

RESPONSE

Self Reflexivity:

A Narrative Analysis of a Poem Titled “Crying”

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When contemplating what to put forth for this issue of *Journal of Prisoners on Prisons*, I engaged in an internal debate for quite some time. The debate was around whether or not to submit this self-reflexive thematic, narrative analysis of a poem titled “Crying”, which I had written shortly after the time when a family member was given a federal prison sentence within Canada. Considering all of my efforts over the past five years have been devoted to creating peer support for loved ones of incarcerated people, and engaging in public education around related issues, I still struggle with the repercussions of stigma that are deeply rooted in this component of my identity.

While the concern that I can potentially face negative reverberations as a doctoral student who may potentially seek future employment within academia lingers, I decided to proceed with this article in which I expose myself as a loved one of an imprisoned person. To the audience, I offer my deepest, and most personal thoughts expressed in a poem and analyzed through thematic and structural narrative approaches. Ultimately, I foresee that maintaining silence about this issue is far more dangerous than taking the risk to speak out publicly.

REFLECTIONS ON ACADEMIC LITERATURE

The literature around the impacts of incarceration on family members often focuses on the hardships of having an imprisoned loved one, inclusive of, but not limited to financial strain, practical challenges of prison visitations and maintaining contact, bridging the relationship between family members in jail or prison and children on the outside, as well as enduring social and structural stigma (Brien, 2013; Codd, 2002; Comfort, 2008; Hannem, 2012). Emphasizing such collateral impacts of the penal system, theoretically and empirically, can be important in supporting loved ones’ voices, particularly within correctional settings (interviews with parole officers, pre-sentencing reports, prison visiting policies), and in academic settings (informing student learning, supporting justification for further academic inquiry). With this said, it is pivotal to point out that the need for theoretical and empirical validation as evidence *to justify* the credibility of loved ones’ narratives remains troubling.

When considering academic research and agency funding proposals, there is often a tendency to take a deficit approach towards marginalized populations. If the focus is primarily placed upon in-depth analyses of social problems, the people whose lives are being scrutinized can often feel exhausted and used. This is because people's testimonies have a history of being monopolized and exploited to build credentials, social statuses, and to provide economic gains for individuals and organizations, with minimal benefit to the population of study (Pittaway *et al.*, 2010; Smith, 1999). As such, in publishing this article I am privileged to be the author of my own experience. I speak to challenges and hardships I faced as a loved one of an imprisoned person, while ensuring I pay attention to emphasizing positive aspects of my journey that highlight elements of strength and hope for others.

INSPIRATION

Prior to delving into this article, it is of utmost importance to speak about the inspiration for embarking on this boldly honest piece of writing that leaves me mentally, emotionally and spiritually naked. One day while in an undergraduate course, a professor from another university was invited to guest lecture to our class. I attended with an open mind, expecting to hear critical perspectives on the topic of social work practice and perhaps to be provided with some helpful resources for further consideration. What I did not expect, however, was for the professor to disclose very personal life accounts that countered many dominant social and academic norms. Instead of solely lecturing in a way that tunnelled deeply into a topic area while simultaneously keeping an arm's length in distance by excluding his lived experiences, this professor spoke without apology about having grown up in extreme poverty, having experimented with drugs and having been in conflict with the law in his younger years.

I must admit most of the students, including myself, were completely shocked. We sat on the edge of our seats clinging to every word the professor courageously uttered. What he did that day, was to transform professors into human beings for the first time for many of us. This may seem like an obvious fact, but in reality, there is a hierarchical-based air of superiority within which many students view professors. This may be connected to the power educators possess to influence the minds and fates of students or the

common perception that professors have to be extraordinarily brilliant to be able to achieve such an esteemed position in life.

Within Eurocentric social work pedagogy, we as students are taught quite a bit about the importance of maintaining boundaries by being very careful not to reveal “too much” about oneself, which evidently transfers over into teaching social work (Dominelli, 2002; Lasky, 2005). I am forever grateful, however, that this professor “crossed the line”, for the positive impacts of him doing so have since rippled like waves throughout my life’s work. His lecture provided me with a gift of strength to be able to honour and share my “socially unacceptable” herstories, with the hopes of further inspiring others to be able to speak their truths without shame or regret.

OPERATIONALIZING TERM(S) AND CONCEPTS WITHIN A SCHOLARLY CONTEXT

Before I share my poem and analysis, I want to clarify a couple of terms with the goal of enabling the reader to better understand the thematic and structural narrative approach that I use to analyze this body of work. Firstly, according to Riessman (2005, p. 394), narrative analyses can be “thematically and episodically” oriented, in contrast to Western chronological categorization, the former being an approach I am taking with this article. Riessman’s (2008) thematic analysis centres on the creation of categories or components of a story, components being relevant to this article, since I will not be analyzing the poem in its entirety. Structural analysis offers critical insight into how narratives are composed and what the language used says about systemic constructs. To provide context to the poem, and as a response to questions Riessman poses around “for whom...how...and for what purpose” the text was generated, “Crying” was originally written for myself without intentions of sharing it (Riessman, 2005, p. 393).

The why and how of this creative endeavour was to find relief in externalizing the internalized. This externalization consisted of putting forth some of my most intimate thoughts and emotions that surfaced when my family member was given a prison sentence, by taking a non-academic approach to the written word. As such, I composed the poem in one sitting without stopping to reflect. In doing so, I typed with vigour and passion, which upon completion brought the calmness I was seeking by purging spirit injuries and clearing my mind. I am thankful I kept this piece of text,

because it is as though a transformative moment in my life was frozen in time, and is now available for critical self-reflection through narrative tools of thematic and structural analysis (Riessman, 2005).

THE POEM: “CRYING”

I am crying...

Because I am stressed out, your leaving affects me in ways I was naive about before.

Because I am angry that I have a child joined to my hip 24/7 & I am being pressured about money.

Because when I try to make money, or partake in something that will lead to a better life I am made to feel guilty; the bad mother complex.

Because you left, I am forced more than ever to depend upon my family member, who is getting old, tired and stressed out by having to live to sustain an adult child.

Because I am sad and feel alone. You were who I confided in, my best friend and now it's just me. So I bottle up my sorrows, angers, frustrations and disappointments to not reveal this part of who I am.

Because I have no down time, or time for self-care. I am behind on my work, and I am isolated, my body is here but my mind is everywhere. It is near impossible to be present in the moment.

Because I am under a microscope. Government bodies and agencies have continually invaded my life, and so I too begin to subconsciously scrutinize my every move, always physically jolting to the sounds of sirens.

Because I am experiencing exhaustion and compassion fatigue at very deep levels. I barely find the energy required to have this purposeful cry.

Because I want our lives to be stable and I have overdosed on courthouses, bail hearings, calls from police stations, visits to jails, and prisons.

Because I am devastated by the time I subsequently have been serving with you – the stigma & restrictions on life. I am scared of this happening again, although this time I have more confidence it won't.

Because there have been times I enabled you, and lacked the strength to set forth/enforce healthy boundaries.

Because posttraumatic stress resides in my heart and I am not sure how to heal it.

THEMATIC NARRATIVE ANALYSIS

Embodiment

Considering narrative approaches to research focus on elements of telling a story that reveal aspects of “narrative identity...according to the situation”, this method is well suited for focusing on components of my autobiographical narration of a particular moment residing within a poem (Dahl, 2009, p. 6). One theme this poem demonstrates is the ways in which experiences directly related to my loved one's criminalization were embodied, or “inscribed in the body” (Csordas, 1993, p. 136). I say this because having a family member in prison can be viewed in relation to cognition and how I mentally processed the experience. However, impacts were equally felt deep within the core of my physical being.

One example of embodiment is illustrated when I relayed, “I too begin to subconsciously scrutinize my every move, always physically jolting to the sounds of sirens”. The experience of my loved one having been on years of very strict house arrest leading up to imprisonment, which involved ongoing police harassment towards the entire family, are events that led to the formation of a negative association with audible sounds of sirens. Regardless of the physical space, when I heard a siren, my body would react with a sudden electrical jolt, my muscles instantaneously became very tense, and I would stand frozen until I realized the siren was not intended for me/us.

Affective Responses

A second theme that emerged is the prevalence of affective responses (Csordas, 1993). As I critically read and re-read the poem, very strong

emotions became evident, the dominant of which I interpret as being sentiments of anger towards my family member for making a choice that led to the circumstances disseminated in the text (Urek, 2005). While reading this poem, I think about how much one person's actions impact those around him/her, thus creating lasting effects among individuals and communities.

In hindsight, the circumstances implicated in my family member's imprisonment were way more complex than choice alone, as systemic racism and poverty were major factors. However, during the time when the poem was constructed, my anger was solely geared towards my loved one. While I was angry that my family member was going to prison, nothing could have prepared me for the sense of sorrow and emptiness I encountered there afterwards. When the physical space that was once occupied by this individual became void – it was as though someone had died, as there lingered a ghost-like presence.

With the absence of my family member and in the process of grieving, one significant lifestyle change that occurred was single parenthood, which I described when saying “I am angry that I have a child joined to my hip 24/7 & I am being pressured about money”. Prior to my family member's imprisonment, there was an enormous amount of (practical) parental help. This form of aid assisted with the privilege of having time to focus on schoolwork, without worrying about (the cost of) childcare, while being able to earn an income. The loss of income increased my precarious financial situation, contributing to the feminization of poverty prevalent among some women raising children with minimal supports (Harris, 1993).

Courtesy Stigma

The third theme I discovered was “courtesy stigma”, a term coined by Goffman (1963), which entails enduring negative social and systemic repercussions as a result of being so closely associated with a family member who carries a highly stigmatic label, such as inmate or criminal (Poindexter, 2005). The following excerpt relays the idea of courtesy stigma,

I bottle up my sorrows, angers, frustrations and disappointments to not reveal this part of who I am... Because I am devastated by the time I subsequently have been serving with you, the stigma, restrictions on life.

I understand this text to be an expression of feeling alone and isolated, because throughout the years leading up to the sentencing and thereafter, the only person I could completely confide in was the person subject to the criminal proceedings – my family member.

As such, I would often go to my student placement, for example, feeling overwhelmed or emotional because the police were in front of our home that morning, honking to draw unwanted attention. Despite the challenging feelings endured, my standpoint was to ensure I did “not reveal this part of who I am” to my peers or supervisors, even when questioned whether or not I was okay, because of “the stigma, restrictions on life”. What led to the impression that it was not safe to disclose this aspect of my life? At the time I was being evaluated as a social worker in a legal aid clinic, in which criminal law was one of the prevalent discourses. I had at times heard clients being discussed in derogatory ways among some colleagues, who were consistently assumed to have no personal relationships with “the deviant or criminalized other” (Juhila, 2011).

STRUCTURAL NARRATIVE ANALYSIS

Economics and Gender

I became aware that economic situations, and gendered dispositions within Western society, are related to the luxury of having time and physical space to oneself and/or to interact with friends and family members (Bittman and Wajcman, 2000). In the poem I state: “I have no down time, or time for self-care... I am experiencing exhaustion and compassion fatigue at very deep levels. I barely find the energy required to have this purposeful cry”. While I did have one close friend with whom I could be honest about the situation described in the poem, there was no time to speak on the telephone, let alone arrange an in-person meeting. This was a result of extensive caregiving responsibilities, in combination with scholarly obligations.

My daily schedule consisted of: full days of childcare; attending evening classes for school while a female family member babysat my child; rushing home to cook and get my child to bed; only to work tirelessly throughout the nights completing readings and assignments. This poem was written in the middle of the night while working on an essay. At the time, written text took the symbolic place of tears, embedded within a heavy energy I desperately yearned to shed (Tilly and Caye, 2005).

Financial desolation also led to what the poem calls being “under a microscope”, or what is better known as accessing Ontario Works (OW). While social assistance provided some financial relief, on a socio-political level, the outcome of receiving that money entailed further policing and oppression from another governmental institution (Hier, 2002). I was judged very harshly for my state of poverty and entanglement with a criminalized identity, while also carrying the burden of internalized shame. I was subject to ongoing and unfathomably intrusive lines of questioning that I answered because of power differentials between government workers and myself, thus, creating many additional spirit injuries.

It has been argued that interpersonal experiences are mutually constructed, but at the time I often felt as though I had lost my sense of agency and self-determination, both of which I argue are required to co-construct a dialogue in which one can maintain a sense of dignity. Aside from compliance, I did present counter narratives to OW and correctional workers as well. However, I was subtly and overtly reminded to reconsider my position if I wanted to continue receiving funds or engage in prison visits. Because I so urgently needed the money and because I wanted to maintain a relationship between my child and my imprisoned loved one, *compliance was my strategy* (Tanassi, 2004).

The Bad Mother Complex

I referred to my dilemmas of being “made to feel guilty” when trying to make money through the rhetorical use of the phrase “bad mother complex” – words strategically employed to relay the depth of intricate and burdensome gendered issues incurred (Riessman, 2005). What was meant by the use of the above phrases was that every time I tried to earn a living of some sort, people would say I was not spending enough time with my child. Conversely, when I decided that I would be better off on OW spending time with my child because what money I was making was too little to afford living and childcare expenses, I was referred to as a “lazy welfare mother”.

What both situations demonstrated is that within a patriarchal worldview, which is dominant in Western, hetero-colonial, settler-societies, mothers are often allocated blame by default of their gender (Jackson and Mannix, 2004). I was judged for not remaining within the private sphere when I attempted to work, yet also for remaining in the private sphere as a poor person, within a multi-racial(ized) family. Hence, my point around economics and the “bad

mother complex” was one of extreme frustration, because it was as though I was “damned if I do, and damned if I don’t”.

A POSITIVE SPIN ON A DIFFICULT SITUATION

Within my journey, there are a couple of very critical points I would like to emphasize for readers – the necessity of maintaining hope, and the act of transforming negative experiences and emotions into energy utilized for igniting change within the self, among my fellow sisters and brothers enduring this struggle, as well as broader social changes. While the experiences conveyed in the poem were often troubling, they did steer my life in unintended directions. Examples of such unintended directions include, but are not limited to: forming a peer-support organization called Supporting Ourselves while Supporting Our Loved Ones (SOSOLO) for friends and families of people in conflict with the law; making my population’s experiences my academic focus; and eventually speaking publically about these aspects of my personal and professional life to work towards minimizing social and structural stigmas. Hence, challenging life’s undesirable experiences via re-scripting, in ways that move towards empowerment and social justice initiatives are important points to highlight (Conrad, 2004).

Similar to the positive spin I placed upon the experience of stigma by forming a peer-support organization, I also initiated a collective in which women bartered services with one another and exchanged children’s clothing to assist with financial difficulties. As a result, many blessings have emerged in the lives of my sisters and I, through the formation of a circle of support, which helps to minimize some of the harmful impacts of this shared identity (Codd, 2002). A part of changing some negative outcomes that feel prescribed by default of having an intimate connection with an incarcerated person, is first becoming aware of stigmatizing messages that can be or have been internalized, and challenge them. Be sure to ask the self: Where are these messages coming from? What purpose do they serve? Who is benefiting – and in what ways? What agency do I have in accepting or rejecting negative connotations associated with this aspect of my identity?

While I began to change gears from internalizing the dominant voice of marginalization, I chose to reflect upon positive responses that emerged from being a family member of an imprisoned person. I started to recognize

the strengths involved in taking a chance by presenting my experiences and ideas to other women who shared my situation. Instead of accepting a demonized identity, I redirected attention to the resourcefulness that it requires to navigate the criminal (in)justice system and the perseverance to not only survive against the odds, but to thrive despite the odds. It is important that loved ones consider and be exposed to ways in which experiences of having their lives become enmeshed with the prison system and issues of criminality, can invite positive life-changing events. While at first I was at a loss as to how I was going to manage the drastic changes incarceration brought about, I was pleasantly surprised to discover a sense of community, resourcefulness, deeper critical reflection and the power to create change.

CONSIDERATIONS FOR ACADEMICS

From an academic lens, I challenge scholars to open their minds to the importance of tuning into the needs and experiences of families, friends, and communities of people who have an imprisoned loved one, particularly in the political era of mass incarceration and prison expansion (Piché, 2015). Within the discipline of social work, I observe a lot of effort being put forth into studying various dynamics of families, albeit child welfare, impacts of immigration, family violence and so forth. What is often absent is a focus on the intricacies and nuances of population-specific ways that incarceration impacts families within a Canadian context.

When considering this avenue of study, I recommend approaching it with critical race, critical feminist, intersectionality, social justice and anti-oppression theories in mind. Such theories will serve as tools to frame research designs in ways that work towards minimizing harm caused by pathologization, while emphasizing strengths, honoring wisdom, and embracing teachings of loved ones of imprisoned people.

Most importantly as academics, we should always give weight and serious consideration to the saying “nothing about us without us” (Charlton, 1998; Riessman, 2008). This slogan signifies that research should be conducted in consultation, and with guidance from the population of interest. Some examples of how this can be done are through the formation of advisory committees, engaging with member checking, and incorporating core values of community-based, Indigenous,

and participatory action research methods whenever feasible. Doing so will help to ensure the research being conducted remains relevant and meaningful to loved ones of imprisoned people.

CONCLUSION

While I engage in various styles of writing as forms of self-expression, I have never before considered revisiting my writing to delve deeper into meanings embedded within my words. Doing so has proven to be a poignant critical reflexive exercise, which has put me in touch with personal work that needs to be continuously attended to. Through the use of a thematic and structural narrative analysis of components of the poem “Crying”, I was able to see just how much the experience of being a family member of an imprisoned person has changed my life. From this reflection, my first aim was to speak to loved ones of incarcerated people by providing examples of maintaining hope, via transforming negative experiences into positive perspectives. Secondly, I ensured allocation of space towards offering insight into academic implications related to my findings, with the desire to ignite and/or contribute to existing critical conversations in regard to conducting research *with* my population.

When initially constructing the poem “Crying”, I talked about my experiences of challenging emotions, as well as physical, financial, practical and spiritual hardships, most of which have been discussed within academic literature. However, in shifting perspectives through re-scripting and challenging pathologizing ideologies, I became attuned to the fact that supporting an imprisoned loved one has brought forth purpose into my life. While clearly understanding that my lived experiences cannot speak for other women who are family members of someone serving a provincial prison or federal penitentiary sentence, my narrative, written poetically and suspended temporally in a period of being deeply involved with a secondary type of criminalization, has served to solidify the importance of my life’s work that was born out of the womb of this very struggle.

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