A rose by any other name? Developing a method of 'collaborative poetics'

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This paper describes a new method of participatory arts-based research, in which poets and social scientists form a collaborative 'research collective.' This 'collaborative poetics' method harnesses participants' skills and knowledge to produce innovative, creative pieces, which can deepen understandings of social scientific issues and communicate this knowledge in engaging, accessible ways. The method was developed in a pilot study in which seven young spoken word poets and one poet/social scientist explored their lived experiences of discrimination. These experiences were elucidated through poetic autoethnographies, which were disseminated in a chapbook and live spoken word performance. Audience feedback indicated that the autoethnographies were powerful and thought provoking. For the co-researchers, the project was a transformative experience, facilitating changes in their focus, exploration and communication of issues around discrimination, and encouraging them to respond differently to instances of discrimination, prejudice or abuse. The pilot study thus provides strong, preliminary support for the value of the 'collaborative poetics' method.

A rose by any other name? Developing a method of 'collaborative poetics'

04.06.16 // Xander Macaulay-Rettino

it's been three years since i started loving you

i biked past your house yesterday

to whisper "fuck you" at your front door

to yell "i'm not scared of you anymore" at your street

today an old man biked past me

gave me a thumps-up

and said – "Tiens!"

Hold on.

I smiled back at him the whole way home.

This poem is taken from a chapbook 'You Kind of Have to Listen to Me,' which was produced as part of a collaborative, arts-based study, held at McGill University's Participatory Cultures Lab (PCL). This study had two aims: 1) to develop the use of poetry as a research tool, with spoken word artists and social scientists working as a 'research collective' to elucidate personal experiences and inform positive social change; and 2) to use this emerging method to explore co-researchers' lived experiences around discrimination and privilege, topics which form are prominent in (particularly North American) spoken word and slam poetry (Gregory, 2009).

A rose by any other name? Developing a method of 'collaborative poetics'

Spoken word poetry was harnessed for its ability to explore and convey lived experiences with a sensitivity, intensity and emotional depth which more mainstream research methods typically lack. While social scientific research methods were utilised to provide a thorough, systematic and authoritative means through which co-researchers' understandings and experiences could be mined, understood, and connected to broader social contexts/issues. These two domains interacted within a collaborative research paradigm, which sought to give equal status/power to all project participants. Within this model, poet co-researchers were positioned as experts, not only in the sense of poetry writing/performance, but also in terms of their personal experiences. The resulting method is termed 'collaborative poetics.'

This article considers both the PCL pilot and the 'collaborative poetics' method. It begins by exploring the methodological and epistemological underpinnings of this approach. 'Collaborative poetics' is then described briefly, before being illustrated through the lens of the pilot study. The aims and method of this study are discussed, with examples of poetic autoethnographies presented to illustrate the project process and outcomes. Finally, the pilot is evaluated, and this evaluation used as a platform from which to explore the aims, benefits, challenges and practice of using poetry as a tool for collaborative research.

1. Three methodological strands: Poetic inquiry, autoethnography and collaborative research

A rose by any other name? Developing a method of 'collaborative poetics'

'Collaborative poetics' weaves together three methodological strands: poetic inquiry, autoethnography and collaborative research. The first of these, poetic inquiry, uses poetry as a tool for data collection, analysis or, most frequently, dissemination. Poetic inquiries share the ability of other arts-based research methods to expose social scientific knowledge to larger and broader audiences, delivering something which is more accessible, playful, emotional, meaningful and, above all, *human* than the typical journal article, conference paper or textbook (Jones, 2006). Further, because poetry condenses language, imagery and narrative into a relatively small space, it has the ability to deliver powerful, high impact messages, which grab and hold the audience's attention (Faulkner, 2009).

As a research tool, poetry can be both flexible and robust. It enables researchers to emphasise the emotional, experiential and relational, to highlight new perspectives and hidden narratives, and arguably achieve a deeper level of insight than many more traditional research tools permit (Fenge, Hodges and Cutts, 2016). It also allows for the retention of ambiguity, the exploration of liminality, and the reflection of silence; all of which are challenging for more traditional research methods (Galvin and Prendergast, 2016; Rapport and Hartill, 2016). Faulkner and Nicole (2016) add that poetic inquiry can act as a form of political activity, embodying ideological struggle through the intersection of self and social issues/values (see also Faulkner, 2009). Arguably, spoken word is particularly relevant here, with its emphasis on accessible texts and frequent focus on socio-political issues (Gregory, 2009, 2015).

A rose by any other name? Developing a method of 'collaborative poetics'

Prendergast (2009) distinguishes between two forms of poetic inquiry: 'vox participare' which focuses on the voices of participants, and 'vox autobiographia/autoethnographia' which seeks to evoke the personal, reflective voice of the researcher in autobiographical poems. The latter could be considered as a form of autoethnography. Indeed, poems created through this approach are sometimes referred to as 'poetic autoethnographies.'

Custer (2014, p. 6) describes autoethnography as 'an artistic tool of deep inquiry.' Autoethnographies place the lived experience of researchers centre stage. This contrasts markedly with mainstream social science, where the researcher is often invisible, the emotional connections that drive their work written out as, at best irrelevant, at worst corrosive, to the 'true' business of science (Jewkes, 2011). Autoethnography holds the potential to empower research authors and audiences, proffering new ways of telling stories, which challenge hegemonic discourses by weaving critical, social analysis with personal accounts of lived experiences (Moriarty, 2013). This is reminiscent of Faulkner and Nicole's (2016) conceptualisation of poetic inquiry as a dialectical, ideological activity.

Nonetheless, autoethnography and 'autoethnographia' poetic inquiry have been criticised for supporting work which is narcissistic and limited in scope/insight (see Atkinson, 1997; Coffey, 1999; Jones, 2014). Chang, Ngunjiri and Hernandez (2013), for example, suggest that the exclusive focus on the author's lived experience can lead to work which lacks critical insight, threatening both the validity and depth of

A rose by any other name? Developing a method of 'collaborative poetics'

analysis. This suggests that there is a need for researchers to ensure that they

scrutinise, question, and look beyond the bounds of, their own personal experiences

when carrying out such work.

Another prominent critique of these methods is that they can be aesthetically and

creatively weak. Thus, Faulkner (2009) argues that poetic inquiries are often sloppily

written and poorly considered. Similarly, Saldaña (2003) and Jones (2012) have

criticized the tendency of some researchers to conduct arts-based research without

giving sufficiently close thought to the modalities, principles and processes on which

they draw.

One response to these criticisms is to carry out collaborative research. Collaboration

can be both across fields (social scientists collaborating with artists) and across roles

(researchers collaborating with participants). Collaborating with artists

acknowledges the specialist skill, craft and knowledge required to produce high

quality creative pieces (Faulkner, 2009; Jones, 2012), while collaborating with

participants can broaden the ethnographic lens, illuminating multiple subjectivities,

as well as the *inter*-subjectivity of their intersection.

Collaborative research, in this latter sense, seeks to dissolve power inequalities

between researcher and researched, reconceptualising participants as co-

researchers with the power to shape a study's design, conduct and outputs to

varying degrees (Cornwall and Jewkes, 1995). The research process is thus

A rose by any other name? Developing a method of 'collaborative poetics'

conceptualised as being one of knowledge/skill exchange. This means that
participants can benefit from, not only the research outputs, but also the skills,
knowledge and sense of power/authority they gain from the co-production of these
outputs. Research professionals, in contrast, lose something of their unique status
as authoritative knowledge producers (Gaventa and Cornwall, 2015; Tandon, 1981).
This approach also aims to empower co-researchers to make positive social
changes that are meaningful to (and realistic for) them (Park, 1993; Kagan *et al*.,
2011). Thus, it strives for both personal and social transformation (see Freire, 1997).

Chang, Ngunjiri and Hernandez (2013) highlight multiple benefits of collaborative
research, including enhancing the robustness and efficiency of the research process,
deepening knowledge, and community building. In the context of poetic inquiry,
Fenge, Hodges and Cutts (2016) argue that collaborative research can give voice
and power to participants, enabling them to engage in dialogue with groups that
would usually be inaccessible to them. Furthermore, collaborative forms of
autoethnography can provide a supportive environment in which to share emotionally
difficult stories (Chang *et al*., ibid).

1.1 Plaiting the strands together: Developing the method of 'collaborative poetics'

'Collaborative poetics' plaits together these methodological strands. It takes from
poetic inquiry the use of poetry as a research tool, and from autoethnography a
focus on personal experiences to describe and transform the world. It draws too on

A rose by any other name? Developing a method of 'collaborative poetics'

the social scientific understandings which frame these approaches. Collaboration

between social scientists, poets and participants (co-researchers) allows these

elements to be combined and strengthened. Thus, the elements of poetry, personal

experience and social scientific theory/research interact reciprocally to form a kind of

fire triangle (see figure one). Within this model, each element is essential for the

research process/products to ignite and be sustained.

Figure One: Collaborative Poetics Fire Triangle

Poetry/Spoken Word
(Heat)

Personal Experiences
(Fuel)

Social Scientific
Research/Theory
(Oxygen)
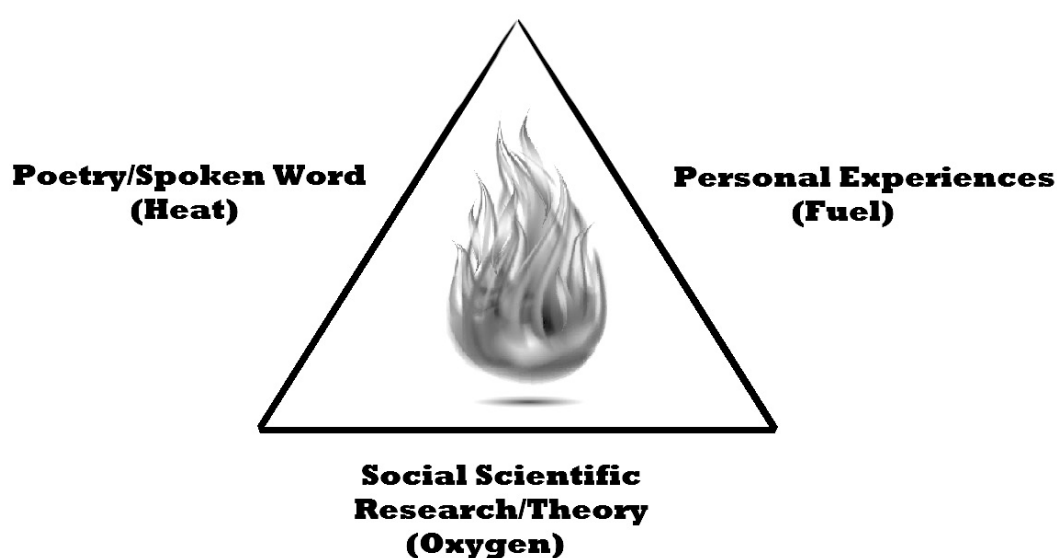
Personal experiences provide the fuel; the data through which social scientific topics

are explored and made concrete. The quality, quantity, form and content of these

determine how easily the fire ignites and how hot it burns. Poetry provides the heat

of emotion, passion and creativity. This is the element that grabs and maintains an

audience's attention, that spreads the messages of research. Spoken word's

emphasis on performance and on broadening the poetry audience makes it a

A rose by any other name? Developing a method of 'collaborative poetics'

particularly powerful tool here (Fenge, Hodges and Cutts, 2016; Gregory, 2008,

2015).

Finally, the theoretical models and methods of social science provide the oxygen that

breathes life into the flames. Accordingly, social scientists provide: access to formal

knowledge and experiences beyond the 'research collective'; an ability to theorise

links between lived experience and broader social contexts, issues and debates;

systematic and robust research tools/techniques; and an authority/status which

means that these narratives are more likely to be heard (see Kagan *et al.*, 2011;

Tilakaratna, 1990). The remainder of this article explores how these elements were

combined in the 'researching discrimination through poetry' pilot.

2   Researching discrimination through poetry: The pilot study

…I will not, cannot forget how you have made me shuffle

in my own bones and skin,

and wince at my own name…

~ Extract from untitled group poem // 'Researching discrimination through poetry'

collective

The initial aim of this study was to use spoken word poetry to create social-

scientifically informed poems, exploring co-researchers' experiences and

A rose by any other name? Developing a method of 'collaborative poetics'

understandings of discrimination. As the research progressed, the collective agreed

five defining themes which served to refine this aim and guide our work:

1. Exploring facets of privilege

2. Questioning our conditioning

3. Making connections between personal experiences and bigger issues

4. Unpacking flaws and subtleties within ideals

5. Exposing microaggressions

These themes were explored in relation to both our personal

experiences/understandings and to psychological theories of discrimination. With

regard to the latter, we drew, in particular, on critical psychology approaches which

characterise discrimination, not as the flaws of individuals or of cognitive processing,

but as socially constructed norms and values which serve the interests of powerful

groups in society (Gough and McFadden, 2001). Critical psychologists argue that

mainstream psychology is complicit in this process, prioritising the role of individual

flaws and responses to discrimination, marginalising important structural factors, and

(re)defining others' reality for them (Burton and Kagan, 2003). This critical

perspective suggests a need for a different approach to discrimination research; one

which foregrounds participants' understandings/lived experiences, and challenges

psychologists' position as sole, authoritative knowledge creators..

2.1 Method

2.1.1 The 'research collective'

A rose by any other name? Developing a method of 'collaborative poetics'

The pilot study adopted a collaborative approach, in which all those involved were conceptualised as equal status participants in a 'research collective.' As with all such research however, there were necessarily limitations on how effectively power was distributed amongst this collective. Given their associations with professional/ academic structures, organisations and discourses, it is perhaps inevitable that the balance of power in such contexts rests with academics like the lead author. It is thus pivotal that this power is shared with, and used to the benefit of, the collective as a whole. In this sense, the project appears to have been successful. As one co-researcher contended: "…you did a great job of sharing that power, by giving us research tools and the language to describe what we were doing."

The 'research collective' was formed of the lead researcher (performance poet, social scientist and lead author of this paper), and seven young spoken word artists aged between sixteen and twenty-five. Four of the poet co-researchers identified as female, two as male, and one as gender queer/non-binary. In terms of nationality/ethnicity, one identified as African, one as Pakistani-Canadian, four as Canadian, and one as Asian-American. The lead researcher identified as female and British.[1]

The poet co-researchers were recruited through volunteer sampling, in response to a call which was spread online and via word of mouth through established poetry networks, events, groups and organisations in the Montreal area. Individuals who responded to this call were asked to email the lead researcher to express their

A rose by any other name? Developing a method of 'collaborative poetics'

interest, including some examples of their poetry. Co-researchers were then

accepted on the basis of their expertise in spoken word writing/performance and

their ability to speak to the issue of discrimination. Five of the poet co-researchers

contributed to the project from start to finish. Two withdrew approximately five

weeks in, due to personal reasons.

Book vouchers were provided as an incentive payment for participation. In addition,

co-researchers benefitted from the opportunity to participate in masterclass

workshops, delivered by four local spoken word professionals. These workshops

were aimed at enhancing the collective's poetry writing/performance skills and aiding

the development of poetic autoethnographies.

2.1.2 The research process

The research collective worked together intensively over a six week period. This

work was conceptualised as a knowledge/skill sharing process, with poet co-

researchers contributing expertise in spoken word writing/performance, and the lead

researcher contributing understandings of social scientific research methods/theory,

as well as her experience as an established performance poet. In addition, all

members of the collective contributed expertise on their lived experiences of

discrimination and privilege. Initial research aims and parameters were defined by

the lead researcher. All other aspects of research design were carried out

collectively, including defining the research timetable, activities and outputs, and

further refining the project's focus.

A rose by any other name? Developing a method of 'collaborative poetics'

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The bulk of the collaborative work was devoted to a series of activities aimed at enabling innovative combinations of social scientific theory/methods and poetry writing/performance. These activities included: seminars on arts-based research, critical community psychology and discrimination theory led by the first author; research methods workshops covering interview practice, thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006)[2] and the 'Listening Guide' (Gilligan *et al.*, 2003) also led by the first author; Listening Guide analysis of poems on discrimination; co-production of an interview schedule focusing on our experiences and understandings of discrimination; paired interviews within the collective; thematic analysis of interview data; poetry writing activities; poetry editing activities; and poetry performance exercises.

An additional set of activities focused on the project outputs of a live spoken word show and chapbook. These are common forms of dissemination for spoken word, and have the advantage of preserving much of the richness, variety and creativity of the collective's combined experiences. Both outputs were chosen and designed collaboratively, and included poems from five of the seven co-researchers and the lead researcher.

Spoken word poetry was integral throughout the research process. At the data collection stage, for example, activities like free writes were used to elicit discrimination experiences, while composition and editing activities enabled us to

organise, clarify and develop our understandings of the topic. During data analysis, we applied methods like the Listening Guide's 'I' poems to explore creative writing as an analytic, transformative process. Finally, poetry was harnessed as a tool for research dissemination through the spoken word show and chapbook.

2.1.3 Ethical issues

The research was approved by ethics committees at the University of Brighton and McGill University. Co-researchers gave informed consent upon recruitment, and this was reviewed at several later points. Co-researchers were able to consent separately to different aspects of the research process. Consent was also obtained from the parents of the one co-researcher who was under eighteen. Co-researchers were assured that they could withdraw at any time without giving a reason, and that this withdrawal could be temporary or permanent, whole or partial. Incentive payments were made at the start of the research and were not conditional on further participation.

Careful consideration was given to the role of anonymity in this research. Although it is standard practice for social scientists to disguise participants' identities, the value of this is ambiguous in artistic contexts. Indeed, arts-based research often seeks to champion, rather than disguise, artists' identities (Gregory, 2014). This issue is hotly debated within art therapy, with some contributors challenging the confidentiality principle, by arguing that clients can benefit from seeing their work displayed and from being credited as artists (see Spaniol, 1994). This research follows Spaniol's

1

A rose by any other name? Developing a method of 'collaborative poetics'

guidelines, allowing each co-researcher the freedom to make their own decision

about anonymity. In accordance with their wishes, no attempt has been made to

hide co-researchers' identities in connection with this project or its artistic outputs.

Social scientific conventions were followed, however, when reporting on the project

evaluation, with pseudonyms used to identify participants in this context.

Throughout the course of our work together we discussed, wrote and performed

about difficult personal issues related to discrimination. Caring for ourselves and

one another in this context was of great importance. We used a number of

strategies for this, including: agreeing ground rules at the outset; working to establish

supportive group relationships; keeping reflexive diaries; and giving each other (and

ourselves) permission to step away from the project when necessary. Contact

details for relevant support organisations were also provided to co-researchers at the

start of the project. These measures should be considered good practice for all

'collaborative poetics' research.

2.2 Results and dissemination

Arts-based research challenges established norms around research outputs,

dissolving traditional divisions between data collection, analysis and dissemination

(Jones, 2012).[3] This presents a challenge when writing up such research, since it is

not necessarily clear what constitutes the 'results.' One possibility is that the

'findings' be read through the artistic texts created; in this case the poems, chapbook

and spoken word show.

A rose by any other name? Developing a method of 'collaborative poetics'

The show, 'The Struggle is Real,' was held in August 2016 at Montreal's Mainline Theatre. It featured six of the research collective (including the lead researcher), twenty project poems, and two of the masterclass workshop facilitators (Cat Kidd and Tanya Evanson). The event attracted an audience of forty-eight people and overwhelmingly positive feedback, with audience members making comments such as "beautiful" and "one of the most powerful shows I have ever been to." This suggests the poems met key criteria of aesthetic quality emphasised by Jones (2012), Richardson (2000) and others. The chapbook contains twenty-two poems from the same six co-researchers. This self-published text also includes a description of the research and notes about each of the poetic autoethnographies. At the time of writing, more than ninety copies of the book had been distributed. Many of these were sold at the show or at presentations given subsequently by the first author.

The poems included in these outputs represent a wide spectrum of the project work. Many were written in response to particular activities, prompts or discussions, while others were inspired by the research work more generally. Two project poems are presented here by way of an illustration. It is important to note, however, that, with eight different voices expressed in dozens of poetic compositions, no small selection of work can fully represent the richness and complexity of these primary artistic outputs. (See Chang *et al*, 2013 on the limitations of attempting to join such disparate voices together in a single, ethnographic report.)

A rose by any other name? Developing a method of 'collaborative poetics'

2.2.1 From: Interviews about Discrimination // Emily Carson-Apstein

The first example, composed by Emily Carson-Apstein, is one of four pieces written in response to an interview-based activity. It was published in the chapbook, alongside two of the other pieces. These poems were created from transcripts of interviews, which were planned, conducted and transcribed within the collective. The transcripts were thematically analysed in the group, and illustrative quotations selected for each theme. These quotations were then used to create individual poems.

This is how a horror movie starts

from the inside looking out,

my psychiatrist was like

'maybe you just had a bad experience...'

(Authority in any given situation creates power imbalances.)

As a white person,

I've been told my whole life that I'm smart

I'm the one who is right and who has a voice.

I'm not having to try and avoid saying or being anything

I can't fully understand

to be clear,

to be indelicate,

It's built into the streets you're walking on.

A rose by any other name? Developing a method of 'collaborative poetics'

It's the vague stuff,

This big stuff is happening because of the small stuff.

I don't think you can separate them, really

And it never went away.

I'm onstage.

Ask me for my consent to touch me.

Why does that joke make sense in the first place?

This piece represents the voices of five members of the collective. It encapsulates a wide range of different experiences of discrimination and privilege, including reflections on homophobia, transphobia, racism, sexism, and prejudice against people living with mental distress, as well as what it is like to be part of the dominant, powerful counterpoint. Embedded in this poem are observations around the tangibility and intentionality of discrimination, the roles that power/authority and identity play in discrimination, and the complex interplay between experiences of discrimination and privilege. All of this is conveyed in short, dense poem, which is arguably both emotive and thought-provoking.

2.2.2 I decided to work on myself… // Inara Lalani

The second example was one of several poems which were not in the show or chapbook, but were sent to the lead researcher on her request. This piece was created using the cut-up technique popularised by William Burroughs (Skerl, 1986). Extracts from four academic texts on discrimination and privilege were selected by

A rose by any other name? Developing a method of 'collaborative poetics'

the lead researcher.[4] These were then cut-up and re-assembled by each co-researcher individually to make new 'mosaic' texts.

I decided to work on myself;

encourage diversity,

paint thinner fumes,

rage at the universe,

remain focused instead of half-conscious,

and rise to the surface from the slight.

My veins have become sensitive to hurling fireballs of words,

because remarks can inflict bruises

since rage freezes reason.

Our country is not immune,

I can be pretty sure that my neighbours turn on the television

or open the front page to see a society

saturated by the smell of gunpowder

-toxins spewed by racists.

Colour made it what it is,

-a sense of entitlement.

"All Asians look the same",

even though they cut their hair differently.

and stock different staple foods in their pantry.

I just want to walk away,

A rose by any other name? Developing a method of 'collaborative poetics'

> -testify to the existence of stereotypes,
>
> and allow my skin colour
>
> to work against the myths

Discrimination is experienced here as something which the author accepts as all-pervasive, and yet simultaneously resists through the simple act of existing as real human being rather than prejudicial myth. Although this piece is very different to the first example, it too is powerful, emotionally-charged and dense, as 'standard' academic texts are mobilised (and subverted) to deliver a personal account of discrimination. The words of authoritative, knowledge creators thus become the building blocks through which the poet constructs her own narrative, one which speaks of hurt, anger, disbelief and finally empowerment.

2.3 Evaluation

Feedback on this study was solicited from co-researchers through one focus group (three participants), two individual face-to-face interviews, one individual Skype interview, and one email conversation. Sessions were facilitated by the lead researcher and structured around a collectively-devised schedule. This schedule focused on co-researchers' experiences and evaluation of the project, the project's impact, and recommendations for prospective 'collaborative poetics' participants. Examples include: 'Was the project effective?' 'have you changed as a result of the project?' and 'what advice would you have for people embarking on a similar

A rose by any other name? Developing a method of 'collaborative poetics'

project?' The data were transcribed (where relevant), and analysed using inductive

thematic analysis.

Three themes were elicited: 'Transformation'; 'maximising the project impact'; and

'academic knowledge' (see Appendix B for thematic map). This discussion focuses

on the first theme, since it provides the most valuable overview of co-researchers'

experiences and assessment of 'collaborative poetics.' 'Transformation' here

describes tangible, positive changes for co-researchers (and to some extent their

audiences) as a result of project participation. It contains four sub-themes,

representing changes in: co-researchers' *focus* on core issues, ideas and

experiences; co-researchers' thoughts and feelings around discrimination

(*exploration*); how co-researchers *communicate* these explorations; and individuals'

actions (or intended actions) in response to perceived discrimination, prejudice and

abuse.

While they are conceptually distinct, these four subthemes are inevitably interrelated.

Indeed, they represent something of a trajectory. This trajectory might be followed in

an individual activity and/or throughout the whole project journey. Thus, an initial

refocusing of attention onto a previously unexplored issue ('focus') might lead co-

researchers to think/feel differently about this ('exploration'), then to write/talk about

this with greater clarity and creativity ('communication'), before finally making a

commitment to act differently when encountering similar ideas in the future ('action').

This trajectory need not represent a straightforward linear movement however.

A rose by any other name? Developing a method of 'collaborative poetics'

Instead, participants might flick between these stages or experience them concurrently. Writing differently about discrimination, for example, could lead to attention being redirected onto new issues and ideas. Alternatively, co-researchers might explore their thoughts and feelings around discriminatory behaviour , while simultaneously taking concrete steps to reduce this.

2.3.1 Focus

The project encouraged the collective to focus their attention on different issues, ideas and experiences. As 'Megan' says: "It forced you to put your thoughts in a different direction." Often this meant attending to experiences and emotions which they had "been avoiding thinking about" ('Megan'). For 'Vanessa,' this included an experience of discrimination as a child. She describes her shock at this memory and the emotions it evoked:

> I was just like 'Wow. What else am I pretty much stopping myself from
>
> thinking about?' or 'what other situation have I gone through that I just played
>
> off, just because I didn't wanna deal with it, but deep down it had some
>
> troubling repercussions?'

This shift in focus was reflected in co-researchers' writing, as they incorporated new and challenging experiences into their work:

> …it pushed me to write this piece that was absolutely brutal to write and
>
> absolutely brutal to practice performing and to perform … I wrote that piece
>
> and it unblocked a lot of stuff, because now I've written the hardest one. And

A rose by any other name? Developing a method of 'collaborative poetics'

> so now there's things, different issues that I've started jotting down thoughts
>
> about, as far as like where poems could go, and I would have been
>
> uncomfortable writing them before... ('Fran')

Clearly, the impact of this spread beyond the bounds of the project, to influence co-researchers' writing practices and focus more generally. 'Megan' reinforces this, saying: "…the stuff I needed to write about wasn't stuff I wanted to think about, and it's really helped to loosen that."

2.3.2 Exploration

Moving beyond a shift in *focus*, the project also transformed *how* co-researchers thought and felt about discrimination. Of particular salience here was the unexpectedly emotional impact of the project. As 'Vanessa' remarks: "I was not expecting for the project to come get me in that way…" Many co-researchers remarked on how "vulnerable" this made them. Rather than being viewed as a negative experience, however, this was welcomed as being productive and empowering:

> …it was emotionally difficult, but I definitely think … it was good. It was, you
>
> know, a kick in the hard dirt. … like when your body is really sore after a day
>
> of working out. So you do all these stretches and it all hurts to do, but it like
>
> feels good at the same time. You feel a little better afterward. ('Megan')

This supports Custer's (2014) claim that autoethnography can empower authors by challenging them to engage with troubling issues. Accordingly, co-researchers

A rose by any other name? Developing a method of 'collaborative poetics'

advised other 'collaborative poetics' participants to "let yourself be vulnerable"

('Megan'); but they stressed too the importance of "tak[ing] care of yourself" ('Chris'),

to ensure that this vulnerability leads to healing.

Co-researchers also thought differently about discrimination as a result of

participating in the project:

> …it got me thinking about discrimination in different ways and … it gave me a
>
> bit of an academic, social science, foundation that I wouldn't have had
>
> otherwise… ('Fran')

As with the shift in focus, this permeated beyond the project, changing how co-

researchers thought about discrimination and privilege more generally:

> I think I would be more likely [in the future] to see discrimination or see
>
> subtleties and nuances in discrimination that I hadn't seen before, and not just
>
> in discrimination but also things related to privilege and also related to
>
> identity… ('Adam')

Thus, there is some indication that 'collaborative poetics' worked to foster a 'critical

consciousness' amongst co-researchers (Leavy, 2009, p. 225).

As 'Fran' indicates, this change in thinking was partly due to the social scientific

underpinnings of the project. Dialogue and collaboration amongst the research

collective were also key however. As 'Liv' says, "getting together and sharing our

experiences from such different perspectives brought so much diversity that I

wouldn't have been able to see elsewhere." This supports Fenge, Hodges and

A rose by any other name? Developing a method of 'collaborative poetics'

Cutts' (2016) observation that collaborative research can empower participants by connecting them with individuals with whom they might not otherwise engage.

2.3.3 Communication

The project also transformed how co-researchers communicated their ideas and experiences around discrimination, enabling them to do so in clearer, more creative ways. 'Chris' described this as "develop[ing] a better language, or a better way of putting into words, a type of experience that I had witnessed in the world..." Co-researchers found themselves writing differently, particularly in response to the masterclass workshops. As 'Liv' remarks, "having these workshop facilitators come in [to] share their experience with writing really helped me grow as a writer, and allowed me to explore different forms of writing..." Similarly, 'Fran' says that "it's changed some of my habits around writing. It's gotten me writing differently." As with the transformations of focus and exploration, these are changes which permeated beyond the project.

Importantly for co-researchers, their writing was directed towards a specific audience. The show was viewed as particularly important here. For 'Adam' this was the "primary goal of this project" and an important constraint for quality control. As he says, working towards a show means that the poetry "has to be good enough that we're not ashamed to bring it on stage." Accordingly, one measure of a project's success is the extent to which the work successfully engages its audience. Thus 'Fran' says, "ultimately we were effective 'cause we really had this direct output, we

A rose by any other name? Developing a method of 'collaborative poetics'

connected with people…" Poetry was viewed as a more effective means for creating

this connection than traditional academic outputs; it is:

> …more appealing to the public eye … people would be more interested in that
>
> type of stuff, compared to reading a whole book or a whole essay or going to
>
> a seminar… ('Vanessa').

For 'Chris,' in particular, this ability to connect with an audience was an empowering

experience:

> "I did feel really powerful when I was there [on stage] and I was basically in
>
> charge of how people felt, emotionally for the next two minutes or whatever.
>
> And suddenly it was like 'woah, my voice is here.'"

This link between creative performance and personal empowerment echoes the

findings of previous research on youth slam and spoken word programmes (Gregory,

2015).

2.3.4 Action

While it is difficult to isolate concrete actions spurred by projects like these, co-

researchers did identify several ways in which they felt the research would inspire

such change. These took two key forms: changes in the audience and changes in

their own behaviour. With regard to the former, most of the co-researchers argued

that they had changed the way in which their audience thought about discrimination.

'Fran' describes this as operating through a subtle, implicit influence, following

A rose by any other name? Developing a method of 'collaborative poetics'

authors like Galvin and Prendergast (2016) in viewing this as characteristic of poetry more generally:

> … you can read a poem that's incredibly direct, but the actual way that it's gonna manifest in someone's psyche is they think about it over time and how their thoughts and attitudes are gonna change ... you plant a seed...

This is reminiscent too of Jewkes' (2011, p. 68) description of knowledge as an embodied 'sensuous and affective' activity, and of Moriarty's (2013) discussion of the visceral action of authoethnographic impact.

With respect to their own behaviour, co-researchers suggested they had "become more likely to talk about discrimination" ('Chris'), "to open up" to people who have privilege they lack ('Vanessa'), and to challenge perceived discrimination/prejudice. This led to some concrete action, with one co-researcher reporting two instances of abuse as a result of their project participation. For 'Fran,' the social science lectures were particularly valuable here:

> [They] were helpful … especially the critical psychology stuff, just being someone that's been in the mental health system for such a long time there were a lot of ideas that I had, I mean internalised stuff, that it was like 'Oh yes, I'm allowed to challenge this.'

Thus 'Fran' was able to draw on critical psychology work which condemns mainstream psychology/psychiatry as disempowering (Burton and Kagan, 2003) to establish a new position as an authoritative knowledge creator.

A rose by any other name? Developing a method of 'collaborative poetics'

Many of the claims discussed here reflect intangible, subtle or anticipated changes. Indeed, social change is notoriously difficult to isolate and measure (Kagan et al, 2011). Nonetheless, this analysis offers strong evidence to support the claim that the 'collaborative poetics' method has transformative potential, and that this is well worth pursuing:

> I just really hope that these kinds of projects keep happening, 'cause I think they're really important and I think that on a personal and on a more large scale global level it changes the people that are doing it, but then it has this bigger world impact… ('Fran')

3   Conclusions

Shakespeare's oft-cited line 'a rose by any other name would smell as sweet' suggests that the language we use to describe, explore and communicate phenomena is unimportant. Yet the Bard's craft indicates otherwise. This article suggests that poetry does indeed have a particular power to explore and communicate issues of social scientific relevance. The poetic autoethnographies produced here were engaging, arresting and transformative. Furthermore, the process of producing these autoethnographies collaboratively was empowering and transformative, spurring changes in co-researchers' focus, exploration, communication and action around issues related to discrimination and privilege.

This suggests that the study was able to effect social change both within and beyond the project. As discussed, however, such impacts are notoriously difficult to

isolate and measure. Furthermore, since the study evaluation focused on *co-researchers'* experiences, any assessment of *audience* impact is necessarily speculative. Given the importance of social change to both collaborative and autoethnographic work, this is a key area for future research. A further area of development is the extension of this method for co-researchers who are neither poets nor social scientists. In such collectives, collaboration would be between three groups: poets, social scientists and participants whose lived experiences are at the heart of the study. This is an important development for the method to have broader currency.

A rose by any other name? Developing a method of 'collaborative poetics'

End Notes

1. Poet co-researchers were asked how they identified for the purposes of this article. They responded with:

    I.   Non-binary/queer Canadian, living with chronic mental illness and identifying as neuroatypical

    II. Canadian male poet (heterosexual, cisgender and white)

    III. Female Pakistani-Canadian

    IV. Female African

    V.   Female, white Jewish Canadian

    VI. Female, white Jewish Canadian, with African parents

    VII. Male Asian-American, with this being the most appropriate, if ill-fitting, label currently available

2. Thematic analysis is an iterative process, where texts are read repeatedly to identify recurrent patterns of meaning. It is a flexible, accessible and widely-used method, making it well-suited for inter-disciplinary, participatory research.

3. Figure Two (Appendix A) uses indicative activities to illustrate how these research stages overlapped in the current study.

4. The extracts were: Gough (2008, p. 78); Lee (2008, p. 899); McIntosh (1990, pp. 32-3); and Nadal *et al* (2011, p. 252).

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A rose by any other name? Developing a method of 'collaborative poetics'

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A rose by any other name? Developing a method of 'collaborative poetics'

Appendix A: Indicative activities illustrating overlapping stages of research

Figure Two

Data collection

- Group interviews
- Project evaluation interviews/focus groups/emails

- Freewrites

- Audience poem in show
- Workshops/ seminars

- Thematic analysis of group interviews

- 'I' poems
- Data poems
- Performing each other's poems

- Spoken word show
- Chapbook
- Journal articles

Data analysis   *Data dissemination*
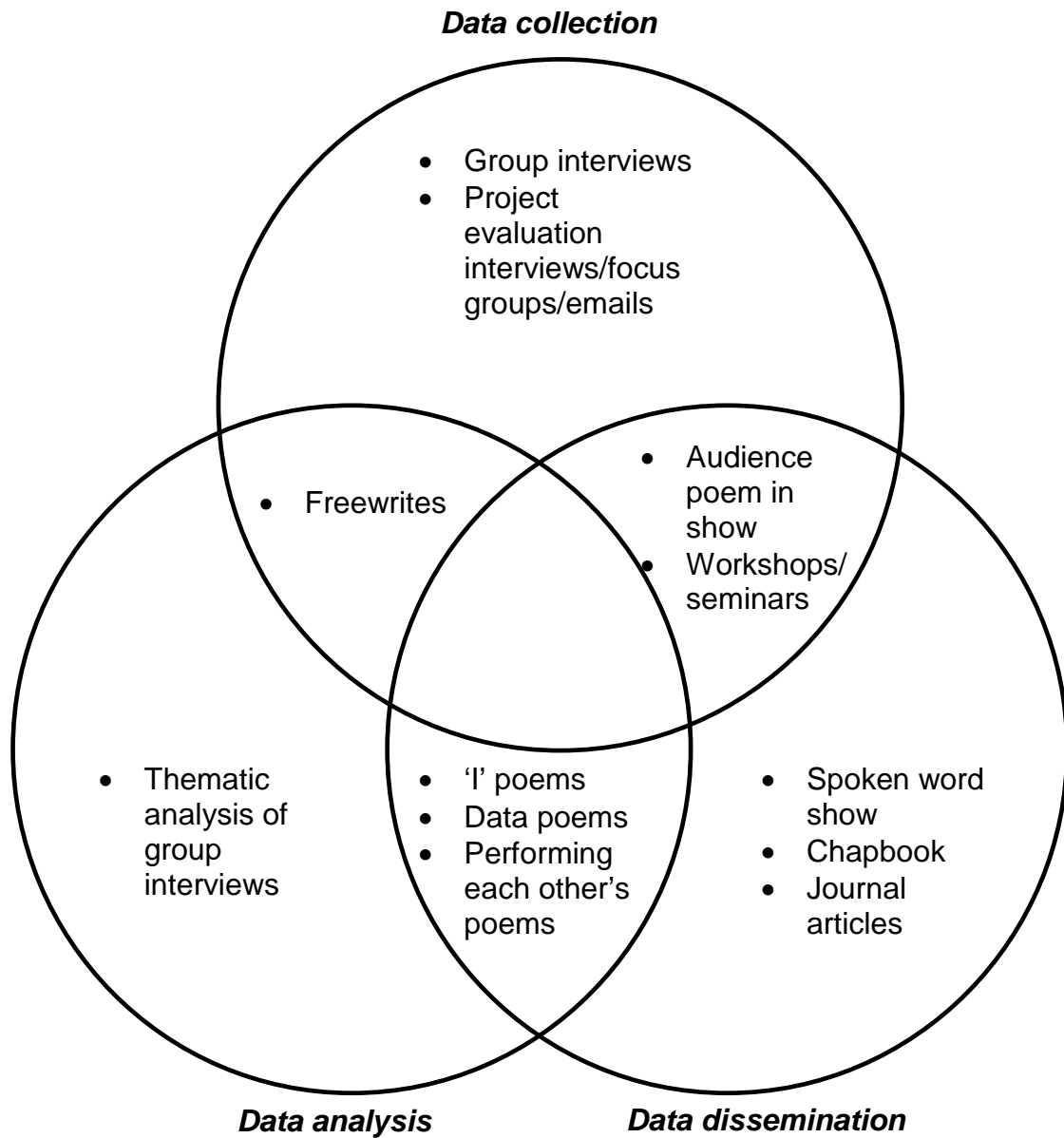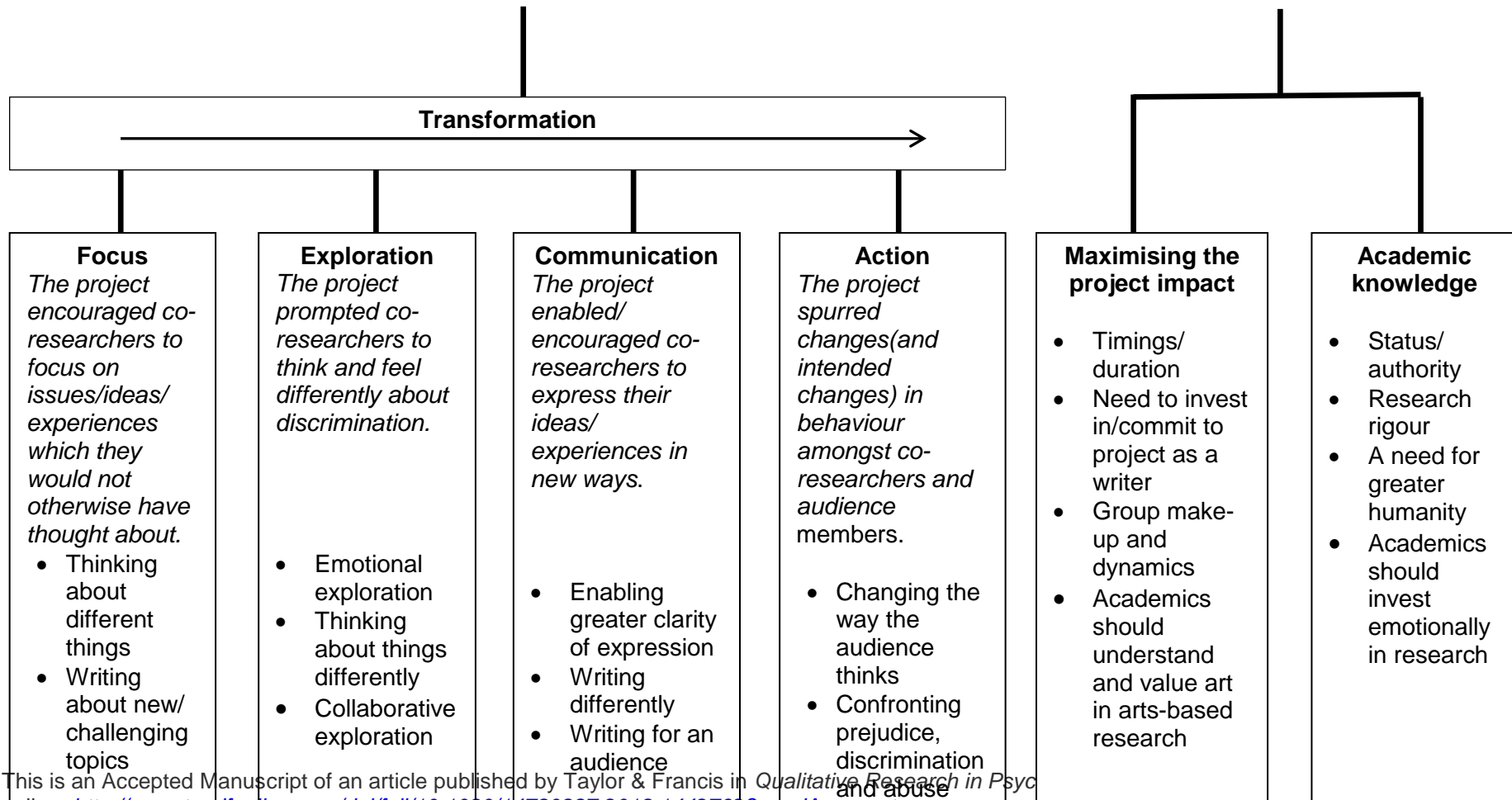
A rose by any other name? Developing a method of 'collaborative poetics'

Appendix B: Thematic map showing co-researchers' experiences and evaluation of the 'researching discrimination through poetry' pilot

Figure Three

Transformation →					
Focus	**Exploration**	**Communication**	**Action**	**Maximising the project impact**	**Academic knowledge**
The project encouraged co-researchers to focus on issues/ideas/ experiences which they would not otherwise have thought about.	*The project prompted co-researchers to think and feel differently about discrimination.*	*The project enabled/ encouraged co-researchers to express their ideas/ experiences in new ways.*	*The project spurred changes(and intended changes) in behaviour amongst co-researchers and audience* members.		
• Thinking about different things • Writing about new/ challenging topics	• Emotional exploration • Thinking about things differently • Collaborative exploration	• Enabling greater clarity of expression • Writing differently • Writing for an audience	• Changing the way the audience thinks • Confronting prejudice, discrimination and abuse	• Timings/ duration • Need to invest in/commit to project as a writer • Group make-up and dynamics • Academics should understand and value art in arts-based research	• Status/ authority • Research rigour • A need for greater humanity • Academics should invest emotionally in research