Poetic Representation: Part I: Voices of Conservative Christian Mothers of Lesbigay Children

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ABSTRACT

This is the first of 2 articles that present poetic representations of research data, which were collected for purposes of a prior study that examined conservative Christian parents’ experiences of parenting a lesbigay child. The poems presented in Part I of the series, a found poem and an I-poem, constitute research poems, comprising only participants’ exact words and phrases. In contrast, the poems presented in Part II are interpretive poems that incorporate formal poetic elements in data representation. The presentation of the poems in homogeneous pairs based on methodological approach serves two purposes: (a) to illustrate the flexibility of poetic inquiry in qualitative and mixed methods research, and (b) to demonstrate the ways that researcher poets’ creative choices ultimately influence final representations of research data.

During recent decades, researchers (e.g., Cahnmann, 2003; Eisner, 1997; Faulkner, 2009) have advocated for the use of unconventional forms of representation of qualitative data. Among other unconventional methods, poetry has developed as a useful mechanism for “capturing the richness, complexity, and dimensionality of human experience in social and cultural contexts, conveying the perspectives of the people who are negotiating those experiences” (Hill, 2005, p. 96). Researchers’ early efforts to formulate poetic representations of qualitative data relied generally on the construction of research poems, which strictly comprise participants’ spoken words that are documented in interview transcripts (Butler-Kisber & Stewart, 2009; Langer & Furman, 2004). However, over time, poetic representation has evolved to include the use of formal poetic structures (Faulkner, 2009) and elements of poetic craft and praxis (Percer, 2002) in poetic reconstructions of data from participants’ interview narratives (Langer & Furman, 2004).

Opinions about the credibility of poetic representation of research data have focused primarily on two aspects of data reconstruction: (a) credibility of the researcher poet and (b) quality of the interpretive poems. Several scholars (e.g., Faulkner, 2009; Lahman & Richard, 2014; Piirto, 2002) have asserted that, to bolster their own credibility, researcher poets need to be formally trained in the art of poetry writing and to possess a strong understanding of poetic elements, including meter, rhythm, form, and speech, “in order to achieve anything original” (Faulkner, 2009, p. 90) with their data representations. Regarding the quality of final products, other scholars have advocated that poetic representations be scrutinized for specific evaluative criteria, including aesthetic merit, impact on emotions and intellect, expressions of a reality (Richardson, 2000, 2003), concrete details (Bochner, 2000), authenticity, coherence (Ellis, 2000), and artistic concentration (Percer, 2002), among others. Notwithstanding, during recent years, a growing group of scholars (e.g., Lahman & Richard, 2014; Lahman et al., 2011) have advocated for the creation of a space in social science research where novice researcher poets can feel comfortable to practice ars poetica (i.e., the art of poetry; Faulkner, 2007) for the creation of “good enough research poetry” (Lahman et al., 2011, p. 894). As Lahman et al. (2011) purported, this type of space is necessary for “a spirit of encouragement and possibility of future poetic growth” (p. 894) among researcher poets.

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Purpose Statement

This is the first of two related articles, each of which presents two poetic representations of research data that were collected for purposes of a mixed methods research study that examined select conservative Christian mothers’ experiences related to a child’s homosexual identity disclosure. Each poem presented in this article, Part I, and in the second article, Part II, was derived from the narrative of one research participant and was arranged to channel specific aspects of the mother’s unique voice to the reader, revealing the essence of what it meant to her to be both a conservative Christian and the parent of a lesbigay (i.e., lesbian or gay; Redding, 2008) child. The four poems are paired for presentation in two separate articles to highlight important differences in the methods that were used for reconstruction and poetic representation of participants’ interview data. The poems are proffered for the literature for three primary purposes: (a) to provide contrasts between research poetry and interpretive poetry, (b) to illustrate the flexibility of poetic inquiry in qualitative research and mixed methods research, and (c) to demonstrate the ways that researcher poets’ creative choices ultimately influence final representations of research data.

Each poem presented here in Part I constitutes what Langer and Furman (2004) defined as research poetry, which is poetic representation of research data that “utilize[s] a participant’s exact words in a compressed form” (p. 1) that excludes the researcher’s interpretations of the data. Yet, although the two poems presented in this article are alike in that they both qualify as research poetry, they are different in that each was constructed via a specific method that was aimed at achieving a specific goal. The first poem is a found poem that highlights themes of the participant’s experiences related to the topic of study, and the second poem is an I-poem (Gilligan, 1982; Gilligan, Spencer, Weinberg, & Bertsch, 2003), which focuses on the participant’s first-person voice. In contrast to the poems presented here, the poetic representations of data that are presented in Part II illustrate the construction of interpretive poems that incorporate elements of formal poetic structures (e.g., quatrains) and that meld the researcher’s subjective interpretations with the participants’ descriptions of their experiences (Langer & Furman, 2004).

Participants

Criterion sampling and snowball sampling were used to recruit conservative Christian parents of lesbigay children for participation in the mixed methods research study of origin. From among the narratives of the eight conservative Christian mothers who ultimately comprised the study sample, the first author, a former secondary teacher of English literature, chose four to use for the generation of poetic representations of research data. The narratives were chosen based on their potential for poetic occasion, which, as Sullivan (2009) outlined, consists of five attributes: (a) concreteness (i.e., the potential for the data to embody lived experience), (b) lyric quality (i.e., voice), (c) tension (i.e., between what was meant and what resulted), (d) ambiguity, and (e) associative logic (i.e., coherence of relationships among parts). Table 1 presents a summary of the demographic characteristics of the two participants whose narratives were chosen for the construction of the research poems that are presented with this article. Pseudonyms are used in place of participants’ real names to protect their identities.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Marital status</th>
<th>Religion of origin</th>
<th>Ethnicity</th>
<th>Lesbigay child’s age/gender</th>
<th>Current geographic region/state</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Gail</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>Re-married</td>
<td>Church of Christ</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>42/Male</td>
<td>Rural/TX</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Isabella</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>Re-married</td>
<td>Catholic</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>22/Male</td>
<td>Suburb/TX</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

During the interviews with the participants, the first author asked each to assign a title to the moment that she had learned about her child’s homosexual identity. The title that each mother identified was used to title the poem that the first author erected with data from the mother’s interview transcript.
Found Poem: “Sadness Personified”

A true found poem is a research poem that contains only exact words from an original source that, at its inception, had not been intended as poetry (e.g., written instructions, advertisement, policy manual, interview transcript) (Padgett, 1987). To create a found poem, the author undergoes a creative process of extracting, synthesizing, refashioning, and reordering words and phrases from the original text. Due to such, found poems most often do not rhyme, and they do not follow a formal poetic structure. Instead, they typically take the form of free verse (i.e., poetry written without rules that regulate poetic craft), with words and lines carefully arranged to elicit affective and cognitive responses that the author of the original text might or might not have intended within the context of the germinal writing occasion (Padgett, 1987).

The found poem, Sadness Personified, was constructed to illustrate within-case themes that emerged—via a five-stage interpretative phenomenological analysis that was conducted to isolate themes that informed the researcher about important elements of each participant’s experiences (Smith & Osborn, 2008) combined with the derivation of manifest effect sizes (i.e., “effect sizes that pertain to observable content”; Onwuegbuzie, 2003, p. 397) that comprised frequency effect sizes and intensity effect sizes (Onwuegbuzie, 2003; Onwuegbuzie & Teddlie, 2003) that testified to the prevalence of the themes within the data—from the narrative that one participant, Gail, shared in her interview for the study of origin. Gail, a 59-year-old parent of an adult gay son, was a retired public school administrator who, during her interview with the first author, spoke with a soft, lyrical voice that provided excellent poetic occasion. In addition to lyric quality, the data from Gail’s interview transcript were rife with concreteness, evidenced with descriptive metaphors and visual imagery that Gail used to illustrate her thoughts, feelings, and ways of being in the world. Prior to poetic construction of data from Gail’s interview, the first author read through her interview transcript multiple times, highlighting poignant words and phrases, identifying speech patterns, and pondering word choices that illustrated themes of Gail’s experience. Then, after obtaining an intimate familiarity with the nuances of the data via reading and re-reading processes, the first author devised a plan for the found poem’s structure, determining in advance the rules that would be used for internal structure and the number of stanzas that the poem would include. When assembling the found poem, the first author used only words that were documented in Gail’s interview transcript, making minor alterations to them only in rare places where doing so would either improve the poem’s flow or help to emphasize an important aspect of Gail’s experience.

Ultimately, the found poem that was derived from Gail’s research data consisted of three stanzas, each comprising 14 lines. The stanzas were parallel in terms of internal structure and were arranged thematically according to the following three themes that arose from Gail’s research data: (a) fear of others’ judgments, (b) fear for child’s spiritual welfare, and (c) fear for child’s future. The found poem, Sadness Personified, is re-printed in Appendix A.

I-Poem: “Gut-Wrenching”

Like found poems, I-poems (Debold, 1990; Gilligan, 1982; Gilligan et al., 2003) are research poems that strictly comprise words and phrases that are found in the research data. Also, because they originate from texts that were not intended as poetry, I-poems, like found poems, do not rhyme. Notwithstanding, I-poems are different from pure found poems in some very significant ways. First, I-poems are constructed specifically to highlight an individual’s use of “I” statements, which expose the individual’s first-person perspectives and reveal “what people know, [and what they don’t know that they know], about themselves” (Kiegelmann, 2009, para. 35) in relation to others. Second, when creating an I-poem, the researcher poet does not take creative liberties with regard to word ordering. Instead, the researcher poet documents the individual’s “I” statements in the sequential order that they appeared in the interview transcript, eliminating all of the participant’s phrases that do not contain first-person references. Gilligan et al. (2003) asserted that, because the sequential order of the original text is preserved, “Often the I-poem itself will seem to follow readily into stanzas—reflecting a shift in meaning or change in voice, the ending of a cadence or the start of a new breath” (p. 260), and the internal conflicts that live within the individual whose experiences are poetically depicted.

The I-poem, Gut-Wrenching, was constructed to capture and to highlight the first-person voice of Isabella, a participant in the study of origin. During her interview with the first author, Isabella, an elementary school principal and a 45-year old mother of a gay son in his early 20s, spoke with a quiet, heavy voice that conveyed a potpourri of conflicting emotions. Rich with respect to lyric quality, Isabella’s narrative also was laden with ambiguity and tension that existed in the spaces between her spoken words and their implied meanings, providing appropriate poetic occasion for the researcher poet. The first author constructed the I-poem from Isabella’s
narrative via the process that Gilligan et al. (2003) outlined. Prior to assembling the I-poem, the first author read her interview transcript from beginning to end, listening for the plot of Isabella’s story. Then, the first author returned to the beginning of the transcript and re-read it line-by-line, highlighting all of the lines that contained “I” pronouns. After identifying all lines of first-person reference, the first author extracted the lines from the text and then listed them in a separate document, preserving their original sequential order. Finally, the first author read and re-read the list of first-person phrases and statements, eliminating unnecessary sentence modifiers and inserting breaks to denote shifts in Isabella’s thoughts and feelings.

Titled Gut-Wrenching, the I-poem that was erected from data obtained in Isabella’s interview reveals aspects of Isabella’s experiences that are not easily perceived as documented in their original form. For example, Isabella’s first-person references in lines 6, 27, 38, 119, 124, and 226 highlight the saliency of her identity as a school educator, beckoning the reader to wonder how this identity influences, and is influenced by, Isabella’s experiences of being a conservative Christian parent of a gay son. The I-poem, Gut-Wrenching, is presented in Appendix B with permission from the author.

Discussion

Both of the research poems that are presented within this article were constructed with research data that were obtained in interviews conducted for purposes of a prior mixed methods research study that examined conservative Christian parents’ experiences related to a child’s homosexual identity disclosure. The words comprising each poem were extracted from the interview transcript of one participant and were assembled to portray the essence of what it meant to the participant to be both a conservative Christian and the parent of a lesbian daughter or a gay son. Even though neither of the research poems included the researcher’s interpretations of the research data or researcher-generated words and phrases, the final data representations were markedly different from each other due both to disparities in the methods that were used to construct the poems and to the researcher poet’s respective intents for the final products.

The first poem, Sadness Personified, is a found poem that was constructed to illustrate stanzaically three themes that emerged from one participant’s interview narrative. This found poem demonstrates one way that interpretive poetry can be used as a means for thematic description of research data, which researchers typically achieve via embedding participant quotations into the paragraphs that form the body of a manuscript. Capturing and conveying the participant’s first-person voice was the goal for the second poem, Gut-Wrenching, which draws attention to shifts in the participant’s narrative and to subtle nuances of speech that reveal aspects of her internal experiences that, if presented in other forms, might not be easily perceived. Together, the poems depict two similar, yet very different, means of constructing research poems from raw research data and of representing research data poetically.

The interpretive poems that are presented in Part II of this series deviate from the poems that are presented here in two primary ways. First, they are interpretive poems (Butler-Kisber & Stewart, 2009), meaning that they convey both participants’ self-understandings and the researcher’s interpretations of the data. Second, unlike the poems that are presented here, the interpretive poems that are presented in Part II follow formal poetic structures, one a quatrain and the other blank verse. Cumulatively, the four poems provide examples of the flexibility that poetic representation of research data lends to qualitative research and mixed methods research.

Author Note

Although affiliated with Sam Houston State University at the time of the study, Amanda La Guardia now is at the University of Cincinnati in Cincinnati, Ohio.

References


Appendix A

“Sadness Personified”

I think basically,
I live
in a real world
community.
My age group, my peers,
we’re all
in the closet.
So it felt like I had a
SPOTLIGHT
on me I guess.
Uncomfortable, them judging me,
like having a big elephant in the closet.
Really really really really aware
of that one issue.

I mean, basically.
And a sense of shame and failure, you know.

(Interviewer: A sense of shame)
Mm hm.
(Interviewer: And failure)
Mm hm.

I mean naturally,
I thought
like a demon
possession.
That devil, that desire,
it’s all
in the Bible.
So I wanted to have it
Exorcised
from him you see.
Homosexual, it changing him,
like a demonic beast in my child, oh my goodness.
So so so so fearful
for his salvation.

I mean, naturally.
And of the AIDS and for his health, of course.
(Interviewer: Afraid of the AIDS)
Yes.
(Interviewer: His health)
Yes.

And truly,
I dreamed
about a normal
future.
A wife, a family,
like all
other boys.
And I wanted him to be
Changed
to that I mean.
Acceptable, him pleasing them,
like a giant reflection of me.
Very very very very sad
beyond damaged hope.

I mean, Honestly.

(Continued)
Appendix A. Continued.

56 Because he couldn’t be Christian and gay, you see.
57 (Interviewer: He couldn’t be Christian)
58 Mm mm.
59 (Interviewer: And gay)
60 Mm mm.
Appendix B

“Gut-Wrenching”

1 In my home growing up, gay people were made fun of,
2 I mean, mimicked.
3 Even now, I mean ...
4 I mean ...
5 I can’t explain it.

6 As an educator, there’s nothing good that I ever saw on MySpace.
7 When he was in 9th grade .... I thought it was a phase.
8 That was the first time, the real first time, that I had concerns.
9 After that, I, you know ...
10 I had to go get him a couple of months into his freshman year [of college].
11 He was so sick, so I had to go get him.
12 My husband woke me, I was asleep.
13 I felt bad because it confirmed what we worried about.
14 I felt bad.
15 I was very, very sad.
16 Although I know it probably came out as anger, because I was mad.
17 I was mad at him.
18 I was mad at him, but ...
19 I was mad at myself.
20 I felt like I did something wrong.
21 I was angry.
22 I even said that to him.
23 I said, “Where did I go wrong?”
24 I mean,
25 I raised him through the church.
26 I even taught classes.
27 I am an educator.
28 I don’t know ...
29 I just felt like I could have done something differently.
30 Looking back now, I realize, ok, it really wasn’t my fault.
31 But I totally blamed myself.
32 I was mad.
33 I was angry with him for being that way, honestly.
34 I just felt like he was choosing.
35 I felt he was choosing to be gay.
36 I have come a long way since then, but ...
37 I was so ...
38 I’m a principal.
39 I have never shared that with anybody at work.
40 My family knows ... I say my family knows.
41 When I try to bring it up, [my husband] gets angry.
42 I feel like ...
43 I feel like my 15-year-old needs to know.
44 I felt like he needed to hear it from his family.
45 I know that if I was to talk to my 15-year-old without him, oh my gosh,
46 that would be horrible!
It would cause problems between he and I.

As a family, well, I say as a family ...
As a couple, I brought it up, because he wouldn’t.
So I mean, even with counseling, it’s been ...
I don’t know.
I mean ...
I know that ...
I know that sooner than later, we are going to have to.
I want my son to be able to come home.

I accept you.
I don’t like it, but I accept it.

I think the first year,
I prayed that God would change him.
Now I pray for happiness.
I just ...
I want my son to be able to come home.

I should back up to tell you that my son’s father has not raised him.

[My son] and I have had some long talks.
I have been able to digest it.
I am in a bad position because of my husband.

I’m worried about my child.
I am.
I know that’s not uncommon.
And I, as a mom, try to say,
“Son, you need to start taking better care of yourself.”
He says he’s always had depression, [but] I don’t believe that.
I don’t believe that.
I’ve never seen him depressed as a child.
I didn’t see that.

I do see it now.

The people he associates with, I don’t care if they’re gay.
The one during Christmas ... I liked him.
I’ve tried to tell [my son] ...
I think when you’re around downers, you start going down.
You know what I mean?
I do worry about that.

I worry that, you know,
I don’t necessarily like who he has become.
I worry, you know.
I worry about him being responsible.
I don’t know ...
I don’t know.

[That was] the kind I would rather see my son with.
Didn’t try to flaunt it, I liked that.
I told [my son], “If you’re gay, you’re gay.
You don’t have to be publicly affectionate.”
I don’t believe that man and woman should be like that in public.
I think it’s very private.
And, you know, I just...
I respected that.
I thought, “Well, maybe this one will make him happy.”

I told him, “You’re young.
A lot of people don’t find a partner until their 30s.”
I don’t know...
I don’t get that.
I don’t get that longing to have somebody, I guess...

The big family secret ... I hate that.
I just...
It hurts [my son].

He’s gone to a therapist, even to one I really don’t care for.
He’s been on antidepressants, and Zoloft, I think.
I can’t remember the name.

I am worried.
I’m worried that he has already had unprotected sex.
I think about those things.
I can’t help it, you know.
I told him, “I want to get you into the doctor to get some blood work done.

I want to make sure you are healthy.”
I worry about his safety, too.
I know people out there are hateful.
I mean, he is very smart.

I have mental health issues since.
I think it is a combination of my job ... I am a principal ... and worrying.
I have anxiety.
I go through periods when I can’t sleep.
I have a brain fog.
I just feel like it has taken a toll on me, too.

When I found out, I was principal at an elementary school.
[My school counselor], [we] had a conversation.
I didn’t know how to feel or think.
I did have somebody to talk to.

I did have another lady.
She told me one day, before I even knew.
She had a gay son.
I was like, “Oh!”
I’m not judgmental.
One of the first I contacted.
I talked to her.
I did have somebody else I could talk to.
I worked with her.

[My younger son] was asking [his therapist] questions about anxiety [that]
I was asking myself, about myself.
I told [the therapist].
That is when I started talking.
That is when I started to go to [therapy].

It's been through prayer that I have accepted.
I still don't know that ...
I still don't ... one hundred percent, I guess, feel like it is not a sin.
But I have accepted.
I have more peace, I guess you could say.

Do I think my son is going to hell?
I don't think that a God that created us, loves us ...
[It] is just one; that is the way I feel.
Refuse to believe.
I have told my husband to never ever say that to me again.

I worried for a good year.
But I don't anymore.

I realized ...
I had to come to grips, or I couldn't help.
I think it was just ...
I realized how he needed me, he needed me.
I was not going to let that happen.
I am still fighting it.
I'm still trying to fight.
I'm trying to ...
I'm just ... (sigh)

I think that ...
I think that by the end of summer ...
If my son's back, and [if] I haven't,
I'm determined that it needs to happen.

I don't know that there was any sign.
I think it's just been through prayer, time.
I finally came to peace.
I can't say there was any big event.

For a year, I prayed he would change.
I even prayed that He would put a girl in [my son's] face
that [he] would be attracted to ...

You know, and then I heard ...
He would come home, and I am the only one he can talk to.
There were times that I didn’t want to,
but I would just listen.
Jeremy was not a good person, from what I could tell.
I didn't even know he had a boyfriend.
All along I was praying he would find the right girl, but ...
“[Son], I am so sorry you are hurting.
I am so sorry for you.
I don't know, maybe you should come home.
What can I do?
I love you.”
The things I would say if it was a girl,
I was saying.
I think that might have been the time.
I had to really accept it.

I’m not sure I believe [they] are going to hell.

I don’t believe.

I think that if they believe in God, and worship Him ...

I just don’t necessarily believe that anymore,

I guess ...

I have always believed that God was loving, forgiving.

I wouldn’t necessarily know that the way I see God has changed,

if I look at Him different.

I think it’s more the way I believe, my beliefs.

I think religion has a lot to do with beliefs.

I think a lot of it is man-made.

I know there [are] things in the Bible, in the Old Testament,

about detestable sin.

I know Jesus died to save us.

That’s what I keep reminding myself.

I am not perfect.

I think that.

I don’t think that God sacrificed his only son for a few.

I mean, it was for all.

I think that, too, growing up in a very Southern family, a racist family ...

it’s a cultural thing.

Do I look at my child differently?

Honestly, I do.

I hate that, but I do.

The child I raised,

I just look at him,

and I see, you know ...

I don’t even see the gay part.

I mean, yeah, there’s that, but ...

More concerned, I guess is what I am saying.

I feel like the laughter, the personality, the easy-going kid that I remember

is not there anymore.

I don’t really

And I have told [my son] this over and over again.

I really did see him doing something big.

I mean ...

I am an educator.

I hoped he’d have a wife.

I’d have grandchildren, and that part’s tough.

I’ve said that to him.

I only said that to him once on the night that I found out.

I regret it now.

I was like, “Please tell me you wouldn’t do that to a child.”

And I regret saying that.

I think I made him feel like he would never have a child.
I think it is because of what I said.
I just worry.
I don’t want him to think ...

That’s a conversation he and I need to have.

But I do ...
I do worry [about] children with same-sex parents.
I mean, it would be my grandchild.
I’m not there yet.

I think we are still close.
I have always been his rock.
His father ... and [his stepfather] ... they’re not, I wouldn’t call close.
I’ve told him, “[Son], if that ever happens, you need to call me, because there is nothing worth that, and you need to know that if you ever did something stupid like that, that you would destroy me.
I would never be the same again.
I want you to know that.”

Grieve, I think that’s important.
There are things I wish I wouldn’t have said.
Talk to people, I really didn’t do enough of [that].
I did research.
I talked to people I trusted.
But I didn’t reach out to anybody.
I think that’s important.

I’m not there, my family’s not there yet.
I think it’s going to be important for my family.
I can’t imagine it being any different for any other family.
The big family secret ... I think it’s unhealthy.
That’s what I’ve been dealing with, this big secret.

I have been very alone.
I don’t know that I had a belief one way or the other before.
I definitely don’t believe anymore.
I believe that, that ...
I think it took me thinking, “Who would choose that life?”
I mean, who would?
That’s what I think.