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Creative engagement with the voices of person-centred therapists: Using poetic illuminations to overcome data fragmentation and to highlight the nuances of lived experience

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Abstract: Increasingly, creative forms of data representation are being utilised within qualitative research as a way of gaining deep, varied and nuanced knowledge of a phenomenon (Amos, 2019; Johnson et al., 2013). A poetic illumination (Scott, 2024) is an analytic and representational technique whereby the words of participants are condensed and transformed by the researcher into a poem (Glesne, 1997; Ohlen, 2003; Sanders & Lamm, 2022; Shinebourne, 2012; Sparkes & Douglas, 2007). Using poetry to represent the person can support researchers in creating intricate representations of human life and lived experience whilst also offering the potential to explicitly recognise the engagement of the researcher in the data (Amos, 2019; Johnson et al., 2013; Glesne, 1997). In this paper, we reflect on the first author's experiences of using poetry to highlight the nuances of lived experience and to overcome data fragmentation (Blundell & Oakley, 2023). It draws on data from the first author's doctoral research into the lived experiences of person-centred therapists who work with primary-aged children in school-based counselling services.

Keywords: Poetic illuminations, data fragmentation, qualitative research, person-centred, school-based counselling

I work in a
Very socially deprived area
Very very multicultural
Whatever's going on politically around the world
Tends to come into our area
Somali
Turkish
Many many refugees
Very complex, traumatised
So sad

Every child is different
There's a context
Y'know, whatever culture they come from
Different cultures that come in to the room
Sort of feels like they're on the other side of something

Aggression
In his body
Oh god, what am I gonna do?
So so aggressive
Urgh, the energy
I took a chance
I said to him
More white middle class people
Telling you there's something wrong with you
As a child, I had those experiences
Here in the sixties
That just opened him up

A lot of refugees
Very complex, traumatised
So sad
A black bin bag

This paper has evolved from previously published research (Scott, Blundell & Dougan, 2023) and research that has recently been completed exploring the lived experiences of person-centred therapists who work with primary-aged children in school-based counselling services (Scott, 2025). Eight participants took part in semi-structured interviews and data was then analysed by the first author using interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) (Smith et al., 2022). The interviews produced rich and compelling data, yet whilst the process of IPA was useful, I (Krystal) felt it fragmented the participants' stories, meaning that important elements of the data were not included and some of the meanings were lost (Blundell & Oakley, 2023). I sought a way to share the core aspects of participants' lived experience that captured the

depth of experience and helped convey the elements of their stories that were lost. In the original study, I created a poetic illumination (Scott, 2024; 2025) for each of the eight participants. This article examines the process of creating a poetic illumination for one research participant – Lily. I have chosen to present Lily's poem because of the richness of her material and because of my own reflexive responses to it.

Fragmented Data

IPA is dedicated to the examination of how individuals make sense of important life experiences, and the meanings that are attached to these experiences (Cassidy et al., 2011; Smith et al., 2022). It aims to explore experience *in its own terms* (Smith

et al., 2022, p. 1) and as such, IPA research focuses on subtlety of meaning and nuanced expression (Smith et al., 2022). Immersion in the lifeworld of the participant is key, and to achieve this I spent a great deal of time dwelling with the data of each participant – re-reading and annotating their transcripts in the search for descriptive, linguistic and conceptual meanings, to a point where I felt that I knew each of them intimately (Smith et al., 2022).

When it came to the stage of data analysis where I moved from singular to group claims, I felt that some of the delicate nuances of the individual experiences had been fragmented as the group experiential themes commanded more attention (Blundell & Oakley, 2023). I was bereft. I began to look for a way of preserving what I had uncovered on my analytic journey with the participants. I wished to present the data in a way that facilitated creative expression and focussed on the holistic stories being told by each participant, and in turn offered a deeper level of analysis (Holloway & Todres, 2003; Blundell & Oakley, 2023). The possibility of using poems caught my attention as a potential method.

Using Poetry to Represent the Person

The terms poetic condensations (Ohlen, 2003), poetic transcriptions (Glesne, 1997; Sanders & Lamm, 2022) and poetic representations (Shinebourne, 2012; Sparkes & Douglas, 2007) have been used to refer to the use of poems as a method to creatively represent research findings. These methods are summarised below, before exploring my own approach, which I termed poetic illuminations.

Glesne (1997) defines poetic transcription as the ‘...creation of poemlike compositions from the words of interviewees’ (p.202). This involves the researcher using the condensed words of the interviewee, which are then formed to give a version of the participant’s story. Highlighting the importance of researcher reflexivity within the method, Glesne (1997) explains that whilst the experience of the participant is accentuated, it has been ‘filtered through the researcher’ (p. 213). For Sanders and Lamm (2022), poetic transcription facilitates the researcher in highlighting specific aspects of the identity of the participants whilst also ‘...allow[ing] for a more explicit acknowledgment of the researchers’ entanglements with...the data’ (p. 1). Sparkes and Douglas (2007) explain that the use of poetry can offer both the researcher and their audience a ‘...different and compelling lens through which to view the same scenery and, thereby, understand the data and themselves in alternative and more complex ways’ (p. 172).

There are examples of this method being used in existing research. For example, Glesne (1997) created six poetic

transcriptions which illustrated versions of the stories told to her by an elderly Puerto Rican researcher and educator, one poem - ‘That Rare Feeling’ (see below), used the words of the participant to represent her comparisons between herself and a bird.

That Rare Feeling

I am a flying bird
moving fast seeing quickly
looking with the eyes of God
from the tops of trees.

An excerpt from ‘That Rare Feeling’ (Glesne, 1997, p.202)

Whereas Sparkes and Douglas (2007) explored the motivations of elite female golfers in their research. They used poetry to represent the experiences of Leanne, one of their study participants, exploring her life and experiences of playing golf. The poem ‘My Dad’ for example (see below), represented the powerful influence of Leanne’s father, who encouraged her to take up golf.

My Dad

At the time I played for Dad
Played my heart out for my Dad
It was for him, we were really close
Doesn’t mean I didn’t love mother

My Dad died in ‘96
Yet, I couldn’t, I couldn’t
I couldn’t play, for my self
I played, but didn’t like it

For a short while there I lost the plot
For a short while—as you know.
Just felt—couldn’t do it for me
I had never done it for me

Golf for me was my Dad’s pleasure
His pleasure was enough
Hand shake—pat on the back ‘well done’
That was me winning—That’s what I got

An excerpt from ‘My Dad’
(Sparkes and Douglas, 2007, p.179)

In another example, Shinebourne (2012) carried out an IPA study into the experience of addiction and recovery, highlighting the experiences of Katherine and creating a poem which examined her experiences (see below) and described addiction as a boil full of poison.

Katherine

Addiction is like you have this big boil
here
and it's like full of poison
and you keep putting elastoplasts over
to try and keep it in, keep it in
one day you come to a point
and you know to get rid of this pain,
this boil
you've got to get the poison
peel back the elastoplasts
one by one
and that hurts
as you pull
the closer you get, the closer you get
suddenly
when all this poison come out
the pain goes away.

An excerpt from 'Katherine'
(Shinebourne, 2012, p.179)

The process of creating poetic illuminations

I settled on using the term 'poetic illuminations' because, in my view, it places more ownership on the researcher for the interpretations that follow. It is the researcher who is choosing to illuminate different aspects of the participant's experience in the poem (even if the researcher does this by trying to illuminate aspects of the account that appeared meaningful to the participant).

The poetic illumination process began when I analysed my data using IPA (although I did not know at the time that I would later go on to create poems). For this stage of data analysis, I read and re-read the interview transcripts, before making exploratory notes about the content of the transcript, the linguistic devices used and the meaning of the lived experiences for the participant. From this, I generated personal experiential themes for each participant, which were a representation of each participant's experiences. As mentioned, upon creating group experiential themes, I noted

a fragmentation of data and so decided to use poetry to illuminate lost aspects of experience. To create Lily's poem, I began by holding her in mind alongside her personal experiential themes. I reflected on what I considered the predominant aspects of her experience; I thought about those that had been represented within the group experiential themes and those which were missing or had been underrepresented.

As with IPA, the guidelines for data analysis and representation when using poetry are flexible, allowing the researcher freedom to develop their approach to analysis in line with the philosophical underpinnings of the approach (Smith et al., 2022). I was inspired to follow Glesne's (1997) guidelines - the words of the poems had to be those used by the participant, but they could come from anywhere in the transcript and could be used in any order. This, I felt, represented how the therapists told their stories – in a non-linear fashion. I used poetic devices such as repetition and pauses and, just as Glesne (1997) had, I allowed myself to alter tense, one participant (Grace) for example said '*you question your own abilities*'. I changed this to '*I question my own abilities*' as I felt that it conveyed the meaning behind her words in a more powerful way, but, importantly, the meaning behind her words was not changed.

Lily's poetic illumination

When creating Lily's poetic illumination, I considered Pillow's (2003) question 'How do I do representation knowing that I can never quite get it right?' (p. 176). Lily's poem was not an attempt at getting her identity *right*, rather I hoped to propose additional ways to read and interpret the data which offered alternative co-constructions of meaning related to the research question whilst also acknowledging that it was 'I' who was illuminating different aspects of the account.

When holding Lily in mind, the dual experience of trauma (the subthemes in bold) shone out to me as something that was underrepresented within the original IPA findings but was an essential element of her lived experience, I knew that it was this that I wanted to illuminate. The thematic concept guiding Lily's poem therefore is that of trauma – her own trauma and the trauma that her clients have experienced. This is illustrated through the poetic illumination.

Personal Experiential Theme	The therapeutic implications of culturally diverse work	My special gift: Being right for this client group
Subtheme 1	Trauma and my role: An emphasis shift	My own experiences and my work
Subtheme 2	My role as a nourisher who meets basic needs	My ‘self’ and my work – there is no separation between ‘me’ and ‘the therapist’

Table 1: Lily’s personal experiential themes

Not only did Lily share experiences that I felt were rich in detail, but I was also touched by her story, and indeed by her. She was one of the most experienced participants and had worked with children all her working life, and as a children’s therapist for 10 years. She worked in a culturally diverse inner-city school in an area of social and economic deprivation. Many of the children had experienced significant and complex trauma. She also shared with me her own experiences of racism and trauma in her early life. This paralleled the experiences of her clients and made her right for her client group, this was her ‘special gift’ (personal experiential theme 1). With Lily’s poem, I wanted to illuminate and illustrate the experience of working in her school with this particular client-group and the meanings that she attached to this based on her own early experiences (Smith et al., 2022).

Lily’s interview finished with her telling me a beautiful and powerful story about her work with children before she was a qualified therapist. She was leading a group session, and a cleaner entered the room carrying a black bin bag. A boy made a comment about how the bags are used for dead bodies. The other children exclaimed, insisting that this was incorrect–however Lily felt that she had to allow him to express himself whilst also upholding her duty of care towards the other

children in the room. It seemed symbolic of the nature of her work and I wanted to amplify this powerful story. The story also afforded me an opportunity to acquire a multifaceted understanding of her lifeworld, offering powerful insight into her experience of empathy; Lily said *‘Empathy is...it’s you know so...when a child comes in the room it sort of feels like that they’re on the other side of something...’*. This story became a metaphor for the extent to which the children were *on the other side of something* – the cries of ‘no, they don’t’ from some of the children illustrating the difference in their experiences.

The story became the starting point for Lily’s poetic illumination because of the emotional impact that it had on me, something that was magnified because it was the last thing that she said to me in the interview – it remained with me. I wanted to do the same for the readers of her poem.

Writing Lily’s poem was pleasurable, I felt as if it flowed freely. I had spent so long with her words that I knew the parts of her transcript where she discussed the concepts that I wanted to illuminate. I read through the relevant sections of transcript and selected the lines and the portions of text that

I felt were most powerful and that told the story. I used repetition of the phrases *‘very complex, traumatised’* and *‘so sad’* to add emphasis. I placed the line *‘no they don’t’* on its own for prominence. The original transcript can be seen next to the poetic illumination in Table 2.

Line	Transcript	Poem
72/73	Yeah, yes cause I work in a very socially deprived area, very very Multicultural	I work in a
75-78	And erm whatever’s going on politically around the world in regard to things like that it tends to erm come into our area erm we’ve got a big Somali group...Turkish...and in years gone by many many refugees, and we still get refugees	Very socially deprived area
	yeah we do long term work. Especially with children like that who are very complex, traumatised, and who are in that sort of environment where they need that ongoing support.	Very very multicultural
		Whatever’s going on politically around the world

361-363	Erm, yeah, it's, it's, yeah, it's just become normal, so she's stopped, yeah. So sad.	Tends to come into our area
		Somali
		Turkish
481-482	And y'know so erm...every child is different...there's a context, y'know whatever culture they come from y'know...what part of society...erm, yeah so erm....and...but having an awareness of that, so that it helps me to understand	Many many refugees
		Very complex, traumatised
147-150	You know so like a child comes from a background where they might be a Jehovah witness...you know and yeah different cultures that come in to the room that may be different from my own	So sad
		Every child is different
152-155	Empathy is...it's you know so...when a child comes in the room it sort of feels like that they're on the other side of something...	There's a context
		Y'know, whatever culture they come from
185-187	There was aggression in his body. And erm you know. And it was a long walk up the stairs (laughing)...And I, all the way up I was thinking oh my god what am I gonna do, so erm, so err, when we got into the room and erm, yeah she he sat down....I'm trying to think about how it started, and err, so yeah I said I'm going to tell you a bit about myself. Yeah so I started off that way and erm. And he said well the thing is he said well erm...And I said well what I do and why I like working with children is...you know just trying to be sort of authentic...and just, then I suppose it's regulating because he was so so aggressive. Urgh, the energy, But yeah erm, and then he said, he started talking about how people in the school were trying to tell him about the boys you know, and that he didn't like the two people, the two managers who were white middle class. He said you know I don't like them, the way that they spoke to him. So I just took a chance and I said to him more white class middle people erm...telling you there's something wrong with you. And he looked at me, and he just completely dis...and he went yes. You know. So, I said to him, I'm Irish, and I said to him as a child I had those experiences here in the 60's you know. And that just opened him up	Different cultures that come in to the room
758-775		Sort of feels like they're on the other side of something
		Aggression
		In his body
		Oh god, what am I gonna do?
		So so aggressive
		Urgh, the energy
	we had a lot of refugees	I took a chance
1018	Especially with children like that who are very complex, traumatised, and who are in that sort of environment where they need that ongoing support.	I said to him
361-363	So sad.	More white middle class people
482	We had a lot of refugees and this little boy shared at the table...the cleaner came in to get a black bin bag and as she did that...and this little boy said 'they put, they put bodies in them bags don't they Lily'. Yeah. And it, the other kids were saying, they said something to him you know 'no they	Telling you there's something wrong with you
		As a child, I had those experiences

1018-1031	don't' and he said 'no, they do don't they Lily, they put bodies in those bags'. And he said that where he came from he said that erm they put them in there and then they used to put them in the river. And he came from a, he came from a war-torn country. And erm, and I just at the time I remember thinking...I wasn't trained at the time, but I remember thinking I didn't want to, intuitively, not to shut him down but also I didn't want the rest of the group traumatised either.	Here in the sixties That just opened him up A lot of refugees Very complex, traumatised So sad A black bin bag This little boy said They put bodies in them bags don't they Lily No! They don't! Where he came from A war-torn country They put bodies in those bags They put them in the river So sad
482	So sad	

Table 2: Comparison of Lily’s transcript (left) with the poem (right)

Ethical Considerations

Some ethical considerations arose when I decided to create poems from the participant data (see Scott, 2025, for a more detailed account of this study).

Good research ethics requires that participants are adequately informed about the research procedures, how their information will be used and their rights regarding confidentiality (Bond, 2004; Abrahams, 2007; Oliver, 2010;

Mitchels, 2018). An important aspect of research ethics is that participants should be given the opportunity to have their identity hidden in the final report (Bond, 2004; Oliver, 2010). Pseudonyms were used to anonymise participants; however, whilst I had informed participants that their words would be reproduced in the final thesis, I had not told them that I would also create a poem based on their data. This posed a potential ethical issue in terms of the participants being fully informed, and I was also worried that the rich and concentrated nature of the poem may make the participant more identifiable, even if this was only to themselves.

Furthermore, when completing the ethics application for my research, I stated that the data would be analysed phenomenologically; however, I did not state that I would be creating poems from the data.

In order to explore these ethical considerations, I consulted the ethical problem-solving in research checklist (Mitchels, 2018) and considered the difference between *means* and *ends* in my research (Davis, 1991). My *end* was to offer a rich and detailed account of the experience of each participant regarding their therapeutic work with children, and to overcome the issue of data fragmentation. The *means* that I was using to fulfil these aims (i.e., creating poems), seemed appropriate for this. I discussed these issues at length with my supervisory team and consulted my ethical application and approval. There were numerous reasons why I, along with my supervisory team, agreed that I could use the poems: I had outlined in my application the focus on hermeneutic (interpretative) philosophy which aligned with my use of poetry; the participants had been informed about and consented to quotes from their interview being used, and they had also been informed about the nature of confidentiality within an IPA study (namely, that the level of confidentiality offered could not be the same as that offered to clients); finally, the purpose of the research was to capture in detail each participant's experience and inclusion of the poetry helped with this aim.

Summary

When undertaking an IPA study, the task of the researcher is twofold – to phenomenologically represent the inner world of the participants, and to interpretatively make sense of their important experiences (Larkin et al., 2006; Smith et al., 2022). Poetic illumination provided a way to enhance both aspects – to strengthen meaning and to offer the reader an original way of seeing the material (Shinebourne, 2012) – something that was central to my epistemological positioning as a researcher.

It is hoped that through sharing the process of creating poetic illuminations with other researchers in the counselling and psychotherapy field, they too may see the potentiality for enriching their research method and methodology. The use of poetic illumination affords the researcher the opportunity to engage with the data in evocative and expressive ways (Sparkes & Douglas, 2007), and to share their perceptions on the core elements of participant narratives, whilst at the same time 'evoking something of the emotional and metaphorical dimensions' (Scarpellini, 2013, p. 59) of individual stories.

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