

# SAGE Research Methods Cases

## Imaginal Resonance: Imagery and Creative Expression in Qualitative Research

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# Imaginal Resonance: Imagery and Creative Expression in Qualitative Research

## Link to the Research Output

- Netzer, D. (2008). *Mystical poetry and imagination: Inspiring transpersonal awareness of spiritual freedom (Doctoral dissertation)*. Institute of Transpersonal Psychology, Palo Alto, CA. Available from ProQuest database (DA3316128).

This case exemplifies the role of imagery and creative expression in qualitative research. Imaginal resonance is a method of gathering and interpreting data through mental imaging, creative expression, and embodied writing. The method was developed as part of the design of an Intuitive Inquiry. In response to a recitation of mystical poetry, participants were asked to mentally image the poem, create an artwork, and write about their experience with attention to subtle body sensations and feelings, as a way of describing their felt response to the poem's imagery rather than their rational analysis of it. In addition to traditional Thematic Content Analysis, I sought to mirror the procedures undertaken by the participants in their interpretive response to their creative expression. Imaginal resonance can be applied under several overarching phenomenological and hermeneutic methods in the social sciences, where human experience is explored on conscious and subconscious levels. Imaginal resonance is particularly appropriate in the analysis of nonverbal data (e.g. visual artwork, music, dance), responding in the imaginal language of the data, yet in a structured and systematic manner that unifies the researcher's intuitive and imaginative interpretation.

## Learning Outcomes

- Learn about the background and procedures of the Imaginal Resonance qualitative research method

- Understand the role of the researcher as gatherer and interpreter of images and imagery-based verbal data
- Consider the value and limitations of imaginative and creative approaches to data analysis

## Introduction

The qualitative research method highlighted in this article was developed during my doctoral research, an *intuitive inquiry* (a transpersonal research method originated by Rosemarie Anderson at the Institute of Transpersonal Psychology, since renamed Sofia University). My topic pertained to the role of imagination in spiritual development. The reading of mystical poetry, as presented in the literature of various spiritual traditions, can be a form of meditation toward spiritual development. The purpose of my research was to explore the nature of individuals' response to mystical poetry in its own imaginal language. I empirically examined the value of imaginal processes, such as mental imaging and creative expression, as inspirational of participants' awareness of their *spiritual freedom* (spiritual freedom was defined as a recognition of that which extends infinitely beyond one's personal boundaries, including oneself, others, the visible and the invisible, the known and the unknown).

My data included mental imagery and the participants' creative expression in response to recitation of nature-inspired mystical poetry (i.e. poems by mystics from various religious traditions, which alluded to a relationship with the Divine through images of the natural world). After a brief centering activity, participants listened to the recitation of the poem with closed eyes and were asked to mentally image the poem. They then recalled their image in a descriptive manner (without added commentary). The third step included the creation of an artwork and embodied writing about their experiences, with attention to subtle bodily sensations and feelings.

The purpose of this approach to prompting participants' felt response to the poems was to focus on imaginative, personal resonance (consonance or dissonance) rather than rational analysis of the poem. My assumption was that the poem's spiritual wisdom will likely be more inspiring and personally integrated into daily life if responded to in the poem's own imaginal, creative language. To complement a Thematic Content Analysis

(TCA), when interpreting the data, I structured a set of procedures that facilitated my own imaginal resonance with the data through mental imagery, creative expression, and embodied writing. My rationale for data gathering was therefore mirrored in my approach to data analysis.

## Intuitive and Imaginative Researching

Qualitative researchers have traditionally utilized verbal accounts, texts, narratives, and the researcher's written description and interpretation as primary modes of data presentation, analysis, and discussion. In the last three decades, however, as discussed by Norman Denzin and Yvonna Lincoln in *The Landscape of Qualitative Research*, with the expansion of multiple paradigms in qualitative research (e.g. constructivism, hermeneutics, feminism, cultural studies), the field has confronted a crisis of representation pertaining to the adequacy of description and interpretation of human experience on behalf of researchers.

With the acknowledgement of the researcher as a transparent instrument in the study, and a recognition of research participants and audiences as equally authoritative in the assessment of validity, there has been an opening for multiple modes of data gathering and response to the data that go beyond the literal, venturing into the intuitive and imaginal, and considering the research process itself as an aesthetic representation of experience, the outcomes of which are intersubjective (through the interactions among all who are exposed to the research experience).

The inclusion of creative and personally expressive forms of writing (vastly different from the aloof observations of the bygone ethnographer) as well as arts-based data and the researcher's visual response to data, has been increasingly prevalent in the research of human experience, especially the deeper (beyond cognition and behavior), more complex, *lived experiences*, such as compassion, forgiveness, creativity, love, joy, spirituality and faith, and exceptional human experiences.

Rosemarie Anderson and William Braud, in *Transforming Self and Others Through Research: Transpersonal Research Methods and Skills for the Human Sciences and Humanities*, suggest that research methods must meet the fullness of human

experience rather than diminish its meaning by attempting to reduce its complexity with tight controls. They urge researchers to open to the transformative dimensions of the research *process* through expanded epistemologies and the inclusion of *multiple ways of knowing* that involve all the senses, conscious and unconscious processes, play, imagination, creative expression, as well as intuition and embodied awareness.

The term *Bricoleur* (a quilt or collage maker, an assembler of images) has thus emerged in the literature of qualitative research methods to describe a researcher who is creative, resourceful, innovative, intuitive, introspective, self-reflective, poetic, and open to multiple ways of knowing and communicating—a researcher who responds to the complexity of human experience in a unifying manner that integrates the raw data, and is able to reconstruct a new, meaningful whole, inclusive of the researcher's interpretive engagement with the data, and open to the readers' or viewers' resonance with emerging meaning (by now intersubjective in nature). This liberal approach to research inevitably results in a richer understanding of the questions at hand, as well as a humble recognition of the limits inherent in all modes of inquiry.

## Multiple Ways of Knowing

As a transpersonal scholar, I view the research of human experience as I do human experience itself. *Transpersonal* implies an interconnection and co-creative dynamics among all aspects of life—the seen and the unseen, the known and the unknown (through and beyond personal experience). These co-creative dynamics exist both in what I choose to research and in how I go about it. William Braud asked in a seminal article, *Can research be transpersonal?* He concluded that research is transpersonal when it is transformative and carries all who are involved beyond its initial knowledge boundaries. Research is transpersonal when it is integrative of all human dimensions: the body and the senses, feelings and intuition, rational cognition, creativity, play, and a spiritual connection to a larger dimension. *Transforming Self and Others Through Research*, by Anderson and Braud, is an excellent resource on the value and methods of including multiple and diverse ways of knowing in qualitative and mixed-methods research. In this article, I shall highlight three modes of knowing that have played a significant role in my research data gathering and interpretation: *experiential*, *imaginal*, and *embodied*.

# Experiential Knowing

Abraham Maslow termed *experiential knowing* to differentiate it from *spectator knowledge* (the latter being the cornerstone of the scientific method). Rather than a neutral, by-standing perceiver, the experiential researcher seeks to know through his or her own experience of the data, by ‘becoming’ (if only imaginally) that which he or she wishes to know. In the process of my research, I realized that experiential knowing means shifting from the need to explain for the sake of control, to paying attention for the sake of a more intimate relationship with the multidimensionality of human experience, ultimately for the purpose of giving voice to its enigmatic and ever-changing patterns.

# Imaginal Knowing

Carl Jung and Roberto Assagioli observed that the imagination is a multilevel function, which integrates sensations, feelings, thinking, and intuition. It is outside the province of reason, yet can become a channel for self-observation, ingathering, storing, transforming, and, ultimately, integrating new awareness. Robert Romanyshyn, an imaginal psychologist and researcher, defined an imaginal approach to research as one that shifts the traditional perspective of the research–researcher dynamics. Within the imaginal approach, the researcher is claimed by the research and discovers as much about himself or herself as about the topic in question. This approach requires a state of reverie and attunement to subtle nuances in the data, as perceived by the researcher in an unmediated manner, in a soulful manner. In the case of my dissertation study, the poetic and the empirical were woven into one process, where the poetic imagination served as the topical focus as well as the vehicle to generate empirical data and uncover meaning.

# Embodied Knowing

Embodied knowing emerges through present attention, sensorial awareness, and inward tuning to the nuances of body language in ways that do not divorce participants and researchers from the original experience they wish to convey. Rosemarie Anderson developed *embodied writing* as a self-reflective research method in response to the predominant, scholarly writing style she felt fell short in capturing the subtleties of human experience as expressed through the body. Embodied writing engages all five senses as well as the visceral and intuitive. It honors the phenomenological, lived experience as a valid source of knowledge that can serve researchers and their research participants in collecting authentic data. The awareness of embodied knowing may be gradually uncovered in the process of sensing and feeling the body and recording the information it reveals. This method of writing is not concerned with linear narrative, grammar, and syntax, it is more aligned with the language of poetry and the imaginal, which is perceived at once and as a whole, rather than through formal discourse.

# Imaginal Resonance in Data Gathering

In my study, participants' responses to the poetry recitations were highly experiential, far from an intellectual analysis you likely recall from literature courses. By engaging with the poems via mental imagery and creative expression, the participants attuned to the poem as a lived experience and integrated it as their own experience (rather than the poet's). Their artwork and embodied writing reflected their inner worlds—thoughts and emotions that surfaced when their imagination was unleashed—and their capacity to create freely was encouraged.

# Data Gathering Procedure

Data gathering was done in five groups of 4–6 participants each. Following a brief warm up (creating a group artwork) to help participants settle into the study environment (see

dissertation document for details on the group activity), data were gathered through the following steps:

- Mental imaging in response to the recitation of a mystical poem
- Oral descriptive report of the mental image in present tense
- Recording of the description in writing
- Creative expression in art media
- Embodied writing
- Brief, written reports of awareness of changes in mood, bodily sensations, thoughts, and feeling during the session

Below is an example of a poem by Collette Aboulker-Muscat, and excerpts from two participants' imaginal resonance through mental imagery, creative expression, and embodied writing. These examples show how responses clearly reflect the participants' inner world, rather than an analysis of the poem.

## Mental Imaging Guidelines and Poem

Close your eyes. Uncross your legs. Regulate your breathing, long exhalations through the mouth and normal inhalations through the nose. Beginning with a long exhalation through the mouth, count three cycles of breathing. Now, see, sense, and feel ...

Perfect, polished, round mirror

Where the soul of my heart

Is clearly reflected

Sunny orb, flowing fountain

Outpouring the starry sand

of Creation.

In a grain of sand all the heavens.

In a drop of light  
All the Universe.  
I am round.  
A flying round bird  
Soaring from star to star  
And singing.  
Breathe out once, and open your eyes.

## Example 1: Imaginal Resonance

I see a round old-fashioned mirror. Gold rimmed—not like the kind I'd buy. I can't see me in there. A bright light (the sun) is coming from the mirror and sand is coming toward me, and being thrown at me, out of the mirror. The handful of sand becomes one grain. The grain becomes part of a larger cosmos, where a bird, a very colorful bird, is playfully circling and singing, going from star to star. The golden glow recedes. The light has turned into darkness. Planets and lots of stars are all around. (see [Figure 1](#))

*Figure 1. Expressive art image created by participant P-02. Watercolors on paper (11# x 15#).*



## Example 1: Embodied Writing

Exciting, free flowing, focused, home, warm, peaceful, powerful, familiar images, with colors—no black, moving all the colors between black and white. Sense of responsibility and purpose as I'm the colorful bird—purpose to see the word as a circle equals one. Express myself now—this is it ... with no correction. There are three concentric circles, or more spiraling out. I'm not dizzy. I don't know anymore which one is the grain, or orb or the mirror. The bird is the inertia, leading out ... Time does not exist if I look at the earth from this angle. I can barely remember the poem now. I'm swept up in the never-ending spiral of circles.

## Example 1: Experience as a Whole

In the beginning I was frustrated that I couldn't remember the poem. When I got into the painting, the poem didn't matter anymore as I remembered the basics—three circles, sand, bird, colors, universe, movement. I loved the silence of the session.

## Example 2: Imaginal Resonance

Mental image: A round mirror. No reflection. A sense of my heart that in some point will show in the mirror, revealing itself. Star sand is outpouring from my heart. I see the star Tarot card, which is a star of finding one's way at night, in the dark. And the round bird—it is an interesting body to be in ... a round body flying in the night, in the dark universe. Cool expanse of darkness and star points of illumination: light, darkness, space. (see [Figure 2](#))

*Figure 2. Expressive art image created by participant P-03. Acrylics on paper (15# x 22#).*



## Example 2: Embodied Writing

In the beginning it is simple black lines, a neat structure I go for color, fire, the feeling of going outside the lines, and suddenly I feel unhappy with how it looks. Then the black writing becomes an obsession. I hurry. I can't get the writing fast enough. I am pleased. My heart races. My mind in awe of all this writing that shifts the painting into something else.

## Example 2: Experience as a Whole

I was struck how I could transform the drawing, which I didn't like, into a pleasurable experience that felt very freeing. I also felt more energy, when this happened. I was surprised at the end result of the painting. I have never done anything like that before, as though the 'no reflection' in the mirror shape shifted into painting.

## Imaginal Resonance in Data Analysis

Hermeneutics is a process of reconstruction of meaning, which is derived from the *lifeworld*, a term coined by Edmond Husserl for the corporeal dimension between the transcendental and the objective. The lifeworld is the world of the immediately lived experience within an intersubjective, collective realm—the source of original transmission prior to analytical perception or all thoughts *about* it. Images are a potent vehicle in hermeneutical analysis because they capture the whole of knowing, integrating past memory and present experience.

Textual TCA and examination of my preliminary assumptions against the verbal accounts of the participants' experience in response to the poems uncovered various themes pertaining to the nature of the imaginal resonance process. For example, that imaginal resonance with nature-inspired mystical poetry generated an *Immediate Knowing* (doubtlessness and meaningfulness in the value of this meditative and creative process). However, the longer time passed, following the initial imaginal resonance experience, the more doubtful the participants were regarding the validity of the imagery and its value. Furthermore, their responses became increasingly more analytical when discussing their recollection of the experience (e.g. in completing follow-up questionnaires 1 week and 1 month later).

To augment traditional approaches to data analysis, and in order to respond to the images in their own imaginal language, I employed Maslow's theory of experiential knowing by immersing myself in the visual data with attention to my cognitive, imaginative, and visceral responses to it. I postponed rational, logical analysis (judging, defining, and classifying in words), and instead did what I asked my participants to

do, namely, engage in what Maslow described as *fusion knowing*—a kind of melting together with the world—keeping in mind the data I gathered and surrounded myself with. Similarly, I invited the readers/viewers of the study's interpretive findings to postpone discursive thought and to engage in an experiential knowing of the raw data, before they proceed to the analysis and discussion chapters.

## Data Analysis Procedure

I approached the data by inhabiting the *lifeworld* expressed in the images and artwork, allowing the creator within me to resonate with the meaning that emerged through the encounter. Through periods dedicated to reverie, mental imaging, expressive art, and embodied writing, I derived my intuitive sense about the data and its meaning as a whole, in light of my original question regarding the participants' imaginal resonance as an inspirational medium of transpersonal awareness of spiritual freedom.

The need to structure my intuitive response to the data led me to an integration of Maslow's theory of *experiential knowing* and Claire Petitmengin-Peugeot's *diachronic model of intuition* into a five-step procedure, which I followed as I reviewed the participants' imagery. This procedure aimed to cultivate my awareness of internal processes while responding to nonverbal data:

- Immersion and interior listening
- Waiting and open experience
- Availability and innocence
- Unconditional acceptance and intuition
- Surrendering and a closing procedure

The following are excerpts from my research journal, to exemplify the insight that emerged in this process.

## Immersion and Interior Listening

I began my experiential, intuitive engagement with the data by setting aside sacred time to dwell with the data at different times of day and in different spaces, indoors and outdoors—in nature. Whereas other parts of my analysis were done sitting at the computer, sorting through documents, or cutting and pasting pieces of the data in order to search for differences in the participants' responses, as well as uncover shared patterns, in this stage of engagement with the data, I sought to experience the data as a whole. I did not sit at a table, limited to the space it provided, but rather spread myself on the floor, surrounded by the participants' artwork, engaged in reverie in the early hours of the day, before I became distracted by the daily routines, and listened inwardly to the stirring of my muse. I used art media to respond to my own experience of imaginal resonance to the mystical poetry and observed the art phenomenologically, as an entity with a life of its own ... I transitioned into a state that requires stopping, stopping my own habitual pattern of being and doing, so as to truly listen—opening into discovering what I do not yet know ... I began with drawing the inner space in which listening to the data can continue (Figure 3).

*Figure 3. Ongoing cycles of creation. Pastels on paper (9# x 9#).*



## Waiting and Open Experience

I began to see the participants' artwork before me as a momentary stroke within the many cycles of creation, within each one of them and within the universe at large. I felt that the *immediate knowing* I sensed in the unique and spontaneous mental imaging and art expression was a glimpse into a broader sense of connection with self in relationship to the universe. The opportunity they each had to stop the mundane, and join others in a sacred space of listening to self, opened the door to the imaginal realm, which they shared, momentarily, with the mystical poet and with others in the space. I experienced my own art expression and that of the participants' as simultaneously infinite and finite ... The artwork showed a struggle to contain, structure, and manage the material aspect of expression within the limits of space, time, and matter ... My own image evolved as a circle. I felt the need to close its borders, yet felt an inward opening with every stroke. Each completion of movement, each application of color on the paper, was followed by blending with a gentle caressing in circular, softening movement. Dark colors begged for lighter ones to follow. I felt I could go on in this way forever ... My awareness of this possibility of endlessness felt as freedom of being,

without goals of becoming, but rather an ongoing engagement in exploration and discovery of a hidden mystery ...

## Availability and Innocence

I continued in this process of intuitive, experiential engagement with the data, listening to and trusting my own voice. I was not concerned with definitive answers, and welcomed further questions if those should arise. I felt available and receptive to knowing, should that arise as well. One evening, as I was driving on my way home from work, I noticed a full moon gloriously glowing in the misty sky above. Although the golden yellow of the moon was captivating, I felt my gaze drawn to the hazy edge, which appeared in the meeting of light and dark. Intuitively, there seemed to be a relationship between my view of the moon and my experience of working with data in my study ... Looking at the moon, I perceived its poetic quality. The haze, especially, felt like a form of communication about appearances and perceptions. Although the haze was physically a diminishment of light, that very edge—the meeting of light and dark—was where I felt most the intensity of the light and its relationship to darkness. Such had been my relationship with the process of imaginal resonance as expressed by the participants in my study. I was drawn to the seam between the imaginal (which was illuminated in the experiential session) and the material (as expressed, primarily, in the follow-up reports) ... I realized that my underlying questioning of the significance and possibilities embedded within the process of imaginal resonance was, repeatedly, taking me to the question of being in the world. Does ongoing imaginal engagement with the world and its manifold creations in all aspects of nature, human creativity being only one, shifts one's being in the world to a greater interconnectedness with the vastness of the universe: its physical and metaphysical expressions?

## Unconditional Acceptance and Intuition

The following night, I began working on a small painting ([Figure 4](#)). As I set my materials out, I was aware that I wanted to depict my experience of seeing the moon, though I did not know exactly how ... As I began to apply the colors to the paper, I knew

that my imaginal perception of the moon transported me from my car and the road, to a sacred place in nature. The imaginal became a vehicle for another sort of journey, toward another level of home, and on to another kind of path—not a busy, three-lane highway, but a side, meandering track—one that I and other travelers cultivate with each step we take. In this image, I was a tree, growing near a small source of water, and I was stretching my branches toward the light.

*Figure 4. Moonlit night. Watercolors on paper (6# x 9#).*



As the colors floated on the small paper, in continuous layering of shadows, I again reunited with the study's participants' expressions of imaginal resonance. Through their images, I traced my way back to the poems. They, too, were filled with the stirring of nature in all its dimensions: earthly and celestial beings, movement and stillness, light and dark, solitude and community. I now perceived the expression of spiritual freedom in this multiplicity of expressions, each seeking to Know, yet accepting of the limits of knowing ... Inviting the participants to engage in a practice of imaginal resonance elicited transpersonal awareness of spiritual freedom; however, at the same time, it engaged them in a limiting process, one that is limited by time and space ...

## Surrendering and a Closing Procedure

This last step of surrendering and closing may be, indeed, the surrendering of the limited to the limitless, of boundaries of time and space to infinity, but it is also, as my

experience showed me, the invitation of spiritual freedom to dwell within the limits of material existence, so it can be manifested and felt by our senses and shared with others.

... In the weeks to follow, some participants found themselves more aware of nature, others of relationships with loved ones, but for most, as the initial moment of awareness faded ... unless they actively and creatively integrated it into their daily lives ... Bringing closure to this portion of the study, I felt myself surrendering to its limits. I was emerging from this stage with an expanded understanding of the potential qualities of imaginal resonance with mystical poetry as well as accepting of its boundaries.

## Addressing Questions of Ethics and Validity

The question of ethics arises anytime researchers solicit disclosure of deep personal nature. Including imagery as research data may both conceal personal information and, at the same time, reveal unconscious material. It is important that the researcher limits the publication of data interpretation so as to not unduly expose participants beyond their consented contribution. Member-check is one way to ensure that participants confirm the study's outcomes. This procedure will also support the credibility of the study as a whole.

The *crisis of representation* in qualitative research raises the question of whether the human lived experience can be captured linguistically, when it is in fact created in the text written by the researcher. On the other hand, nonverbal data raises questions of validity due to the inevitable projections that accompany the viewing of imagery. Images are open to a vast range of interpretation and thus more subject to dispute than the interpretation of verbal narrative. In arts-based research—when the visual image is the primary mode of participants' expression—researchers seek to demonstrate that certain information (e.g. subconscious feelings) can be more effectively gathered via nonverbal modalities, might otherwise not be revealed by participants, and perhaps not even emerge in the participants' conceptual awareness. Shaun McNiff, a leader in art-based research, suggests that when interpreting nonverbal data through creative means, the researcher should be, first and foremost, *transparent* about projections and creative connections.

The case in this article is one in which the use of imagery was purposefully indicated as integral to the rationale of the study. As a transpersonal researcher, I was moved to intuitively and imaginatively interpret and creatively respond to the participants' expressions. However, by structuring my procedures through the imaginal resonance method, I was transparent about my process, increased unification and consistency in data gathering and analysis, and developed deep awareness of my assumptions, insight, and the limitations of the study.

The reader is invited to engage in the imaginal resonance procedures in response to the poem and the two exemplary participants' responses in this case, and to reflect as to whether he or she experiences sympathetic resonance with the researcher's response to the data—identification that goes beyond rational agreement and toward connection or even harmony between knower and knowledge.

## Exercises and Discussion Questions

- Follow the imaginal resonance steps as you read the poem under the heading *Mental Imaging Guidelines and Poem*. Once you have captured your own mental image and created an artwork in response to the poem, note whether your *experiential knowing* contributes to your *sympathetic resonance* with the two examples of participants' imaginal resonance.
- Provide a rational analysis of the poem presented in this case, and reflect how different/complementary it is in relation to your imaginal response to the poem.
- How does the imaginal resonance method address the 'crisis of representation' as discussed in this case under the heading *Intuitive and Imaginative Researching*?
- Having read this case, what is your understanding of the value of *multiple ways of knowing* and the concept of the researcher as a *Bricoleur*? Provide examples from the case.
- Can you point out shortcomings or issues of validity in the imaginal resonance approach to data gathering and analysis that were not discussed by the author?

## Further Reading

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