revisited unpleasant experiences from their past. Writing about those experiences not only aided in the processing but also allowed for the finishing of unfinished business - as PS commented – 'it gives people another take [to complete]'. Completion, as asserted by Mann (2021) is congruent with improved happiness and the act of writing, as an intervention, can aid with healing. Extending this intervention into practice provides opportunities for further research within the field of positive psychology, particularly in the area of how people experience social class inequalities.

My original aim for the book was to share the fraught and difficult experiences of working-class academics. In practice, creating a space for people to challenge the dominant discourses that have maintained and perpetuated elitism and exclusion within social structures and institutions like HE, has led to important insights and enabled them to process their experiences in meaningful styles. As a result of writing their story and sharing insights into their lived experiences, each of the authors experienced well-being benefits in different ways.

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