



Doing it Differently: Engaging Interview Participants with Imaginative Variation

by Emma L. Turley, Surya Monro and Nigel King

Abstract

The phenomenological technique of imaginative variation was identified by Husserl (1936/1970) as conducive to elucidating the manner in which phenomena appear to consciousness. In brief, 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 epoché. Imaginative variation is a stage aimed at explicating the structures of experience more distinctively, 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 envisaged this process as ultimately definitive of the essential elements 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 paper is to present a radically novel way of using imaginative variation as an interview technique by engaging the participants in imaginative variation in order to elicit a richly detailed 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 and submission, and sadism and masochism (BDSM), before considering the usefulness of this technique when applied to areas of study beyond human sexuality.

Introduction

The purpose of this paper 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 and submission, and sadism and masochism (BDSM). Before outlining the innovative use of imaginative variation in the current study, some background in terms of the research problem will be provided.

Phenomenological research methods set out to move beyond the obscuring influence of the natural attitude that pervades everyday life and can impede grasping the meanings of lived experience (Husserl, 1931/1967). Many such methods involve requesting participants to describe particular experiences in vivid detail. Lived experience, however, can be difficult for participants to articulate, requiring as it does that the individual reflect on that which is normally taken for granted. We would argue that this difficulty tends to be exacerbated in relation to certain areas of the life-world. These would include experiences that may not be considered

socially or culturally acceptable, thus leading either to reticence or to the hijacking of personal experiences by dominant discourses. A perceived lack of common reference points with the researcher may also inhibit a research interview.

Turley (2012) highlighted the problems encountered when relying on participants' descriptions of lived erotic experiences. Along with not providing sufficient detail in their descriptions, participants 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. The problems posed by difficulties such as those outlined above are what this paper seeks to address in its focus on a particular empirical example, the essential nature of the lived erotic experiences of consensual bondage, discipline, dominance and submission, and sadism and 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 within a phenomenological framework, the researcher would adopt the phenomenological attitude (Giorgi, 2006) and be in constant engagement with the epoché and phenomenological reduction, as detailed by Husserl, in order to avoid working within the natural attitude. Along with the epoché and phenomenological reduction, imaginative variation is an analytic method available to phenomenological researchers for the purpose of examining how a particular phenomenon presents itself to the consciousness of the researcher. The established aim of utilising imaginative variation in a phenomenological analysis is to elucidate meanings inherent to the experience under study. It involves the researcher considering the phenomenon being experienced from different perspectives by imaginatively altering various features of the phenomenon. As maintained by Husserl (1936/1970), this process will reveal the essences of an experience, as only those aspects that are invariant to the experience of the particular 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 in her phenomenological study of the lived erotic experience of consensual bondage, discipline, dominance and submission, and sadism and masochism (BDSM). The nine participants recruited for the study ranged in age from mid-20 to mid-40, and identified across the spectrum of sexualities, with their BDSM role preferences ranging from dominant (or top) and submissive (or bottom) roles, although some liked to switch between these sexual roles. The 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 template approach (King, 1998, 2012) was used within a broad interpretative phenomenological framework influenced by Merleau-Ponty's (1945/1962) approach, where lived embodied experience is foregrounded. In template analysis, the researcher starts by developing an initial coding template of hierarchical themes, usually on the basis of a sub-set of the data. This initial template is then used as a starting point for the consideration of further data. Where this leads to the recognition that the initial themes do not capture the phenomenon described, the template is modified by adding or re-defining themes. Analysis proceeds by way of an iterative process of revising and re-applying the template until the researcher is satisfied that it enables her or him to successfully characterise and interpret the data set as a whole. As a generic technique, template analysis is compatible with a range of methodological positions (see Brooks, McCluskey, Turley, & King, 2015). When used phenomenologically, the emphasis must necessarily be on flexibility and depth of analysis – in which regard, we find the iterative approach to template development very helpful, since it encourages the researcher to think carefully about the meaning of every theme.

Potentially problematic in using template analysis for a phenomenological study is that its focus is typically on across-case rather than within-case analysis, and there is thus a risk of losing the holistic nature of the individual interviews. A useful technique used in this research in order to avoid this is the construction of case summaries (Brooks et al., 2015). For each interview, the researcher produced a case summary which aimed to capture something of the context of the interview and provided a record of her immediate thoughts and embodied reactions to the interview. This enabled each individual participant's experiences to be foregrounded during the analysis. In an interpretative phenomenological use of template analysis, there is also no need for aspects of experiences to be common across most or all cases in order for them to inform the definition of a theme. For examples of the phenomenological use of template analysis, see Hardy, King, and Rodriguez, 2014; King, Carroll, Newton, and Dornan, 2002; McLachlan, King, Wenger, and Dornan, 2012.

During an earlier stage in the project, participants were interviewed with regard to 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 in the context of BDSM participation. The participants were not shy or embarrassed to talk about their BDSM play, and had discussed the sexual aspect in terms of an enjoyable

and gratifying experience; however, they frequently relied on commonly available pseudo-scientific scripts or discourses, such as “a rush of endorphins”, to describe their sexual experiences. There was an absence of input regarding the sexual triggers and erotic constituents of BDSM. Those aspects of BDSM play that are most 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 the participants displayed when trying to articulate their thoughts. All of the participants at some point during the interview grappled with verbalising their thoughts in clear and expressive language. Jackson (2003) notes that there is a lack of language of eroticism, with the difficulty that arises from this inevitably being that the representative lexicon of sexual pleasure is constrained. There are linguistic absences when discussing sexual desires, insofar as language relates to sexual acts rather than to feelings, sensations and emotions (Frye, 1990, pp. 310-311; Jackson, 2003, p. 170).

The issue for the present research was *how* to get beyond these lay descriptions and effectively enable participants to vividly express and engage with their lived experiences of BDSM participation. It was thus considered whether engaging participants in making comparisons between examples of a fulfilling and a non-fulfilling recent BDSM experience would elicit more detail about how they actually experienced BDSM, and whether 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 involved in this practice such as thoughts, emotions and sensations.

In collecting data, a combination of written accounts and participant-specific interviews was used. Each of the research participants was required 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 other 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 provided by the participant. The rationale for using a combination of both written accounts and individually tailored interview schedules was to maximise the potential depth of description of the phenomenon of BDSM. Writing the accounts enabled the participants to reflect and focus on their experiences, and to recollect the detail of what occurred along with their associated thoughts and feelings. As participants were free to select the experiences they wanted to discuss, the possibility of their being influenced by the agenda of the researcher was reduced. As pointed to by King and Horrocks (2010), interviewees can become

“swept along” with the researcher’s agenda and guiding of the dialogue; using the participants’ written accounts as the interview basis therefore minimised the influence of the researcher’s agenda and allowed the 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 interpretative phenomenological analysis. Combining this method of data collection with the semi-structured interview method allowed the researcher 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. Ong (1982) notes that, in comparison with oral accounts, written accounts tend to be more temporally ordered, cohesive, focused and, in particular, self-reflexive, thus yielding greater depth of detail. Handy and Ross (2005) further point out that, when writing accounts, participants can consider the questions carefully before responding, plan their responses, and put these in writing at a pace of their own choosing. In the context of this study, the written accounts therefore allowed for self-reflection and detailed focus on the topic at hand, which, in turn, served as a stimulus for the participant interviews, thus achieving the level of depth and detail necessary for an interpretative phenomenological analysis.

Langdridge (2007) contends that producing adequate written descriptions can place pressure on participants in terms of the time demands and the effort required to produce the content of the accounts. This can be countered by providing participants with a clear brief explaining exactly what is required. The participants in this study were informed of the specific type of experience and contextual details to describe as vividly as possible, and given a general guide as to the length of the requested 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 of where the experience took place.
- Details of what happened.
- Details of thoughts, emotions and physical feelings during the experience.
- About one side of A4 paper in length per account.

As we have noted, imaginative variation is usually used by the researcher only during the analytic process; for this study, however, the researcher 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 to elucidate the main erotic constituents of the experience. During the interviews, the researcher used the erotic aspects of BDSM provided as part of the written descriptions as a basis and asked the participants to imaginatively alter these aspects in various ways, and to consider whether then

the changed element still appeared to be erotic.

See Table 1 below 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 and open your mouth. Satin just doesn't have that restrictive feeling. <i>[Tom, late 20s, specialist nurse, homosexual, North West England, UK]</i>
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?	That doesn't arouse me <i>at all</i> . 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. <i>[Tom, late 20s, specialist nurse, homosexual, North West England, UK]</i>
Can you imagine the effect on your sexual experience if you didn't wear the collar?	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 effect 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 on my sexual experience; I wouldn't be as committed. <i>[Annie, mid 20s, civil servant, bisexual, South West England, UK]</i>

<p>So imagine that they weren't wearing masks and that you could clearly see their faces, how would this affect the experience?</p>	<p>I think it would make a big difference, to be 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. [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. [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 the participants to produce two written accounts, one of a positive BDSM experience, and the other of a negative experience. Making comparisons using imaginative variation can assist participants to clarify at a fine level of distinction 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 interpretative phenomenological analysis.

A distinction should be recognised in this research between simply asking a participant to describe and/or imagine his or her lived experience, as compared to facilitating a participant's recall of an experiential moment during the research interviews. Finlay (2006) warns against focusing only on words during participant interviews, pointing out that, since experience is pre-reflective, using techniques that enable the participant to get closer to the experiential moments in question will yield richer data. The recalling of an experiential moment, rather than asking participants to describe or imagine, is a less mechanistic process, and thus allows the researcher to appreciate the participants' existential

experiences in a more reflexive and empathetic way (Finlay, 2006). Todres's (2008) embodied relational understanding is relevant in this regard. In the present study, the researcher treated the interview situation as a relational moment occurring in the lived world and comprising a meaningful connection for those involved.

For the phenomenological researcher, being with a participant's lived experiential moment as it is recounted in the course of the interview is an embodied intuitive event. Developing an understanding of those moments requires the whole of the body, since 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 researcher achieved by going beyond simple descriptions of the participants' lived experiences of BDSM during the interviews. Lived embodied experience is imbued with textures, and it was the researcher's aim to capture these through the participants' respective recollections of their experiential moments during BDSM, and to gain an understanding of the experiential possibilities available to them during the BDSM scene. Gendlin's (1962, 1981) practice of experiential focusing was useful in terms of rendering the researcher open and present to the participants' accounts, as she accordingly attended to her body's sense of the participants' experiential

meanings. Finlay (2006) noted the importance of the researcher's paying attention during the interview to the body of the participant as well as his or her own, since attending closely to participants' bodies and gestures can provide insight into the ways the phenomenon had been experienced in the lived moment through a shared embodied intersubjectivity.

Following Ezzy (2010), as well as Todres and Galvin (2008), the interviews in this study were envisaged as embodied performances, with the researcher focused on "reflexive awareness of, and engagement with, the emotional, embodied, and performed dimensions of the interview" (Ezzy, 2010, p. 163). During traditional semi-structured interviews, the researcher is in the privileged position of control; these traditional dynamics are, however, disrupted when using imaginative variation. The participant not only determines the experiential moment in focus by providing the written account, but s/he takes an active role in experimenting with each focal moment by varying certain experiential aspects. Rather than the researcher merely having "obtained" a given descriptive account of a particular experience, imaginative variation enables the participant to recall his or her chosen erotic experiential moments in visceral detail and to communicate them accordingly. It is the quality of the shared embodied interaction between the participant and the researcher that contributes to the recounting of the experiential moment and the effectiveness of the imaginative variation. When, as in the case of this study, the research participants are revisiting experiences which are often emotionally charged, such as certain successful and unsuccessful erotic experiences, the researcher should remain in the open attitude in order 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. Facilitating the participants' recall of their lived experiential moments during BDSM, rather than simply asking them to describe or imagine an event, captured both the textual (what was experienced) and the structural (how it is experienced), and yielded interesting and insightful data on the lived experience of consensual BDSM.

Discussion

In this section, we will reflect on the use of imaginative variation as a means of helping participants to engage with the phenomenon under investigation, and examine the implications of this for phenomenological (and other qualitative) research, before proceeding to a discussion of the potential limitations of this technique, followed by some concluding comments.

Often, when conducting research, unanticipated issues

and problems arise that require creative and innovative solutions, as was the case in this study, leading to the researcher's development of imaginative variation as a means of data collection. The data gathered with the use of this technique were highly descriptive and rich in detail, and captured the subtle nuances in the lived experience of BDSM eroticism by managing to avoid the verbalisation difficulties observed during the first stage of the research. Ihde (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 not only during analysis but *also* with participants during interviews may assist researchers to engage in phenomenological research on a more truly grounded level. In the study presented, the researcher found the application of this technique as part of the interview process extremely helpful in elucidating the information given at a micro level. Seemingly small and insignificant alterations to BDSM fantasies made a huge difference to the eroticism of the scenes for the participants, and using imaginative variation enabled the importance of these nuances to be recognised. While this technique can be used to tease out fine detail of the lived experience of any phenomenon, it would appear to be particularly useful for sensitive topics that might be difficult to articulate.

This creative and participatory use of the process 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 derive some use from this technique. 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 in order to clarify meanings and understandings. Grounded theory could similarly utilise imaginative variation during interviews to clarify the ways in which participants understand and interpret the processes of social interactions and the meanings assigned to these. The use of this technique is also not limited to individual interviews; it would be effective too in the context of dyads, group interviews and focus groups, as well as when interviewing children.

Limitations

Although utilising imaginative variation creatively with participants proved effective in the study reported, the researcher nevertheless encountered certain limitations while engaging with the technique in this way.

The effectiveness of imaginative variation in enabling participants to express the particularly nuanced details of their lived experiences of BDSM was inevitably still

dependent on the 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 did others.

In briefing the participants on what was required when writing their descriptive experiential accounts, it was added that they could bring a meaningful or interesting item or object with them to the interview. It was made clear that this could be anything that was related to their experiences of BDSM, such as a photograph, an item of clothing, restraint, or the like. The purpose of this was for the item to act as a memory trigger and lead to the emergence of increased detail during the imaginative variation experiments. However, none of the participants brought anything to the interview. King and Horrocks (2010) point out that participants require a very clear brief that explains exactly what is required of them, so perhaps this part of the brief was not clear enough, and appeared to be an insignificant addition to the request for a written account. It may be the case, however, that utilising imaginative variation along with visual materials would require modification of the technique.

Conclusion

This paper has presented a way in which the technique of imaginative variation can be used differently from the traditional manner as proposed by Husserl (1936/1970). This innovative use of the phenomenological technique was implemented in the course of 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.

This technique could also be applied effectively in the case of other marginalised and suppressed sexualities to elucidate the lived experiences of such phenomena. For example, 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. Given that there has been a tendency for the sexual experiences of these groups to be either neglected or ignored (Kim, 2011; Vares, 2009), using imaginative variation during participant interviews would elicit direct, in-depth accounts containing salient descriptive features. The authors nevertheless advocate the use of imaginative variation in data collection more broadly than in sex research alone, and suggest that it would prove useful in the case of any phenomenon

considered "sensitive", or that research participants may have difficulty describing. While we acknowledge that, phenomenologically, all lived experience may be considered "hard-to-access", we would argue strongly that, above and beyond this, certain aspects of human experience would tend to present special challenges for the empirical researcher, due, for example, to their complexity, stigmatisation, or the lack of everyday vocabulary with which to describe them. Topics where this technique would be particularly useful include, but are not limited to, transgendered embodiment, the experiences of refugees or other displaced peoples, and lived experiences of any specific traumatic life event. Imaginative variation enables the elucidation of minute and nuanced details that may not be captured when relying on more conventional interview techniques. King and Horrocks (2010) furthermore 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 reflect on and articulate subtle experiential differences between similar phenomena. This technique would also, we suggest, prove fruitful when exploring phenomena experienced by individuals as internally directed bodily feelings, such as boredom, daydreaming, and creativity. Topics such as these are worthy of research; however, they may be challenging to study due to the difficulty participants tend to experience in describing *what the experience is like* for them personally. In this case, using imaginative variation could assist participants to consider the experiential subtleties involved in their personal experiences of these phenomena, and in the process provide illuminating data for analysis.

The primary purpose of this creative technique is to enhance participants' descriptions. Since, at the heart of all phenomenology, is concrete and richly detailed description of some phenomenon, using imaginative variation in the way presented in this paper would certainly be useful for phenomenological research. The possibilities offered by this technique are exciting and powerful, since, as pointed to by Langdridge (2007), it opens the way for a shift away from naturalistic variations to the realm of fantasy – and beyond. It is important, however, for researchers to recognise the need to consider ways in which to use this technique in relation to 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 embarked on, this alternative conceptualisation of imaginative variation offers a wide range of useful and exciting possibilities for researchers.

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About the Authors



Emma L. Turley
Senior Lecturer in Psychology
Manchester Metropolitan University, UK
E-mail address: e.turley@mmu.ac.uk

Emma L. Turley is a Senior Lecturer in Psychology at Manchester Metropolitan University in the United Kingdom. Dr Turley is interested in gender, feminism, LGBTQ+ sexualities and erotic minorities, particularly BDSM, and the ways in which these can be understood and experienced from a non-pathologising perspective. Other specialist areas of interest include qualitative research methods, especially phenomenological psychology and experiential research, and the use of innovative data collection techniques.



Surya Monro
Associate Professor of Sociology and Social Policy
University of Huddersfield, UK
E-mail address: s.monro@hud.ac.uk

Surya Monro is a Professor in Sociology and Social Policy based at the University of Huddersfield in the United Kingdom. She has published widely in the fields of gender and sexuality, notably on the topic of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender equalities. Prof Munro is the author of *Gender Politics: Citizenship, Activism, and Sexual Diversity* (Pluto Press, 2005), co-author (with Diane Richardson) of *Sexuality, Equality and Diversity* (Palgrave MacMillan, 2012), and author of *Bisexuality: Identities, Politics and Theories* (Palgrave MacMillan, 2015).



Nigel King
Professor of Applied Psychology
University of Huddersfield, UK
E-mail address: n.king@hud.ac.uk

Nigel King is Professor in Applied Psychology at the University of Huddersfield in the United Kingdom. He has a longstanding interest in the development and use of qualitative methods in psychology, particularly the template analysis style of thematic analysis. More recently he has pioneered the Pictor technique – a diagrammatic visual method for exploring perceptions of roles and relationships. His substantive interests include collaborative working in health and social care, experiences of illness, and human relationships with the natural world.

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