

# Combining collaging, phenomenology and photographs to meaningfully interact with participants' creative self-representations

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## ABSTRACT

This study advances the integration of creative and visual methods within phenomenological psychology research. Photovoice is a common visual research methodology used in health research. In studies that combine photovoice with Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis, images often only serve to illustrate the analysis of the interview data, despite being powerful illustrations of participants capturing their altered ways of being-in-the-world. As researchers, how can we engage more meaningfully with participants' self-representations?

This paper explores the analysis of visual materials created by participants by treating their photographs as interpretable data, separate from their interview data. Further innovations are present in the communication of qualitative findings. In a continued commitment to the visual, analytical findings are shown through collages of participants' photographs. These novel approaches are demonstrated through an exploration of how participants employ photographs to depict their day-to-day experiences of living with 'unseen' chronic health conditions whilst navigating UK health-based welfare systems. Collaging is used within a phenomenological analysis to visually illustrate the features of these experiences.

While delving into the differing ways of understanding made possible through creative methods, we argue that visual displays of analyses offer new avenues for demonstrating and creating impact in qualitative research.

## 1. Introduction

The semi-structured interview is the default, or 'traditional', form of data collection in phenomenological research (Smith et al., 2022). Creative methods of data collection, those that draw on artistic approaches, have been recognised as holding significant potential for increasing human understanding, adaptation, and acceptance of health conditions (Smith, 2002). Growing numbers of researchers working within phenomenological psychology advocate a 'moving beyond' the spoken word (see Boden et al., 2019; Burton et al., 2017; Kirkham et al., 2015; Boden and Eatough, 2014; Shinebourne and Smith, 2011). This is not a rejection of the spoken word or linguistic forms of communication, but rather an argument that deeper exploration of participants' life-worlds can occur through a supporting of visual articulations. Eliciting and engaging with subjective experiences through visual and creative methods can support more nuanced understandings (Day et al., 2023). This can become particularly pertinent when exploring sensitive or stigmatised topics, for example, those relating to identity, illness and distress (Day et al., 2023).

Creative approaches to phenomenology aim to explore new ways of seeing and expressing. In providing participants with different platforms of expression, a shift in the power balance of the 'standard' researcher-participant relationship can occur. Allowing greater feelings of autonomy and self-direction to be experienced by participants can, in turn, empower them to step outside of their 'rehearsed narratives' (Boden et al., 2019). However, creative approaches to phenomenological data can often require participants to be skilled or motivated in data creation - such as having the ability to produce artwork (Craythorne et al., 2020, 2023) or drawings (Nizza et al., 2018; Boden et al., 2019). Such skills may be perceived as a barrier to research participation, particularly for a person experiencing pain or reduced self-esteem (Fancourt et al., 2020). Given the integration of smart phones into our daily lives, digital photography can be a method that requires less skill, is 'close to hand' and familiar for participants, but that still has the potential to produce data rich with meaning.

Photovoice is a common visual research methodology used in health research (Murray and Nash, 2017). Photovoice aims to place participants and their image creation at the centre of the research process

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(Brunsden and Goatcher, 2007). Brunsden and Goatcher (2007) suggest that making use of photovoice within a framework of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA; Smith et al., 2022) could be particularly generative. That, through the combination of the visual and verbal, an opening up of new potential routes to understanding becomes possible through a fusing of horizons. Drawing upon Gadamer's conceptualisation of hermeneutics illustrates how the combination of visual and verbal data can enable more centralised understandings of others' lived experiences.

Within photovoice research, participant-created photographs can act as data in and of themselves but can also be used to facilitate and drive a discussion that produces verbal data (Brunsden and Goatcher, 2007). In studies that situate photovoice within phenomenological explorations of experiences of illness, the analytical focus is often on the interview data produced, rather than the interpretative potential of the created visuals. This may be for a number of reasons or restrictions (such as the confines in which academic research is published), however a privileging of one data set over the other can undo the empowering commitments that underpin creative approaches to phenomenological investigation. For example, when looking at longitudinal experiences of caregiving, Morrison and Williams (2020) embedded IPA within a photovoice methodology. Their findings illustrated how caregiving as a 'consuming' act were made sense of by participants. However, the evocative photographs created by participants are excluded from the authors' analysis and published work; relegated to the paper's online supplementary materials. Photographs produced by Norwegian participants living with medically unexplained long-term fatigue are included within Lian and Lorem's published study (2017). Yet the images only serve to illustrate the analysis of the interview data, despite being powerful illustrations of participants capturing their altered ways of being-in-the-world (Lian and Lorem, 2017). Photographs here represent a way for the researcher to "visit" places that are a part of participants' daily lives (Lian and Lorem, 2017, p. 484) but how might we, as researchers, interact in a more meaningful way with participant efforts of self-representation?

Other studies find a better balance between the inclusion of photographs within analytic processes. One such example is Papaloukas et al.'s (2017) research around marginalisation and chronic illness. Photographs taken and captioned by participants are not only used to illustrate analytical points made within an Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis but the photos also structure and drive the focus of the study's analysis. Inductive coding and categorisation are applied to participants' photographs in a way that positions the visual data in an "equal locus" with the in-depth interview data (Papaloukas et al., 2017, p. 419). A similar approach is taken by Wilde et al. (2020) in their exploration of men's experiences of living with ME/CFS; integrating the verbal and visual data into the analytical process of IPA. Papaloukas et al. (2017) celebrate the necessity for approaches to research that are designed in a flexible manner. However, they remain committed to the notion that participant-created photographs cannot and should not be separated from the individual narrative text of which they are part (Balmer et al., 2015; Papaloukas et al., 2017). But in doing so, we suggest, one form of data will *always* take priority over the other. This is similar to the problems faced by mixed-methods research, where data collected through different epistemological positions can cause difficulties when a reconciliation towards a conclusion is attempted (Shaw et al., 2018). Where there is ambiguity, or a tension, between how a photograph can be viewed and how it is spoken about by its creator, which account would shape our understanding of the image? Given phenomenological psychology's reliance on the semi-structured interview format, the verbal account would likely take precedence over a photograph's more aesthetic qualities. Within the setting of a photovoice study, treating photographs in this way renders them as tools of intended elicitation: ways to produce more, or richer, interview data. Treating participant-created photographs as efforts of self-representation, open to interpretation away from the context of an interview, may enable us as researchers to explore these potential

tensions between what was said (meaning of the photographs for participants) and what was seen (how photographs could be interpreted).

### 1.1. The current study

Often framed as a 'response' to the growing numbers of individuals living with chronic health conditions, many countries have introduced policy instruments for promoting the employment of individuals with chronic illness (Gjersøe, 2015). Within the UK, the two main 'health-based' welfare policies are Employment and Support Allowance (ESA) for individuals who are unable to work due to sickness or disability, and Personal Independence Payments (PIP). PIP aims to support individuals with costs incurred due to illness or disabilities. Access to both PIP and ESA rest on processes of assessment and conditionality; processes that have been found to lead to feelings of marginalisation and stigmatisation (Patrick, 2016). These feelings may be felt more keenly by individuals whose health conditions lack a visual signifier of disability (Hale et al., 2021). The first author's PhD thesis sought to explore how these health-based welfare policies were experienced by participants living with a chronic 'unseen' health condition. This paper details, and illustrates, the innovative ways in which arts-based methods were used in this context.

Collaging is the art of making a new whole through an assemblage of different forms (Gerstenblatt, 2013). Within research contexts, collages have been used as a form of therapy for children who refused to attend school (Takata, 2002); a means to explore adolescent perceptions of health (Borraccino et al., 2019); a medium to convey the experiences of families affected by rare health conditions (Gorman et al., 2023); as part of an arts-based intervention to reduce emotional and behavioural problems (Amjad and Jami, 2020); and a visual tool to motivate at-risk children (Cho, 1996). Within all of these settings, collaging is deployed as a methodological tool, often as a technique used to change behaviour; the success (or not) of which can be measured. One study (Gerstenblatt, 2013) presented a method of creating collage portraits which supported a narrative thematic analysis around African American women's experiences of living in a rural American town. Beyond this example, we were unable to find other instances of collages being used to display the results of a psychological analysis or as an attempt to represent the findings of an analysis.

Visuals are an effective medium for communicating and drawing attention to the plights of stigmatised individuals. We theorised that collaging has the potential for generating research impact via visual pathways; a means of capturing the shared features of participants' representations of experience. It was hoped that by incorporating an arts-based way of communicating analytical findings, participants' visual efforts of self-representation would resonate with the reader. Specifically, this study sought to understand how participants use photographs to represent their day-to-day experiences of living with chronic unseen health conditions and claiming health-based welfare. Methodologically, we wanted to explore if using collaging, within a phenomenological analysis, could visually illustrate the features of these experiences.

## 2. Methods

### 2.1. Data collection and ethical considerations

The project received ethical approval from Aston University's Life and Health Sciences Ethics Committee. As part of a longitudinal study, participants were invited to take photographs between their first and second interviews. Beyond the ethical issues discussed below, participants were given little direction as to what these photographs could, or should, contain. Participants were provided with an additional information sheet towards the end of the first interview which invited them to take images representing their day-to-day experiences of living with a chronic unseen health condition and/or their experiences of claiming

**Table 1**  
Details of photovoice engagement.

Participant pseudonym	Health conditions	Month of first interview	Month of second interview	Number of photographs shared	When photographs were shared
Denise	IBS, asthma, undiagnosed musculoskeletal genetic disorder	June 2019	March 2021	3	At the end of the first interview
Diane	Myalgic Encephalomyelitis	June 2019	April 2020	9	Throughout the period between the first and second interview; during the second interview
Lucy	Asthma, idiopathic chronic back pain	July 2019	April 2020	8	During second interview
Richard	Multiple sclerosis	March 2019	February 2021	10	During second interview
Sarah	Fibromyalgia, Borderline Personality Disorder	July 2019	March 2021	3	During second interview
Shelly	Myalgic Encephalomyelitis	July 2019	April 2020	7	Throughout the period between the first and second interview; during the second interview

**Table 2**  
Framework for the analysis of drawings (adapted from [Boden and Eatough, 2014](#)).

Framework for the analysis of drawings
1 Contents: Describe each of the distinct elements of the image.
2 Composition: How are the elements spatially laid out on the page? Are they sparse or dense, are there areas of blank page, do the elements overlap? Is there a sense of repetition, 'rhyme,' or pattern?
3 Balance: How do elements interplay? Is there a sense of equilibrium or disequilibrium? Is there symmetry or pattern?
4 Geometry: What shapes are used? How do these interplay together?
5 Materials: Which material has been used for each element?
6 Texture: What are the textural characteristics of each element?
7 Colour: How have hue (colour), saturation (vividness), and value (lightness/darkness) been used?
8 Depth/Perspective: What spatial depth and perspective have been created through space and colour?
9 Temporality/Dynamism: Is there a sense of rhythm or movement? Does the image suggest a snapshot, continuity or duration?
10 Focus: What is the visual focus of the image? What is your eye drawn to?
11 Expressive content/Empathic reaction: What is the emotional tone of the image? What feelings does the viewer have in response (bodily, emotional, memories, images)?
12 Signs/Symbolism: Are there any overt symbols or cultural references included?
13 Style: Does the image 'shout' or is it 'quiet,' or something in between? Does the drawing seem to imitate or reflect a particular trend or style, e.g., cartoonish, child-like, modern, romantic, pop-art, etc.?
14 Text: Has any text been included, for example a title? Where has this been placed? In what way has it been included? What style, font, capitalisation, etc., is used?
15 Distraction/Noise: Do any elements draw your attention away from the main focus? Is there a sense of confusion or clarity in the image?

health-based welfare benefits.

The photovoice element of the longitudinal study was optional. Six of eight participants chose to share images they had taken. Participants had autonomy over how and when they shared their images. [Table 1](#) gives an overview of the participants who took part in the photovoice element; showing how many images were taken and when these photographs were shared.

In order to preserve the anonymity of participants (and other individuals), participants were asked to avoid taking photos that contained identifiable information (such as faces, addresses, unique locations etc.). Photographs were screened by researchers during analysis and any potentially identifiable content was obscured in a way that reduced the risk of identification but still retained the visual content of the images. Participants gave consent for their photographs to be used in any written reports, publications and academic presentations.

## 2.2. Analysis and reflexivity

The incorporation of participant created photography was initially conceptualised within an interview framework, e.g. that participants would talk through the meaning of the images during a second interview and the analysis of this data would include an exploration of the photographs. Here the photos would become interview stimuli, more ways 'in' to participants' lifeworlds but would ultimately be subservient to the interview data: the meanings foregrounded by the participants in the interview shaping our understanding of the images. However, in a commitment to treating multimodal data as distinct, the visual data was first analysed away from (and separate to) the participants' interview data.

The research of [Brown et al. \(2020\)](#) and [Boden and Eatough \(2014\)](#) inspired the approach taken to the visual data. [Brown et al. \(2020\)](#) reveal the complex relationship that exists between interview and visual

data in their reflections on the use of photo-production to explore the material spaces of mental health units. Rather than a presumption of, or striving towards, triangulation (the photographs providing a clarification or a means to elaborate on the interview data), once viewed as distinct but interconnected types of data, photographs and interview extracts may not be necessarily complementary ([Brown et al., 2020](#)). We argue (like [Guillemin, 2004](#); [Boden and Eatough, 2014](#)) that the photographs created by participants produce meaning outside of a verbal narrative and can be considered as a rich source of meaning in their own right. As such, this paper focuses on the analysis of the visual materials created by participants.

Adapting [Boden and Eatough's \(2014\)](#) framework for the analysis of drawings (see [Table 2](#)) provided the researcher with a phenomenologically informed 'toolkit' to explore and make sense of the visual data.

The framework enables the analyst to explore how an image was made, its composition and what meanings it may convey. As the framework was created to be used alongside participants' created drawings, some elements of the framework were less relevant than others (i.e., "material"). However, the framework encouraged the researcher to 'look carefully': paying attention to how the image resonated, bodily, within the analyst.

Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA; [Smith et al., 2022](#)) was deployed as a method of analysis; a means to 'structure' and guide the use of the framework. The analytic process of IPA complemented the framework for the analysis of photos ([Boden and Eatough, 2014](#)): describing the contents of each image mapped onto the exploratory noting stage of IPA. The content of each image was initially described in detail. The remaining elements of the framework allowed the researcher to move towards a more interpretative stance. In line with the construction of experiential statements; the volume of the detail was reduced while maintaining a commitment to understanding the complexity expressed within each photo. After all of the photographs



were analysed, the experiential statements were used to develop group experiential themes (GETs). These themes formed the analytical findings explored in this study.

In a divergence from IPA, the *photographs* were explored individually, rather than exploring each participant's photographs collectively. There was, by effect, an attempt to temporarily 'lose' the agency inherent within the photographs; as artifacts separated from those who created them. This shift came as a result of prioritising the interpretation of the visual. The analyst attempted to strip the images of their wider contexts whilst foregrounding the hermeneutic function of IPA. Within IPA, an analysis always involves interpretation (Smith et al., 2022). The essential role of interpretation is captured in the concept of the double hermeneutic: the researcher is attempting to make sense of the participant, who is – in turn – making sense of a phenomena. There are two types of meaning making occurring. The participants' photographs represent the first-order of meaning making: the visual as an attempt to represent their experiences (Smith et al., 2022). Rather than have the second-order sense-making undertaken by the researcher shaped by both the interviewees' account of the visual alongside the images, the analytical approach taken by this work sought to interpret the visuals as aesthetically presented in a way that is both empathic and questioning. Doing so within an IPA context, acknowledges the ever-present role that interpretation has when we encounter data.

The analysis was shaped by the research question (considering these photographs as representations of life with a chronic health condition and/or experiences of claiming welfare) rather than exploring who took these images or how participants had communicated the meaning of these images in their second interview. A later study used IPA to explore how participants spoke about their shared photographs. However, in *this* analysis there was a concentration on the affective qualities of the images: how were these affects achieved through the creation and presentation of these photographs? How might these affects be phenomenologically understood? Reflexively, this was a significant undertaking. The analyst first actively attempted to engage in the phenomenological psychological reduction (Giorgi et al., 2017). This reduction was towards the photographs as representations of 'being in the world', expressions of lived experiences. However, there was an attempt to bracket what was said about these images by participants in their interviews (and therefore known by the interviewer, who is also the analyst). The temporal distance between when the interviews were conducted and the production of this analysis helped, as did the phenomenological concept of intentionality. The photographs were thought of as being oriented *towards* an object. The analysts' role was to consider what the significance of that intentional relationship could be. Doing so allowed the analyst to consider how the photographs present themselves to the consciousness of the experiencer: how might the photograph be made sense of?

### 2.3. Collages

Collage, as method of creativity, involves experimentation and discovery (Gorman et al., 2023). The term collage originates from the French word "collé", which means "glued" (Gerstenblatt, 2013). With these conceptualisations in mind the first researcher got to collaging the only way I knew how. Each participant-created photograph was printed at its original size. Photographs were then moved into their group experiential themes. The written analysis of each GET was read and reread. Holding the experiential qualities of each theme in mind, I began to cut portions of the images out. Through these acts of cutting and deconstruction, the objects of intentionality (as interpreted by the analyst) were focused on. These were arranged and rearranged onto a blank piece of A4 paper. The more descriptive analytical insights gained through engagement with Boden and Eatough's framework (2014; see Table 2) helped guide the placement of these objects. The visual descriptions, which addressed the components of the framework, were drawn upon to determine how the meaning within each GET could be



Fig. 1. By Diane.

communicated through the collage. For example, could the recontextualised geometry of objects within a collage be used to represent the patterns of meaning across the GET? How might representations of movement be captured, or recontextualised in affective ways? Sections of images were added, taken away, overlapped, trimmed in an iterative manner. At this stage, the aim was to create a new image. This new image, the collage, aimed to capture and reflect the affective 'mood' of each GET. Once I felt this had, in some ways, been achieved, the selected portions of images were glued in place – creating a visual representation of a group experiential theme. This process was repeated across each theme. The GET collages were shared with colleagues before being digitalised. These scanned versions of the collages are included at the end of each thematic write-up as a visual 'summary' of the interpretative commentary.

## 3. Findings

Four GETs were developed through the analysis. To illustrate the methodological innovations of this study, two of these GETs are explored in this findings section. In a disruption of what might be expected structurally from an academic publication, a final theme which functions as a methodological reflection is considered as part of the paper's discussion section. One further theme (titled "towards productivity: signs and symbols of daily management") explored the self-management routines that resemble regimes: an intertwining of personal time and body through the medication, procedures and applications engaged with. In order to preserve the methodological focus of this paper (within the journal's word limit), this theme has been omitted.

### 3.1. Homeliness: the quiet joy of authenticity and potentiality

In this theme we see images that serve as displays of identity;





Fig. 2. By Richard.

displays of a comfort with who participants *are*. Within, and through, the images created we are able to see how participants have developed their sense of self, within (or alongside) the ‘dis-ease’ of living with chronic health conditions.

Here ‘home’, and the feeling of being at home, exists not just through the physical rooms we see but the spaces that reflect an authentic ‘being’. Where participants can, and do, dwell. One such example is shown by Diane in Fig. 1.

Two shadows are shown on a country lane. The shadows stretch into the middle of the lane. On the right we see the shape of a man, presumably the photographer as his right hand seems to be holding a camera or smartphone to his chest. A woman is to the left of him – seemingly gazing up at his face. The woman seems to be either in a wheelchair or using a walker. The depth within the image is striking: many elements ‘stretch’ into the further aspects of the photo. The country lane and the shadows being the most prominent aspects. The parallel lines of the hedge and grass line lead the viewer to ‘look ahead’, down the lane to the eventual unknown: it isn’t possible to know what is around the bend. The expressive, emotional content of the image is complex. There is a sense of potentiality, heading towards a future together, alongside feelings of peace and tranquillity (communicated through the stillness and the vitality of the surrounding countryside).

Despite not being able to see Diane’s facial expressions, her shadow (on the left) seems to be expressing love. Cumulatively, the image portrays ‘home’ as an emotional state, an expression of security that is rooted in companionship.

Home is embodied in a more concrete example provided by Richard Fig. 2. The image shows a window, three panes, looking out onto a row of houses. On top of the windowsill are 10 “new home” cards of various different designs. The bottom half of the image feels deliberately obscured: the darkened lighting drawing the viewer’s attention to the row of “new home” cards. The focus of the image seems to be the middle card, which is itself a card that shows a complete house, a home that is sitting within a home. There are houses and homes within many parts of the photo: explicitly expressing the tangibility of homeliness, but also that this feeling of being ‘at home’ is a novel sensation. This view from the window is perhaps a new one. However, similar to Diane’s image, there is a sense of stillness: the symbols of suburbia creating a mood of security and safeness. In a series of distinct images (which were curated as a triptych by the analyst) Richard further explores expressions of homes (Fig. 3-5).

The first is in darkness, a gothic style mansion lit in dramatic blue and purple light. The second image shows a castle constructed out of Lego. The third image shows an actual castle, set against a cold-looking blue sky. Bringing to mind the idiom “an Englishman’s home is his castle”, Richard captures the differing ways that homes can be conceptualised. However, the shapes and locations of each castle are distinctly different. For example, the first castle, which resembles more a gothic mansion, has a peaked tower surrounded by two roofed elements. In comparison, the Lego castle (from left to right) has a cloister-type building facing the front-right of the picture. To the right of this is the largest turret, which reaches up to the middle of the background tapestry (hanging on the wall). What is visible of the final castle seems to be the gatehouse – an entry point surrounded by two watchtowers of equal height. In addition, the differences in perspective and temporalities (e. g., the sense of moving through a crowd in the first compared with the solitary, almost solemn, movement *towards* the final castle) present within each image potentially challenge the decision to consider these images as a triptych. However, we argue that – collectively – the photos seek to evoke feelings of adventure, wonder and grandeur. Reflecting on

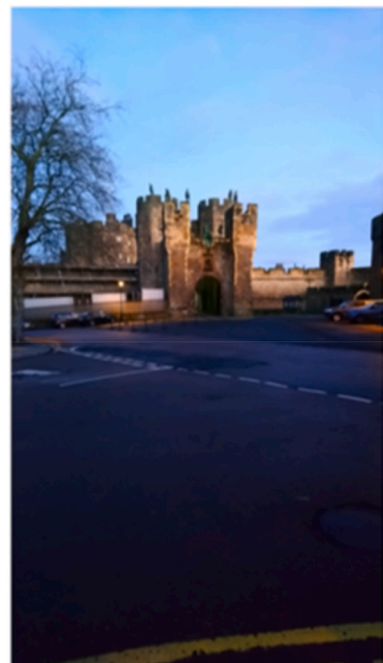


Fig. 3-5. Richard’s castles.





Fig. 6. By Diane.

the dedication needed to create the Lego castle, these teleological considerations extend to the other two sites. That these castles, or mansions, represent an endpoint: a historical marker of the labour required to create a castle (and/or home). Within the context of living with chronic unseen health conditions, we are reminded of the disrupted nature of 'progress', or life as a project: that the creation of comfortable and safe environments cannot be taken for granted. But that these feelings of awe (wonder, grandeur etc.) brought about by historical sites can act as a catalyst to realising potentiality, whether this be the creating of a Lego castle within a home or the development of feelings of 'homeliness'.

A realisation of potentiality is celebrated by Diane in an image showing a scene from graduation (Fig. 6). Against a backdrop of greenery, the flung mortarboard 'cuts through' the less-defined shapes of nature (the trees and dome-shaped bushes; full of leaves and a deep, dark, green). The image itself is fleeting, a brief snapshot to capture a symbol of academic achievement. The trajectory of the mortarboard, extending away from the thrower's arm, recalls a 'line of flight', or escape (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987). That graduation enables the opening-up of a new identity: that of 'a graduate'. With the fulfilment of this potentiality, new possibilities become available: new job roles, or further study, for example. These new opportunities function, perhaps, as ways of moving towards further new identities. However, the appearance of a second mortarboard (to the left of the image, lower than the mortarboard in focus) reminds us of the competition that is implicit within neoliberal job markets and academia itself. It is necessary for some individuals to do better than others; achievements may always entail comparison.

Other images show the comforts of homemade food, wild gardens and shared restaurant meals. It is within these widening contexts of homeliness, that allow authenticity to flourish, we see the practices of care for the self: an illustration of Foucault's notion of self-liberation through secular or non-theistic spirituality (White, 2014). That is, that in these 'quiet' – often still – moments of peace, participants find themselves able to (temporarily) escape the subjectifications imposed on them. Instead, these moments provide moments of meaning and reveal future templates for a continued project of authentic living.

The created collage for this theme aims to show the meaning of homeliness and the different ways that potentiality has been represented by participants. Sometimes these are through grand 'life events' (such as graduation) but are more regularly shown through quiet moments of authenticity and domesticity. Qualities of rootedness, peace and possibility are present throughout this theme's photographs. A calm acceptance of what is 'now' but also a hope for what can be in the future. The



Fig. 7. Collage 1. Homeliness; the quiet joy of authenticity and potentiality.

potential limiting aspects of illness (and the stigma of claiming welfare) are pushed far into the background. Instead the possibilities of well-being are foregrounded. Here 'home', and the feeling of being at home, exist not just through the physical but through spaces that reflect an authentic 'being'. Where participants can, and do, dwell. In these images there is a sense of 'rootedness', a peaceful attunement (Galvin and Todres, 2011). Through the foregrounding of nature and differing portrayals of home, the collage seeks to communicate these feelings of attunement. The conceptual framework provided by Galvin and Todres (2011), alongside Heidegger's writings around authentic living can enrich these analytical points. In later works, Heidegger theorised that living an authentic life (our "ownmost" being; Moran, 2000) relies on a sense of mobility: a movement towards this wholeness. This existential route towards an authentic homecoming is through an ontological certainty; individuals with a stable sense of self who are able to engage with society in ways that feel meaningful (Shaw et al., 2016). Galvin and Todres' (2011) theory of well-being develops experiential domains (such as spatiality, mood) which function as distinct examples of how well-being can be expressed. These domains are informed by lifeworld constituents found in the phenomenological tradition (Galvin and Todres, 2011). Their value is in asking us to think about well-being in distinct ways: how could, for example, mobility be emphasised in some experiences of well-being? Different variations will become more relevant at different times. The collage seeks to represent how these constituents become known through the visual data.

Deleuze and Guattari's concept of deterritorialisation may be a useful addition to discussions of dwelling-mobility. Deterritorialisation is the process where there is a break from the rigid territories of 'the major' (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987). For the post-structuralist thinkers





Fig. 8. By Sarah.

Deleuze and Guattari, 'the major' are all things that have status and significance at any given time (Barlott et al., 2020). The major codes and creates hierarchies, organising binaries and oppositions. Examples relevant to this research topic could be the distinction between healthy/ill; legitimate/illegitimate; or deserving/undeserving. For Deleuze and Guattari, a break from the rigid territories of the major is possible through a 'line of flight'. Lines of flight refer to the paths or trajectories that individuals or groups can take to break free from the constraints of dominant social structures and power relations. These lines of flight are not predetermined or fixed, but rather emerge through the experimentation and creativity of individuals who seek to escape from the limitations of their current situation (Barlott et al., 2020). The collage (Fig. 7) seeks to show these lines of flight; examples of participants taking trajectories of escape from the constraints of the status quo and reimagining their unfurling existences. These lines of flight can offer a complimentary insight into how the dwelling-mobility attunements are achieved through the mobility of movement towards change.

### 3.2. Liminality and the world outside

Images within this theme speak to the 'other side' of homeliness: the unease that is present in some photographs. We see a world that exists outside, but it is one that remains at a distance to participants. This can be specific physical places (where comfort becomes more akin to confinement or a 'waiting') but also the political world that is experienced as an 'outside' but also in an affective, embodied sense. The stillness present within Fig. 8 is different to the sense of ease contained in the photographs in our first theme.

A portrait images showing a curtain-drawn across a window. Light is visible through the curtains. The desk in front of the window is very 'busy', cluttered, and barely visible. Stacked on it are plastic boxes,

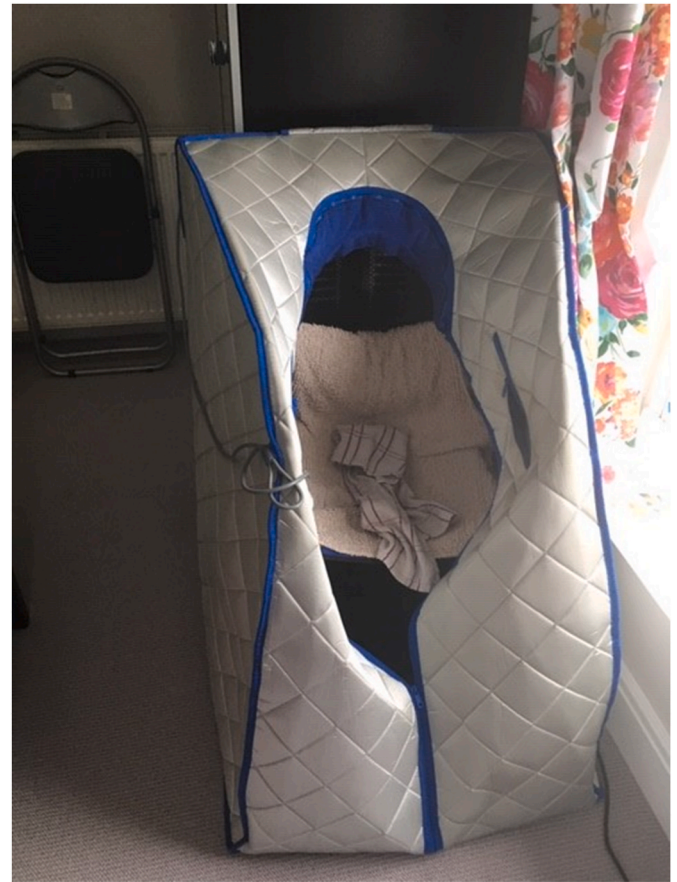


Fig. 9. By Shelly.

bottles, nail polish remover, cleaning sprays, pink desk files, books, boxes, a biscuit tin – topped with a Coca-Cola can on the right-hand side of the image. The viewer's focus is immediately drawn to the hanging skeleton, looming over the stacked and cluttered items in the foreground. It may feel reductive to draw attention to the symbolism of death and mortality; what may be more appropriate is a sense of resignation. A feeling of that nothing can be done, of waiting away from the world. The outside daylight is being kept at bay: the colours become drab and indistinct. The cluttered desk is not dirty or unclean. It does, however, add to the expressive content of the photograph: an oppressive feeling of being shut away, alone.

The presence of the outside world is felt in Fig. 9 taken by Shelley. The image shows what appears to be a chair, enclosed in a material 'shell'. It looks as though someone would sit in the chair and 'zip' the shell around them. The grey of the shell-chair brings to mind foil, an almost spacesuit type design. This contrasts with the flowery curtain, which acts as a symbolic conduit to the natural world. Despite the potential for the shell-chair to be moved, it seems rooted there as a place to sit and watch the world. The mixture of the clinical confinement and protection adds to the mood of liminality: of being between worlds. One pictures the participant as a solitary figure, a separated observer. What may be on the outside is explored in a series of paintings created by Denise (Figs. 10-12).

Through shifting the medium from photography to photographs of created artwork, Denise is able to represent their fears in a more abstract manner. The artwork is presented in a domestic context: they are not hanging within a gallery nor even held against a wall. Instead, they appear to us as newly materialised pieces; quickly photographed against the carpet they may have been completed on, with the artist's fingers or toes creeping into shot. The first painted individual shown seems to be a reoccurring character within the triptych. Potentially a self-





Fig. 10-12. Painted triptych by Denise.

representation, the figure displays an expression of extreme worry and upset. Eyes are filled with tears, which stream down the figure's face. The second painting replicates the same portrait style. However, the expressive content is vastly different. Against a dark red background (that seeps into the woman's hair), a new character is introduced. A small nose leads down to large, grimacing, mouth. Her mouth is open, revealing a full set of teeth. On each tooth, from left to right, there is a letter. These letters spell "austerity".

The final image is different in scope: the first character seemingly returns, although they have their back to the viewer. The character is facing a white set of disjointed, uneven, stairs. Their arms, a fleshy pink colour, are stretched to the right, as if gesturing in an uneasy way. Attached to their left leg, but moving to the right of the painting, is a large ball and chain. Written on the ball, in white paint, is the acronym "DWP" (i.e., the Department for Work and Pensions, the UK government department responsible for the administration of health-based welfare). A sign is hanging at the base of the stairs: it states that the stairlift is out of order indefinitely.

Taken together, this evocative set of images seems to tell the affective story of the subjectification of claiming welfare. The first and third paintings are saturated with sadness: feelings of being held back, of being upset and isolated. The character is at the mercy of someone who has power. The woman who features in the second painting seems to be an embodiment of the state, or the DWP. Here austerity literally 'has teeth': a display of power and aggression. The DWP conceptualised as a metaphorical ball and chain, is in very concrete terms adding to the structural difficulties faced by the character. Unable to access a stairlift, the attached chain makes any sort of ascent an impossibility. There seems to be no hope of resolution, just an exasperation (shown by the character's arms, flailing in disbelief).

The images that form the basis of this theme express moods of horror, frustration and isolation. Spaces that are 'between': liminal in physical space, but also in their affective dis-ease. Feelings of limitation or restriction may arise through the limitations brought about by poor health. However, they also serve as an important statement on the role of *autonomy*. Without having a choice over their living situations, constrained by both their bodies and by being at the mercy of

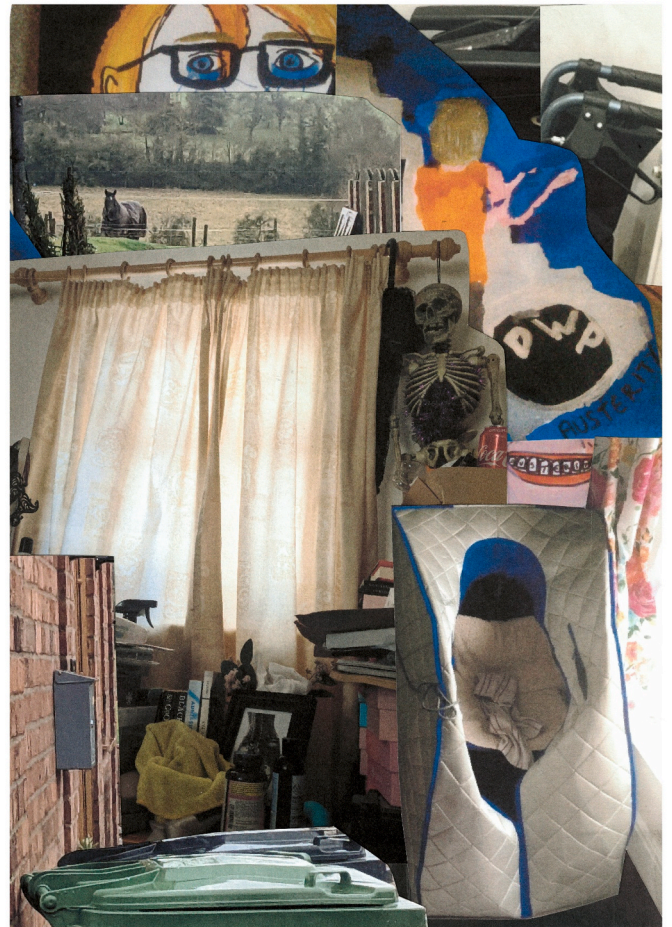


Fig. 13. Collage 2. Liminality and the world outside.



governmentality, the affective moods of day-to-day life become constrained and isolated.

In contrast, within in the second theme, the stillness present in images is interpreted as displays of 'dis-ease': a fear of the physical spaces and reminders of displays of power that may exist 'outside'. The created collage (Fig. 13) aimed to illustrate how illness can be experienced as a state of disharmony, disequilibrium, dis-ability and dis-ease (Toombs, 1990). These qualities represent a loss of a once familiar world; a distant change in how one can be in the world. Although taken after many years of living with chronic unseen health conditions, these images represent the long-lasting nature of these changes. A mood of isolation is present within these photographs. Isolation within experiences of illness can be all the more acute because the familiar world continues on as normal (Toombs, 1990). The images within this theme seem to capture this aspect of isolation through their representations of liminality. Liminality as an existential state is where individuals do not fit into a space, classification or definition (Sanders et al., 2019). The collage seeks to show how illness can leave participants stuck between what is familiar yet unobtainable. Feelings of existential well-being (seen in the previous theme) may be displaced or disrupted by the fluctuations inherent within chronic illness. The uncertainties fostered by looming health-based welfare systems may further contribute to these feelings of liminality. Knowing that the 'genuineness' of their claims are only ever temporary and could be revoked with little notice, undermining ontological certainties needed for authentic living such as a stable sense of self.

#### 4. Discussion

Inspired by creative approaches to phenomenology, as well as being motivated by the belief that participant-produced photographs can

communicate meaning outside of a verbal narrative, this study illustrates how collages can help foreground participant created representations of experience. We adapted Boden and Eatough's (2014) framework for the analysis of drawings to phenomenologically explore and make sense of participants' visual data. We then took a novel approach to the communication of these findings: using collages to illustrate analytical insights. By taking an approach to participant-created photographs which foregrounds visual data, we have offered an analysis which expands a complex understanding of how chronic unseen illnesses are experienced within the context of health-based welfare systems. The use of collaging provides a new way of communicating the affective and analytical meanings of each theme whilst also opening up potential pathways for dissemination of findings which goes beyond an academic or researcher-focused environment (Papaloukas et al., 2017).

There are examples of critical health research making use of a phenomenologically informed approach to photovoice. However, we identified a tendency for the privileging of verbal accounts over a consideration of what a photograph may represent through the aesthetic choices made in its creation. Instead, we posited that the photographs created by participants can be considered a rich source of meaning in themselves. Doing so enabled another perspective on the data to be produced; a way to explore how the complexities of human experience can be captured through representations. Considering the socio-political, power-related and emotional risks (Corbin and Morse, 2003) of research, we used an approach that shifted power from the researcher to participants. In the generation of data, participants were empowered to direct the research process utilising a creative method that didn't require specific skills or technical knowhow (digital photography); directing the dialogue of their second interviews and deciding which images they created were shared.



Fig. 14-15. By Diane.

Collaging was used to display the analytical findings. The act of collaging illustrates the complexities of power in a hermeneutic paradigm: the researchers' interpretation reshaping participants' data. The 'hands-on' approach to physically cutting and gluing images aligned well with the role of embodiment within phenomenology (Chilton and Scotti, 2014); the research's embodied engagement with the physicalised data becoming an active site in the production of new knowledge. It is hoped that these collages may meaningfully reverberate and affect an audience. Representations of experience, particularly the visual, can be effective mediums to communicate and draw attention to the plights of individuals living with health difficulties (Day et al., 2023). By potentially taking these new ways of displaying qualitative analysis into spaces outside of the academy (such as art galleries; online media; or public spaces; e.g. Langdridge et al., 2019) there is an increased potential to create empathy and meaningful change through research practices.

Often the ways in which academic research is evaluated comes from external bodies, through processes such as the Research Excellence Framework. Through collaging, and the wider project of taking creative approaches to phenomenological research, novel ways of demonstrating (and creating) impact from qualitative research become possible. This programme of research functions as a call to diversify the types of data qualitative researchers can, and should, engage with. By using collages to jointly reflect and illustrate our analytical insights, we have been able to demonstrate the differing ways of understanding made possible through creative methods. Future qualitative research should look to routinely include different types and forms of data within analyses. What insights can be learnt from encouraging, and fostering, creativities?

#### 4.1. Evaluating the method: photographs and the limits of horizons of understanding

Through the exploration of a final analytical theme, we hope to demonstrate a metatextual critique of the innovations presented in this study. The study was driven by the desire to treat participant-created photographs as efforts of self-representation, open to interpretation away from the context of an interview. It was hoped that in doing so we may have been able to explore potential tensions between what was said (meaning of the photographs for participants) and what was seen (how photographs could be interpreted). Reflexively this was a significant task. Impressions and reactions to the interview data were, through a temporal distance, able to be bracketed. Concerns around potential instances of 'over-interpretation' were explored within discussions around the research: both within the research team and as part of research presentations. In some ways, the approach taken in this study (and indeed, the photovoice design of the study) entailed that these analytical points could only go so far.

Given the project's focus on 'unseen' conditions, through this theme we can explore how the photovoice method captures that which isn't present. However, these images additionally provide a means through which to reflexively explore the phenomenology of analysing photographs: what is it *like* to analyse these photographs? How can we make sense of the limits – or horizons – of our understandings?

Gadamer's concept of horizons, and particularly the *fusion* of horizons, becomes a useful tool here. Rather than the 'every day' use of the term, Gadamer builds upon Husserl's definition of horizons: a horizon is not a boundary, but something that invites us to advance further (Moran, 2000). Our horizons mark both what is significant for understanding, but also what our current limits are. A fusion of horizons between people (for example, through the collection of qualitative data) is not simply an opportunity to arrive at a mutual agreement but is an expansion of understanding; an openness to move beyond our current fore-conceptions.

One of the ways in which these horizons of understandings are represented is through the glimpses we catch of our photographers. As in



Fig. 16. By Richard.

the example images above (Figs.14-15), taken by Diane, these appearances are often very faint: just enough to be aware of the participant's appearance. Mirroring the unseen nature of participants' health conditions, the glimpses of individuals resemble a disclosure of sorts: they have chosen how much, or how little, to reveal. These appearances come to the viewer via reflective surfaces. Laptop screens, shower panels, microwaves draw our attention to what is *behind* the camera. In doing so, we – as viewers and interpreters – move beyond the intentionality of the participants. Participants were asked to take images that captured their day-to-day experiences of living with a chronic health condition and/or their experiences of claiming welfare. As such, images are directed towards scenes or objects that are filled with some degree of meaning for the photographer. In an attempt to broaden our understanding of participants' lives, through the process of analysing these images (as 'standalone' attempts at representation), the analyst neglects, or moves away from, this intentionality. Instead, there can be a focus on what is not present; or the aspects of the image that are *barely* present. Despite what we can see, there is so much more 'out there'.

Notions of intentionality are embedded within the temporalities of the images. The images given to the research process appear on a continuum between one-off snapshots, brief moments in time, to more posed demonstrations of 'something': an image for an intended audience. Those that are snapshots reminds us of the temporal limits of the photograph, as a medium: a snippet of a life that is imbued with meaning through the act of capturing it as an image. What has come before, or the future events that have followed, remain an unknown. This can give images a sense of mystery. Fig. 16 by Richard is one such example; a crowd of people are stood either side of a pathway (or road). The image is taken 'back' from the closest row of people. Passing through the road, through the middle of the pathway, there is a large metallic looking dragon. There is a dreamlike quality to the seemingly metallic, hollow, dragon parade. Devoid of the wider context, of what happened next or before, more questions remain.

Collectively these insights illuminate the limits of our understanding. Collage 3 (Fig. 17) reflects these limitations: a jumble of images that share features (such as reflective surfaces) but which cannot find a visual coherence. These limitations appear to us in terms of the methods used (that the images are stripped of the meaning given to them by participants) but also as a reminder of our horizons of understanding. We, as researchers, may attempt more than most to reach as far as possible towards these horizons. However, it is also apparent that figures of authority (healthcare professionals, representatives of the state; assessors, DWP staff etc.), as well as friends, family members and strangers, may regularly and actively refuse or resist an *attempt* at fusing horizons. This is not to pass a moral judgement, favouring a 'virtuous' researcher, but rather illustrate the difficulties associated with communicating meaning: that a holistic understanding of the impacts of poor health is inherently complex. Deploying differing ways for participants to show the effects and affects of their condition (within the context of their





Fig. 17. Collage 3. Invisible presence: photographs and the limits of horizons of understanding.

lives) becomes salient, if an attempt at understanding is to be made.

A ‘splitting apart’ of the visual data from later interview data (where participants spoke about what the photographs meant to them) was needed in order to meaningfully engage with each of the data sets. To approach the data as a whole would entail prioritising one over the other: what participants said about the photographs rather than the potential meanings present in the images themselves. The limits of that approach represent a starting point for other opportunities for analysis. However, within the context of this study, the final theme of this analysis is where these limits were met. Here we considered the limitations of the treatment of images, as separated from their creators. Notions of intentionality become useful for understanding the mystery and ‘unseen’ elements present within photographs, which acted as reminders of our horizons of understanding. Within the wider project in which this research occurred, later analysis explored how these images became recontextualised as participants spoke about the meaning and significance of the images; these meanings complimenting, but also contrasting, with the researchers’ interpretations of the photographs as captured. Jointly, these analyses creating differing ways of exploring the phenomena under investigation. Future explorations of collaging within IPA research may wish to explore the ideographic merit of producing collages by participant rather than by theme. Can the complexities of individual experiences be represented in a visually affecting and coherent manner?.

## 5. Conclusions

This study presents an innovate and novel approach to how participant created self-representations can be meaningfully engaged with in psychological research. By extending the researchers’ commitment to the visual, using collages to illustrate analytical findings, this study is the first of its kind.

### CRedit authorship contribution statement

**William Day:** Conceptualization, Data curation, Formal analysis, Methodology, Visualization, Writing – original draft. **Michael Larkin:** Methodology, Supervision, Writing – review & editing. **Rachel Shaw:** Conceptualization, Methodology, Supervision, Writing – review &

editing.

### Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

### Data availability

Data will be made available on request.

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