

# Communicating through Objects: Facilitating qualitative Research in Design

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*When it comes to user inquiry and observation in design research, much emphasis is placed on verbal exchange and dialogue. While this is often an essential tool in understanding the user's needs and reactions, it is important to consider the value of non-verbal signs and methods of communication in eliciting a response or to aid the interview and research process. Megan Ashton's paper investigates the influence of visual, non-verbal elicitation during qualitative interviews, and explores this concept by examining several examples of visual elicitation, namely photography, video, drawings and diagrams. Furthermore it discusses the production of visual data by informants as a way of communicating during the interview process. Based on these findings it looks at the possibility of using objects, and then more specifically clothing, to aid the interview process and to facilitate communication.*

## **Semi-structured Qualitative Interviews as a Research Method**

The structure of interviews used in research methods could be pictured as a spectrum, ranging from structured to unstructured (Brinkmann 2013, 18). A structured interview, one which aims to produce quantitative data, consists of a predetermined, invariable list of questions with finite answers, the purpose of which is to produce findings which are easy to classify. The advantage of structured or 'survey' interviews is that it is simpler to analyse the collected data (Weiss 1994, 2). Semi-structured interviews, most often used to collect qualitative data, should be open enough to allow unexpected, voluntary input from the subject, while still being structured enough to follow the topics important to the research project (Brinkmann 2008, 470). The researcher develops the interview alongside the answers from the respondent, in order to probe specific information and encourage dialogue about the research topic (Weiss 1994, 2). In an unstructured interview, such as a 'life story' interview, the researcher asks one very specific question to initiate the interview and then works to 'facilitate' the interview, asking questions only designed to define unclear answers, rather than to guide the respondent's monologue (Brinkmann 2013, 20).

The interview structure, as well as the chosen method of interview and the way it is implemented, is very specific to a project and its research topic (ibid., 25). The structure may even vary during the various stages of an interview or research process, for example, when a researcher is familiarising themselves with a topic or area of research, they may first ask broader, more open-ended 'unstructured' questions in order to better understand the subject matter (Johnson & Weller 2001, 500). In this essay, I will focus specifically on the semi-structured interview, as this is the most widely used interview structure for the collection of qualitative data (Brinkmann 2013, 24). Within the classification of semi-structured interviews, the qualities of the interview can be further influenced by the method of communication used to conduct it, for example via email or in person. An in-person interview, where the interviewer and the respondent communicate verbally, face to face, is seen as an effective method of

gathering qualitative data. It provides the researcher with a direct reaction to their questions and a chance to develop a rapport with the interviewee, more so than in an interview conducted by email, for example (Plano Clark 2008, 432). An interesting characteristic of an in-person interview is that the interviewer is also able to observe the non-verbal reactions of the respondent when they answer questions, creating a richer source of data from which to work with. Also incorporated into the face to face interview, could be the opportunity to conduct the interview in the respondent's work, home or other settings familiar to them, giving the researcher the opportunity to observe the interviewee's environment (Plano Clark 2008, 432).

The inclusion of non-verbal communication during the process of interviewing is a concept which this paper will explore further, by looking at visual and object elicitation, and how these can affect the response of an informant. As it stands, areas of study that practice qualitative research, such as sociology, rely heavily on language and often follow the practice of firmly separating language from other, non-verbal, methods of communication (Banks 2001, 9). The use of language is clearly crucial in communication, yet there are some notions and qualities which it cannot express (Weber 2008, 50). Marcus Banks states in his book 'Visual methods in social research' that "Social research has to be an engagement, not an exercise in data collection" (Banks 2001, 179), and this paper explores whether the inclusion of non-verbal communication within an interview can facilitate this concept. Firstly it is important to look at some of the different forms of visual elicitation that could be used during the interview process.

### **The Possible Influences of Visual Stimulation on the Interview Process**

Visual communication is inherently older than verbal communication and relates to our subconscious in a way that language cannot, attributing to it a completely different essence. Incorporating the use of visual communication when conducting an interview, through the use of visual stimuli, can change the character of the interview, possibly providing a richer response from the

interviewee (Harper 2002, 12). The involvement of visual data in an interview could be crucial in providing a method of communication which allows the participant to express situations, feelings and concepts which they themselves have not yet or cannot convert to verbal communication. For example, feelings of the subconscious which are felt but not yet formed in words, or which the respondent finds hard to articulate (Johnson & Weller 2001, 492). Images also affect the memory in a different way to language, and the use of visual stimuli as elicitation could provoke different, perhaps stronger memories in the respondent (Weber 2008, 45). Images can be used to help facilitate the communication of an unfamiliar viewpoint, allowing the researcher, in the case of respondent generated visual data, to see the subject from the point of view of the respondent (Jupp 2006, 321). Using images in communication can, in this way, facilitate a more comprehensive understanding of diverse backgrounds and cultures (Prosser & Loxley 2008, 4). The practice of viewing, and the way it is respected and interpreted, has evolved differently in different cultures and religions, and the importance of eye contact, for example, or the use of visual metaphors within language, varies between different countries. In research, the understanding of the visual perceptions within a culture, through visual communication, could facilitate a greater understanding of the culture itself (Ibid., 8).

An image is interpreted differently by every person who sees it, and this diverse understanding of imagery makes it a very subjective means of communication (Sturken & Cartwright 2001, 25). Similarly, when images are created they are a representation of many factors; the history of the person creating the image, the situation surrounding the image etc. This subjectivity can make the image an interesting tool through which to communicate during the interview process, where the wish is to explore the personal views and experiences of the respondent (Prosser & Loxley 2008, 18). This concept will be addressed in the following paragraph in more detail. As in any form of research, the question is the priority, and the methods which follow should relate to the question, meaning that the researcher must first consider if visual elements used during an interview could add to the research process, prior to their implementation (Banks 2001, 14). To further explore the effect of the use of visual stimuli during the interview process, it is advantageous to explore two

possible mediums used in elicitation; photographs and diagrams.

### **Photography as a Form of Visual Elicitation**

The most common form of image-elicitation used during the interview process is photography (Harper 2002, 13). Photographs can serve as a reference, for both the interviewer and the respondent, creating the starting point for a mutual understanding of the topic, and helping to familiarise the subject with the research question (Ibid, 20). Referring to a photograph can also act as a tool for focus within the interview, ensuring that topics relevant to the research are discussed (Schwartz 1989, 143). Although photographs are images which have been created, and are therefore subjective (Prosser & Loxley 2008, 6), they nonetheless have the ability to capture and remember factual detail that the human brain may either fail to notice or forget, providing a more detailed and maybe more accurate reference point than a verbal statement (Collier 1957, 844).

Although they are a reproduction of people, objects or places as they may appear in reality, photographs are not strictly a factual representation. Rather they have a slightly ambiguous quality, being influenced by the personal perspective and intent of the photographer, by the surroundings and the social context in which they were taken, and also by the end viewer's interpretation of them, which in turn is influenced by the background of the viewer and the social context in which they are observing the photograph (Banks 2001, 10). For this reason photographs may sometimes be a difficult subject matter for research, however, this same subjectivity can make photographs an interesting form of elicitation. Due to the multiple meanings present, a lot can be said about the respondent in how they perceive the photograph, and the differing perceptions of various respondents can be compared (Schwartz 1989, 140). The fact that the observer of a photograph will comment on the photograph according to his or her own views and experiences, means that the photograph can inspire different narratives from different subjects, or inspire conversational topics unexpected by the researcher, adding more depth to the interview (Ibid, 143). When

subjectivity is seen as an important quality of qualitative research, the subjectivity of an image becomes relevant (Jupp 2006, 321). A photograph taken from a child's eye level for example, could facilitate the viewer in perceiving the child's conscious experience. A photographer can manipulate the technical aspects of a photograph in order to communicate a sociological idea (Harper 2002, 16). Such a change in perception may be useful in helping the respondent to consider various viewpoints when responding to interview questions. A photograph that was taken from a different angle, for example, could help inspire the respondent to see their everyday life, their job or their environment from a new and different perspective. An interesting example of this technique is illustrated by Douglas Harper during his study of his neighbouring farms and the 'changing role in agricultural technology' in 2001. He was experiencing trouble in engaging participants and encouraging them to talk enthusiastically and in-depth about their routine farm work. Eventually, he was able to stimulate the conversation by presenting them with aerial and historical photographs of the farms in question. Through this change in viewpoint, he encouraged deeper reflection from the respondents on what they would otherwise perceive as normal and mundane (Ibid., 20-21).

The first instance of photographs used as elicitation in qualitative research interviews was by John Collier in 1957, when he was a member of a research team working on a study to show the relation between environment and mental health. Collier performed control interviews which did not employ the use of photo elicitation, as well as those which did, providing a comparison between interviews with and without the use of this stimulus (Collier 1957, 846). He illustrated quite clearly a few reasons why the use of photographs could help encourage a more reflective, relevant response from the informant.

- The interviews that used photo-elicitation were more guided through the use of photographs as reference points, and the responses were more specific.
- The responses from the informants were influenced by the photos rather than their mood.

- There was more of an openness from the respondents and they were more willing to participate and develop rapport.
- The use of photographs as elicitation proved useful in overcoming fatigue and repetition in repeat interviews (Ibid., 856-857).

Before perceiving them as a form of elicitation, this study used photographs to create a standard evaluation system amongst researchers for describing the quality of the housing in the area of research. When the research group analysed photographs of the various qualities of housing, it was discovered that the researchers were judging the housing differently according to their particular backgrounds. This illustrates further how a single photo shown to various people can be used to signify a difference in perception according to social background, and also how it can be used to quickly and easily convey a standard or norm. These responses to the subjective yet simultaneously factual qualities of photography inspired Collier to use photographs while interviewing respondents (Ibid., 846).

The act of viewing photographs is a social one present in many peoples' lives, it is an activity undertaken by family and friends together. The use of photo viewing in an interview can create a relaxed atmosphere as it mimics a friendly, informal social activity. This can lead to more direct answers and lack of hesitation in providing information, sometimes even the disregard of the presence of the interviewer in a group interview, for example (Schwartz 1989, 152). The act of taking photographs can also be used to facilitate the interview process, as shown by Donna Schwarz in her case study of the effects of change in a rural farm community in Iowa. She began by creating photos of the community, which she would use later as stimuli in formal interviews with the town's population. She noticed that this initial photo-taking served as a way of introducing her to the farming community, stimulating conversations between her and the people of the town, creating a sense of ease between her and those who she was researching and even allowing her to photograph more intimate social situations, such as family interactions (Ibid., 125).

There are a few important points to remember when using photographs as stimuli in the interview process. Photographs, although useful when guiding an interview, can also be very influential. The use of photographs as props could encourage the respondent to try and predict what the researcher wants to hear, influencing their answers and creating bias results (Prosser & Loxley 2008, 22). Also, photographs can elicit strong emotional responses in a respondent, leading to unpredictable, unstable reactions (Ibid., 24). It is important that the researcher gives careful consideration to which and how many photos to show during the interview, at which point during the interview the photographs could be most effective, the format of the photographs, and of course, the subject matter of the photograph. These are all factors which could directly affect the results of the interview, and therefore the research (Collier 1957, 858). Due to the subjectivity of photographs, there are many questions surrounding images, where they come from, how they are perceived, or the different influences. A researcher using images should be well informed of the variables associated with them in order to correctly understand their use and the responses generated (Weber 2008, 50).

### **Diagrams as a Form of Visual Elicitation**

Diagrams rely on a combination of words and visual symbols to express and simplify ideas and concepts which may otherwise be problematic to communicate. They are not literal representations of reality and range from more text-based, such as a table of information, to more visual, such as an infographic. Diagrams are unique as visual stimuli in their capacity to represent both the physical world and abstract ideas, making them an ideal tool during an interview, to illustrate concepts and ideas that may be hard to express in a purely verbal way. Diagrams used during the interview process are more often produced by the respondent than the interviewer (Crilly, Blackwell & Clarkson 2006, 342), a concept which will be explored in the following paragraphs. This section looks at the effects of using an existing diagram, or one created by the researcher, as a method of communication during the interview process. When referenced by both parties, a diagram can help to confirm a mutual understanding of the topic,

to create a framework for discussing a topic and keep the interview relevant to the interviewer and the respondent (Ibid., 348).

A researcher may create diagrams and show these to the respondent, in order to generate feedback on the accuracy of the diagrams in their understanding and depiction of the research topic. The respondent then communicates their perception of the diagram, how this relates to what the researcher wanted to illustrate and how it may need to be altered to allow improved communication in future visual representations. Also, in interpreting the diagram, the respondent is automatically encouraged to talk about the topic, generating new input which may be important to the research (Crilly, Blackwell & Clarkson 2006, 348). This is illustrated by Nathan Crilly, Alan F. Blackwell, P. John Clarkson in their interviews with industrial designers in 2006. They presented the designers with diagrams created for the research, depicting the factors in the industrial design process which could influence the appearance of the products, and asked for feedback on their accuracy. The interviews highlighted some important changes needed in the diagrammatic representation in order to correctly depict the design process. For example, the respondents were frustrated by certain aspects of the 'fluid and complex' design process being depicted by 'linear...left to right' diagrams (Ibid., 354). An interesting observation during this study was that the feedback was more forthcoming when the diagrams were communicated in a less finished, more sketch-like form, which could imply that the diagram is more effective at generating discussion when it is less polished and more open to interpretation (Ibid., 352-359). Also, a diagram is often used to present a very specific point, and whilst this is a helpful tool, in being so specific the diagram is also more likely to be misrepresentative. This study illustrates the importance of updating and reviewing diagrams to assess their accuracy and stresses that they should not be seen as a finite idea or concept (Crilly, Blackwell & Clarkson 2006, 360).

When using diagrams as a form of elicitation, the way that they are presented is very important. It is helpful not to give the respondent too much stimulation at one time, in order to keep their attention focused and allow enough time for discussion. This could be achieved by, for example, making sure only to show one diagram at a time (Ibid., 354). Also, in order to avoid over

influencing the opinion of the interviewee, to the point where their answers are determined by what they believe the researcher wants to hear, it may be recommended to not show the diagrams at the very beginning of the interview (Ibid., 360).

### **Respondent Generated Visual Data**

A Researcher may also ask respondents to generate visual data during an interview, by undertaking tasks such as producing a painting, taking photos or making a video, all of which can then be discussed during the interview process. It may also be interesting for the researcher to analyse how the object of visual communication is created, and what this can communicate about the respondent and their perception of the research topic (Weber 2008, 47). The following paragraphs investigate respondent generated photo and video data, and drawings and diagrams, as ways of communicating ideas and concepts during the interview and research process.

#### *Photo and Video*

Photographs used for elicitation during the interview process can also be provided by the informant. An existing family photo collection, for example, provided by the family members, could give an insight into their relationship dynamics. The content of the photographs, the situations, people and objects on which they are focused, may be informative in showing the values which influence the family (Jupp 2006, 321). This concept can be taken one step further by asking the participant to take photos for the purpose of research, and then use them as elicitation during the interview process. In this way, the researcher is handing over some of the power to the interviewee, almost like they are working together to solve a problem, to discover something significant towards the research (Harper 2002, 22). This approach gives the respondent more control over the interview discussion and encourages an equal atmosphere during the interview. This, combined with the fact that the respondent has a collection of self-chosen stimuli through which to communicate, could encourage them to be

more relaxed and forthcoming in their answers (Prosser & Loxley 2008, 22). Asking the respondent to create their own photo or video documentation around a specific subject area also allows the researcher to see the subject from a different point of view (Ibid., 31).

The first major example of the respondent visually recording the research topic from their own perspective is illustrated in the research study of the Navajo people by Worth, Sol & Adair, John in the mid-1960s. The purpose of the study was to explore the consequences of introducing filming to a culture who had not previously worked with this medium (Worth Adair & Chalfen 1997, 4), in order for them to use the recording method as a means to express their own perception of their society and their worldview. The result was the communication of a culture from within that culture, in a way that was inherently different to what the anthropologists could have perceived (Ibid., 252-253). This study illustrates the advantages of visual material created by the respondent, as opposed to visual material created by the researcher, who would only be able to depict the research topic according to their own world views and beliefs. The interviewee may have insights into the subject that the researcher cannot attain (Ibid., 254). Similar, subsequent variations of this study include asking participants to create a film about a specific topic, allowing participants to make a film on a topic of their choice and asking participants to create films which could then be viewed together with the researcher, and become a starting point for discussions (Ibid., xv-xvii). The involvement, for example, of young people in the planning, filming and editing of a video documentary on youth style in the study entitled 'Youth Style: Articulating cultural anxiety' by Janet Hethorn and Susan Kaiser, created a situation where the informants offered their own interpretations on this topic - a useful technique as they are possibly the experts on the subject (Hethorn & Kaiser 1999, 113).

In order for the researcher to achieve a correct, in-depth analysis of the respondent's views and perceptions, it is important that any respondent generated visual data is also discussed verbally. The subject of research exploration is not only the images or videos that the respondent produces, but also the associations which they might have to what they have recorded. It is also important that the correct balance is achieved between the input from the

respondent and that from the researcher. It is necessary to remember that ignoring or lessening the academic input from the researcher could be harmful to the outcome of some studies (Reavey & Johnson 2017, 360).

### *Diagrams and Drawings*

Some researchers may ask the subject of an interview to use drawing as a form of communication to express the way that they feel about certain issues relating to the research topic. This non-verbal explanation may allow the respondent to describe the way that they feel in a form which communicates different aspects to those which they could define verbally (Jupp 2006, 321). In the same ways that photography, and other visual stimuli, have a greater connection to the emotional response of a respondent, the use of drawings could help the respondent better communicate emotions. The use of diagrams by the respondent could also greatly facilitate situations where communication is otherwise an issue, due to language differences or illiteracy. The respondent and the interviewee engage in a conversation through the act of, or through reference to, drawing and sketching (Prosser & Loxley 2008, 24). Respondents with a disability which inhibits their verbal communication skills can often communicate more effectively through visual methods, such as drawing. They may relate better to expression which deals with more sensory aspects, and diagrams provide the respondent in this case with a valid presence during the research process, ensuring that their voice is not lost (Prosser & Loxley 2008, 28). Even those who do not have a disability, but do not respond well to the pressure of verbal communication, such as the need to give an immediate answer to a question, may be able to better express themselves through drawings and diagrams (Ibid., 27).

By encouraging the respondent to create diagrams, the researcher is allowing them to play a greater role in determining the topic and pace of the interview. This could create a greater sense of relaxation for the respondent and give them the strength to express more meaningful opinions. Instead of feeling pressured to respond, they are given the freedom to explore their own thoughts and control the agenda of the interview (Ibid., p.26). The researcher should be mindful that giving the interviewee too few guidelines on how to produce a

drawing or diagram can have negative consequences, as the freedom of expression becomes overwhelming and distracts the respondent from the topic. Helpful guidance, such as how to structure the diagram and show the relationship between different subjects, can be very important. It is important for the researcher to find the suitable balance between guidance and freedom in relation to the respondent and type of question, in order to encourage a response which is reflective and informative whilst still being focused (Varga-Atkins & O'Brien 2009, 65).

### **Objects as a Form of Elicitation and Communication during an Interview**

Although objects are seldom used as a means of communication during interviews, and the relevant methods have not yet been fully explored (Iltanen & Topo 2015, 168), it is argued that study of the relationships between people and objects could lead to new and interesting discoveries about society and human nature (Schiffer 1999, 168). For example, asking respondents a question which encourages them to consider and discuss objects which are valuable to them could also lead to the examination of important memories (Prosser & Loxley 2008, 23). Object elicitation could ease the process of talking about life experiences; and including objects that are a part of the respondent's life may aid in discussion and encourage a greater range of responses (Willig 2016, 211). Objects could also help facilitate the explanation of the topic at hand, as perceived in the previously mentioned study by Nathan Crilly, Alan F. Blackwell and P. John Clarkson, which investigated the factors in the design process which influence the final appearance of the products. The initial interviews, which provided the groundwork for creating the diagrams to be assessed in the later interviews, were conducted in the designers' work environment. Among other resources the respondents used objects, such as prototypes and finished products, to explain the design process (Crilly, Blackwell & Clarkson 2006, 354). In the case of interviewing children, objects and environments could be a useful form of elicitation as they are more tangible. A child respondent could be more willing to talk when in their own surroundings or referencing specific objects that are part of their world (Prosser & Burker 2008, 410). Objects can also be used as a

channel of communication when discussing sensitive research topics, such as the use of dolls when discussing the topic of child abuse. The informant may not feel comfortable expressing emotional memories in an explicit way if the memories are very sensitive. As with all cases of elicitation which address such delicate issues, the researcher must act with caution and awareness (Prosser & Loxley 2008, 23).

#### *Object Elicitation in the Study 'Living with Dyeing'*

In order to illustrate some of the qualities of object elicitation, this section looks at an interview process which was part of the project 'Living with Dyeing', a collaboration between Jacqui Farrants and Carla Willig, researchers at City University London, and Catherine Nelson, researcher at Maggie's Cancer Centre. This research project is driven by the question "*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?*". In this interview scenario, the informants were asked in advance to select objects which had significance for them at that time in their lives. Allowing the respondent to select the object or objects that they wanted to discuss during the interview, gave them a way to control the structure of the interview. By encouraging the interviewee to prompt the topics for discussion, the interview became more relevant to them (Willig 2016, 212). However, due to the variety of objects a person could choose, the interview situation could become quite unpredictable for the researcher. There is also the danger that informants will choose an object simply for the sake of fulfilling the researcher's demands, and then attribute a meaning to it which is not real, simply to participate in the interview (Ibid., 217).

The aim of the object elicitation was to avoid a standard question and answer situation during the interview. The researcher was aware that the respondents had often been asked to describe their experience with cancer in terms of treatment assessments and in the discussion of their illness with friends and family. The research aimed to avoid a practised narrative, and the objects allowed the patients a fresh reflection on their situation (Ibid., 213). The informants contemplated their relationship with an object prior to the interview,

when selecting it (Ibid., 211), and also during moments of reflection during the interview, whilst discussing with the researcher. A well illustrated example of this was the discussion surrounding a coffee maker, which the respondent had chosen because she used it every day and it was an integral part of her life. During the interview she reflected on the process of making coffee and how much she enjoyed it, looking forward to it even. Through the presence of the coffee maker, and the physical associations it prompted, she realised how much the sensual experiences in her life meant to her at this time (Willig 2016, 214). A physical object allows a respondent to consider their feelings and experiences, and the patients in this study related to their chosen objects as connections to their body, as triggers of certain emotional states or moods, reminders of their lives before cancer and as symbols of relationships. The discussions inspired by the objects allowed greater insight into their present lives and assessment of their current values (Ibid., 216). It was noted during this study that it is possible for the presence of objects to distract the researcher. It was highlighted that it is important that the researcher should concentrate on the respondent's response to the object and their relationship to it, not focus on the object itself and try and attribute meaning to it (Ibid., 220).

### *The Use of Clothing as Elicitation*

The use of clothing as elicitation has the potential to provoke a strong emotional response. In the book 'Not Just any Dress', a compilation of narratives which focus on the connection between dress and identity, one author describes how a collection of dresses from childhood can evoke affecting memories, comparable to that of a family photo album (Mavor 2004, 26). A personal item of clothing elicits not only personal memories and associations affiliated with it, but also a connection with the garment's social or historical meaning in the context of society (Weber & Mitchell 2004, 4). Even a description of or an opinion about clothing, given by a respondent, could reveal details about their social background (Hethorn & Kaiser 1999, 114). There are many factors which influence the meanings associated with a garment; the historical and social context in which it was produced, the environment or way it was received or

attained by the wearer, and the subsequent associations that the wearer then attributes to it. The interpretation of clothing is very subjective and individual to each person, making it an information rich source of elicitation (Weber & Mitchell 2004, 5). In fact, because the perception of clothing is often so ambiguous and complex when looking at dress as a method of interpreting a culture or part of society, conducting interviews and eliciting an explanation from the people about their clothing is crucial in understanding its significance (Hethorn & Kaiser 1999, 110). In the study entitled 'Youth Style: Articulating cultural anxiety' by Janet Hethorn and Susan Kaiser, the authors look at the underlying themes in dress and the capacity that clothing has to express cultural themes such as violence and sexuality. It works closely with youth culture in exploring the concept that clothing can be used to address subjects that are otherwise less accessible, due to their sensitive nature (Hethorn & Kaiser 1999, 109). It is also possible that because the act of dressing and wearing clothing is an everyday experience relevant to all, that its presence and discussion could encourage a sympathetic atmosphere and equal interview relationship between the researcher and the informant (Iltanen & Topo 2015, 174).

The following paragraphs investigate the analysis of three studies, as presented in the paper 'Object elicitation in interviews about clothing design, ageing and dementia' (Iltanen/Topo 2015). The paper explores the use of clothing elicitation in interviews to investigate how the cultural perception of age, and age related conditions, influence the design of clothing for ageing generations, and how the design, in turn, influences the cultural perceptions of age. The studies interviewed the ageing demographics and the designers of the clothing, and relevant samples of clothing were requested from the designers in question and used as elicitation during the interviews. The physical presence of garments during these interview processes allowed for more realistic, detailed discussions than, for example, the use of visual elicitation, such as photographs of the clothing in question. In a discussion which focuses on the body, an item which encourages thought and consideration about the body is a powerful tool (Ibid., 180).

Study one explores the connection between fashion and late middle age, and the influence of clothing in how a woman of this age is perceived by society

(Ibid., 169). In this study, the clothing helped to facilitate talk about sensitive issues such as ageing. One designer, for example, was reluctant to talk about the concept that her designs targeted an older audience. However, when presented with the object of clothing itself, and encouraged to talk about it, she was more willing to explain her methods of designing clothing for a certain age, and how she understood what was appropriate for middle-aged women in terms of garments. By talking about the object, rather than directly about a sensitive issue such as the ageing body, she was able to overcome her reluctance to speak (Ibid., 163).

The third study focused on 'the social construction of dementia as it is performed through the design of clothing and textiles' (Ibid., 169). Before the interview process took place, it was decided by the steering group that it would not be advisable to interview patients with dementia using garments designed for people with this illness. This was due to the possible emotional response that may be elicited from the patients when confronted with such negatively characterised clothing; the fact that they were possible users of these products could negatively affect their mental condition (Ibid., 172). The researcher decided not to carry out interviews with those affected by dementia, which was unfortunate, as opinions of the demographic in question were not represented. There needs to be more research on the inclusion of 'ethically biased' objects as part of the interview process (Ibid., 182). As part of the study, the clothing was photographed as worn by models who did not have dementia. Even this raised ethical issues, as the physical act of using the restrictive garments triggered negative emotions in the researchers and the models (Ibid., 177).

The use of clothing as object elicitation in these studies incorporated the respondents' senses of touch and sight, as well as creating a physical experience through which they could reflect. This was particularly relevant as the study itself was about the 'experience' of wearing garments. The garments functioned successfully as a method of communication, to express the sometimes very different reflections of those involved in the studies. This was especially noticeable when discussing clothing which raised ethical concerns, such as restricting the movements of a patient (Ibid., 180). Using photography as a method of recording during the interviews in these studies created some issues

due to the need to preserve anonymity. This was solved by pixelating the faces of those respondents who did not wish to be known, or taking photographs where the only part of the respondent shown was their hands (Ibid., 178). The possibility of using clothing elicitation in the exploration of sensitive issues such as ageing and illness is not highly explored and could benefit from further analysis (Ibid., 180).

## **Conclusion**

There are many positive attributes to non-visual elicitation and the use of non-verbal communication during the interview process. Using images or objects as props during an interview is a gentle way to keep a clear focus throughout, and to familiarise the respondent with the research topic. Images, photos and objects can be specific to a culture or part of society, and can be used to help understand and facilitate discussion about that society. Visual and object elicitation inspire a different type of reflection from the respondent than purely verbal, and could inspire more varied and comprehensive answers. This could evoke or allow a better expression of complicated, subconscious or emotional feelings. The change in atmosphere when using images or objects as communication tools could help relax the informant and inspire discussion.

An image or object is always created and is therefore subjective in its meaning and how it is viewed. When the intent of the research is to gather qualitative data, providing personal insights and reflections, this can be a very useful quality. A person themselves is subjective, made of many different factors and experiences, and a subjective tool, such as a photograph or a garment, could elicit or help effectively communicate individual experiences and emotions.

Out of all the methods observed in this paper, photography is the most common and its effects are therefore most explored. It is useful in its ability to capture real life situations in great detail, making it very powerful in communicating accurately and to the point. For example, photography can describe a face in a much more instant way than a verbal description. Viewing photographs as an activity is common in many cultures, an often intimate activity taking place between family and friends. Viewing photographs and mimicking

this atmosphere in an interview environment could inspire a more relaxed and insightful conversation. The accurate yet subjective nature of photographs can inspire the respondent to reconsider a situation or experience from a different angle, literally. By manipulating the perception of the subject of a photograph, in how it is taken and the focus, the researcher can inspire the respondent to reconsider something that may be routine or commonplace.

Diagrams can be used to simplify ideas and concepts, allowing for direct, fast communication of specific topics. They can create a visual representation of an abstract topic, making them useful to communicate concepts or ideas which are hard to describe verbally, or where communication itself is problematic. This allows for the possibility to include less vocal groups, such as disabled persons, whose opinion may otherwise not be heard. Researchers can create diagrams to show to respondents in order to receive feedback on their understanding and depiction of a topic. Diagrams created by a researcher need to be regularly reviewed and updated during the interview process. They are capable of representing very specific concepts and ideas, making the possibility of misrepresentation more likely.

In cases where the respondents generate their own data, the researcher is allowing them a sense of control, and the feeling of working together with the researcher in a process of discovery. This could help to generate enthusiasm from the respondent, relaxes the atmosphere of the interview, and the transfer of power gives the respondent the confidence to express themselves. Respondent generated visual data, or an object chosen for discussion by the respondent, allows the researcher to see the topic from a different viewpoint. The researcher is inhibited by their own experiences and backgrounds, and may also need stimulation in order to understand a subject from a different point of view. It is very helpful to discuss verbally any material that has been produced or chosen by the respondent, in order to fully understand the meanings and associations it holds for them.

Objects as a form of elicitation is an extremely interesting concept, as it appeals to a wider variety of senses and embodies the overall concept of bodily and emotional experience. This could add valuable depth to an interview, yet it is a concept that needs to be much further explored. In our society, our connection

to objects is very strong, and it could be a considerably interesting way to elicit communication about material culture. Clothing too could be a very powerful tool in talking about experience and discussing a person's relationship to society. It is an object that is relevant to all of us and can be very representative of our thoughts, personalities and background.

The research for this paper indicates that non-visual communication could be very beneficial in a qualitative interview. However, every research study is different, and the research design needs to be made accordingly. The positive effect of visual methods or of objects as elicitation and as a means of communication is dependant on the nature of the study and the interview, on the attitude of the respondent and the type of data needed. For example, it could be harder to control the nature or amount of data produced when using objects as elicitation, or the production of photographs may be too complicated and expensive for the time and budget allowed. Photographs, diagrams and objects are all very subjective forms of elicitation, and for a successful collection of relevant data, it is imperative that the researcher understands the variables associated with these methods, how to utilise them, control them and interpret them. This could prove difficult in the area of object elicitation, as it is not yet very common and is under researched.

It is incredibly hard to fully understand the viewpoint of another person, and when images or objects help us in doing so they should be utilised. The subjectivity of these methods of communication, and their ability to involve the respondent in a more active way, to varying degrees, making them a useful tool in assuring that qualitative research is an exploration, rather than simply data collection.

***Megan Ashton, July 2018***

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