Using research poetics responsibly: Applications for health promotion research

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Abstract:

Research poetics, a form of arts-based research methods, has been underutilized in the field of health promotion. Poetic methods have most commonly been used as a form of representation of the lived experience in qualitative research. For the community-engaged researcher, representing findings through poetry offers unique opportunities for engaging the reader and reaching diverse communities. However, this approach also has implications as an analytic method and allows the analyst to have a more meaningful and personal engagement with participants' stories. Perhaps most importantly, this approach acknowledges and brings to the forefront the co-construction of qualitative findings and de-centers the authority of the researcher by preserving and promoting the participant's voice. Using examples from the authors' own research, this article describes opportunities for incorporating research poetics into health promotion research and argues for its applicability for community-engaged health promotion researchers.

Keywords: research poetics | art-based research methods | qualitative research

Article:

> Figurative language can give shape to the difficult and the painful. It can make visible and "felt" that which is invisible and "unfeelable." Imagery, more than anything else, can take us out of our own existence and let us stand in the condition of another instance, or another life. It can make the subject of the poem, whatever it is, as intimate as honey—or ashes—in the mouth. Use it responsibly [1, p. 108].

Research poetics—part of a larger field of arts-based research methods—is increasingly used as a methodological approach in qualitative research across various fields and disciplines, such as sociology [2], education [3], evaluation [4], and social work [5]. As made explicit in the introductory quote, poetry can be transformational. When poetry is applied to qualitative studies it can deepen our understanding and heighten our connections to the lived experience. Research poetics is used as both an analytic tool and a means of data re/presentation through a variety of applications, including poetic transcription (poetry created from condensing and re-writing

verbatim transcripts), found or archived poetry (poetry created from literary texts and public documents), and poetry created through the researchers' experiences, perceptions, and field notes. Although research poetics is gaining in popularity and rigor, to date there is little exploration on its applicability to community-engaged health research. The purpose of this article is to illustrate ways research poetics can be useful in the field of health promotion as both a form of analysis and re/presentation.

ARTS-BASED METHODS IN HEALTH SCIENCES

Arts-based methodology is increasingly used in health-related research [6]. Photography is one common application. In both Photovoice and photo elicitation, participants are provided with cameras and asked to take pictures that relate to the phenomenon of interest [7, 8]. The photographs are printed and group discussions ensue in order to elicit and examine participants' interpretation of meanings of the photographs. This use of arts-based methods focuses on data generation/interpretation and allows for more meaningful and empowering participation. Because the primary premise of Photovoice is to instigate policy-level change [8], re/presentation of the findings through the images and their attributed meanings becomes a critical focus. One dissemination strategy for Photovoice research is a public display to which community members and local politicians are invited to attend. Thus, Photovoice research uses arts-based re/presentation as part of a community activism strategy. More recently, community-based participatory researchers have been advocating for similar methods using other art forms, such as painting [9].

Arts-based methodologies also have a history in the delivery of health pro- motion messages and campaigns [6]. Examples include theatrical productions to educate and engage communities around specific health topics, such as HIV/AIDS [10]. Posters, public health novellas, serial radio/TV dramas, and music are also common venues for delivering health promotion messages [11-13]. However, poetry has had far less application. A recent systematic review of arts-based methodology in health research demonstrated only two examples of research poetics among 30 studies, both focused on healthcare provider training [6].

Other examples of health-related research poetics show a focus on clinical populations and specific health issues, such as re/presenting the experiences of persons living with certain health conditions [14, 15] and re/presenting the experiences of family members of hospitalized patients [16]. Very little health promotion research incorporates research poetics. Yet this methodology offers a valuable tool for researchers engaged in community-engaged research and social justice issues. This article offers several approaches to using research poetics in health promotion with examples provided from the authors' research.

RESEARCH POETICS AS AN ANALYTIC TOOL

Using research poetics as a method of qualitative analysis has several advantages, including: preserving participants' voices, crystallizing narratives, deepening the intimate connection between researchers and participants, allowing researchers to focus on specific components of the participants' voices, and uncovering connections between critical constructs in the phenomenon and textual representations. Research poetics also offers a way to insert creativity

into the analytic process. Coffey and Atkinson [17] describe several techniques for "playing" with qualitative data during the analysis phase. They emphasize the importance of creative play as a means to delve deeper into the findings and provide richer interpretations. Poetic transcription can be viewed as one form of creative play.

Poetic Transcription

Poetic transcription, or "condensation" [18], recreates participant responses to interview questions into poetic form. It may come before or after other analytic techniques, such as coding and creating themes, but generally occurs fairly early in the analytic process. When employed early, poetic transcription encourages the emergence of rhetorical devices, such as metaphor, which can aid in the researcher's ability to recognize the complexity of the phenomenon under investigation and in the interpretive process. Preserving the voice of participants is a critical element in qualitative analysis as it is important to ensure the voice and experiences of the researcher does not displace those of the participants [19]. By crystallizing the narrative or story at the analytic level, research poetics allows the researcher to hone in on critical elements within the participants' story as well as examine how the story is told, while still preserving the intonation and cadence of the participant's speech.

The act of writing is a method of inquiry in qualitative research [20]; thus, expanding our writing methods and strategies, including poetics, are worthwhile endeavors for the qualitative analyst and should increase the richness and complexity of the interpretation. As "a practical and powerful method for analyzing social worlds" [20, p. 522], poetic transcription builds the analyst's emotional connection to the participant's story. Richardson describes the intensity of this connection while discussing the process she used to create the poetic transcription of her participant, "Louisa May" [2, p. 150]:

> Writing the poem took the better part of four weeks. During that time, Louisa May moved into my psychic interior in a way that no interviewee of mine ever had. She moved in the way poetry does. She's not yet moved out.

While poetic transcription can deepen this emotional connection, care must be taken not to assume ownership of participants' stories or reduce participants to characters. Neither transcripts nor poems can represent an entire person. Poetic transcription, as with verbatim transcription [21], represents the co-constructed story of a specific interview that took place within a specific time. Our own experiences with poetic transcription have fostered deeper understandings of this story-in-time-and-place and have provided a way to engage in more personal and thoughtful interpretation than what we experienced reading verbatim transcripts and/or listening to audiotaped interviews alone. Community-engaged and participatory forms of research conducted in health promotion call for researchers to pursue deeper understandings of the historical context and current realities of populations with which they work. The use of research poetics during data analysis may be a fruitful venue for increasing researcher sensitivity, under- standing, and connection to the communities in which they work while both allowing and facilitating mutually constituted knowledge.

We have used poetic transcriptions frequently in our own work. Our first experience was with data from a study that focused on health communication between low-income mothers of color and their adolescent daughters [22]. Creating poems out of verbatim transcripts changed both how we perceived the topic and how we related to the data. The act of creating each poem helped us to identify and convey essential images and/or concepts. It allowed us to become immersed in the data and connect how the sounds and rhythms of each participant's words illuminated what she felt or experienced. After we created a poem from our deep engagement within each transcript, we assessed the ways that the poem took up and reflected critical issues within the transcript. We revised each poem until all of the essential pieces from our readings of the transcript were represented.

We used a specific process to create the poetic transcriptions. After several readings of the full verbatim transcripts, we created narrative profiles using only participant voices (e.g., participant quotes) that detailed the phenomenon directly under investigation. Passages of transcripts that included the phenomenon of interest were separated from the full transcript but left in the original order in which they appeared (were spoken) in the interview (see Table 1). We read each narrative profile several times to immerse ourselves in the participant's perspective. Then we identified representative phrases and images. These phrases and images that illuminated specific insights about the phenomenon were cut from the profiles and arranged into a poem. Again we placed the significant phrases and images in the order in which they appeared in the original interview. Each author read these individual poems multiple times with discussion, memo-ing, and revisions (if needed) after each reading. Poems were compared with the narrative profiles and the original transcripts in an iterative process to ensure each poem crystallized the essence of the phenomenon without losing the context in which it occurred. This method, particularly the iterative cycling between transcripts, profiles, and poems, allowed us to view the participant's story through different lenses. It required us to examine and play with language; to "play" with the data in order to explore what did and did not represent the participants' stories as we understood them.

The steps associated with the iterative process of poetic transcription facilitate increasing levels of intimacy between the analyst and participant. At the transcript level, the analyst is an outsider examining the conversation between the participant and the interviewer. At the narrative profile level, the analyst engages with the participant's viewpoint, much like fiction readers enter into the protagonist's world, and relates to the participant's motives and goals. At the poetic level (via rendering the profile in poetic form), analysts are able to relate to the participant in terms of how the story is told. Poetic transcription requires a close, nuanced examination of language in order to choose the lines that best represent the participant and her story. In this manner, the analyst moves from his/her position as an outsider to a co-constructor of and active participant in the narrative.

"I" Poems

"I" poems are an early step in the analytic process known as "The Listening Guide" [23]. This type of analysis involves taking small sections of transcripts and isolating "I" statements made by the participant. The technique is designed to "press the researcher to listen to the participant's first-person voice" and "to hear how this person speaks about him- or herself" [23, p. 259].

Generally, "I" statements include only the pronoun "I" and the corresponding verb. Occasionally "seemingly important accompanying words" are added for context [23, p. 259]. Listing these truncated "I" statements in the order that they appear within a transcript creates a poem that reveals the voice and perspective of the participant. By isolating just the "I" statements, the analyst is able to separate the voice the participant uses to express her identity through the narrative she is telling. In a comparison of analytic techniques, Edwards and Weller [24] noted a shift in relationship between the analyst and participant when moving from a thematic analysis to the use of I-poems. They experienced these relationships as "gazing at," when using a thematic analysis and "standing alongside," when using I-poems [24, p. 215]. While Edwards and Weller [24] contest that one approach is superior to the other, for the community-engaged researcher an argument can be made for the importance of "standing alongside" participants.

Transcript segment	Narrative profile	Stanzas
I: So she's getting ready to turn 13. Has her responsibilities changed around the house? M: She needs to start washing her own clothes. I: [giggles] M: She knows how but she won't keep the cycle going. I: Ok. M: I have to tell her to do everything. She won't take the initiative to go and do it, so I have to say Rhapsody you need to sort your clothes out, Rhapsody I need you to wash the dishes, and do you—believe it or not, she has one day I had her doing a lot of stuff and she said "what are you gonna do?" I: [laughter] M: yea so you know [laughter] I: [laughter] I was the same way, I hated to wash dishes. M: "What are you gonna do," you know it's just her and myself so I: Right M: She's like "what are you gonna do" and I have to sit down and tell her, well not actually sit down, but stand there and tell her in her face "look I'm the adult here, I have to pay the bills, and I need in order for us to keep this household working, you have to put in just as I do," and I mean if it's just like fold clothes, she don't feel like doing it, you can see it on her face but she's gonna do it, and the way I do things, I guess I want her to do things. She'll sit down and fold clothes, and it's like a pile of clothes and she'll sit down and fold every piece of them and one time she didn't fold them. She folded them real sorry and I unfolded all of them and I threw them back on the floor and I said "and you need to fold the clothes like you really feel like folding the clothes."	*She needs to start washing her own clothes. She knows how* but *she won't keep the cycle going.* I have to tell her to do everything. *She won't take the initiative* to go and do it, so I have to say "Rhapsody, you need to sort your clothes out. Rhapsody, I need you to wash the dishes." And do you—believe it or not, she has, one day I had her doing a lot of stuff and *she said, "what are you gonna do?"* You know, it's just her and myself so she's like "what are you gonna do?" and I have to sit down and tell her, well not actually sit down, but stand there and tell her in her face, "Look, I'm the adult here. I have to pay the bills and I need, in order for us to keep this household working, you have to put in just as I do." And I mean if it's just like fold clothes, *she don't feel like doing it,* you can see it on her face *but she's gonna do it,* and the way I do things. I guess I want her to do things. *She'll sit down and fold clothes,* and it's like a pile of clothes and she'll sit down and fold every piece of them and one time she didn't fold them, *she folded them real sorry,* and *I unfolded all of them* and *I threw them back on the floor* and I said "And *you need to fold the clothes like you really feel like folding the clothes.*"	She needs to start washing her own clothes She knows how She won't keep the cycle going She won't take the initiative She said "What are you gonna do?" She don't feel like doing it But she's gonna do it She'll sit down and fold clothes One time she folded them real sorry I unfolded all of them I threw them back on the floor "You need to fold clothes Like you really feel Like folding clothes"

In our previously described study, we modified the "I" poem technique to reflect the mother-daughter dyad [22]. These modified poems helped to reveal each participant's perception of her relationship with her mother/daughter. We examined sections of transcripts where the participant was discussing her mother/daughter. First we extracted all statements where the participant referred to herself ("I" statements) to create "I" poems. Then we extracted all statements where she referred to the other member of the dyad ("she" statements). Finally we then combined the "I" and the "she" poems, keeping the original order intact. By creating these poems we were able to both "hear" and explore how the participant expressed herself in relation to her mother/daughter, how she perceived the other dyad member, and how she viewed the relationship. The poems also provided a way to compare these expressions and perceptions across the dyads.

Table 2 provides an example of "I," "She," and "I/She" poems for one of the mothers in our study. In the "I" poem we begin to see the participant's view of herself in relation to her eldest daughter. We notice that many of the statements are directive, which resonates with how she perceived her role as a mother. In the "She" poem we can concentrate on how the mother views her daughter and we find both descriptive statements (representing how the mother viewed her daughter) and supportive statements (representing how the mother expressed her role). While each poem stands on its own and provides information about the woman's perception of the relationship, it is also important to examine the combined "I/She" poem. This final poem illuminates the connections between the woman's views of herself and of her daughter. The poem helps us consider how her relationship with her daughter is embedded within the mother's identity.

The "I/She" technique shows how research poetics can be used to explore both relationships as a construct and how individuals position themselves within relationships. A similar method could be used for other dyadic relationships. The method may be especially useful for health promotion researchers interested in examining relationships at multiple levels and in a variety of settings, such as families (e.g., husband/wife, siblings), schools (e.g., teacher/student, peers), and institutions (e.g., doctor/patient, employer/employee).

Found Poetry

Found poetry, also known as archival poetry [25], represents discovering poetry in text that already exists. Some methodologists include transcripts as text in which poetry can be found. However, in this article we are using the term to describe how written texts (e.g., literature, blog posts, reports) can be transformed into research poetry. By using literature and other public documents as source material, the researcher can examine public discourses around specific topics. The use of poetics in this context provides another opportunity for the researcher to "play" with the data; to alter and reconfigure the material in order to bring forth subtle meanings and messages. An example from our own work (see Table 3) includes a series of paired poems created to examine the ways that mothers are positioned in and by breastfeeding promotion culture.

Table 2. Sample "I," "She," and "I/She" Poems

I	She	I/She
I consider myself . . . happy	She loves to smile	She loves to smile
I am okay	She brings a smile	I consider myself . . . happy
	She always looks to make sure	She brings a smile
I taught her how		She always looks to make sure
I told her about shaving	She wanted to know	I am okay
I told her about the tampon	She wanted to know	I taught her how
I attack it	She puts it out there	I told her about shaving
	She's open to talk	She wanted to know
		I told her about the tampon
I had it	She's very open	She wanted to know
I have it	She'll rat everybody	She puts it out there
I push her	She'll say "you need to talk to . . ."	I attack it
I tell her		She's open to talk
I had to work double	She's got a big mouth	She's very open
I get up every day		
I go to work	She has a learning disability	She'll rat everybody
I love my job	She can do it	She'll say "you need to talk to . . ."
	She can do it	She's got a big mouth
I teach her	She has excellent work ethics	
	She says	She has a learning disability
	She gets that from me	I had it
		I have it
		I push her
	She loves doing that	I tell her
	She sees a role model	She can do it
	She tries to mimic	I had to work double
		She can do it
		She has excellent work ethics
		She says
		She gets that from me
		I get up every day
		I go to work
		I love my job
		I teach her
		She loves doing that
		She sees a role model
		She tries to mimic

Table 3. Breastfeeding List Coalition "Found" Paired Poetry

Poetic citation	Word replacement
Coalition*	Coalition
I would prefer to feel guilt than be ignorant of the truth	I would prefer to feel guilt than be ignorant or the truth
That artificial milk is Never best for a baby	That artificial mother is Never best for a baby
Your sweet baby with nasty old contaminated Inert fast-food.	Your sweet baby with nasty old contaminated Inert mother.
Significant deviation, a last resort: Milk of an alien species.	Significant deviation, a last resort: Mother of an alien species.
It's a natural, living substance Vs. a dead, processed, inferior product:	It's a natural, living substance Vs. a dead, processed, inferior mother:
An investment o time money and emotional guilt.	An investment of time money and emotional guilt.
The simple answer find a way to breastfeed.	The simple answer find a way to mother.
Breastmilk is never recalled.	Mother is never recalled.

*Title of poems.

The poems engage with various sources of information and commentary about maternal infant feeding practices that included: La Leche League International's book *The womanly art of breastfeeding* [26], the U.S. Surgeon General's *Call to action to support breastfeeding* [27], and e-mails via a breastfeeding advocacy coalition listserv (2009-2011). An additional set was created from an essay one of the authors wrote in 2012 detailing her experiences with breastfeeding as a new mother. The first poem in each set is designed as poetic citation and is similar to the poetic transcription process detailed above. In these poems the original source language was used in an attempt to "cite" (i.e., accurately replicate tone and overarching message) the original text. The second poem in the set replaces words associated with infant feeding with the word "mother" (or a grammatically correct variation). The poems offer reflective analysis of both the structuring of breastfeeding promotion and representations of mothering.

As can be seen in Table 3, the act of creating and refining the poems illuminated the positioning of mothers within the infant feeding discourse. The first poem in each set represented a content analysis of the original source materials. By focusing on the tone of breastfeeding advocacy across multiple sources, the first set of poems expressed the glorification of breastfeeding mothers. The word replacement in the second set of poems highlighted the maternal objectification within breastfeeding narratives. Taken together, the poems both illuminate and contest breastfeeding promotion scripts.

POETRY AS RE/PRESENTATION

Much of the discussion around research poetics methods focuses on the re/presentation and dissemination of qualitative findings. Qualitative methodologists [19, 20] discuss the need for qualitative writing to "come alive" for the reader or its very meaning will be lost. Research poetics can accomplish this through providing a vicarious experience. Its strengths lie in its ability to evoke strong emotional responses from an audience. Poetry is a powerful tool for re/presenting participants' stories in a way that is vivid and meaningful to the reader [28]. Research poems draw the reader in and create more intimate spaces for him or her to experience the participant's story. Further, as Ward claims [29], we have a moral and ethical responsibility to represent our participants' stories in a way that engages the reader.

By using research poetics for representation, the participant's story is "allowed to stand alone inviting interpretation by the reader; the reader is invited into the research space" [29, p. 356].

By its very nature, research poetics breaks the authoritative voice of traditional representation [29, 30] and underscores the role of the analyst/researcher in the co-construction of the narrative. Research poetics compel both researchers and readers to acknowledge this co-construction by allowing for multiple readings and interpretations [2]. As Glesne explains: "poetic transcription creates a third voice that is neither the interviewee's nor the researcher's but is a combination of both" [30, p. 215]. This positions research poetics as an appropriate technique for translational and participatory research because it eases the divide (and hierarchy) between researcher and researched. Research poetics has also been identified as a particularly appropriate dissemination venue for marginalized populations [2], making its role in community-engaged and participatory methods all the more important.

Richardson argues that poetry is not only a better representation of human speech but that it "re-creates embodied speech" [2, p. 141]. Acclaimed poet and Nobel Laurete Richard Pinsky makes a similar claim remarking on the "special intimacy" [31, p. 8] of poetry through the bodily experience of the written and spoken word. Richardson explains how the experience of reading or listening to poetry is embodied and how this embodiment connects the reader/ audience to the lived experience [2, p. 143]:

Lived experience is lived in a body, and poetic representation can touch us where we live, in our bodies. Thus, poetry gives us a greater chance of vicariously experiencing the self-reflexive and transformational process of self-creation....

Richardson also reminds us: "Qualitative research has to be read, not scanned; its meaning is in the reading". [2, p. 87]. Qualitative researchers face a unique challenge: dissemination requires condensing study findings, but the complexity and context around the phenomenon is central to understanding. Poetry is a way to achieve condensation without losing complexity. Richardson's point is that complexity is lost if the text is boring to read. Poetry, she argues, captures the reader's interest. Research poetics necessitates deep reading and rewards with vicarious experience.

We do not suggest that poetic methods be limited to text on a page; as Jorge Luis Borges proclaimed, poetry is meant to be read aloud. Indeed, community-engaged health promotion research may benefit from re/presenting findings through poetry that is non-textually disseminated. Poetry takes many forms, including: spoken word, song lyrics, greeting cards, and jingles. Some have argued that the criteria for quality in research poetics should, in part, be based upon the quality of the poem [32] and others have cautioned that written poetry can appear academic and inaccessible [3]. It is true that abstract poetry that emulates literature may not be accessible or meaningful to some audiences, even highly literate ones [25]. Therefore, for the community-engaged researcher, quality may need to be based upon the poem's ability to connect with the intended audience rather than its merits as literature [28].

In our own work with Southern Black mothers, we have noticed that participants often share the lyrics of their favorite songs and words of favorite psalm or bible verses as a way to illustrate opinions, explain experiences, and/or bolster worldviews. Introducing research poems in a similar vein, as something personally meaningful to be shared, might be an accessible approach within this community.

A recent example of our own attempts to re/present research poetics to diverse audiences is a community project we conducted using the mother-daughter research poems that included sexual communication issues [22]. For this project we filmed a staged reading of the poems. We filmed readings of several individual poems that represented specific mother and daughter participants but we also developed hybrid poems from stanzas across the poems. These hybrid poems, representing "conversations" between mothers and "conversations" between adolescent girls around sexual communication in the family, were also filmed. We then developed brief workshop protocols for use in a local community organization's pregnancy prevention efforts with teen girls and their mothers. The protocols emphasized common problems in mother-daughter communication strategies and the video clips of the poetic readings served as triggers to more in-depth discussion and role-play activities.

CONCLUSION

This article has presented several strategies for incorporating what Prendergast and Belliveau [33] termed "participant-voiced" and "literature-voiced" research poetry. We have argued that "participant-voiced" poetry can be especially useful for community-engaged researchers in health promotion. "Participant-voiced" poetry helps analysts to feel a deeper personal connection to the lived experi- ences of their participants, gain a more complex understanding of the meanings participants relay through their experiences, and better preserve the voices of their participants in their disseminated products. "Literature-voiced" poetry provides additional

techniques for incorporating other sources into health research. By crystallizing both published and unpublished literature (e.g., reports, documents, blogs, and listservs) generated on a health topic into research poems, analysts can deepen their understanding of how the issues are discussed and represented by different constituents as well as illuminate underlying tensions and inequities within these re/presentations. Both "participant-voiced" and "literature-voiced" research poetry can be an engaging format for re/presenting research findings to multiple and diverse audiences.

Richardson credits Robert Frost with calling poetry "the shortest emotional distance between two people" [20, pp. 521-522]. As an analytic method, research poetics shortens the emotional distance between analyst and participant and helps the researcher deeply engage with the participants' expression of their experience. As a method of re/presentation, poetry shortens the emotional distance between the audience and the co-constructed reality of the participant and the analyst and helps the audience deeply engage with research findings. While arts-based methodologies are growing in the field of health promotion, research poetics has rarely been used. We have found that the use of research poetics as both an analytical tool and a form of re/presentation enriches our community- engaged approach to our own work in the field. Using research poetics as both a mode of analysis and of re/presentation can be a useful tool for health promotion researchers who incorporate a social justice framework and engage in participatory research methodologies with communities.

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