Reflections on the Use of Object Elicitation

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Abstract

Objective

This paper reflects on the use of object elicitation in a phenomenological study of the experience of living with advanced cancer.

Method

Object elicitation was used to assist data collection by facilitating participants' reflections on the quality and texture of their lived experience. Participants were invited to select objects that held special meaning for them during the current phase of their lives, and to reflect on their relationship with these objects during a research interview.

Findings

This paper reflects upon the opportunities and challenges inherent in the use of object elicitation. These include the method's ability to prompt unrehearsed, in-the-moment reflections about what it means to be 'living with dying' as well as to shed light on participants' sense of who they can be during this final phase of their lives. At the same time, the focus on objects can result in the imposition of an object-led structure on the interviews and a consequent failure to follow up on aspects of participants' accounts which transcend their relationship with the objects they brought. A further challenge resides in the temptation to look for meaning in the objects themselves rather than in the participants' use of, and relationship with, the objects.

Conclusion

The paper formulates guidance on the use of object-elicitation.

Introduction

This paper introduces object elicitation as a way of supporting data collection when the aim of the research is to facilitate research participants' communication about aspects of their experience which may be difficult to tap into through conversation alone. Here, research participants are invited to select objects they encounter and engage with in their everyday life and which carry meanings that are relevant to the phenomenon under investigation. These objects are brought along to the research interview which then focuses on each of the objects in turn. Rather than asking participants direct questions about the nature and quality of their experience, object elicitation provides an opportunity for participants to talk about their relationship with the objects and in this way hopes to shed light on their wider experience. Through reflecting on their relationship with their chosen objects, participants can perhaps more easily share the quality and texture of their life-world than if they were asked to talk about it unaided.

The object elicitation method has been inspired by both photo-elicitation and photo-production methods which have been used in qualitative psychology increasingly in recent year, particularly in health psychology research (eg. Radley & Taylor, 2003; Frith & Harcourt, 2007; Silver & Reavey, 2010; Del Busso, 2011). Photo-elicitation works with already existing images which participants reflect on during interviews whereas photo-production involves participants taking photographs as part of the research process (see Silver, 2013 for an introduction to these methods). Object elicitation is similar to these methods in that it involves participants in some preparation and some reflection prior to the research interview and in that it seeks to stimulate and contextualize such reflections with reference to something of substance that exists in the participants' world. It requires participants to select significant objects and to reflect on the

meaning and significance of each object as well as their personal relationship with these objects before attending the research interview. As such, the use of object elicitation as a method of data collection offers research participants an active role in setting the agenda. It allows the participant to shape the focus and structure of the interview as their choice of objects (eg. their size, the number of objects selected, and their social significance) will determine what and how their experience is talked about. In its attempt to "increase participant agency and control and help participants to make meaning of their experiences in a manner that does not rely on language alone" (Silver, 2013: 163) the method contributes to the emerging field of visual methods in qualitative research (Reavey, 2011).

Although the object elicitation method is a new addition to the portfolio of visual methods in qualitative psychology, it builds on insights about the significance of people's relationships with objects from across the human and social sciences. Researchers have explored people's relationships with both familiar and unfamiliar objects including the role of material objects in people's biographies (eg. Hoskins, 1988), what happens when we encounter objects in a museum (eg. Wood & Latham, 2009), the symbolic meanings of domestic objects (eg. Csikszentmihalyi & Rochberg-Hakton, 1981), as well as the role of artifacts in human social life more generally (Schiffer, 1999). There is also a body of literature in philosophy that concerns itself with the meaning and significance for human beings of the material world in general (eg. Merleau-Ponty, 1962) and 'things' in particular (Heidegger, 1967), as well as literary texts which reflect on our (often ambivalent) relationship with materiality (eg. Sartre, 1959). The field of art therapy (eg. Dailey & Case, 1992) has, of course, also engaged with the meaningful relationships that people can have with objects including their production, destruction and/or transformation.

This paper offers some reflections on the use of the object elicitation method in a phenomenological study of the experience of living with advanced cancer. The aim of the paper is to discuss the opportunities, challenges and limitations associated with this method of data collection as they were encountered within the context of the 'Living-with-Dying' project.

The paper begins by introducing the 'Living-with-Dying' project, its aims and approach to data collection and analysis. This is followed by a discussion of some of the ways in which the use of object elicitation shaped the nature of the data that was produced and the implications of this for the kinds of insight that can be generated on the basis of such data. The paper also looks at some of the challenges encountered by the researchers in their use of object elicitation. It is hoped that the reflections contained in this paper will be useful for other researchers who consider using object elicitation to aid data collection in the study of lived experience.

The 'Living with Dying' Project

The 'Living with Dying' project is a collaboration between researchers at City University London (Jacqui Farrants and Carla Willig) and Maggie's Cancer Centre (Catherine Nelson). The project is concerned with the phenomenon of 'living with dying', with how people experience themselves and their relationship with the world when they are living with the awareness that the end of their lives is not far away. The research question driving the research is 'how do people live with the prospect of their own death occurring in the not-too-distant future and how do they experience this situation?' The study employs semi-structured interviews supported by object elicitation to collect data and existentially-informed hermeneutic phenomenological analysis to interpret the data. This paper is concerned with data collection; reflections on the process of

analysis have been published elsewhere (Willig, 2015). Research participants were recruited via Maggie's Cancer Centre. All 14 participants had been diagnosed with advanced (metastatic) cancer and all were aware that their life expectancy would be significantly reduced as a result of their diagnosis. Their ages ranged from the mid-thirties to early eighties. Interviews were conducted in a quiet room either at Maggie's Cancer Centre or in the participant's home. Interviews lasted between one and two hours and were audio-recorded and later transcribed verbatim. Ethical clearance for the research was obtained from City University London.

Using Object Elicitation

Participants had been asked to select and bring along to the interview a collection of objects that held special meanings for them during the current phase of their lives. The idea of using objects to structure the interview was introduced to potential participants during an initial telephone conversation. This telephone conversation took place once potential participants had indicated to staff at Maggie's Cancer Centre that they were interested in taking part in the 'Living-with-Dying' research project. Some potential participants were intrigued and excited by the prospect of selecting meaningful objects whilst others were puzzled and unsure as to whether they would be able to identify relevant objects. However, no-one decided not to participate because of the object elicitation dimension of the research. The objects participants selected included photographs, books, jewelry, diaries, small household objects, items of technology, small pieces of art and/or craft works, items of clothing and recordings of music. There were striking differences between the ways in which individuals engaged with the invitation to select objects which reflected the diversity in initial responses to the idea of object elicitation during the introductory telephone conversation. Some participants brought a large number and variety of

objects whilst others brought only photographs. Two participants brought no objects at all. Irrespective of what participants had brought, the interviewer invited participants to talk about each of the objects they had brought, one by one, explaining their meaning and significance and the role that they played in the participant's life at the present time. Where no objects had been brought, the interviewer conducted a phenomenological interview focusing on the nature, quality and meaning of the experience of 'living-with-dying'.

In what follows we will be reflecting on the use of object elicitation in the context of a phenomenological study of the experience of 'living-with-dying. Illustrative examples from interviews with participants will be used in order to reflect on some of the challenges and opportunities inherent in the method. We will start with a demonstration of how object elicitation can facilitate the articulation and expression of pre-reflective, felt dimensions of experience through in-the-moment meaning-making around the object. This is followed by a discussion of how the focus on objects during the interview can impact upon, and potentially compromise, the exploration of the interviewee's experience.

'In-the-moment' Meaning-making

One of the reasons for choosing object elicitation was that direct questions about the experience of being diagnosed with advanced cancer can prompt established narratives about diagnosis and treatment journeys. Since people living with cancer are likely to have been required to tell their story (both within medical contexts as well as to relatives and friends) more than once, it would not be surprising if they told the same story again within the research setting. As this research was concerned with shedding light upon the lived experience of confronting one's own mortality as it is encountered in the here-and-now, it seemed important to avoid prompting established

narratives. Whilst there are other ways of eliciting thick, fresh descriptions of lived experience which are outlined in the literature on qualitative interviewing (eg. Josselson, 2013), the use of significant objects as a focus for the phenomenological interview can support this process by allowing the interviewer and interviewee to share the experience of looking at the object and thus foreground their joint present-moment processing of its potential meanings. As hoped, the use of objects to structure the interviews did seem to elicit unrehearsed, in-the-moment reflections about what it means to be living with a terminal diagnosis. For example, one of the participants brought a small coffee maker which she described as having become terribly important to her. She described how it was "a sort of sensual pleasure to use it" and "a comfort". As she described her use of the coffee maker, telling the interviewer about the different experiences of morning and afternoon coffee, and the way in which anticipating the coffee was experienced as mood lifting, she uncovered a connection between her enjoyment of coffee and the importance of sensual pleasure during this phase of her life, and concludes:

> "Well, it delights me that I can still have sensual pleasures. And I have. Because actually in this phase of my life I feel I am much more sensitive to external stimuli. I respond more to things".

The participant arrived at her conclusion about the importance of sensual pleasure through her description of using the coffee maker and her in-the-moment-reflection on her relationship with the act of making and drinking coffee. The way in which the participant formulates her conclusion reflects this process whereby a description of her experience makes her notice something about her experience ("Well, it delights me…"), which on reflection is then confirmed

(“ And I have.”) generating a more general insight about the nature and quality of her current experience (“ Because actually in this phase of my life ….. I respond more to things”). Here is the extract showing the process of meaning-making in action:

Participant: “It [the coffee maker] is something I bought since the cancer was diagnosed. So it belongs to this phase of my life. But that is it [points to coffee maker]. And it looks nothing. It makes superb aromatic coffee. And I am a coffee freak.”

Interviewer: “A coffee freak, right.”

Participant: “Yes, yes.”

Interviewer: “How does this work ?”

Participant: “Well, it’s called an Arrow Press. There’s a little filter in there which lasts for a long time. The coffee in there, you stand it over a small jug, bigger than that. You then pour in water up to the level which you want. Stir it with a stirrer. Push this down. It’s instant. And then against all the rules and regulations you add hot water. And it’s amazing because it is very very strong, you see. And it is beautiful and I even use it the next morning for my coffee. And it’s a sort of sensual pleasure to use it. And it’s a comfort, really.”

Interviewer: “So it’s become a really important part of your day, having coffee ?”

Participant: “Yes, absolutely. Absolutely, yes, yes.”

Interviewer: “So when do you use it ?”

Participant: “Well, I usually make it in the afternoon which is the time I sit down and enjoy a coffee. And I make a double amount. Reheat it in the morning and it’s just as aromatic first thing in the morning.”

Interviewer: “Yes. And you said you got this after your diagnosis, so this is very much part of it ?”

Participant: “Yes, yes, I did. In fact, I think I got it after surgery.”

Interviewer: “Right.”

Participant: “Yes, yes.”

Interviewer: “You mentioned comfort, you associate it with comfort ?”

Participant: “I associate it with comfort and sheer sensual pleasure.”

Interviewer: “Sensual pleasure.”

Participant: “Yes, yes.”

Interviewer: “Yes. So when you have a coffee is it like a ritual ?”

Participant: “It is, it is, yes, yes (…)”

Interviewer: “So this really adds to your day ?”

Participant: “Oh absolutely, yes.”

Interviewer: “To help your day to have this coffee ?”

Participant: “Yes, mood lifting even before I have it.”

Interviewer: “Ah yes, yes. So the mood will be lifted by anticipating and then having the coffee ?”

Participant: “Yes, yes, yes.”

Interviewer: “And so this idea of a sensual pleasure, what does that mean to you in this phase of your life, to have something that’s sensual ?”

Participant: “Well, it delights me that I can still have sensual pleasures. And I have. Because actually in this phase of my life I feel I am much more sensitive to external stimuli. I respond more to things. To sunshine, to people being pleasant. I find I instinctively open up.”

Here we can see how the use of object elicitation can encourage fresh engagement with lived experience and thus allows the researcher to witness active meaning-making on the part of the participant. It seems important that participant and interviewer took the time to stay with a description of the participant's coffee ritual as this allowed the participant to home in on the significance of her increased openness to sense impressions.

Sometimes this meaning-making was very much a joint activity to which both the participant and the researcher contributed. The following excerpt illustrates this process well. Here, one of the participants observed that she was feeling more joy now than before her illness. She seemed puzzled by this, saying "It's strange, this sense of joy". Here is what followed:

Participant: "I'm feeling more joy now [name of the interviewer] than I think I've ever felt in my life. It's strange this sense of joy (…)"

Interviewer: "(….) it sounds like it's a different way of experiencing the world ?"

Participant: "It is. It is a different way of experiencing the world. And I'm finding it a wonderful way of experiencing the world (…)"

Interviewer: "It sounds almost quite magical or special"

Participant: "Yes."

Interviewer: "Is it something out of the ordinary in some way ?"

Participant: "Yes, I wouldn't go so far as to say it's ecstasy. But it is almost sometimes an overwhelming feeling of joy (…)"

Interviewer: "Yes"

Participant: "Yes"

Interviewer: “And you have said a few times that you’re not religious but some of the religious [art] works are very meaningful to you ?”

Participant: “Absolutely, absolutely, yes, yes, yes. “

Interviewer: “So would you call that spiritual or what would you call it ?”

Participant: “I suppose so. I always think it sounds boastful to refer to oneself as spiritual. But I think there is something spiritual about what is happening to my life at the moment.”

Interviewer: “Yes”

Participant: “Mm, mm”

Interviewer: “I totally agree. I think the word isn’t really the best word.”

Participant: “No”

Interviewer: “But there’s something there and I can’t think of a better word”

Participant: “Yes, yes”

Interviewer: “Can you think of a better word ?”

Participant: “It’s a sort of awareness of something absolute”

Interviewer: “Yeah”

Participant: “I’ve only just thought of that, yes.”

Interviewer: “Uh-huh, yes. Shall I pour some more tea ?”

It seems that together the interviewer and the participant have arrived at a way of capturing the participant’s experience which makes sense to them both. This process is reminiscent of Gendlin’s (1962) ‘focusing’ technique whereby a person is helped to find a ‘handle’ (through words or other forms of symbolization) which captures and gives expression to their ‘felt sense’ of something (McLeod, 1998:105-6). The interviewer’s “Shall I pour some more tea ?” at the

end of this sequence marks the successful end of this process of joint construction and could perhaps be read as way of acknowledging that something important has been achieved as now a 'tea break' has been earned.

By way of contrast, it was interesting to note that the two participants who did not bring any objects along to the interview started their interviews with accounts of their experience of diagnosis and treatment, thus producing more established and most probably more rehearsed illness narratives than those who did bring objects. It would be interesting to explore further the meanings and significance of not bringing objects.

A second advantage of the use of object elicitation is that a focus upon objects which play a significant role in participants' everyday lives means that participants can talk about what is present in their lives (eg. what they value and enjoy, what or who they can be during this final phase of their lives) rather than reflecting primarily on what it means to be terminally ill. Being diagnosed with terminal illness involves significant losses. It could be argued that a method that enables researchers to catch a glimpse of how those living with terminal cancer create and maintain meaning is particularly helpful, especially since it has been suggested that finding meaning in the experience can reduce symptoms of emotional distress associated with the cancer experience (Jim and Andersen, 2007; Tomich and Helgeson, 2002; Voogt et al., 2005; Coward, 2000; Breitbart et al., 2010; Henry et al. 2010). A thematic analysis of how objects were used by participants in the 'Living with Dying' study identified nine ways in which participants found meaning in the objects they brought (Willig and Nelson, 2014). These included using objects i) as a symbol of continuity with the person's sense of self pre-cancer; ii) as a way of connecting with something transcendent or absolute; iii) as a way of maintaining relationships with others; iv) as a way of evoking specific moods or v) dwelling in significant emotional states; vi) as a

way of conveying a shift in values; vii) as a way of acknowledging the importance of the physical body; viii) as a way of capturing and representing one's experience of the illness; and iv) as a way of locating the self in space and time. All of these offer insight into how meaning is made and maintained as participants negotiate their experience of moving closer to the end of their lives. And although this experience is characterized by the distress and suffering that accompanies the process of coming to terms with losing first one's health and then one's life (see Willig, 2015), it does not mean that the experience is all about absences. The use of object elicitation provided us with an opportunity to gain insight into what is present, into the meanings participants create and what they put in the space that opens up when the end of life comes into view. As such, this method can also potentially fulfill a therapeutic function in that it encourages and supports the process of meaning-making at the end of life.

Focusing on Objects

There were also some indications that the use of the object elicitation method may interfere with meaning-making during the interviews as the focus on objects serves to set a clear agenda from which both the interviewer and the participant may find it difficult to stray. As indicated earlier, potential participants were introduced to the idea of object elicitation as part of the recruitment process. On the consent form, we wrote:

> "In order to better understand your 'lived experience', we will meet for a one-to-one interview where we will explore your experiences. This is expected to last approximately 1.5 hours. To explore your relationship with the world in a more personal and concrete way, we would like you to bring along objects such

> as photographs or other images, household items, pieces of music, poetry or any items which capture something about your experiences of 'living with dying'".

Most of the participants did bring along a collection of objects. Some reported that they had found it easy to select objects whilst others had found it more challenging. There was some evidence that some participants responded to our invitation by trying to meet what they believed to be our expectations of the types of objects that were appropriate within this context. For example, one participant seemed to have assumed that the objects referred to on the consent form by way of example constituted categories of objects that we expected to see at interview. This assumption is made explicit through the following exchange:

Interviewer: "So here we are. Yeah, let's start with the objects"
Participant: "Well, household objects is a strange one and I wondered quite what you meant. But I can't think of any specific household object except for my newish little American coffee maker which has become terribly important to me"

Here, it seems that whilst the initial motivation for thinking about household objects had come from the guidance provided on the consent form, this process led the participant to identify an object (her coffee maker) that did actually carry significant meaning for her during this phase of her life. This was not always the case though. Another participant started the interview by talking about some pieces of furniture but later acknowledged that they were "not of great importance" and that he had only referred to them because the researcher had asked him to think of objects:

Interviewer: “So this [continuity as embodied in the furniture] is something that’s always been important to you ?”

Participant: “I don’t think it has really no it’s just the fact that you asked me to consider”

Interviewer: “Yes”

Participant: “and I thought what the heck can I think of”

Interviewer: “Ok so”

Participant: “and that’s what I came up with. It’s not a, it’s not a big matter.”

Here we can see how the invitation to identify meaningful objects can encourage participants to try to meet the researchers’ expectations so that they end up selecting objects and giving them meaning almost at random (“what the heck can I think of”).

Another way in which a focus on objects can steer the interview in a direction that may not, in fact, reflect the participant’s own priorities can be identified when the imposition of an object-led structure on the interviews entails a missed opportunity to follow up on aspects of participants’ accounts which transcend their relationship with the objects they brought. For example, one participant had brought a collection of photographs depicting people and places that meant a lot to her. She started by talking about a photograph of the house she grew up in. She described how she had recently inherited the house from her mother who had died the previous year, and went on to reflect on her relationship with her mother during the latter’s final years and how inheriting the house coincided with her own terminal diagnosis. She then explains how she came to terms with her diagnosis and how getting everything ready (her will, funeral arrangements etc) helped her to cope, as did praying, going to church and regular contact with her relatives. Although the participant had clearly moved on to an exploration of her coping strategies, the interviewer

seems to have decided that more needs to be said about the house and returns to a focus on the photograph by asking "So the house… ?". This redirects the participant's attention to the photograph of the house and her memories of growing up. She then continues to talk about her parents, grandparents and other relatives who lived nearby at the time. Here is the extract showing the shift in focus from the participant's coping strategies back to 'the house':

Participant: "(…) But then I came to terms with it. And I sorted things out as regards, it might sound morbid, but it was a case of having to, as I am on my own. I have four grown up children as you can see [on the photographs] they've all got lots of children. So I sorted out money for my will, my funeral and the graves in [name of country], that I have in [name of country] so I've done all that. But I wasn't morbid about it. And then once it was done I feel relaxed and if anything happens to me now, everything is ready. And I pray and go to church. And that keeps me going. Plus I get phone calls (…) and I meet one of the two of them [her adult children] in this country and I see them every week"

Interviewer: "Right, yes. So the house (…) ?"

Participant: "It has a lot of memories for me (…)"

Looking at the transcript with the benefit of hindsight it seems that the participant's reflections point to the importance of being connected (with the past, with her relatives, with God) as well as the importance of preparing for her absence (to make sure "everything is ready"). Instead of returning attention to the photograph of the house, the interviewer could have stayed with the concerns raised by the participant by asking further questions about the meaning and value of being connected to others during this phase of her life, or about what it means to "be ready". It

seems that the interviewer's attention was so focused on the photograph in front of her that it was difficult for her to follow the participant's train of thought and move on from the image of the house.

Finally, it was interesting to observe how on occasion we as researchers seemed to be tempted to look for meaning in the objects themselves rather than in what the participants had to say about them. Although we had intended to use objects in our research as a stimulus for participants' reflections about the meaning-making they engaged in during the final phase of their lives, it seemed that there were times when we wanted to attribute symbolic meaning to the objects themselves, almost as though the objects could tell us something that the participants could not. Here, rather than asking questions about a participant's relationship with and use of their object, we would be asking questions about the intrinsic meaning of the object itself. For example, one participant brought some pieces of music including a recording of her own songs and some sheet music of Beethoven's sonatas. The participant talks about these pieces of music by reflecting on her relationship with making music over the years. In her reflections she focuses on the extent to which she has fulfilled her musical potential, explaining why she did not become a concert pianist and how she never finished recording an album of her own. It seems that reflecting on her relationship with the recordings and the sheet music led the participant to acknowledge that there was some 'unfinished business', some musical potential that perhaps has not been fulfilled but perhaps also the need to come to terms with her limitations as a musician. In other words, the participant is concerned with her relationship with making music and with the extent to which she has fulfilled her musical potential rather than with the meaning of the actual pieces of music she has brought:

Interviewer: "(…) Let's go on to the second object. So this is a cassette ?"

Participant: "This is a cassette. And this was made in 1980 (…) and these are some tracks from a band that I was in, my band."

Interviewer: "So you were in a music band ?"

Participant: "Yes. As you can see from this I've always been quite musical. When I was this age, when I was 20, I could play this" (points to sheet music)

Interviewer: " So this is a wonderful piece of… so Beethoven's sonatas ?"

Participant: "Beethoven's sonatas. I also used to play Chopin once and various other things as well and do performances. And at one time when I was at school I had this great thing about I'd like to be a concert pianist or I'd like to be a pianist of some sort. And I gradually realized when I went to college and trained to be a teacher and did music as my main subject, I realized I would never be a concert pianist. Number one I'd made the choice not to go to music college but I think I'd already decided that I couldn't do it and I couldn't make it as a concert pianist because my memory is not good enough. I would always have to have the music in front of me. And I would never have quite got it exactly how I wanted it. So I thought, well… looking back I could probably have quite easily done accompaniments with people or I could've made a living out of the piano but I didn't. But I did write… when I was at college start to write my own music and songs, and was very keen to do an album and to get better but I never finished it. So I've got probably about thirty songs and most of them are recorded in one shape or another but not very professionally. Some of them are professionally recorded but others are not (…)"

During the exchanges that follow this extract, the interviewer seems keen to search for meaning in the actual choice of music (Beethoven's sonatas, the songs the participant has recorded) and

encourages the participant to comment on the music itself by asking a number of questions about what the pieces of music may "represent" and whether there might be something meaningful about the particular pieces of music chosen ("Is there something about that particular piece which is important to you now ?" and "Beethoven has many pieces, particularly his late music, that are very significant. Is there something about that particular piece which is important to you now ?"). Interestingly, although the participant does attempt to answer these questions, she keeps returning to the theme of unfulfilled potential. For example, when she is asked why she picked Beethoven's sonatas ("And so just thinking about the music, this book of Beethoven's sonatas (…) tell me a little bit about what that means ?"), the participant focuses upon her desire to fulfill her potential to be able to play this piece of music:

Participant: "I get a lot of relief from practicing the piano at the moment. I really enjoy relearning the stuff that I used to be able to play quite well. And practicing, just properly practicing, going over a few bars and having it become fluent and my fingers remembering it. So for me it's been quite important that I'm still able to play."

Interviewer: "And the pleasure comes from connecting… ? Is it to do with the music, is it to do with the skill ?"

Participant: "Yeah, interpreting the music, really. That isn't what I call my creativity, it's Beethoven's creativity obviously. But it's a marvelous piece of music. And there are many other marvelous pieces of music which I probably won't touch on at all. But that one I'd really like to be able to play."

The theme of unfulfilled potential resonates throughout this participant's interview, and it is evoked in her reflections about most of the other objects she has brought (eg. there is an unfinished piece of embroidery, a poem about a former friend she has unresolved issues with, a photo of another friend with whom she would like a reconciliation before she dies). Right at the end of the interview, when she is asked "What was it like to choose the objects ?", she reaffirms this when she says:

Participant: "It was very easy actually. It was very easy. The main things, yeah, just the main things in my life. Trying to complete and finish things. Trying to get back in touch with my creativity (…) And making a record of the events of my life that seem significant to me and that I think might be significant to other people."

This suggests that for the participant it was her relationship with the pieces of music that captured something of her current experience of being acutely aware of 'unfinished business' and her desire to fulfill hitherto unfulfilled potential. An attempt to find meaning in the nature of the music itself would not have allowed us to gain insight into this particular concern and we are reminded that the objects themselves do not provide us with information about the participants' experience. This means that during the process of interviewing aided by object elicitation it is important for interviewers to bear in mind that it is the interviewee's relationship with the objects and the meanings given to these relationships that are of interest and ought to be explored, rather than the possible meanings that could be given to the chosen objects by either the interviewer o the interviewee (or both).

Discussion and Conclusions

We have seen that the use of object elicitation can facilitate unrehearsed, in-the-moment reflections on lived experience, and that it can encourage a focus on what is present. As such, it resonates with a phenomenological perspective and its concern with allowing a phenomenon to show itself in the way that it is experienced, in the here-and-now and in an embodied and felt sense (eg. Giorgi, 2008; Finlay, 2011). Although this does not mean that data generated on the basis of object elicitation cannot be analysed using non-phenomenological methods of analysis (such as forms of discourse or conversation analysis), it does mean that the experience of taking part in an object elicitation interview may confront participants with aspects of their experience which they may not have reflected on previously. In this regard, taking part in an object elicitation interview can feel similar to taking part in a counseling session. Open-ended questions about how something feels and what meanings it may carry as well as a focus on the experiential quality of the details of everyday life are both characteristics of humanistic forms of counseling and psychotherapy (eg. McLeod, 1996). It follows that careful attention will need to be paid to the ethical dimension of object elicitation when planning to use this method. Most importantly, participants need to be fully informed about what is involved in an object elicitation interview and they need to be made aware of the potential emotional impact of reflecting on their relationship with the objects they bring to interview. Interviews supported by object elicitation share this ethical challenge with other forms of qualitative depth interviewing (see Kvale, 2003; Josselson, 2013).

We have also seen that the interviewer's preoccupation with the objects themselves during the interview can lead to a failure to follow up on issues raised by participants in their reflections on

their relationship with the objects. It is important for interviewers who use this method to remember that the objects function as a stimulus for participants' reflections about their experience and meaning-making rather than provide the researcher with information in their own right. This was particularly apparent when participants brought photographs which often functioned merely as a prompt for story-telling. As Radley and Taylor (2003) remind us in their discussion of the use of images in qualitative research, images are given meaning by research participants and it is usually this meaning that qualitative researchers are interested in. Images (or objects) do not provide the researcher with direct access to the participants' inner world, and images (or objects) do not speak for themselves. It follows that when working with objects or images, the aim of the research interview is to obtain the participants' responses, descriptions, associations and/or memories that emerge in connection with the material they have brought rather than to 'read' or interpret the images or objects themselves (Silver, 2013; see also Reavey and Johnson, 2008).

Finally, it is important to be aware that participants respond differently to the invitation to reflect on their relationship with significant objects. Some respond with enthusiasm and bring along numerous and varied objects, whilst others struggle to identify any significant object at all. Others may bring only photographs and yet others bring objects but do not actually experience them as particularly meaningful. Thus, when designing an object elicitation study, researchers will need to prepare themselves for a range of different responses and engage participants in reflection on their experience in ways that are appropriate to whatever they have brought and the spirit in which they have bought it.

To conclude, the use of object elicitation within the context of the 'Living-with-Dying' project has proved to be valuable, both in terms of its ability to generate unrehearsed, in-the-moment

reflections about what it means to be ‘living with dying’ as well as in terms of what is has taught us about the advantages, opportunities and limitations associated with this method of data collection. The addition of the object elicitation method to the portfolio of visual methods of data collection can contribute to increased variety and sophistication in the field of qualitative data collection as it can assist qualitative researchers to move beyond ‘mono-modal’ practice which relies on accessing meaning-making through language alone (Reavey & Johnson, 2008).

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