

Reflections from the Editorial Team: Valuing Lived Experience

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Abstract: *Reflections* Volume 30(2) begins with an update from the Editorial Leadership Team and our appreciation for the many people who give of their time to make *Reflections* a reality. We continue to explore narrative writing as a means to share lived experience as authors tell their stories about encounters and interactions that transformed their personal and professional lives. We are excited to be highlighting 11 engaging manuscripts in this General Issue in which poetry, art, musical lyrics, and narratives are used to focus on the mental health needs of helping professionals, their clients, and their communities.

Keywords: lived experience, creative expression, empathy, narrative writing, mental health, emotion

Our Appreciation

It is with great appreciation that we thank our new publisher Beth Massaro (Associate Dean at Salem University School of Social Work) and Justin Snow (Salem State's Digital Initiatives Librarian) at the [Frederick E. Berry Library](#). Not only have they welcomed the journal to Salem State, but they have worked tirelessly with us to make this transition as seamless as possible. We are excited to have visited Salem State in early April for the opportunity to meet face-to-face with the College administration and many faculty, students, and staff, and also tour the campus.

As we have transitioned to our new home, we remain very grateful to so many! We can't say enough about how our Lead Copyeditor Jack Pincelli continues to move articles forward as manuscripts are being prepared for publication. Endless thanks go to our Section Editors who continue to volunteer their skills and time in facilitating the submission and review process. Special appreciation goes to Jon Christopher (Chris) Hall who served as our Practice Section Editor for many years and who will continue his involvement as a reviewer for the journal, and we welcome Pat Gray who has enthusiastically stepped into the Practice Editor role. With so many submissions coming into the Practice Section, we are in the process of recruiting a Section Co-Editor to work with Pat. We are indebted to Section Editors Crystal Coles (Research), Beth Lewis (Practicum Education), and Arlene Reilly-Sandoval (Teaching and Learning) for their continuing commitment to the highest quality *Reflections* and for their incredible behind-the-scenes work that keeps manuscripts flowing through the review process. And we are eternally grateful to our dedicated reviewers who commit their thought, time, and attention to providing constructive formative feedback to our authors. Even with all of this, *Reflections* wouldn't be as meaningful as it is today without our readers and donors—like you!!

A school, college, or university can become a *Reflections* institutional Publishing Partner by making a \$3,000 commitment to be paid over a three-year period. We are incredibly grateful to the Deans (and their Schools) who serve as Publishing Partners and as such members of the *Reflections* Executive Committee: Philip Hong (University of Georgia); Sandra Crewe (Howard

University); Nancy Myers-Adams (California State University Long Beach); and Robin Mama (Former Dean, Monmouth University School of Social Work).

Sharing Lived Experience Through Narrative Writing

Reflections provides a unique opportunity for authors to write their stories, to express their feelings and thoughts, and to share those interactions that shape their personal and professional lives. So often we keep reminding ourselves and others that writing a narrative is different than writing an exposition such as a research study or technical report. For years we have referred potential authors to an article written for *Reflections* by Joshua [Kanary](#) (2014) to clarify “the distinction between exposition (telling) and narrative (showing)” (p. 4) and to provide guidance on how to “show” more than “tell.”

In recent years as new authors submit their manuscripts, we have noticed how challenging it is for those persons trained to write for professional journals that publish research or in-depth literature reviews to step back from their well-honed expository writing skills and write their own stories. With this in mind, we identified several indicators or clues to whether a submission might be more expository than narrative. For example, if there is a long list of references at the end, chances are that the writer has mastered the ability to ground their work in the latest literature, but narratives are not literature reviews. If the writer has provided case examples or vignettes from an observational or third-party viewpoint without revealing many of their own feelings and reactions or interactions, the manuscript is likely not highlighting the writer’s reflection on their own lived experiences. Yet other indicators are long length of manuscript, the inclusion of research results or data tables, or the occasional narrative paragraph or “I” statement interspersed within a well-documented telling rather than descriptive showing. Because narratives are inherently personal, they are also very subjective.

Thus, writing for *Reflections* releases potential authors from the constraints of trying to step back and become an objective reporter of what was witnessed to being an integral part of the story with all the accompanying emotions and assumptions laid bare. “Through emotive writing, we create shared spaces for meaning making” (Yoo, 2018, p. 358).

Let us be clear. There is a place for multiple types of writing. Knowing how to present information in an expository style is critical to the dissemination of knowledge gained through extensive literature reviews, case studies, and research projects. And yet, the dissemination of what one has learned from lived experiences in the process of helping others, exploring the literature, teaching a class, intervening with a client, developing a community, conducting a study, or experiencing life is just as important for the writer to share with others.

Stories such as these enable us to learn from and actually interact with one another about the things that work and don’t work, that test our patience and our skills, that give us joy, that make us sad, that cause us to question ourselves, that contribute to our choices, and that elicit a range of emotions, thoughts, and feelings. *Reflections* is a home for the dissemination of one’s lived personal and professional experiences so that other helping professionals may benefit from what

one has learned and so that we can grow in better understanding our own stories through the writing process.

Narrative writing has profound implications for the writer's growth and development as well as for the reader with whom the story resonates. One doctoral student described the experience as follows:

Viewing narrative writing as a feeling process taught me about the value of self in inquiry, and how to explore and hone my own unique ways of knowing. Particularly, I learned that one way I come to knowledge is by embracing the strong emotions I tend to feel when I engage in inquiry and writing, despite having been taught early on that feeling should be removed from academic and properly objective inquiry. (Harris, 2018, p. 33)

Not only is the process of narrative writing growth-producing for the writer, but narrative writing has been used to induce empathy in others. Shaffer and colleagues (2019) document how their use of narrative writing can be used to intervene with helping professionals and even policymakers to encourage empathy for care recipients by contextualizing "how external forces can play a role in someone's ... behavior" (p. 1).

In other words, the author places the narrative within the context of a well-told story that helps readers discover new ways of thinking about the personal, the professional, and the political in their lives. In a time in which the capacity for empathy is sorely needed, narrative writing can be an intervention to inspire empathic understanding. Lastly, narrative writing is particularly relevant to the helping professions since, as we all know, being in touch with one's feelings is critical to self-awareness. And we also know that there are implications of sharing those feelings and experiences with others in an open access journal that anyone can read.

Nonetheless, we would be remiss not to recognize the courage it takes to reveal one's authentic self and to write about highly sensitive experiences. We are so grateful to those authors who are willing to share so much of themselves so that others can learn from their experiences and have better understandings of the power dynamics and potential consequences of their interactions.

Highlights of This Issue

Now we are pleased to highlight a diverse group of authors who have shared their lived experiences in this General Issue of *Reflections*. May their words resonate with and bring forth new insights for readers.

In our previous "[Letter from the Editorial Team](#)" published in [V29\(3\)](#), we reminded everyone that contributions to *Reflections* come in many different forms and that we welcome creative forms of expression. In this General Issue we are excited to share a wealth of narratives and other creative expressions that poetically and artistically explode in moments of epiphany as insight turns into deepened self-awareness.

The first five contributions in this issue are dedicated to harnessing the power of the arts in both therapeutic and expressive ways. These authors emphasize the essential role of diverse forms of engagement in human development and interaction. [Holloway and Putnam](#) use the expressiveness of poetry to send a message to trans and nonbinary readers in their moving accounts of how gender-affirming surgery transformed their lives. They contextualize their poetic expression within an onslaught of anti-transgender legislation within the United States, reinforcing how practice and policy are inextricably intertwined. Using a form of poetry called haiku verse, [Sullenberger](#) writes from the heart as close friends communicate about race and learn from one another. This author is challenged to think deeply about equity and justice as well as racism within the context of a cherished relationship. [Rosado](#) uses art to express concerns about suicide among athletes who are taught to be strong and tough, often denying and repressing their own mental health needs. Using the visual arts as a means of expressive intervention, Rosado's digital drawing, also featured on our cover of this Issue, calls for us to "kick the stigma" of asking for the help of professionals who work with the sports community. The fourth expressive contribution is by [Latterner](#). Introducing a song as a musical approach to mental health therapy, the author uses hip-hop lyrics to inspire individual meaning and emotionality. [Eckhaus and Hedlund Nelson](#) provide an overview of attachment theory between children and their caregivers. They write about using expressive therapies of various modalities, from art and dance/movement to music and play, and offer two case studies underscoring the importance of both listening and observing to most effectively communicate. Together these five contributions provide insight for practitioners by using creative forms of expression to evoke empathy and contextualize meaning.

The next three articles in this Issue focus on the growing awareness and self-reflection felt by professionals who work across a diverse range of settings and come face-to-face with their own identities within contexts different from their lived experience. [Scheyett](#) documents a revealing journey into a community practice arena in which researchers are introduced to settings and situations beyond their comfort zones. Raised as a child in the suburbs, this author became involved in research on stress and suicide rates among farmers in rural Georgia, revealing the need for scholars and service providers in the agricultural sector to work together and calling upon helping professionals to understand food production—which is essential to all our lives—to recognize the challenges farmers face, and to advocate for policies that support farmers' wellbeing. [Kaseman](#) documents a journey into community practice in which it is equally important to gain valuable communication skills. Within the context of family and community influences, the author introduces us to multiple settings and situations and chronicles a quest in search of social justice through ministry and activism in four communities, resulting in a set of leadership principles and practices shared with our readership. [Yamashita and Eltaiba](#) reveal how an MSW student from Japan unpacked cultural background and identity assumptions in response to working with refugees and asylum seekers. Through examples that the authors call "small encounters" emerges a deeply reflective narrative filled with clues about professional growth and cultural humility. In these three narratives the authors share how their consciousness is raised as they walk in unfamiliar territory and learn from the communities and individuals they encounter.

Building on the theme of self-reflection and focusing on the vulnerability of practitioners who experience traumatic personal life events, the next three articles disclose the depth of personal grief, loss, and trauma that impact helping professionals who are educated to respond to tragedy. [Gantt and Greif](#) write about the death of DeVonte, Gantt's grandson, who was shot by another young man. Struggling with how to make meaning out of loss permeates this heart wrenching story of empowerment in which a grandmother, who is also a school social worker, becomes even more committed to preventing gun violence and to advocating for victims. The theme of coping with loss continues in [Blackman's](#) story in which she explores the experience of pregnancy loss from the perspective of an "insider." Acknowledging the painful isolation of disenfranchised grief, Blackman advises helping professionals to recognize that the loss of motherhood manifests itself in a multi-faceted set of losses including purpose, belonging, and possibility. [Toland](#) focuses on the personal experience of adoption trauma as a gauntlet of emotions that moves through stages of development in which the adopted child becomes an adult with unresolved questions about identity. This author contributes to practitioners' understanding about the prevention of and healing from adoption trauma. Together, these narratives provide the reader with very personal accounts of how these helping professionals are even more committed to share what they have learned so that others can benefit from their experiences.

We trust that you will find this Issue as you find all of *Reflections*—full of compelling narratives that offer insights that will be useful to educators, practitioners, students, and others alike. Once again, we look forward to hearing from you!!

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With Gratitude...

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We appreciate you all and your commitment to *Reflections* and our authors!!

Supporting *Reflections*

Reflections depends upon the investment of dedicated volunteers and contributions from our individual and organizational friends, allies, and advocates and our institutional publishing partners. Other than our deepest gratitude, our peer reviewers, our Section Editors, and our Publishing Team receive no compensation. We operate on a very tight budget that we stretch to fund a part-time Assistant Editor, a Lead Copyeditor (formerly a work study student, now an employee!!), and students who help with copyediting and production. It costs about \$515 to copyedit one manuscript. Publishing one *Reflections* Issue with 7–9 articles (which includes copyediting, communications with authors and reviewers as well as our OJS platform expenses) costs approximately \$7,250. We strive to bring to you 3–4 Issues a year.

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