

Shaping Poetic Inquiry

Abstract This chapter focuses on positioning Poetic Inquiry philosophically with a discussion on paradigms. Also, I propose Poetic Inquiry can be shaped via meaningful methodologies specifically employing a phenomenologically inspired approach. This type of approach is well-placed as an approach to doing poetry with an emphasis on the mind-body-self nexus in relation to sensory experiences. Additionally, there is a focus upon the centrality of the ‘visceral’ body in the relationship between self-consciousness and the self. Details of this approach will set the scene for approaching various forms of Poetic Inquiry which are outlined later in the book.

Keywords Paradigms · Interpretivism · Phenomenology · Sensory experiences

INTRODUCTION

In order to understand Poetic Inquiry, it is important to position it in a discussion on *philosophical* foundations that are known as Paradigms. *Paradigms* are an overarching set of beliefs and provide orientations towards how researchers’ assumptions perceive the world and how this view is used to break down the complexities of the ‘real’ world (Denzin and Lincoln 2000; Sparkes 1992). Markula and Silk (2011) argue that;

Paradigms are important because they provide the boundaries for the researcher's ethics and values, actions in the social world, the control of the study (who initiates the work, and asks questions), the voices deployed in the accounts of the research, and indeed, the very basic and fundamental understanding of the world the researcher is investigating (p. 25).

The positivistic paradigm is particularly prevalent in my specialised field—sport and exercise sciences—and it often serves to subordinate all other paradigms because of its assumed scientific authority. Often, positivists (e.g. experimental scientists) are hailed as the ‘crowning achievements of Western civilization’ (Denzin 2011, p. 2). *Positivism* is based on notions of an objective measurable reality, employing quantitative methods to predict and control research, with concepts of hypotheses, reliability, validity and objectivity (Sparkes 1992; Willig 2003). These methods within positivism are often taken to be the experts of truth, and knowledge is believed to rest on firm foundations that can be measured by scientific terminology or technical equipment (Denzin 2011; Sparkes 1992). Researchers working within this paradigm tend to view emotions as irrational, unscientific and/or contaminating of the research project (Tillmann-Healey and Keisinger 2001). Whilst positivists accuse the so-called new experimental qualitative researchers of writing fiction, not science with no way of verifying ‘truth’, Denzin (2011, p. 2) argues that ‘there is little to be gained by attempting to engage in moral criticism’ given the fixed and solid beliefs associated with positivism. In ‘The Study of Poetry’, Arnold (1880, Li 23–24) wrote that, ‘Without poetry, our science will appear incomplete’ and Wordsworth (cited in Arnold 1880, Li 27–28) calls poetry ‘the impassioned expression which is in the countenance of all science’.

What can be learned from qualitative research is the importance of drawing upon and discussing one's own personal experiences and emotions during the research process, and those that are not, perhaps are being dishonest (Gilbert 2000). Arguably, the reader is not made aware as to the extent the researcher is conscious of her/his own biases and assumptions. Some argue that whilst paradigms are described and issues rehearsed being resolved ‘in a bloodless, technical, and strangely old-fashioned counsel of perfection’ the realities of qualitative research are much messier (Denzin 2011, p. 574). Traditional approaches have been extremely useful in social sciences, but Poetic Inquiry, where emotions are inextricably tied together, aims to capture the messiness of people's lives. When investigating the more complex, interchanging, subjective,

emotional and individual lived experiences, the *interpretive* paradigm guides the way in which I approach and write up Poetic Inquiry. Before describing the interpretive paradigm, I detail how paradigms may be understood in terms of *axiological*, *ontological*, *epistemological*, *rhetorical* and *methodological* assumptions (Sparkes 1992).

Questions about ethics within the social world are known as axiological assumptions (Denzin and Lincoln 2011), and ontological assumptions concern the nature of the world, ‘reality’ and human beings in social contexts (Bryman 2001). One’s epistemology is dependent upon beliefs and perceptions of truth; ‘theory of knowledge’ refers to the ways we acquire knowledge and what constitutes knowledge (Denzin and Lincoln 2011; Giacobbi et al. 2005). Methodological assumptions focus on providing a rationale for and analysing why we have selected methods used for attaining data (Sparkes 1992). According to Sparkes (1992), ontological assumptions give rise to epistemological assumptions which have methodological implications for data collection techniques, the way findings are interpreted and the ways they are written up in the final research project/papers. In this sense, paradigms guide all aspects of undertaking research (questions asked, ethical stances, actions, method choices, relationships to the participants, judgment of the quality of the research) (Markula and Silk 2011). Table 2.1 outlines some of the key paradigmatic frameworks that make up the world of research design.

Many qualitative researchers subscribe to a form of interpretivism (Smith and Sparkes 2016) which in many ways stands in opposition to the positivistic paradigm. Interpretivism has deeply embedded historical roots established in the nineteenth century, and contrary to positivism, the interpretative paradigm is underscored by very different ontological

Table 2.1 Based on Sparkes’ (1992) Philosophical assumptions underlying the different paradigms (p. 21)

<i>Assumptions</i>	<i>Positivist</i>	<i>Interpretivist</i>	<i>Critical</i>
Ontology	External-realist	Internal-idealist, relativist	External-realist or internal-idealist
Epistemology	Objectivist-dualist	Subjectivist, interactive	Subjectivist, interactive
Methodology	Nomothetic, experimental, manipulative	Ideographic, heuristical, dialectical	Ideographic, participative, transformative
Interests	Prediction and control (technical)	Understanding and interpretation (practical)	Emancipation (criticism and liberation)

and epistemological assumptions, as Table 2.1 highlights (Sparkes 1992). Under the umbrella of the interpretative paradigm, approaches include ethnography, autoethnography, hermeneutics, naturalism, phenomenology, symbolic interactionism, constructivism, social constructivism, ethnomethodology, case study, essentially qualitative research (Sparkes 1992). Preissle (2011) employs different metaphors (tapestry, umbrella and bramble bush) to describe a variety of approaches. For example, she employs the metaphor of a *bramble bush* which encompasses fields of traditions and study that ‘draw, borrow, or rob from one another in sometimes prickly fashion’ (p. 689).

Poet-researchers do not aim to act in a distant, disembodied or dispassionate way (Gould and Nelson 2005; Leggo 2008). Instead, we acknowledge and integrate emotional experiences into our research (Tillmann-Healey and Keisinger 2001; Owton and Allen-Collinson 2014). In Poetic Inquiry, the poet-researcher’s voice is always present in the research showing her/his role in the research process. The influence of the relationship between the researcher and participant is acknowledged in the production of data emerging from that interaction meaning that Poetic Inquiry cannot be reproduced exactly the same way. In this way, poet-researchers can act as a constructionist researcher, co-constructing knowledge, understanding and interpreting the meaning of lived experiences (Smith and Sparkes 2016). Furthermore, a critical researcher adopting Poetic Inquiry could involve ‘being an activist and transformative intellectual’ (Smith and Sparkes 2016, p. 3) where poetry is employed as a transformative tool.

MEANINGFUL APPROACHES

Working from an interpretivist perspective, I believe that the meaning that individuals give to their experiences and their process of interpretation is essential, not accidental or secondary to the experience itself (Becker 1999). People interpret things from their past, from writings, families, TV, personalities, work and play (Becker 1999). It is in the interaction with these combined influences where an individual constructs meaning. Therefore, my aim is to work towards an understanding of the social milieu that is consistent with the experiences of the participants and to represent their accounts on a deep and meaningful level. I seek invitation into the intersubjective meanings (Gergen and Gergen 2002), that is of shared meanings, subjective states and processes of psychological energies moving between people.

I am also guided by feminist principles because I am concerned with ‘issues of power, both societal power dynamics that impact and shape women’s lives, as well as the power dynamics that exist between researcher and researched’ (Cooky 2016, pp. 77–78). Whilst, ‘giving voice’ might be part of the outcome of Poetic Inquiry I tend to adopt a ‘friendship as method’ approach in an attempt to *get to know* others in meaningful and sustained ways (Fine 1994; Tillmann-Healy 2003; Owton and Allen-Collinson 2014; Castrodale and Zingaro 2015). Friendships, like fieldwork, have similar endeavours in that they both involve being in the world with others (Tillmann-Healy 2003). Friendship is described by Rawlins (1992) as an interpersonal bond characterised by the ongoing communicative management of dialectical tensions, such as those between idealisation and realisation, affection and instrumentality, and judgment and acceptance. This method encourages pathways towards actively undermining and disrupting the power imbalance between researcher and participant, reducing the hierarchical separation between them, which can be attempted through dialogue, relationships, and an ethic of caring that invites expressiveness, emotion and empathy (Tillmann-Healy 2003). It is unrealistic for a mutual, close and/or lasting friendship to develop between researcher and every participant, and so it is important not to unduly ‘mislead’ participants (Owton and Allen-Collinson 2014). Tillmann-Healy (2003) proposes that there is not necessarily a need to adopt the ‘whole vision’ to benefit from ‘friendship as method’, therefore I approach participants from a ‘stance of friendship’, meaning that I treat them with respect, honour their stories, and try to use their stories for humane and just purposes. With a particular focus on a feminist phenomenologically inspired approach, I bring ideas of existential phenomenology to the analysis of people’s lived experiences and aim to sharpen the focus on corporeal embeddedness within cultural and social worlds (Allen-Collinson 2011a; Owton 2015a). As Allen-Collinson (2011a: 303) argues

For feminist phenomenologists the ‘personal’ of phenomenology (first-person, subjective, experientially-grounded) is fundamentally linked to the ‘political’ (located within wider social, political and ideological structures).

Contrary to behaviourist approaches, symbolic interactionists, such as Mead (Silva 2007), claim that human interaction is mediated by social actors’ interpretation of the situation, and/or the way each other’s

actions are defined (Silva 2007). Social actors do not simply react, but their ‘response’ is based on the meaning which they attach to such actions. The following ideas are central to this approach:

- The focus on the microscale social interactions between the actor, others and the world
- A view of both the actor and the world as dynamic processes and not static structures
- The actor’s ability to interpret the social world.

Symbolic interactionism is a somewhat distinctive approach to the study of human group life and human conduct; it premises that human beings act towards things on the basis of the *meanings* that they have for them (Blumer 1969; Silva 2007). This emphasis on symbolism, signification, negotiated meaning and social construction of society, focuses attention on the roles people play (Silva 2007). This is not commonly explicitly recognised Poetic Inquiry. Goffman (1959) is a key advocate for studying roles dramaturgically by describing the way humans are role-playing actors following culturally formulated scripts; a theoretical perspective which provides one of the overarching frameworks for this research.

Identity is a common theme threaded through much poetry because many people write about what they know best. Poets often give us insight into their own worlds through their poetry which gives others a way to connect their own experiences, emotions and problems to better understand themselves. I draw upon symbolic interactionist-inspired conceptions (e.g. Goffman 1963, 1969) on identity. These conceptions emphasise the processual nature of self and identity (Allen-Collinson and Hockey 2007), where social actors and others engage in interactional work to actively develop and negotiate their selves in an intersubjective, dynamic and ongoing social process (Mead 1934). However, Shilling (1993) criticises Goffman for a failure to engage with the interactive dimensions of body management, and by assuming that categorisations of stigma can somehow exist prior to social encounters, although this perception is open to some debate. Some of Goffman’s concepts might be a helpful to draw from.

Much of Goffman’s work relates to the body and the ways in which people devise and maintain strategies for carrying out interactions with each other. Goffman (1959) argues that the presentation of self concerns the maintenance of a positive and convincing self-image. The body

is the site where meaning is inscribed, which mediates the relationship between self-identity and social identity: consequently, the social meanings attached to the expression of bodily display are an extremely important factor in an individual's sense of self, and in his or her feelings of inner worth (Goffman 1959).

Goffman (1963), who was heavily influenced by the works of Mead, suggests that what matters in relation to a person's identity is not how the individual identifies her/himself but rather how others identify her/him. He also believed that all participants in social interactions are engaged in certain practices to avoid being embarrassed or embarrassing others (Goffman 1963) and thus to maintain the microsocial order. Goffman (1963) states that in some cases where a person could be stigmatised, it is possible for them to make an attempt to correct their condition by devoting much private effort (in the 'back regions' of one's life) to the mastery of areas of activity ordinarily felt to be closed on incidental and physical grounds to one with their 'shortcoming'. In order to prevent embarrassment and disruption to social interaction, Goffman (1963) refers to *impression management* and *dramaturgical discipline*. Goffman (1959) explains 'impression management' by employing the metaphor of 'dramaturgy', which permits a sociological understanding of the vital emotion of embarrassment. Embarrassment arises when the assumptions an interactant projects about her/his identity are threatened or discredited by the 'expressive facts' of the situation (Goffman 1967, pp. 107–108), which might lead to a 'spoiled identity'. For example, in Granny's poems (Owton 2015a), the poems demonstrate fluctuating interactions between the 'front regions' and 'back regions' of her life. In the 'back regions' of her theatre life, a considerable amount of dramaturgical discipline is invested in putting on a 'good face' for the 'front regions' of her life (Goffman 1959).

PHENOMENOLOGICALLY INSPIRED POETIC INQUIRY

A sociological phenomenological approach can *inspire* Poetic Inquiry by also exploring the interaction between mind-body-world. Like Poetic Inquiry, phenomenology is much more than a specific technique (Allen-Collinson 2016). According to some phenomenologists, we can know the world only through the senses; we must perceive first and reason second. Similarly to phenomenology, Poetic Inquiry is not a method, it is an attitude and a way of being and becoming in research and in the world. Leggo (2008, p. 168) explains;

The poet-researcher seeks to live attentively in the moment, to seek to enter lived experiences with a creative openness to people and experiences and understandings.

Through this phenomenologically inspired approach, I subscribe to the phenomenological quest to, ‘attempt to suspend our “adult” knowledge and preconceptions in order to view the world through the fresh, excited, “naïve” eyes of childhood’ (Allen-Collinson 2011b, p. 4). This approach aligns with poetry since it ‘is not based upon linear cause and effect logic; a poem does not need to “make sense”’ (Furman 2007, p. 2). Allen-Collinson (2016) aligns herself with Varela (1996) and Ravn and Christensen (2014) who call for phenomenology to be ‘a specific type of reflection or attitude about our human capacity for, and mode of, being conscious’ (p. 15). Merleau-Ponty (2002), a leading existentialist and phenomenological writer, describes reflection as not withdrawing from the world’s basis:

it steps back to watch the forms of transcendence fly up like sparks from a fire; it slackens the intentional threads which attach us to the world and thus brings them to our notice; it alone is consciousness of the world because it reveals that world as strange and paradoxical (p. xv).

Phenomenology offers a strong theoretical tradition, which also highlights the crucial role that the *senses* play in our experiences (Hockey and Allen-Collinson 2007; Allen-Collinson and Hockey 2007, 2009, 2010; Sparkes 2009). Phenomenologically speaking, being aware of the senses in poetry both when writing, when writing about and when listening to, is central. There has been an over portrayal of the visual in much of the research on senses therefore other sensory dimensions have been neglected, yet Sparkes (2009) stresses not to ‘advocate replacing one sensory bias with another’ as part of an ‘anti-visualist agenda’ (p. 31). As Paterson (2011, para 6) argues ‘we never perceive by vision alone’, and he further questions how haptic or ‘more-than visual’ knowledges are conceptualised and operationalised. For example, Paterson (2011, para 6) argues that:

We have many expressions about ‘knowing’ that invoke touch, such as wanting a ‘hands on’ experience. Especially in our relation to ‘things’, we desire to know them through closeness and the mediation of our touch.

These bodily (somatic) senses inform our perception of ‘inside’ and ‘outside’, of inner and outer space (Paterson 2009). In phenomenology, this neat distinction between inside and outside or interior and exterior is problematized (Merleau-Ponty 1969) and ‘rather than discrete and separate, these senses act in concert to help give us our embodied perceptions of space’ (Paterson 2009, p. 768). Forms of corporeal knowledge or ‘carnal knowing’ are connected deeply to sensory experience (Mellor and Shilling 1997, p. 56). This seems to be well aligned with Poetic Inquiry given the messiness this type of inquiry allows (Krane 2016). Commensurate with the phenomenological approach, when poets use words that appeal to our senses (e.g. sight, hearing, touch, smell, taste and balance) the poet ‘shows’ us rather than simply telling us and perhaps can transport us to place, time and experience. Therefore, how we might ‘return to our senses’ is particularly important in connection with the phenomenological idea of self-understanding (Block and Block 2005).

The phenomenological view believes that our body is always in relationship to itself, with others, with human space and time, and everything affects it in terms of how we experience ourselves and the world around us (Allen-Collinson 2009a). Consciousness is always consciousness of something and therefore intentional which means it is always directed towards something (Leder 2001; Merleau-Ponty 2001). Phenomenologists, such as Merleau-Ponty (2001) believe that ‘to begin with the lived body is to understand the physiological as always intertwined with, and an expression of, the body’s *intentionality*¹’ (Owton 2015b, p. 224). As such, according to phenomenologists, people’s experiences should be understood in the context of the person’s *existential* grasp of the world (Leder 2001; Merleau-Ponty 1962). Similarly, symbolic interactionists believe that consciousness is not separated from action and interaction; it is an integral part of both (Silva 2007). Leder (1992) argues that taking a phenomenological approach offers the possibility of a ‘sensitive analysis of the relationship between the self, identity and the body’ (cited in Nettleton 1995, p. 108). Given that poets often tell us quite a bit about themselves in poems, the specific ways we experience ourselves as embodied thus become prime data for theorising about knowledge and experience.

In this sense, therefore, Poetic Inquiry can explore how people might act towards things associated in their lifeworld and these meanings that things have for humans are central in their own right (Blumer 1969).

Theoretical perspectives that focus upon the importance of meaning making in everyday life can be employed in Poetic Inquiry in order to offer an insight not only into the individual's meaningful experience and embodiment but also into the ways in which people share their embodied experiences in various environments. Whilst I adhere to a feminist phenomenologically inspired approach to Poetic Inquiry, as Denzin (2010) reminds us, it is important to remember that there is no one way to do interpretive qualitative inquiry. He argues;

We are all interpretive bricoleurs stuck in the present working against the past as we move into a politically charged and challenging future (Denzin 2010, p. 15)

Bricoleurs, in this sense, are interpreters working to construct or create research from a diverse range of methodological tools available to us and the process in which such work is created.

PERFORMATIVITY

A shift towards a willingness to experiment with alternative new representational forms has been accompanied by the move to performance (Denzin 2010). Denzin (2010) argues for a performance studies paradigm: one, which 'understands performance simultaneously as a form of inquiry and as a form of activism, as critique, as critical citizenship' (p. 18). Denzin (2001) argues that we inhabit a performance-based, dramaturgical culture where the dividing line between performer and audience blurs, and culture itself becomes a dramatic performance. 'Performance is a way of knowing, a way of creating and fostering understanding, a method that persons use to create and give meaning to everyday life' (Denzin 2010, p. 30). As argued earlier, engaging participants as a poet-researcher is not a top-down process of gathering data, but a reciprocal relationship in which insights are developed and shared. Given this, poetry and other arts-based methods can be appropriate and particularly powerful tools for achieving these aims. When I read poems to an audience, I am making my performative role explicit.

Many researchers acknowledge and understand how the interview itself is a performance in which each performer (or social actor) actively selects how they will respond to each other (Denzin 2001; Ezzy 2010). This understanding has grown out of symbolic interactionist traditions

including via Denzin's (2001) appreciation of Goffman's work that argues that we inhabit a performance-based, dramaturgical culture where the dividing line between performer and audience blurs, and culture itself becomes a dramatic performance. Therefore, to listen effectively involves *seeing* as well as *hearing* that person. More importantly, this also involves being aware of one's own non-verbal messages (gesture, body-posture, eye contact, tone, facial expression), which is an important part of communication. When performing poems from transcribed interview verbatim, these nuanced expressions might be captured more visibly when performing poems to audiences.

Whilst I recognise my performative role in research, I recognise the limitations of 'page' poetry identified by Wade (2011, p. 13) which include:

- Linked with serious philosophy
- Written with the use of private reference
- Presented elaborate syntax
- Used obscure vocabulary and imagery.

'Page' poetry, however, is actually a relatively new idea in poetry. Historically, poetry has been written with performance in mind since c.1000 A.D. when the Anglo-Saxon epic *Beowulf* was read aloud to an audience and medieval times when poets performed their poetry to music (Wade 2011). The 1960s pushed for a shift back to performativity in a quest for a more flexible approach which touches on ongoing debates about issues of representation, which often appears to be about the prioritising and valuing the *written* word over *verbal* and *visual* word (Richardson 1997). By offering this guide, it is not meant to devalue the importance of either type of representation, but it is aimed at seeing how to start developing and nurturing your reflective, poetic, performative self (Douglas and Carless 2008) in ways that offer new ways of 'knowing' and 'seeing'.

NOTE

1. Merleau-Ponty (2001) focuses on bodily intentionality—the body as an attitude directed towards an existing or potential task. For him, intentionality, perception and action are fundamentally intertwined. See Allen-Collinson (2011a, b) for examples of Merleau-Ponty's existential approach and the concept of intentionality.

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