

Institution: Kingston University		
Unit of Assessment: 27 – English Language and Literature		
Title of case study: Expressive Writing for Supporting Post-Conflict Recovery in Vulnerable Populations in the UK and Middle East		
Period when the underpinning research was undertaken: 2007 – 2020		
Details of staff conducting the underpinning research from the submitting unit:		
Name: Meg Jensen	Role: Professor of English Literature and Creative Writing	Period employed by submitting HEI: Sept 2001 – present
Period when the claimed impact occurred: 2015 – 2020		
Is this case study continued from a case study submitted in 2014? N		

1. Summary of the impact

Expressive writing (EW) is a form of imaginative writing that places emotional expression at the centre of post-trauma recovery. Through face-to-face and, since the Covid-19 pandemic, web-based research and training projects, developed collaboratively with stakeholders in Iraq, Lebanon, and the UK Jensen has trained 259 rights advocates and overseen deployment of EW methodology to extremely vulnerable populations, reaching over 23,096 trauma, conflict, and gender-based violence survivors. The resulting testimonies, and Jensen's methodology, have engendered a shift in policy and training protocols for the United Nations Development Project in Iraq, local charities in Iraq and Lebanon, and UK government and private sector bodies. These organisations have, thus, attained their goals to build highly efficient, cost-effective, and sustainable programmes, which support vulnerable populations, social cohesion, and cultural recovery.

2. Underpinning research

As Co-Director of Kingston's Writing Cultures Research Group (and director of its forerunner, the Life Narrative Research Group, established 2007), Jensen has developed an international reputation for innovative research at the interface of life writing, narratives of trauma and the advancement of social cohesion. Jensen's article on the relationship between life-story-telling and human rights, published in her co-edited collection *We Shall Bear Witness: Life Narratives and Human Rights* [R1], is widely considered foundational to the new interdisciplinary study of literature and human rights. A related study of the legibility of rights and traumatic experience in autobiographical writing appeared in another prestigious edited collection [R2]. Jensen's developing expertise on the impact of traumatic experiences on the survivors' ability to tell their stories led to the publication of her widely read and ground-breaking interdisciplinary monograph *The Art and Science of Trauma and The Autobiographical: Negotiated Truths* [R3]. Drawing on the latest research on the biological and psychological origins of trauma, Jensen elucidated and explained the complexity of the relations between life stories, traumatic disorders, and the advancement of social cohesion. This firmly established Jensen as a leading voice in this field.

Jensen's publications on trauma, imaginative writing, and testimony led to a collaboration with Open University-based poet Dr Siobhan Campbell, resulting in the formation of the Military Writing Network in 2009, which was the subject of a REF2014 impact case study. Their work uses the EW methodology developed by Professor James Pennebaker in the 1980s for use in rights-building contexts. EW is a humanities-based intervention often used with survivors of trauma: participants are asked to write freely and without self-editing about past traumatic experiences, usually for a set period of time over a number of days. It has showed the therapeutic benefit of expressing thoughts and feelings in writing on troubling topics.

Jensen's current EW projects significantly broaden the scope of Pennebaker's EW methodology both theoretically, by drawing on Jensen's expertise on the science of trauma and the art of its representation, and demographically, by deploying EW to address specific challenges facing those in conflict and post-conflict contexts.

As mentors (since 2011) for the John Smith Memorial Trust (JSMT), Jensen and Campbell helped young leaders from the Middle East develop effective narratives for their advocacy work. In 2015, they began to collaborate with two of these leaders, developing and adapting the EW methodology for use in conflict and post-conflict settings, drawing on Jensen's research on trauma, storytelling, and social cohesion. This research has demonstrated the effectiveness of EW methods for supporting the well-being of vulnerable populations in conflict and post-conflict regions without the danger of triggering undiagnosed trauma [R4]. Jensen and Campbell have since trained human rights advocates in the EW methodology and overseen its deployment to support more than 20,000 vulnerable people in multiple regions across the world. Their co-authored *Expressive Life Writing Handbook* [R5], published in English and Arabic, presents and evidences their methodology which has now been adopted by local human rights defenders in post-conflict settings in Iraq and Lebanon. Since the Covid-19 pandemic, these materials have been further translated, adapted, and digitised for access to both social workers aiming to prevent domestic violence across Iraq, and to support the wellbeing of frontline health care workers in Italy, the UK, and across the Arab-speaking world.

3. References to the research

R1 – Jensen, Meg (2014) "The Fictional is Political: Forms of Appeal in Autobiographical Fiction and Poetry" in Jensen and Margaretta Jolly, eds. *'We Shall Bear Witness': Life Narratives and Human Rights*. Madison, Wisconsin: University of Wisconsin Press. (Peer reviewed prior to publication by external readers for University of Wisconsin Press). REF2ID: 27-19-1435

R2 – Jensen, Meg (2015) "The Legible Face of Human Rights in Autobiographical Fiction" in McClennen and Moore, eds. *The Routledge Companion to Literature and Human Rights*, pp. 184-192 London: Routledge. (Peer reviewed prior to publication by external readers for Routledge). DOI: [10.4324/9781315778372](https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315778372)

R3 – Jensen, Meg (2019) *The Art and Science of Trauma and the Autobiographical: Negotiated Truths*. London: Palgrave Studies in Life Writing Series. (Peer reviewed prior to publication by external readers for Palgrave). DOI: [10.1007/978-3-030-06106-7](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-06106-7) REF2ID: 27-16-1429

R4 – Jensen, Meg and Campbell, Siobhan (2019) "Negotiated Truths and Iterative Practice in Action," in Kate Douglas and Ashley Barnwell, eds. *Research Methods in Life Narrative Studies*, pp. 149-160. London: Routledge. (Peer reviewed prior to publication by external readers for Routledge). DOI: [10.4324/9780429288432](https://doi.org/10.4324/9780429288432)

R5 – Jensen, Meg and Siobhan Campbell. (2016) *The Expressive Life Writing Handbook*. Edinburgh and London: Beyond Borders Scotland/The Stabilization and Recovery Network (Published as an output from a successful research proposal, which secured a GBP10,000 research grant from the UK Foreign and Commonwealth Office Human Rights fund)

4. Details of the impact

The Expressive Writing Project (EWP) has shaped the practices of non-governmental organisations (NGOs), governments, and private sector bodies supporting trauma survivors after conflicts and disasters in the UK and Middle East; supported by funding of over GBP88,000 from the UK government, AHRC, and the private sector. It provides an alternative toolkit for supporting vulnerable groups, notably female survivors of gender-based violence, when traditional mental health tools are not available or are hard to access by those most in need. Jensen's EWP has reached an estimated total of 259 professionals and at least 23,096 survivors in some of the world's most unstable and/or dangerous regions. Equally significantly, the EWP has developed in collaboration with local experts and those survivors who have used the EWP.

They have embedded further knowledge and expertise into the EWP. In turn, the testimonies of these women, often from minority and/or marginalised groups within their home context, have gone on to shape local and international agencies' and NGO's responses to trauma and gender-based violence in war and displaced communities.

Iraq

In 2016, Jensen and Campbell collaborated with UK-based social enterprise 'The Stabilisation and Recovery Network (TSRN)' to develop an applied research project, funded by GBP9,952 from the UK Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO), to test the efficacy of the FCO's *International Protocol on Documentation of Crimes of Sexual Violence in Conflict* (2014). The project involved working with INMAA, a women's legal aid charity in Northern Iraq for women survivors of sexual violence amidst continued conflict and instability in the region. The project delivered bespoke EW training to their social workers. A central principle governing EW methodology is to allow for the disclosure of strong emotions in a slow, safe, and detached form, making it a less harmful way of gathering testimony from those who have been traumatised. The FCO's existing interview protocols, on the other hand, were mainly driven by the legal aims of procuring consistent narratives for statistical evidence. Jensen's research suggested that this approach might unwittingly re-traumatise survivors.

The project thus adapted those protocols to incorporate EW methodology and trained interviewers to provide active emotional support to survivors in interviews. The project provided 12 INMAA staff with tools and techniques to gauge the emotional impact of their clients' rights violations, enabling survivors to produce a narrative that enhanced their sense of agency and detachment, benefitting their recovery. Jensen and Campbell then created *The Expressive Life Writing Handbook*, and this new interview protocol has been deployed in 20 workshops with INMAA's mobile human rights team; they have since interviewed a total of 400 women survivors across Kirkuk governorate [S1]. The programme director of INMAA writes that the project '*enabled the INMAA team to reflect on and improve their working practices especially with respect to the interface with victims/clients,*' and that the training '*...has changed the way we work with victims,*' enabling them to help '*...these victims to tell their stories*' [S2].

The value of Jensen's and Campbell's research was recognised by the award of an additional GBP2,400 from the FCO Human Rights Fund (November 2016) to bolster humanitarian support for Iraqi women stigmatised by their experiences of sexual violence. In collaboration with TSRN, 100 faith leaders and rights defenders were introduced to the EW Methodology and 15 trained via The Stigma Project [S3]. One of those participants, a strategic security expert and researcher at Baghdad University, cascaded that training to additional two further rights defenders and facilitated EW workshops in 2017 with 36 women victims of sexual violence including "*women kidnapped by ISIS and survivors of domestic violence*" in Baghdad [S4]. He concluded that EW methodology was "*very useful*" for supporting those survivors "*especially in Iraq*" where such help is sorely needed in the wake of devastating conflict [S4]. Jensen, Campbell and TSRN then received GBP7,400 (January 2017) from the UK Cabinet Office *Countering Violent Extremism Programme* for a collaborative research project with 20 policy makers from the seven Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries [S5]. This also resulted in the production of a 'training' video with Arabic subtitles. TSRN concluded that the project helped them reach their organisational goals 'of building individual capacity for increasing resilience and well-being for groups at risk of radicalisation in the GCC and Iraq.' [S5].

In November 2017, two representatives from the United Nations Development Program's 'Support for Integrated Reconciliation in Iraq (SIRI)' Project requested training in EW from Jensen and Campbell. This training led to the collaborative development of training materials for a five-day EW course for 35 UNDP social workers from Baghdad, Wasit, Babil, and Diyala provinces [S6]. One participant went on to employ this EW methodology to interview 100 women survivors as part of her research into gender-based violence in Iraq [S7]. Jensen and Campbell's research changed UNDP's policy on the documentation of sexual violence; they have now incorporated training in EW methodology for social workers, resulting in the creation of a database of Iraqi women's stories as a resource for researchers. UNDP's representatives

confirmed that EW *'is a key methodology in achieving community reconciliation in a post-conflict environment and increasing well-being for groups at risk'* [S6]. In April 2020, in response to increased domestic violence during the Covid-19 lockdown, UNDP experts drew on Jensen's research and methodology to develop a social cohesion project that trained 75 social workers from NGOs across 15 governorates in Iraq, providing support by phone and online to victims of domestic violence. In all, these 75 social workers contacted 10 women a day across Iraq, reaching a total of 7,500 women using adapted EW techniques. The UNDP concluded that the EW toolkit of research and training techniques had a *'valuable impact...upon the practice and protocols of UNDP Iraq's Integrated Reconciliation Project'* whose objective is to support victims of violence and women affected by conflict [S6].

Syrians in Lebanon

Since 2017, the EWP has expanded through a series of collaborative projects with Akkar Network for Development (AND), a women's charity in Akkar, Lebanon, that works with up to 15,000 women annually [S8]. The collaboration was supported by GBP47,000 from the AHRC Global Challenges Research Fund (GCRF). In 2018, Jensen and Campbell trained 12 social workers and oversaw the deployment of their method with 16 Syrian women refugees living in two settlement camps in Lebanon [S8]. This work *'supported AND's strategic aims of developing and implementing local development projects that support our communities in Akkar'* [S8]. In 2019, Jensen and Campbell oversaw these trained AND social workers as they cascaded EW training to 10 more gender-based violence and children's support specialists from AND, the United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF), and the International Rescue Committee. Since then, two additional AND social workers have run EW workshops with more than 60 participants from the camps. One participant noted that this methodology *'...helps social workers reach the stage of healing, and even overcoming trauma,'* and that it *'...became one of the tools we use to help women express themselves'* [S8]. A translated transcript of a video produced by AND details the personal impact of this program for individual survivors [S9].

Digital Impacts

In 2020, Jensen and Campbell's research has had further impacts, stemming from the development of digital access to EW materials such as the UNDP's web-based training of social workers during lockdown [S6]. In April 2020, Jensen and Campbell received GBP12,371 from the AHRC Global Challenges Research Fund to research and develop a range of EW digital technologies to support the well-being of human rights workers, and in June 2020, they received GBP10,000 of private sector funding from Viaro Energy, as part of their Corporate Social Responsibility strategy, to develop digital EW material in several languages free at the point of use for frontline health care workers [S10].

5. Sources to corroborate the impact

S1 – IMMAA 'Project Completion Report,' submitted to the UK Foreign and Commonwealth Office, May 2016 (See section 'Outputs 3.5' in report)

S2 – Quotations from General Director of INMAA Iraq, quoted in ['Expressive writing workshops in Iraq'](#) blogpost, February 2018

S3 – TSRN Project Completion Report Stigma/GBV January 2017

S4 – Testimonial by a strategic security expert and researcher at Baghdad University (translated section Adaptation points 1-3)

S5 – TSRN, The GCC Countering Violent Extremism Network IMPACT EVALUATION REPORT 2017 (<http://tsrnetwork.org/the-gcc-countering-violent-extremism-network/>) (See Overview, Section 5.3, and Section 6)

Impact case study (REF3)

S6 – United Nations Development Program (UNDP) reports, [November 2018](#) and [May 2020](#) and Testimonial from the UNDP Gender Specialist

S7 – ‘Gender-based violence against women’: A social study of a selected sample of survivors of violence in Iraq’

S8 – Testimonial from the President of the Akkar Network for Development, Lebanon

S9 – ‘Our Life Stories as Refugees’ Transcript from AND video (English Translation)

S10 – CSR report, Viaro Energy LTD, 2020 <https://viaro.co.uk/about/frontline-health-care-workers-project/> and <https://expressivewritingresearch.com/>