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**Rich Furman** MSW, PhD, Professor of Social Work at the  
University of Washington, Tacoma.  
E-mail: [rcfurman@u.washington.edu](mailto:rcfurman@u.washington.edu)

**Michelle Enterline**, MSW, Doctoral student,  
Pacifica Graduate Institute.

**Riki Thompson**, PhD, Assistant Professor of  
Rhetoric & Composition, University of Washington  
Tacoma.

**Allison Shukraft**, MSW, Social worker.

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**RICH FURMAN,  
MICHELLE  
ENTERLINE, RIKI  
THOMPSON,  
ALLISON SHUKRAFT**

## **POETRY MATTERS: A CASE FOR POETRY IN SOCIAL WORK**

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### **ABSTRACT**

#### **Poetry matters: a case for poetry in social work**

This article seeks to contribute to an unfortunate decline in literature that explores the importance of the arts and humanities to social work practice, education and research through an exploration of the role of poetry in social work. The authors explore the metaphor of the poet/practitioner, identifying what practitioners can learn from the poet. Second, the authors explore the use of poetry in therapeutic settings, identifying the strengths of using this tool in clinical practice. Third, the authors address the use of poetry within the context of research, exploring how the research poem can be used as a tool of post-modern qualitative research to help social workers understand the lived experiences of their clients. Finally, the authors explore current and future consequences of the profession ignoring the arts and humanities.

## **Keywords**

Social work, arts-informed research, poetry in practice

## **SAMENVATTING**

### **Poëzie doet ertoe: de toegevoegde waarde van poëzie in het sociaal werk**

In dit artikel wordt de toegevoegde waarde van kunst en de geesteswetenschappen voor praktijk, onderzoek en onderwijs op het gebied van sociaal werk onderzocht. In het bijzonder wordt er ingegaan op de rol van poëzie in het sociaal werk. De auteurs verkennen de metafoor van “de dichter/sociaal werker” en stellen vast wat de sociaal werker kan leren van de dichter. Verder onderzoeken de auteurs de rol en kracht van poëzie in therapeutische settings. Voorst wordt achterhaald hoe poëzie, in het bijzonder het onderzoeksgedicht, ingezet kan worden als vorm van kwalitatief onderzoek, met als doel het verkrijgen van inzicht in de belevingswereld van cliënten. Het artikel wordt afgesloten met een pleidooi voor het integreren van de kunsten en geesteswetenschappen in de sociaal werk professie.

## **Trefwoorden**

Sociaal werk, op de kunsten gebaseerd onderzoek, poëzie in de praktijk

## **INTRODUCTION**

Over the last twenty years, social work has become more aligned with the biobehavioural approach to human behaviour and has largely adopted science as its dominant metaphor (Goldstein, 1987; Kreuger, 1997). While science certainly can be a valuable tool in creating and testing social work knowledge, there are many other metaphors for knowledge generation that may be more able to depict the life experiences of the vulnerable populations that social work traditionally serves (Heineman, 1981; Langer & Furman, 2004a). Additionally, the over-reliance on science as a metaphor for practice has largely shifted the focus of social work from a relatively equal balance between values and knowledge to a valuation of knowledge as the central driver of social work practice. Gordon (1965) expressed concern about the diminution of values in social work as early as forty years ago. She asserted that when social workers base decisions upon knowledge when reliance upon values is indicated, interventions will be misguided, and perhaps even oppressive.

Scholars and practitioners have argued that social work has neglected the moral compass of its liberal arts and humanities inspired history (Goldstein, 1990; Kreuger, 1997). The arts and humanities have been an integral part of social work since its inception (Furman, Langer, & Anderson, 2006; Gray, 2002). For instance, the work of the early functionalists, from which a great deal of social work practice wisdom and core values was derived, was based upon the teachings of the artist-turned-psychoanalyst Otto Rank (Stein, 2010). This research contributes to scholarship advocating for a value-based "artistic" approach to social work (Gray & Webb, 2008), aligned with a social justice orientation (Gray, 2010), in large part stemming from, and grounded in the tradition of the arts and humanities.

As explored in a previous article (Furman, Langer & Anderson, 2006), the use of poetry and the work of the poet serve as a valuable metaphor for social workers. This article seeks to contribute to an unfortunately declining literature that explores the importance of the arts and humanities to social work practice, education and research through an exploration of poetry in social work practice and research. This article will achieve its aims in the following ways. First, the authors will explore the metaphor of the poet/practitioner, identifying what the practitioner can learn from the poet. Second, the authors will explore the use of poetry in therapeutic settings, identifying the strengths of using this tool in clinical practice. Third, the authors will discuss the use of poetry within the context of research, exploring how the research poem can be used as a tool of post-modern qualitative research to help social workers understand the lived experiences of their clients. Finally, we shall explore current and future consequences of the profession ignoring the arts and humanities.

## **POETRY AS A METHAPOR OF THE POET/PRACTIONER**

The importance of the helping relationship in social work practice has been central since the profession's inception. Not only has this centrality been supported by a century of practice wisdom, but also numerous studies have shown the relationship between helping relationships and positive outcomes (Horvath & Symonds, 1991). Traditionally, the helping relationship in social work has been characterized by a focus on empowerment, mutuality, and the self-determination of the client. However, the advent of managed care and the increasing medicalization of the profession have impacted the social work relationship. In the medical model, the practitioner is seen more as an expert (Schon, 1983) or technician who has evidenced-based solutions to provide to their client. The focus is on the short-term amelioration of the problem. However, while this model may be effective for helping alleviate the short-term suffering of clients, it may not be effective for empowering a client to commit to lasting personal and systemic change.

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Research has pointed to the significance of art for social work practice (Siporin, 1988; Goldstein, 1999), and specifically in regard to the notion of social worker as metaphoretician (Palmer, 2002). This section will demonstrate how the metaphor of the poet is perhaps more aligned with the values and practice realities of social work than is the metaphor of the scientist. While the poet and the scientist both value discovery, there are several key differences. Taking a poetic approach to social work practice, the practitioner recognizes the importance of the subjective, lived experience of the client. To the poet, there is no one single truth, there is that which is constructed based upon a lifetime of experiences, values and meanings. The poet/practitioner understands that the social work relationship is one in which clients construct their own narratives, and the social worker supports the client in reconstructing their story, and their lives.

Research has shown how narrative serves as an especially powerful therapeutic tool that allows individuals to discursively organize experiences in storied form to make sense of events in their life (Anderson & MacCurdy, 2000; Ferrara, 1994; Goldstein, 1999; Mansfield, McLean, & Lilgendahl, 2010; Pennebaker & Seagal, 1999; White & Epston, 1990). As a linguistic device, explanatory sense-making strategies in narratives help individuals to explore self-identity in relation to illness (Cardano, 2010; Estroff, Lachicotte, Illingworth, & Johnston, 1991), communicate an identity of illness to others (Riessman, 1990), and create counter-narratives about illness and recovery (Adame & Knudson, 2007; Emslie, Ridge, Ziebland, & Hunt, 2006). Poetry provides as another form of storytelling that allows individuals an avenue to express the self and therapeutically make sense of the world around them.

As a poet/practitioner understands that the act of creation, whether that creation is a poem or the construction of one's individual life space, is a highly personal act, demanding more witness than expert (Furman, 2004, 2005). Using the poet mindset to enrich analysis allows the practitioner a more tangible examination of the human experience through his or her own reflections on life and experience. In this way, poetry can act not only as a means of social work research, but also as the beginnings of an intervention, both for the client and the practitioner himself (Furman, 2004). The poet/practitioner seeks to understand the human experience from a holistic perspective, while also striving to understand him or herself from this perspective. Both of these abilities will allow better insight into a client's perception and experiences. Since this interpretive approach assumes that people create their own social reality, it is essential that the practitioner attempts to see the client's social reality, to integrate the client's words, thoughts, feelings and ideas into observations, as well as the helping process. In this way, the practitioner can see each client as an individual and strive to create the most effective treatments for them, as well as learning new views and truths from them.

One way to understand the client's reality is to create connections. The poet/practitioner seeks to connect the client to the outside world and her inside feelings and beliefs simultaneously. He or she promotes a connection with others through personal expression of shared feelings, as well as promoting a connection to feelings through direct access of experiences and personal fallout from these experiences. The poet/practitioner recognizes what people share universally, what is "normal", as well as what they carry alone, what is unique, as part of the human condition. Even though two people may experience the same event, the impact typically differs for each. Because of this, it is important to know how the individual experienced an event, as well as to normalize their feelings so they still feel connected to others.

In addition to connecting people inside and out, the poet/practitioner simultaneously seeks to separate the client from the inside and outside worlds. When people are faced with challenging experiences in their lives, they tend to want to disengage from their feelings so that those feelings are easier to examine from a more objective perspective. When looking at these feelings as metaphor, something that the poet/practitioner would commonly incorporate into practice, they are easier to extricate oneself from. Speaking of the client's life as a story or poem, it is as though the experiences and emotions within that life belong to the characters within, not to the client. On a larger scale, these metaphors serve to give ownership of experiences to the client, allowing them to create or utilize symbols that are meaningful to them alone. Metaphors have an internal consistency and coherence personal and unique to the client, and provide an avenue to inexplicit or consciously held ideas (Leavy, McSorley, & Bote, 2006). The evocative element of metaphor allows the teasing of connections that may not be accessible by direct questioning. In this way, through metaphor, implicit feelings become explicit by way of reflection on and representation of the client's narrative and provide a vehicle for further dialogue (Leavy, McSorley, & Bote, 2007). The poet/practitioner encourages clients to find or create metaphors that are personal, unique expressions of feelings, which serve to separate their views from those of others. Although some of these may tap into archetypal or cultural symbology, such as the use of the Hero's Journey metaphor seen through Star Wars, or the orphan archetype symbolizing attachment and abandonment, among other things, to name a few examples. When looking at the client's use of metaphor, it is essential that the poet/practitioner be able to observe and utilize patterns of behaviour, language, and thought, both on a personal and universal level. He or she recognizes the client's own ability to be an individual and a part of the collective, as well as recognizing the client's ability to take part in his or her own treatment. In this way, poetry empowers clients to take control of life and shape their own mold. The poet/practitioner approaches each individual as an individual, as a "partner in the co-construction of the helping experience" (Furman, Langer & Anderson, 2006).

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The final requirement of the poet/practitioner is flexibility. Although he should be well trained, as should any social worker, he should also be open to new learning experiences, be they formal, classroom experiences, or lessons from the mouths of his clients. He should allow himself to retain knowledge of his training and experiences, but he does not hold onto this foundation so rigidly as to let it overshadow the client's individual needs. The poet/practitioner, like a poem, can grow and change with time building on his strengths, editing his weaknesses, constantly striving to bring new insights into deeper focus.

## POETRY IN PRACTICE

The therapeutic use of poetry has become an important tool of social work practice. In fact, poetry therapy has become its own discipline, complete with its own professional association and its own journal. Poetry therapy has been used with many client populations, including the chronically mentally ill (Goldstein, 1987), the elderly (Edwards & Lyman, 1989), troubled children and adolescents (Alexander, 1990; Langosch, 1987; Mazza, 1996, 1987; Mazza, Magaz, & Scaturro, 1987), veterans (Geer, 1983), the terminally ill (McLoughlin, 2000), substance abusers (Bump, 1987; Leedy, 1987), and families (Gladding, 1995). Practitioners working in diverse settings including women's shelters (Hynes, 1987), nursing homes (Edwards, 1990; Kazemek & Riggs, 1987) and elementary schools (Gladding, 1987) have made use of poetry and poetry therapy. Additionally, poetry has even been incorporated into family work (Mazza, 1996), diversity work (Holman, 1996), community consciousness raising work (Kissman, 1989). Goldstein (1987) contends that poetry is a way to enhance consciousness in lived experience.

Within a therapeutic context, writing poetry can provide tremendous insight into a client's experiences. Much of this insight comes through the use of metaphor, which can be a powerful tool (Collins, Furman, & Langer, 2006; Dalton & Krout, 2005; Rousseau *et al.*, 2005; Finn, 2003). One of the great strengths of metaphor in the therapeutic setting is how it lends itself to universality. So many symbols that clients use in their writing are archetypal, allowing for ease in interpretation, as mentioned in the previous section. Still others, though, are more personal in nature, and provide a window into how they perceive their experiences. In this way, metaphor serves to strengthen the ability to own and identify with emotions and behaviours, as if the poet has created his or her own reactions to a powerful event (Furman, 2004). Poetry uses the client's own words to give voice to difficult feelings on her own terms. Though some consumers may be intimidated by the writing process, it can also be freeing, allowing them to let others in without a direct assault on their emotions. Rather, poetry pushes them to open up under the veiled guise of metaphor. This allows the writer to impact the reader greatly as well, as the imagery often taps

into the emotions of the reader as well as the poet, giving practitioners a glimpse through client's eyes.

Besides allowing the client to open up through language, metaphor allows the practitioner to access the true voice of the client. Through metaphor and symbol, the poet/client can often access his or her core beliefs without the restrictions that he or she typically places on these beliefs (Collins, Furman, & Langer, 2006). Evocation of meaning is contained in the client's story bringing to the forefront with images and language that are so vivid and real that they stimulate questioning and introspection (Van Manen, 1997).

Meaning is relative to our experiences. Each person views an event differently, so writing can not only help to give perspective to others, but also to help normalize experiences, showing that some of the feelings that the poet/client is experiencing are shared with those around her who are facing the same challenges in life. Poetry can give an indirect pathway to access difficult feelings, or feelings surrounding difficult emotions (Furman, 2004).

Poems lend themselves to repeated "visits". While they may have one meaning or impact for a client during the writing process, they may take on whole new meanings in later viewings, whether during the editing process, or in sharing with others, such as the practitioner, poetry allows us to face the portions of life we don't necessarily want to. Paul Valery once said of writing poetry that "a poem is never finished, only abandoned". Because of this ever-changing nature, poems lend themselves to re-examination over time. Add to this their brief nature and the ease with which the author can separate him or herself from the events and emotions within the poem, demonstrating how this genre can be therapeutic. The poet/client can revisit the feelings without owning them, should he or she choose. Rather, the emotions belong to a character, one the poet/client understands intimately, but nonetheless can separate him or herself from, should he choose (Furman, 2004). The expressive and creative arts have become a valuable tool for the social work practitioner (Szto, Furman, & Langer, 2005).

## **POETRY IN SOCIAL WORK RESEARCH**

Social workers need knowledge to guide their practices. While quantitative methods can be extremely valuable for testing the efficacy of certain methods, qualitative methods are far more useful in helping social workers develop an in-depth understanding of clients. Through reading in-depth qualitative accounts, social workers can learn how clients perceive their social and emotional life spaces, their social relationships, and provide insights into how they experience social work services (Furman & Cavers, 2005). Ethnographic and other types of qualitative data help social workers understand the lived experiences of their clients. However, a great deal of

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quantitative data is dense and often difficult to penetrate with regards to the application to human emotion (Finley & Knowles, 1995). What social workers need is data that can provide the in-depth liveness of ethnographic studies yet be more condensed. Fortunately, a new method of expressive qualitative research, the research poem, or what has been referred to in the literature as poetic transcription (Faulkener, 2009), is just such a tool (Langer & Furman, 2004b).

The research poem is, simply put, a condensed version of qualitative data about a client's life experiences (Langer & Furman, 2004b). Langer and Furman (2004a) discussed one methodology for creating the research poem. Using traditional methods, the researchers first conduct an interview to obtain qualitative data about the lived experiences of the client in her words. The interview data is then compressed into a draft of a poem using only the client's language, and allowing the data itself to determine the structure of the poem. The idea is to utilize the visual components of poetry, such as line and stanza breaks, to give the data form and substance, as well as to access the fundamental nature of what the client is saying about herself (Langer & Furman, 2005). Although no words are added to the data, many are removed in order to help boil it down into the essence of the client's words. In this way, the poem focuses ideas into key words and phrases of the client's making, which in turn focuses the writing and reading of the poem on what the client is truly feeling at the core of her experiences. This method utilizes the researcher's artistic sense, as well as interrater reliability between at least two researchers in order to assure that the poem is true to the client's original statements and expressed emotions (Langer & Furman, 2005). See Furman's previous work, *Poetic forms and structures in Qualitative Health Research* (2006) for a more detailed description of methodology.

Poetry can be a powerful form of qualitative data collection (Poindexter, 2002; Richardson, 1994). Because it allows us such an intimate look at the client's emotions, it gives us a true picture of how they perceive the world and their problems in it. When studying human behaviour and feelings, data is inherently social in nature, and this social data must be taken in a fitting manner. Because of the complex, personal nature of the human experience, a simple survey where choices are defined for clients would hardly suffice to give practitioners an accurate picture of the client's experiences and feelings associated with substantial events in her life (Finley & Knowles, 1995; Furman, 2005).

Poetry allows the social worker to gauge experiences, to hear the voices of clients and not simply to diagnose and treat their physical symptoms based on qualitative data. Through this medium, the practitioner is allowed to see the world through the poet's lens, filling in some of the more personal, more meaningful aspects of the client's experiences, which will allow the practitioner to better understand and more compassionately and competently treat her (Furman & Cavers, 2005;

Richardson, 1994). This can give us an insight into the client that is both unique and personal, something that many practitioners strive for years to achieve.

Because of this unique perspective, poetry can be used to create a language around which true discussions of feelings and experiences can begin. Though the words of the poet are not statistically generalizable, readers can share the thoughts, the emotions held by the poet. Because of the accuracy of the picture that a poem can present about, say, Alzheimer's disease, or the experiences of someone dealing with bipolar disorder, or loss and grief, this type of data can give researchers new insight into the actual feelings that are being experienced, not just data sets and statistics. The poems can be generalized, in the sense that they can give insight into what the writer is feeling about the experience, and those feelings, though often worded differently depending on the writer, can be shared by others experiencing the same events.

## **CONCLUSION**

Much of what this implicates is a greater need for education within the field of social work in regards to the methods, effectiveness, and uses of creative and expressive arts in the contexts of general practice, therapy, and research. There are organizations which hold individual trainings, but by and large, poetry is probably not high on the curriculum priorities of most BSW and MSW programs, whereas it could be spread liberally throughout the curriculum. Although poetry therapy has come a long way, there is still a need for effective techniques to be brought into the mainstream of the practice, so that poetry can be seen as less intimidating, as well as more effective than most people would think. Additionally, in the area of research, more investigation into widespread application of findings will be useful for the field of social work.

Within the social work field, there are many ways to approach clients. The use of poetry is one method that needs to be more readily brought to the table. Although it can be intimidating to practitioners and clients alike, it does lend itself to self-determination, in that a poem can be anything a poet or a reader wants it to be. There is no magic formula for a poem, especially not one written for personal use. The poem does not need to be "good", in the sense that literary criticism is not the essential goal of social work in any arena of the field. Rather, the essential goal is to illuminate some truth from the client's perspective. This truth is universal, in the sense that there are more than likely others experiencing the same feelings, but more so personal, subjective truth, the truth of experiences. In this way, social workers can see through the client's lens, and the hope is that this lens will help them to better understand their clients so that they can continue to grow in their practice knowledge.

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