



CONCRETE RESEARCH POETRY: A VISUAL REPRESENTATION OF METAPHOR

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ABSTRACT: In this paper, I employ concrete research poetry as a visual representation of a metaphor analysis. Using autoethnographic methods, I explore the experiences of eight single mothers of children and young adults with mental illness. I conduct a metaphor analysis of semi-structured interview data and generate concrete poetic structures from metaphors that emerged from the data. In the process, I transform data into art.

KEYWORDS: autoethnography, research poetry, concrete poetry, mental illness, single parents

Caregivers of children with disabilities are at high risk for developing depression (Bourke-Taylor, Howie, & Law, 2009) and caregiver burnout (Smith, 2012) because they face exceptionally high levels of stress and stigma (Barker, Greenberg, Seltzer, & Almeida, 2012; Green, 2003; Johansson, Anderzen-Carlsson, Ahlin, & Andershed, 2010). Society often blames parents for causing their child's mental illness (Corrigan & Miller, 2004) and mothers are deemed incompetent or unfit when their children do not act in a socially appropriate manner (LeCroy, 2011). This type of social judgment is generally worse for single mothers (Johansson et al., 2010; Sidel, 2006). Therefore, courtesy stigma (Goffman, 1963), a form of marginalization by association, may be most pronounced against single mothers of children and young adults with mental illness.

Most of the extant literature about mothers of children and young adults with mental illness is rooted in the fields of mental health, nursing, psychology, sociology, and social work. A review of the literature across the aforementioned disciplines revealed that no studies have been conducted on the population of single mothers of children and young adults with mental illness. This project explores the experiences of single mothers of children and young adults with mental illness in order to understand the challenges that they face. One of the practical implications of gaining this type of knowledge is that practitioners may be able to use it to develop informed interventions to reduce stress, stigma, depression, and caregiver burnout in this population.

This project takes an arts-based approach (Leavy, 2009) to studying the experiences of single mothers of children and young adults. Inspired by gifted research-poets who precede me (Carr, 2003; Ellingson, 2011; Faulkner, 2005, 2009; Furman, 2006; Glesne, 1997; Lahman, et al., 2011; Leavy, 2010; Prendergast, 2004, 2006; Richardson, 1992), I essay to provide innovative exemplars of how poetry can be used to represent research. Specifically, I employ concrete research poetry as the means by which I review relevant research and give voice to my participants. In choosing this mode of representation, I hope to appeal to readers' hearts and stomachs, as well as their heads (Ellis & Bochner, 2000). By embracing a genre that demands cognitive, emotional, and aesthetic processing, I invite the reader to become actively engaged in interpreting the text.

Literature Review

Concrete research poetry. Most research poetry takes the form of free verse (e.g., Carr, 2003; Ellingson, 2011; Faulkner, 2005; Glesne, 1997), although some writers have intentionally contrasted multiple forms (e.g., Furman, 2006) or have experimented with specific forms such as haiku (e.g., Holman Jones, 2011; Lahman, et al., 2011; Prendergast,

2004). Most research poems are found poetry, because they transform existing text, such as transcripts, into poems. One unique approach to found poetry was pioneered by Prendergast (2006), who converted a literature review into found poetry free verse. This project makes a novel contribution to the existing body of research poetry by creating concrete poetic structures that are informed by the academic literature and shaped by participant voices.

Concrete poetry can be conceptualized as “word-imagery,” or “artifacts that are neither word nor image alone but somewhere or something between” (Kostelanetz, 1970, para. 1). Alternatively, concrete poetry can be thought of as an “ideogram or a constellation” of words (Solt, 1970, p. 59). Essentially, concrete poems provide the reader with a visual object to be perceived, as well as a text to read. By creating a shape that serves as a container for the text, the poet preempts the linear, logical, sequential means by which humans typically process written communication word-by-word, line-by-line, paragraph-by-paragraph, and page-by-page with a gestalt visual image. In other words, the reader’s interpretation is shaped by the poem’s physical form; interrupting the left brain’s task of cognitive processing and inviting the right brain to participate in the interpretive process has the potential to create a more emotionally evocative reading of the text.

There are a number of benefits to using concrete poetic structures in research poetry. The word design embedded in concrete poetry is a powerful metaphorical device because it conveys metaphoric structure through a visual image. Whether employed as an alternative to a traditional literature review or a results section, concrete research poems have the potential to transform data into art. Concrete research poetry reflects the principle of crystallization (Ellingson, 2009; Richardson, 2000) in which the act of representation is accomplished via multiple genres. Inspired by Leavy (2010), I offer concrete research poetry as a novel creative analytic practice that problematizes the false dichotomy of science and art.

***“Essentially,
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Parenting children with disabilities. The first series of concrete research poems that I present (Figures 1-3) offer an alternative representation of a literature review about the experiences of parents of children with disabilities, notably mental illness. The process of conducting a literature review involves both analysis and synthesis; generating visual images that represent scholarly findings is a creative process. By layering analytic, synthetic, and creative processes, I offer the reader an aesthetic and evocative, rather than a purely analytic interpretation of the literature. I constructed these concrete research poems in two

ways: For some (e.g., Figure 1), I created the poem freehand by using line breaks to delineate the shape of the word image; for others (e.g., Figure 2), I used Microsoft clip art to create an image behind the text.

This first worded image, pictured in Figure 1, was inspired by a 60 Minutes Overtime episode that explored the stigma of raising a mentally ill child (Pelley, 2014). This episode aired after Virginia Senator Creigh Deeds was stabbed by his son, Gus, who was psychotic and subsequently committed suicide. The shape of this word poem was inspired by the response that a focus group of mothers gave to reporter Scott Pelley, when he asked, “What’s the difference between raising a child with a physical illness and raising one with a mental illness?” I offer this concrete research poem in lieu of an introduction that cites a contemporary newsworthy event as a justification for the salience of this topic.

Do you know

the difference between being a mother of a child with mental illness and a

mother of a child with a broken leg? I know it sounds like a joke, but it’s
not. Please don’t laugh when I say, “casserole,” because it’s not funny.

When your child breaks a leg, the church organizes a brigade of casserole-
makers: Friends, family, neighbors, co-workers bring food. But when your
child is in the psych ward, there are no casseroles. Alone, you set an empty
place for stigma at the table. Do not blame the church, the neighborhood
association, or the social committee at work: It’s not their fault—you
didn’t tell them. Don’t blame yourself, either: Blame it on stigma.

Invite them over for a stigma casserole.

Figure 1. Casserole.

The next concrete research poem (Figure 2) is informed by a review of the literature about parenting children with disabilities, such as mental illness (e.g., Barker et al., 2012; Bourke-Taylor et al., 2009; Green, 2003; Johansson et al., 2010; Karp, 2000; LeCroy, 2011; Richardson, Cobham, McDermott, & Murray, 2013; Smith, 2012). I chose the image of the Rorschach inkblot¹ to illustrate the emphasis that most scholars place on describing the emotions that parents experience. Employed here as an alternative to a traditional review of the literature, it offers a gestalt visual image to represent the findings in the academic

literature that pertain to the psychological and emotional states of parents of children with mental illness. As the words indicate, many parents experience negative emotions from the constant stress of managing their child's illness.

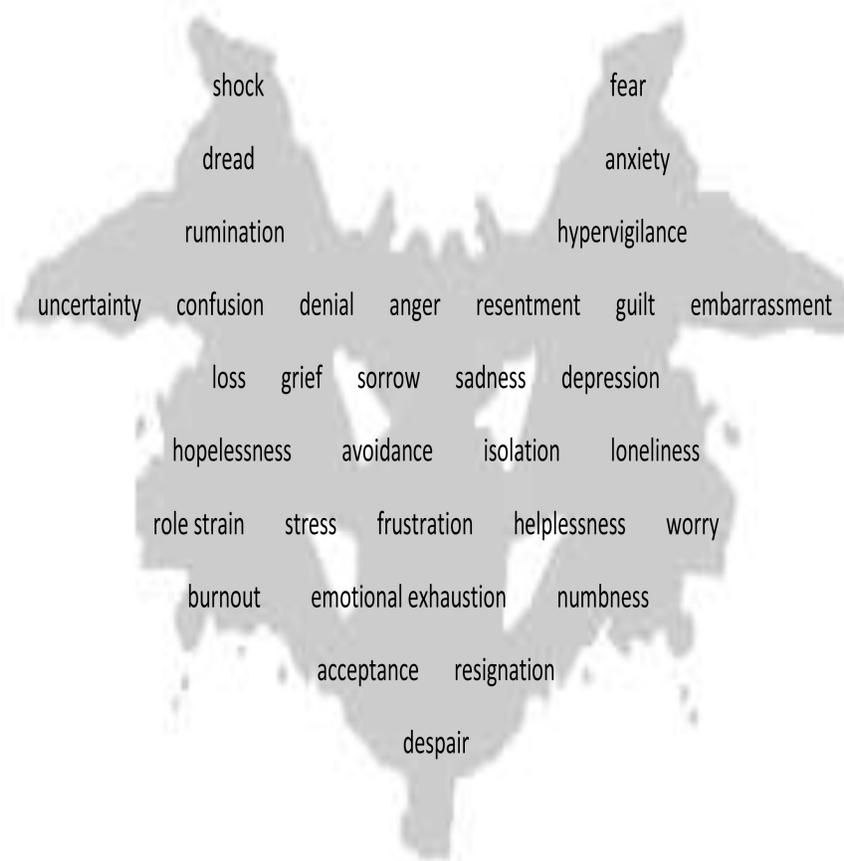


Figure 2. Rorschach.

The worded image in Figure 3 is shaped not only by a review of the literature about parenting children with disabilities and mental illness (e.g., Barker, Greenberg, Seltzer, & Almeida, 2012; Bourke-Taylor, Howie, & Law, 2009; Green, 2003; Johansson et al., 2010; Karp, 2000; LeCroy, 2011; Smith, 2012), but also by sources that explore posttraumatic growth, or positive changes that arise from the challenge of difficult circumstances (e.g., Calhoun & Tedeschi, 2000; Gorman, 2011). In contrast to the previous image, I chose a heart-shaped icon to illustrate the positive emotions that parents of children with mental illness sometimes experience as a result of overcoming adversity.



Figure 3. Heart.

Methodology and Methods

Autoethnography and research poetry. I employed an autoethnographic methodology (Holman Jones, Adams, & Ellis, 2013) in this study. As Ellis and Bochner (2000) explain, “auto-ethnography is an autobiographical genre of writing and research that displays multiple layers of consciousness, connecting the personal to the cultural” (p. 739). By combining my own experiences along with those of the other participants in a reflexive ethnography (Ellis, 2008), I strive to bridge not only the personal and the cultural, but also the personal and the political (Holman Jones, 2005). Inspired by research-poets such as Richardson (1992), Carr (2003), Furman (2006), Faulkner (2009), and Ellingson (2011), I use poetry as the primary means by which I give voice to my participants and myself. Like Denzin (2014), I believe that:

The poetic representation of lives is never just an end in itself. The goal is political, to change the way we think about people and their lives and to use the poetic-performative format to do this. The poet makes the world visible in new and different ways, in ways ordinary social science writing does not allow. The poet is accessible,

visible, and present in the text, in ways that traditional writing forms discourage. (p. 86)

This study began as a single-authored project, rooted in my experience as a single mother of a young man with mental illness. However, when I attended Ball State University's 2011 Diversity Research Symposium, I had the opportunity to hear a bright and beautiful woman named Lyn Jones give a presentation about her dissertation, an autoethnographic study about the experiences of mothers of children with special needs (Jones, 2011). I do not cry easily, but as I listened to her talk about the challenges and the rewards associated with her parenting role, tears streamed down my face. After her presentation, I told her how much her work moved me and asked her if she would be willing to collaborate with me on my research project. When she agreed, I was thrilled at the prospect of having her as a research partner: Not only was she a mother of a son with a disability, but she was also a qualitative researcher, a professor, a writer, and a new sister friend. At that moment, my heart swelled with joy because I knew that I was not alone.

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Participants and procedures. After receiving Institutional Review Board approval from my institution, my research partner and I conducted semi-structured interviews with eight single mothers who had either a child (under 18) or a young adult (aged 18-25) who had a mental illness. We employed network and snowball sampling to identify participants. Because I belong to a National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI) chapter in my hometown and am myself a single mother of a child with mental illness, I solicited participants at the beginning of the monthly support group meeting, giving an overview of the study and providing prospective participants with my contact information. My research partner employed a similar procedure to recruit participants from a NAMI chapter in her hometown. Because this procedure did not generate a sufficient number of participants, we asked the president of NAMI in our state capitol to send a follow-up email to members of nearby NAMI chapters, soliciting additional participants. My research partner and I also asked participants to identify other single mothers of children

and young adults with mental illness who might be interested in participating in the study. We contacted those participants by telephone or email. We held face-to-face interviews in our offices or a location that was convenient for participants, such as the local library. My research partner and I used a semi-structured interview technique to elicit participants' narratives about their parenting experiences and communication interactions related to their child's mental illness. We digitally recorded interviews, which ranged from 35 to 60 minutes. My research partner and I guaranteed respondents confidentiality and invited them to use

pseudonyms to protect their identities. If respondents chose to use pseudonyms, those names replaced real names in transcriptions. When geographic distance precluded face-to-face interviews, we conducted interviews via email. Eight interviews produced a total of 55 single-spaced pages of transcribed text.

Concurring with Orbe and Drummond (2009), who cautioned that commonly used racial and ethnic labels reflect essentialist categories, my research partner and I asked participants to describe themselves in terms of any salient demographic characteristics that defined who they were. All of the respondents were single mothers. Six respondents described their socioeconomic class, which included three individuals from middle-class and three individuals from working-class backgrounds. Five respondents reported their age, which ranged from 36 to 55, with a median age of 46. Of the five respondents who reported their race, three were Caucasian, one was mixed-race, and one was of Pacific Island descent. Three respondents described themselves as Christian; one described herself as spiritual. Two respondents referred to themselves as able-bodied and able-minded; one mentioned that she had learning disabilities; another indicated that she had an autoimmune disease; one other mentioned that she experienced depression.

Analysis

I conducted an iterative thematic analysis (Tracy, 2013) of the data. Drawing upon contemporary versions of grounded theory (Charmaz, 2006; Lindlof & Taylor, 2011), my analytic process alternated between emic and etic coding (Tracy, 2013). I began by immersing myself in the data. While transcribing, I spent several hours revisiting each conversation. Although some people may perceive this task to be tedious, I enjoyed reliving the conversations because the process brought me closer to my participants. Once I transcribed an interview, I emailed the text to the respondent, who verified its accuracy. As I engaged in member checks (Ellingson, 2009), I made notes in the margins about whether or not respondents wanted me to use a pseudonym, remove identifiers, edit any statements, or approve any verbatim quotations that I used in the final paper. During this stage, I also asked participants to clarify ambiguous statements. I used differently colored fonts to indicate which text was original and which text was added during the member checks.

During the primary stage of my analysis, I engaged in first-level (Tracy, 2013), initial (Charmaz, 2006), or open coding (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011). I combed the edited transcripts sentence by sentence for statements about what it was like to be a single mother of a child with mental illness and the challenges that respondents had experienced. I used a manual approach to coding, using a pencil to underline statements that reflected Owen's (1984) criteria of recurrence, repetition, and forcefulness. I then used edge-coding to label these statements with words that encapsulated the thoughts, feelings, or behaviors that the

participants described (e.g., “involved ex-husband” or “ex-husband not involved”). These first-level codes (Tracy, 2013) were inductively derived and descriptive in nature. I identified ten first-level codes in my preliminary analysis.

During the next stage of my analysis, I engaged in second-level (Tracy, 2013), focused (Charmaz, 2006), or axial coding (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011). I compared participants’ statements to concepts identified in the literature about parents of children with mental illness (e.g. burnout, stress, stigma, etc.). During my secondary analysis, I identified eight second-level codes.

As I repeatedly combed through the transcripts, I observed similar patterns that emerged among respondents, as well as contradictions and inconsistencies in the data. I highlighted conflicting statements that indicated possible ambivalence or tensions. For example, when a participant initially claimed that she did not experience stigma related to her child’s mental illness, yet later voiced concerns about negative gossip, I drew attention to the discrepancy. Throughout the process, I added analytic comments or memos (Charmaz, 2006; Tracy, 2013) that explored how the coding categories related to one another. For example, I observed that stigma perpetuated social isolation.

During the final stage of my analysis, I re-read the data, specifically searching for metaphors that participants used to frame their experience. I drew upon poets (e.g., Oliver, 1994), linguists (Lakoff & Johnson, 2003), and researchers (Malvini Redden, Tracy, & Shafer, 2013; Tracy, 2013; Tracy, Lutgen-Sandvik, & Alberts, 2006) to identify linguistic markers that typically signal metaphor and simile use, such as “like” and “as.” I searched for both explicit and implicit references to metaphors, mindful of dominant metaphors in American culture (Lakoff & Johnson, 2003). I identified 15 metaphors in my final stage of analysis.

After I completed my metaphor analysis, I moved from the process of analysis to that of representation. My goal was to offer the reader an aesthetic and evocative, rather than a solely analytic interpretation of the data. I began by identifying verbatim quotations from the interview transcriptions that best illustrated the metaphors that I uncovered during my analysis. Similar to my literature review, the concrete research poems in my results section were constructed in two ways: For some, I created the poem freehand by using line breaks to delineate the shape of the word image; for others, I used Microsoft clip art to create an image behind the text. I experimented with different typography (i.e., font, format, spacing, capitalization) to emphasize certain words and evoke emotions that were consistent with respondents’ words. In total, I created seven poems from six participants’ voices.

Once I completed my installation of concrete research poems, I solicited member reflections (Tracy, 2010) by sharing a draft of my paper with some of my participants and

inviting them to assess the resonance (Tracy, 2010) of my analysis. The fact that I created a space in which to dialogue about my findings with my participants enhances the credibility of my research. However, rather than seeking to validate the accuracy of my findings, I sought to assess the extent to which my work resonated with my respondents. In other words, I asked whether my text reverberated with my audience in a meaningful way: Did they identify with the metaphors that I uncovered? Given that my participants responded to the images by saying things like, “I could really relate to the challenges the interviewee mentioned,” and “I could empathize with the poem because I could understand where the interviewee was coming from,” I am confident about the resonance of my work.

In addition to conducting a member check, I decided to solicit feedback from local artists and poets. I wondered whether my concrete research poems moved readers: Did I achieve aesthetic merit by presenting my text in a beautiful, evocative, and artistic way? One artist-poet told me that he was moved by my openness and vulnerability and that he liked my choice to use concrete poetry because it involved the reader in interpreting the text. Another poet suggested editing the poems in order to reduce redundancy and increase fluency.

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Finally, I used participant and poet-artist feedback to revise poems that were difficult to read. For example, the direction of the text in some poems was difficult to discern, so I added white space, changed line breaks, and used formatting to reduce ambiguity. In addition, I made a few minor editorial changes that did not substantively alter participant responses. In the following section, I present an installation of concrete research poems that I generated from respondents’ narratives.

Findings

The next series of concrete research poems (Figures 4-10) are visual representations of metaphors that I generated from the metaphor analysis of interviews conducted with single mothers of children with mental illness. Here, the concrete research poems serve as a surrogate for a results section. The process of identifying metaphors that emerge from

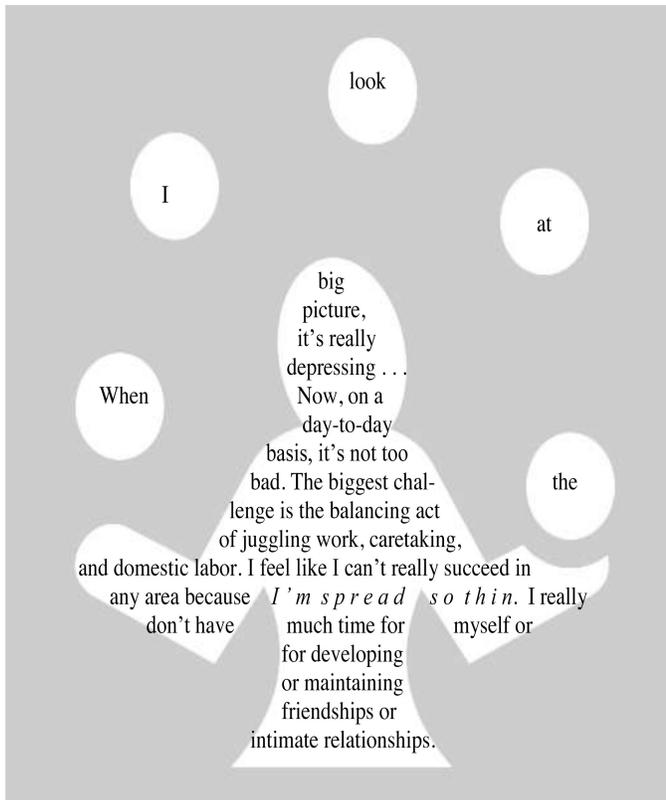


Figure 4. Juggler.

qualitative data is inductive; generating visual images that represent those metaphors is creative. By layering inductive and creative processes, I invite readers to reflect on their cognitive, emotional, and aesthetic responses to the data.

The first concrete research poem derived from my analysis (see Figure 4) illustrates a metaphor generated by Elisabeth, a 45-year old, highly educated, middle-class, divorced European American woman who is the single mother of Gabe, a 22-year-old young man with schizoaffective disorder. She generated the metaphor of juggling in response to a question about the biggest challenges of being a single mother of a young man with mental illness. The juggling metaphor suggests a performance that involves a difficult balancing act: Her references to work, caretaking, domestic labor, and relationships convey a work-life

imbalance that prevents her from succeeding

in any arena because she is so overextended. I italicized her words, “I’m spread so thin,” and added extra spaces to emphasize the role strain that she is experiencing.

The worded image pictured in Figure 5 was inspired by Susie, a lower middle class, divorced woman of Pacific Island descent who is a single mother of Wendy, a 16-year-old girl with a mood disorder, not otherwise specified. Susie referred to Wendy’s father as “the father,” indicating that his role was strictly biological. She uses a pictorial metaphor to indicate his absence, adding that he is in prison because he tried to kill her. I employed an image of an empty picture frame to represent her metaphor and bold formatting to emphasize the words, “he tried to kill me,” not only because intimate partner violence was a common theme among respondents—indeed, most women described ex-husbands who were physically and verbally abusive—but also because she experienced the most extreme form of abuse among respondents: Susie is lucky to be alive.

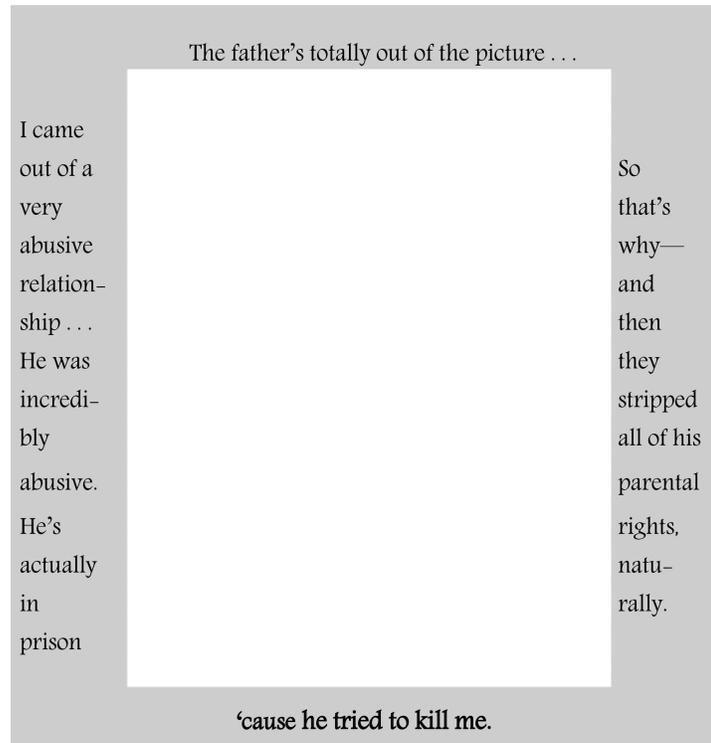


Figure 5. Out of the picture.

The concrete research poem illustrated in Figure 6 was inspired by Liz, a 53-year-old divorced Irish Catholic woman with mixed race ancestry. I used an image of a gray horse to represent the nightmare metaphor that she generated to describe her first seven years of motherhood. I emphasized in bold the psychologist's words, "you are the one with the problems," and her corresponding thought, "it was all my fault" to indicate the harmful effect that providers' careless words can have for caregivers who tend to blame themselves for their child's mental illness.

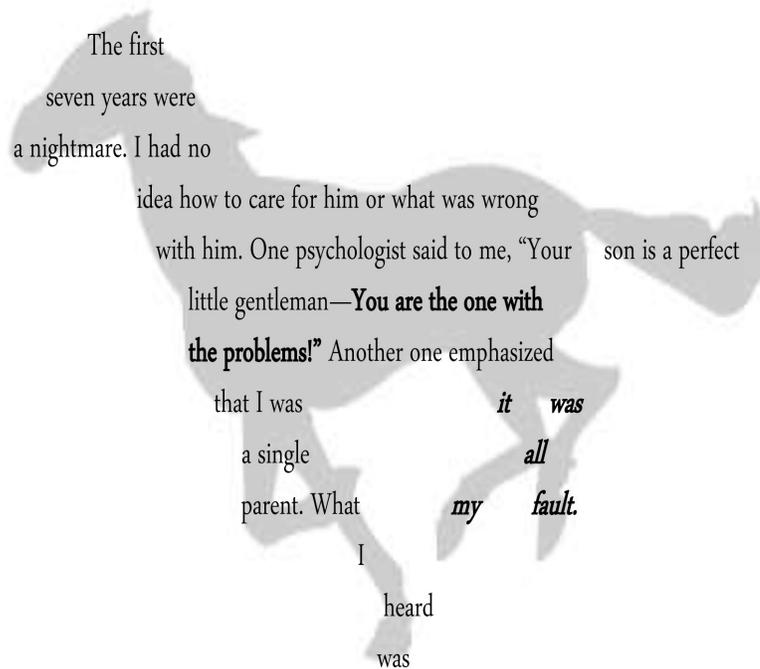


Figure 6. Nightmare.

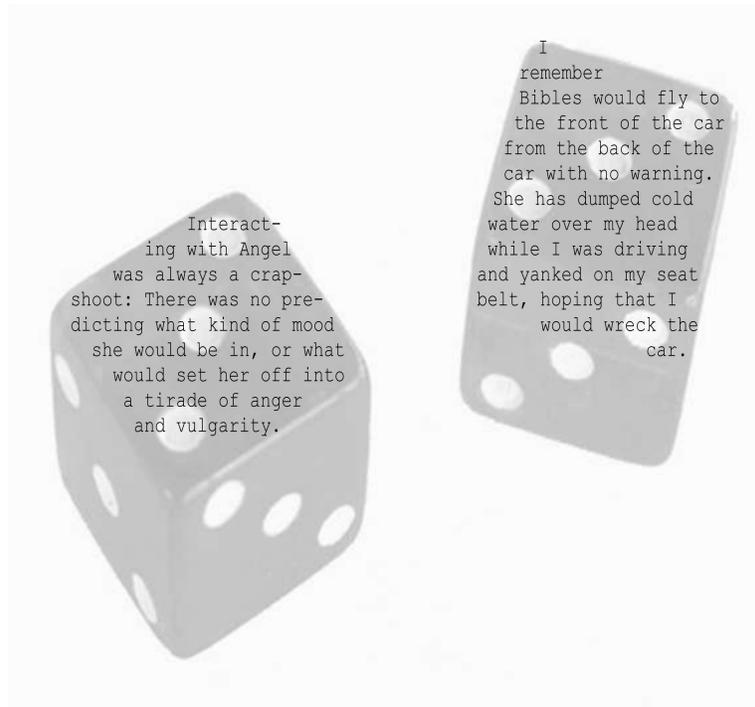
The word design in Figure 7 is constructed from a quotation by Amy, a 46-year-old divorced mother of Beth, a 16-year-old girl with bipolar disorder. Amy had the most metaphor-laden language of all of the respondents: she explicitly references a rollercoaster, and then alludes to walking on eggshells, waiting for the next shoe to fall, and an explosion. In this poem, which takes the form of a rollercoaster, I employed all uppercase letters for the word “explosion” to invoke the “spontaneous screaming” that Amy later refers to when describing Beth’s temper tantrums. The multiple, mixed metaphors that she invokes reveal the chaotic hypervigilance and anxiety that she experiences as she cares for someone with a mood disorder. Unfortunately, Amy is not alone: Most of the respondents had a child with a mood disorder who engaged in frequent violent physical and/or verbal outbursts. Because this phenomenon was so pervasive, I decided to create another poem (see Figure 8) about the issue of caring for someone who is unpredictable and volatile.

The concrete research poem in Figure 8 includes another quotation from Amy, as well as the voice of Maya, a 55-year-old Caucasian, spiritual, middle class, able-bodied and able-minded, divorced woman. Maya experiences mild depression that she attributes, in part, to parenting Angel, an 18-year-old young woman with cyclothymic disorder and ADHD. In this poem, Maya compares interacting with Angel to a “crapshoot.” The gambling metaphor that she employs highlights the unpredictability and volatility of Angel’s moods. I have placed Maya’s words in the left die, followed by an excerpt from Amy’s interview located in the right die. Here, the singular form of dice, “die,” represents a pun invoked by the specter of a narrowly averted car crash, tempted by Beth’s abusive behavior. In her interview, Amy said, “When [Beth] figured out how to throw me down, she would then do it often. I am physically impaired and walking is difficult for me to this day.” Clearly, these mothers have permanent physical and psychological scars caused by caring for children with mood disorders.

The worded image in Figure 9 was inspired by Christine, a 36-year-old divorced Caucasian, heterosexual, working class, Christian woman who laughed as she said that she hoped she was able-bodied and able-minded. I used the image of a guard dog to represent the protective stance that she took toward her 12-year-old son, eschewing labels and avoiding social situations where her son was likely to misbehave because people might not understand him. Christine told me that she was reluctant to disclose his diagnosis of bipolar disorder because she did not want him to be stigmatized. However, her choice to withhold information and to avoid potentially awkward social situations had the unintended effects of self-isolation and perpetuating stigma.

It feels like
 an
 unending
 roller
 coaster:
 I’m walking on eggshells, holding my breath
 and
 then
 we
 fall
 into
 the
 abyss.
 It isn’t just waiting for the next shoe to fall—
 It’s
 knowing
 that
 an
 EXPLOSION
 will
 follow
 the
 shoe
 that keeps me on edge.

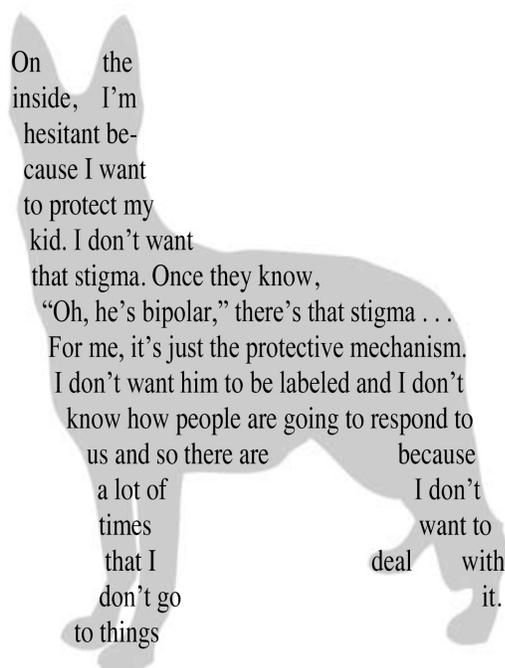
Figure 7. Rollercoaster.



Interact-
ing with Angel
was always a crap-
shoot: There was no pre-
dicting what kind of mood
she would be in, or what
would set her off into
a tirade of anger
and vulgarity.

I
remember
Bibles would fly to
the front of the car
from the back of the
car with no warning.
She has dumped cold
water over my head
while I was driving
and yanked on my seat
belt, hoping that I
would wreck the
car.

Figure 8. Crapshoot.



On the
inside, I'm
hesitant be-
cause I want
to protect my
kid. I don't want
that stigma. Once they know,
"Oh, he's bipolar," there's that stigma . . .
For me, it's just the protective mechanism.
I don't want him to be labeled and I don't
know how people are going to respond to
us and so there are because
a lot of I don't
times want to
that I deal with
don't go it.
to things

Figure 9. Guard dog.

The final concrete research poem, featured in Figure 10, is constructed from a second quotation by Susie, who was featured in the earlier research poem “Out of the Picture.” In this poem, “Meltdown,” which takes the form of a warning sign for radioactive material, Susie references one of her daughter’s meltdowns. Later, she laughingly refers to “one-trip friends,” which reflects the social isolation experienced by many single mothers who experience stigma related to their child’s mental illness. Indeed, many of the respondents shared stories of friends and family who no longer invite them to social functions because of their child’s mental illness.

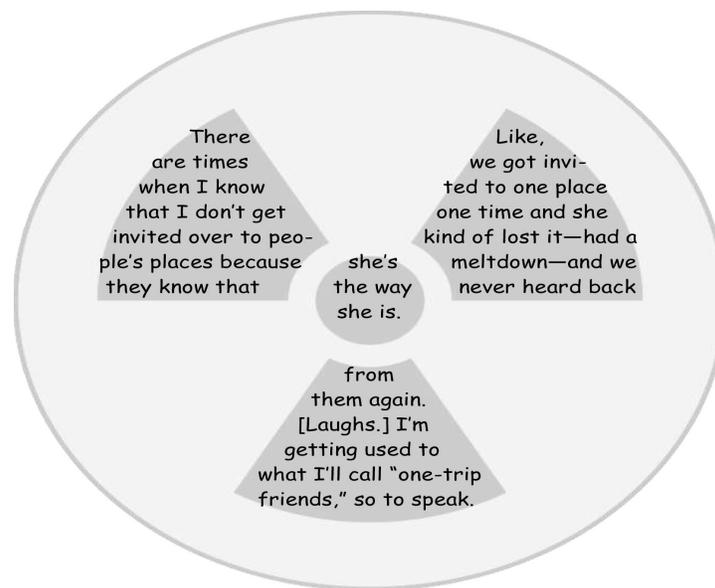


Figure 10. Meltdown.

Conclusion and Discussion

In this paper, I employed an arts-based approach (Leavy, 2009) to represent the experiences of single mothers of children and young adults with mental illness. Inspired by Richardson (2000), Carr (2003), Furman (2006), Faulkner (2009), and Ellingson (2011), I essayed to create an innovative exemplar of concrete research poetry. I created concrete research poems in place of the traditional literature review and results sections. Mindful of Ellingson’s (2009) suggestions for allaying concerns about the rigor of creative qualitative research, I chose to write my introduction and methods section in prose in order to articulate my rationale for studying this topic, to explicate my approach to concrete research poetry as a mode of representation, as well as to be transparent about the methodological, analytic, and creative choices that I made.

The concrete poems that I generated explore a number of metaphors found in respondents' narratives: the daily stress of "juggling" work, caregiving, domestic labor, and relationship maintenance; biological fathers who were often abusive and "out of the picture;" the "nightmare" of dealing with difficult diagnoses; the unending "rollercoaster" of taking care of a loved one with a mood disorder, coupled with constant hypervigilance and anxiety; the "crapshoot" of interacting with children whose behavior is unpredictable and volatile; the inner "guard dog" who takes a protective stance toward children who are threatened by stigma and discrimination; and the social isolation that is often the fallout from "meltdowns" that their children have had in public. Interestingly, the majority of the metaphors that were generated concerned the challenging aspects of being a single mother of a child with mental illness. Most of the emotional states evoked by respondents' metaphors were consistent with the literature about parenting children with disabilities, particularly the negative emotions pictured in Figure 1. Although respondents did mention positive experiences related to parenting their children with special needs, the language with which they described those experiences was not characterized by metaphor use.

One limitation of this study is its small sample size. Although this is not a limitation, per se, for a qualitative research project – indeed, as Tracy (2013) argued, resonance achieved through transferability and naturalistic generalization may be more impactful than statistical generalizability – it means that the findings cannot be generalized to all single mothers of children with mental illness. As I described in the methods section, my colleague and I had a difficult time recruiting participants, even though we employed network and snowball sampling, and recruited participants in person and via email. One reason it may have been difficult to find participants may be that, as illustrated in Figure 4, many single mothers of children with mental illness are so busy trying to juggle work, caregiving, and domestic labor that they do not have time to participate in support groups, let alone research projects. Ironically, this same issue is what led to the demise of my collaborative research partnership. My colleague, who is the mother of a special needs child, realized that she was over committed and decided to drop out of the research project during the data collection phase. As I reflected about her decision in my journal, I wrote:

I can't imagine how stressed out she must be. She is a contract faculty member with no research release. Her son is severely handicapped and requires major surgeries and constant care. It's a minor miracle whenever we can meet and talk about our lives and ideas.

Although I did not want our collaborative relationship to end, I understood and respected her decision to opt out of the project. As I write this today, I feel wistful about being the single author of this manuscript. Nevertheless, I am grateful that my colleague and I still maintain a friendship, despite the fact that we are no longer research partners.

What are the implications of these findings for professionals, colleagues, friends, and family members who interact with single mothers of children and young adults with mental illness? First, the fact that participants' metaphors were predominantly negative has important implications for therapists. If, as Lakoff and Johnson (2003) posited, "we define our reality in terms of metaphors and then proceed to act on the basis of metaphors" (p. 158), then a tendency to structure one's experience with negative metaphors may lead to discursive moves that perpetuate negative cognitive and emotional states. Therapists who use creative arts techniques (e.g., McDonnell, Cerridwen, & Carney, 2006; Moon, 2007) could encourage clients to generate metaphors or concrete poems that represent the joys and rewards associated with parenting children with mental illness. The process of creating positive metaphors associated with posttraumatic growth, such as caregiving as a therapeutic or spiritual journey, could potentially help caregivers reframe their experiences in a more optimistic way.

“The concrete poems that I generated explore a number of metaphors found in respondents’ narratives...”

Second, the stigma casserole featured in Figure 1 offers “food for thought” for colleagues, family members, and friends of single mothers of children of young adults with mental illness. In the words of Sidel (2006):

Rather than isolating and marginalizing them, rather than denigrating and stereotyping them, rather than blaming them for problems that befall a wide variety of families, we as a society must recognize that most single mothers are strong, courageous, and uncommonly hardworking. (p. 217)

Although Sidel did not make explicit references to single mothers of children with mental illness, the unsung heroines that she interviewed reported many of the same challenges as the single mothers in this study, including loss, poverty, isolation, emotional burnout, and unfulfilled aspirations. Whereas many of Sidel's respondents cited extended families and social networks from church and the community as significant sources of social support, the participants in my study were just as likely to associate family, church, coworkers, and friends with stigma as they were to identify them as sources of support. In the same spirit in which I remind single mothers to reject blame and self-isolation when I urge them to “invite them [family, friends, neighbors, and coworkers] over for a stigma casserole,” I appeal to colleagues, family members, and friends to reject stigma and offer support to single mothers of children and young adults with mental illness. Make them a casserole for dinner. Offer to

help watch their children or drive them to an appointment. Ask them how they're doing and listen—really listen—to their responses.

What are the implications of this project for scholars of research poetry? As I have demonstrated in this article, concrete research poetry can be employed as an alternative to a traditional literature review or results section. Concrete research poetry offers a particularly effective representation of a metaphor analysis because it enables the researcher to convey metaphoric structures through visual images. The gestalt visual image embedded in the poem's physical form shapes the reader's interpretation of the data. In addition, the concrete research poem harnesses the power of compressed form, similar to other parsimonious forms of research poetry (e.g., haiku). As Lahman and colleagues (2011) have argued, highly distilled forms of poetry are powerful because they represent the essence of a research study: "This whittling away words to the heart of the matter delivers a powerful message that may equally intrigue and incite" (p. 894). Although I share Lahman and colleague's skepticism about the extent to which poetry is accessible to all audiences, I argue that concrete poetry may be more easily digested than other forms of poetry because it enlists visual images to help shape the reader's interpretation. Both scholars and laypersons who do not consider themselves poetry aficionados can understand concrete research poems without undue right or left-brain burden. Finally, for those of us who have been socialized not to think of ourselves as artists or poets, the creative experience of writing a concrete poem may reawaken a passion for drawing or writing that has been long dormant. When I mention this project to friends and colleagues, they often recall an experience that they had with concrete poetry in grade school. I hope that this project inspires other recrudescient research-poet-artists to give themselves permission to transform data into art.

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NOTES

¹ The Rorschach inkblot test is a projective personality assessment in which a person being tested reacts to a series of inkblot images. A psychologist then analyzes the responses to reveal underlying personality characteristics, emotions, conflicts, reactions, thoughts, and motivations (Atkins, 2012).