

COMMENTARY

Can Poetry Be Data? Potential Relationships Between Poetry and Research

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The article by Rich Furman (2004) uses personal poetry written a decade ago, as well as current reflections on these poems, to explore the author's reactions at various points in time to his father's diagnosis of lung cancer. Furman created his poems in the time-honored tradition of writing as personal therapy (Anderson & MacCurdy, 2000). Confronted with emotional chaos and loss of control, he wrote to restore a sense of order and balance in a fragmented life. However, 10 years later, the author regards these poems differently, with the eye of perspective not as therapy but as raw material for investigation. He has become the archeologist of his own past. The poetry he wrote then, likely with no thought of scholarly study, is transformed into the stuff of research.

POETRY AND RESEARCH

Possible Relationships Between Poetry and Research

In excavating his writings, Rich Furman (2004) explicitly makes the claim that poetry, including in this case autobiograph-

ical poetry, can plausibly be used as data for qualitative research. Furman is by no means the first to explore the relationship of poetry to research. For example, many physician-scholars and patient-poets have commented on the healing value of reading—and writing—poetry (Coulehan, 1991; Walker & Roffman, 1992), thereby implicitly suggesting such writing to be a kind of therapeutic treatment, the efficacy of which is presumably testable. More recently, empirical designs have indeed investigated personal writing about trauma or illness as interventions and demonstrated significant improvement in outcomes of health and psychological well-being (Pennebaker & Seagal, 1999; Smyth, Stone, Hurewitz, & Kaell, 1999).

As Furman indicates, poems may also be considered as specific pieces of information or evidence. Other scholars have also approached medically related poetry in this manner (Campo, 2003; Henderson, 2002; Oiler, 1983; Poirier, Ahrens, & Brauner, 1998; Rucker & Shapiro, 2003), scrutinizing poetry by medical students, nurses, physicians, patients, as well as formally trained poets to explore and understand aspects of professional development, the illness experience, and the doctor-patient relationship. In his seminal book, *Prairie Voices*, medical anthropologist Howard

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Stein (1996) courageously weaves together personal poetry and scholarly text about family medicine practiced on the plains of Oklahoma so that each modality mutually informs the other.

Researchers have even written poetry as a way of representing and reporting other qualitative findings obtained using more traditional methods. For example, one ethnographer has drawn on qualitative data about family members of hospitalized relatives to create an opus through what she calls "poetic transcription" as a way of giving voice to the lived experience of her study's participants (Carr, 2003). In the area of developmental disability, another investigator similarly experiments with presenting his research in "alternative textual formats," including poetry (Smith, 2001).

Poetry as Data

Despite these efforts, and returning to Furman's assertion that poetry is data, there is something vaguely jarring about the juxtaposition of these two words. Finding them together in the same sentence may seem bold to some, oxymoronic to others, or perhaps even just moronic. Furman's article begs the question, How can we approach the concept of poetry-as-data in a way that retains both literary and scientific integrity and somehow enhances each?

Researchers might be forgiven for long-ing, however fleetingly, for the good old days, when everyone knew what data were. Recourse to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, the last refuge of solidity in a groundless, inconstant world, produces the following definition: *A datum is something known or assumed as fact, and made the basis of reasoning or calculation.* Few would claim that poems are primarily facts, although they may certainly contain facts and even numbers (one of the most moving poems I have ever read is comprised entirely of the "numbers" of a patient admitted to an in-

tensive care unit who eventually expires; Cramer, 2004).

The relative absence of factual, objective, universally verifiable evidence in poems may at first blush appear to be a disadvantage in exploiting the possibilities of poetry as data. We know that how knowledge is expressed and represented in part determines its value both to scientists and to society as a whole (Sibley, 1995). Generally speaking, knowledge expressed as quantifiable information is more esteemed than knowledge expressed as poetry. However, as the British physician and researcher Denis Burkitt observed, "Not everything that counts can be counted." In the postmodern era, it makes sense to consider the extent to which we might be able to expand the sources of knowledge that we admit as legitimate data in the academic and scholarly canons (Frank, 2004).

Ways of Knowing

Some resolution of this dilemma may be found in how we conceptualize and legitimate different ways of knowing, including both logicoscientific and narrative modes (Bruner, 1979). Howard Stein (2003) points out that knowing in medicine, as in other areas of life, is not singular but rather various. What we "know" in medicine and life is surely derived in part from empirical research and scientific data, but it is also derived from multiple other sources, including poetry. In fact, Stein argues, we ignore multiple ways of knowing at our peril. In the medical realm, attention to poetry and painting can, in fact, help us identify clinical data often missed or muddled through more conventional assessments. In contrast to Sibley's discomfort with the social privileging of the language of science over the language of art, Stein and others make the point that, for many purposes related to healing, scientific terminology is deficient in comparison to poetic expression (Campo, 2003; H. F. Stein, 1996). Poetry speaks in a unique way from the interior of human experience in a way

that science can never, indeed does not wish to, do.

Poetry as Data in Qualitative Research

Furman acknowledges that poetry is not the sort of data that conforms to tenets of reproducibility, generalizability, and objectivity found in quantitative research. Instead, his project offers poems as the basic building blocks from which qualitative research can be made. In many ways, this is an appealing and credible proposition. As some scholars have asserted, "a poem [should be] no less subject to proof than a scientific theorem, and its veracity is drawn from being consistent with the reality it conceives" (Weishaus, 2004), and perhaps qualitative research gives us a process by which this can be so. Certainly the values and priorities of qualitative research are often those found in poetry as well.

However, can traditional qualitative concepts be transferred whole cloth from narrative to poetry? In speaking of literary analysis, Henderson (2002) rightly points out that "a simple mapping of . . . techniques that apply to poetry in one cultural domain onto poetry in another domain is problematic." If that is the case, then what guiding principles, if any, should we use in determining how poetry can be used as data in qualitative research?

COMPARING THE PURPOSES OF QUALITATIVE RESEARCH AND POETRY

Pursuit of Meaning

Some assumptions of qualitative research appear highly amenable to integrating poetry as a source of data. For example, qualitative approaches are absorbed in questions of meaning. Poetry also may be broadly understood as an inquiry into meanings (Campo, 2003), and qualitative investigators have explicitly acknowledged the debt owed to humanities-based modalities in their efforts at meaning-making in their interpretive endeavors (Hunter,

Lusardi, Zucker, Jacelon, & Chandler, 2002). Rich Furman's (2004) poetry overtly struggles to wrest meaning from his father's encounter with cancer.

Multiple Realities

Qualitative research further favors the view that its task is not to verify or predict a single, enduring "truth" but rather to discover and better understand the multiple, socially constructed realities that surround us (Frank, 2004; Greenhalgh & Taylor, 1997). Such research is interested in relationships and circumstances in which the explanation of action is not straightforwardly causal, linear, or unidirectional but rather is due to multiple interacting factors, events, and processes. Similarly, poetry is not concerned with prediction; rather, it provides a kind of deep understanding of subjective experience that it is difficult to access in other ways and is capable of presenting diverse, often contradictory, narratives and images simultaneously (Campo, 2003; H. F. Stein, 1996).

Particularity

Because of its belief in coexisting various, inconstant realities, qualitative research approaches knowledge as local and specific. Poetry too is fiercely particularistic and concrete (Downie, 2002). As Campo (2003) writes, it is one of the few ways available to us of preserving "the fragile details of the human experience of sickness" (p. 98). In the process of writing about his father's desk, for example, Furman hunts for clues to his father's soul. In the metaphorical intimacy of dancing chest to chest with his father, he pokes about in the emotional complexities of their relationship.

Point of View

Qualitative approaches are very much concerned with the informant's frame of reference (Ventres & Frankel, 1996); and in poetry we find what has often been called a unique entry into the subjective

experience and point of view of others, especially others unlike ourselves. In some respects, poetry is like instant anthropology. The power and immediacy of its language take us in short order to places we never thought we would be and into lives perhaps we did not initially wish to know. In Furman's (2004) article, we see that, in searching the details of his father's life and illness, Rich Furman is forced to wrestle not only with the space and place of death but with a man he loves but who also bewilders and frustrates him.

Subjectivity and Reflexivity

Further, qualitative research takes as a given that inquirers cannot maintain objective distance from the phenomena being studied; at best, they can only acknowledge and reflect on their own subjectivity. For this reason, qualitative research prizes reflexivity (i.e., the capacity of the research presented to authentically identify and contemplate personal biases introduced by the researcher). In the Furman (2004) article, an interesting wrinkle is added by the autobiographical nature of the poems. The poet is the subject is the researcher. Subjectivity is compounded and intensified because of the retrospective analysis of these "raw data," also conducted by the poet-researcher. Congruent with assumptions of qualitative research, it is precisely this reflexivity that interests the author and precisely what he finds of value.

Trustworthiness and Credibility

In terms of assessing the validity of conclusions, qualitative guidelines of trustworthiness and credibility (Lincoln & Guba, 1986) seem intuitively relevant to poetry. It is probably safe to say that poetry continues to survive as a mode of expression because we recognize that it has the capability to create useful, credible, and trustworthy truths that are hard to discover in other ways. To the extent that we accept and find value in Rich Furman's

poems about his father, it is because we believe them and believe *in* them.

Finally, one conceptual model of qualitative research activities has theorized the process as a series of interrelated acts of asking, witnessing, interpreting, and knowing (C. H. Stein & Mankowski, 2004). This too is recognizable to us as analogous to what occurs in the writing and reading of poetry. What begins as an interrogation of experience proceeds to unflinching presence in the face of that experience to ongoing construal and discovery of meaning in the experience. Such an unfolding is evident in the movement of Furman's body of work from flailing anxiety to deepening awareness, resolution, and acceptance of certain ultimately unresolvable questions.

POETRY AS DATA

Data Analysis and Interpretation

Because Furman (2004) specifically puts forward the notion of poetry as data, I would like to probe this issue in somewhat more detail. Data sources in qualitative research (and in quantitative research for that matter) are generally determined by the nature of the problem and are identified by asking what are the most appropriate sources of information for the particular question posed (i.e., most useful, make most sense, are ethical). Qualitative research generally identifies two interrelated aspects of dealing with data: analysis, or the process of bringing order to the data by organizing it into patterns, categories, and basic descriptive units; and interpretation, which involves attaching meaning and significance to the analysis, explaining descriptive patterns, looking for relationships and linkages among descriptive dimensions (Patton, 2001). None of these dimensions of qualitative data seem to disqualify poetry on their face, so it is probably permissible to conclude that poetry can be considered to be data for the purposes of qualitative research.

Poetry as Text

We might next ask, What tools might be used to approach the qualitative analysis and interpretation of poetry data? One intriguing question is whether poetry should be treated like any other text. Clearly, poetry is not the same as prose, but especially when written by untrained medical students, nurses, physicians, or patients, it is sometimes difficult to specify precisely why. One author (Henderson, 2002) has speculated that, because of its requirement for reflection, analysis, and organization of ideas as well as its inquiry into the meaning, poems provide a uniquely critical position from which their authors may "interrogate" salient life experiences. This point, however, is arguable, as is demonstrated by a momentary reflection on insights generated from other forms of narrative writing, interviews, and focus groups.

In any case, techniques of literary criticism and analysis abound, but these may not be entirely sufficient for the research purposes of the social and clinical sciences (although researchers who are serious about incorporating poetry as a source of data would do well to at least familiarize themselves with basic concepts of narrative analysis; Charon, 2001). Furthermore, there are methods of textual analysis in both anthropological and other social science traditions (Elwyn & Gwyn, 1998). In addition, qualitative researchers often use some form of content analysis as a method of identifying categories and themes in textual data. However, are these practices appropriate or sufficient for understanding poetry as data?

Considering Rich Furman's (2004) poetry itself may give us pause. It is one thing to make the declarative statement, "I became short of breath." It is another thing to write, as he does, "Breath a limping third world trodden dog." Both lines convey knowledge. However, the kind of ambiguous, ineffable knowledge contained in the metaphor of breath as a dog leads both

writer and reader to places of unexpected discovery and insight. In another example, we may intellectually recognize that "we all must die," but I suggest that our reaction when we read "All is decided by forces unseen/ our blood thickens,/ and the universe plots our endings" is far more complex and emotionally engaging. Finally, a son may state, "I'd like to achieve emotional closeness with my sick father," but in the imploring, commanding, "Disco dance with me/ dying father," we hear additional layers of nuance and ambivalence not as easily found in prose.

The Implications of Metaphor

Because of its predilection for imagery and metaphor, meanings may emerge in poetry of which the author herself is not always completely aware and which may not be entirely intentional, yet which have their own inherent validity and signification (Kociatkiewicz & Kostera, 1999). This characteristic of poetry raises fascinating questions about how, or even whether, consensual interpretations can be reached in treating poetry as data. It even suggests the possibility that outliers or negative cases might be found within a single poem that simultaneously contains their contradiction! One way to mitigate this problem (or perhaps *richness* would be a better word) of differing meanings within a single poem is to encourage the full inclusion of poetic text in the reporting of findings, as many investigators have done. This allows readers to act as triangulated investigators in their own right.

The Aesthetics of Poetry

A final issue worth contemplating is the dimension of poetry as art and whether this has any place in analytic approaches. Having been personally involved in a qualitative research project that adopted a content analysis approach to medical student poetry (Rucker & Shapiro, 2003), my personal reactions were mixed. Our critical process was generally useful and credible,

but at times the "drawing and quartering" of these poems into thematic categories smacked of aesthetic murder. We need to understand more about how the artistic signification of this form of self-expression influences the poetic data we are analyzing and interpreting.

Some Caveats and Conclusions

As we venture into the realm of poetry as data, we require both courage and humility in large measures. Until we better understand the multiple potential relationships between poetry and research, it seems wise to incorporate established qualitative guidelines into investigations involving poetry. As one of the founding fathers of family medicine so wisely observed (McWhinney, 1989), any research that focuses on meaning is validated only if it makes sense to the subject, if other skilled observers can agree with, or at least accept, its interpretations, if it fits with the larger context from which it derives, if it stands up to informed criticism, and if multiple descriptions lead to similar conclusions. Let such criteria be applied to qualitative research involving poetry as well. In like manner, practices such as establishing an audit trail, theoretical saturation of the data, triangulation of data sources, and involvement of more than one researcher can provide reassurance regarding the trustworthiness, credibility, dependability, and utility of authorial conclusions about poetical data.

In particular, because of the issue of multiple coexisting, and often contradictory, meanings, it is to be hoped that, although investigators will begin by asking themselves, "What do I hear in this poem? What do I feel? Why am I drawn to it?," they will not stop there. Let them then also ask, "What do other people hear, see, and feel?" As more contemporary physicians and medical students explore writing poetry, in some poetical "data sets," it may be feasible to conduct a form of "member checking" with the authors themselves. In-

vestigators should also follow principles of prolonged engagement and persistent consideration, so that they do not merely "dip into" a poem or set of poems but authentically grapple with and revisit their interpretations of meaning. Furman's return 10 years postwriting is an excellent model in this regard.

When poetry becomes data, we see that the binary opposition between poetry and science is an arbitrary one (Wersher-Henry, 2000). The boundaries delineating worlds are more porous than we expected. The couplet may peacefully coexist with the p level of statistical significance. As Howard Stein (1996) intimates, the subjective and the objective may become allies "rather than wary and weary enemies." Although there are different ways of knowing, among our sources of information we discover not only divergence and separation but serendipitous convergences and felicitous affirmations that perhaps begin to approach wisdom.

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