

**Title:**

'The Lady of Shalott': Insights Gained from Using Visual Methods and Interviews  
Exploring the Lived Experience of Codependency

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## **Abstract**

Codependency is a complex human experience with many meanings. The experiences of self-identified codependent individuals, who attend 12 steps groups are largely missing from the literature. In this article, we present how a combination of a visual method and interviews assisted deeper exploration and analysis of the experience of living with codependency, in an Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) study.

A case example, entitled the 'Lady of Shalott', is offered as an illustration of the data collection and multilevel interpretative analytical process, highlighting how the ambiguity in the meanings of the imagery aided the interpretation. The case study, demonstrates how the visual method enriched the data collection and analysis process assisting the researcher to reach deeper layers of meanings, capturing a better understanding of the lived experience portrayed by the participant.

## **Introduction**

Recently there has been a growing interest in the use of visual methods in qualitative research (Cristancho, Bidinosti, Longard, Novick, Ott and Forbes 2014; Bevan 2014; Keller, Fleury, Perez, Ainsworth, Vaughan 2008; Wiles et al 2008; Guillemin, 2004). In health and social research, the usefulness of visual methods as a form of data collection has been advocated by several authors (Woodhouse, 2012; Shinebourne and Smith 2011; Frith and Harcourt, 2007; Prosser, 2008, Keller, Fleury, Perez, Ainsworth and Vaughan 2008; Hurworth et al 2005). For example, Shinebourne and Smith (2011) highlighted the usefulness of the method in enhancing their participant's' expression of the experience of addiction through drawings. Woodhouse (2015) advocated the strength of the method in fostering a user involvement in research. Overall, these authors demonstrated the benefits of the method in assisting researchers in capturing the participants' social and cultural context and complex situations, and in obtaining an understanding of how participants interpret and understand their world. Incorporation of visual methods within interviews is also thought to help empower participants to become more actively engaged in the research process (Padget et al 2013).

The growing interest in visual methods demonstrated by various qualitative authors highlights the need for more examples of studies adopting this innovative method, in particular examples of the method being used to capture complexity, in-depth, meaningful data and aid interpretations. It also calls for more consideration about

the benefits and challenges of adopting this data collection method in combination with other qualitative methods.

In this research, we utilised a visual method to complement an interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) methodology exploring the complex lived experience of codependency. Codependency is an often misunderstood construct, with many meanings, featuring in the popular (Schaef, 1986; Beattie 1991, 1992, 2011), clinical (Hemfelt, Minirth and Meier, 1989; Sadock & Sadock, 2004) and research literature (Harkness and Crotrell, 1997; Fuller and Warner 2000; Marks, Blore, Hine and Dear 2011, 2012). There is a complex and interconnected range of terms, assumptions and quantitative models of codependency (Wegscheider-Cruse, 1985; Whitfield, 1989; Hemfelt et al, 1989; Cermak, 1986; Fischer, Spann and Crawford, 1991; Wright and Wright, 1991; O'Brien and Gaborit, 1992). The construct has been interpreted variously over time, and appears to mean different things to different people, for example, as an addiction, a family or personality problem. However, there are few qualitative studies (Blanco, 2013; Irvine, 2000; Biering, 1998; Rice, 1992) and the lived experience of individuals who consider themselves codependents and attend (or have attended 12 step groups) is largely missing from the literature.

In this research study, the lived experience of codependency was considered in the context of the individual's personal values and interpretations. The Interpretative phenomenological analysis methodology was chosen as it has an idiographic and hermeneutic flavour, which is appropriate to examine 'how people make sense of their major life experiences' (Smith et al 2009, p.1).

The inclusion of the visual method was chosen to obtain a more in-depth phenomenological analysis, helping participants and the researcher to move beyond their 'received' or 'rehearsed' narratives about codependency that might have been developed within the 12-step groups, which they attended thus facilitating a deeper exploration of their particular experience. We believe it gave the study a unique identity, facilitating a more meaningful expression of participants' experiences. Here, we offer a case example as an illustration of the process. We present the lived experience of one participant, Patricia (pseudonym), 'the Lady of Shalott'.

This current paper brings new insights into qualitative research that recruits participants from support groups. The combination of methods assisted the researcher to reach develop a more spontaneous exploration of the experience as there was less emphasis on the 'rehearsed narrative' which can be offered by participants who attend support groups.

## **Methodology**

The research obtained full approval from the University's Ethics committee and the 12-Step recovery group central office. The research was informed by non-consequentialist ethical approaches (ESRC, 2008), which focus on the principles of autonomy, confidentiality, beneficence, non-maleficence and justice. Participants received information packs via email and all gave written and verbal consent.

Eight people with self-identified codependency who were members of local 12-step support groups volunteered to take part in the study. Participants, who had their names and contact information on the group website, were contacted via email. Participants who expressed an interest received a follow-up call explaining the details of the study. Once consent was obtained, participants were invited to attend 3 in-depth interviews over a period of 3-6 months.

IPA is always dependent on what the participant chooses to disclose about the experience (Smith et al, 2009). The repeated interview process offered each participant the opportunity to experience in-depth conversations over an extended period of time, as well as allowing the elicitation of further narrative through visual methods. At the first interview, the visual methods procedure was explained, and participants were asked to choose at least one object or image that represented their experience of codependency and to bring these items to be discussed during the second interview.

The first interview had an emphasis on engaging with the participant, building rapport, and providing an environment where their views could come forth more readily (Smith et al, 2009). The second interview, alongside the visual methods, intended to facilitate a more in-depth conversation about the lived experience of codependency and specific open questions were asked to facilitate this. This session was also used to explore the images or objects that symbolized each participant's experiences of codependency. Often, mutual discussion of these images facilitated in-depth exploration of the experience, through assisting them to describe their experiences more freely and creatively. It assisted the researcher to explore the

experience described by the participant to a greater extent, facilitating the communication process, the flow of the interview and the overall interaction between the researcher and the participant. The third interview was used to continue to explore participants' experiences, aiming at obtaining an even deeper account. Avenues of inquiry that were possibly left open or unexplored from the previous interviews were followed. This meeting was also intended to offer closure to the interview process, debrief the participants and to thank them for their participation in the study.

Twenty interviews were completed in total; 8 participants took part in all 3 interviews and 4 took part in 2 interviews. One participant provides the case study analysed in this article. She took part in 3 interviews.

The type of visual data included in the research consisted of items, chosen by the participant as representations of their experiences of codependency, for example: photographs, drawings and media images (Prosser 2008). The researcher suggested that the participants could bring anything that would help them 'tell their story'. A number of images and objects such as books, illustrations, post cards, paintings and photographs helped the participants to express their experiences (Woodhouse 2012).

The steps of IPA analysis recommended by Smith et al (2009) were adapted and used with the management of interview and visual data. Each individual case was analysed separately. The visual and textual data of each case was analysed as one data set, with the text analysed around the image, as an interactive, inductive and

flexible process. As the interview transcripts of each individual participant were analysed, the corresponding visual data brought by the participant were also analysed and interpreted, as summarised below:

The analysis involved reading the transcript and corresponding image several times moving between the image and the corresponding text, writing notes on any meaningful and significant aspect. This was done in collaboration with the textual meanings from the participant, including also the researcher's own interpretation. This dynamic analytical process involved several layers: (a) returning to the transcript and images several times to transform notes into possible emerging themes; (b) examining the emerging themes and grouping them according to similarities; (c) emerging themes were given a name and conceptual description; (d) checking the transcripts and images to ensure the connection with the participant's account. Finally, meanings arising from the visual images helped to look for other issues elsewhere during the analytic process, assisting in probing the data for further connotations and interpretations.

As a phenomenological methodology, in IPA the researcher aims to get as close to the experience as possible (Hefferon and Gil-Rodriguez, 2011); however IPA also adopts a hermeneutic approach to phenomenology. This interpretative component situates the IPA analysis within an interpretative cycle, involving the perspectives of both the participant and the researcher (Smith, 2004), achieving 'a dynamic relationship between the part and the whole at a series of levels' (Smith et al 2009, p.28). The IPA researcher also engages in double hermeneutics considering both the participant's and researcher's perspectives when analysing the phenomenon. In



this case, the researcher is attempting to 'make sense' of the participant's 'making sense' of the experience (Langdrige, 2007, p.7). The example offered below demonstrates the data collection and multilevel interpretative analytical process used in this IPA research, which was facilitated by the inclusion of the visual method. This process represents the hermeneutic circle. The interpretative and idiographic aspects of the IPA methodology in combination with the visual method were useful to explore the complex illness experience portrayed by the participant.

### **Case example: Patricia's experience, 'the Lady of Shalott'**

Patricia described herself as a successful middle aged, business woman, married and with children. She associated the experience of codependency with her depression.

"... my journey in terms of codependency or recovery, came about as a result of developing really quite a severe depression about 8 years ago. I was initially a bit depressed than moderately depressed and then ended up severely depressed. And this went over a number of years. And I ended up, about 5, 6 years ago, making a suicide attempt. And it was obviously very serious... my psychiatrist said: 'I think you might be suffering from something called codependency...'"

Patricia began to attend codependency recovery groups as part of her treatment for depression. She also travelled abroad where this condition is more widely accepted and took part in an in-patient codependency treatment centre. At the time of the

interview, she was attending several codependency recovery groups a week, and felt that she was making some improvement. It appeared that as Patricia was searching for the meaning or what she hoped was underlying root of her depression, she found several possible explanations in codependency as described by the extract below:

“I went to seminars ... with loads of other people, whose primary problem was addiction, which wasn't mine, but mine was definitely depression, but everybody there had a secondary problem of an underlying problem of codependency, so that was my kind of first introduction to it... for me the main things that caused depression for me were perfectionism, so being disappointed in myself, caretaking people, so that is codependency, rushing around everybody else, lack of self-esteem...being workaholic that is codependency, yeah I see it as very much coming from codependency.”

The quotation illuminates Patricia's experience of codependency and her struggle to make sense of this experience. This is exemplified by the choice of words and terms she uses, as there is a pressure to explain (“...so that is co-dependency”), to find meaning (“...definitely...”), to find commonality of experience with others (“loads of other people...”).

*Initial interpretative layer: Patricia's sense making of her response to the painting – 'Lady of Shalott'*

Patricia introduced the image of the 'Lady of Shalott' to her second interview (see website link: <http://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/waterhouse-the-lady-of-shalott-n01543>).

She used the image to represent the contrast between how she felt when she was ill and how she felt at the time when she visited the Art gallery, on the week of the interview. Patricia spoke about experiencing a sense of surprise when seeing the colours of the painting as brighter and sharper than her usual perceptions of the world. In this case, Patricia interpreted the picture as representing her sense of satisfaction with the improvement she had made as part of her recovery, as portrayed by the quote below:

“I had never quite felt moved by paintings as much as I did that particular day, and I think it was partially because I perhaps never been quite as much in the present moment as when I was looking at paintings as I was on that particular day. I was able to appreciate them much better and a lot of myself, I was in the painting, the painting was drawing me in. I mean in, because I was really seeing it properly and the colours were much brighter and the whole thing was much sharper, and that was really umm sort of striking to me that that my life wasn't so much in a monochrome, that by being in the present moment I get so much more out of it.”

This initial layer of interpretation, could be described as close to the participant, in the hermeneutic circle (Smith et al 2009). It consisted of Patricia's sense-making around the experience of visiting an art gallery and seeing paintings as she had never seen them before, with much colour and enjoyment; as she expressed it: 'in the present moment'. This initial layer captured a sense of excitement and surprise experienced by Patricia, as she began to feel was aware of her initial signs of her

recovery. It may highlight how she felt more aware or fully engaged in that present moment, her senses open to new experiences and perhaps less focused on inward reflection or negative thoughts than prior to this time.

### *Deepening the interpretation*

Interpretative phenomenological analysis invites the researcher to add layers of interpretation to the particular experience portrayed by the participant, thus eliciting a deeper insight into their phenomenological experience. The researcher is invited to dive deeper into the hermeneutic process and can moving 'away from the original text of the participant (Smith et al 2009, p.90).

It was possible to suggest that the specific image described by Patricia conveyed a deeper insight into her experience. This image she presented facilitated this hermeneutic process.

Patricia may have chosen the image of the 'Lady of Shalott' as a less 'edited' means of self-disclosure, whereby she was able to reveal more issues about her identity and inner struggles related to what she understood to be her codependency. It is possible that the image may have resonated with her for many reasons. It may have represented her inner confusion; she could have found resonance with the lonely drifting woman on the boat; she may have been attracted by its colours or the poem which inspired the painting.

## *Extremes*

Patricia explained seeing the picture of the Lady of Shalott from two separate angles: as beautiful and colourful from one and ghostly, without colour from the other angle. She spoke about two ends of a spectrum, conveying a sense of extremes: a colourful, young and beautiful lady, as opposed to a colourless, old woman.

“And it was weird because when you looked at it from a certain angle a beautiful woman in a little, long blond hair, wavy sort of long blond hair sitting in the boat in the middle of the lake, and she is colour, everything is the colours you expect. Another place quite close up but beneath her, she was, she was ghostly; the painting lost all its colour, she was such of grey...when you walked between the two, she went from this beautiful blonde umm young person to this person with lines!”

An additional deeper layer of interpretation was added to the analysis: a sense of extremes experienced by Patricia, which was portrayed by the image of the Lady of Shalott being young/old, with both death and life represented, for her, by the painting. In this case, the painting seemed to represent a struggle Patricia experienced in her own life, as inferred from the verbal interview data: from one particular angle she felt alive and well but from another she felt depressed and codependent. The researcher inferred that it was possible that this duality portrayed by Patricia was revealing a sense of oscillating between extremes.

It is interesting to note here how this idiographic analysis, also aided by the ambiguity of the image, then helped the researcher to find this theme in other participants' accounts.

### *Perfectionism*

It may be possible to suggest an even further layer of interpretation to this image. Throughout Patricia's interviews, she appeared to be searching to find some form of perfection and honesty in her relationships. When speaking about the issues related to her mental health problems, Patricia described her need to see perfection in herself and in others. She indicated that these issues were associated with her depression and codependency. Patricia reflected on feeling disappointed when confronting the reality of seeing her husband as he really was - 'not perfect'.

'...So it is actually this person isn't God, they are vulnerable they are fallible, they are umm bad tempered, impatient, wherever all the things that men often are and that doesn't mean that I can't love them because if they were God they would have to be perfect all the time. ... And so it was very disillusioning when some characteristics that I thought my husband had, and he didn't have and in fact he had some nasty characteristics and you know and that was very disappointing ...'

This apparent sense of disappointment portrayed by Patricia when she reflected on her husband's perfect/imperfect image also resonated with her choice of the

ambiguous image of 'the Lady of Shalott'. This sense of ambiguity alluded to in the painting and words used by Patricia called for further investigation, and aided the process of analysis in the larger study.

The image of a painting, 'the Lady of Shalott' from William Waterhouse (1888) is based on the poem from Lord Alfred Tennyson (1809–1892). The researcher also considered the Victorian poem by Alfred Tennyson (1869) which the painting represents. Although Patricia did not go into much detail about the poem during her interview, it was consulted to determine if it offered any further metaphorical insights that might resonate with her experience.

The poem tells the story of a lady who lived in a tower, and could only see reality through a reflection on a mirror. Tennyson's poem says that the Lady of Shalott could not contemplate reality, or she would fall under a curse which would lead to her death.

'...To weave the mirror's magic sights ...She left the web, she left the loom,  
She made three paces thro the room...The mirror crack'd from side to side  
...The curse is come upon me, cried The Lady of Shalott...'

The experience portrayed by the painting and poem may symbolise Patricia's difficulties in contemplating her own reality, which she feels leads her to extremes of feelings of depression and despair, which she associated with her experience of codependency.

Overall, the image of the Lady of Shalott added interpretative insights to Patricia's lifeworld and enriched the research findings. It created further opportunities for an exploration of deep and meaningful aspects of her lifeworld; providing a symbolic representation of her experience of codependency and depression. The image enabled Patricia to convey a message that otherwise she may not have been able to articulate through the use of interviews alone. It assisted the researcher to gain further insights into her experience, for example in relation to her sense of self, confusion, ambiguity and oscillation between extremes, and possibly her difficulty in facing the naturally flawed reality of her life and relationships.

## **Discussion**

As exemplified by this case, the visual image became a 'vehicle for voice' (Lorenz 2010, p.210), bringing much richness to the data collection and analytic processes. The visual image opened up opportunities for a more expressive, albeit ambiguous, communication, adding a richer level of comprehension to the data collected. As exemplified here, the use of visual imagery provided the participant not only with much opportunity to communicate her own experience, but also to elicit a deeper interpretation of her experience. Initially the image described Patricia's experience of recovery, of becoming more responsive to colour as her depression abated. Other layers of interpretation were added to the analysis, allowing for a richer exploration of the experience, i.e. a sense of oscillation between extremes experienced by Patricia, related to the portrayal of young life and impending death of the Lady of Shalott, and the co-existence between the monochrome depression and yet colour represented



by the painting. Finally, the possibly hidden and ambiguous aspects of Patricia's experience were also explored, including a possible struggle for meaning exemplified by the rapid flight of ideas in response to the painting, and sense of insecurity, associated with a disappointing search for perfection among those close to her and her identification with the enigmatic image of the Lady of Shalott.

This case study forms part of a larger PhD study, in which various visual images were explored with participants (Bacon 2015). Using images assisted participants in bringing further insights into their lived experience of codependency, offering multiple possibilities for interpretation and rich layers of meaning. The IPA methodology facilitated fuller expression of participants' experiences, accepting that this process was also influenced by the double hermeneutic. In this, the researcher's own contribution had also to be taken into consideration. Through reflexivity, the researcher was able to consider the impact of the image and the poem on herself and her own interpretation of the content brought in by the participant. Although this method added a valuable aspect to this research study, inevitably there were also challenges encountered with Patricia and the other participants.

First of all, ethical implications regarding the use of images in health care research had to be carefully considered. Special attention had to be drawn to issues of anonymity, confidentiality and protection of the visual data gathered. For example, all the information collected through the interviews and visual methods had to be anonymised, and photographs brought by participants with faces of people could not be disseminated in reports of the study. Although the ethical procedures were well received by all of the participants, it also restricted what could be explored in terms

of visual data. For example, one of the participants brought a number of photographs, including pictures of members of her family, to illustrate her experience of codependency in relation to what she considered to be a dysfunctional upbringing. Although the photographs were useful to elicit an in-depth discussion, they could not be included in the dissemination of the findings of the study.

Secondly, non-engagement with the visual method was an issue, and two of the eight participants, both men, did not engage with the visual procedure. They did not present any particular reason for this, expressing only that they could not think of anything to bring at the time. The researcher believed that it was important to respect the decision-making and autonomy of the participant. Nonetheless, their reaction suggests that not all participants are likely to be comfortable with this creative element of data collection.

Finally, there were also issues of where to end the interactive and dynamic analysis process, which was somewhat indeterminate as the visual methods data could be interpreted on so many levels, for example image, colour, and recollections, including childhood meanings and associations and researchers' own reflections. This decision was made by the researcher in collaboration and confirmation of the co-researchers.

In spite of the limitations highlighted, the combination of methods worked positively in a complementary fashion, assisting the researchers to reach and make sense of complex and painful experiences which may have been difficult for the research participants to describe.

## **Conclusion**

In summary, the study added new knowledge in the field of codependency, demonstrating also the utility of the combination of interviews and the visual method in aiding the researchers and participant to move beyond the possible 'rehearsed narrative' learned at the 12-step groups. The case presented illustrated how the image and the participant's account of its meanings helped to sensitise the researcher to the experience of duality or oscillation between extremes portrayed by the participant. It facilitated the researcher's understanding of some of the difficult content expressed by this participant, and then others in the sample. The combination of methods captured an abundance of information which assisted in bringing further insights into their lived experience of codependency, offering multiple possibilities and rich layers of meaning.

Although the method contributed significantly to the exploration of experience, it also posed challenges related to ethics, analysis and engagement from participants. In spite of this, the use of visual images had a positive effect as they helped the participants to communicate their complex experiences, which they may otherwise have found difficult to articulate. As exemplified by the case study, the combination of methods helped to gain further insight into the lifeworld of the participant, which otherwise would not have been captured by a single data collection method. It is hoped that this article will inspire more researchers to further to consider the usefulness of including visual methods in exploring complex experiences such as codependency.

The Authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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