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Expressive, research and reflective poetry as qualitative inquiry: a study of adolescent identity

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ABSTRACT This article explores the uses of poetry in qualitative research. In this study of adolescent identity and development, poetry is used as data, as a means of data representation, and as a process of inquiry. The authors explore the nature of poetry as a tool of qualitative research for investigating human phenomena. Autobiographical poems are used as data which are analysed through thematic analysis. From this analysis, research poems in the form of Japanese tankas are created. Finally, the third and fourth authors respond to the original poems and the 'findings' from the grounded theory analysis as responsive poems.

> I have come to respect more and more the indefinable place from which the poem comes, the ability of each individual to travel to that source of creativity easily and naturally, and how much the poem has to teach us about ourselves and the world, as form and sound give rise to silence. (Longo, 2004: 1)

Introduction

Expressive arts research has been gaining influence in the qualitative research community over the past two decades. Such research places value on the views and perspectives of those who experience various phenomena and lived events (Richardson, 1994, 2002), and presents its findings through various creative and expressive media. Arts-based approaches are part of a methodological trend as postulated by Denzin and Lincoln (1994), who noted a fifth movement in qualitative research in which experimental

and expressive techniques expand the way voice and authorship are expressed. These approaches recognize the interpretive and constructionist nature of the research endeavor. Expressive arts researchers seek to present human phenomena in a manner that preserves its *livedness* (Furman, 2006; Willis, 2002). Indeed, expressive arts researchers seek to magnify the intensity of the affective experiences of people, whereas traditional researchers seek to 'cool down' data via their presentation in research reports. Researchers studying identity have utilized the arts research in autobiographical studies as a means of vividly and evocatively presenting personal and intimate topics (Muncey, 2005). Utilizing autobiography in conjunction with expressive arts techniques helps researchers grapple with the vulnerability that is experienced by presenting sensitive data, and can help increase researcher empathy towards their research participants. By themselves being the subject of research, researchers are compelled to move from conceptualizing those they study as research 'subjects' to viewing them as co-participants (with themselves) in the research effort. This is not to say that by merely utilizing these techniques researchers automatically become more empathic towards research participants. Researchers must be willing to critically reflect upon the nature of power within each research relationship. However, engaging in expressive, autobiographical research is a perfect medium for encouraging self-reflexivity in the research process. Additionally, researchers employing autobiographical methods need not worry about gaining access to populations as in traditional participant/observer systems of data collection; they are themselves insiders (Duncan, 2001).

Poetry has become an increasingly valuable tool for social investigators utilizing expressive arts (Furman, 2004a, 2004b, 2004c; Langer and Furman, 2004a). As a document of social phenomena, poetry can be viewed as a vehicle through which to communicate powerful and multiple 'truths' about the human experience. While poetry may not commonly be thought of as a source of knowledge, poems are powerful documents that possess the capacity to capture the contextual and psychological worlds of both poet and subject.

The purpose of this article is to explore the uses of poetry in qualitative research. In this study of adolescent identity and development, poetry is used as a source of data, as a means of data representation, as a means of inquiry, and as a means of data analysis. The authors will achieve the aims of this study in several ways. First, the uses of poetry in qualitative research are explored. Second, the methodology of the study is presented. Third, autobiographical and research poems are presented and analysed. A poetic response to the poetic data is then presented. As these various poems function simultaneously as data, discussion and analysis, the author will keep summary comments to a minimum. This allows the various levels of analysis to present multiple perspectives regarding the data.

Poetry as research

Data about adolescent development typically has been derived from quantitative and qualitative studies in psychology, social work, human development and other disciplines. Such studies have been invaluable in helping practitioners understand the normative and non-normative developmental patterns of youth. However, important contributions to understanding adolescent development can also be derived from the arts and humanities. For example, Salinger's (1951) classic novel *The Catcher in the Rye* is a profound and insightful exploration into the alienation of adolescence. Similarly, Downey et al. (2002) demonstrate how the use of films can help graduate students understand adolescent rebellion, identity development, and the transition into adulthood.

Poetry also can be a valuable aid in understanding the experience of adolescence. Poetry has the capacity to express both affect and context, or affect *in* context. In autobiographical poems, poetry has the capacity to express the lived experience of the author. Poetry is personal, yet it is the goal of the poet to transform his/her personal experience into that which is universal, or in the vernacular of social research, generalizable. In this sense, the goal of the poet is to present his/her experiences, both internal and external, in such a way that the reader may enter the work as if it were their own. This notion is explored by Willis (2002) in his discussion of poetry as a tool of social educational research:

> The criterion of the 'goodness' of poetry and those genres derived from it seems to hinge more on its expressive ability than its adherence to cannons of genre... Poetry is valued as good and useful when it opens up a useful space that is shared between reader and poet. (p. 9)

Denzin (1997) advocates for alternative qualitative methodologies with the capacity to evoke emotional responses in the consumers of research. He posits that research methods must have the capacity to connect the cognitive and affective worlds of research participants, investigators, and ultimately those who read or view the findings. Poetry is utilized to explore the developmental realities of people throughout the lifespan. Furman (2003a) utilizes poetry as a means of exploring the transition from being single to step-fatherhood. Similarly, he also utilizes poetry as a vehicle to understand the importance of friendship in human growth and development (Furman, 2004d).

Furman (2004b) also utilizes poetry and narratives to explore the impact of his father's cancer, and the death of his companion animal (forthcoming). In a commentary about this research, Stein (2004) argues that poetry used in research, while not generalizable in a traditional sense, may be 'metaphorically generalizable', – while poems address the experience of one person, they have the capacity to sensitize readers to existential themes that are often shared by many people.

In addition to personal or autobiographical poems, numerous qualitative researchers utilize poetry and poetic forms in qualitative research.

Richardson (1993) presents wonderfully crafted research poems utilizing the exact words of her subject, derived from traditional qualitative interviews as a means of exploring the lived experience of women in various life cycle transitions. Furman (2005) demonstrates how using different poetic forms in conjunction with traditional data analysis methods can lead to the development of data that are both highly consumable and emotionally evocative. The author argues that utilizing poetic forms in qualitative research allows researchers to achieve the compression that is valued in quantitative methods along with the in-depth nature of thick and dense qualitative data.

Poindexter (1998) created research poems from interviews with persons struggling with HIV and their caretakers. Her poignant methodological note provides insight into the process of creating research poems:

> As I coded each transcribed interview, I copied phrases, sentences, or paragraphs which seemed to highlight the unique personality or perspective of the respondent and transferred them to another computer document. At the end of that process, I arranged the respondents' phrases into stanzas which seem to me to best represent the narrative flow and meaning, no changes were made to what the respondent had actually said. (p. 23)

In later work (2002), she experiments with various methods of textual analysis and compares how each technique impacts the representational process. Utilizing the methods of linguist Gee (1991), her poems are characterized by structural devices which represent changes in vocal patterns and meanings. She posits that the purpose of the research poem is to communicate the emotional and contextual world of the research respondent 'effectively and efficiently' (Poindexter, 2002). She also stresses the need to 'honor the strengths and uniqueness of each individual and to preserve their inspirational stories' (Poindexter, 1998: 22).

As is the case in the study we are presenting here, poetry is often utilized as a means of inquiry –that is, the process of writing research poems helps the authors develop new insights. Prendergast (2004) utilizes what she refers to as literature-voiced poetry as a means to 'help me synthesize, process and make meaning' (p.75) of a literary text. For her, the literature-voiced poem is both a means and an end, a process of coming to grips with the nature of text, as well as a means of data representation. She states that the intention of the work is to 'transfer cognitive and affective knowledge from artist/researcher to reader' (p. 75).

As when engaging in more 'traditional' qualitative autobiographical data, it is imperative that the researcher/poet engage in a constant process of self-reflection as a means of exposing their biases, or develop other means of assessing the rigor of their work (Constas, 1992; Creswell, 1998). This is especially true when poems convey experiences that may portray the researcher/poet in a less than flattering light. For instance, in the poems that will be presented in this article, the first author as researcher/poet presents

some material that is related to his own developing sense of sexual and role identity. In such instances, it is crucial that the researcher/poet asks him or herself if there are emotions they are excluding, or if they are omitting important data to make themselves more 'acceptable'.

How should the poems presented here be judged? Poindexter (2002) contends that the most appropriate standard for judging such work is the degree to which empathy and understanding is fostered. These concepts are perhaps more relevant to the clinician who consumes research than more familiar research concepts of correlation and significance.

Method

Poetry is used in a four-step process in this research: 1) the first author created autobiographical poems as data; 2) the second author created research tankas using the first set of poems as data; 3) the third author used a variation of a grounded theory analysis to analyse the original poems and the tankas; 4) the third and fourth authors responded to the original poems and the 'findings' from the grounded theory analysis as responsive poems.

The first set of autobiographical poems presented here were written in their original form in 2001–2003 by the first author. As a means of insuring that they incorporate current feelings of the author, the following methodology was used to update them. Each day for a week, the author read each poem out loud and reflected upon it. After reflecting upon each poem, he wrote an entry in his research journal, considering if there were part of each poem that could be improved; improved not in terms of aesthetics, but in terms of the degree to which the work expressed his feelings, perspective, and perceptions. In the end some words were changed that were in fact poetically more appropriate, yet may have obscured the meaning of the poem to readers not familiar with how to 'read a poem'. Therefore, in an autobiographical sense, the poems were subjected to a 'member check' as a means of insuring greater validity. Thus, the poems presented here are slightly different then they are in their original form.

The research tankas were than created from the autobiographical poems. The tanka is an excellent tool for presenting complex and dichotomous data in a highly compressed form. Langer and Furman (2004b) found the tanka useful in exploring the complexities of identity development in native woman. With origins tracing back to 8th-century Japan, the tanka is one of the oldest forms of poetry still widely being used (Waley, 1976). The tanka is far older and, in many ways, of more historical significance than its cousin the haiku. Traditionally, the tanka was written in one long line of 31 'onji', or sound units (Ueda, 1996). The rhythmic pattern of onji consisted of units of 5-7-5-7-7 sound and meaning units (Strand and Boland, 2000). The onji in Japanese is a different unit of sound than is the English syllable, yet the American tanka has come to use the same pattern, corresponding to syllables instead of onji.

The second author utilized a six-step method for creating the research tankas. First, she read the autobiographical poems without the intent of providing formal codes and themes. Any initial impressions were noted. Second, the poems were reread and themes were identified. Third, recognizing the complex and often dialectical nature of poetry, dichotomies were explored. Fourth, to insure fidelity between the original poem and subsequent poetic re-creation (the research poem), the original poem was mined for words and phrases that more appropriately characterized each theme. Fifth, these words were organized into lines. Finally, the final tanka was written by placing these lines together from the dichotomies that emerged from the poems.

The third author read both sets of poems and coded them using an interpretive thematic analysis similar to a constructivist method of coding grounded theory (Charmaz, 2000). Action words were derived from reflecting on the language used in the poems and on the meanings of the messages incorporated in the poems-as-data. Ideas were built inductively throughout the process, and the method of constant comparison allowed the author to understand the meanings inherent in the poems through her own experiences of adolescent identity. These themes, ideas, and meanings are presented as stream-of-consciousness writings after each set of poems. A final analytical poem closes the discussion section, as the authors illustrate the use of poems-as-findings.

Poems as data and inquiry

Of role and existence

At night you served as family dog dirt scout,

for parents with narrowing eyes and fading vision,

past the outdoor cafes,

aromatic sauces filled the air,

tables glowed with dripping candles

crowded with laughing drunk voices,

past the prostitutes painted in red,

the gondolas and their baritoned mustached

captains thunderous songs,

the kissing lovers, their lost gazes

under shadowy doorways.

You miss not understanding.

Not being able

to fill in the blanks.

You may never again know

the joys of such a simplicity

of role and existence.

Themes: vision, aroma, lost, simplicity Dichotomy: light/dark

Tanka: With narrowing eyes

You scout for parents past songs

And gazes lost in

Shadows, drunk voices, red paint

Never again know the joy.

Interpretive coding:

Searching. . . Searching for someone to love me, looking for something that I didn't know I was looking for. . . Feeling jaded. . . Too old, too young, I knew too much before I was ready to understand. . . Knowing but not understanding. . . Aging. . . Others' fears giving way to my fears, wanting to be nurtured, wanting to be rescued, not knowing how. . . Blinding. . . Seeing. . . Do you need eyes to see? Do eyes make you see? My blind grandmother saw all. . . Not seeing. . . Watching. . . Being watched. . . Feeling awkward. What are they thinking? They're whispering about me. They're judging me. Living. . . Looking. . . I watch people. I try to understand them. I invent stories about them. What are they thinking? What are their stories? Losing. . . Missing. . . Misunderstanding. . . I see part of the whole. I fill in the blanks from my imagination. Things make no sense. Confusing. . . Unknowing. . . I want to know but I don't know how to ask. I don't know what to ask. I'm afraid to ask. Feeling joy. . . Simplifying. . . Existing. . . Ignorance is bliss.

And so much to follow

We walked upstairs away from the party.

Tucked out of sight from the hotel rooms,

in the soda machine cubby, my arm finally around a girl.

I moved my mouth towards her lips, a distance so far and slow

like a Model T racing towards Mars

She tuned her face away.

I don't like to kiss. I like other things.

What kind of other things?

Like rubbing breasts, her eyes catching mine then looking away.

So, I grabbed a breast like a doorknob,

turned to enter a forbidden room that I

did not understand, could not see the colors

of in the dark I was blind and otherwise senseless and

unable to hold it all. We walked back downstairs.

Would the other boys know of my failure?

How was it? What happened? Did you do anything?

The voice dropped an octave as I told them about her breasts.

And I was a hero and I was a man, I was ready to enter forbidden spaces,

fight the dragon that blocked the cave,

slaughter for sacrifice to gods above.

I was a small boy, hidden in full metal armor, dark with mace and lance,

soon to conquer a land I could hardly even imagine. And there would be much pain, much pain, to follow.

Themes: distance, dark Dichotomy: conquer/failure

Tanka: So far toward Mars

Like rubbing breasts then away

Blind, senseless, unable

The dragon that blocked the cave

Could not see the sacrifice

Interpretive coding:

Walking away. . . Fear. . . Afraid. . . He wanted me. . . Not ready. . . Wanting to be wanted but afraid. . . Not too much. . . Not too little. . . Keeping secrets. . . Who else did he want? . . . Exploring secrets. . . Waiting. . . Ready. . . Not ready . . . Moving. . . Trying. Exploring. . . Who else knows?. . . Exciting. . . Turning. . . Risking. . . Gossiping. . . Who else do I want to know? . . . Grabbing. . . Scaring. . . Confusing . . . Good girls don't . . . Rejoicing . . . Telling . . . Jumping . . . Popular girls do . . . Conquering . . . Inflicting . . . They all know . . . Make sure they know. . .

Reading Husserl

I remember you,

a glistening white pearl of hope,

a face caked in alabaster makeup.

And other shields

blocking your beauty,

like spitting rage,

or taking me too quickly,

shields, semi permeable

only for fleeting moments.

Perhaps seventeen year old girls

dressed in deep black funeral gowns

under the Orange Country sun,

rarely thought themselves lovely.

Burning in the littered sand

reading Sartre, Camus, Heidegger,

next to blond Tiger Beat perfection ,

besides the raw wood surfers

with bulging arms and sex wax,

and the graffitied lifeguard station

where you were raped, age twelve.

But you and I, always shameless,

the first to attack, the beer sticky dance floor

flaying to the final beat of the very last song

of maybe the sixth garage band

of a two dollar a night show.

And what did we have?

Sweat, stale malt liquor breath,

head dizzy and drunk with shots of what?-

Maybe living at seventeen,

and skin ripping frenetic skin,

and the future like a maze of burning oil wells-

but too few tender kisses,

too many furious fixes in deserted lots

in the hatchback of my car,

and the ready mix of your makeup,

of you, transfixed,

to my ears,

my taunt neck,

my silenced lips,

my gasping breath,

and the zipping up of pants too quickly

for me to learn about love.

You were like an opera in Latin,

or my mind now

twenty years later reading Husserl.

And now, in spite of the years,

if science be true,

I shut my eyes,

inhale, kiss, the back of my hand deeply,

some of your cells

lingering

like a lovesick embrace

that we could never share.

Themes: violence, time Dichotomy: too much/too few

Tanka: Glistening white hope

Spitting rage, burning in sand

Sex wax, bulging arms

You raped at age twelve, too transfixed

We could never share, learn love

Interpretive coding:
Remembering. . . Hoping. . . Girls in tight short shorts . . . Hiding. . . Shielding. . . Fearing. . . Pretending not to look . . . Reading. . . Thinking. . . Trying. . . At boys walking by . . . Looking. . . Remembering. . . Inflicting. . . Shaming. . . Trying to look older . . . Attaching. . . Dancing. . . Listening. . . Trying to be the one. . . Drinking. . . Living. . . Burning. . . Rushing. . . He noticed . . . Learning . . . Yearning. . . Remembering. . . Re-enacting. . .

Limitations

Methods such as those described in this article must be understood on their own terms and from their own epistemological stance. While the biases and subjectivities inherent in this method might be viewed as limitations, they can

TABLE 1.

	Ready	
	Empowering	
Not till you're ready		Now, I can't wait.
	Searching	
Cool fall		Cold winter.
	Trusting	
Crisp air		Crisp air.
	Knowing	
Why do you think you're ready?		Why do you think you're not ready?
	Respecting	
I really loved him		I really loved him.
	Aging	
I really liked him		I wanted him to like me.
	Seeing	
As a person		As a person.
	Watching	
He respected me		I wanted him to respect me.
	Living	
I was just ready		He was just ready.
	Looking	
I was emotionally ready		I was emotionally needy.
	Confusing	
I knew		I knew.
	Unknowing	
I was lucky		I was scared.
	Simplifying	
We came back early		We stayed up late.
	Existing	
The house was empty		His parents were upstairs.
	Fearing	
It was late afternoon		It was night.
	Exploring	
It wasn't planned		It was planned.
	Waiting	
It just happened		It happened.
	Moving	
Normal		Momentous.
	Trying	
Natural		Monumental.
	Grabbing	
Safe		Scared.
	Confusing	
Healthy		Did I look different?
	Telling	
Connected to him emotionally		Connected to him physically.
	Knowing	

T A B L E 1.   (*Continued*)

	Ready	
I was totally connected to my body		New sensations.
	Filling	
Pleasant		Pleasant.
	Identifying	
Good in retrospect		Good in retrospect.
	Hiding	
Unique experience		New experience.
	Hoping	
We were so open		We were so shy.
	Thinking	
Talking about bodies		Never talked about it.
	Remembering	
Expectations		Expectations.
	Attaching	
I have given this most private thing to someone else.		I have become a woman.
	Living	
Nice.		Nice.
	Speaking	

also be viewed as enlarging and enhancing the original data by imbuing it with the analyst's own subjectivities. While other analysts might have developed different codes and themes from the original material, the idiosyncratic associations, reflections, and personal meanings of the analyst are central to the endeavor. The goal is not necessarily to validate specific, concrete meanings from the original poetry, but to create a layered, emotionally resonant representation of the struggles of establishing adolescent identity as viewed by both poet and analysts. The validity of the data in large part relies upon the ability of the analyst to be unconsciously self-reflexive and truthful about their responses to the material and to the degree that this is possible the 'findings' will be strengthened.

However, it is clear that arts-based research and other similar methods are contested (Slattery, 2003). First, it has been argued that data such as these are more 'self-observed' than self-reflective (Eisner, 2005). Second, the idiosyncratic nature of this type of work makes it difficult to move beyond a sample of one. While the strength of this research may be in its ability to explore multiple perspectives on multiple levels, it is not designed to produce generalizable findings. When exploring themes of great psychosocial importance, this may often be an important consideration. Third, the arts-based researchers' concern for aesthetic concerns may at times get in the way of the ability to present

their subject as faithfully as possible. Indeed, such research may be viewed more as a dynamic interaction between researcher and research participant than an 'objective' portrayal of the 'subject'. Such critiques certainly are based upon more traditional views of social research, yet should be considered when attempting to understand these data.

Conclusion

This essay illustrates the use of poetry as data, as a method of inquiry and understanding, and as a method of writing and reporting. The use of multiple levels of data serves as multiple voices in the process of data analysis. Through the use of three different analysts, the reader are presented with multiple perspectives on the meaning of the data that are presented. These multiple perspectives are not available when researchers analyse their data in isolation. Having research analysts work as a team can mitigate against potential biases, encourage each other's self-reflexivity, and create a resonant environment that allows for deeper understanding of the material. Trusting relationships between researchers are also critical in order for analysts to explore potential vulnerabilities in their reactions to the data. Discussing and normalizing possible discomforts within the process prior to data analysis may help the research team in this respect.

We also encourage researchers to seek methods that appeal to practitioners at both cognitive and emotional levels. Many practitioners, and clinicians in particular, appreciate that there are multiple ways of knowing. Though possessing clinical utility, much social research can be experienced by practitioners as dry and unidimensional, and as failing to reflect the richness and complexity of the clients whom they see every day. Thus, there is also value in non-traditional research which is emotionally evocative and gives permission for readers to reflect on their own experiences and reactions beyond the researcher's limited conclusions.

Much as a performance scholar uses their performance to embody the experience under study and thus more fully understand it, poetic responses let us more fully understand the intimate experiences of the topic under study. In this way, the writing itself becomes a method of inquiry (Richardson, 2002), as we examine the meanings in the first set of poems through our own thoughts, feelings, and memories. Poetic autobiography adds to the qualitative turn that blurs the lines between social science and the humanities, bringing rigorous inquiry to life with evocative texts.

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