

UC Berkeley

Recent Work

Title

Imaginary Friends: Helpful or Harmful?

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/5cg5h1kw>

Author

Klivans, Laura D

Publication Date

2016

Supplemental Material

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/5cg5h1kw#supplemental>

Imaginary Friends: Helpful or Harmful?

ABSTRACT

Meet Shea*: she's a 27 year-old working woman married to David*. Together they're trying to start a family. But what David doesn't know is that Shea already has a family, including Jasmine, Varyn, Aerya, and Doc: her imaginary friends.

But here's the crazy thing: Shea's not crazy. At least 9,000 people on the Internet and most mental health professionals don't think so.

Shea has tulpas – imaginary friends she's intentionally created who have a life and voice of their own. They live in Shea's mind and share her body. Unlike the painful, uncontrollable voices associated with psychiatric illnesses like schizophrenia, tulpas help people by providing companionship and advice. The person with tulpas, or "host," has control over when their tulpa is active.

For years Shea believes her first tulpa is an anomaly and Shea doesn't tell anyone, including her family or her husband of seven years. But when she stumbles across a subreddit community, she discovers she's one of many people with tulpas. Her self-confidence grows with each chatroom conversation and group Skype call. Shea deliberately creates three more tulpas, each playing a different role in her life.

As Shea feels more and more like herself, her desire to share all of herself (tulpas included) with her husband grows.

Shea feels best living with tulpas. But this path could mean she'll lose the people she's closest to in her physical world. If she ignores her tulpas, though, she'll be compromising who she believes she is.

This story explores: the origin of tulpas and the community behind this concept, tulpas vs. mental illness, and who gets to decide what normal really is.

** Real names withheld for privacy*

SCRIPT

MEET SHEA

SHEA: I was 19 and contemplating suicide cause I thought I had nothing left.

Shea had just graduated from high school, She didn't have a job, money, or a driver's license. She lived in her parent's basement. In her rural, midwestern town she could either work on a farm or in an aluminum factory. And really, what she wanted was to write or draw -- any creative career. Her situation wasn't particularly unusual, but what saved her -- that was unexpected.

She

SHEA: Cried for most of the night. Fell asleep, woke up, thought about it more, cried more. And that's when Jas told me to get up, we need to talk.

Jas, or Jasmine is one of Shea's best friends.

SHEA: 11 o'clock at night. Everything's quiet. Everything's dark. She looked at me and said: I don't care how you feel right now. This is not the end of your story. This is just the end of one chapter.

If Jas hadn't intervened, I probably would have sunk into such a deep depression I would have just slept all day, stopped eating and got myself so sick I would have wound up in the hospital. She stopped me from stopping living.

Now years later, as Shea remembers that dark time in her past, Jasmine shows up.

KLIVANS: Um, and so... She's right there? Wait she's right here?

SHEA: Yeah

KLIVANS: Like very small.

SHEA: Yeah, it's easier for me to impose, to consciously hallucinate, her presence if she's small because there's less details. And the brain doesn't have as much of a tendency to want to fix things or point out how unrealistic that probably is.

It's unrealistic because I can't see Jasmine. Jasmine is Shea's tulpa. T-U-L-P-A.

TULPA 101

A tulpa, as Shea puts it, is like an adult imaginary friend -- but you can't anticipate what they'll say. A person who has a tulpa calls themselves a tulpamancer or a "host."

LUHRMANN: What the tulpamancer was doing would not look odd if it were set within a Christian context. And the tulpamancer called the tulpa god. Calling it a tulpa is what makes it weird.

Tanya Marie Luhrmann is an anthropologist at Stanford. Among other things, she studies absorption.

LUHRMANN: The capacity to be caught up in your imagination. And that is the practice of focusing on your inner experience and trying to use all your inner senses to have it feel more real.

What the tulpamancer is doing is done in all societies. It's just part of the package of religious -- just the way that humans learn to experience the supernatural as vividly present.

But doesn't it seem like having an adult imaginary friend that you think is real, borders on...mental illness? I ask Samuel Veissiere, one of the only academics studying tulpas. He's a professor at McGill University's Culture, Mind, and Brain program.

VEISSIERE: the first and most important question to ask is is there distress? Is there suffering?

The second question is is the person inflicting suffering on others? ... Really the vast majority of tulpamancers that I have spoken to and interviewed report feeling much better now.

Veissiere is saying that tulpamancers benefit from having tulpas. They report their tulpas help them in tons of ways -- figuring out what to study in college, helping them identify and get out of bad relationships, and being more social. And that's what it did for Shea.

MORE SHEA

It's the spring of 2015 and it's been nine years since Jasmine saved Shea's life. The two have been friends since. And things are much better for Shea now. She has a job as a nurse's aid, she has a husband of seven years, and they live in a larger, more vibrant town.

Shea met her husband through her church. She was 19 and he was 24.

SHEA: Neither of us had ever dated anyone else before. So we were each other's firsts on everything. I had to teach this poor fellow how to kiss... We went out to the library for our first date. Of course, called mom. I've got my first date! Yay. We met up at like 3 or 4. We spent the whole day walking around town and talking. He's walking me home at 9 something o'clock at night. Mom calls me up.

How'd it go? Um we're walking home now. And she's freaking out: that long on a first date?

They got married a few years later. Now Shea says she has a happy marriage with her husband; he's her best friend and confidante. They're trying to start a family.

But what her husband doesn't know is that Shea already has a family of sorts: with her tulpas. Yeah, she's got more than one.

TULPA ORIGIN

In Shea's early teens, she started writing fan fiction based on a sci-fi series called *Animorphs*.

SHEA: And that's where Jas got her official start in a story. ROUGH EDIT And I realized that I liked writing my own characters a lot more than I liked writing the original characters.

But writing Jas's story out like a novel didn't feel right. It was stilted. So Shea took it a step further and

SHEA: Started writing out like dialogue between her and me, you know, asking her questions and you know writing back what I thought her answers would be.

As Shea did this, she created a list of the traits she wanted Jasmine to have.

SHEA: They came from a lot of the things in myself that I was proud of and a lot of the things I wished I could fix about myself... I was the nerdy geeky kid, also very emotional, so I had no clue how to stick up for myself. But I wished I did. And Jas definitely knew how to stick up for herself.

Through Jasmine, Shea took traits that could be seen as weaknesses and made them strengths. Like how Shea is small and looks younger than a woman in her late 20s. Shea made Jasmine small too. And for her being short meant Jasmine could sneak around easily, and looking young meant she had lots of youthful energy.

When Shea first heard Jas speak,

SHEA: I was just relieved. Relieved that there was someone, even if it was just a character I created who believed in me. But later as I was thinking about it, I realized just how crazy it all sounded. I worried that I was coming down with some sort of nuts.

Shea researched mental illnesses. She didn't think she fit into definitions of things like schizophrenia or dissociative identity disorder (what we used to call multiple personality disorder). She knew what she was experiencing was weird, and uncommon - she never heard of this thing happening to people before.

Later Shea would learn there's a whole community doing this too. A group of people following written guidelines -- Sitting for hours each day, imagining tulpas into existence.

REDDIT/OTHER TULPAS

So let's review. A tulpa is like an adult imaginary friend. A tulpamancer is a person who has tulpas. Some people have one tulpa and some have a lot more. Most people I've talked to have around three or four, like Shea does.

It's hard to measure how many tulpamancers are out there. In their subpage on the website reddit there are nearly 10,000 members, but an informal census taken of the community by someone in the community had around 450 responses.

Shea found the group on reddit.

SHEA: And it looked actually kind of interesting and as I looked into it more I was like oh my gosh this explains so much about me and Jas.

She was hooked. She spent

SHEA: 10-20 hours just reading through post history and prominent threads throughout the couple of years that the subreddit has existed...

KLIVANS: What were your feelings as you did this?

SHEA: Oh my gosh I did this without even realizing I did this. I did wonder for a while does this make me crazy?... They're going way further along with it than we ever even thought possible.

When Shea says we, she's talking about herself and her tulpas.

SHEA: You've got tulpas and hosts who switch places and the tulpa's talking out of the host's body.

KLIVANS: And you hadn't done that before?

SHEA: We hadn't even considered it a possibility.

KLIVANS: Before that what did you call Jas?

SHEA: Mostly we just thought of each other as an author and a character and that was good enough. We've gone so far past that now.

So far that now she's created three more tulpas:

SHEA: We've got Jas who's a normal humanoid-looking young lady. We've got doc who is a british fella who loves suits and ties and canes. He has a huge obsession with hats. Varyn is a little songbird, looks like... Then we have Areya who is a hologram of a cat.

This crew is always around. They weigh in on what Shea eats for dinner,

SHEA: I want something in a can and it's getting vetoed by everybody.

They remind her to breathe when things get hard, they make jokes when Shea's in a long meeting.

And sometimes, Shea's tulpas do that thing she thought was so strange when she first found the tulpa community. They come out and speak for themselves using Shea's voice and her body. Here's Shea's tulpa Varyn.

SHEA: Hi I'm Varyn. Or sometimes Varena or V. It's all okay. Just so long as I know you mean me.

Shea, as Varyn, is much more fidgety now – when I ask why, Varyn says it's because he's a bird and the human body is so different than the one he normally uses. He plays with drawing supplies on the table.

SHEA: I love to draw. I mean Shea likes to draw but I love to draw.

I also talk to Doc. He's analytical but adventurous. He's also British, and Shea says his accent is horrible. He's working on it.

SHEA: Now the goal with this is to get to be more comfortable with my voice so I'm not thinking about the accent because definitely something I'm self conscious about.

Like Varyn the bird, it's hard using a body that's not Doc's own. He makes a cup of tea.

SHEA: Much better. Now that is a cup of tea.

KLIVANS: Where is Shea right now?

SHEA: Right here. Listening. Talking over me.

So we've got a bird. A pretty British British guy, a cat and our old friend Jas. When I first meet these folks I have lots of questions. Are you in control Shea? Yes she says. Where are you when they're talking to me? I'm just sitting back, observing, she says. She tells me she remembers it all and can pipe in and take control at any time.

Most tulpamancers say the concept of tulpas is loosely based on Tibetan Buddhism. The female explorer Alexandra David Neel wrote about tulpas after traveling to Tibet in the 1920s.

When David-Neel was in Tibet she even made a tulpa herself -- a short, fat, western-looking monk.

Dr. Richard Loewenstein is a psychiatrist based in Baltimore. He's one of the country's experts on dissociative identity disorder and sees a lot of patients with this mental illness. I talk to him on Skype.

LOEWENSTEIN: Unity of self is probably more of an aspiration than a reality. And in our general culture we often refer to ourself as If it were divided. People will say well part of me wants this and part of me wants that or. You know. I wouldn't recognize myself ten years ago compared to how I am now or I'm not myself today.

We all do this to an extent. Like someone who imagines they're talking to a guide when they need wisdom, or when we revert to a younger version of ourselves when we're visiting our parents. But where does normal end and illness begin?

In truth, DID can sound pretty similar to having tulpas. People in the tulpa community and people with DID even use some of the same language to talk about their experiences. Like they both call their groups of personalities a "system" rather than a self.

But here's Loewenstein explaining the key difference:

LOEWENSTEIN: disorders have a distress category, which basically says the symptoms cause clinically significant distress or impairment in social, occupational, or other important areas of functioning.

Are Shea or others distressed by their tulpas? Does it mess with their jobs, personal lives, other stuff?

SHEA: They are definitely not dangerous. It's not distressing. People with mental illness are distressed by it. It's a scary thing. It causes dysfunction it makes them unable to take care of themselves.

Shea feels like she has a good sense of when mental illnesses do cause distress -- at work, she's a nurse's aid to patients with schizophrenia. The distress she sees in them is extreme.

And there's another key difference between tulpamancers and DID patients.

LOEWENSTEIN: the disturbance is not a normal part of a broadly accepted cultural or religious practice.

In other words, you need a community that does accept tulpas.

COMMUNITY

SKYPE: Hello hello? Hello! So we've got me Shea, I've got Varyn and Doc at the moment. Although I may switch out with any of them. Everyone knows me as Oswald and Tambors here with me. I'm Ranya and I'm here with Neuron. Well I guess you could say we are together. This is UForce but the one who will probably be talking most is Karen.

Shea calls this group of people "our Little Family." They first met each other online. Sometimes they meet up offline. And sometimes they have a group skype call. I ask them my big question.

SKYPE KLIVANS: What would you guys say to someone who says oh this is crazy?

SKYPE GROUP: Actually my friend just telling me a story where he basically lied and said it's him giving his emotions names so he can logically talk himself out of bad situations. Yeah I'm gonna go with maybe not the best method. I talked about the idea to my friends and I described it as a psychological phenomenon. All making a tulpa is you want to get your brain to do that thing it did before again and make a second consciousness.

To go back, like at birth, and make another consciousness.

SKYPE GROUP MEMBER: And that's kind of how I explained it. And the people heard that, they seem to understand. Those were my friends and my parents. It's not going to be the same for everybody.

COMING OUT

It's not the same for Shea.

She's wanted to tell her husband about her tulpas for a long time. He's her best friend. But Shea's worried about how he'll respond.

SHEA: What if he doesn't understand? What if he thinks I'm crazy, what if he wants me to go to therapy, what if he totally shuts me down?

Holding in this secret though, is too hard. Finally, the night before I meet her in March of 2015, Shea, as she puts it, "comes out" to her husband.

SHEA: To start with we were in the car and I was like there's something I really need to talk about. Okay, about what?

She told him she had four tulpas, what they meant to her, and that to her they felt real.

SHEA: He really didn't understand. He was like so you're multiple personality? No, it's not a disorder, definitely not a disorder. But you've never acted like you were a bunch of different people. Yeah, we try not to. One of the questions he had after I explained where Jas came from, he asked me what do you think gives you that right to make another person?

G-d gave us the right to make children. I mean we're making people that way. People do it on accident. I think I did it on accident and I'm not getting rid of them. That would be like murder.

He asked what do you want from me? What do you need from me? I just want to be honest, I want to be truthful. I don't want to hide us from you anymore.

I want to talk to Shea's husband, to get his side of the story. How does it feel to hear that his wife is sharing their apartment and her mind with four imaginary beings?

KLIVANS: Given how your conversation went yesterday would he want to talk to me?

SHEA: I really don't know. He's got a history of when something's upset him and he's not sure how to handle it, he doesn't want to talk about it for a while.

So we wait for most of the day, and into the evening, Shea texts him. We keep talking. Then we get a message back.

SHEA: He just said I don't think so.--*pause is just a bit too long*-- He says he doesn't think I'm crazy. He says he still loves me. But I wonder what he really thinks.

I keep following up with Shea's husband, and he won't talk to me.

Instead, I look for someone who can give me a bit of an idea of how Shea's husband may feel.

I talk to this guy Sean. He lives on the east coast. Sean doesn't know Shea and he isn't a tulpamancer. But Sean's sibling is. The first time Sean learned about tulpas was when his sibling embodied one: a tulpa named Nat.

SEAN: The interaction was very strange. I didn't understand it at first. I was in my living room and Nat came downstairs and said, "Hi my name is Nat." And immediately I was confused because the attitude of my sibling is completely different.

Sean said his sibling, who's gender-fluid, was walking differently as Nat, a female tulpa. After the confusion wore off, more complicated feelings came through. On the one hand, Sean is loving and accepting.

SEAN: I feel that to an extent these tulpas really do make my sibling more happy. And I think that's the most important part of it.

On the other hand,

SEAN: I feel if there really is a disconnect between me and my sibling now.

Last Sean checked, his sibling had 14 tulpas.

SEAN: Just the thought of that is kind of scary that. Now I don't even know who is who... I just personally I just want to have one sibling.

Maybe this is how Shea's husband feels. He just wants Shea back, just that **one** person he married.

RELATIONSHIP UNRAVELLING

A month later in April I talk to Shea on Skype. I ask her how her husband is dealing with tulpas now.

SHEA: It's a slow difficult process. He definitely does not accept them at all right now. He sees them as being something that's only in my mind you know? Something that draws me away from the real tangible world, when they draw me out into it.

This is a very different Shea than the one I talked to a month ago. This one is less confident about having tulpas, about whether they really could be a problem or not.

SHEA: The last thing I need is to end up in a mental facility, you know?

KLIVANS: Are you worried about that?

SHEA: Yeah. If I can't convince my husband that all is well with this I may have to go to a therapist just to have someone to talk to and help me help work through things with him

KLIVANS: Having that diagnosis, what would that mean? What would it lead to?

SHEA: If I ever wanted to adopt a kid in the future I probably wouldn't be able to. It might lead to issues getting jobs in the future. If it ever came out in my community, oh my gosh I don't even want to think about how people in my church community might start to view me.

I keep checking in with Shea. In the summer she and her husband go to counseling.

In the fall Shea tries taking a break from the tulpa community for a month. She says it's a compromise with her husband, who wants her to focus more on their world rather than her tulpa-world. While Shea doesn't want to get rid of her tulpas, I wonder if that's even possible.

Remember the explorer Alexandra David Neel? The one who made the jolly western monk-like tulpa? She later writes in her book that quote:

DAVID-NEEL: "The features which I had imagined, when building my phantom, gradually underwent a change... The fat, chubby-cheeked fellow grew leaner, his face assumed a vaguely mocking, sly, malignant look. He became more troublesome and bold. In brief, he escaped my control."

So the explorer decided to get rid of her tulpa, but it took six months of "hard struggle."

In early winter, Shea moves out. She lives with some non-tulpamancing folks nearby.

And then we talk in February of this year, just before Valentine's day.

SHEA: The big news is that probably in the next month my divorce will be final. That's been tough, but getting through it.

I think he felt like he had lost me at some point. I think he was feeling like I wasn't the same person that he married. That all this is just too strange for him.

I ask her what's the hardest part about that.

SHEA: Readjusting to not being married. He was my best friend you know? We've got really good friends here. It's just different it's not the same.

In some ways I wonder if Shea chose her tulpas over her husband. But when we talk about this she says it's not a choice. Her tulpas make her life better in so many ways. Is this enough distress to qualify as a mental illness? Or is this just life?

LOEWENSTEIN: You know there are situations where somebody will get a new religion or get a new political orientation and get really into it.

Dr. Loewenstein again.

LOEWENSTEIN: You know the spouse may say well i think they're crazy. But again if this is a culturally shared phenomenon, and the person finds it beneficial, it could be the same as saying well i've decided to go and be part of this religion.

And the tulpamancers I've talked to -- which is nearly 20 now -- *want* to be part of this community. Many say their tulpas saved them from dark places and hurting themselves. Some say it is the people in the tulpa community that did this.

When I talk to Shea in February and she tells me the divorce news, she surprises me with something else too. One of her good friends from the online tulpa world just moved to Shea's small town and into Shea's small apartment.

SHEA: And in April another friend of ours is going to be moving in with us. We are family by choice because we fit together.

KLIVANS: How does it feel to be able to be who you are more fully who you are in your home?

SHEA: That feels wonderful... yes.

Now, with tulpas Jasmine, Varyn, Doc, and Aeraya, plus two tulpamancing roommates, Shea is more fully herself. But she lost her best friend in the process. So is it worth it? Are tulpas helpful or harmful? And who gets to decide?

SOURCES

Shea*

Oswald*

Ranya*

UForce*

Sean^o

Alexandra David-Neel, explorer and author of Magic and Mystery in Tibet

Kate Hardy, MD, Clinical Assistant Professor, Psychiatry and Behavioral Sciences,
Stanford

Tanya Marie Luhrmann, PhD, Watkins University Professor, Anthropology
Department, Stanford University

Richard Loewenstein, MD, Medical Director, The Trauma Disorders Program, Part of
the Sheppard Pratt Health System, and Clinical Professor, Department of
Psychiatry, University of Maryland School of Medicine

Samuel Veissiere, Visiting Professor, Culture, Mind & Brain Program, McGill
University

** Real name withheld for privacy*

^o Last name withheld for privacy