Freebirthing in the United Kingdom: The Voice Centered Relational Method and the (de)Construction of the I-Poem

Gemma McKenzie

Abstract
Freebirth occurs when women intentionally give birth to their baby without midwives or doctors present in countries and eras in which there are maternity services available to assist them. This paper forms part of a wider project on women’s freebirthing experiences in the United Kingdom. Verbatim transcripts created from face-to-face narrative interviews with 16 freebirthing women were analyzed using the Voice Centered Relational Method (VCRM). VCRM is a feminist methodology that consists of four readings of an interview transcript: reading for the plot and the researcher’s response to it; reading for the I; reading for relationships; and placing people within cultural and social contexts. This paper focuses on the second reading and in particular the creation of I-poems from the data, which require the researcher to focus on sentences made by the interviewee that include the word “I,” and without changing the order of those sentences, to present them in poetic stanzas. While there is literature on this form of data presentation, there is a paucity of information on how to evolve the data from transcript to I-poem and the alternative ways researchers can construct I-poetry. The aims of this paper are to demonstrate the theoretical background to I-poems, the variations in their form, explain the steps taken to create I-poems from interview transcripts from freebirthing women and to highlight poetry as a novel way of disseminating research results beyond an academic audience.

Keywords
freebirth, unassisted childbirth, I-poem, voice centered relational method, VCRM, feminist methodologies, poetic inquiry, pregnancy, childbirth

Introduction
Freebirth is a practice that occurs when women intentionally give birth without health care professionals (HCPs) present in countries and eras in which there are maternity services available to assist them (McKenzie et al., 2020). Women make this decision for complex reasons including the over-medicalization of childbirth, trauma during previous births, inflexible homebirth rules and the risks associated with hospital births (Dahlen et al., 2011; Feeley & Thomson, 2016a; Hollander et al., 2017; Jackson et al., 2012; Plested & Kirkham, 2016). Although legal in the United Kingdom (UK), freebirth is often stigmatized and women who make this decision can be subjected to investigation and condemnation from relevant authorities (see for example Feeley & Thomson, 2016b; Plested & Kirkham, 2016).

Georgia

Rights
I knew what I was allowed to do.
I knew what I could decline.
I knew I could basically just decline everything.

1 Florence Nightingale Faculty of Nursing, Midwifery and Palliative Care, King’s College London, United Kingdom

Corresponding Author:
Gemma McKenzie, Florence Nightingale Faculty of Nursing, Midwifery and Palliative Care, King’s College London, James Clerk Maxwell Building, 57 Waterloo Road, London SE1 8WA, United Kingdom.
Email: gemma.mckenzie@kcl.ac.uk

Creative Commons CC BY: This article is distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 License (https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/) which permits any use, reproduction and distribution of the work without further permission provided the original work is attributed as specified on the SAGE and Open Access pages (https://us.sagepub.com/en-us/nam/open-access-at-sage).
This project explored the experiences of women who had freebirthed their babies in the UK. Ethical approval was granted by King’s College London PNM Research Ethics Committee Ref: HR-19/20-13511. Women were recruited via social media and interviewees were geographically spread throughout England. Face-to-face narrative interviews were conducted either at women’s homes, places of work, a neutral yet private space such as a YMCA or in one case at the author’s home (the pilot interview). Women were asked to talk about their freebirth journey through four stages: relevant experiences prior to their freebirth pregnancy (including any previous maternity experiences), their freebirth pregnancy, their freebirth (i.e. the act of giving birth without HCPs) and their post-natal experiences. All interviews were transcribed verbatim, anonymized and interviewees’ names replaced by pseudonyms in order to protect participants’ identities.

Data were analyzed using the Voice Centered Relational Method (VCRM) (L. M. Brown & Gilligan, 1992). This is a feminist methodology that works particularly well with subjects that are “taboo” and “complex” (Koelsch, 2016, p. 171). It is a useful approach when attempting to understand the voices and experiences of marginalized communities, and in particular, the private worlds of women (Edwards & Ribbens, 1998). VCRM consists of four readings of the data. Originally conceived within the discipline of psychology (L. M. Brown & Gilligan, 1992), it draws on literary theory and its application within the social sciences consists of the following readings (Mauthner & Doucet, 1998):

1. Reading for the plot and the researcher’s responses to the narrative;
2. Reading for the Voice of the “I”;
3. Reading for relationships;
4. Placing people within cultural contexts and social structures.

The purpose of this paper is to explore approaches that can be taken within the second reading. Primarily this reading aims to understand “how the respondent experiences, feels and speaks about herself” (Mauthner & Doucet, 1998, p. 12). This aspect of the methodology has evolved in ways which enable the data to be used to create I-poems (Gilligan et al., 2003). However, while there is literature that presents the poetic output of this second reading, there is a distinct lack of information on how to create I-poems, the various approaches researchers can take and any limitations to analyzing data this way. The primary aim of this paper is to demonstrate in detail the creation of I-poems from the data provided by freebirthing women while also highlighting the various options available to researchers who wish to employ this form of analysis and data presentation. Further, the paper explores the theoretical background to I-poems and demonstrates how I-poems can be used as a powerful and novel way of disseminating research results beyond an academic audience. By considering I-poetry’s underlying principles and scrutinizing its construction, the method will be better illuminated, thus becoming more accessible to social scientists interested in adopting this innovative methodology.

### The Use of Poetry in Qualitative Research

I’ve got the children to tend
The clothes to mend
The floor to mop
The food to shop
Then the chicken to fry
The baby to dry
I got company to feed
The garden to weed
I’ve got shirts to press
The tots to dress
The cane to be cut
I gotta clean up this hut
Then see about the sick
And the cotton to pick . . .

*Woman Work* by Maya Angelou (2015)

In *Woman Work* Maya Angelou skillfully draws the reader into the life of an unnamed African American woman and provides us with a sense of how it may feel to walk in her shoes. In this example, Angelou demonstrates how poetry can be a powerful way for an author to communicate a message, to voice an experience and to stir the emotions of the reader.

While poetry comes in myriad forms its primary purpose is to connect with its audience. As the poet Robert Frost stated:

> There are three things, after all, that a poem must reach: the eye, the ear, and what we may call the heart or the mind. It is most important of all to reach the heart of the reader. (Newdict, 1937, p. 298)

The ability of a poem to stir the emotions is what makes it attractive to some qualitative researchers. Ricci (2003) highlights that “[p]oetry and qualitative research share in their goals of providing meaning, density, aestheticism, and reflexivity. They are also evocative” (p. 590). Poetic inquiry has therefore emerged as a method by which the social scientist can analyze and present their data in a format that “merge[s] the tenets of qualitative research with the craft and rules of traditional poetry” (Leavy, 2009, p. 64). It is also frequently used by researchers to become socially engaged and politically active (see Faulkner, 2019, p. xi). Speaking more broadly on arts-based research, Leavy (2009) argues that the presentation of data in this atypical way can raise critical awareness, promote dialogue and “give voice” to subjugated perspectives (pp. 13–14). It also has the potential to reach a wider and more diverse audience than those within and connected to academia.
Poetic Inquiry

Poetic inquiry does not have a fixed definition (Vincent, 2018, p. 49). However broadly speaking, Butler-Kisber (2016) describes it as:

…the process of using words from transcripts or field notes from our studies and transforming them into a form of poetry. (00:10)

As I-poems use the words voiced by participants during interviews and captured in written form within an interview transcript, they fall within the second of Prendergast’s (2009) three categories of poetic inquiry, namely “Vox Participare” or “Participant-voiced poems” (p. 545). Participant-voiced poems are most typically written by the researcher but can also be created by the participants as a form of data (see Bishop & Willis, 2014) or even by the participants from their own interview transcripts (Lafrenière & Cox, 2012).

Further, I-poems are also a form of “found” poetry as researchers applying this methodology “use the actual words of the participant” (Butler-Kisber, 2016 at 00:10). Typically, found poems take “existing texts and refashion them, reorder them, and present them as poems” (Poets.org, “Found Poem: Poetic form,” 2004, para. 1). Found poetry is a large and complex area, which links to wider artistic forms that appropriate, remix and borrow from other writers, speakers, musicians and artists (see for example, Epstein, 2012). Appropriation as an art form has a long history and includes for example collage, photography, and the work of well-known artists such as Andy Warhol and Pablo Picasso (Epstein, 2012; Van Camp, 2007).

In the last 2 decades found poetry has appeared frequently in the popular media, often to make political statements. Hart Seely (2003), for example created found poems from the speeches of Donald Rumsfeld, using official transcripts that appeared on the US Defense Department website. In the context of qualitative research, found poetry has been created from the transcripts of interviews relating to a range of studies. This includes for example, the experiences of Holocaust survivors (Rapport & Harthill, 2016) and people living in residential care (Miller et al., 2015).

I-poems are therefore rooted in both literary and qualitative methodological theory. They exist in an artistic sphere that incorporates poetic inquiry, found poetry and appropriation art. As already noted, L. M. Brown and Gilligan (1992) created VCRM using literary theory as one of its foundational bases. This foundational underpinning is demonstrated most acutely in the use of I-poems during the second reading.

Quality and Poetic Inquiry

The presentation of qualitative data in poetic form is not without its critics. Piirto (2002) raises concerns with regard to the frequent lack of literary qualifications of social scientists who create poetry from their research. She laments that in qualitative research, “[t]o write poetry one need not have studied it” (p. 435). Piirto (2002) also makes a point of asking whether such creations are poems or merely “poem-like” (p. 443) thus raising the issue of quality. In reference to witnessing qualitative researchers present their work in an arts-based form she states:

To observe heartfelt efforts by researchers with little or no background in the art being demonstrated was sometimes painful, especially to those who worked in, were trained in, knew, and loved the art being demonstrated. (p. 443)

Faulkner (2007) takes this a step further. She writes:

I am tired of reading and listening to lousy poetry that masquerades as research and vice versa. (p. 220)

Faulkner continues by confessing that she has written such poetry herself and has:

…received criticisms from poets and colleagues of sentimentality and/or cuteness, triteness, melodrama, and especially, a “ruthless adherence to research language at the sacrifice of line.” (p. 220)

There is a sense of elitism in both Piirto’s and Faulkner’s comments. This tension has been noted by authors such as Prendergast (2009) who highlight that poetic inquiry concerns itself with “aesthetic issues around quality, qualifications, preparedness, elitism and expertise” (p. 563). She states that in exemplary practices, “poetic inquiry is…indistinguishable from literary poetry” (p. 561). The argument suggested by scholars such as Piirto (2002) is that “good” poetry drawn from qualitative research therefore requires literary education and/or experience in the art.

Such a view sets poetry as a lofty endeavor achievable only by a select few. An alternative view of creativity is that while there is a final output—the poem, the novel, the painting—there is also the journey of creating it. While the aforementioned criticisms focus on avoiding the writing of “poor-quality” poems, and although Piirto (2002) concedes that creativity can be beneficial for the researcher on a personal level (p. 434), they nevertheless fail to acknowledge the benefits of artistic projects to other aspects of a study. The journey of creativity could for example, provide valuable insights in the pursuit of reflexivity. Rolling one’s eyes at the researcher who does not meet a specific literary threshold is to view poetry and art through a very narrow window.

Leggo (2011) approaches poetic inquiry from a different angle when he states “I no longer ask, Is this a good poem? I ask, What is this poem good for?” (p. 147) In this very personal article which contains both prose and poems, Leggo (2011) explains what the writing of poetry means for him as an individual and as a researcher. From a feminist perspective, but in a similar vein, Richardson (1993) used poetry in the presentation of a narrative from a single parent mother living in the American South. Discussing her methodological approach, she states:
Writing Louisa May’s life as a poem displays how sociological authority is constructed, and problematizes reliability, validity, and truth. Poetics strips those methodological bogeymen of their power to control and constrain. A poem as “findings” resitutes ideas of validity and reliability from “knowing” to “telling.” Everybody’s writing is suspect—not just those who write poems. In sociological research the findings have been safely staged within the language of the fathers, the domain of science writing. “Louisa May” challenges the language, tropes, emotional suppressions, and presumptive validity claims of masculinist social science. (p. 704)

For Richardson (1993) therefore, the use of poetry makes a political statement within her field of sociology in that it challenges its androcentric epistemology. Whether her poem was “good” by literary standards becomes irrelevant; what matters is the importance to her of using the methodology to undermine her discipline’s androcentric status quo.

Further, attempts to set boundaries as to who is allowed to write, perform and publish poetry based on qualitative research runs contrary to the spirit of creativity. In fact, enforcing rules with regard to the creation of art runs the risk of becoming a contradiction in terms. While experience is likely to improve a researcher’s poetic output, this is no different to all forms of writing.

Poems created within the social sciences can be impactful, even when the creator is not a “trained” or “published” poet. Although the authors in Miller et al. (2015) did attempt to adhere to poetic constructs, they describe two out of the three members of the research team as “non-poets” (p. 415). Nevertheless, the poetic output from their research of people living in “aged residential care” is both compelling and evocative. Created from an interview with 85-year-old Joy, You could scream the place down is particularly impactful:

| My family said |
|----------------|
| I was too old |
| to be on my own, |
| that I needed organizing. |
| You lose everything |
| you lose everything |
| to come in here. |
| You only have the barest minimum |
| there’s not much here. |
| It is not nice, not nice at all. |
| It is not good for me. |
| I can’t get out. |
| That’s what you lose, when you come in. |
| All your independence is taken away from you. |
| I’m not able to do it myself. |
| That’s very hard to take, |
| you get so frustated at times |
| you could scream the place down |

Further, studies that invite participants to create poetry which researchers then analyze is a less frequently used form of poetic inquiry. In work by Bishop and Willis (2014), primary and high school children were asked to create poems on the theme of hope with a view to creating data that “reflected their thoughts and feelings” (para. 3.2). The authors end with the contribution from one student—who is “not a trained or established poet”—yet whose poem they describe as “beautiful”:

| Hope is that fiery |
| Feeling you get inside, |
| When your whole heart |
| Is tingling, and you |
| Feel as if everything you |
| Do next is destiny. |
| It soars from your heart |
| And into the world |
| To touch the hearts of all. |

In qualitative research therefore, the literary quality of poems presented as data or findings can frequently become secondary to alternative motivations of the researcher. The context, language and simplicity of Joy’s words in Miller et al. (2015) create impact while the student in Bishop and Willis (2014) captures the enthusiasm and excitement of childhood. Each poem therefore provides value to the social scientist attempting to understand the lived experience or world view of these two study participants and enables a reader to quickly and easily digest these perspectives.

I-Poems

Unlike other forms of poetic inquiry and literary poetry, I-poems are not created to present a plot or a narrative. Their purpose is to pick “up on an associative stream of consciousness carried by a first-person voice” (Gilligan et al., 2003, p. 163). This requires that all sentences using the first person “I” within a given passage are underlined or highlighted in some way. In some studies, researchers have also used other pronouns that relate to oneself such as “me” (Kiegelmann, 2007). These sentences are then recorded without altering the order in which they appear in the text (Gilligan & Eddy, 2017, p. 78). The idea is that focusing on the “I” privileges the participant’s position in the narrative. It then enables the listener to focus on any potential shifts in the way an interviewee uses “I” within her interview thus representing different “voices” (Gilligan et al., 2003, p. 163). Consequently, I-poems are a form of data analysis in addition to a way of presenting research results.

I-poems have been employed in a range of studies (for example, Balan, 2005; Miller et al., 2015; Montgomery et al., 2015; Pinto, 2004; Koelsch, 2016; Woodcock, 2016). Some researchers have begun to use I-poems without the accompanying VCRM readings, thus employing this aspect of the
VCRM methodology as an independent process (Miller et al., 2015). While VCRM is based on feminist thought, I-poems are not limited to the spoken words of women (J. Brown, 2018) and have for example, been created using atypical datasets such as dissertation proposals (Zamba & Zamba, 2013). Parsons (2017) extended the concept of the I-poem to include the pronoun “we” (Parsons, 2017), while Bekaert (2014) created “she”-poems.

The way in which I-poems are constructed is more restrictive than other forms of poetic inquiry. While some researchers appear within their poetry (see for example Faulkner, 2007; Machado, 2016) within an I-poem the researcher is only present by omission. This means that her presence appears only by her choice of which words to eliminate from the text. Additional words are not introduced into the poem and as the focus of the text is on the voice of the interviewee, there is no overt inclusion of the researcher’s emotional response to the participant’s words. Beyond this, creativity is limited to the formatting of the text with regard to grammar, spacing, the formation of stanzas and the selection of where the poem should begin and end.

The Construction of I-Poems

One of the problems with I-poems is the subjectivity inherent in their creation. For example, Edwards and Weller (2012) create I-poems that stop rather abruptly, in some cases immediately after the verb:

I dunno
I help her out
I look after
I can talk to her
I did
I don’t think I would
I didn’t want

This stripped back or “sparse” (J. Brown, 2018, p. 193) approach is the one favored by Gilligan (Gilligan et al., 2003, pp. 163–164) and serves to “maintain focus on the participant’s subjective experience of her sense of “I’” (Koelsch, 2016, p. 172). What is lost here however, is any sense of context or frame of reference. In Gilligan et al.’s (2003) own examples, there is an occasional allowance for extra words although there is no grammar such as a full stop (p. 163):

I think
I stopped talking
I think
I think
I didn’t have anything to talk about

In contrast, other researchers have included longer phrasings and grammar in their I-poems. Zambo and Zambo (2013) in their study of students conducting action research, created the following (p. 10):

I will verify students are reading independent level books.
I will model sustained silent reading.
I will confer with students one at a time about their reading.
I will model effective and ineffective dialogues, and the students will role-play effective ways to dialogue.
I will prompt students to talk about the comprehension strategies they are using
I will have students read aloud to me, and I will take notes about their oral reading...

An extract from Balan’s, 2005 study of women who had been involuntarily displaced from their corporate workplace reads as follows:

... I’m not a naturally competitive, aggressive individual
I was looking at money more as a way of wanting to be treated fairly and equitably
I wanted recognition for my contribution
I think for men every last dollar is recognition of their power...

Miller et al. (2015) created an I-poem from the words of 86-year-old Jane:

_Being 86_  
I am 86 this year  
I have been getting not so good  
I can’t do much, anyway.  
I can’t really go out at all.  
I can’t walk, I can sit  
I can’t write my own name  
I can’t even make a cup of tea  
I would rather be healthy.  
I wouldn’t say “happy.”  
I didn’t wet the bed when I came to live here.  
I haven’t really made friends with anybody.  
I feel I need a bit of privacy  
I would rather be in my own house  
I am alright when I am on my own  
I like a little chat like this, now and again.

Without context, “sparse” (J. Brown, 2018, p. 193) I-poems run the risk of presenting people as unjustifiably confused. Their narratives can become simplistic and serve to diminish the narrator. Unlike Miller et al.’s (2015) _Being 86_, “sparse” I-poems (J. Brown, 2018, p. 193) do not always “standalone” and often require explanation before the text. Returning to Maya Angelou’s (2015) _Woman Work_, literary poetry is self-contained and the poet does not need to provide any context in a paragraph before the poem begins. This is similar to other examples of poetic inquiry (see for example Machado, 2016; Rappaport & Harthill, 2016; Richardson, 1993). “Sparse” (J. Brown, 2018, p. 193) I-poems may therefore serve VCRM’s analytical purposes, but not more general aims of presenting data in a meaningful and understandable way.
On the other hand, too long phrasings can read like a shortened version of an interview transcript. They may lack what makes a series of phrases “poetic.” With such long phrases, it may be difficult for a researcher to represent even basic tenets of poetry such as rhythm and repetition. The length of the poem may also contribute to “full” I-poems (J. Brown, 2018, p. 193) reading like lists more than poetry.

One way in which Koelsch (2016) has approached the creation of I-poems is to alter the presentation of the wording, which is evidenced by the following extract to Trish’s I poem (p.177):

I first lost my virginity
I was drunk
I’ve ever had
I was like
I’m not ready for this
I was like
I was a senior
no I was a junior
like I said
I was like “no”
“I want to wait”

One interpretation of the way in which this poem has been constructed is that the indented lines create a contrast to the non-indented ones or provide a way to emphasize a point. We see the speaker as confused, “I was a senior, no I was a junior.” The author emphasizes that the speaker was “not ready for this” by setting it apart from the line before. Koelsch (2016) applies a similar method to a second poem which can be seen in this extract from Megan’s I poem (p.172):

I didn’t think anything about it being weird
because I trust,
I have a certain level of trust
I don’t have any classes with [him]
Um, I talk to
I mean
I’ve hugged, it’s not like high school
I mean
I’ve hugged

Freebirth and the Construction of I-Poems

When creating I-poems from the narrative interviews conducted with women who had freebirthed it was important to carefully consider which approach to take. The following short paragraph from Elsie’s interview provides an insight into the different ways that the I-poem could be created and constructed. The relevant quote reads as follows:

They didn’t tell me that before, so at this point, I was livid because we’d been there for so long, and I was like, “I can’t believe this.” So, I kind of, I don’t know why, I agreed to do it for a bit. So, I lay down on the bed, and as I lay down on the bed, I was like, “It’s just really uncomfortable. I’ve had enough.” So, I did about 10 minutes and then realized how ridiculous this was. It was getting late. I was tired. I was getting more and more antsy and I just wanted to go home.

An I-poem that is “full” (J. Brown, 2018, p. 193) would read as follows:

I was livid because we’d been there for so long,
I was like,
“I can’t believe this.”
I kind of,
I don’t know why,
I agreed to do it for a bit.
I lay down on the bed, and as
I lay down on the bed,
I was like, “It’s just really uncomfortable.
I’ve had enough.”
I did about ten minutes and then realised how ridiculous this was.
I was tired.
I was getting more and more antsy and
I just wanted to go home.

An I-poem that is “sparse” (J. Brown, 2018, p. 193) would read as follows:

I was livid
I was like,
“I can’t believe this.”
I kind of,
I don’t know why,
I agreed
I lay down
I lay down
I was like,
“I’ve had enough.”
I did about ten minutes
I was tired.
I was getting more and more antsy
I just wanted to go home.
Stripped of grammar (Gilligan et al., 2003), the I-poem becomes:

I was livid
I was like
I can't believe this
I kind of
I don't know why
I agreed
I lay down
I lay down
I was like
I've had enough
I did
I was tired
I was getting more and more antsy
I just wanted to go home

Once the I-poem is constructed in a manner reflecting Koelsch (2016), we see:

I was livid
I was like
I can't believe this
I kind of
I don't know why
I agreed
I lay down
I lay down
I was like
I've had enough
I did
I was tired
I was getting more and more antsy
I just wanted to go home

This last version enables the reader to see the conflicting voices. On the one hand, Elsie is angry and does not want to do what is being expected of her. Yet, on the other, she does in fact carry out the required act. This could be interpreted as an “assertive” versus an “uncertain” voice. The separation of the various voices in the text emphasizes this difference, but the interpretation of this is of course the researcher’s own.

Taking Koelsch’s (2016) approach one step further and bringing in some creative thought to provide a final version, the use of the lower case “i” with regard to the “uncertain” voice could be seen to provide greater emphasis. There has also been a reintroduction of some basic grammar (two full stops) to indicate a shift in thought. The spacing between the main body of the poem and the last line highlights what is driving Elsie: she simply wants to go home, and she is attempting to navigate that by alternating between agreeing to what maternity staff want from her and challenging them. Finally, in a similar vein to Miller et al. (2015) the use of a title provides some context to the poem, while also enabling the data to be formatted in a way that is more typical of poetry.

A second example highlights when an I-poem may not work as satisfactorily. A passage from Fionnuala’s interview reads as follows:

Um, and I’d been really upset by that email ‘cause I thought-, unfortunately, I felt, for me, that during this beautiful pregnancy, where I didn’t have to deal with, um, ignorant, um, rude, um, misogynistic, err, healthcare professionals, um, I-, what I did have to deal with was my fear around social services involvement, and that’s not fair that I had to, I felt I had to even think about that, when it’s my human right to be able to do this. Um, but-, so I sent this email to the Head of Midwifery, and about four hours later I got a response, which I was gobsmacked at, um, and she said something like, um, “Thank you for informing me about your choices, um, which are of course your choices and ones that I respect.” Um, and she said, “You’re very welcome to contact us at any point and look round, um, don’t hesitate-, don’t hesitate to contact me.” Um, which I was like-, I couldn’t believe it. So, that really-, you know, that should have been her response, but it was surprising, nonetheless, um, and yeah, it, it did give me a real peace, um, about it all.

This paragraph demonstrates an important moment in Fionnuala’s account. She is the only participant who informs the Head of Midwifery of her freebirth plans and is fully respected in her decision. As this is a more complicated paragraph, it is worth demonstrating the methodology by highlighting the sentences that directly relate to Fionnuala’s position:

Um, and I’d been really upset by that email ‘cause I thought-, unfortunately, I felt, for me, that during this beautiful pregnancy, where I didn’t have to deal with, um, ignorant, um, rude, um, misogynistic, err, healthcare professionals, um, I-, what I did have to deal with was my fear around social services involvement, and that’s not fair that I had to-, I felt I had to even think about that, when it’s my human right to be able to do this. Um, but-, so I sent this email to the Head of Midwifery, and about four hours later I...
got a response, which I was gobsmacked at, um, and she said something like, um, “Thank you for informing me about your choices, um, which are of course your choices and ones that I respect.” Um, and she said, “You’re very welcome to contact us at any point and look round, um, don’t hesitate, don’t hesitate to contact me.” Um, which I was like-, I couldn’t believe it. So, that really-, you know, that should have been her response, but it was surprising, nonetheless, um, and yeah, it, it did give me a real peace, um, about it all.

One noticeable problem is reported speech. At times, the use of “I,” “us,” “me” and “you” becomes complicated as these are not the words of Fionnuala. Consequently, a choice was made to exclude them. Here again the subjectivity of the researcher plays a role.

Table 1 above demonstrates the different iterations of Fionnuala’s I-poem.

What is lost as the poems progress from left to right is Fionnuala’s assertive anger. In the poem, she is “upset” but her language in the original quote suggests more than that. Much of the plot has been removed and it becomes unclear what is actually happening. We know that whatever has happened Fionnuala has mixed emotions: she is upset, fearful, gobsmacked and relieved. She feels compelled to both do something and not do something; she has human rights and she acts to defend them.

Constructing the I-poem in a different format (Koelsch, 2016), does not serve to emphasize Fionnuala’s message or enable her conflicting “voices” to be recognized as well as in Elsie’s poem. In the following, a title has been created, some grammar has been reintroduced, the active voice is highlighted, and the poem is separated into three stanzas:

In the final example below, it can be seen how the success of an I-poem can depend largely on the narrator and the passage selected. To make the point, a “sparse” (J. Brown, 2018, p. 193) I-poem from Marion’s interview will be presented first, and then the passage from which it was taken:

| Table 1. I-Poem Iterations. |
|----------------------------|
| “Full”                     |
| I-Poem                     |
| I’d been really upset by that email |
| I thought-                 |
| I felt,                    |
| For me,                    |
| I didn’t have to deal with |
| I-                         |
| What I did have to deal with was |
| My fear around social services involvement, |
| I had to-                 |
| I felt                     |
| I had to to-               |
| I-                         |
| What I did                 |
| My human right to be able to do this |
| I sent this email to the Head of Midwifery, |
| I got a response,           |
| I was gobsmacked at,       |
| I was like-                |
| I couldn’t believe it.     |
| It did give me a real peace about it all. |

| “Sparse”                   |
| I-Poem                     |
| I’d been really upset      |
| I thought-                 |
| I felt                     |
| For me                     |
| I didn’t have to           |
| I-                         |
| What I did                 |
| My fear                    |
| I had to to-               |
| I-                         |
| What I did                 |
| My human right             |
| I sent this email          |
| I got a response,           |
| I was gobsmacked           |
| I was like-                |
| I couldn’t believe it.     |
| It did give me a real peace |

| Grammar Removed           |
| (Gilligan et al., 2003)    |
| I’av really upset          |
| I thought                 |
| I felt                    |
| For me                    |
| I didn’t have to          |
| I                         |
| What I did                |
| My fear                   |
| I had to                  |
| I                         |
| What I did                |
| My human right            |
| I sent this email         |
| I got a response,          |
| I was gobsmacked          |
| I was like                |
| I couldn’t believe it.    |
| It did give me a real peace |

Gobsmacked

I’d been really upset.

I thought

I felt

For me

I didn’t have to

I-

What I did

My fear

I had to

I felt

I had to

My human right

I sent this email

I got a response

I was gobsmacked

I was like

I couldn’t believe it

It did give me a real peace.

I was vomiting

I was laying on the floor

I didn’t want

I was trying to avoid
I was on my side
I had someone
I was vomiting
I was just laying
I was
I think
I don’t think
I was
I don’t think
I was
I wasn’t crabby
I was really proud
I’m pretty sure
I asked them afterwards
I was like
Was I rude to anyone
I was really happy
I went through
I don’t
I’m not saying
I blame her
I’m saying
I really didn’t wanna do that
I was really pleased that
I didn’t

As the poem is quite disjointed and unclear, it is difficult to create stanzas or recognize specific voices. Consequently, creating a unique format becomes unworkable. The poem also feels forced and in parts reads as a list of unrelated first-person pronouns and verbs. This relates to a personal decision as to how much of the narrative to remove to ensure that Marion’s voice is not eclipsed by a focus on the plot. Consequently, it is hard to understand what we are learning from Marion. In the I-poem, there is no real point being made and unlike Elsie’s and to a lesser extent Fionnuala’s it does not conclude satisfactorily.

The quote from which the I-poem was created reads as follows:

So, I was, like, vomiting. I was, like, laying on the floor on my side, ‘cause I didn’t want to be on my back on the floor. I was trying to avoid, at all costs, being on my back. So, I was on my side. I had someone, like, holding my leg up, on my side. I was, like, vomiting, vomiting, and poor [Amanda] was just, like, mopping up my sick, putting another towel under, mopping it up, putting another towel under. She was brilliant. They were all brilliant, like really brilliant, and, err, I was just, like, laying on the floor, shouting, just like, you know, yeah. I was-, I think-, I don’t think I was-, I don’t think I was-, I wasn’t crabby with anyone at any point, and I was really proud of myself for that. I’m pretty sure they would say the same thing. Yeah, ‘cause I asked them afterwards. I was, like, “Was I rude to anyone?” and they were like, “No.” So, I was really happy about that because, like, ‘cause I went through, like, [Natalie] being, like, really rude to me, but that’s okay. I don’t-, I’m not saying I blame her for that, but I’m saying I really didn’t wanna do that, and I was really pleased that I didn’t, and, um, yeah. We kept-, it was pretty, like-, ‘cause also, [husband], my bloke, he can, like, he can crack a joke in any situation.

In this scene in Marion’s story, she has entered a period where she is laboring hard, and similarly to other women in this cohort she has begun to vomit. Her partner and friends are supporting her through this difficult stage of labor. However, the reason that this poem does not work is that Marion moves from scene to scene and from point to point very quickly. In one short extract she refers to four different actors and three events in her story: labor, post-birth when she asks whether she was crabby, and to a previous incident with Natalie. This section of the transcript therefore does not create an effective I-poem.

**Rigor**

One noticeable omission in I-poetry literature are the thoughts and feelings of interviewees with regard to the poems that have been created with their words. As far as can be discerned, researchers typically do not present their I-poems to participants before publication. While there is no requirement to do so within the VCRM methodology, sharing I-poetry with interviewees may provide an opportunity for public and patient involvement. Further, it may also aid rigor if interviewees confirm their support of, for example, a researcher’s presentation of her words or the creation of a title. However, thus far, the academic literature pertaining to I-poems remains silent on this point.

What should also be borne in mind is that the creation of I-poetry is only one step in a four-step process. Output from each of the four readings required of VCRM are brought together during the final reading in order to compose an analysis (Gilligan et al. 168). While some researchers do approach I-poetry as a standalone method, adherence to VCRM requires a synthesis of all four readings. Consequently, ensuring rigor when using VCRM poses the same hurdles and requirements as any other qualitative approach.

**Examples of I-Poems From Freebirthing Women’s Narratives**

As has been highlighted, not all aspects of a transcript are suitable for the creation of I-poems. All the following I-poems were created from very short sections of transcript, the shortest being 55 seconds and the longest 2 minutes 40 seconds. Notably, listening to the audio recording of an interview while carrying out the second reading aided in the location of passages best suited to the creation of I-poetry. This was due to the natural rhythm of women’s speech patterns becoming more noticeable on the audio. Nevertheless, on average it was only possible to create one to three meaningful poems per interview, with each interview lasting between 1 and 2 hours. This leaves the majority of a transcript unsuitable for I-poetry. However, as VCRM enables a researcher to look at the data from a number of angles, the remaining aspects of the transcripts may be better suited to alternative readings.

The following examples contain we- she- and I- poems, with the latter including words pertaining to oneself, i.e. my, myself,
me. In a similar vein, one we-poem extends to the pronoun “us.” As the author of this paper does not have a background in English Literature the work was undertaken with the aim of demonstrating the way in which the methodology can be used to uniquely understand and present participants’ perspectives of various aspects of their stories. Consequently, there is no expectation that these I-poems match the quality of the professional poet. In creating them, the only goal was to produce poetry that engages, stirs emotion and enables the reader to momentarily “viscerally experience” (Miller et al., 2015, p. 416) the interviewees’ lived experiences. Beyond those three criteria, no claims are made regarding the poetry’s literary quality.

A decision was made to add titles to these I-poems as the chosen approach leans more toward that taken by Miller et al. (2015) than to Gilligan et al. (2003). Using titles means that the poems can be standalone, performed orally and more easily referenced. Further, as already noted, interviews with freebirthing women included understanding their previous maternity experiences. Consequently, some I-poems presented below relate to prior interaction with health care professionals and maternity services.

**That would be amazing**

I’ve just been so traumatised.

If I wipe the slate clean
I would’ve
My dream

Before I had children
I was, you know, nineteen.

I was dreaming
Before I was married and having a baby.

I just dreamed of having this friend
I suppose,
just with me,
just stroking my hair.
I know it sounds crazy
stroking my hair.

There was bright lights in my face.
Ten people in the room talking over me.
Like I’m a child.

It’s all about the baby—nothing to do with me.
I was left in stirrups.
Just left there with my placenta on the floor.
I couldn’t cover myself.

If we could erase all of that pain
I could have the perfect midwife
That would listen to what I actually want
That would be amazing.

*Alicia*

**Our right to decline**

I said, “Well, do a scan, have a look, baby is not massive.”
I told them how fast
I’d birthed before.
I felt it was dangerous to try and speed that up.

I told them all about things
I’d read and people’s experiences.

The last thing I wanted was anybody
Pumping me full of drugs.

I’ve never even had -
I didn’t want anyone to mess with me.
I knew -
I asked them, “What are the negatives about induction?”

I got really upset and just said
“We’re going home.”
I wouldn’t go back in that room.

Cause by then I had
a consultant
a senior registrar
a senior midwife
the shouty midwife
the student midwife
All in the room.

*Elsie*

**Midwife**

she came
she said that she wanted to examine me.

she said she couldn’t quite feel
she wanted me to wait.

she
she
she said that
she wouldn’t let me push.

she decided when I could
she over-coached me
she needed to be at her sister-in-law’s for tea.

*Fionnuala*

**Vibe**

I’m very much, like, a vibe kind of a person.

If I’m not feeling your vibe,
I’m not going to be open with you.

If someone came to my house
I’m like
If I’m in the middle of having a baby
and I’m not feeling your vibe,
I feel like
I’m not going to be able to express it.
It’s gonna affect my labour.

I feel like having that is more detrimental
Do you know what I mean?

For me
For me
I started thinking.

I started thinking
Do I want that vibe
in my house at that time?

Oh, what would happen if I didn’t call the midwives?

Nadia

First Time Parents

they said, “No, we think”
they said, ‘No, we think you
we think you should go into hospital.”

We’ve got to do
what we’re told.
We’ve got to do
what we’re told.

That’s how we’re programmed.
To do what we’re told.

I don’t think we need to go anymore.
They’ve already admitted us.
They’ve already sent us there.

We dutifully complied.
We got swept along.
We were admitted.

We had to do what they said.

Ophelia

Knock on the Door

We’d discussed this before.
What would we do after the birth?
Would we phone them?
Would we not do anything?
What would we do?

We’d always, always said
We would phone
Once we felt ready.
We could then go down.

We rang the hospital.
We rang the hospital
We rang the birth unit.

“We’ve had-
We’d had a baby.
We had our baby at home.”

“No, we didn’t.
We just-
We’ve had our baby at home and
We just want to let you know that
We’ve had our baby at home.”

We put the phone down.
Then we got this,
this knock on the door.

Polly

While it is not the purpose of this paper to discuss the results of the wider study per se, what the I-poems do is present the experiences of these interviewees in a stark and illuminating way. Immediately, the reader has a clear sense that women who make this decision have often had complex or negative relationships with health care professionals or the maternity system. Wider social, legal and bioethical issues become apparent, such as the role of informed consent/refusal in maternity care; the importance of continuity of carer, respect and autonomy; the power relationships between HCPs and pregnant women; and the impact of obstetric violence and birth trauma on women’s future birth decisions. Notably in this project, interviewees had access to their own I-poems and twelve provided feedback on the presentation of their words in this format. Four interviewees volunteered to take part in feedback sessions which took the form of individual one-hour telephone conversations. This feedback has informed and reinforced the researcher’s interpretation of women’s experiences, aiding methodological rigor.

The presentation of the data in this way also means that an interviewee’s impactful experience can be communicated powerfully in a few short lines. Further, as other VCRM researchers have done, the I-poems can be combined with additional artistic forms such as animation (see for example, King’s Cultural Community, 2015). Nevertheless, the use of an arts-based presentation of I-poetry is still in its infancy and the full range of possibilities and their impact remain as yet unexplored. In the freebirth study however, there is scope for women’s narratives to reach a wider audience beyond academia and for the overall results of the research to be disseminated in a novel way.

Conclusion

The creation of I-poems during the second reading of VCRM is rooted in both psychological and literary theory and draws on established artistic and qualitative approaches. Although there
have been many studies and publications on the subject, the lack of in-depth discussion on the creation of I-poems means that the methodology has evolved in several directions. This paper has highlighted the various approaches researchers have taken and outlined the benefits and problems inherent in creating I-poems that are either “sparse” or “full.” Further, examples provided of she- and we-poems demonstrate opportunities for social scientists to develop the concept further and to explore alternative ways of analyzing and presenting data.

Although this paper does not aim to discuss freebirth in detail, the inclusion of I-poems created from the narratives of freebirthing women demonstrates how the presentation of data in this way can be particularly impactful. In a few short lines insight into this phenomenon is immediately created and the complexity of the subject made apparent. In addition, the examples provided highlight how I-poetry can be used as a means of sharing the results of research studies in ways that are digestible and understandable to people who previously may have known nothing about the subject. This can aid the dissemination of research findings and provide a basis for further relevant artistic endeavors.

Acknowledgments

I would like to thank the women who shared their freebirthing stories and provided feedback on the I-poetry created in this study. I would also like to thank the Economic and Social Research Council for funding this project and Professor Glenn Robert, Dr. Elsa Montgomery and Iain Ryrie for their time and energy in providing useful feedback on earlier drafts.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author(s) disclosed receipt of the following financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article: This project was funded by the Economic and Social Research Council.

ORCID iD

Gemma McKenzie https://orcid.org/0000-0003-2639-0636

References

Angelou, M. (2015). The complete poetry. Virago.

Balan, B. N. (2005). Multiple voices and methods: Listening to women who are in workplace transition. International Journal of Qualitative Methods, 4(4), 63–86.

Bekaert, S. (2014). Challenges in choosing research methodologies as a novice researcher. Review of Social Studies (RoSS), 1(1), Autumn, 93–109.

Bishop, E. C., & Willis, K. F. (2014). “Hope is that fiery feeling”: Using poetry as data to explore the meanings of hope for young people. Qualitative Social Research, 15(1). Retrieved August 15, 2020, from. https://www.qualitative-research.net/index.php/fqs/article/view/2013

Brown, J. (2018). Exploring payday loan consumers’ lived experience of managing money [PhD thesis, University of Northumbria]. Retrieved April 19, 2020, from. http://nrl.northumbria.ac.uk/36851/1/brown.jane_phd.pdf

Brown, L. M., & Gilligan, C. (1992). Meeting at the crossroads. Ballantine Books.

Butler-Kisber, L. (2016). Lynn Butler-Kisber defines poetic inquiry [Streaming video]. SAGE Research Methods. Retrieved July 9, 2020, from. http://methods.sagepub.com/video/lynnbutler-kisber-defines-poetic-inquiry

Dahlen, H., Schmied, V., Tracy, S. K., Jackson, M., Cummings, J., & Priddis, H. (2011). “Home birth and the national Australian maternity services review: Too hot to handle?”. Women and Birth, 24(4), 148–155.

Edwards, R., & Ribbens, J. (1998). Living on the edges: Public knowledge, private lives, personal experience. In J. Ribbens & R. Edwards (Eds.), Feminist dilemmas in qualitative research (pp. 1–23). Sage.

Edwards, R., & Weller, S. (2012). Shifting analytic ontology: Using I-poems in qualitative longitudinal research. Qualitative Research, 12(2), 202–217.

Epstein, A. (2012). Found poetry, “uncreative writing,” and the art of appropriation. In J. Bray, A. Gibbons, & B. McHale (Eds.), Poetic inquiry as social justice and political response (pp. 11–15). Vernon Press.

Faulkner, S. L. (2007). Concern with craft: Using Ars poetica as criteria for reading research poetry. Qualitative Inquiry, 13(2), March, 218–234.

Faulkner, S. L. (2019). Poetic inquiry as social justice and political response. In S. L. Faulkner & A. Cloud (Eds.), Poetic inquiry as social justice and political response (pp. 11–15). Sage.

Feeley, C., & Thomson, G. (2016a). “Why do some women choose to freebirth in the UK? An interpretative phenomenological study.” BMC Pregnancy and Childbirth, 16(1), 59.

Feeley, C., & Thomson, G. (2016b). “Tensions and conflicts in ‘choice’: Womens’ experiences of freebirthing in the UK.”. Midwifery, 41, 16–21.

Gilligan, C., & Eddy, J. (2017). Listening as a path to psychological discovery: An introduction to the listening guide. Perspectives on Medical Education, 6, 76–81.

Gilligan, C., Spencer, R., Weinberg, M. K., & Bertsch, T. (2003). On the listening guide: A voice centred relational method. In P. M. Camic, J. E. Rhodes, & L. Yardley (Eds.), Qualitative research in psychology: Expanding perspectives in methodology and design. American Psychological Association.

Hollander, M., de Miranda, E., van Dillen, J., de Graaf, I., Vandenbussche, F., & Holten, L. (2017). Women’s motivations for choosing a high risk birth setting against medical advice in the Netherlands: A qualitative analysis. BMC Pregnancy and Childbirth, 17(1), 423.

Jackson, M., Dahlen, H., & Schmied, V. (2012). Birthing outside the system: Perceptions of risk amongst Australian women who have freebirths and high risk homebirths. Midwifery, 28(5), 561–567.

Kieglemann, M. (2007). Defining poetic inquiry. In J. Bray, A. Gibbons, & B. McHale (Eds.), The Routledge companion to experimental literature. Taylor and Francis.

Kiegelmann, M. (2007). Analyzing identity using a voice centred relational method. In P. M. Camic, J. E. Rhodes, & L. Yardley (Eds.), Qualitative research in psychology: Expanding perspectives in methodology and design. American Psychological Association.

Lynn Butler-Kisber defines poetic inquiry [Streaming video]. SAGE Research Methods. Retrieved July 9, 2020, from. http://methods.sagepub.com/video/lynnbutler-kisber-defines-poetic-inquiry

M. Watzlawik & A. Born (Eds.), Capturing identity: Quantitative and qualitative methods (pp. 71–84). University Press of Amsercia.
King’s Cultural Community. (2015). Elizabeth’s story. Retrieved August 18, 2020, from https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=afNeLuomAko&feature=emb_logo.23.02.2015
Koelsch, L. K. (2016). The use of I poems to better understand complex subjectivities. In K. T. Galvin & M. Prendergast (Eds.), Poetic inquiry II—Seeing, caring, understanding: Using poetry as and for inquiry. Sense Publishers.
Lafrenière, D., & Cox, S. M. (2012). ‘If you can call it a poem’: Toward a framework for the assessment of arts-based works. Qualitative Research, 13(3), 318–336.
Leavy, P. (2009). Method meets art: Arts-based research practice. Guilford Press.
Leggo, C. (2011). Living language: What is a poem good for? Journal of the Canadian Association for Curriculum Studies. 10(2), 141–160.
Machado, S. (2016). Faggot speaks: A poetic inquiry into the experience of antigay mistreatment and sexual prejudice. Art/Research International: A Transdisciplinary Journal, 1(1). Retrieved April 19, 2020, from https://journals.library.ualberta.ca/ari/index.php/ari/article/view/25309
Mauthner, N., & Doucet, A. (1998). Reflections on a voice-centred relational method: Analysing maternal and domestic voices. In J. Ribbens & R. Edwards (Eds.), Feminist dilemmas in qualitative research: Public knowledge and private lives (pp. 119–146). Sage.
McKenzie, G., Robert, G., & Montgomery, E. (2020, May 2). Exploring the conceptualisation and study of freebirthing as a historical and social phenomenon: A meta-narrative review of diverse research traditions. BMJ Medical Humanities. Advance online publication May 02, 2020. https://doi.org/10.1136/medhum-2019-011786
Miller, E., Donohue, G., & Holland-Batt, S. (2015). “You could scream the place down”: Five poems on the experience of aged care. Qualitative Inquiry, 21(5), 410–417.
Montgomery, E., Pope, C., & Rogers, J. (2015). The Re-enactment of childhood sexual abuse in maternity care: A qualitative study. BMC Pregnancy and Childbirth, 15(194), 1–7.
Newdick, R. S. (1937). Robert frost and the sound of good sense. American Literature, 1, 299.
Parsons, J. (2017). ‘I do remember being hungry’—Ophelia’s ‘i-poem’. Journal of Psychosocial Studies, Special Issue, 10(2), 59–76. Retrieved July 9, 2020, from http://www.psychosocial-studies-association.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/10/Julie-Parsons-Commentary-I-do-remember-being-hungry-Ophelias-i-poem.pdf
Piirto, J. (2002). The question of quality and qualifications: Writing inferior poems as qualitative research. International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education, 15(4), 431–445.
Pinto, K. C. (2004, January). Intersections of gender and age in health care: Adapting autonomy and confidentiality for the adolescent girl. Qualitative Health Research, 14(1), 78–99.
P Rested, M., & Kirkham, M. (2016). Risk and fear in the lived experience of birth without a midwife. Midwifery, 38, 29–34.
Poesy.org. (2004). Found poem. Retrieved April 19, 2020, from https://poets.org/glossary/found-poem
Prendergast, M. (2009). “Poem is what?” Poetic inquiry in qualitative social science research. International Review of Qualitative Research, 1(4), (Winter), 541–568.
Rapport, F., & Harthill, G. (2016). Making the case for poetic inquiry in health services research. In K. T. Galvin & M. Prendergast (Eds.), Poetic inquiry II: Seeing, caring, understanding: Using poetry as and for inquiry. Sense Publishers.
Ricci, R. J. (2003). Autoethnographic verse: Nicky’s boy: A life in two worlds. The Qualitative Report, 8(4), 591–596.
Richardson, L. (1993). Poetics, dramatics and transgressive validity: The case of the skipped line. The Sociological Quarterly, 34(4), 695–710.
Seely, H. (2003, April 2). The poetry of D.H. Rumsfeld: Recent works by the secretary of defense. Slate. Retrieved April 19, 2020, from https://slate.com/news-and-politics/2003/04/the-poetry-of-donald-rumsfeld.html?
Van Camp, J. C. (2007). Originality in postmodern appropriation art. Journal of Arts Management, Law, and Society, Winter, 36(4), 247–258.
Vincent, A. (2018). Is there a definition? Ruminating on poetic inquiry, strawberries and the continued growth of the field. Art/Research International: A Transdisciplinary Journal, 3(2). Retrieved April 19, 2020 from. https://journals.library.ualberta.ca/ari/index.php/ari/article/view/29356
Woodcock, C. (2016). The listening guide: A how-to approach on ways to promote educational democracy. International Journal of Qualitative Methods, January–December, 15(1), 1–10.
Zambo, R., & Zambo, D. (2013). Using I poems to hear the voices and understand the actions of EdD students conducting action research. The Qualitative Report, 18(42), Article 2. Retrieved April 11, 2020, from https://nsuworks.nova.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1453&context=tqr