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Using Poetic Paradox to Enhance the Self-Esteem of Shame-Driven Older Adults

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ABSTRACT. The article first identifies the characteristics of shame-driven reminiscences. It then explains how poetic paradox can draw troubled members from relentless self-criticism toward increasing self-acceptance of their life remembered. Finally, it concludes with illustrations of poetic paradox and the enabling responses that occur among the group participants.

In previous articles in this journal I described the manner in which poetry and metaphors can empower shame-driven older participants in life review groups (Magee, 1988, 1991). Inquiries from readers of those articles then led me to examine the responses of group members to poets’ paradoxical points of view about themes prominent in members’ lives. This article explains how such paradoxes can be an exceptionally powerful tool for evoking new, self-affirming responses from members with chronically poor self-esteem.

The article first identifies the characteristics of shame-driven reminiscences. It then explains how poetic paradox can draw troubled members from relentless self-criticism toward increasing self-acceptance of their life remembered. Finally, it concludes with illustrations of poetic paradox and the enabling responses that occur among the group participants.
I facilitated two life review groups which met weekly in Senior Citizen centers. Even though I admitted the eight members of each group without prior screening, in each group three participants shared reminiscences revealing low life-long levels of self-esteem. Their reminiscences, for instance, contained these negative patterns:

- lacking confidence in themselves, they dreaded new experiences, felt a constant need for positive feedback, and often withheld their own opinions in give-and-take exchanges;
- feeling defenseless, they reacted oversensitively to criticism, and blamed others rather than taking responsibility for self (often criticizing in others the very qualities most disliked in self);
- feeling inadequate, they boasted of their mastery, though typically waiting for events to happen to them;
- feeling bereft of support, they dreaded the prospect of being responsible for their own survival. (Frey and Carlock, 1989)

The life review of shame-driven older adults also revealed the strategies with which they attempted to moderate the discomfort of feeling so unworthy. Often they took the position, “even if I know something is there, if I don’t say it is and if I act as if it’s not, then I don’t have to take it into account” (Kinston, 1983). Thus, they tried to compensate for self-acceptance by concealing their felt defectiveness through a rigidly controlled presentation of self. Even when that failed to help, they usually found it less painful to focus upon problems arising from inordinate self-control than upon the underlying shame.

For several, their life review pointed out how they experienced less distress suffering from depression fueled by shame than from the shame itself. Depression became the prevailing mood when they directed “shame-range” against themselves. Shame-range was their immediate response to feeling exposed and vulnerable. It served to “reject the rejectors” who supposedly found the person wanting. However, since the assumed rejectors often included those who were also genuinely beloved and whose alienation would make the isolation of shame-driven persons even more extreme, the latter redirected their hostility against themselves (Lewis, 1971).
Paradoxes that appear in poems are doubly helpful in evoking in shame-driven older adults a new, self-affirming perception of belabored memories. First, there is the attractiveness of the poetry which can disengage readers from their self-critical preoccupation. Most older participants find that poetry is an exhaustible resource that reviews significant memories, captures the emotional tone of scenes from their past, and expresses the meaning that these scenes now hold for them. Some older adults have already identified favorite verses that express a dominant theme in their lives. The verses may be chosen from the works of their favorite bard or selected from poems treating a treasured subject, such as nature’s beauty, marital and parental ties, or perseverance in adversity. Others, who in their earlier years may have been indifferent to poetry, are often attracted later to images that recapture a deeply felt experience from their own lives. Introverted participants are pleased with the opportunity to talk more about the poems than directly about themselves. All have the advantage of choosing poems that they can be comfortable discussing.

Second, embedded in the attractiveness of poetry, paradox challenges the perspective from which shame-driven members assess their reminiscences. Each paradox presents a contradiction that members cannot resolve so long as they cling to the circularity of viewing themselves through the lens of their own distorted self-esteem. By baffling all attempts to adapt to this distorted lens, paradox can elicit in members an openness to a different self-perception with its own disarming perspective on troublesome memories.

Paradox transcends the circularity of shame through its “double aim of dazzling—that is, of arresting thought altogether in the possessive experience of wonder—and of stimulating further question, speculation, qualification, even contradiction on the part of the wondering audience” (Colie, 1966). It is not, however, a “quick fix” for shame. Paradox is a prompt to initiate an ongoing restructuring of self-esteem. Its power lies in moving older adults to entertain new, affirming insights about themselves. When they share these insights in the group, other members can consensually validate them. If they talk privately about discomfort accompanying
their reassessment of self and past relationships, group facilitators can help with referrals to physicians treating mood disorders that often underlie life-long fractious self-esteem.

**THE USES OF POETIC PARADOX**

After the first three sessions during which each member reminisced about childhood, schooling, and adult family life, I introduced the group to poetry as an evocative source for further memories. Then, after two sessions during which participants ably referred to their poetic choices, I explained the power of paradox to puzzle and to elicit inventive leaps of solutions to the puzzlement. I invited the older adults to select poems which expressed themes that have been prominent in their own lives and which incorporated a paradoxical point of view or insight about those themes. Participants reported that they found little difficulty in finding poems that met these specifications. To facilitate access to a large number of poems with varied themes, I distributed anthologies of English language poetry to group members. Excellent anthologies by Allison (1983), Baldwin and Paul (1985), Campbell (1983), Clark and Gillespie (1979), Friebert and Young (1982), Johnson (1969), Nims (1981), and Williams (1980), are readily available.

The following two examples in this section illustrate how group members responded to poetic paradox to change the frame of reference against which they had been judging their life recalled, thus "changing the meaning and value of the event without changing the facts" (Sherman and Fredman, 1986). Each example has three components: the conflicntual self-assessment of personal history; the poetic paradox; and the novel, self-affirming response to the paradox.

Eleanor participated in the first group. The first born of six children, she was a seventy-eight year old retired librarian whose reminiscences reiterated an enduring theme of assuming responsibilities as though to justify her existence. Her family's folklore noted that her mother had lost fourteen pounds during the first eight months of her pregnancy with Eleanor. Eleanor would make it up to her in dutifulness. To illustrate this theme, she read the group a letter she wrote at age eight, to her mother:
I know a lot of things about this world. It took me a long time to know about them. So now I know what I shall be when I grow up. I shall be a hard work lady. If you are alive then you will get part of my money of course. Remember to keep on the right side of God. That’s the best side, don’t you think. So do I.

Eleanor commuted to college in order to hold a job in her hometown and defray family expenses. While raising her own family, she also became the primary caregiver for her widowed, infirm mother. Now she was bereft that her four children lived out of state. She visited each child’s family for two weeks twice a year, even though arguments between her children and grandchildren upset her considerably. She chose as her first paradox William Wordsworth’s *The Prelude*:

> How strange, that all  
> The terrors, pains, and early miseries,  
> Regrets, vexations, lassitudes interfused  
> Within my mind should e’er have borne a part,  
> And that a needful part, in making up  
> The calm existence that is mine when I  
> Am worthy of myself!

The paradox she noted was not that suffering was a prerequisite for calm, but that both were dependent upon being “worthy of myself.” For, she only felt worthy when grappling with responsibilities, a toiling which precluded calm. Her insight was that she was entitled to a “calm existence” even when she felt unworthy. “I am entitled to accept myself unconditionally. I don’t have to earn my self-acceptance!” She groaned, however, that she had encapsulated her whole life in her childhood letter and now had to settle for exhaustion in lieu of calm.

Her colleagues intervened. One man cited another poem that seemed appropriate to her dilemma. He read Edith Lovejoy Pierce’s *Thou Art Within Me Like a Sea*:

> Thou art within me like a sea,  
> Filling me as a slowly rising tide,  
> Thou art within me like a sea at dawn.

He observed that this metaphor about God would appear to confound her in two ways. On the one hand, she would have felt herself
drowning at dawn as the tide of responsibility—her bond with God—engulfed her. On the other hand, she was drowning even now because, as inevitably as the tide itself, she could not escape feeling unworthy unless she was submerged with tasks. What a loss, he added, that she could not appreciate the rising tide, instead, as filling channels for delight and raising surf for relaxation!

Another participant offered a third poetic paradox as an insight into transcending Eleanor’s dilemma. She quoted from William Carlos Williams’ *The Descent*:

> Memory is a kind of accomplishment, a sort of renewal even an initiation, since the spaces it opens are new places.

She encouraged Eleanor “to enter the paradox” to discover how her unpleasant memories could become an “accomplishment.” Then, at the next session Eleanor explained that although her feelings were “stuck,” she could act freely by “owning” her life, her “programming,” “the way I do me.” “How could I have lived as I did all these decades and not be as I am? Accepting myself as I am now seems to be ‘the right side of God’ to be on.” She ended her remarks delighting in a newly found poetic paradox taken from T.B. Aldrich’s *Lycidas*:

> “I hope,” said Lycidas, “for peace at last; I only ask for peace! my God is Ease: Day after day some rude iconoclast Breaks all my images.”

In the second group, George, an eighty-one year old retired chief from the fire department, was the first participant to volunteer a poetic paradox. His reminiscences had emphasized the theme of relentlessly pursuing goals of self-improvement. When he had frustratedly brought a grammar school assignment to his father saying, “I can’t do this,” his father had corrected him, “Can’t is not in this family’s vocabulary.” During his adolescence, his parents purchased an oversized china closet to hold his athletic and forensic trophies, and to his cousins’ chagrin extolled his scholastic achieve-
ments at every wake and wedding. He termed it "rebellion" when he sullenly refused to apply for college and joined the fire department. When his mother died a decade later, however, he returned to college in the evening, and "making up for lost time," simultaneously passed the series of civil service examinations that led to the rank of chief. He recalled his wife referring to herself as an "exam widow" whose children had an "absentee father."

Disconsolate that recognition for his achievements and affiliations was already behind him and distancing further as he aged, he chose William Blake's *Eternity* for the paradox which epitomized his dilemma:

He who binds to himself a joy
Does the winged life destroy;
But he who kisses the joy as it flies
Lives in eternity's sun rise.

He explained that he had been unable to "kiss joy 'Hello' and 'Good Bye'" because he had tried, instead, to "stuff" himself with "joys—trophies and promotions." On the other hand, he was proud that his ambition had enhanced the quality of his performance and the opportunities for service. On the other hand, he had sacrificed relationships and self-awareness to accumulate his goals. He had been driven to choose the wrong goals in life.

Again, a colleague intervened to guide him beyond this impasse. She urged him to reflect upon her own poetic paradox which reframed "either-or" choices as "both-and." She read Alexander Pope's *The Dying Christian to His Soul*:

Vital spark of heav'nly flame!
Quit, oh quit this mortal frame;
Trembling, hoping, ling'ring, flying,
Oh the pain, the bliss of dying!
Cease, fond Nature, cease thy strife,
And let me languish into life.

She appreciated this poem's honesty concerning the unavoidable ambivalence about dying, the hesitant release of "languishing into life." George seized upon the image of languishing to describe the condition of his marital and parental relationships. He proposed that
one path open to him now was talking candidly with his family, one on one. For the first time he would admit his mistakes, seek their forgiveness, and ask if there were still time to heal their relationships.

At the next session, George described the heartening conversation he broached with his wife, and concluded his account with a paradox that echoed Blake's. From William Shakespeare's *That time of Year Thou Mayst in Me Behold*, he recited,

> In me thou see'st the twilight of such day  
> As after sunset fadeth in the west, . . .  
> This thou perceiv'st, which makes thy love more strong,  
> To love that well which thou must leave ere long.

**CONCLUSION**

When shame-driven older adults reflect upon their personal history, they assess their past through the lens of their own meager self-esteem. Their life review bears the risk of confirming the sense of life wasted. Life review groups, however, can confound this hazard by engaging participants in discovering and reflecting upon poetic paradox. Poetry can ennoble themes that harassed members' lives. Paradox can force the reassessment of self-esteem. Less fragile colleagues can affirm these positive reassessments and the plans to act daringly upon them.

**REFERENCES**


