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Doing it differently: Engaging interview participants with imaginative variation

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Abstract:

Imaginative variation was identified by Husserl (1936/1970) as a phenomenological technique for the purpose of elucidating the manner in which phenomena appear to consciousness. Briefly, by engaging in the phenomenological reduction and using imaginative variation, phenomenologists are able to describe the experience of consciousness, having stepped outside of the natural attitude through the epochē. Imaginative variation is a stage aimed at explicating the structures of experience, and is best described as a mental experiment. Features of the experience are imaginatively altered in order to view the phenomenon under investigation from varying perspectives. Husserl argued that this process will reveal the essences of an experience, as only those aspects that are invariant to the experience of the phenomenon will not be able to change through the variation.

Often in qualitative research interviews, participants struggle to articulate or verbalise their experiences. The purpose of this article is to detail a radical and novel way of using imaginative variation with interview participants, by asking *the participants* to engage with imaginative variation, in order to produce a rich and insightful experiential account of a phenomenon. We will discuss how the first author successfully used imaginative variation in this way in her study of the erotic experience of bondage, discipline, dominance & submission, and sadism & masochism (BDSM), before considering the usefulness of this technique when applied to areas of study beyond sexuality.

Introduction:

The purpose of this article is to discuss the innovative use of the phenomenological technique of imaginative variation as a creative method within data collection. It focuses on the first author's research investigating the lived erotic experiences of consensual bondage, discipline, dominance & submission and sadism & masochism (BDSM). The authors will first provide some background in terms of the research problem, before outlining the innovative use of imaginative variation in the current study.

Phenomenological methods set out to move beyond the obscuring influence of the natural attitude that pervades everyday life and can impede understandings of the meanings of lived experience (Husserl, 1931/1967). Many such methods involve asking participants to recount descriptions of particular experiences in vivid detail. However, lived experience can be difficult for participants to articulate, requiring as it does the individual to reflect on that which is normally taken-for-granted. We would argue that this difficulty is exacerbated in relation to certain areas of the lifeworld. These include experiences that are not socially or culturally acceptable, leading either to reticence or to the hijacking of personal experiences by dominant discourses. Another issue may be that there is a lack of common reference points with the researcher, which may inhibit a research interview.

Turley (2012) highlighted the problems encountered when relying on participants' descriptions of lived erotic experiences. Participants did not provide sufficient detail in their descriptions, and they struggled to articulate their sexual experiences while grappling with expressing the nuanced detail in their accounts. In an attempt to circumvent this, the first author decided to utilise the

phenomenological technique of imaginative variation in an innovative way. It is the difficulties such as those outlined above that this article seeks to address through the use of a particular empirical example, the lived erotic experiences of consensual bondage, discipline, dominance & submission and sadism & masochism (BDSM). Before this is discussed in detail in the next section, the traditional use of this method as proposed by Husserl (1936/1970) will be summarised in order for the differences between the two to be considered.

Traditionally, when conducting research and analysis, one should adopt the phenomenological attitude (Giorgi, 2006) and be in constant engagement with the epochē and phenomenological reduction, as detailed by Husserl, in order to avoid working within the natural attitude. Along with the epochē and phenomenological reduction, imaginative variation is an analytic technique available to phenomenological researchers for the purpose of examining how particular phenomena present themselves to the consciousness of the researcher. The established aim of utilising imaginative variation within a phenomenological analysis is to elucidate meanings from the experience under study. It involves the researcher considering the phenomenon being experienced from different perspectives, this is done by imaginatively altering various features of the phenomenon. Husserl (1936/1970) argued that this process will reveal the essences of an experience, as only those aspects that are invariant to the experience of the phenomenon will remain unchanged through the variation.

An innovative use of imaginative variation:

This section will present the first author's novel use of imaginative variation for her research examining the lived erotic experience of consensual bondage, discipline, dominance & submission and sadism & masochism (BDSM). Nine participants were recruited for the study, who ranged in age from mid-20s to mid-40s, and identified across the spectrum of sexualities. The participants had a range of BDSM role preferences consisting of dominant (or top) and submissive (or bottom) roles as well as participants who liked to switch between these sexual roles. Data were collected using in-depth semi-structured interviews that were specific to each participant, and had a close focus on various aspects of embodied experience. For the analysis, the first author used the template approach (King, 2012) within Merleau-Ponty's (1945/1962) interpretive phenomenological framework, where lived embodied experience is foregrounded. Within this analytical technique a coding template is developed in order to summarise the themes arising from the data and to hierarchically organise these themes to reflect their salience within the analysis. This analytic method is particularly flexible, and is well suited to a phenomenological methodology which by its nature encourages creative freedom in research (e.g. Hardy, King, & Rodriguez, 2014; King, Carroll, Newton, & Dornan, 2002; McLachlan, King, Wenger, & Dornan, 2012). The flexible approach enables the analytic procedure to be adapted to suit the needs of a particular study, and template analysis lends itself to a variety of research topics and areas, particularly those that are under studied. In the case of the current research, using this hierarchical approach enabled the first author to adapt the analytic technique in order to meet the requirements of the research; being able to develop and focus more fully on the most salient and relevant areas of the analysis and capture important aspects of the lived experiences of BDSM (Brooks, McCluskey, Turley & King, 2015).

Potential limitations of template analysis relate primarily to the production of the final template. There is a risk that this constructed template becomes the focus of the analysis, as the original research aims are overlooked in favour of a focus on the final version of the template. The template should always be viewed as a means to make sense of the data, and not as the product of the analysis (Brooks et al, 2015). A potentially problematic issue is that the focus in this method is on across case rather than within case analysis, and there is a risk of losing the holistic nature of the individual interviews. A useful method used in this research to avoid this is the

construction of case summaries (Brooks et al, 2015). The first author produced case summaries for each interview, which aimed to capture something of the context of each interview and were a record of the first author's immediate thoughts and embodied reactions to the interview. This enabled the individual participants' experiences to be foregrounded during the analysis.

During an earlier stage in the project, participants were interviewed about their BDSM related roles, practices and lifeworlds (see Turley, King, & Butt, 2011). Despite interesting data arising from this study, the most striking aspect of these findings was what was absent from the participants' accounts: a description of what was specifically sexual or erotic regarding BDSM participation. Participants were not shy or embarrassed to talk about their BDSM play, and discussed the sexual aspect in terms of an enjoyable and gratifying experience, however, participants frequently relied on commonly available pseudo-scientific scripts or discourses, such as 'a rush of endorphins', to describe their sexual experiences. There was a lack of input regarding the sexual triggers and erotic constituents of BDSM. Those aspects of BDSM play that are viscerally sexual were missing in descriptions of the experience of BDSM participation, which posed the questions 'why are they missing?' and 'where is the eroticism to be found in BDSM?' A possible answer to the former question may lie in the difficulty participants displayed when trying to articulate their thoughts. All of the participants at some point during the interview grappled with expressing their thoughts verbally in clear and expressive language. Jackson (2003) notes there is a lack of language of eroticism and a difficulty arises from this; the representative lexicon of sexual pleasure is constrained. There are linguistic absences when discussing sexual desires, according to Jackson and Frye (1990, as cited in Jackson, 2003), language relates to sexual acts rather than to feelings, sensations and emotions.

The issue for the research was *how* to effectively get beyond these lay descriptions to enable participants to clearly express and engage with their lived experiences of BDSM participation. The first author considered that asking participants to make comparisons between fulfilling and non-fulfilling examples of a recent BDSM experience would enable more detail about how they actually experienced BDSM, and using imaginative variation as a kind of mental experiment *during* participant interviews, rather than only at the analytical stage, would tease out the various experiential elements such as thoughts, emotions and sensations involved in this practice.

When collecting data, a combination of written accounts and participant-specific interviews was used. The research participants were asked to write two descriptive accounts of an experience of engaging in BDSM, one account to be focused on a successful and enjoyable experience and the second on an experience of BDSM that was unenjoyable or unfulfilling. A specific interview schedule was then developed for each participant containing a small number of general questions, with the majority of questions specifically informed by the written accounts they had provided. The rationale for using a combination of written accounts and individually tailored interview schedules was to maximise the depth of description of the phenomenon of BDSM. Writing these accounts enabled participants to reflect and focus on their experiences, and think about the detail of what occurred along with their associated thoughts and feelings. As participants were free to select the experiences they wanted to discuss, they were not influenced by the agenda of the researcher. King and Horrocks (2010) argue that interviewees can become 'swept along' with the research agenda and the dialogue of the researcher, therefore using written accounts as the interview basis minimised the influence of the researcher's agenda and allowed participants to express themselves in their own unmediated words.

Written accounts alone usually will not produce the depth of information and description required for an interpretive phenomenological analysis. Combining this method with the semi-structured interview method allowed the first author to probe further, ask for elaboration where necessary and tease out the rich information in order to reach the crux of the lived experience of the

phenomenon. Handy and Ross (2005) argue that written accounts are usually temporally ordered, cohesive, focused and particularly self-reflexive, leading to real depth of detail. Ong (1982) notes that when writing accounts participants can consider the questions carefully before answering, plan responses and they can be written at a pace of the participant's choosing. Written accounts therefore allowed for self-reflection and detailed focus on the topic at hand, which in turn, were a stimulus for the participant interviews, thus achieving the level of depth and detail necessary for this research.

Langdridge (2007) contends that producing adequate written descriptions can place pressure on participants in terms of time demands and content of the accounts. This can be countered by providing participants with a clear brief explaining what is required from the written account. The participants were informed of the specific type of experience and contextual details to describe as vividly as possible, along with a general guide on the length of both accounts.

- A recent experience of BDSM that was enjoyable and considered to be successful.
- A recent experience of BDSM that was not particularly enjoyable and not considered to be successful.
- Details of who was there and where the experience took place.
- Details of what happened.
- Details of thoughts, emotions and physical feelings during the experience.
- About a side of A4 paper in length per account.

As we have seen, imaginative variation is usually only used by the researcher during the analytic process; however, for this study the first author used imaginative variation as a research tool by asking *the participants* to imaginatively change elements of *their* experience of BDSM. The purpose of this was in order to elucidate those main erotic constituents of the experience. During the interviews the first author used the erotic aspects of BDSM provided as part of the written descriptions as a basis and asked participants to imaginatively alter these aspects in various ways, and consider whether then, the changed element still appeared to be erotic. See table 1 for examples of specific interview questions and participant responses illustrating how imaginative variation was utilised as a method of rich data collection.

Table 1. examples of the use of imaginative variation with interview participants

Question	Response
Can you picture if instead of rubber, the clothing was made out of satin? How do you think that might alter your sexual experience?	Probably because satin's more, it's gentle material not like rubber. One of the things I like about rubber is that it's hard and tough and industrial. The satin's too soft and gentle and wouldn't lend itself to the play I was doing. It's a practical and aesthetic level I think... If you've got rubber shorts on they're tight, they hug your skin, and they are restrictive. As soon as you've got a rubber vest on, or a rubber mask it's...especially a mask, it's very restrictive, so you can't speak

	<p>and open your mouth. Satin just doesn't have that restrictive feeling.</p> <p>[Tom, late 20s, specialist nurse, homosexual, North West England, UK]</p>
<p>Imagine that instead of wearing your collar and lead and tag, you've got a bridle and saddle instead, and you've got a long horse's tail rather than a dog tail, and instead of being walked in the forest, Joe was riding you. How does that make you feel?</p>	<p>That doesn't arouse me at all. It does nothing for me. I don't know whether I just like dogs better than horses, it's as simple as that or whether it's to do with the toys, with puppy play you have lots of toys and you play games and play fetch...it's fun. My view of horses is riding around in a circle in a field, which doesn't really seem that much fun. I don't see the same kind of master and submissive relationship with horses, not to say that other people don't, I just...perhaps I don't view horses as being submissive animals. They're very strong and quite large animals and...dogs are smaller and obedient and cute and fluffy, so perhaps it has to do with my perception of horses and dogs.</p> <p>[Tom, late 20s, specialist nurse, homosexual, North West England, UK]</p>
<p>Can you imagine the effect on your sexual experience if you didn't wear the collar?</p>	<p>Hmmm...I suppose my submission wouldn't be explicit. A person, especially a woman, wearing a collar is a radical statement. It's an explicit statement that I belong to Robert, I am his property. It's part of the humiliation for being someone's slave, because it makes it obvious to everyone else and to yourself. I think it would have a psychological affect on me, and probably on Robert too, because with the collar there is a blatant sign, and I can't get away from it, or avoid it because I can always feel it on my neck, and I know that it means I belong to Robert. Without it...maybe I wouldn't be as prepared or as...willing to endure as much than when I have it on, because it acts as a constant reminder, so if it wasn't there it would perhaps, be easier to back out rather than to try and endure. In that sense I think it would have an effect of my sexual experience, I wouldn't be as committed.</p> <p>[Annie, mid 20s, civil servant, bisexual, South West England, UK]</p>
<p>So imagine that they weren't wearing masks</p>	<p>I think it would make a big difference to be</p>

<p>and that you could clearly see their faces, how would this affect the experience?</p>	<p>honest. There would be no mystery surrounding the encounter, I would know who they were. I also think that their intentions would be clearer, when someone's main way of communicating is obscured, you're less sure of their intentions. I could imagine that their intentions were not honourable if their face was not visible, and it's back to what they might do. Having no mask on would remove the fear factor I was talking about, and that's a part of what I enjoy about BDSM, so yes, it would have a huge effect on my enjoyment.</p> <p>[Vikki, late 20s, local government, heterosexual, Midlands, UK]</p>
<p>I'm wondering if you can imagine anything that would have changed this good experience of feeling vulnerable into something not pleasurable?</p>	<p>I suppose if I didn't feel safe or if I didn't trust the guy I was with. Again it's the <i>premise</i> of risk and danger, but if I didn't feel particularly safe then I would not like to experience those feelings at all. I think that would be quite terrifying. I knew a hundred percent that I was safe in that situation, we had each other's interests at heart, we both were in it for a good time and we both knew what to expect from the play. I never felt at real risk or in danger or distrusting at any time during that scene, I was absorbed in the fantasy of playing a submissive role but in reality I was completely safe. I would not find it arousing to feel in danger or at risk during BDSM, or in any other situation. If I was tied up and felt truly unsafe, that would be terrible.</p> <p>[Maria, mid 30s, educator, heterosexual, North East England, UK (originally from Southern Europe)]</p>

The intention was that this technique would clarify what exactly is erotic about particular aspects of the BDSM experience, and elucidate the nuanced erotic elements for the participants. This was also the rationale behind asking participants to produce two written accounts, one of a positive BDSM experience, the other of a negative experience. Making comparisons using imaginative variation can assist participants to clarify at a fine level of distinction, so that participants can distinguish why one particular act presents itself to them as erotic when a similar act does not. It is the fine level of detail and distinction that can be attained that means this technique lends itself well to eliciting the information required for an interpretive phenomenological analysis.

A distinction should be recognised in this research between simply asking a participant to describe and/or imagine their lived experience, compared to facilitating a participant to recall an experiential moment during the research interviews. Finlay (2006) warns against simply focusing on words during participant interviews, explaining that as experience is pre-reflective, using techniques that enable the participant to get closer to those experiential moments in question will yield richer data. The notion of recalling an experiential moment, rather than asking participants to describe or imagine, is a less mechanistic process and therefore allows the researcher to appreciate the participants' existential experiences in a more reflexive and empathetic way (Finlay, 2006). Todres' (2008) embodied relational understanding is relevant to this discussion. The interview situation was treated by the first author as a relational moment that was occurring in the lived world, and was a meaningful connection for those involved.

As a phenomenological researcher, being with the participants' lived experiential moment during the interview as it is recounted is an embodied intuitive event. Developing an understanding of those moments requires the whole of the body, as it is through the body that the meanings of the world and the other are understood (Todres, 2008). This embodied presence enables some intimacy with the unfamiliarity of otherness (Gendlin, 1962), and this is what the first author achieved by going beyond simple descriptions of participants lived experiences of BDSM during the interviews. Lived embodied experience is filled with textures, and it was the aim of the first author to capture this through the participants' recollections of their experiential moments during BDSM, and gain an understanding the experiential possibilities available to them during the BDSM scene. Gendlin's (1962, 1981) practice of experiential focusing was useful in order to become open and present to the participants' accounts, as the first author attended to her body's sense of the participants' experiential meanings. Paying attention to the participants' bodies as well as the researcher's body was cited as important by Finlay (2006), as attending to participants' bodies and gestures can provide insights into the ways the phenomenon was experienced in the moment through a shared embodied intersubjectivity.

Following Todres and Galvin (2008), the interviews were envisaged as embodied performances with a focus on reflexive awareness of the researcher's engagement with the emotional, embodied and performed aspects of the interviews. During traditional semi-structured interviews, the researcher is in the privileged position of control, however, using imaginative variation disrupts these traditional dynamics. The participant has determined the experiential moment in focus by providing the written account, and they take an active role in experimenting with those moments by varying particular experiential aspects. Rather than the researcher having 'obtained' a descriptive account of a particular experience, imaginative variation enables the participant to remember their chosen erotic experiential moments in visceral detail and communicate them. It is the quality of the shared, embodied interaction between participant and researcher that contributes to the recounting of the experiential moment and the success of the imaginative variation. The participants are revisiting some successful and unsuccessful erotic experiences, which are often emotionally charged, and the researcher should remain in the open attitude to understand the subjective meanings as lived by the participants. The interview questions asked for visceral examples of events; emotional and bodily sensations, moods, embodied emotions, levels of awareness and atmospheres in order for the researcher to grasp how the experience of BDSM was lived. By facilitating the participants to recall their experiential moments during BDSM, rather than simply asking them to describe or imagine an event, captures the textual (what was experienced) and the structural (how it is experienced), and offered interesting and insightful data into the lived experience of consensual BDSM.

Discussion

This section will reflect on the use of imaginative variation to help participants engage with the phenomena under investigation, examine the implications of this for phenomenological (and other qualitative) research, before presenting a discussion of the potential limitations of this technique along with some concluding comments.

Often when conducting research, unanticipated issues and problems arise that require creative and innovative solutions, as was the case in the development of imaginative variation in the first author's research. The data gathered with the use of this technique were highly descriptive, rich in detail and captured the subtle nuances in the lived experience of BDSM eroticism while managing to avoid the verbalisation difficulties observed during the first stage of research. Idhe (1986) advocates a dynamic and active use of phenomenological experiments in phenomenological research, which can add excitement and autonomy to the research process. Framing the imaginative variation technique as a tool to be used by the researcher during analysis and *also* with participants during interview may assist researchers to engage in phenomenological research on a truly grounded level. The first author found this technique as applied to participants during interviews extremely helpful in elucidating information at a micro level. Seemingly small and insignificant alterations to BDSM fantasies made a huge difference to the eroticism of the scenes for participants, and by using imaginative variation the importance of these nuances was recognised. This technique can be used to tease out fine detail of the lived experience of any phenomenon, though it appears to be particularly useful for sensitive topics that might be difficult to articulate.

This creative and participatory use of imaginative variation offers exciting possibilities, not only for phenomenological research but also for other methodological approaches. Approaches that share an experiential focus with phenomenology might draw some use from this technique. Some narrative approaches could use imaginative variation during interviews and oral history gathering with participants. The technique may assist participants to reflect on their stories and take up an alternative position to re-examine their life episodes and important life events to clarify meanings and understandings. Grounded theory could also utilise imaginative variation during research interviews to clarify the ways that participants understand and interpret the processes of social interactions and the meanings assigned to these. This technique is not limited to use during individual interviews, it would be effective for dyads, group interviews and focus groups, as well as when researching with children.

Limitations

Although using imaginative variation creatively with participants was successful in the present study, the first author did encounter certain limitations while engaging with the technique in this way. The success of imaginative variation at enabling participants to express the particularly nuanced details about their lived experiences of BDSM was still dependent, to a degree, on participants' own ability to express themselves and articulate meanings. Thus while using the technique was generally helpful, some participants took to it more readily and used it more thoroughly than others.

As part of the brief detailing the instructions on writing the descriptive experiential account, the first author added that participants could bring a meaningful or interesting item or object with them to the interview. It was explained this could be anything that was related to their experiences of BDSM, such as a photograph, item of clothing, restraint and so on. The purpose of this was that the item would act as a memory trigger and lead to increased detail during the imaginative variation experiments. However, none of the participants brought anything to the interview. King and Horrocks (2010) state that participants require a very clear brief that explains

what is required of them, so perhaps this part of the instruction was not clear enough, and appeared as an insignificant addition to the request for a written account. It may be the case however, that using imaginative variation alongside visual materials requires some modifications to the technique.

Conclusion

This article has discussed the way the phenomenological technique of imaginative variation can be used differently from the traditional manner as detailed by Husserl (1936/1970). This creative use of the technique was used during research conducted by the first author in a bid to overcome the articulation difficulties experienced by research participants when describing their lived erotic experiences of engaging in consensual BDSM.

The authors propose that this technique could be applied to other marginalised and suppressed sexualities in order to explore the lived experiences of such phenomena. For example, the authors suggest that this type of imaginative variation would be useful in research investigating invisible sexualities, such as elderly or disabled people's experiences around sex and sexuality. Often the sexual experiences of these groups are neglected or ignored (Vares, 2009, Kim, 2011), and using imaginative variation during participant interviews would provide direct, in-depth accounts containing salient descriptive features. The paper advocates the use of imaginative variation in this way for use more broadly than in sex research alone, and suggest it would be useful for any phenomenon that is considered 'sensitive', or that participants may have difficulty describing. Topics where this technique would be particularly useful include, but are not limited to; transgendered embodiment, the experiences of refugees or displaced peoples and the experiences of specific traumatic life events. Imaginative variation enables the elucidation of minute and nuanced details that may not be captured using more conventional interview techniques. King and Horrocks (2010) note that making comparisons between the experience under study and other, similar examples can be useful to clarify distinct experiential aspects. Using imaginative variation would elucidate the subjectivity and encourage participants to describe & articulate subtle experiential differences of a phenomenon. The authors propose that this technique would be fruitful when researching phenomena that are experienced as internally directed bodily feelings by an individual, such as feelings of boredom, daydreaming and creativity. Topics such as these are worthy of research, however, they may be challenging to study due to participants' difficulties of explaining *what the experience is like* for them. Using imaginative variation could assist participants to consider the experiential subtleties involved in their own personal experiences of these phenomena, and thus provide illuminating data for analysis.

The primary purpose of this creative technique is to enhance participants' descriptions, and at the heart of all phenomenology is concrete and detailed description of some phenomenon, therefore using imaginative variation in this way would certainly be useful for phenomenological research. The possibilities for this technique are exciting and powerful, since there can be a shift away from naturalistic variations to the realm of fantasy (Langdrige, 2007) and beyond. It is important to recognise that researchers should consider the ways to use this technique for a particular study, rather than applying it as a recipe for success or a 'one size fits all' approach. If used in a manner appropriate to the study, this alternative conceptualisation of imaginative variation offers a range of useful and exciting possibilities for researchers.

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