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## A Poetic Gaze into Gay Aging

### Abstract

The shift toward embracing creativity in qualitative research has opened up new possibilities for researchers who seek to represent themselves and their findings in ways that capture the complexities of human life. This case study on gay aging combined life history interviewing with arts-based techniques to explore how one individual made sense of his sexual orientation at a time when gay men were criminalized and pathologized. Using principles from poetic inquiry, interview data were transformed into a short poem that captures the emotional and affective undertones of gay aging. The findings reveal the utility of poetics as both a process and product that generates deeper understanding about complex social phenomena. The value of arts-based research as relational, embodied, and affective praxis are discussed. This research highlights the need for ongoing training of emerging qualitative researchers in arts-based techniques.

### Keywords

Arts-Based Methods, Poetic Inquiry, Gay Men, Aging

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## A Poetic Gaze into Gay Aging

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*The shift toward embracing creativity in qualitative research has opened up new possibilities for researchers who seek to represent themselves and their findings in ways that capture the complexities of human life. This case study on gay aging combined life history interviewing with arts-based techniques to explore how one individual made sense of his sexual orientation at a time when gay men were criminalized and pathologized. Using principles from poetic inquiry, interview data were transformed into a short poem that captures the emotional and affective undertones of gay aging. The findings reveal the utility of poetics as both a process and product that generates deeper understanding about complex social phenomena. The value of arts-based research as relational, embodied, and affective praxis are discussed. This research highlights the need for ongoing training of emerging qualitative researchers in arts-based techniques. Keywords: Arts-Based Methods, Poetic Inquiry, Gay Men, Aging*

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We are living in the midst of a crisis of representation that challenges traditional norms of engaging qualitative data (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). This new era of scholarship has opened up new possibilities for researchers who seek to represent themselves and their findings in diverse ways that capture the full complexity of human life. The shift toward embracing creativity in qualitative research is inspired by postmodern philosophy which advocates for “self-conscious commitment to *blending* diverse fields and genres and collapsing as many traditional disciplinary boundaries as possible” (Prasad, 2005, p. 219). Marcus and Fischer (1986) introduced the concept of messy texts to describe the process of blurring boundaries between art and science. They argue that social problems are messy, nonlinear, and irreducible to a single truth. Therefore, researchers are encouraged to apply creative methods that reflect the plurality and diversity of the phenomena they study.

Now more than ever, scholars are taking risks to address the problems of academic writing by incorporating creativity and reflexivity throughout the research process. This has resulted in a gradual increase in published research that applies unconventional methods that challenge accepted forms of knowing and being (Barone, 2008; Cahnmann, 2003; Piirto, 2008). One way that scholars are resisting the tropes of traditional academic research is through arts-based methods. Arts-based research “employs the premises, procedures, and principles of the arts” (Barone, 2008, p. 30) at some or all stages of the research process. Methods are diverse and may include poetry, creative nonfiction, dance, digital art, dramatic performance, screenplay, and music among other creative forms. Participants may be asked to draw pictures during data collection, researchers may analyze data using poetic sensibilities, and findings may be re-presented in dramatic performance or screenplay.

Although scholarship in this area is growing, there remains a need for more research that applies arts-based techniques to understand complex social phenomena (Cahnmann-Taylor, 2008). Critical methods that incorporate artistic expression can be particularly useful when working with individuals whose lived experiences are difficult to put into words and numbers. Previous research has found that art is essential in opening pathways of communication for individuals living in the crosshairs of political and cultural tensions. Sirin

and Fine (2007) used drawing as a method to convey how individuals piece together multiple and fractured identities that are joined and separated by history, geography, politics, and culture, Osei-Kofi (2013) demonstrates how different uses of art in research can facilitate social justice through resistance and radical praxis, and Luttrell (2013) highlights the value of photography in portraying the quotidian lives of children in order to create counter-narratives of care at home and in school.

The present research combines arts-based techniques with life history interviewing in a case study on gay aging. The purpose of this study is to explore how one individual made sense of his sexual orientation at a time when gay men were criminalized and pathologized. It seeks to facilitate a close relationship with the affective undertones of gay life and generate empathic understanding about the topic. Findings are relevant to historians and qualitative researchers who are interested in creative approaches to historical research.

### **Description of the Creative Process**

This paper emerged from a larger qualitative study that explored the social lives of older gay men (see Oswald & Roulston, 2018). The study was approved by the Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Subjects; ethical compliance on issues of safety, privacy, and confidentiality were maintained throughout. This case study reports on the experiences of one participant from the larger study, George (pseudonym). Data were generated through a three-hour life history interview that involved the generation of a narrative that chronicled seminal events over time (Roulston, 2010). In addition to this, I accompanied George to several social events and used information gleaned from our interactions as data to supplement the interview.

### **Personal Context**

In line with what Collins (1999) describes as outsider-within, I occupy multiple social locations that bring intersecting sources of privilege and marginalization. Central to this project is my identity as a young gay man who has benefitted from the gay rights movement. My history is vastly different from those who came of age prior to or during gay liberation (1969-1980). I have immense respect for those who fought for the rights that I enjoy today, and I take seriously the importance of holding their stories with dignity and respect. Ultimately, I hope that this research provides a platform that elevates the voices of older gay men, making visible their strength in the face of oppression.

### **Interview as Creative Protest**

It was a brisk afternoon in early March when George and I agreed to meet for an interview. We decided to convene at Union Square Park, an historic site of political struggle and unrest in New York City. George suggested this location because he believed that it was the ideal place to construct knowledge in protest of the oppression that gay men lived through during the 20<sup>th</sup> century. We spent three hours sitting together on a park bench discussing important moments in his life. He shared stories about being rejected by his family of origin because of his sexual orientation, navigating his gay identity at a time when homosexuality was criminalized, and living through the trauma of the HIV/AIDS crisis.

As the interview came to a close, George invited me to a spoken word event where he would be performing the following month. I agreed, and we later met at a dimly lit underground bar in Greenwich Village. George was given 15 minutes to recount a story from his past to which he spoke about meeting Madonna, the singer-songwriter and pop sensation. With his

permission, I audio-recorded the performance and used it as data for the study. Following the event, we met over coffee to debrief his performance and clarify questions stemming from the original interview. Across these multiple encounters, we weaved together stories of pain, suffering, strength, and resilience that emanated from our shared experiences as gay men living in a heteronormative society.

### Poetic Analysis and Re-Presentation

Inspired by George's creativity, I decided to use poetry to analyze and re-present his life history. Richardson (2002) explains that poetic inquiry is a rigorous undertaking that should meet both scientific and artistic standards. There is no single way to create a poetic re-presentation of qualitative data; however, researchers should remain open to the dynamic creative process (Richardson, 2002). The analysis began as it would with any other scientific study. I read the transcript several times to familiarize myself with the data. Working recursively, I sorted the data into codes and categories that captured the meaning and essence of George's narrative (Glesne, 1997). This phase of the analysis allowed for thematic understanding of seminal events throughout George's life. The themes were used in the process of structuring the poetic re-presentation.

The next stage applied poetic sensibilities to address the artistic criteria of this method. In an effort to honor George's speech style, I repeatedly listened to the audio recordings and paid particular attention to the tone, rhythm, and syntax of his speech (Richardson, 2002). Literary devices such as meter, rhyme, repetition, form, imagery, and metaphor were used to craft the poem (Cahnmann, 2003). As I moved towards a poetic re-presentation of the data, I remained open to unforeseen possibilities that emerged from the creative process (Grbich, 2013). I read the poem several times to gain a feel for flow and expressed emotion. I also shared the poem at poetry circles and received feedback that helped shape the evolving creative process. The process entailed "a critical iterative feedback loop that inform[ed] ongoing decision making" (Cahnmann, 2003, p. 32). Figure 1 provides an example of the interaction between verse and transcript. Effort was made to use verbatim quotes throughout the poem.

Verse	Transcript
<p>I think I skipped adolescence went from 15 to 21</p> <p>You grow up fast when you're on your own</p> <p>I was 16 and my mother didn't understand</p> <p>Two lesbians took me in. took me out.</p> <p>We went to bars. We danced. We drank. And I met guys.</p> <p>I think I skipped my adolescence... went from 15 to 21</p>	<p>Well it wasn't far before I was 16. Well let's see school was hard, but it was hard before anyway. What else... I think I skipped an adolescence really, I went from 15 to 21, and that really became a part of me. Because I would go with them [two older lesbian women] to these bars or whatever, whenever.</p> <p>Well now first of all I'm 16 and I moved out. That's weird enough, it had to be, but anyway so this became sort of a routine. [My mother] wanted me to I don't know, whatever. So somehow, she found out that the two women were lesbians, but she didn't know... she had no concept of such a thing. She drives, she pulls up outside, she toots the horn and I come out and she says "I didn't know they... you didn't tell me... How? What? What do they do? What do they do?" She couldn't figure it out.</p>

Figure 1: Verse and transcript.

### Findings: Poetic Re-Presentation

The findings are presented in a short poem about George's life. Richardson (2002) explains that "short poems focus and concretize emotions, feelings and moods—the most private kind of feelings—in order to recreate moments of experience" (p. 880). The poem is divided into three sections that capture salient moments throughout George's life.

*i. Coming out to self and others*

We were kissing and I was nervous  
 I was only 15 and it was my first time.  
 I remember the record, *hard* vinyl  
 We were kissing and I was a little bit nervous –  
 Wondering like is it gonna work?  
 And then I said "oh yeah okay this will work  
 ...This is working".

I think I skipped adolescence  
 went from 15 to 21.  
 You grow up fast when you're on your own.  
 I was 16 and my mother didn't understand  
 two lesbians took me in; took me out.  
 We went to bars. We danced. We drank.  
 I met guys.  
 ...I think I skipped adolescence  
 went from 15 to 21.

*ii. The rise and fall of gay life*

Cashier working overtime.  
 Saving my money to get my own place.  
 Hitchhiked and caught a train to New York City –  
 I was 17, and I was gay.  
 I wanted to live in New York City, but how?  
 Hitchhiked to New York City and caught a ferry to Cherry Grove.  
 Got a job on Fire Island. Late nights serving *hotdogs*.  
 Gained my independence and lost my mother.

Now I'm 110% gay  
 Late nights at the disco  
 Dancing around the Round Table  
 Gay life was a whirl. Vibrant and free.  
 Until the 1980s and 1990s. Everybody that I ever knew was dead.  
 From that period onward...  
 I don't know anybody. I don't have any friends.  
 So I moved. And I moved. And I moved.  
 Gypsy on the run.

*iii. Reemerging from life's greatest trauma*

The newspaper declares "Gay Cancer"  
 I got trained in holistic health. This new age stuff.  
 Worked at the hospital. The unit says "Gay Cancer"

The masks. The gloves. The gowns.  
Pretty boys...withering away  
Skin falling off and falling to the ground.  
I write an ad in the local paper: free services, standing offer.

Now I'm 65 and living like a recluse  
Recovering from life's greatest trauma.  
Still, almost everybody that I have ever known is dead.  
I'm hoping that I will run into somebody that I might have known  
Old friends from the past.  
Seeking friendship in gay spaces  
Acting classes. Theatre. Gay Centers.  
To me, I'm just emerging.

### **Discussion**

The aim of this paper is to illustrate the usefulness of poetry in capturing the affective undertones of gay aging at a time when gay men were under attack through homophobic rhetoric that criminalized and pathologized them. The intense discrimination, stigmatization, and violence toward gay men leaves a residue on the lives of older individuals who are expected to manage the additive effects of ongoing social, health, and economic inequities across the life course.

A major source of difficulty for George was the homophobic beliefs of his family of origin and the consequent rejection that he faced. Studies have found that older gay men maintain strong and supportive connections with their biological families after coming out; however; this is not always the case (Orel, 2017). Many gay elders have the shared experience of being rejected by their families, causing them to develop families of choice in response. According to de Vries and Megathlin (2009), chosen families are comprised of friends, co-workers, neighbors, and ex-partners who provide many of the same supportive functions of biological families. For George, a robust network of supports within the gay community provided him with the emotional and instrumental support that he needed. The concept of chosen families has been integral in broadening modern conceptualizations of family by transgressing traditional norms and customs of family life.

The last section of the poem focuses on George's emergence from the trauma of the HIV/AIDS crisis. The widespread loss that many experienced as a result of the epidemic has had a lasting impact on their social networks. Older gay men often live alone, lack critical supports, and have smaller social networks (Emlet, 2006; Espinoza, 2014; Masten, 2015; Oswald & Roulston, 2018). Having lived the majority of his life in gay enclaves, George was situated at the center of the epidemic. His story captures the social trauma that many gay men experienced and the consequent struggle to overcome a time of loss. Yet, it was also a time of activism and solidarity within the gay community. Entangled in the suffering of political oppression and HIV/AIDS was resistance that pushed back against homophobic rhetoric that dehumanized gay men. Fine, Torre, Frost, and Cabana (2018) write about queer solidarities as a form of activism that demands recognition and belonging be combined with redistributive justice. The efforts of ACT-UP on behalf of people living with AIDS during the 1980s and 1990s, for example, challenged dominant assumptions about acceptable human behavior (D'Emilio, 1998). George occupied space within the medical community and challenged the dehumanizing treatment of AIDS patients. He provided holistic therapies, free of charge, and educated staff about providing humanizing care to AIDS patients. At present day, George is still recovering from the loss that he endured.

### Limitations

This case study focused on the experiences of one gay man situated within a particular historical, geographical, and political context. Therefore, the findings cannot be generalized to other settings or situations. The aim was to delve into the emotional and affective dimensions of gay aging in order to generate empathic understanding about the topic. This study constructed a short poem from a three-hour life history interview. Short poems allow for focused attention on significant moments that elicit feelings within the reader. This comes at the expense of providing a detailed, comprehensive overview of an individual's life history. Constructing a long poem from the data would have allowed for more depth into the complexities and contradictions of George's life by capturing minute details that were overlooked in the short poem.

### Implications

The results from this study demonstrate the utility of arts-based techniques in facilitating cognitive and creative processes at various stages of the research process. The larger study (Oswald & Roulston, 2018) relied on thematic analysis to generate understanding about the social lives of older gay men and missed out on the affective elements of their lived experiences. Including poetry in the analysis enabled a deeper connection to the data, highlighted the emotional undercurrents of gay aging, and produced a final product that invites readers into a relationship with the topic. Poetics, therefore, proved to be a fruitful method to enhance many aspects of qualitative research that are sometimes missed with other methodologies and epistemologies.

Infusing poetic principles in the analysis strengthened the overall research design. It is important to note that the value of arts-based techniques is lost if emerging scholars are not exposed to these methods in their research training. As such, doctoral curricula and research training should include content about the utility of arts-based techniques as both a process and product of rigorous research. Chatfield, Cooper, Holden, and Macias (2014) studied the use of arts in research instruction and found that students exposed to arts-based techniques reported enhanced emotional aspects of learning, deeper understanding of qualitative research, improved confidence in their analytic skills, and enriched understanding of reflexivity. Similarly, Cooper, Chenail, and Fleming (2012) found that including arts-based techniques in qualitative studies help researchers build connections to their topics and participants. This research confirms these findings by illustrating how poetry enhanced the research process in a study on gay aging. Researchers interested in the affective, cognitive, embodied, and relational dimensions of social phenomena benefit from understanding arts-based methods and incorporating these practices in their studies.

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