



Creative Approaches to Research

2015: Volume 8 Issue 3

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ISSN: 18359442

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Autoethnographic Explorations of Researching Older Expatriate Men

Magnifying Emotion Using the Research Pantoum

Rich Furman

Abstract

This article explores how the research poem is a valuable tool for autoethnographic qualitative researchers who wish to highlight powerful emotions in an evocative way. It presents the researcher's reflexive field note data from a qualitative study of older expatriate men. The author arranged these data into a poetic form called the Pantoums. The article demonstrates how poetic structures and forms can be used to magnify the affective content of data, thereby providing focus and emotional resonance to data derived from various forms of qualitative data.

Keywords: Autoethnography, poetic inquiry, poetry as research, expatriate men

Introduction

Jane Hirshfield (1997) observed that poetry magnifies and clarifies life. The notion of research magnifying the lived experience is an important one that at times has been lost in the positivist discourse about the aims of social research (Eisner, 1981; van Manen, 2006). Expressive researchers and scholars have flung aside the shackles of false objectivity and detachment (Ellis & Bouchner, 2000), and have sought to value the depths of the lived experiences of research participants and

researchers alike (Francis, 2002). Researchers' capacity to use their own humanity to connect with the humanity of others is essential; increasing our own capacity for emotional depth and insight is certainly a prerequisite to our producing research of emotional depth and sophistication (Denzin, 2003). Many research methodologies have been developed that seek to explore and represent the lived experiences in evocative, passionate ways that can help inform various "consumers" of research (Finley & Knowles, 1995).

While traditional ethnographic data, thick descriptions, and other evocative methods do have the ability to present people's emotions in context, they are at times too dense and long to be of value to people who are not likely to read research studies (Cahnmann, 2003). Additionally, the lack of compression and immense density in most in-depth qualitative studies can often obscure the most salient affective messages and themes that researchers wish to communicate. Evocative as they are, they often do not implement means of data reduction and presentation that allow for readers to connect to the core messages and insights of the researchers.

Many of these concerns contributed to what has often been referred to as the "crisis of representation" (Denzin, 1994; Richardson, 2000). Those responding to these dilemmas have experimented with writing and data representational methods that present the lives of others in evocative and creative ways (Poindexter, 2002; van Manen, 2002). The strength of these diverse means of data presentation rests in their privileging the creativity of their authors in exploring methods that are most congruent with their own sensibilities, talents, and understanding of the data. One such tool that has been developed by researchers from various disciplines has been referred to as the research poem or poetic inquiry (Faulkner, 2009). In poetic inquiry, researchers use various methods to present data in creative and evocative ways. As such, it has highlighted the spirit of creativity that has typified what Hemmingson (2008) posited as a needed antidote to various scholars positioning their methods, experimental as they may be, as "the right way."

Yet, what of the scholar who wishes to experiment with such approaches, yet finds him/herself without the artistic sensibilities (or confidence in such sensibilities) to engage in such work? Might not some forms or structures assist them, without being overly prescriptive as to hinder their experimentation?

The purpose of this article is to explore how the research poem is a valuable tool for qualitative researchers who wish to highlight powerful emotions in evocative ways that seeks to create a sense of "emotional resonance" with its audience. More specifically, as means of providing a potential method and one structure to those interested in experimenting with poetic inquiry, this article will explore how the poetic form of the Pantoum is a powerful vehicle for focusing on and magnifying human emotion. In a previous study, the author demonstrated how

different poetic forms and structures lead to different data representational effects (Furman, 2006).

The Pantoum is a useful form for researchers, as its use of repeating lines can create an evocative and haunting “ringing” of emotional content discovered through various data collection methods. In this paper, autoethnographic research poems are presented based upon the author’s field notes of his research with older expatriate men. The poems are autoethnographic, in that they explore the researchers connections to broader socio-cultural issues implicated in the process of conducting research with his respondents (Reed-Danahay, 1997).

The article will meet its aims in the following ways. First, it will explore how poetry can be used as a tool in expressive research, and it can be a valuable vehicle for focusing and magnifying emotion and meaning. Second, it will explore the use of autoethnography in research, and situate autoethnographic methods as a tool for social research. Third, the form utilized for data representation in this article, the Pantoum, is described. Finally, four research pantoums are presented that explore key themes that the author grappled with in his research with older, expatriate men. I end with these poems and not traditional concluding comments, in the spirit of the poetic tradition’s call to “show don’t tell.” The poems should speak for themselves.

Poetic Inquiry

Arguments that pit one methodology over another often neglect to account for the multiplicity of needs for various forms of data. An important use of research is to help practitioners from many professions (i.e. education, social work, nursing, counseling ect) understand and develop empathy for the lived experience of others (Witkin, 2014). Research methods that focus on the powerful emotions of people may be useful in sensitizing practitioners to how people experience various affective states; such data may better prepare them for contending with powerful and even extreme emotions than other types of data.

To be an effective portrayer of emotion, methods should amplify or magnify the affective experience. Magnification does not connote alteration; when a biologist peers into a microscope, thereby magnifying a specimen, they are more able to view essential aspects of their subject and their details more clearly and with minimal distractions. So too, in applying or magnifying emotions, they are highlighted and enlarged, or brought from a background consisting of a multitude of information to the foreground of awareness.

One means of magnifying meaning in research is through the use literary and artistic means of data (re)presentation. Such methods are often grouped under the broad classification of arts-based or expressive arts research (Leavy, 2008). Expressive arts research use various artistic genres such as poetry, music, art, and dance to

present data in a way that may preserve the “lived experience” of research subjects (Finley & Knowles, 1995). According to Willis (2002), research that incorporates or relies upon the expressive arts is looking not to analyze or constrain meaning, but to elaborate and enhance it.

Poetic inquiry, or the research poem, has been used throughout the research process. For instance, researchers have conceptualized poetry itself as a form of highly condensed affective data (Furman 2004a; 2004b; 2006; Furman, Collins, Langer & Bruce, 2006; Furman, Lietz & Langer, 2006). Poetry has even been used in research for the generation of research questions (Leung & Lapum, 2005). Perhaps the most common mean of utilizing poetry in research is as a method of data (re)presentation (Predergast, 2009). Research poems can be written from data as a way of presenting the results of research implementing various data collection strategies. One of the first researchers to utilize research poetry was Richardson, who used research poems drawn from interview data to more fully capture the “lived experience” of women’s family life (Richardson, 1992).

Poindexter (1997) crafted research poems based on her work with HIV-affected caregivers. Later, Poindexter (2002) used the linguistic work of Gee (1991) to help her standardize the process of creating a research poem. By using Gee’s work, Poindexter was able to develop procedures that provide structure for her crafting of research poetry. The notion of structure is essential, as it allows for researchers to explore the strengths and weaknesses of various techniques.

Furman and others have also adopted various methods for crafting research poetry (Furman, 2006, Furman, Lietz & Langer, 2006; Langer and Furman, 2004). By utilizing existing poetic forms, research poetry help provide data a container to highlight essential themes found in the data, regardless of the method of data analysis. Langer and Furman (2004) explore two main ways of crafting research poetry. The first method uses only the words of the subject, from narratives, interviews or other types of rich qualitative data that has been analysed thematically. When using this method, only exact words from the original or transcribed text are placed into the poem. The words can be rearranged or juxtaposed in order to highlight themes, or to convey complex or conflicting ideas. A second method of crafting poems in research is writing interpretive poems based upon the researcher’s sense of the data. Interpretive poems differ from research poems in that they can use words and ideas that may not be found explicitly in the data itself. An interpretive poem could explore anything from the actual lived experience of the research participant, to the relationship of the researcher to participants, or even the research process itself. In writing interpretive poems, the researcher must be reflexive, aware of their own positionality, and have a deep understanding of the strengths and limitations of their data.

Depending upon the impact the researcher wants his/her work to have, different poetic forms may be utilized. Different poetic forms and structures possess

different features that create various possibilities (Furman, 2006). For example, the Tanka, due to its highly condensed, five sentence line structure of limited syllables, was found to be useful in capturing the essence of the data being analyzed (Furman 2006). The Pantoum, on the other hand, was useful for highlighting affective aspects of original data through the use of repeating lines that move throughout the poem's form (Furman, 2006).

Through the use of poetry and poetic forms, lengthy and complex data can be presented in a shorter form than traditional ethnographic accounts and narratives. These ethnographic accounts, while providing thick descriptions, may be unwieldy or hard to digest for consumers of research. They may also at times be too impersonal to move readers to really understand research participants' lived experience (Francis, 2002). For these reasons, research poetry is powerful tool that seasoned and new expressive researchers can use to enhance the affective magnitude of their work.

Autoethnography/Autoethnographic Poems

Autoethnography is a method and methodology of research that seeks to explore sociocultural phenomena by using the self as a vehicle of research (Chang, 2008; Pelias, 2003; Philaretou & Allen, 2006). Richardson (2000) observed that autoethnography is:

Highly personalized, revealing texts in which authors tell stories about their own lived experiences, relating the personal to the cultural (p. 935).

Autoethnographies vary in the degree and manner in which focus on the self (auto), on a cultural group (ethno) and the tools they use to engage of inquiry (graphy) (Reed-Danahay, 1997; Foster, McAllister, & O'Brien, 2006). However, all autoethnographers engage in a process of casting the gaze of the researcher on themselves, using these insights as a means through which to explore the larger world. How this is done, to some degree, depends on the goals, methods and epistemological orientations of the researcher.

In this sense, it has been suggested that autoethnographies may be classified into two subtypes, evocative or expressive (Ellis, Adams & Bochner, 2011) and analytical (Anderson, 2006). Evocative or expressive autoethnographies utilize methods from the humanities, the arts, and narrative based inquiry. The focus of such research is on the ways in which people's lived experiences, as told through evocative and powerful narratives, can provide insights into the explored phenomena. Ellis & Bochner (2000) privilege the power of emotion and empathic resonance as a means of contextual, personal truth telling. Expressive autoethnographers may or may not always consciously "bend" their narratives consciously

and expressly back to larger social issues. Some expressive autoethnographers allow their narratives to become unanalyzed, “lived” exemplars of larger social issues. Such researchers do not view the role of the expressive researcher to reduce their story to easy to comprehend generalizations, but instead to create an evocative, emotional resonance with their audience (Willis, 2002).

Analytical autoethnographies, less common in literature, are less influenced by the humanities and arts based traditions and more by the social sciences (Anderson, 2006). Analytical autoethnographers tend to utilize methodologies that are more congruent with various qualitative approaches that use triangulation of methodology, often beyond the lived experience of the self into collecting data from and about others (Chang, 2008). Additionally, analytical autoethnographies tend to (but not always) utilize more explicit theoretical lenses by which to understand the data.

Autoethnography is a recent form, and as such, it is still under development; insights and strengths from various types of autoethnographies should be used as they meet the aims of a particular study. For example, while expressive autoethnographers tend to privilege complete narratives, they certainly can utilize methods that are evocative and powerful, yet not privilege long and complete narratives. For instance, Furman (2005) used poetry and reflective memos to explore the personal and sociocultural meaning of the death of his companion animal. Further, analytical autoethnographies most certainly can rely on powerfully evocative text, and may at times privileged insights into the self. I would argue that taken together these two stands of autoethnography actually can be viewed as various strategies and tools of the thoughtful and methodologically evolving autoethnographer. As the approach is relatively new, it is important that researchers utilize various tools whereby they can explore the individual as a means of speaking of larger group and social truths.

Methods

The Pantoum

Prior to exploring the methods of this study, a brief description of the poetic form used in this study, the Pantoum, is presented. In the 15th century, the pantoum originated in Malaysia as a simple folk poem. Originally, it consisted of two rhyming couplets, but as it was introduced into Western countries, its form has evolved and has become more structurally variable. The pantoum now is a poem consisting of any number of stanzas, whose second and fourth lines become the first and third lines of the next stanza. Typically, the last line of a pantoum is the same as the first line. The repetitive nature of the pantoum presents an almost haunting quality. Pantoums are emotionally evocative, and have been ideal for the

expression of intense topics. I present this poem, written by me not for research purposes, as an example. Notice the effect of repetition, and how starting or ending stanzas with certain lines can create powerful emotional responses. While the intentional use of line positioning is essential, the author of a Pantoum is often surprised and challenged by the juxtapositioning of lines in future stanzas. The evaluation of position and its effect compels the author of a Pantoum to contend with various layers of meaning and consciousness that are essential in autoethnographic exploration (Ellis and Bochner, 2000; Humphreys, 2005).

Pantoum for Her

Brains leaking through my ears my years with you,
 pawned to prisons, priests,
 we traded clubbings between whispering songs,
 and in the end, vacuous.

Pawned to prisons, priests,
 dog rectal tumors, rent, chigger orphans the rest,
 in the end, vacuous,
 faded photos chucked into the sea.

Dog rectal tumors, rent, chigger orphans the rest,
 saddled with the shit of space you crawled away,
 fading photos chucked into the sea.
 Spent love like cholesterol, battery acid, phlegm.

And taking stock of our years? What's left?
 We traded clubbings between whispering songs,
 spent love like cholesterol, battery acid, phlegm,
 Brains leaking through my ears my years with you.

*

The following pantoums were written from field notes I have taken while conducting research with older expatriate men. For the last several years, I have conducted in depth interviews with men 55 and older who have expatriated to Costa Rica, Thailand, Mexico and the Philippines. In addition to my interviews and interview transcriptions, I have taken dozens of pages of field notes focusing on my emotional reactions to the research participants, their lives, social conceptions about them, and observations about my own life. While I have learned a great deal about their lives, I have also learned a great deal about myself, my own sense of identity, aging, and masculinity. While such insights have at times been

denigrated as constituting “navel gazing” (Holt, 2003), this type of self reflection and reflexivity is invaluable for those of us who not only are researchers, but who teach and practice within the helping professions (social work, in my case). I do not view this as an either analytical or an expressive autoethnography, yet one which is influenced by and consists of both traditions, yet consciously seeks methods that best meet its aims. It begins with traditional qualitative interviews and field note, yet is represented through a specific poetic form and structure, not a traditional narrative. I am also conscious of my own use of theory(ies), in this case from masculinities studies, as a primary set of lenses that focus me on various aspects of my participants’ experiences, as well as my own. In this sense, I use analytical lenses both in my creation of field notes, and in my understanding of them. Through the use of theory, a traditional method of thematic coding, and an evocative, expressive vehicle of data (re)presentation, this study is influenced by both the analytical and expressive autoethnographic traditions.

For a two week period I read my research notes, and made interpretive codes in the margins of printed copies. After this initial coding, I waited for two weeks as a cooling off period before before I approached the text again. This was done to allow for a bit of distance by which to view the text with fresh eyes. I then re-coded the data, without looking at the first set of analytical codes. Two days later, I compared the two sets of codings, and wrote reflective notes to understanding any discrepancies between the two sets of codings. After several hours of reflecting upon these codes, I developed final themes that reflected my sense of the meaning of the data. Given that I was both researcher and researched, my use of self reflection and multiple coding sessions helped insure the trustworthiness of the data (Leitz, Langer & Furman, 2006). Still, while trustworthiness is an essential consideration for all qualitative researchers, I make no pretense about themes being dispassionately or objectively induced; the purpose of inquiry such as this is to present one’s lived, emotional experience. Themes were selected for inclusion here not for their representativeness or generalizability, but for their representation of what I, the subject and “researcher” believe to be a core, emotionally relevant theme. Therefore, while themes were systematically discovered, their inclusion was based upon my own values and emotional resonance.

Research Pantoums

Research Pantoum One

Themes: Social perceptions, my own biases, role of researcher

These are the words they use against them:

Sexpats. Misogynists. Failures.

And I, the researcher?

I am supposed to be objective, observe, code data.

Sexpats. Misogynists. Failures.

I feel their tears inside of me, light tears, trying to hide.

I am supposed to be objective-observe, field notes, code data.

First. We are all human.

I feel their tears inside of me, light tears, trying to hide.

I feel my own- what am I to do?

First. We are all human.

Must I report my heart to the Human Subjects Committee?

I feel my own- what am I to do?

Put down the notebook, the pen- touch a bony shoulder.

Must I report my heart to the Human Subjects Committee?

My hand here, now, more ethical than any form.

Put down the notebook, the pen- touch a bony shoulder.

And I, the researcher?

My hand here, now, more ethical than any form.

These are the words they use against them

*

Research Pantoum Two

Themes: Resilience, ability/disability, transcendence, aging

His limp does not define him.

His shuffling to the right, the dragging motion.

I see myself, thirty years from now.

My trifecta of arthritis defining me.

His shuffling to the right, the dragging motion.

He triumphs each day, refuses to submit.

My trifecta of arthritis defining me.

I have much to learn.

He triumphs each day, refuses to submit.

His girlfriend of thirty, smiles at his tenacity.

I have much to learn.

Oh, to let go of unrelenting infallibility

His girlfriend of thirty, smiles at his tenacity.
A new kind of power as his sun slowly sets.
Oh, to let go of unrelenting infallibility.
Almost eighty, he holds dear each day.

A new kind of power as his sun slowly sets.
I see myself, thirty years from now.
Almost eighty, he holds dear each day.
His limp does not define him.

*

Research Pantoum Three

Themes: my experiences with death, men and emotions, researcher's use of self, masculinity and research

I do not feel safe in my skin.
I think of all the tubes, his moaning in pain
I really just want to go home.
I just think about the night my dog died.

I think of all the tubes, his moaning in pain.
I try to listen. I am the researcher.
I just think about the night my dog died.
Supposed to be selfless here, focus on collecting.

I try to listen. I am the researcher.
I must be stoic. They must not know of my pain.
Supposed to be selfless here, focus on collecting.
When I held him as he died, I felt so close to death.

I must be stoic. They must not know of my pain.
He is 70, he tells me his girlfriend of 23 is great in bed.
When I held him as he died, I felt so close to death.
Stuck. I play researcher. I play masculine, nodding, silent.

He is 70, he tells me his girlfriend of 23 is great in bed.
I really just want to go home.
Stuck. I play researcher. I play masculine, nodding, silent.
I do not feel safe in my skin.

Research Pantoum Four

Themes: Isolation, men and social work, care

Who cares about them?

Alone, drinking and lost, a world away.

Funders love the innocent: children, the abused, the vulnerable.

My profession ignores them, ignores me.

Alone, drinking and lost, a world away.

I minimize and overemphasise, as guilty as most.

My profession ignores them, ignores me.

Better than rotting in assisted "living."

I minimize and overemphasise, as guilty as most.

Sadness. Joy. Pain. Pleasure.

Better than rotting in assisted "living."

Millions spent, but nothing on them.

Sadness. Joy. Pain. Pleasure.

The choices we make, are ours alone.

Millions spent, but nothing on them.

We will not die public heroes, only in our own stories.

The choices we make, are ours alone.

Funders love the innocent: children, the abused, the vulnerable.

We will not die public heroes, only in our own stories.

Who cares about them?

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