

'Composing myself on paper': Personal journal writing and feminist influences

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Abstract

This article uses two counselling practitioner-researchers' personal responses to journal writing as a therapeutic vehicle. They presented a version of this article at the New Zealand Association of Counselling Research Conference in Christchurch in 2008. When the authors met, as counsellor educator and student, they recognised a mutual interest in the therapeutic potential of personal journal writing. Using writing as inquiry, the two co-researchers began writing short observations of their individual experiences to help them reflect on how feminisms had influenced their thinking and writing.

...I am not separate from writing, I only began to become myself in writing. (Cixous & Calle-Gruber, 1994/1997, p. 93)

Introduction

This article intends to start a conversation about personal journal writing – the kind of memory and reflecting-on-life writing where writers of diaries and journals tell our stories, sometimes in collage, colours and images as well as in words. There is a tradition of research and writing on: That profoundly female and feminist genre: The diary as feminist practice (Huff, 1989). Unstructured and possibly turning in on its own subjectivity, we intend to avoid 'prescriptions' for journalling as an instrument for mental and spiritual health (Dowrick, 2009; Progoff, 1975) in this article. Whilst acknowledging those prescriptions' value for some people at some times, the kind of writing we comment on here is exploring "a whole new psychic geography" (Rich, 1980, p.35) which is particularly important for us (Jeannie and Pip) as women. Essentialism raises its head and we position ourselves as one Pakeha, one relatively recent migrant to Aotearoa New Zealand (Butler, 1999) and acknowledge that 'we' and 'us' means Pip and Jeannie (authors) who collaborated in a research conference presentation on journal writing out of which this article germinated.

The complexity of feminist perspectives on research methodology can lead into 'getting lost', as Lather (2007) suggests, and even to stopping the attempt to claim feminist approaches all together in the sometimes exasperating epistemological disputes about which discourses we can draw on, or are even aware of. Our expression and discussion of subjective experience, as written in journals, will fall into 'the shaking up' of post-modern interrogating of what we mean by gender, identity and culture (Weedon, 2004). We are also aware of the contested ground of what makes this a feminist project, "to do justice to the complexity and instability of all of this in addition to the dislocated identities of posthumanism that challenge oppositions of language/material and culture/nature" (Lather, 2008, p. 190).

The central focus of this article is an examination of our own experience of journal writing and its therapeutic value to us, with an eye on gendered injustice and subordination in a social context where patriarchy means women are often not on an equal standing with men (Fine, 1992; hooks, 1999; Reinharz, 1992). By placing ourselves, as both the researcher and the re-

searched transparently in the field of study (Oakley, 1999), we aim to ask whether personal journal writing makes a difference to our lives, illustrating the exploration with extracts from our personal journal writing. We also raise the question of how further research in this area might be of use to practitioners and researchers in counselling and psychotherapy in Aotearoa New Zealand.

Individual, reflective writing such as this could be critiqued in the same way that therapy has famously been accused of rendering docile and pathologizing women's political protest (Kitzinger & Perkins, 1993). On the other hand, by probing, re-authoring and playing with creative writing and other forms of expression in writing, we are claiming certain therapeutic benefits of working with 'myself as the first other'.

Some private journals help self-recovery in a particular way (hooks, 1993, 2000); other well-known examples of 'illness and recovery' journals, which may have been written with no wider audience in mind, have seen the light of day through performance and publication, therefore connecting with others and reducing isolation for both author and reader (Lorde, 1980; Sarton, 1997).

In this collaboration, for example, we presented/performed at a counselling conference in Christchurch to a small group of counsellors. A number of women in the group responded with a strong sense of connection to Pip reading from her journals and, at one point, to illustrate how they had helped her survive life's vicissitudes, to Pip standing on a pile of those journals. Some took out small books from their bags and smiled, "yes, I keep a journal – I have it here."

Methodology and theorising

We aim to use writing as a method of inquiry (Richardson & St Pierre, 2005) to research subjective experiences of journal writing as a particular practice within the context of our various feminist influences. Questions such as whether language can reflect our experience are not addressed in the populist journalling literature, and are not within the scope of this article. Constructionism and poststructuralism notwithstanding (Drewery & Monk, 1994), and we acknowledge that Foucault's genealogy of the confessional self is not addressed at all here (Besley, 2005), we are basing this writing on a pluralistic approach to research, to feminism(s) and to journal writing. Just as we cannot settle ourselves down into a comfortable position of any kind about where we are up to as feminists, it seems no one theoretical underpinning will explain how this writing enables us to transform rather than adapt to our life's spaces and changes. We are using the terms, 'second and third wave feminism' as descriptors of particular periods in counselling and psychotherapy traditions (Enns, 2004). The need for a deeper and wider analysis of poststructuralist and feminist theorising of journal writing is clear and is not within the scope of this article, nor the major focus here. At this stage, we are concerned with how the practice of journal writing has therapeutic power for us and how that sense of agency is influenced by feminist thinking, particularly using bell hooks' work. As a black feminist theorist and therapeutic journal writer, hooks (1999) cites Kristeva, "Within patriarchy woman has no legitimate voice" (hooks, 1999, p. 11). In our journal writing we find several voices and in writing this article our personal and 'academic' voices have come together.

Extracts from our personal journals are printed in italics.

Pip: Personal experience of journal writing

"I listened to the old brag of my heart. I am. I am. I am." (Plath, 1981, p. 256)

I began writing in a journal at ten years of age. My very first entries were small confessionals -

"I was mean today for no reason and I'm not sure why"; "I'm having a wee cry tonight, I think it's because Dad is so unwell." They were also the first markings of an instinct to represent my self, using my own words - an instinct that must have seen to its own increase because I've continued to write in journals ever since. For years now, I have been composing myself, double entendre intended, through journalling. Anneli Rufus (Rufus, 2003, p. 54) writes: "time spent alone has a way of winnowing the inventory of what we need." I find this true of both the act of being alone to write and the writing itself. There's something in claiming time for myself to write that's important in and of itself too.

In ancient shamanic healing, disease was attributed to the soul having strayed, being stolen or otherwise dislocated. Contemporary shamanic healing nomenclature regards trauma and dissociation, chronic depression, pervasive apathy, and addiction, for example, as indicative of soul loss (Ingerman, 1991). Retrieving the soul is a matter of "finding it, capturing it, and obliging it to resume its place in the patient's body" (Eliade, 1972, pp. 215-216). There is something in the act of journalling that is not dissimilar to this process. I assemble myself on the page in a practice of reclamation. The etymology of 'reclamation' can be traced to the French *reclaimer*, an old translation of which is 'to call the hawk back.' In the shamanic traditions of Native American peoples, Hawk is the messenger. People with Hawk medicine are those aware of messages from Spirit and the nuances of power because they are able to achieve the overall view (Sams & Carson, 1988). When I write in my journal, I act as my own emissary; I both call to my self in the act of writing and retrieve messages from my self, that are the response. It is in this way that I listen for and express the antiphonal longing between the inner and outer worlds I inhabit, what is formed and forming in me, and the timeless and temporal elements of my existence. Journal writing helps me identify both the seamless at my centre and the stitched together, picked at, or undone life of my thoughts. It is an act of reclaiming the psychic space in which I am free to imagine, invent, collect and reflect on my self and an embodiment of this self-representation.

To beckon to my self through journal writing is to address the estrangement from self that can occur when I become entangled in "such a thicket of excess that [I] can no longer make out the real contour of things" (O'Donohue, 2003, p. 51). Journal writing is a way of creating a clearance within the sprawl of information, acquisition, assumption and expectation ever encroaching on the quotidian, so that I can discern the unique shape of my self and my life and the kaleidoscopic patterns I am home to. Forming words on the page that have until then lived in the silence of my body also creates a clearance within me so there is space for new sensations and perspectives to emerge. And then there is the clearance made in claiming the time and physical space in which to write during the course of a day, week or month so I may be as attentive to the presences within me as I am to those without, as available to my self as I am to others.

Cornell (1998, p. 9) comments that "spatial metaphors abound in feminist literature" and presents "Virginia Woolf's demand for every woman to have a room of her own" as an example, arguing that claiming the room to write is inseparable from Woolf's need to represent herself as a writer. While Woolf's demand has often been literalised (Cornell, 1998), a room of one's own is also indicative of a psychic space in which women are free to imagine and represent themselves. For me, journal writing is a way of honouring, inhabiting, expressing and actualising this psychic space.

Jeannie: Personal and professional experience of journal writing

In a suitcase, carried over with me when I migrated to Aotearoa New Zealand are several years of journals. Rather than a particular book, I now tend to write on any paper that's to hand (often the back of advertising flyers) and keep all the odd sheets together in a drawer under the bed. In

January every year, I transfer the year's writing into a carrier bag and put it in a cupboard.

Like the women at the conference referred to in the introduction, I like to know I have a pen with me at all times, and something to write on. Storing the resulting writing needs to be thought through; there are risks involved in putting thoughts and feelings outside my head and into the world. The lack of actual private space is often a surprise to some women who realise they have nowhere to keep anything they don't want partners, children or others who share living space to read. One woman I worked with in workplace counselling said that she kept her writing in an envelope in a handbag in a coat pocket at the back of the wardrobe (Wright, 2003a).

As a talking therapist and educator/trainer of talking therapists, I have, perversely, been interested in reflective and expressive writing as a vehicle for therapy for over ten years (Wright, 2004). Journal writing is one particular descriptor for a practice which is traceable to ancient times. Like counselling and psychotherapy, its commercial growth as a 'therapy' in the twentieth century could be viewed as a particular product of a specific point in history. Like second wave feminism (Baker Miller, 1978), some of the certainty of the language used to 'define' journal therapy seems steeped in modernity:

Journal therapy is the purposeful and intentional use of reflective or process writing to facilitate psychological, emotional or physical healing and to further therapeutic goals. (Adams, 1990).

At times, writing a journal has been a survival tool for me (Chandler, 1990). Times of frustration, crisis and isolation feature, such as in the early days of moving countries and jobs, as the following extract from a recent personal journal shows:

Still raining.

N's persuaded me she won't need the car for the rest of the week so it seems silly to refuse. Then I can't find the car key. Search, twice, feeling tension tightening my neck, shoulders, whole muscle groups. Catch the mini-bus to Turitea. As I'm stepping off I twist and jolt down then gasp as I feel that same old place in the lower right of my back twang and the pain starts.

Crying a lot today – all the way to the Business School and thro' to the HR bush location. A kind man walks with me from the car park where I'm wandering lost. He's from Aberdeen and works in Finance. Easy to pretend it's rain on my face.

So here we go – it has to get better.

Although the writing starts out as private, essentially kept to myself, miss-spellings [spelling?!] and all, the move towards transforming some of the writing experience to connect with others is one of the vital influences of second wave feminism for me. In 'consciousness raising groups' we learned that our troubles could be talked about, and were shared by many (hooks, 2000).

Professionally, forms of writing have been central to practising as a counsellor, not only as a therapeutic tool but also as a way of 'protecting' myself (Wright, 2003b). Sometimes, a particular story, and the physical effects of listening to other people's stories, sticks like sand on wet skin. Writing has helped 'purge' those experiences, when talking to a counselling supervisor or group seemed too exposing and painful like rubbing the sand off before it dries.

The counselling I refer to here has mostly been in educational settings, which has implied a literate population; writing has also provided a connection when working across cultures and when English is not a shared first language (Wright, 1999).

The claims of the 'journaling industry' to help, to heal and to improve our lives are similar to those of the therapy industry. One of the most important benefits of writing for me is that I

write what I like, when I like, how I like without following instructions or being part of any ‘therapeutic relationship’. It is particularly useful for me when I feel silenced [by other]. Perhaps this is self-help? It feels more like liberation, a very ‘second wave’ word. Cixous (Cixous & Calle-Gruber, 1994/1997, p.39) describes this freedom as a kind of “paroxysm ...when one does not master oneself”. In similarly ecstatic vein, hooks describes the experience as ‘remembered rapture’ (hooks, 1999). Certainly, I hear my voice differently in writing when I can ‘lose myself’ enough to move into metaphor and the poetic voice. Voice is an important and contested construct in feminist research and writing traditions, and has been glossed over in this account (Gilligan, 1982); it deserves more attention in future therapeutic writing research.

Pip: Journal Writing as ‘Self Help’?

While journalling may appear to constitute a retreat into an isolated subjectivity, for me it is a practice that resonates powerfully with third wave feminism’s appreciation of the individual voice and its particularity. In an email correspondence to Jeannie I wrote:

Here’s how I connect journalling and third wave feminism:

- Journalling privileges the individual voice and as I understand it, third wave feminism is about individual empowerment and the particularity of the experiences of women which constitute challenges to the essentialist definitions of female identity and liberation associated with second wave feminism.
- Journalling offers an opportunity to create a meaningful identity, reflecting third wave feminism’s celebration of diversity, the incorporation of all voices and the accompanying challenge to second wave paradigms of what is and is not good for women. To an extent I see this as the ability to decide for myself how I will define my experience – I remember reading somewhere that where second wave feminists discussed women as ‘victims,’ third wave feminists refer to women as ‘survivors’ and thinking, I don’t want either of those definitions thanks.
- Journalling is an act of embodiment in that it is self-representation made visible. As such it may be considered in alignment with third wave feminism’s inclusion of all forms of empowerment and expression, not just sexual empowerment and expression, which, for me, is associated with second wave feminism.
- There’s something about journalling that permits/acknowledges internal discord and contradiction that reminds me of Walt Whitman’s “I contain multitudes” (Warner, 2003, p. 66) from *Song of Myself* and also lines of Anne Michael (Michaels, 1998, p. 166) from *Fugitive Pieces*: “There is a precise moment we reject contradiction. This moment of choice is the lie we will live by. What is dearest to us is often dearer to us than truth.” The possibility of this kind of acknowledgment fits with third wave feminism’s celebration of multiplicity and the multiple identities of women.

For me, journalling also vivifies the living, wild threshold between nature and life that is the self as well as providing a way to participate on this threshold by reflecting on my experience. I’ve discovered that through close attending of this kind it’s possible to identify the patterns that emerge from the confluence of the elements and energies of perception, emotion, sensation and intuition which reveal the presence of symmetry, coherence and synchronicity. These presences turn me on to the deeper currents of my self and my life. The practice of being receptive to these patterns and currents and aligning with them cultivates an intimacy with myself that makes intimacy with others possible and enables me to move with greater authenticity and fluency in the world.

Refining my sensitivity to the presences of symmetry, coherence and synchronicity also reveals a thread of continuity that connects me with what is timeless and seamless within me

and draws me close to my own mythology. I've found that the more able I am to consciously inhabit my own mythology and harness my power in this respect, the less susceptible I am to the commodified mythologies that flourish in the vacuums created by personal and collective amnesia, amnesia that is often solicited or induced. Journalling enables me to face my own forgetfulness, remember who I am and discern and design my path.

I've found that journalling also fosters endurance and cultivates faith in the sense that writing about my experiences has taught me that it is possible to not become fearless but to move beyond fear. I have written long enough to see trauma and grief transfigured into tenderness and an abiding appreciation for life, so whenever I encounter difficulty now, I can remind myself of this. My journals are the sacred vessels in which the songs of adversity and despair, resilience and transformation have been composed.

A partial review of the literature on personal journal writing

Since the 1980s, and the second wave of feminist activism, manuals for self-help therapy for women's groups have offered an alternative to the individual therapy industry, albeit one produced by white, middle-class women (Ernst & Goodison, 1981). One clear link, acknowledged by New Zealander Stephanie Dowrick (1993, 2009), between her activism in the 1980s and current career as spiritual and personal growth guru, is her connection with the Women's Press (as a founder member) and continuing collaborations with Lucy Goodison. It is not within our scope here, but another study could trace the similarities and changes between Dowrick's specific forms of 'feminist' practice, although the word 'feminist' does not occur in her recent work. Certainly, a growing interest in the practice of journal writing, as part of the personal growth and 'self-help' industry, is reflected in a 'how to' genre (Adams, 1990, 1996; Dowrick, 1993, 2009) which is particularly strong in the 'popular psychology' section of any bookshop or library in the developed world.

Creative writing teachers have also developed a flourishing literature (Bolton, 1999b; Moskowitz, 1998), which has emerged independently of counselling and therapy. Some therapists have also described how journal writing works successfully as a tool within and before therapeutic contracts begin (Thompson, 2004), especially for those who are categorised as 'introverted personality types'. Second-wave feminist thinking and humanistic concepts of self and empowerment are clear in some of Gillie Bolton's early work (Bolton, Gelipter, & Nelson, 2000). At her most impressive (Bolton, 1999a) she soars and, like Cixous, encourages others to by developing creative writing which accesses the 'well' of the unconscious mind. Celia Hunt's (2004) influences include the French post-structuralist tradition, most centrally Cixous, Kristeva and Irigaray (Hunt & Sampson, 2006). She also demonstrates a more highly theorised style, drawing explicitly on psychoanalytical influences.

Meanwhile, positivists from arts and science disciplines, but predominantly working in psychology, have attempted and so far failed to explain why it is that expressive, reflective or 'emotional writing' is consistently effective in improving both psychological and physiological tests of well being (Pennebaker & Chung, 2007). Meta-analyses of Randomised Controlled Trials of the 'writing paradigm', replicated in several different settings and across continents, have confirmed some of the benefits of writing (Sloan & Marx, 2004) but have not been able to pin down how, why or for/with whom writing works. The language of the medical model is dominant: prescribe, treat, dose.

In other academic disciplines, women's 'personal' writing has often been central in setting out a record of female experience which would otherwise be hidden from 'man made' history. Based on migrant and Māori women's letters, diaries and other documents from nineteenth

century Aotearoa New Zealand (Porter, MacDonald, & MacDonald, 1996), some of the functions of the women's writing, interpreted by the editors, could be compared to those we have identified in this more 'secular, post-Freudian period'. Personal diaries and journals, as well as letters to sisters, family and friends elsewhere, enable women to interrogate their own feelings, thoughts and reactions:

At the day's end the day's account was made. It served as a kind of anchor for unfamiliar, unpredictable and isolated situations. Writing to friends and families, or for themselves, formed a link with a known and more certain world. Women's sense of themselves was constantly being recreated as the world they inhabited took on new meanings. (Porter et al., 1996, p. 13)

In the twenty first century, in conjunction with face-to-face counselling or not, journalling is widely used but under-researched as a therapeutic tool (Thompson, 2004). As journal writing in the form of blogging has emerged on the Internet, some of its parameters have shifted (Tan, 2008) and it has become 'commodified' with sites charging for the use of their charts and templates; see, for example 'MyTherapyJournal.com' which encourages users to 'visualise your progress with your own personalised graph'.

However, journal writing as a form of self-therapy, in its subversive or transgressive qualities, could be seen as a feminist interrogation of some of the assumptions of conventional therapies, where the relationship with the therapist is often cited as the most dominant factor for 'positive outcomes' (Hubble, Duncan, & Miller, 1999). Although healing may be the case in some counselling and psychotherapy relationships, and recently the 'heroic client' is being given more credit for their own 'healing' (Duncan, Miller, & Sparks, 2004), the fact is that some women and men neither have the wish nor the wherewithal to seek therapy in its individualised form as yet another commodity in Western societies (Furedi, 2004). Writing a journal puts agency back 'in our own hands'.

Pip: Journal writing as an act of resistance, not self-improvement

Journal writing enables me to repel the pressure to be other than I am. In the acts of taking the time to write, writing and reflecting, I surrender my attachment to the augur of professional voices and listen instead to what I am saying to myself about my life. Reclaiming the ground that is psychic space in this way may be considered an act of resistance. Psychic space is ground that is hotly contested and constantly assailed by hierarchical, static representations of selfhood and the predictions that are their corollaries. Cornell (1998, p.21) refers to psychic space as "the sanctuary of the imaginary domain" in which the boundaries of individuation are personalised and represented. Journalling is one way among many, of marking these boundaries for ourselves, displacing the fixed boundaries that define static representations, so "we may dream on and unhinge the unconscious connections we make between race, sex, and desire...that ensnare us in hierarchies" (Cornell, 1998, p. 25).

Journal writing, as an embodiment of the "idea that people be allowed to maintain an imaginary domain so as to draw boundaries between themselves and the state" (Cornell, 1998, p. xi), subverts the power of static representations of selfhood. Journalling is an expression of the freedom to create and represent one's self beyond given definitions of self, including definitions of female identity which engender notions of what is and is not good for women and may be considered essentialist. Its potency in this regard is undeniably diluted, however, when it is approached as a self-improvement tool. Treated in this way, journalling can become an expression of internalised surveillance, outward scrutiny turned inward, a policing of our success or failure in approximating a sanctioned representation of selfhood - "a manufactured coherence toward which we must falsely strain" (O'Donohue, 2003, p. 8).

I know I did not pursue journal writing as a young person because I considered it a way of improving myself. Nor did I write because I thought that writing about dilemmas would help me solve them. However, when I became older I did, at times, deploy my journals in rigorous analysis of myself and suffered the confinements of contortions willingly assumed in the name of self-improvement that amounted to self rejection.

Extract: I know I just need a bit of time to rest, reflect, and shrug off the self-improvement harness I like to attach to a bolting filly who doesn't remember her name. (2003)

I came to appreciate what I was doing as internalised objectification - subjecting myself to the kind of scrutiny internally I felt subjected to externally as a young woman. Captured by sanctioned discourses about what was healthy and desirable, I strained relentlessly toward their fulfilment and sustained the wounds of self-inflicted reprisals when I fell short of the mark, my journal a kind of "basilisk's eye" (Rufus, 2003, p. 16). Exploring this dynamic through journaling and conversations with other women, the word 'surveillance' emerged. I transformed my relationship to journalling and to my self by approaching it as an act of observance rather than surveillance. My experience has taught me that surveillance occurs within a context of reformation and promotes self-consciousness, where observance is sister to reverence and fosters curiosity and tenderness. Observance is the adoption of a hospitable posture toward the phenomenological, regarding it as revelation rather than product (O'Donohue, 2003, p. 132). It is an act of recognition and remembrance. Journalling as an act of observance is to approach the self the way one might an animal rather than an autopsy, waiting on it patiently, moving toward it respectfully, heeding its signals and touching it gently. For me, Mary Oliver's (1986) poem *Wild Geese* was significant in illuminating the possibility of this more gentle approach to self, especially the wonderful lines: "You only have to let the soft animal of your body/ love what it loves" (Oliver, 1986, p. 14).

Extract: My depression is here to remind me of how drunk I am. How sick I've become on the bottle of self-improvement. How moronic it is to set up a house I'll always feel homeless in. I'm less equipped for the wanton cruelty of conformity than I think. How ironic to seek love and safety in the arms of a beast that treats everyone with indifference. All I can do is move deliberately and gently toward myself rather than away from myself. (1998)

Journalling is how I move toward myself. Its practice has taught me that acknowledging my experience is to acknowledge my self and that to reject my experience is to reject my self. I want to hasten to add that I do not mean that I consider my experience my truth, or the truth (I think of my self as more than my biography) - just that acknowledging my experience leads to a reconciliation between the presences within me which promotes mindfulness and fluency. It elicits composure - I see that my losses and pleasures, my ambivalence and sureness, my knowing and not-knowing all belong alongside each other. I notice that I unfold like a wing in the absence of pretension.

Suggestions for further research

We have often felt the lack of private space, the right to close doors, establish boundaries between ourselves and others. When there is no actual private space, a writing space is possible. The propositions we are suggesting that might be valuable in practice are:

Firstly, writing about our inner lives, at the time of events and experiences or soon after, enables us to compose ourselves for ourselves. Women's writing has been described as embodied in the French, feminist poststructuralist tradition: "...it is as if I were writing on the inside

of myself. It is as if the page were really inside. The least outside possible. As close as possible to the body. As if my body enveloped my own paper” (Cixous & Calle-Gruber, 1994/1997, p. 105). Further studies could pursue the idea of embodied voice in women’s personal journal writing.

Secondly, journal writing provides a testimony, a record which can be re-read and reflected on. We are constantly re-creating ourselves and making sense of a changing world; writing helps to anchor us. There is currently no research based in Aotearoa New Zealand which studies how women use personal journals. In addition, how current migrants to Aotearoa New Zealand make sense of their experience in writing journals and letters, following Porter et al.’s (Porter et al., 1996) model, would be another recommendation for further research.

Access to psychic space is arguably one of the fruits of feminist activism in the West. The self-absorbed quality of some of the journalling is inevitable. We would suggest it is part of the potentially preachy, motivational ‘writing as healing’ (DeSalvo, 1999; Dowrick, 1993) movement, which has its roots in the same historical period as second wave feminism: the optimistic 1960s.

In Aotearoa New Zealand there is a lack of published research on the therapeutic use of expressive and reflective writing. Case studies of practice and personal accounts would provide us with the means to carry on this conversation about therapeutic writing from different approaches and theoretical orientations.

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