Voices of Control:  
Researching the Lived Experiences of Addictive Consumers

Sue Eccles¹ and Eleanor Hamilton  
Lancaster University, UK  
Richard Elliott  
Exeter University, UK

Marketing Stream

Abstract
Previous studies in the USA, Germany, Canada and the UK have highlighted the existence of a small group of (mainly female) consumers who are addicted to the consumption experience. A range of possible biological, social and cultural, and psychological issues identifying the causes and consequences of addictive consumption has been suggested. The extreme and seemingly bizarre behaviour of the addictive consumer has often been interpreted as being “out of control”.

In contrast, the research reported in this paper suggests that addictive consumption may be the only activity undertaken by these people where they do feel in control. Phenomenological interview techniques gave those interviewed the opportunity to “tell their own story” rather than answer prescribed questions. It also, unlike other research techniques, placed the locus of control during the interview process with the researched and not the researcher. This juxtaposition of being in control/out of control is the theme of this paper.

This research has sought to hear the voices of those who feel themselves to be addicted to the consumption experience. Adopting an existential-phenomenological approach has helped to develop an understanding of how their behaviour is embedded in a social and cultural context. By exploring the dialectic of in control/out of control, this paper seeks to refute existing assumptions, arguing that as a means of making sense of and coping with their lived experiences, addictive consumers seek, through their behaviour, to gain some control in a part of their lives. At the same time, the experiences for the researcher of utilising research methods that entail relinquishing control of some elements of the research process are also explored. How, and to what extent, are their voices also heard?

1. Introduction
This research, started in 1994, was the first major investigation into addictive consumption in the UK. It followed on from, and further developed, studies carried out in the USA (e.g. O’Guinn & Faber, 1989), Canada (Valence, d’Astous, & Fortier, 1988), and Germany

¹ Corresponding author. The Management School, Lancaster University, Lancaster LA1 4YL, UK. Tel.: (+44) 1524-593908; e-mail: s.eccles@lancaster.ac.uk
The primary objectives were to obtain descriptive data on the nature of the behaviour in terms of the frequency and form of the shopping experience; to identify the functional consequences that help maintain the behaviour; and to investigate the negative consequences of the behaviour, such as personal debt, marital breakdown and stress. Apart from five personal interviews by O’Guinn and Faber (1989) and 26 in-depth interviews by Scherhorn, Reisch and Raab (1990), most of the previous research had been based around self-administered mail-out questionnaires, and group interviews. In general terms, the results suggested homogeneity in the causes, manifestation and consequences of addictive consumption. Depression, low self-esteem, family disharmony and materialism were all measured and analysed. What never fully emerged were the individual factors and influences that could provide a far greater insight into how and why some women become addicted to the consumption experience. Understanding this, it was felt, would not only assist in furthering the provision of appropriate support by policy makers and practitioners, but would also contribute to the overall knowledge of a small group of consumers who develop and maintain consumption behaviour to such an extreme.

It was therefore felt both appropriate and desirable that this research should endeavour to explore this form of consumption from the consumers’ perspective, so that it may provide a rich first-person description of their own lives, beliefs and experiences. Using the methods suggested by Thompson, Locander and Pollio (1989), phenomenological interviews were carried out throughout the U.K. with 46 women. This sample was part of a group of 300 who had responded to requests in the media to participate in the research, and for whom their shopping behaviour was problematic and excessive. Some of the results and interpretations from these interviews have been previously reported (Elliott, Eccles and Gournay, 1996a; 1996b; 1996c; 1995). The purpose of using the study for this paper is as an illustration for critical reflection on the research process when using existential-phenomenology as a method.

2. Existential-Phenomenology
Edmund Husserl’s (1970) phenomenological philosophy is concerned with the experiential underpinnings of knowledge. He argues that the relation between our perception and the objects we perceive is not passive, and that human consciousness actively constitutes the objects of experience. We all actively constitute and reconstitute the world of everyday life because our experience is mediated by our perceptions.

According to Holstein and Gubrium (1994), approaches to the study of interpretive practice share a set of subjectivist assumptions about the nature of lived experience and social order. These assumptions are derived from Shutz’s attempt to develop a social phenomenology based on Husserl’s philosophy: ‘Shutz (1970) argued that the social sciences should focus on the ways that the life world – that is, the experiential world every person takes for granted - is produced and experienced by members’ (Holstein and Gubrium, 1994; p.263).

Relating this philosophical approach specifically to consumer research, Thompson, Locander and Pollio (1989) present existential phenomenology as an alternative paradigm for understanding and researching consumer experience: “there are alternative, epistemologically viable world views for exploring human experience. One such world view is existential-phenomenology” (Thompson et al., 1989; p.135). Thompson et al. use metaphors of pattern, figure/ground, and seeing to illustrate the core assumptions of this alternative world view.
The ‘pattern metaphor’ relies on the notion that a pattern can be perceived within a context; it does not exist as a separate phenomenon but is nevertheless distinguishable as it emerges from the surrounding context. Existential-phenomenologists therefore seek to study individuals in the environment in which they live, as the ‘human-being-in-the-world’, not separated from their environment and not as they interact with it since that very interaction implies separation: “existential-phenomenology seeks to describe experience as it emerges in some context(s) or, to use phenomenological terms, as it is ‘lived’” (Thompson et al., 1989; p.135).

The ‘figure/ground metaphor’ is based on our perceptual ability to bring certain aspects of our experience to the fore (becoming the figure) whilst other parts recede to become ground. The figure that stands out is never independent of the ground and vice versa. So experience is then essentially a dynamic process in which at a given moment certain elements stand out whilst others recede. We attribute meaning to that pattern and from it derive our perception of reality. Our experiences can be viewed as intentional phenomena, dynamic and varying with context, because of this process of perceptual figure/ground focusing and refocusing.

The ‘seeing metaphor’ is used by Thompson et al. (1989) to describe the assumption of existential phenomenology that human experience is both reflected and unreflected: ‘the relationship between reflected and unreflected experience is one of figure/ground’ (p.137). As Winograd and Flores acknowledge, ‘reflection and abstraction are important phenomena, but are not the basis for our everyday action’ (Winograd and Flores, 1987 in Thompson et al., 1989; p. 137).

In proposing a philosophy and method for consumer research, Thompson et al. contend that by adopting an existential-phenomenological world view we assume that human experience can be seen as a pattern emerging from a context. They state that the research focus should be on individual experience described from a first person perspective. The researcher should seek to recognise patterns as they emerge. Descriptions of specific experience should be related to each other, and to the overall context, in a holistic way. Existential-phenomenological interviews should focus on identifying recurring experiential patterns. The research goal is to give a thematic description of experience.

3. The Phenomenological Interview
Thompson et al. (1989) outline in some detail guidelines for a suggested method of research, the phenomenological interview: “The interview is perhaps the most powerful means for attaining an in-depth understanding of another person’s experiences” (Thompson et al., 1989; p.138).

According to Thompson et al., the in depth interview should obtain a first person description of some specified domain of experience. Ethical concerns are dealt with in a very limited way, and it is suggested such concerns may be resolved simply by obtaining informed consent, telling the ‘respondents’ the purposes of the study, informing them that it will be audiotaped and assuring them of anonymity.
Interviewers are advised that since the topic is the respondent’s experience, they should not begin the interview assuming they know more about the subject than the respondent (perhaps a radical view for many consumer researchers).

Apart from an opening question, the interviewer should have no set questions regarding the topic, questions should “flow from the course of the dialogue … the interview is intended to yield a conversation, not a question and answer session” (Thompson et al., 1989; p.138).

The interviewer should aim to be “a non-directive listener… the transcript is a record of the interview dialogue and should reveal whether the interviewer assumed a domineering or directive role. In most cases, such an interview would not be acceptable as data” (Thompson et al., 1989; p.138)

4. The Voice of the Researcher

By using phenomenological interviews (Thompson, Locander and Pollio, 1989), participants were able to ‘tell their own story’ rather than answer prescribed questions. This approach also helped to maintain the non-invasive nature of the interviews and avoid setting a quasi-medical framework around the discussion of the behaviour and its social location. Each interview was conducted in the participant’s own home, and tape-recorded for later transcription. The session began with a broad introduction to the purpose of the study, and reiterated both the confidentiality and the format of the interview. All interviews began with the general question “Can you tell me about the last time you went shopping?” Each interview lasted between one and four hours.

“Although familiar with a range of quantitative and qualitative research techniques, this was the first study in which I had utilised an existential-phenomenological approach. The detailed guidelines provided by Thompson, Locander and Pollio, together with previous research experience gave me a certain degree of confidence in what to say (or not say), how to say it, and what I thought I could expect from the interview and the participant.

Forty-six separate histories were transcribed from the interview recordings, each starting with the same broad question and each following a path determined by the participant and not the researcher. What emerged were areas both of diversity and of similarity. The actual addictive behaviour described (the shopping experience and consequences) was remarkably similar. As well as rich detail on the actual shopping experience (the anticipation, the “high”, the guilt, the secrecy, the items bought, how they were selected, how they were hidden away at home etc.) each interview gave a compelling description of the life, loves, feelings, fears and frustrations of each participant. The precursors to the behaviour becoming addictive, both recent and distant, varied according to each individual, although there were certain themes that emerged so that elements of addictive consumption could be tentatively sub-grouped. These included aspects of personal relationships, existential choice, social support and family background (see Elliott, Eccles and Gournay, 1996a; 1996b; 1996c; 1995). An exciting and fascinating picture gallery of addictive consumers was beginning to emerge.

2 I choose to use the term “participant” rather than “informant”, “client”, “subject” etc. as I believe it more closely supports the notion of this type of interview being a conversation or circular dialogue (Thompson, Locander and Pollio, 1989; p.136). As the researcher, I am also a participant in the process, even though as Birch (1998) points out “we are not all participants in the same world at the same time”.
There were, however, a number of issues that impacted on me both as a researcher and as a woman. Whilst these issues may not be unique to this particular research method, they challenged me to critically reflect upon my own involvement, interpretation and responsibilities in the whole process.

One of the first issues of which I was very aware was that for most of these women, I was the first person ever in whom they had confided about their addictive behaviour. This made the experience sometimes painful and emotional for them, and placed me in the position of being something of a “mother confessor”. To remain the implacable, objective researcher when it was apparent that some of these women were hoping I would provide support, understanding and comfort created some dilemma. To walk away from someone who had just poured her heart out to me and was understandably upset was incredibly difficult. I felt, ethically, that I had a responsibility to “give something back”. This was eventually resolved to a certain extent by having an informal debrief after the interview, when I explained that I was not qualified to provide counselling or advice, but could give them contacts that they may wish to get in touch with to further explore, understand and resolve some of the issues and problems they had raised.

The second research issue arose with three of the woman I interviewed, who provided very short responses and felt unable to elaborate on many of their comments. They were constantly looking to me to lead the interview, ask the questions and provide direction for the discussion. Instead of the “conversation” format (Thompson et al. 1989; p.138) the interviews risked becoming rigid question and answer sessions – how do I have a circular dialogue with someone waiting for questions and seeking to give the “right” answers?

The other extreme of this scenario arose with a couple of women who completely dominated the interview situation to the point of me having no input at all. Unable to get a word in edgeways, the monologue galloped away into detailed descriptions of past holidays, the progress of the children at college and how the country would be ruined if the Labour Party won the next General Election. In both cases, the wealth of detail and opinions from four hours of transcribed interviews was rich and fascinating - but not always relevant to the topic in hand!

As an experienced researcher, the most valuable lesson I learnt in relation to using existential-phenomenological interviews was understanding how to be, and to cope with being in and/or out of control with the situation. By its very nature, this research method enables – indeed necessitates that – the locus of control is with the participant leading the conversation. Having set up and controlled all the administration of the interview, I now found that I had to allow the control to be taken by the other participant. Whilst not always a comfortable situation to be in, I believe it provided the right forum for the voices of these addictive consumers to be heard.

However, this last point also raises the final issue. The voices of the participants could literally be heard - in this case by myself as the researcher, and on audiotape. How could I adequately interpret and represent them? At this stage, the locus of control returns back to the researcher. Interpreting the transcripts and writing up the research places me back in a safe and known environment, both physically and intellectually. However, in the spirit of existential-phenomenology, a small interpretive group was formed to interpret the interview transcriptions (Thompson, Locander and Pollio, 1989). Emergent themes were discussed and
debated. In accordance with phenomenological interpretations, we sought to avoid both imposing our own meanings on the reflections of the participants, and incorporating ‘hypotheses, inferences and conjectures that exceed the evidence provided by the transcript’ (Thompson, Locander and Pollio, 1989, p. 140). Working as a group certainly helped in following this procedure, but inevitably there is the recognition that, by representing the voice of others, distortion may arise. The language I use to communicate with an academic audience is very different from the language I used to communicate with the research participants (see Standing, 1998 for a powerful discussion about this point). Both are, arguably appropriate and valid, but the question remains of how much is lost in translation and compromise. Should or could both audiences share one voice? How should I as the communicator react to the needs of both audiences, and do I do this effectively?

Inevitably situations such as this led me to constantly question my own role and performance as researcher. Was I doing something “wrong”? Could I or should I have handled the situations differently? To whom could I turn for support and guidance? By revisiting Thompson, Locander and Pollio, and reading other contemporary publications, I sought reassurance that my approach was as rigorous and professional as possible. It seems that it is only in the last two or three years that I have been able to hear the concerns, questions and intellectual conflicts of other researchers (see, for example, Ribbens and Edwards, 1998). Understanding their experiences has allowed me to more fully understand and reflect upon my own. Recognising that being “in control” of all stages of the research is not always wholly practical or, arguably, desirable was a useful lesson to learn.”

5. The Voice of the Addictive Consumer

Addictive consumption has been reported in terms of being ‘out of control’ behaviour. Baumeister, Heatherton and Tice (1994) believe that this type of shopping behaviour “represents a considerable problem with self-control” (p. 224). Faber and O’Guinn (1988) concluded that “these people…sometimes feel out of control while buying and experiencing [sic] an inability to control their behaviour” (p. 105). Scherhorn, Reisch and Raab (1990) supported this finding. In their research, they found that two thirds of their sample of 26 experienced feelings of a loss of control – “these persons experience a loss of control in the sense that they buy too much, feel guilty and have a bad conscience” (p.378).

The results of this current study would suggest that, far from being an out of control activity, the consumption process for addictive consumers is often the only occasion in their lives when they feel in control. Bearing in mind the personal observations and reflections made in the previous section, this section will briefly present some of the voices of these consumers. Inevitably, individual quotes presented in isolation from the rest of the interview risk interpretation out of context. However, the aim here is to provide some insight into their feelings of being in and out of control, in various parts of their lives.

The interpretive group explored many of the individual and group themes that emerged from the transcriptions, and comments about feeling in or out of control of one’s life or situation were common through most of the interviews. What emerged from the interviews was that each of the participants in the research, to a greater or lesser extent, were living in a situation where they felt they had little control over many aspects of their everyday lives. The causes of this were varied.
Carol’s marriage broke up in 1992. She was left with a young daughter, full-time professional job. “That’s when I started feeling out of control. Not out of control in terms of going loopy. If I stopped thinking about work or something specific, I started panicking; that sort of out of control. I hated it...there were times when I could easily have yelled at someone, but I think the way I coped with it was thinking ‘oh, let’s go out and blow some money’.

Rose, on the other hand, was “definitely out of control before my [exam] finals. Everything had taken over and I didn’t do as well in the degree as I should have done and that just felt awful, because as the time it just felt as though this is not my fault, although it was me that messed up my degree”. Later in the interview, Rose revealed that a family friend had repeatedly sexually abused her as a child. Although she had recently been seeing a psychotherapist, she still found it difficult to talk about this period of her life. She reflected “I was so desperate to be in control. Which relates to when I was younger, because I wasn’t allowed to tell people how upset I was inside. I just had to keep it all in”. Like Carol, Rose became addicted to the shopping experience as a means of escaping from feelings of being out of control of her life. She described the “high” or “buzz” from being in the shopping environment as “really exciting. I can stand at the make-up counter and look at everything and try everything. And I think ‘oh, that’s really nice – I’ll buy that. I’m sure I really need it’ but what’s even better is that at last I feel that I can decide what I look at; what I buy. I don’t have to explain or justify what I’m doing to anyone.”

Other participants talked about parts of their lives that they felt beyond their control. This may be financial;

“My husband has always held the purse strings right from when we were married. He’s the one who always decided what we bought for the house – even the clothes we bought for the children. I’ve just had to go along with what he’s said”

relationship-based;

“my husband has always treated me like a child. I’ve never really been able to grow up, so now here I am aged 45 with 3 kids, and still being treated like a kid myself”

or stem from their family background

“I always wanted to be like my sister. She was my Mum’s favourite and I’ve always been compared with her – and not in a nice way. I’d just like to be like my sister. She can talk to anyone, go anywhere, be slim, eat normally. Not like me at all – I’ve always felt that whatever I’ve done, however hard I’ve tried, it’s never been good enough”.

This contrasts with their reflections on their shopping experiences. In the shopping environment, awareness of the surroundings and atmosphere enhance their feelings of being in control of themselves. They can choose where to go, what to look at, what to buy. The sorts of comments made by participants include:

“Shopping is the only time when I forget all the other problems in my life”

“Shopping makes me forget who I am - I feel I can get away from the real me”

“It’s like time stands still when I’m shopping”
“I don’t really think about anything when I’m shopping - it’s just like escaping into my own peaceful and trouble-free world”

“I’m aware of where I am - the surroundings and all the beautiful clothes - and nothing else seems to matter”

“I feel somehow set free - as if I can look at and buy all these things without it mattering”

In other words, for this period of time, addictive consumers can make their own decisions, untroubled by external pressures or concerns. It is an important “space” in their lives where they can remove themselves not only from everyday issues, but also take full responsibility for what they are doing. “It’s a sort of freedom.”

Even beyond the shopping environment, this element of being in control continues. Secreting the goods away, sorting out paying the credit card bills, hiding both the purchases and the consumption behaviour from partners, friends and families all contribute to the feeling that a small part of their lives is free from the knowledge and interference of others.

“I quite like the fact that my husband doesn’t know about my shopping. It’s something that is mine and although I feel guilty about it, it’s nice having a bit of time and a bit of my life that is mine.”

“If they knew about all the clothes I’ve got stashed away upstairs, they’d go mad. But this is my secret and I don’t want them to find out about it”

So, while addictive consumption has been described as an inability to control behaviour, the reflections reported here suggest the contrary. The shopping and associated behaviour appear to provide feelings of empowerment and emancipation. These patterns of behaviour may be open to multiple interpretations, but what is clear is the powerful and intimate nature of the disclosures voiced during these interviews.

6. In Control / Out of Control or Seeing the Patterns?
Crotty (1998; p157) summarises some of the basic assumptions which ‘critical’ researchers should adopt. These include the following:
“that all thought is fundamentally mediated by power relations that are social in nature and historically constituted
…that oppression has many faces, and concern for only one form of oppression at the expense of others can be counter productive because of the connections between them
…that mainstream research practices are generally implicated, albeit often unwittingly, in the reproduction of systems of class, race and gender oppression”.

Crotty goes on to say that criticalists should take care not to embrace accounts of ‘lived experience’ without listening to the ‘voice of inherited tradition and a prevailing culture’ and argues that a sustained effort should be made to detect those voices. Interpretivists cannot be content to adopt an uncritical stance in relation to the culture they are exploring (Crotty, 1998; p.159). He concludes that the spirit of social critique can be expressed in many ways but throughout all the diversity “critical inquiry remains a form of praxis – a search for knowledge, to be sure, but always emancipatory knowledge, knowledge in the context of action and the search for freedom”.

8
We have heard the voice of the researcher and the voice of the addictive consumer(s) and in those voices we can hear echoes of oppression. Issues of gender, class, and the role of consumption in our society, loom large. Addressing what could be defined a social problem through qualitative research is also an issue which others have sought to clarify (Bloor, 1997; Finch, 1993).

Our focus in this paper is on the researcher, and on the nature of relationship between the researcher and the researched during the research process, exploring the tensions surrounding issues of control.

The locus of control at various stages in the research process is debatable and of course extremely complex. The researcher selected, and therefore arguably controlled, the area of inquiry (or did she?). Those interviewed chose to take part and therefore, at that point, were in a sense in control. The epistemological and methodological approach (chosen/controlled by her?) required the researcher to relinquish control of the direction of the interview. Nonetheless the subtle effects of the researcher as ‘expert’ (Ribbens and Edwards, 1998) may be evident in her account of some of the interviews where women were “waiting for questions and seeking to give the right answers”. The researcher then has control over the transcripts and the interpretation and/or communication of the contents. However the dissemination of that interpretation will to an extent be controlled by the academic community and its institutions.

Feminist critiques have addressed ethical concerns about power and the imposition of meaning during the research process (Wilkinson, 1998; Stacey, 1988; Woodruffe-Burton, 1998; Finch, 1993). “The issue is not just one of the gaps between the written and the spoken word, but between the spoken word and the academic presentation of the spoken word. It is the way in which we represent and interpret the women’s voices which reinforces hierarchies of knowledge and power” (Ribbens and Edwards, 1998; p.190). Similar concerns have been voiced in relation to ethnicity (Stanfield, 1994), and these concerns are now being articulated across the social sciences in relation to research design and process.

These crises of representation, and the tensions surrounding them, are included by Lincoln and Denzin (1998) in their discussion of six fundamental issues facing the field of qualitative research. Other issues include crises of legitimacy; a cacophony of voices speaking with varying agenda – race, class, etc; the blurring of the borders between science and religion; and the influence of technology.

At the risk of adding to the cacophony of voices, we are seeking to listen to the voice of researchers who are involved in research methods and processes which ask the researcher to get close to the experiences, feelings, and lives of the researched. “No matter how the scientist may attempt to rationalise the investigation as socially beneficial or contributing to the furtherance of knowledge, the fact remains that he or she is becoming involved with peoples lives” (Hirschman, 1986; p247).

Reflexivity is becoming the “defining characteristic of the crisis of representation” (Hatch, 1996; p.360). This increasing reflexivity on the part of researchers is included in the vision of “a new age where messy, uncertain multivoiced texts, cultural criticism and new experimental works will become more common, as will more reflexive forms of fieldwork, analysis and intertextual representation” (Lincoln and Denzin, 1998; p.583).
The messiness is not just to be found in texts. Increasingly we are adopting forms of fieldwork which demand a quasi-intimacy with the lives about which we write, “lived close enough to them to begin to understand how their worlds have been constructed” (Lincoln and Denzin, 1998; p.582). The phenomenological interview can result in the articulation of previously unvoiced realities, and using the metaphor of Thompson et al (1989) in ‘seeing’ an experiential pattern.

Some colleagues, using a range of qualitative research techniques, have spoken of experiencing a degree of emotional fallout impacting on them as researchers, as well as on the researched. There appears to be have been little discussion to date about the emotional dimension of the research process. We continue to hold on to some ideal of scientific objectivity in the sense that the impact of certain types of research on the researcher is not acknowledged. To trigger a “compelling description of the life, loves, feelings, fears and frustrations” suggests that there may be consequences for the researcher. It is not just in relation to research topics of clear sensitivity such as addiction that we hear accounts of emotion-laden encounters. One colleague interviewing entrepreneurs asks about their lives and their businesses. We are told that they are often recalling events (perhaps painful events) and articulating their feelings in a way they may never have done before. Another colleague asked members of two organisations that had undergone a merger to take part in an exercise where they explored their views of the organisations by painting their reality. The exercise revealed a depth of emotion, fear, distrust, uncertainty that could not be ignored. Having tapped into peoples lives, taken advantage of their trust and encouraged them to open up to us, established this quasi-intimacy do we then switch off the tape and walk away? In most cases, yes.

As researchers we are not examining our experience and sharing it in some of the dimensions we may not feel comfortable about. We discuss some of these issues in terms of ethical dilemmas and in doing so distance it from our emotions, and ourselves keeping it safely in the public domain.

“The subjective experience has often been hidden and, by not having a voice, has been inaccessible to ourselves and others” (Davies, 1992; p.214).

Acknowledgements
This research was funded by an Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) grant to Professor Richard Elliott.

References


