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Qual Health Res 2006 16: 560

DOI: 10.1177/1049732306286819

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Poetic Forms and Structures in Qualitative Health Research

Rich Furman

In this article, the author explores the uses of poetic forms in qualitative health research, analyzing thematically a poem written from a patient's perspective of being treated in an emergency room. From the themes identified, he created two "research poems" using two formal poetic structures: the French-Malaysian pantoum, and the Japanese-inspired American tanka. The author contextualizes this research through an exploration of the arts and poetry as qualitative research.

Keywords: *poetry-as-research; expressive arts research; emergency care*

The arts and humanities have become increasingly important in the treatment practices of health professionals (Begel, 1998; Donohoe & Danielson, 2004; Genova, 2003). Not only have music, poetry, dance, and art become aids in patient care, each has become a valuable tool in qualitative research. Poetry in particular has become a valuable tool for qualitative researchers. For example, Oiler (1983) used published poetry written by nurses as a source of qualitative data. Other researchers have used poetry as a means of data representation by arranging data from qualitative interviews into line and stanza breaks. By so doing, these researchers use poetic devices as a means of highlighting important themes from research. Text presented in this manner has been referred to as poetized verse (Willis, 2002) or poetic transcription (Carr, 2003; Glesne, 1997) and consists of quasipoetic forms that do not adhere to any particular standard poetic construction. In other words, although some poetic devices are used, the power of formal poetic structures has not been used in social science and health research. The overarching question of this study addresses this issue: How would structured poetic forms affect the presentation of data? In this article, I will explore the use of multiple poetic forms as vehicles for data representation using a poem as data. Differing from a previous article published in the "Pearls, Pith, and Provocation" section of *Qualitative Health Research* by Carr (2003), in this article I have used poetry throughout the research process, not solely for data representation. As my source of data, I will use a personal poem about an experience I had as a patient in an emergency room. I analyze data thematically and use the themes that were derived to create research poems in two forms: the pantoum and the tanka. Prior to presenting these forms, I explore the uses of poetry in, and as, social research.

POETRY AS RESEARCH

Over the past several decades, qualitative researchers have begun to use various artistic media as both sources of data and for the purposes of data representation. Willis (2002) described how the arts are congruent with the expressive research agenda. This is contrasted with the analytical tradition of research, in which experience is reduced into compressed numerical forms, which often strip the essence and important meanings from the experience or phenomenon being explored. Expressive research

does not grasp an object to analyze and subdue it. It attempts to hold it in consciousness, to allow its reality and texture to become etched on the mind. It holds back from closure and returns again and again to behold the object, allowing words and images to emerge from the contemplative engagement. (Willis, 2002, p. 4)

This notion is congruent with Denzin's (1997) conception of using alternative forms of data to evoke deep and powerful emotional reactions in the consumer of research. The expressive and creative arts seek to expand understanding, present subtle ideas that might even be paradoxical or dialectic, and lend themselves to the study of that which is difficult to reduce. This is particularly important in qualitative health research. For example, researchers and practitioners wanting to understand the health-seeking behaviors of those from historically oppressed communities must use methods that facilitate the expression of powerful emotions that might not always be easily expressed in a clear or linear fashion. The arts, which allow for the expression of feelings that might not have previously been clear even to research participants, create a space for an interactional process of discovery. As such, engaging participants in arts-based research should be not a top-down process of gathering data but a reciprocal relationship in which insights are developed and shared.

Poetry is a particularly powerful tool for achieving this aim. For thousands of years, poets have used the medium to explore and express the importance truths of their hearts and their experiences of existence. Poetry often has the capacity to penetrate experience more deeply than prose. For instance, in his classic and haunting poem *Howl*, Ginsberg (1956) proclaimed, "I saw the best minds of my generation destroyed by madness" (p. 36). When reading the poem, one does not doubt his perceptions or the intensity of the madness that he observed. His words penetrate the experience profoundly.

The compressed nature of the poem forces the author to make decisions about what is essential. This is analogous to the data reduction process in both qualitative and quantitative research. The compression of a poem allows text to express affect and context, or affect-in-context, powerfully and evocatively. The compression of a poem also makes it more consumable than longer, less "cooked" narratives. Poems are built on concrete, real-world images that engage the reader through various senses. Successful expressive poems are based on empirical data that are sensory and evocative in nature. Imagistic language allows the reader to enter a work and develop his or her own personal relationship with it; the images are transformed into knowledge pertaining to both the poem and the reader. Having had a visual, sensory image evoked, readers of a poem are allowed to explore the currency and relevance of the poem to their life. It is through the image that poetry can become metaphorically generalizable (Stein, 2003, 2004). Although a poem addresses a

particular person or situation, it seeks to communicate more universal truths. It is for this reason, perhaps, that Hirshfield (1997) referred to poetry as “the clarification and magnification of being” (p. 5).

Researchers who use poetry in and as research typically use it in one of two manners. First, researchers from various disciplines use poetry as a means of data representation (Poindexter, 2002). These researchers begin with traditional qualitative research methods and form poems from their data. Although the use of poetry might have been intended from the onset of the inquiry, poetry is used only after data have been collected. Poetry does not seem to be imbedded within the structure and processes of such studies. Other researchers have used poetry as an integral component to their inquiry (Chan, 2003; Richardson, 1993; Stein, 2003). In such studies, poetry is viewed not solely as a means of data representation but as a tool that gives shape to the research design as a whole. For instance, in his autoethnographic research of his father’s bout with cancer, Furman (2004) used poetry as a source of data and reflective narratives as a means of adding additional layers of meaning. Poetry and writing become both data and data analysis. In reflecting critically on his own words, and through presenting his own biases, readers are invited to explore their own sense of the limitations and potential reliability of the data.

As a means of data presentation, different poetic forms may have different effects on data re-presentation. Langer and Furman (2004) used a 700-year-old Japanese poem as a means of reducing traditional qualitative interviews into a compressed form. The *tanka*, from which the more familiar *haiku* arose, consists of five lines and forced the researchers to capture the essence of their clients’ words into a highly succinct form. By reducing the more lengthy interviews, we hoped to maintain the depth and richness of the interviews yet also achieve data reduction so prized by quantitative researchers. Besides this work, there is little indication that traditional poetic forms have been used in qualitative health research. This study experiments with such forms as a means of impacting the presentation of data.

METHOD

Several poems are presented based on different poetic forms that explore the same health care–related event. I wrote the original poem approximately a month after I was taken to the emergency room for what I thought, at the time, was a heart attack. As it turns out, the event was due to respiratory distress from nearby forest fires. There were three goals for writing this poem: (a) to represent faithfully the salient affective and psychosocial issues, (b) to create an aesthetically satisfying poem, and (c) as a means of self-exploration and even self-therapy. Although the explicit aim was not research per se, the above-stated goals are congruent with the expressive research agenda (Eisner, 1981; Finley & Knowles, 1995). In many regards, the poem can be viewed in much the same way as a qualitative interview, as an exploration of the lived experience of the research subject-participant.

I derived each of the subsequent poems from the first poem, which I used as data. Treating the poem as text, I analyzed it for themes using traditional open and axial coding methods. A five-round method of coding was used in the data analysis

phase. During the first round of coding, I read the poems without the intent to develop codes or themes. The goal was to familiarize myself with the text. During the second round, general impressions were noted and written in the margins of the text. The third round of coding consisted of a line-by-line analysis of the text. During the fourth round of coding, general themes were induced from the identified codes. I conducted a fifth round of coding 2 weeks after the previous round, using the identical method. Congruence was found in nearly all identified themes. I identified the following themes: fear of dying, fear of medical procedures, concern about the meaning of my life, humor as a defense, and the desire to live.

Once these themes were identified, I undertook the process of representing various themes in different poetic forms to experiment with the impact of the various forms. I posited that different poetic forms would highlight different aspects of the data. Too often, data re-presentation is seen as something separate from the research. Richardson (1992) has suggested that methods of data re-presentation are integral to the research process. By experimenting with representing this data in different forms, I hope to stimulate similar experimentation and attention to strategies of data representation. The original poem is presented first.

Emergency Room, Almost Thirty-Seven

They force tubes through your nostrils
and roughly shave your chest
in uneven swatches like cornfield
plowed by psilocybin farmers,
hook you to machines you cannot see,
the nurses calm as you contemplate
a life without you.
Who will attend the funeral?
How long with they keep your website up at work?
You are almost calm too.
You stare at a container on a shelf
written in black marker, *diapers*.
The doctor asks you questions
but you keep thinking about diapers.
Are they one size fits all?
Unisex, or one's cut for muscular squat legs—
think of Sumo wrestlers dancing on your chest.
The doctor asks—*heart or lungs?*
How are you to know?
On a bike or making love
they always seemed to work together
flawlessly,
but now you're not so sure,
three days before turning thirty seven.
When your wife enters you
ask her if a blood pressure reading of
400 over 200 is high
through feigned calmness and tearing eyes—yes dear it is,
and you tell her it sounds high and
thank god yours is nearer to normal,

and through your laughter she knows your ok,
 or as ok as you ever were,
 but maybe not,
 and tears mix with laughter
 thinking this could be your last night
 wishing to hear the sound of the wind
 or even your huge farting dog,
 tears, pouring down your lips.

The pantoum is a powerful form that can create a haunting effect through the repetition of lines throughout the poem. The pantoum is a French poem based on Malaysian forms (Unst, 2002). It was introduced to the West by the French poet Victor Hugo and gained popularity in the United States throughout the 20th century (Blackmore & Blackmore, 2004). Colorado poet Jack Marin (personal communication, June 1, 2003) referred to the pantoum as the poetry machine, in that the repetition of lines and energy the poem can be almost contagious. It should be noted that because each of the following research poems are of a condensed nature, all of the identified themes are not contained in each poem.

Tears, pouring down your lips
 through feigned calmness and tearing eyes
 they force tubes through your nostrils
 emergency room, almost thirty seven

through feigned calmness and tearing eyes
 you contemplate a life without you
 emergency room, almost thirty-seven
 How long with they keep your website up at work?

you contemplate a life without you
 Who will attend the funeral?
 How long will they keep your website up at work?
 You are almost calm too.

Who will attend the funeral?
 they force tubes through your nostrils
 you are almost calm too.
 tears, pouring down your lips

The following tanka was crafted mostly using lines from the original poem, with some minor restructuring to help the poem fit close to the traditional form of the American tanka. With origins tracing back to eighth-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 & 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.

Tears, pouring down lips
 who will attend the funeral?
 Feigned calmness and tears

they force tubes through your nostrils
 you contemplate life without you.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Clear differences can be noted between the three different forms and their effect. The first poem, written for the purposes of self-expression and self-therapy, was treated as raw data from which the other poems were written. This original "free verse" poem is analogous to a more traditional qualitative interview or other "uncooked" data. It is expansive and, at times, narrative. Although it expresses the fullness of my affective state, it also contains details that might not contribute to elucidating the most salient aspects of the experience. This is the weakness of presenting data in unanalyzed forms: Although it preserves the full "livedness" of the author's experience, the consumer of the research might not easily construe the most salient information. I created the two other poems by including only data that were uncovered by thematic analysis. The pantoum is long enough to contain a great deal of the original "data," yet through repetition, it creates a haunting emphasis on key affective aspects of the original work. It moves away from a narrative or linear portrayal of the experience and moves toward a more metaphorical, lyrical treatment. The tanka, as a highly compressed form, forced me to make specific choices and seek to explore the essence of the experience. The tanka is more direct in its treatment yet creates a sense of mystery through what is omitted and implied. Although I sought to rely on the data and the subsequent thematic analysis, intuition certainly played a key role in the creation of the tanka. As Reason (1988) has suggested, interpretative research processes often push researchers to trust their own intuition and "gut" sense of their data. One of the implications of this research is that qualitative tools and techniques borrowed from the humanities can have powerful effects on qualitative research. Qualitative researchers who use the arts and humanities in their inquiry can uncover insights that are multisensory in nature, thus portraying more completely many aspects of the human condition that do not lend themselves to numerical reduction, or even portrayal through traditional narrative and naturalistic methods.

The inquiry presented here is situated at the intersection between the humanities and social sciences. As disciplinary boundaries continue to be transcended, qualitative health researchers might find the insights of both lend richness and depth to their work. Research based on the "logical" of the humanities, which is metaphorical, image and intuition, is meant to illuminate experience and can complement research paradigms, which can subsequently test the generalizability of such arts-derived insights.

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