
Article

The Research Poem in International Social Work: Innovations in Qualitative Methodology

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Abstract

In this article, the authors explore the use of the research poem, a powerful method of qualitative research, in an international social work context. Using ethnographic poems as data, the authors demonstrate a method for creating research poems. They discuss potential strengths and limitations of this approach and explore implications for social research and international social work practice.

Keywords: research poetry, qualitative methods, international social work

Introduction

Quantitative methods are essential for helping social workers understand the nature of social problems. Statistical data can help them understand the scope of social ills and can provide international social workers with data about the effectiveness of interventions (Furman, 2004a). Although it is true that social workers must understand the scope of social problems and the efficacy of social technology, such data might not be of use to line-level practitioners working with lower income and vulnerable clients. Line-level social workers operating in international contexts need data to help develop their understanding of the lived experience of those they are charged to serve. Social workers need research that helps them understand the emotional and contextual realities of people whose life experiences are often very different from theirs. Traditionally, this need has been met by traditional qualitative data, such as in-depth interviews or ethnographic reports. However, Francis (2002) observed that such data are often too impersonal or dense to be easily consumed and often leave readers overwhelmed or unmoved. Methods

are needed that can communicate contextual and affective realities of thick qualitative descriptions yet are condensed enough to be easily consumed by community-based social workers and human service practitioners, who might not be well versed in research.

In this article, we seek to present a research innovation that might be a valuable tool in meeting this aim. Specifically, we explore the uses of poetry and poetic structures and forms as valuable tools of qualitative social research. Based on practices from expressive arts research and more traditional qualitative methods, the research poem can present evocative, powerful insights that can teach us about the lived experience of social work clients. Specifically, this might better meet the needs of line-level social workers working with diverse communities.

We will explore in this article the use of the research poem in an international social work context. First, the uses of poetry as a tool of qualitative social research are explored. Second, using ethnographic poems as data, we demonstrate a method for creating research poems. Third, we discuss potential strengths and limitations of this approach, and explore implications for social research and international social work practice.

Poetry as qualitative research

Postmodern researchers have recognized the value of studying the lived, subjective experience of individuals and groups (Alsop, 2002; Eisner, 1981; Reason, 1988). Less concerned with statistical generalizability, such authors instead are interested in “metaphoric generalizability,” the degree to which qualitative data penetrate the essence of human experience and reveals themselves fully to an engaged audience (Denzin, 1997; Oiler, 1983). The goal of such generating and presenting of this type of data is to inspire an empathic, emotional reaction, so the consumer of research can develop a deep, personal understanding of the “subject” of the data. Such understandings might help develop one of the most essential attributes of practice in various professional disciplines: practice wisdom. Practice wisdom has been viewed as the transaction between scientific information and that of the phenomenological experience that is derived from interactions with clients (Klein & Bloom, 1995). The culmination of such ways of knowing are synthesized through the process of critical thinking and assist the social worker in making decisions in the field. The research endeavor is not viewed merely as an activity aimed at finding “facts” but, instead, is geared toward creating knowledge that might affect its audience intellectually and emotionally.

This type of affective knowledge is what social work practitioners need to sensitize themselves to the life contexts and experiences of their clients. It informs practice wisdom by allowing scientific information to be more than the consumption of quantitative data and instead creates a research experience that stimulates the critical thinking that is necessary for developing well-informed decision-making skills. International social work, in particular, might call on social workers to develop a holistic, contextual understanding of their clients. For those social workers whose origin is in developed countries, not only must this awareness be cultivated but, to be effective, social workers must transcend initial reactions that are typically affective in quality and move to the level of practice wisdom. International social workers providing services to those whose life context is very different from theirs must seek data that present the lived experience of their clients. In particular, the international social worker must understand the complex relationship between culturally specific emotional tendencies within context that are often difficult for them to understand fully. Qualitative methods that are easily digestible yet preserve the depth and richness of context are highly valuable to these workers.

Over the past two decades, researchers have demonstrated the value of the creative, expressive, and even performing arts in social science research as mechanisms for presenting data (Allen 1995; Barone & Eisner, 1997; Blumenfeld-Jones, 1995; Cole & Knowles, 2001; Eisner, 1981, 1991; Finley & Knowles,

1995; McNiff, 1998; Prosser, 1998; Stein, 2003; Willis, Smith, & Collins 2000; Wong, 1999). The agenda of expressive arts research is not to reduce the human endeavor but to illuminate and expand on an experience or phenomenon. Through the use of expressive or creative arts medium, researchers attempt to show the richness and fullness of the phenomenon being explored.

Poetry has only relatively recently been used as a tool of social research and has been used in various ways throughout the research process. The most popular application of poetry includes its use as a tool of data representation and presentation. In her powerful and groundbreaking research on women's experiences of family life, Richardson (1992) crafted her interview data into lyrical poems to present the "lived experience" of her research participants. Using more traditional qualitative methods during the data collection phase of her study, she relied on her sense of the data and knowledge of literary tools to stay as true to the meaning of the original text as possible. During the writing of the drafts of her poems, she used a journal as a reflexive tool to explore her potential biases about her research.

In her research on the caregivers of HIV patients, Poindexter (1997) used research poems to present traditional qualitative data.

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 seemed 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, Poindexter (2002) moved toward more standardized procedures adapted from field of linguistics and the work of Gee (1991). These procedures are designed to provide structure to the research process and help implement a systematic process into data analysis and the creation of poetic research texts. Through use of line and stanza breaks, and various types of accents and stresses, Poindexter created texts that integrate the original affect of the research interview.

Although some authors have used poetry more as a means of data representation, in the work of Furman (2004b), one finds poetry embedded in nearly all phases of the research process. In his autoethnographic study of his father's cancer, poetry is used as the data from which narrative reflections are written. These reflections serve as data as well as analysis of the original ethnographic verse. In a similar study (Furman, 2006a), poetry and narrative are used to explore the author's lived experience of the death of a companion animal. The various types of data provide different lenses through which to understand issues of loss, death, and family composition. In this account, the researcher/author was in a unique position to use self-reflection as a type of member check.

Langer and Furman (2004) have used formal poetry as a tool of data analysis. The authors wrote Japanese tankas as a means of representing interview data about the experience of ethnic identity of a biracial Native woman. In the creation of their research poems, the authors began their process by engaging in traditional thematic analysis, whereby they mined the data for codes and themes. Once these themes and codes were identified, the authors found key passages within the text that represented each theme. These words were then arranged into the form of a Japanese tanka. In using this method, the authors assert that they were able to maintain fidelity to the original data yet were able to achieve data reduction as well. By achieving both aims, the authors hoped to have created a method that allows qualitative research to be presented in an evocative and trustworthy manner; yet unlike more lengthy ethnographic accounts, is easy to consume.

The term research poems has been advocated by various authors (Furman, 2004, 2006b; Stein, 2003; Willis, 2002). The term connotes the use of poetry less for expressive and literary means, and more for

the purposes of generating or presenting data. The difference between a literary poem and a research poem can be seen in the position of the author to the data. Whereas research poems might borrow methods from literary poems, as is the case in the present study, the are written with the expressed purpose of presenting data that remain faithful to the essence of the text, experience, or phenomena being represented. Literary poems do not necessarily follow this mandate, as they might incorporate fantasy, shift reality to incorporate alternative perspectives, and even alter the original experience in fundamental ways. This is not to say that no literary poem can be an accurate view of reality. For instance, the poems used in this study as the primary text for analysis were written to capture the experience of the first author. Additionally, as with other data analysis methods, researchers using the research poem will explicate their methods prior to their use. This allows other researchers to make assertions as to the rigor the methods (Lietz, Langer, & Furman, in press) and to replicate the methods.

Method

Because international social workers might easily be overwhelmed with the sheer magnitude of unfamiliar stimuli and working environments, developing a tool that will allow them to reflect concisely and accurately what they see, hear, think, and feel while they grapple with the demand to listen to their clients' needs and concerns is a compelling agenda. To facilitate the development such a tool with accuracy and precision, we present the following examples of how poetry can help to meet this demand. As such, the methods below can be viewed in two ways: first, as a process that can be used to help social workers develop empathy and understanding of their clients; and second, as a method of data reduction that re-represents data for the purposes of research. Clearly, the two purposes do not need to be viewed separately but can be used for either or both purposes by practitioners and researchers alike. In this study, we have chosen to use several poems as the based of data re-representation.

Two sets of three poems are presented here. The original poems were written about two clients with whom the first author worked as a volunteer in Antigua, Guatemala. Both were children who lived in a hospital that cared for physically and psychiatrically disabled children who had been abandoned by their parents. The author had three objectives for writing these original poems: (a) to represent faithfully the salient affective and psychosocial issues that he encountered in his interactions with the children, (b) to create aesthetically satisfying poems, and (c) as a means for the author of exploring his perceptions and feelings about the complex, personal issues implicated in cross-cultural and international helping. Although the explicit aim was not research per se, the abovestated goals are congruent with the expressive research agenda (Eisner, 1981; Finley & Knowles, 1995). Understood differently, these poems can be viewed in much the same way as qualitative data, as an exploration of the lived experience of the research subject/participant. The poems are data about both subject and author, and, significantly, about the relationship between them. These poems are texts that were subsequently analyzed. The methods of data employed here can used for analyzing other types of text, for instance original ethnographic transcripts, newspapers, and other media text, as well as any other data that can be transcribed into written form.

The subsequent research poems each were derived using the original poem as data. Treating the poems itself as text, the first author analyzed them for themes using traditional open and axial coding methods. A five-step method was used in the data analysis phase. During the first round of coding, the researcher read the poems without the intent to develop codes or themes. The goal was to familiarize himself 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. The researcher conducted a fifth round of coding 2 weeks after the previous round using the identical method with the intent to discover any uncovered themes and to ensure accurate and adequate representation of the themes.

Once these themes had been identified, the first author undertook the process of representing some of the observed themes in different poetic forms. He posited that different poetic forms would produce different effects. For instance, the use of the pantoum and its repetitive lines allows for the repetition of salient or emotionally evocative themes. The use of the tanka, which is characterized by an extreme economy of words, forces the researcher to make decisions about what data should be included and what may be left out. In many qualitative studies, the method of data presentation is taken for granted and is viewed as a natural byproduct of data collection and analysis. Richardson (1992) has suggested that methods of data representation are integral to the research process. By experimenting with re-presenting these data into different forms, we hope to stimulate similar experimentation and attention to strategies of data re-presentation.

In a previous study, this researcher demonstrated how different poetry structures gave the presentation of data different focus (Furman, 2006b). Too often, data re-presentation is seen as something separate from the research. The original poem is presented first. The following tankas were crafted using, for the most part, lines from the original poem, with some minor restructuring to help the poem fit closely 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, is 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 unit of sound in Japanese is different from the English syllable, yet the American tanka has come to use the same pattern corresponding to syllables instead of onji.

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. Colorado poet Jack Martin referred to the pantoum as the poetry machine, in that through the repetition of lines and energy, the poem can be almost contagious (J. Martin, personal communication, 2003). It should be noted, however, that because each of the following research poems is of a condensed nature, all of the identified themes are not contained in each poem. Also, you will note that the tankas do not adhere to the exact number of syllables. The structure serves as an important guide but should be used flexibly.

Poetry Set One

Que Que

Alone in the gray soft shadows
the scowl of caverns haunted

arms crossed silent,
and what nine year old

folds her arms in anger, but those
abandoned by deathsome roadside

or in shanty shacks baking alone?
She waits for voices hurled between fragile ears,

her only communication a sound or
maybe a word, noone knows.

Que que, what what. Does she intend
her yearning calls to compel us to know?

She follows me around the courtyard
and tilts her head to shoulder whispering, que que,

what, what, phonics and eyes begging us to not fail.
I wonder how come not, why why?

Perhaps not yet ready,
never ready

to comprehend the reasons
for being thrown away

like littered, scavenged bones
to the scrap-heap.

Que Que: A Tanka

scowl of caverns haunted
only communication a sound
folds nine year old arms, anger

never ready to comprehend
the reasons for being thrown away

Que Que: A Pantoum

like littered, scavenged bones to the scrap-heap
what nine year old folds her arms in anger,
those abandoned by deathsome roadside
She waits for voices hurled between fragile ears

what nine year old folds her arms in anger
Alone in the gray soft shadows
She waits for voices hurled between fragile ears
the scowl of caverns haunted

Alone in the gray soft shadows
her only communication a sound or maybe a word
the scowl of caverns haunted
She follows me around the courtyard

the reasons for being thrown away
those abandoned by deathsome roadside

She follows me around the courtyard
like littered, scavenged bones to the scrap-heap

Poetry Set Two

Juanita

I was barely not a boy when you called
me father, papa en Español.

You, Juanita, stricken with Polio,
your face and limbs, fissile, useless

dangle to sides like discarded threads,
or the child you were, dismissed for frailty.

Each day I came to visit,
you screamed for me shrill, eyes

boundless, head thrust back, tilted uncontrollable.
Held feather light flimsy body, contorted arms locked in mine,

tortured laps around decaying courtyard garden
of the hospital that is your lifelong home.

Fed you each day for months
each bite you choked down

a painful victory followed by relief,
and a reminder of the cruelties of existence.

Never spoke of the future
we both knew all too well,

When it was time for me to return, you would think I,
like the others, left because of you.

Juanita: A Tanka

Like discarded threads
your face and limbs useless
dismissed for frailty

the future we knew too well
would think I left because of you

Juanita: Pantoum

Your face and limbs, fissile, useless
you, Juanita, stricken with Polio.
When it was time for me to return,
you would think I, like the others, left because of you.

You, Juanita, stricken with Polio,
tortured laps around decaying courtyard garden
you would think I, like the others, left because of you.
the child you were, dismissed for frailty.

tortured laps around decaying courtyard garden
of the hospital that is your lifelong home
the child you were, dismissed for frailty.
dangle to sides like discarded threads

tortured laps around decaying courtyard garden
held feather light flimsy body, contorted arms locked in mine,
dangle to sides like discarded threads
Your face and limbs, fissile, useless

Discussion

The two sets of poems demonstrate the impact of using different poetic forms in data analysis. In the first set, the tanka is perhaps too condensed. Too much of the context seems to be stripped out of the poem. It is hard to get a sense of the person and her lived experience. Yet, although this tanka is not able to express fully many of the key themes of the original poems, its parsimony does lead to an interesting effect. In the tanka, the relationship between the first two stanzas is delicate. They are clearly related yet stand alone. In this poem, the emphasis on the theme of abandonment is stressed in the second stanza but subtly connects the reader to the first. However, as a research tool, this poem does not seem to express fully enough important elements of the text (the first poem) to have successfully captured its essence. From this exercise, what emerges is a sense that for passages in which themes emerge, or where there is a relationship between two themes that can be emphasized, the tanka might be a good tool in data reduction and presentation.

This study highlights the importance of considering the manner in which data are represented. As previously noted, data presentation is often overlooked in qualitative studies. This might be a function of many researchers' having been trained primarily in quantitative research methods, in which means of data presentation are limited. In qualitative studies however, the manner in which data are presented greatly influences the meaning that consumers of research take from the data. Furthermore, the very "consumability," or the degree to which the data engage their readers, is an essential element to consider. For those individuals engaged in international social work, the use of the research poem might be a powerful and concise way to transfer data to the reader, to complement their own necessary reflexivity, and to use the perspective of the person in the environment effectively.

Implications

In this article, we have presented a postmodern perspective on research that uses various forms of poetry to represent the lived experience of social work clients. The model of data presentation has implications for social work researchers and practitioners, particularly those working in an international context facing

the daunting task of coming to understand the unique experiences of people who are experiencing their world in a way that might be vastly different from that of the researcher or practitioner. Social workers who engage in practice with diverse populations long for ways of knowing that can illuminate the unique experiences of their clients. We have offered here a model by which poetry can be used to present qualitative data in a way that evokes both emotion and thinking about lived experience creating a way of knowing that is better suited for these complex practice settings.

Coming to understand the ways in which poetry represents a client's story while also stimulating our reflexivity has implications for researchers and practitioners. First, social work researchers can recognize the usefulness of various forms of poetry as presented in this article as ways of reconstructing qualitative data that are stimulating and meaningful to the reader. If we consider the desire for research to reach an audience and, ultimately, to have implications to those we are serving, social work researchers should consider this model as way of representing the qualitative data of diverse populations. Second, this model has implications for practice. Social work practitioners can use poetry forms, such as those that were presented in this article, as another way of knowing that can be used to inform their practice wisdom. Social work practitioners working in an international capacity must recognize the complexity of their work and be open to ways of knowing that stimulate thinking rather than ways of knowing that narrowly prescribe their work. Using the methods advocated here, social workers can develop practice wisdom by engaging fully in the stories of others and having to make difficult decisions about what data to include and what to exclude. The process of data analysis and reduction forces the practitioner/researcher to grapple with the context of the emotions and behavior presented, and to understand this behavior in the context in which it occurs. By coming to see the differences between the cultural contexts in which the research participant lives, and the cultural context in which the practitioner/researcher was raised and trained, one can come to understand the subtleties of international practice; that is, one becomes acutely aware that although many existential and developmental truths make certain experiences "universal," the manners in which they are expressed and lived are often very different. Finally, we suggest in this article that social work practitioners can, indeed, recognize their work as not being separate from that of the researcher but, instead, can see it as lending knowledge to our field. Social workers who engage in practice in an international context have the unique opportunity to learn about diverse lived experiences. Coming to see their work as qualitative data that can be developed into poetry, therefore informing other practitioners and researchers, allows researchers in our field to benefit from understanding and thinking about unique experiences across the world.

Certainly, limitations to this model exist. Not all social work researchers or practitioners are comfortable with creative writing or maintain the skill necessary to formulate client stories into poetry. An additional limitation is the lack of generalizability of this way of knowing. Despite these limitations, however, the use of poetry as a form of data reconstruction that creates evocative presentations of client stories provides a new way of looking at the presentation and understanding of the lived experience for both social work researchers and practitioners.

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