



The resolution of internal conflict through performing poetry

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ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:

Poetry
Poetry therapy
Poetry slam
Creative arts therapy

ABSTRACT

This study investigates how performing competitive poetry aids in the resolution of internal conflict in poetry slam participants. Grounded theory methodology was chosen for this research; the results are further grounded by comparison to the creative arts therapy literature. Eight participants were asked how writing and practicing poems affected their feelings of internal conflict, how performing for an audience, receiving scores, and performing their most honest work affected them, and why they continue to slam.

A total of 45 noteworthy codes emerged (at least 63% endorsed). Slam poets must have the goal of eliciting emotions in the audience, write and revise with the audience in mind, and experience a mutuality with the audience. This study concludes that in order to be successful in slam, a recreational poetry competition seen as entertainment, poets must present themselves as sympathetic heroes, which directs their narratives towards a selfview of health.

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Poetry slam, the art of competitive “performance poetry” (also referred to as “spoken word”), is the focus of more than 100 venues in the United States. Spoken word communities have developed around these events and many have organized their own outreach programs to high school students, prisons, and mental hospitals, in the belief that spoken word is a tool for change and healing (M. Cirelli, October 14, 2008, personal communication).

The popularity of poetry slam’s non-clinical setting seems to indicate some benefit to the competitors, which may or may not resemble the benefits received by those who are involved in creative arts therapies. This study addresses the question, “Does performing competitive poetry aid in the resolution of internal conflict? If so, how does this effect manifest?” Understanding the experience of competitive poets in slam is essential information as performance poetry events and workshops taught by slam poets proliferate in both clinical and outreach milieus.

The modern competitive poetry genre known as slam was originally established by Chicago poet Marc Smith in 1986 “as a means to heighten public interest in poetry readings” (*Poetry Slam Incorporated* [PSI], 2001, p. 1). The rules are: poems must be written by the poet, the poet may not perform with props of any kind, and if the poet goes over the 3 min time limit points are deducted from his or her score. “In the simplest sense, the rules of the National Slam give the poems a form in which to be presented” (Glazner, 2000, p. 13). Five judges are chosen at random from the audience and are asked to judge each performance on a scale of 1–10, with one

digit after a decimal point. The high and the low score are dropped, leaving a highest possible score of 30 points.

How does poetry therapy, the use of poetry in conjunction with therapy under the guidance of a trained therapist, compare to poetry slam, the performance of poetry to a room full of strangers for competition? Poetry slam consists of the triad of performer, host, and audience, rather than person-to-be-helped, helper, and therapy group. This brings a greater anonymity and distance to the interaction, with low call for accountability for the interpretation and continuing thought processes and feelings brought on by hearing or reading a poem. At the same time, there is a ritual element to poetry slam that is structuring, resembling McNiff’s (1981) emphasis that “all psychotherapy, and even its most traditional forms, is inherently ceremonial. The ceremonial enactment focuses energy” (p. xxiii). Ritual is also involved in the third component of Mazza’s (2003) poetry therapy practice model, the “symbolic/ceremonial component involving the use of metaphors, rituals, and storytelling” (p. 17).

Because slam poetry is technically entertainment, it may help people feel more free to engage in it. Similar to some types of drama therapy, “the fact that it is a game is the sole justification for an event, not simply an excuse offered to patients for something they might find embarrassing,” and in this way, “people are given permission to enjoy themselves and helped to lose their self-consciousness” (Grainger, 1995, p. 74). Slam also does not entail therapeutic goals, while the goals of poetry therapy as set forth by Gorelick (2005) include:

- Developing an understanding of oneself and others through poetry and other forms of literature.
- Promoting creativity, self-expression, and greater self-esteem.

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- Strengthening interpersonal and communication skills.
- Expressing overwhelming emotions and releasing tension.
- Promoting change and increasing coping skills and adaptive functions (p. 118).

However, the pre-existing framework of slam as vehicle for self-expression may serve a similar function to expressive writing manipulations, in that it implies that “such feelings are valid and potentially beneficial to experience” (Lepore, Greenberg, Bruno, & Smyth, 2002, p. 110).

Many creative arts therapists believe simply that writing poetry or participating in the creative arts is therapeutic in itself, regardless of the specificity of therapeutic intent (Akhtar, 2000; Emunah, 1990; Grainger, 1995; McNiff, 1981; Reiter, 2000; Wadeson, 1980). Poetry slam has many similarities to poetry therapy, including the opportunity for transformation, but poetry slam provides a very different level of containment and safety compared to a poetry therapy group or a drama therapy context. The therapeutic effect of performing poetry in a competitive poetry slam setting is completely unresearched. Thus, there is demonstrated opportunity to advance the field, both in terms of the traditional methods of poetry and creative arts therapies and in terms of the specific competitive art of performance poetry known as poetry slam.

Method

Grounded theory was chosen as the methodology for this study. The purpose of grounded theory is to build theory using a rigorous research process, while helping the researcher to break through any biases brought to the research and providing the grounding needed to generate “a rich, tightly woven, explanatory theory” (Strauss & Corbin, 1990, p. 57).

In grounded theory, the literature review is intended to “stimulate theoretical sensitivity” (Strauss & Corbin, 1990, p. 50), though researchers must be careful to let their data determine their results and then compare these results to the literature. The literature can be used as a secondary source of data, especially when the literature contains descriptions of phenomena similar to the research. Also, the literature can stimulate questions to help to derive the list of questions to ask respondents and to better understand discrepancies between the research and literature during analysis. Lastly, the literature can help the researcher to choose which situation to study and provide supplementary validation of research findings at the end of the study process. This study used the literature review in these ways.

Description of setting and participants

Co-researchers were recruited from poetry slam venues local to the San Francisco area. With the assumption that continued interest in this medium indicates the occurrence of experiences of great meaning for poets, only those who had participated in slam for at least 1 year, had performed at least 5 different poems, and expressed an interest in the research question were selected. As the research interest was in an English-speaking, adult, non-clinical population, all participants selected were at least 18 years old, spoke English and performed primarily in English, and had gross psychological and reasoning functions intact. All of the criteria was assessed in the screening questionnaire (Table 1) except that of psychological and reasoning functioning, which was assessed during the interview.

Eight participants were interviewed in order to generate enough data for this exploratory study. An equal number of men and women were interviewed to capture any relevant variations in theory due to gender. The data was saturated after 8 participants were inter-

Table 1

Screening and interview questionnaires.

Screening questionnaire

How long have you participated in slam?

How many poems have you performed? (if you don't know exactly, please estimate)

Are you willing to be interviewed for research pertaining to the question, “Does performing poetry in the slam setting aid in the resolution of internal conflict?”

Will you be available locally?

What is your age?

Do you speak English and perform primarily in English?

Interview questionnaire

How does your process of writing slam poetry help you resolve internal conflict, if at all?

How does practicing before performing affect your feelings of internal conflict, if at all?

How are you affected by audience response while performing?

How do scores affect you?

How were you affected by writing and performing your most honest slam poem?

Why do you continue to slam?

viewed, so it was not necessary to select additional participants through theoretical sampling to reach saturation.

Procedures for data collection

Participants were recruited through an existing weekly e-mailed newsletter which reached approximately 1700 slam poets and fans of slam poetry, including almost every slam poet in the San Francisco area. Respondents to this call for volunteers were e-mailed the screening questionnaire (Table 1). The participants were selected from the pool of qualified applicants based on availability, with an effort to make the selections as diverse as possible. The semi-structured interview included the questions in Table 1. Interviews were tape-recorded and then transcribed by an outside typist. Each subject received a copy of their transcript and was given the opportunity to request any deletions they desired in order to provide the most respectful containment of emotional material possible.

Instrument

Co-researchers were interviewed in a semi-structured fashion. Questions were developed using both the findings of the literature and the input of three San Francisco area poetry slam organizers who had extensive slam experience (between 5 and 9 years) and personal time investment nurturing the local slam environment through the development of competitive poetry venues. They were asked, “What are the most important aspects of slam?” Their responses detailed the chronological slam process, including writing, practicing, performing in front of an audience, receiving scores, and continuing dedication to slam.

The questions that best fit the findings of the literature and the unique aspects of slam that were not covered in the literature were chosen (Table 1). The literature suggests that the act of creation of artistic products has healing effects (Akhtar, 2000; Brown & Heimberg, 2001; Emunah, 1990; Grainger, 1995; Lepore & Smyth, 2002; Malchiodi, 2005; Mazza, 2007; McNiff, 1981; Reiter, 2000; van Emmerik, Kamphius, & Emmelkamp, 2008; Wadeson, 1980). In order to uncover any beneficial effects due to the creation of slam (performance) poetry (written text), the question “How does your process of writing slam poetry help you resolve internal conflict, if at all?” was chosen. The literature also states that rehearsal and repetition facilitate healing by allowing the exploration of painful situations and emotional mastery (Bell, 1984; Emunah, 1990) and facilitating both stimulus- and response-related habituation (Lepore et al., 2002). “How does practicing before performing affect your

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