# Researching recovery from drug and alcohol addiction with visual methods

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## Acknowledgments

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[1] A social enterprise company that focuses on visual arts and addiction recovery.

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## Introduction

The aims of the study were to give people in recovery new ways of understanding and communicating complex affective experiences that are difficult to verbalise, provide new insights for recovery agencies into the difficult emotions that accompany recovery, and engage participants in visual reflection on recovery.

The principal method of research was the Visual Matrix (VM)[2] including the use of drawing and movement. The VM, described below, is a method that encourages the sharing of mental visual images in a group context. It prioritises visual over verbal expression. The use of drawings and movement provided an opportunity to turn mental into actual images in order to facilitate meaning and understanding.

## Research programme

The research was planned with 3 recovery agencies and 1 dance theatre organisation dedicated to people in recovery. We aimed to introduce the VM (1) as a practice method that could contribute a new way of using visual thinking to support expressions of complex feelings in the course of clients' recovery journeys, and (2) to test the research method in the context of psychosocial approaches to understanding shared affect in complex situations such as recovery from substance misuse. In each case, the organisation was responsible for recruitment for the VMs.

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[2] This work complements previous studies using the VM in understanding the lives of socially excluded young men (Hughes et al 2014; Manley et al 2014); art and community engagement (Froggett et al. 2014); and cancer research (Haga Gripsrud et al. 2014).

VM1: Acorn, Oldham Recovery Centre, with a focus on people settled into the Acorn safe housing community plan described by the organisation as 'Secondary clients (more stable)'. The stimulus material (see below) was prepared by one of the service users prior to the session.

VM2: Acorn Recovery, Tameside, for service users described by the organisation as 'Primary clients (early recovery)'. The recruitment was selected from groups running at that time.

VM3: BUBIC, London, supports people in communities across London. People known to BUBIC were recruited and described by the organisation as '2/3 years into recovery'.

VM4: Fallen Angels, a dance theatre company supporting people in recovery. A peer led performance group of adults in recovery took part and were described by the organisation as 'stable in recovery'.

The Artistic Director from Portraits of Recovery, Mark Prest, provided advice on artistic elements of the research, commenting on the stimulus material and supporting the analysis. An expert in somatic movement from UCLan, Tim Lamford, contributed to analysis of the dance material.

## Research context

### Policy, practice and knowledge

Recently formed recovery policies in substance misuse have been designed and widely interpreted as a change with the recent past (Wardle, 2012). Although 'recovery' is a word imbued with hope and the promise of successful treatment, some argue recovery policy hides austerity behind its philosophy of social inclusion (Ashton, 2008). Agencies work against competing recovery concepts, including service user-led demands for full citizenship (Measham, Moore and Welch, 2014; Roy and Prest, 2014), and government-backed policy, often regarded as ineffective (Drummond 2004; Hall 2005; Nicholls, 2009; Plant and Plant, 2006; Best 2010; Watson, 2013). Buchanan (2004) argues addiction treatment is over-biologically and psychologically oriented. Little research

focuses on complex expression of affect and the real life decisions that go with emotional cognition.

### Visual Thinking in Recovery Research

Researching visual thinking has been a topic of study since Wittgenstein (1953) demonstrated how the intrinsic complexity of what is seen cannot be explained through language. Langer (1942) called this difference 'presentational' rather than 'discursive', and Arnheim (1969) later defined language as a tool that attempts to express thoughts that can only be completely expressed through visual thinking. The pre-eminent value of the image, according to Deleuze (1981) depends on the extent to which it is able to shed itself of narrative and words.

This project addresses the lack of visual methods in recovery research and in doing so also continues to develop theory and practice of visual thinking.

## What is the Visual Matrix?

### Background

The VM is a method designed by PRU to allow for associative thinking and the expression of unspoken affect in a research context. It has been developed from the practice of Social Dreaming (Lawrence 2005; Manley 2014). Since 1982, Social Dreaming has been developed as a method that aims to give expression to unconscious knowledge emerging through the sharing of dreams. The principal difference between the VM and Social Dreaming is that the VM does not focus on dreams. The VM can be used to focus on visual thinking in relation to a research topic, rather than the wide ranging, dream-inspired content of the Social Dreaming Matrix.

### Sessions of the VM

### Description of process

### *1. Stimulus material*

Thinking on the research topic is encouraged through the sharing of stimulus material relevant to the research topic, This encourages participants to begin thinking visually. In three sessions, this material was projected as a series of

slides alluding to recovery. In the fourth session, with a recovery dance group, movement exercises were used instead. (Session lasts 5 minutes)

### 2. VM

Participants sit in a 'snowflake' formation (Figure 1). In this arrangement people are discouraged from speaking directly to each other. Participants are encouraged to contribute mental images, feelings and associations to the group space. There is no turn-taking or interpretation; images and feelings are allowed to (e)merge in a collage-like process and are recorded. (40-60 minutes)
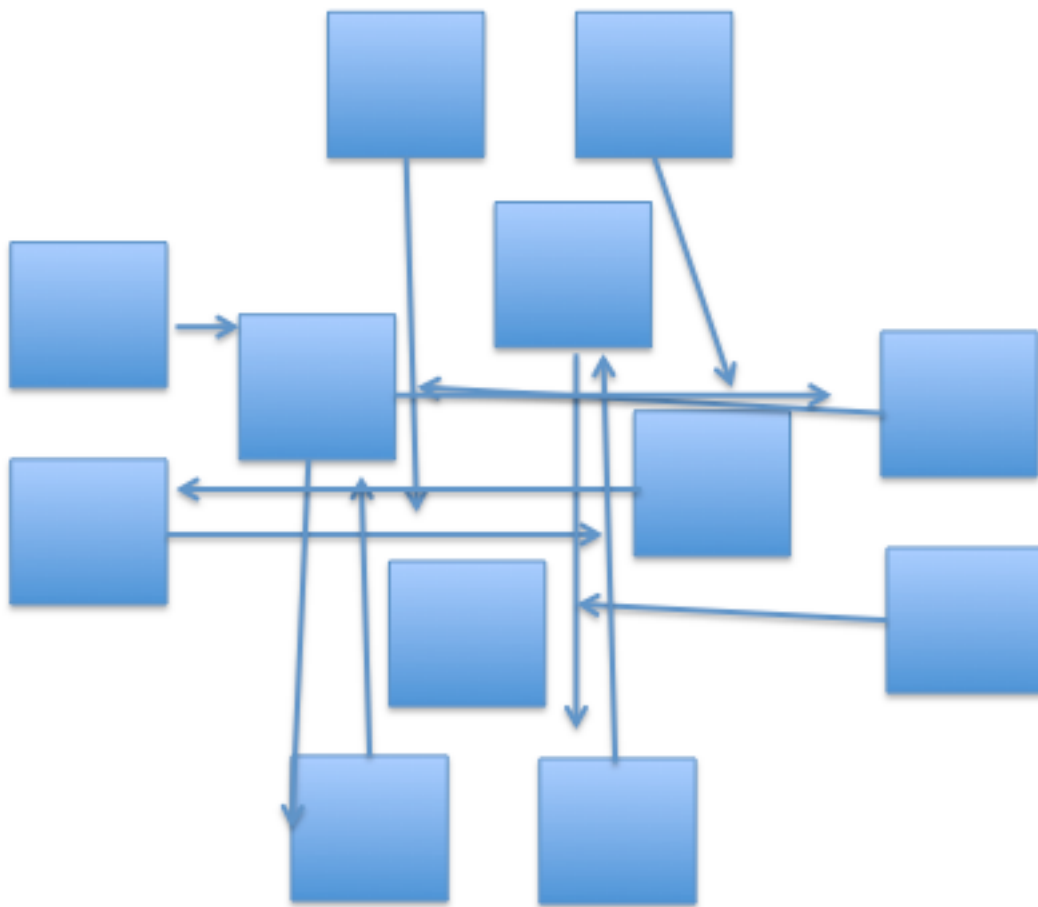


FIGURE 1 Snowflake seating arrangement. The indirect gaze of each participant is indicated by the arrows.

### 3. The post-matrix session

The post-matrix session allows participants to begin interpretation of the images of the VM. In this study participants created individual drawings (VMs 1, 2 and 3)

or individually choreographed movements (VM4) in response to the VM, followed by discussions. (20 minutes)

## Interpretation

The interpretive process partly draws on an understanding of the interplay between 'practice-near' and practice-distant' research interpretation (Froggett and Briggs 2012), which has been a recent source of debate in the field of psychosocial research (Froggett and Briggs 2009). In our understanding of the oscillation between 'near' and distant', however, we introduced an *experiential* 'nearness' of a 're-living' of experience through the repeated return to the reading out-loud of the original visual matrix transcript, acknowledging the indissoluble nature of the original experience, which elsewhere we have described as the 'scenic rhizome' (Froggett et al 2014). That is to say, in a Deleuzian sense, the VM is a space of 'becoming' where 'the event has the privilege of beginning again when time is past' (Deleuze 1994, 158).

The **post-matrix sessions** began the interpretation process. The drawings provided individual interpretations that each participant felt was important. The drawings were placed in the middle of the room and participants were encouraged to move them around, placing similar images and interpretations together to facilitate the discussion of important themes emerging from the VM. This was followed up by a **post-event meeting** of the researchers and Artistic Director to consider immediate impressions. This enabled the researchers to further develop the themes identified in the post-matrix session and to combine this with their own interpretations as observer researchers rather than participants to the process. Subsequently, after approximately 10 days, the researchers attended a series of **research panels** to allow meaning to emerge and be corroborated through combining a 're-living' of the VM experience - by re-reading the VM transcript - and allowing thoughts to flow freely in response to it, followed by a more discursive consideration of emergent ideas. In this part of the interpretive process, the use of the transcript allowed the researchers to analyse the data in detail and not just from memory and feeling. The researchers attempted to both interpret the parts, (the single images in their own right), and the whole, (the possible interpretations that could be made only through

considering a variety of images together). Interpretations were challenged for rigour by fellow researchers and artistic director/somatic movement expert during the research panels and findings were tested against feedback from service users and organisation leaders.[3]

## Summary Findings

### VM1. Acorn. Oldham Recovery Centre. 23.01.14

*Attendance: 7 Secondary clients (more stable), 1 researcher, 1 artistic director*

Participants considered their present status in the recovery community by bringing up images of the Amish community, a present day community based in the past. The Acorn Recovery Centre was compared to the Amish, where the participants' past could be accepted in their present:

- The Amish suggest a pure sense of life, simple, cleaner, ordered, safe, secure, no worries.

- I remembered coming from prison to Acorn and thinking this is just another rehab, now I feel gratitude, a safe house.

Thoughts of community brought out memories and photos of family:

- ... an old picture of my Gran and Great Gran and my uncle in the middle.

- My Great Grandfather and Gran in Trinidad ... and images of beaches and sunshine.

- Pictures of my Mum and Dad when they were younger.

Understanding that photos are old but their depictions are 'younger' commented on idealised comforts of family past.

The post-matrix drawing session brought up journey images. In the example below, the journey is envisaged through the 'eyes' of a man's head seeing through the other side of the paper to an abstract sea of red and purple.

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[3] For further comment on the interpretation process see Froggett et al. (2014)

FIGURE 2 Front and reverse image of back of man's head and sea of colour

*Attendance: 10 Primary clients (early recovery), 2 researchers, 1 artistic director*

Images were expressed in a series of rapid utterances, with few pauses and little development. In the following, aggression vies with calm alternatives towards potential recovery (in bold):

- Bins

- **Calendar: organisation**

- Bins

- Shooting gallery

- The posh bedroom, all lies

- Bedroom: sex

- Metal, abuse

- **Traffic lights, stop and think which way you are going to go.**

Themes were developed through film imagery and use was made of the film A Clockwork Orange:

-The Clockwork Orange outfits, all mixed up, penis, smashed your head in and that was just foreplay.

> \- The film Clockwork Orange, and the car like the Batmobile, the car racing along lanes.

These images represent the 'mixed up' experience of addiction and recovery, with people alluding to overwhelming experience including rushes of excitement, as in the car scene alluded to from the film. These ideas were developed through other film references:

> \- Reminds me of the film with the fellow hanging off the clock, trying to stop time moving.

This image, possibly a reference to the Harold Lloyd scene of a man hanging on to a clockface, connects with the 'clock' in A Clockwork Orange and combines the morbid scenes of the latter with the time struggle symbolised by Lloyd.

The post-matrix drawing session depicted images of substance misuse, and some reference to alternative possibilities, reminiscent of the opening of the VM cited above.



FIGURE 3 Substance misuse and recovery alternatives

Ideas of community were expressed through images of families and houses connected by washing lines. The difficulty of life in community was resolved by images of different animals 'in community':

> -The animals give a sense of community, they are able to sit down together.

Hope for the future was represented in images of light bulbs, '- Like an idea, not completely lit, only focussed on one idea, the way to recovery'. The limitations of the 'lightbulb' moment, 'not completely lit', reminded participants that there is no 'magical' way to recovery.

The image of houses was developed in the post-matrix session as a symbol of recovery. In Figure 4, the house combines both hope and uncertainty, represented in the steps leading to the entrance depicted as a precarious pedestal, with the house teetering on top.

FIGURE 4 House

Themes of change and transformation were evinced through images of ice – '[Icicles] are so beautiful but they start to melt, drip by drip', and an ice hotel needing to be remade every year; finally, glacial ice, both strong and powerful, carrying stones to distant places and grinding them into something new used creatively to design a Zen garden:

> - A friend of mine has a garden and small rocks in it, like a Japanese Zen garden style. They are stones from a glacial shift.

> - You don't know how far they have travelled, in the long journey, and how they have been rounded.

These images bring out the complexity of the recovery journey, the transience of life and the need to move on. Although the recovery journey, like the glacier, can

move on shifting ground, be slow and grinding, it can take you far and be transformative.

Transformation became a horrifying metamorphosis – 'Kafka's novel Metamorphosis, where someone wakes up and finds himself like a beetle, completely transformed', and at the same time something potentially new:

> - Images … from Kafka and Dostoyevsky, where characters are insects; anger in Dostoyevsky is expressed and there is redemption at the end.

> - Image of a cocoon and a butterfly emerging …, previously trapped.

Metamorphosis is situated between ephemerality and the wish for solidity in images where melting ice became rock:

> – Before, someone mentioned icicles, and I have this image of stalactites and stalagmites.

The post-matrix session was expressed in movement, which developed the themes of gradual metamorphosis and rebirth.
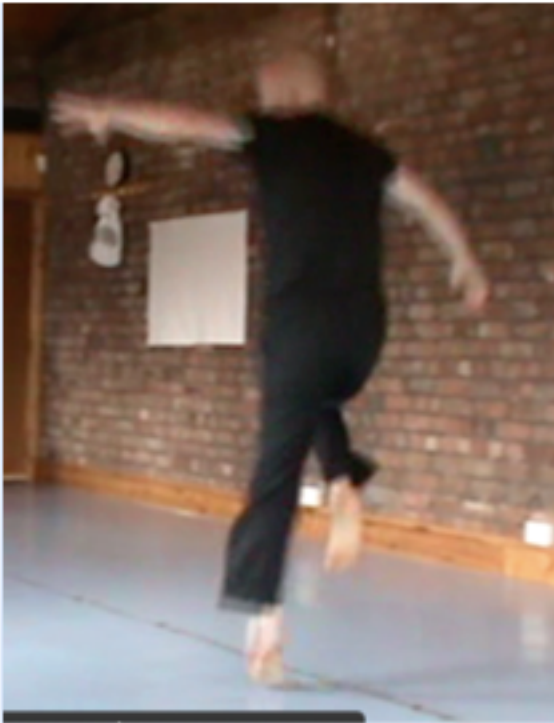
1.



2.



3.

4.



5.

FIGURE 5 Sequences of stills: development of metamorphosis theme

## Discussion

### Participant reflections

Working with the VM was popular with three groups (1, 3 and 4); in the other group, reactions were mixed. Reflections included references to creativity – 'Felt creative, never thought of myself as creative' – the ease of the method – 'Thought I would have nothing to say, but it came easily, pictures too', and comments about the advantages of working visually – 'It sticks in my head…you remember better what you can see rather than verbal.' Feedback also pointed to how the VM encouraged new thoughts – 'I enjoyed it, made me start thinking out of the norm'. Others commented on therapeutic aspects – 'Everybody was more relaxed and in the drawing exercise, a feeling of sharing and being connected, bonded and connections.'

### Themes

The emerging themes included 'family relationships/home and community', 'change/transformation', and 'time/temporality'. These have emerged in other addiction research (Kemp, 2009; Neale, Nettleton and Pickering, 2012), however, working through the VM helped participants find a new language for experience related to personal and shared ideas. Thinking through imagery had allowed them to develop these together, providing complexity of meaning and affect. For example, in VM1 relations to a treatment-centred recovery community are developed through images of Amish community. Working together with this image, we were able to explore important issues to those in recovery, including the elusive desire for an 'impossible' community of order, cleanliness, spirituality and simplicity as well as the real difficulty of feeling a sense of belonging in conditions of stigmatised exclusion. Working through images in the VM allowed participants to consider such impossibilities, which show how a historical sense of 'past' of the Amish community is available to us in the present, and a sense of hope for the success of their recovery community. This is a good example of how the visual metaphors in the VM work to mesh a number of themes simultaneously in complexity, since 'community' here is also bound to the idea of 'temporality'.

The transformation theme is developed through images of the transformations of insects, metamorphosis and ice. References to Kafka evoked the horror of uncontrolled transformation through addiction, yet other transformations could be beautiful and wished-for, such as a butterfly emerging from a cocoon. Thus, the VM encapsulated conflicts inherent in addiction and the question of who or what is 'in control' of personal transformation, and, therefore, feelings about the personal struggles of recovery.

The theme of temporality was developed through images related to A Clockwork Orange, Harold Lloyd, photographs linking past and present, and loss of teenage youth and were also meshed with images of metamorphosis and glaciers. Addiction interrupts 'normal' timings, and the VMs evinced images of lost idyllic pasts in family photographs, where old parents can be youthful again, communicated desires to make up for lost time. The hedonistic, timeless youths of A Clockwork Orange are simultaneously fun and tragic. These are good examples of how working with images allows the expression of complex and ambiguous feelings which are central to those trying make sense of a past time of addiction where confusion and negativity combine with euphoria and escape.

## Conclusions

1. The VM is an innovatory 'practice-near' research method that might, after further research, also be made available to recovery organisations to promote the sharing of complex emotional experiences of recovery, which are often hard to voice.

2. The participating organisations identified the advantages of this work as: increased creativity, enjoyment, inclusivity in sharing, and a new way of complementing other creative methods, such as drama and dance. In this way the VM as a practice method could fill a gap in recovery support work by encouraging the use of affective personal responses to recovery which is a counter-balance to the often overly bio-medically focussed professional work and the cognitive-behavioural orientation of mutual aid fellowships such as Alcoholics Anonymous. The visual/associative work of the VM elicited powerful affective responses, even from people early in recovery, facilitating a complex expression of feelings and

opening a space for mutual reflection and support. However, not all the service users in 'early recovery' were positive about the VM experience, and we would recommend further research into the use of visual thinking with people at similar stages of recovery.

3. Previous research has suggested that finding ways to cope with negative affect is especially beneficial for women in recovery (Kelly and Hoeppner, 2012). Our research suggests that exploration of affect is also appreciated by men.

4. The use of drawings to support the transition from the VM to the post-matrix discussion was welcomed by service users, and therefore is a significant contribution to practice. The images of the VM might otherwise be overly obscure making interpretation through discussion feel difficult, whereas in this practice the process is supported by concrete visual prompts. As a transitional part of the method, moving from the images of the VM to the interpretation of the discussion, the use of drawings can be considered both as an extension of the VM itself and also part of the interpretation process. The drawings also contributed to the research as another form of data open to interpretation.

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