

Tea and bread: poetic transcription and representational practice in public health

Dr Katie Collins

Centre for the Study of Behaviour Change and Influence

University of the West of England

Bristol

BS16 1QY

UK

Katie.Collins@uwe.ac.uk

Abstract

This paper presents and analyses the poem 'Tea and Bread'. It is about content and process, about a struggle for survival as an asylum seeker in a UK city and about exploring poetic transcription, as pioneered by sociologist Laurel Richardson, as representational practice in public health. The asylum seeker, known by the pseudonym of Peter, was interviewed as part of a project to compare the destitution of the past with that of today.

Tea and bread: poetic transcription and representational practice in public health

“...writing is precisely the very possibility of change, the space that can serve as a springboard for subversive thought, the precursory movement of a transformation of social and cultural structures.” [1]

Tea and Bread

*I'm wasting my time in this limbo.
I survive the way I survive,
Hand to mouth; don't try anything else.
When all is taken from the food bank,
I'm told to come back next week.
It's crazy life.
You want to maybe, you know,
Maybe even not to be alive.
That feeling of hopelessness.
You can spend a couple of hours,
You know, crying on yourself.
Cover yourself, your head, with a duvet,
And be there for ever. But then you go out.
Buy a loaf of bread,
Buy everything you haven't got.
Sometimes, at the food bank,
Sugar is finished, sometimes cereals,
So it's not proper food.
Sometimes I hate the soups when I make them,
Sometimes I have tea and bread, that's all.
That's how you survive.
I have, you know, good friends,
I respect them; they respect me.
But I feel, I feel,
I look down on myself because of my situation
Like a second-class citizen.*

Peter

Peter is an asylum seeker in a limbo. Being 'in limbo' means he is legally unable to work and receives no state support. He is about 50 years old and lives in temporary accommodation, surviving on gifts from local charities, his community and his friends; he usually has around £10-15 a week to live on. Peter tells us that in a few weeks he

will have to leave his lodging. He doesn't know where he will go then; he says he "will probably have to go back to the church, maybe somewhere on the corridor, or somewhere..." He spends around 80% of the money he has on food, though sometimes he has to buy a scarf or jacket if it's cold and pay for transport, if he is in too much pain to walk. He finds it "very hard to cope with that sort of money with so many needs." He chose the meeting place for the interview, a local café.

Observations made at the time record his struggles to stand up, to sit down and turn around, his slow movements indicative of back pain. Throughout the interview, Peter seemed very conscious of confidentiality issues; he stopped speaking whenever a waitress passed and looked suspiciously at a man who sat at an adjacent table. He didn't want his exact age or his country of origin recorded, asking that the latter be noted vaguely as 'Horn of Africa'.

Why a poem?

Peter was interviewed as part of a larger exploratory study looking at the diet of marginalised groups in the UK and comparing this to published literature on typical diets of the urban poor before the Welfare State. As I coded the transcripts in preparation for a more conventional qualitative write up, there was something about Peter's words that touched me. He was so matter of fact about how little he had, how hard he had to fight to survive and the toll this took upon his mental health. There was also something distinct about his expression, his choice of words. At first, I called the poem 'Difficult Day', which I thought highlighted just how 'difficult' a difficult day could really be, when someone's typical day involves waking up and thinking...

"...about where I get my next meal. If you wanted to know a typical day. Next meal, cause you wake up and have nothing, so you go out and can't pay, it's

crazy life... It's not very healthy, you want to maybe, you know, maybe even not to be alive. You have that feeling of hopelessness..."

Making poetry using a transcript as raw material is known as 'found' poetry [2] or poetic transcription [3,4]. This particular poem might not be very good, its language more forensic than lyrical perhaps [5], but then it doesn't need to win literary prizes to raise consciousness of Peter's life. It is what Lahman and Richard would call "good enough" [6] poetry. I think it gives Peter back some of the power to represent himself, his story, even though I have chosen which words to remove from his sentences for aesthetic and interpretive reasons. The poem attempts to honour Peter's speech, his pauses, repetitions and idiom. [7] He is represented in this poem as a whole person, someone with whom we can empathise, rather than as a fragment of speech quoted out of context to illustrate a more abstract meaning constructed by a researcher, according to our epistemic conventions. Using poetry as a representational practice stands in contrast to a more established distanced, authoritative representation buttressed with technical descriptions of sampling, transcription, coding and validation procedures. Not that such representations of research are lacking in value, however the point I would like to argue is that the more distanced qualitative representations of people's lives typically found in public health have no more or less of a privileged relationship to reality than poetic representations, indeed it can be helpful to regard experimental and conventional representational practices as "a single, continuous, seamless activity in which the divisions are merely institutional and pedagogical". [8]

A Laurel crown

The writings of Professor Laurel Richardson have been the greatest influence upon my own engagement with alternative ways to write about research. In Western

scholarly tradition since the seventeenth century, Richardson explains, writing was artificially split into science and literature; the former associated with facts expressed in plain language, and the latter with rhetoric, subjectivity and fiction. [9] But writing, even science writing, can be said to involve what Barthes calls “ownership of the means of enunciation” [10] which phrasing evokes the radical ideas of Marx and thus highlights the idea that the deployment of language is a political act, not just a means of communication. All texts, whether a conventional scientific research paper or a poetic transcription, contain codes and in research writing, epistemological codes – those which attempt to reference something of ‘reality’ outside the text – tend to dominate, whereas in poetic writing epistemic codes are dormant. Instead, poetry is a form of representation that draws heavily upon “the silences and pauses of speech” [11] and as such seems more likely to evoke some kind of affective response in listeners and readers, opening up the representation of an experience like Peter’s constant search for food to multiple interpretations. The onus is on the reader or listener to do the work of interpretation, to close the emotional distance, to put something of themselves on the line. In other words, it invites participation, empathy, the awakening of a sense of outrage at injustice, rather than the distanced reading invited by conventional research writing.

D’Souza [12] writes of the Asian and Middle Eastern poet-saints, scholars she regards also as activists as we would understand the term today, who fell victim to colonisation and Enlightenment rationalism too, replicating the division Richardson perceives between poetry and scholarship, literature and science. In a context of widening inequality, I see a role for researchers who craft poetic representations of people and their lives that may function as advocacy in this tradition, helping to shape our moral characters [13, 14] through the amplification of a “testimony of rebellion” [15] composed of the challenging words of those who are socially and epistemically marginalised.

- 1 Cixous H (1976) The Laugh of the Medusa. *Signs* 1:875-893 p. 879
- 2 Prendergast M (2006) Found Poetry as Literature Review Research Poems on Audience and Performance. *Qualitative Inquiry* 12: 369-388
- 3 Glesne C (1997) That Rare Feeling: Re-presenting Research Through Poetic Transcription. *Qualitative Inquiry* 3: 202-221
- 4 Richardson L (2002) Poetic representations of interviews. In J. F. Gubrium & J. A. Holstein (Eds.) *Handbook of interview research: Context and method*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage 877-891
- 5 Day G (2015) The Reading Room: A review of Katrina Bramstedt's 'Trapped in my own labyrinth: poetry spawned by vertigo'. Retrieved 04 16, 2015, from BMJ Blogs: <http://blogs.bmj.com/medical-humanities/category/poetry/>
- 6 Lahman MKE, Richard, KM (2013) Appropriated poetry: Archival poetry in research. *Qualitative Inquiry* 20:344-355 p. 344
- 7 Richardson, L. (1994). Writing: A method of inquiry. In N. K. Denzin & Y. S. Lincoln (Eds.), *Handbook of qualitative research*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage 516-529
- 8 Rorty R (1991) *Objectivity, relativism, and truth*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press p. 76
- 9 Clifford J, Marcus GE (Eds.) (1986) *Writing culture: the poetics and politics of ethnography: a School of American Research advanced seminar*. Berkeley: University of California Press
- 10 Carver T, Chambers SA (2012) Shapiro, Michael J. *Discourse, culture, violence*. Abingdon: Routledge p. 18
- 11 Richardson L (1991) Postmodern Social Theory: Representational Practices. *Sociological Theory* 9: 173-179 p. 177

- 12 D'Souza R (2014) What Can Activist Scholars Learn from Rumi? *Philosophy East and West* 64: 1-24
- 13 Yamada S, Slingsby BT, Inada MK, Derauf, D (2009) Evidence-based public health: a critical perspective. *J Public Health* 16:169–172
- 14 Harvey J (1999) *Civilized oppression*. Oxford: Rowman & Littlefield
- 15 Freire P (1970; 2000) *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. New York: Continuum p. 145