

## Poetry as Illumination: Enhancing the Content and Process of Qualitative Research

Karen S. Joest<sup>1</sup>

### Abstract

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While conducting qualitative interviews with female adolescents exposed to domestic violence, some of whom were also victims of violence, the author used poetry as a means of enhancing reflexivity and the content and process of interviewing. Although participants wrote and shared their poetry, the primary purpose of this article is in how the researcher used poetry as a means of reflecting on how her own lived experiences could impact the research and her perceptions of participants. Secondly, poetry illuminated concerns the researcher had about the research process and the difficulties in really assisting participants who had experienced traumatic life experiences. Do we, as researchers, do enough to help? A third purpose delineated how the author used poetry to reflect on how she viewed participants in the study. Reflective poetry written by the author was shared with participants, and as reported by participants, often enhanced a sense of empowerment and catharsis.

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*"The poem has social effect of some kind whether or not the poet wills that it have. It has kinetic force; it sets in motion... elements in the reader [and writer] that would otherwise be stagnant."*

–Denise Levertov (1923-1997)

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Violence is the feeling of nothingness...

Complete and utter nothing.

Once you get bruised, battered, broken, smacked, and cracked so many times...

You've allowed them to make you feel...

...it just starts to feel like nothing.

And your heart lets this cold, lonely, hateful shield down where...

No matter how hard you're hit

No matter how loud you've been screamed at

No matter how deep the wound

No matter how long you bleed

No matter how hurt

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<sup>1</sup> State University of New York, College at Oneonta. Associate Professor in Child and Family Studies, Department of Human Ecology, State University of New York, College at Oneonta, 118 B Human Ecology Building; Oneonta, NY 13820, USA. (607) 436-2063; [Karen.Joest@oneonta.edu](mailto:Karen.Joest@oneonta.edu)

You almost wished you feel...

**You Feel Nothing!!**

The heart, mind, and soul can only be fucked with so many times

Before it shuts down. Totally.

No emotion... In or Out

--Victoria (participant), Feb, 2003

Qualitative and feminist methodologies emphasize the importance of “researcher as the instrument,” constructing an understanding of phenomena via the questions they ask, their interactions with participants, and their own personal biographies (Merriam, 1998; Rossman & Rallis, 1998). Attending to the phenomena from participants’ perspectives often involves physically going into the “field,” and spending time with participants in their territory to investigate phenomena rather than conducting research within the confines of our offices (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998; Merriam, 1998). Field experience offers a variety of avenues for exploration, and although a great deal of attention has been given in the methodological literature to field strategies and specific data collection techniques, there has been far less research on dealing with our own emotions, especially when those emotions may evoke strong feelings in ourselves.

Terry’s (2003) portrayal of “the fellas” (20 men who had lived as heroin addicts and prisoners) is an exception. His description is an intentional attempt to capture pain and suffering—including his own, by exploring the intersection of addiction and incarceration. This powerful work enhanced my understanding of the pain of participants in exploring difficult issues, that such work can entail similar emotional pain for researchers.

Kleinman and Copp (1993) describe the intensity and complexity that experiences in the field evoke in researchers, especially when feeling multiple, at times conflicting, emotions simultaneously. Allen (2001) connects how our way of being in the world (ontology), the ways we choose to examine and explore the world (methodology) and how we know what we know (epistemology) are intertwined with reflexivity, and an understanding of how we come about our analyses. Allen (2000) emphasizes that it is necessary to understand how we, as researchers, and our experiences alter our findings. Joest (2004) connects these multiple ideas and suggests that not only do we experience strong emotion in research, but that we must use reflexivity, the process by which we are attentive to our own use of self while conducting that research (Allen, 2000). Poetry may be one avenue in which to not only express emotion, but as a tool toward reflexivity (Joest, 2004).

Using poetry to reflect emotion in research is not a new concept. Percer (2002) emphasizes that poetry can be used as a way to understand and make some sense of a world that is too difficult to describe in traditional research practices. Audre Lorde (1984) refers to poetry as illumination. It is through poetry that “we give name to those ideas which are—until the poem—nameless and formless, about to be birthed, but already felt” (p. 36). Poetry can be a way of not only expressing strong emotions in research, but as a way of externalizing for participants and the researcher (Joest, 2004). Externalizing, the process of expressing emotion, thought and significant life experiences through talking or overt actions can be an essential therapeutic process (White & Eptson, 1990). And, as Armstrong (2013) would suggest, poetry can ultimately anchor and enliven an exchange while Lorde (1984) insists that poetry is a means of expressing and illuminating understanding (Lorde, 1984). It is in this way that I have used poetry as reflexivity.

In particular, I used poetry as a means of better understanding three aspects of my research: 1) how my views of the world based on my life experiences, my history as a therapist with at-risk populations and other ontological perspectives impacted the research; 2) to more deeply investigate and understand what I was bringing to the research and findings as I struggled with the differing boundaries and expectations as a researcher rather than a counselor; 3) to more deeply reflect on my perspectives of participants and how this impacted the research.

### **The Broader Study**

The purpose of the broader study from which this article is derived, was to develop an understanding of the multiple contexts of violence in the lives of adolescent girls whose mothers experienced partner violence (approved through IRB). Participants of the study had been exposed, in varying ways, to this violence and the design focused on how participants perceived, interpreted, understood and communicated about their experiences of being exposed to that violence. Furthermore, protective factors, available resources to participants, and the myriad of ways in which they coped with these experiences were explored. At least four research interviews were conducted with each participant over a period of one to two months. As part of the methodology, participants wrote poetry based on the general themes of our interviews. These included what violence meant to them; their experience of family and violence; and the aftermath of family violence.

Just as I asked participants to share their experiences through poetry, I too used poetry as a means of expression and reflection. As a part of my field notes, I used poetry to more deeply understand the ways in which my own life events possibly impacted the research and findings. In addition, poetry was used to reflect on the research process itself, which ultimately delineated a profound struggle with the blurred boundaries between the researcher and counselor in me. Finally, poetry was used to more deeply express how I viewed participants, my perceptions of participants and their life experiences, and the emotions I experienced throughout the interviewing process in regard to participants. Through the process of conducting this research with young women exposed to domestic violence, I came to know each participant in ways that dramatically altered not only my view of them and their experiences, but altered my very interactions with them and how I ultimately interpreted the research. Poetry from the third category was shared with each participant, with one exception. Her denial mechanisms were such that I thought it was not in her best interests to challenge those mechanisms within the boundaries of a researcher.

### **My Cloak...Reflecting on the Past**

As a researcher, I thought about my life and how I have become the person I am today, and I realized as most other people, I am an amalgam of many experiences. There were many personal experiences that guided and affected my life course and continue to affect my interpretations of what exists. My familial experiences, childhood economic deprivation, the rampant sexism, abuse, and violence I experienced as well as learning to become a survivor in the midst of despair were and are, cloaks worn daily. Yet, it is through the understanding of the cloak that has shrouded my life, that I have been able to illuminate and enlighten my understanding of the experiences of others. Those experiences are all interrelated with who I am, who I claim to be and ultimately how and what I see in participants and ultimately how I have interpreted the research. Although I was aware of the probable impacts that my life experiences could have on my research, it was still important to challenge how I made meaning of others' experiences through my lens.

My Cloak

I was born of "the other"  
 Not one of the same  
 A child of the ghetto  
 A child with no name

The invisible youngster  
 Who yearned for so much more  
 Was told she was different  
 Nothing more than a whore

Banished to the outskirts  
 Often filled with rage  
 Hatred poured within her soul  
 Trapped within a cage

The child, a survivor  
 But tainted none the same  
 Fingers curled in fists of rage  
 Who is there to blame?

And then there was a friendship  
 The seed became a bloom  
 Years of perseverance  
 Protection from the doom

A seed was firmly planted  
 And then began to grow  
 Altered desperations  
 Altered all I know

A tree now tall and sturdy  
 Seasons change, and thoughts provoke  
 But all I knew as a child  
 Worn daily as my cloak  
 --Field Notes

Since I was interviewing young women exposed to domestic violence, several of whom lived in impoverishment, it was important to understand how my life experiences, including growing up very poor in the inner city projects, filled with daily exposure to extreme violence, might impact this research. . Likewise, it was also important to reflect upon how my career as a counselor working with sexually abused, traumatized, and at-risk youth might impact my view and interpretation of participants. This could ultimately impact my interpretation of what they were sharing with me—and thus the research process. I had to consistently remind myself, these were research interviews, not counseling sessions.

Though there may have been a level of catharsis for participants by simply being able to share their stories, the primary purpose was not to develop a healing relationship. And, I understood it would be unethical to engage in any form of counseling relationships with participants.

However, throughout the research process, I was consistently engaged in a battle with myself that I had not clearly identified as a probable issue prior to the research beginning—guilt at ending my career as a counselor after the suicide of a client. As I interviewed participants, my own sense of sadness, futility, and despair came up when I realized I had not adequately dealt with my client's suicide. I had begun to believe I could no longer make a difference in the lives of my clients, and these same feelings were coming to surface in my research. A pervasive feeling of helplessness flushed over me and I questioned my ability as a researcher or if I was perhaps doing more harm than good in conducting this type of research. I even found myself questioning my actions prior to my client's suicide...

The smell of alcohol,  
A slight negligee  
She stumbled from the bedroom—  
The middle of the day

‘I can't really talk now,  
I just need to sleep’  
She turned her back and walked away—  
The secret she would keep

I saw no pills or opened caps—  
I scanned the surface well...  
Yet night would fall, the phone would ring—  
Into a private hell!

I stood beside her bedside,  
Face as though she told  
The secrets of a life long gone—  
Devoid of love and hope

Her skin was pale and lifeless-  
Machine would now give way.  
Her tortured soul would not live-  
To hurt another day!  
I stood by her graveside.  
Could I ever be the same?  
What did I miss that fateful day?  
And who else is to blame??  
--Field Notes

After my client's suicide, it was a somewhat natural process to question my ability to continue working with clients.

However, I was not prepared that these issues would surface so completely while conducting research. Poetry was an outlet to more deeply express my emotions and to better understand any connections between my history as a counselor and my new role as a researcher-- including touching the pain that I thought I'd left behind! Writing reflective poetry was an avenue with which to explore those feelings and experiences and how they might possibly impact my research. Thus, as I was able to explore the helplessness of a client's suicide, I could see that reflected in how I may have viewed participants.

Did I perceive their helplessness in changing their circumstances because that was real or because I was feeling it within the context of my own experiences? Secondly, would I see resilience in these young women, as we explored their lived experiences because they were truly resilient? Or, if I did find resilience, was it because I needed them to be?

Ultimately, it was important to continue to reflect upon and explore these issues throughout the research process. In order to have more trustworthiness in my findings, I thought it all the more important to conduct member checking with participants to ensure that my findings and interpretations were accurate. Therefore, I shared interviews and findings with each participant to ensure accuracy in my interpretations of what they had shared. Ultimately, I was able to tap into my emotionality surrounding my choices to leave the field of counseling and see connections to qualitative interviewing. Through using reflexive poetry I did not simply ignore this, but rather was able to explore these issues ontologically, methodologically and make important epistemological connections.

### **Boundaries Blurred...Reflecting on the Process**

Just as I was reminded of the suicide of my client and the subsequent questioning of how my role as a researcher varied dramatically from my previous role as a counselor, I also became concerned about maintaining appropriate boundaries between researcher and participant and not engaging in a counseling relationship. Yet, the line was so thin at times. I had incorporated several components into the methodology such as giving participants information on counselors and assisting them with accessing counselors if necessary. Several had even been referred by their own counselors for the study. I had also designed the study to ensure appropriate boundaries for myself and to ensure that I was not engaging in a counseling relationship. Boundaries are often permeable; However, the shift into a counseling relationship could be detrimental to participants, and was something that needed consistent evaluation. Contrarily, it was important to meet participants' emotional needs. Each meeting would begin and end with a period of time in which we could reconnect and build more rapport, discuss important issues that had occurred that related to the study, and most importantly, time to ensure that the youth was coping well with what she was sharing and experiencing as a result of participating in the research process.

Certainly my former career as a counselor made me more aware of how opened wounds needed to be closed, so, once again, the line between counselor and researcher often felt blurred. Therefore, the reflexivity of the poetry I was writing in my field notes, allowed me to explore these issues, rather than ignore them. For, through the poetry I could tap into and externalize feelings and how they may be impacting the research process—giving “name to those ideas which are—until the poem—nameless and formless, about to be birthed, but already felt” (Lorde, 1984, p. 36).

As a researcher, I was prepared to make appropriate referrals, and yet, it didn't feel like it was enough. I was developing strong connections with these young women who were beginning to trust me and who had seen, heard, and felt so very much.

Therefore, I needed to ensure that once I left the field and our series of interviews came to a close, the participants would have adequate support systems—that I wasn't simply taking without giving in return. The issue lingered readily in my mind...

I wonder where she keeps it  
 This pain she feels inside  
 Masked from all who see her  
 Or does she simply hide...

I fear that I will harm her  
 Veiled balance of her life  
 Opening the salted wounds  
 Questions, a dangerous knife...

Will I force the wounds wide open  
 Will I pour the salt myself?  
 Then leave with all my data  
 Here, then mighty stealth??

I'll be gone and left the baggage  
 Marked simply as goodbye,  
 We tend to call it science  
 The guise behind the lie...

Be true to what I've stated  
 Don't leave the gaping hole...  
 Be sure the salve is sticking  
 Before the time to go!!  
 --Field Notes

Yet, how could I really ensure that I was not inflicting damage? Participants were given referrals or were currently working with counselors. As part of the original methodology, I had incorporated four interviews and allowed time to check-in about how they were dealing with the interviewing process. In addition, the poetry they were writing was also meant to be a way to externalize strong emotion about their experiences not only from their exposure to violence, but from our process as well. As part of our check-in process we would begin with participants reading their poetry and discuss not only the meaning of their poetry, but ways in which writing and sharing their poetry (and our process) was impacting their daily lives. I was also sure to remind participants at the closing of each interview, the amount of interviews that we had left. And, although participants were certainly expressing strong emotion about their experiences, no participants indicated any negative changes in behavior or affect as a result of the process. In fact, participants frequently shared that it was helpful to share their experiences and that the poetry was a positive way to help them understand what they were feeling.

However, on two occasions, the issues that had come up were so upsetting to the participants that we agreed to simply talk together and reschedule the formal interview...was THIS counseling?? Was THIS allowed? After one conversation with Victoria, I clearly remained conflicted with my role. I wrote the following poem...

I cannot protect you  
 As you slowly die inside...  
 I cannot protect you  
 As you try to fade and hide...

I cannot watch  
 As you hold your breath...  
 Silently waiting  
 For some internal death...

I cannot do this  
 I have nothing left to give...  
 As you look to the past  
 And you don't want to live...

For no one would protect you  
 We all closed our eyes...  
 And listened to the story  
 Of our own pathetic lies  
 --Field Notes

It was not suicidal ideation with which I was concerned. Rather, her self-destructive behaviors that concerned me. Not only was she using illicit drugs, but was selling them. Although Victoria had a counselor and was actually referred by her, it did not decrease my own emotionality or the very real belief that Victoria and other participants' lives had been forever changed as a result of the violence they had been exposed to. And...I felt helpless to help in any real way—to use the skills I had to actually help them. After well over a decade of counseling young clients, many of whom were quite similar to the participants in my study, my role had dramatically changed. My role as a researcher was to better understand the experiences and multiple contexts of violence of young women who had been exposed to domestic violence—not to intervene in clinical ways. This research was important to better understand the many ways in which youth may be impacted by their exposure to the violence, and that would then hopefully assist clinicians in understanding the multiple ways in which exposure to violence can impact clients. In the end, my hope was to find more effective ways to assist these young women and the many youth exposed to such family violence. Still, this was unsettling to me and the counselor within.

Poetry was then a very effective way to check in with myself and externalize what I was experiencing and feeling. I was cognizant that my own clinical “burn out” gave me a measure of relief in leaving the field, yet enormous guilt at leaving them, my research participants, to fend for themselves!

I see them now  
 Though I can't comprehend  
 The impact of our visits  
 And the holes that could not mend



I am free to go  
But they must stay  
I am happy to be home  
So very far away

I cannot concede  
The complexities I feel  
In knowing I did nothing  
To help their wounds heal

Once again abandoned  
Though they ever shall remain  
A reminder to each of us  
Of those who live in pain  
--Field Notes

The boundaries were still blurred...

### **Understanding, Embracing, Empowering... Reflecting on Participants**

In addition to reflecting on my past, and my own process and emotions surrounding the research process, I used poetry to reflect on my perceptions of participants—how I saw them, and feelings or thoughts about them.

Who is this child, the fighter  
Whose anger fills the place  
Who hides behind her smile  
The cheerful, brightened face

But knows that there is danger  
She doesn't understand  
At times it overwhelms her  
Comes pulsing through the hand

As it reaches out to punish  
Those lying in her path  
Spilling words of hatred  
A fire filled with wrath

Yet this child is a fighter  
In a very different way  
Refusing to forsake herself  
Nor holding life at bay

She seeks for something hidden  
 And knows not where to find  
 But won't give up the search  
 Understanding of the mind  
 --Field Notes, for Mariah

Unfortunately for Mariah, her exposure to violence resulted in her own acts of violence towards others. As Virginia Axline (1964) has written, "I had known children who had been overcome by their fears and anxieties, striking out in self-defense against a world that for many reasons was unbearable to them" (p. 28).

For Machenzie, it was quite different—giving to the point of harming herself. She volunteered in a number of organizations for younger youth and was a constant companion to her younger siblings and mother. The level of compassion she expressed for others was absolutely remarkable.

Filled with such compassion  
 For all she grows to know  
 Giving all a piece of self  
 Feelings held in tow...

Reaching out to others  
 Who have some special need  
 Embracing them and knowing  
 Some hunger she could feed...

And yet it could be harmful,  
 In how she treats herself  
 Does she put ahead of others  
 To the demise of her own health?

But yet the world is better  
 For having her to speak  
 And fill a certain void  
 Giving voice to those more meek...

So filled with such compassion  
 In a world that doesn't trust  
 A model to us all  
 To teach us to be just  
 --Field Notes, for Machenzie

Poems were shared with participants in one of our final interviews, with one exception. Natalie denied that any abuse had ever occurred to her mother at the hands of her father (though she did describe many occasions of abuse), and I was concerned about crossing a therapeutic line by breaking through her strong sense of denial. That Natalie had refused counseling in the past and indicated she saw no reason for a referral was of further concern since she would have a limited support network.

When I asked Natalie why she had agreed to participate despite believing her father had never really abused her mother, she stated that everyone said it was abuse, but it was her mother's fault. Natalie was very close to her father and rather estranged from her mother, whom she blamed for her parents' divorce.

She doesn't seem to know  
The pain her mother felt  
She doesn't seem to see  
The sadness she was dealt...

The distance that they feel  
That doesn't go away  
Breeching into their daily lives  
Grows without delay...

Her father, brave and daring  
Does she even dare to know?  
What illusions would it shatter?  
What seeds would it sow?  
Is it that she can't remember?  
Or that time has changed her mind?  
What won't she ask her mother  
About another place in time?  
--Field Notes, for Natalie

I read the poems to participants, gave them a copy, and asked for their interpretation of what the poem meant to them and, if the poem reflected something of themselves, and if so in what ways. In general, these were discussions rather than an interviewing strategy. It was the one thing I could give them—a view of how I saw them, or at least a snapshot of them, perhaps in some way challenging negative perceptions they had grown to expect. Each participant agreed that their poem described a part of her. For each participant this seemed to be a very positive experience. And yet, there was ambiguity. For some participants, there seemed to be a distinct sense of sadness that someone saw their pain, for others concern about what their lives had become or would become. Yet, every participant, with the exception of Natalie, vowed that they would never allow themselves to become victims of the violence to which they had been exposed. There seemed to be an element of empowerment that they held their futures in their own hands and could make a difference, if they were able to choose it...

You are strength  
You are courage  
You have hope  
And yet you worry...

You have grown  
You have learned  
You are all  
That child yearned...

You are everything you wanted  
 You are so much more  
 Despite the many losses  
 The lack of a 'bright red door'

Though you lacked the home conventions  
 As you say, a family of norm  
 You've become your own true person  
 Despite the daily storm...

I look at who are now  
 I know what I can see  
 You have so many choices  
 To become who you will be

I see the strength within you  
 And wonder if you know,  
 This wonderful young woman  
 Will only continue to grow  
 --Field notes, for Victoria

And... for Danielle it allowed me to explore the contradictions that I was observing in her interviews...

Can she see her life as different  
 Had she never been exposed  
 To all she shouldn't see  
 And all the doors that closed

Though she says that she has learned  
 The lessons she was taught  
 To never be the model  
 Of the violence that was wrought

Yet, here she sits before me  
 I can see it in her eyes  
 The dreams that were futilely shattered  
 The secrets and the lies

The burdens she still carries  
 As a child in her arms  
 Coddled and confused  
 Just inches from the harm

I wonder where she'll be  
 In years that yet we know  
 Will she still believe the lessons?  
 Or will the lessons have taken hold??  
 --Field Notes, for Danielle

Danielle, just 19-years-old, wanted to live a better life for herself and her three-year-old daughter. She could see the cycles of abuse her mother had experienced, and was adamant, as was every other participant, that she did not want to be in a violent relationship. She exclaimed she knew that she did not want to live the life her mother had led and would NEVER allow that to happen to herself and her daughter.

As Danielle and I discussed this poem I'd written about her, tears came to her eyes. She held herself tightly, overwhelmed with emotion. She leaned over and rolled up her pant leg. Just below the knee were fresh bruises...

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