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Object elicitation: A compassionate and culturally informed method for psychotherapy research

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Abstract

This study provides an innovative, compassionate and culturally informed method for psychotherapy research, using object elicitation with 13 participants from vulnerable groups. It examines the positive impact it has on building the research alliance, enhanced depth of sharing within qualitative research interviews and emic ways of knowing through the engagement with a culturally relevant, tangible, internalised or transitional object brought by vulnerable participants from diverse cultural contexts of origin. Results showcase how a creative and compassionate research method can promote a culturally informed research alliance with vulnerable participants, helping to build trust, rapport and relational depth; encourage elicitation of experiences; and empower emic and subjugated voices. The implications of this study make the case for the inclusion of object elicitation as a creative and compassionate method in qualitative research with traumatised and vulnerable individuals, which should be used as part of a culturally informed approach to psychotherapy research.

KEYWORDS
compassionate research methods, culturally informed research, culturally relevant object, object elicitation, refugees

1 | INTRODUCTION

This study aimed to contribute to the knowledge and evidence base which advocates the use of culturally informed and compassionate methods within the field of qualitative research in psychotherapy. It also emphasises what we as researchers can do for participants and promotes social justice (Ellis, 2017). We examine how participants can be supported in their autonomy to be psychologically free and in control of their voices and choices within qualitative research (Perry, 2022). This is particularly important for the growing number of vulnerable groups, such as refugees and asylum-seekers, whose numbers have now exceeded 89.3 million worldwide (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees [UNHCR], 2022).

This study explores the employment of object elicitation as a culturally informed and compassionate method, taking the positionality of power-with, and not power-over, participants (Proctor, 2021). Charura and Wicaksono (2023) argue for a decolonised approach to research, which aims to demonstrate a deep respect for and valuing of participation and participants. Expanding on what the approach of power-with, rather than power-over, means, they suggest that power-over is synonymous with colonising dynamics whereby researchers focus on having their research questions answered, rather

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than on engaging with the diversity of world views and experiences that participants bring to the research process. This study therefore presents a method that embodies a power-with approach and an *I-Thou relational stance*, which is about valuing the participant and treating them with respect, rather than an *I-You stance*, in which the participant is merely used to satisfy the purpose of gathering data (Buber, 1958). Furthermore, the I-Thou stance is one we advocate throughout the research process, which models being present with the participant and offering mutuality, intensity, ineffability, accessibility and transparency (Martin & Cowan, 2019), honouring the participants and acknowledging emic and previously subjugated ways of knowing (Rose & Kalathil, 2019).

Recent literature has argued that compassion-focussed skills in research should be taught in pedagogical scholarship alongside ethics, as the research process is not purely method, reason and logic, but begins with the self, with reflexivity and connecting with empathy and emotions, which are an inherent part of dealing with humanity in research (Smith & Narayan, 2019). As trust grows between researcher and participant through the offering of compassion-focussed methods, we suggest in this research that participants are likely to share more intimately, and at a greater relational depth (Mearns & Cooper, 2017), that the researcher can respond more appropriately and attune to the participant's needs, working alongside and collaboratively witnessing with participants, rather than practising research on them (Ellis, 2017; Martineau et al., 2020).

In this study, we position the researcher as the learner, with the participant evoking the senses in our path to knowing which are long forgotten, embodied and tacit, making them available to conscious awareness through the symbolic, and use of externalisation (Eisner, 2008; Jensen, 2022). In line with this, we also draw on the work of Charura and Wicaksono (2023) who recommend an increased awareness of the researcher's and participant's multiple and changing understanding of 'things', both material and conceptual, whilst at the same time remaining committed to the process of searching for their own truths and to the maintenance of ethical research and professional practice. This research aims to support the current movement within psychology and psychotherapy to align with cultural discourse and practices, to democratise the production of knowledge and to decolonise research, making it more relevant and inclusive (Charura & Lago, 2021), using qualitative methods that encourage emic or insider perspectives and diverse voices to construct their own meaning independently from the researcher (Nastasi et al., 2017).

A decolonised approach is about breaking down the structures that support power inequalities, such as discrimination, prejudice and racism, within our profession. In the context of this research, this can be done by analysing how oppression and power are used to exploit, oppress, discriminate and exclude refugees and asylum-seekers. It is also about how we approach and critically examine the beliefs we hold about certain groups and, in this case, how we 'other' refugees and asylum-seekers. Lastly, decolonising research and practice is about challenging and critiquing how Eurocentric ideas and methodologies are given pre-eminence in ways of researching

Implications for practice and policy

This study highlights the following implications for practice and policy:

- The pedagogical need for training in compassionate, creative, and culturally informed approaches to qualitative research in psychotherapy.
- The need to refocus on and de-colonise the field of psychotherapy research and its methods.
- The importance of empowering the emic voice of participants and advocating for previously subjugated ways of knowing within qualitative psychotherapy research, practice and policy.

mental health and ill health, even when they do not fit other groups (Charura & Lago, 2021). In response to this, we decided to use object elicitation as a decolonised approach because it positions the researcher as the learner (Plumb, 2008) and, at the same time, positions both the participant and the researcher as having power with one another, rather than the researcher having power over the participant (Charura & Wicaksono, 2023).

1.1 | What are culturally relevant objects and the object elicitation method and why is it important when working with vulnerable groups?

Before introducing this innovative research method, we would like to outline here what we conceptualise as culturally relevant objects and object elicitation. We will then explicate how our conceptualisations constitute a compassionate research method. In alignment with Charura and Wicaksono (2023), we draw on the work of the quantum physicist Karen Barad (2007), who asks us to consider how what we *know* about things makes them into what they *are*; and how these objects of knowledge are also agents in the generation of knowledge. Barad (2007) challenges us to use a diffractive methodological approach to bring together perspectives and disciplines, which seem far apart, into mutual conversation, reorienting our ontology to give matter a new and participatory status and rethinking how we can utilise our own human relations between matter and its representations, which are inherently intertwined. We embrace Barad's (2007) idea of engaging in a constant opening of the dialogical encounter, allowing us to embark alongside participants in a continuous construction of the world.

Our understanding and conceptualisation of object elicitation also aligns with Willig's (2017) reflections, which assert that, as a method, it is a way of supporting data collection when the aim of the research is to facilitate research participants' communication about aspects of their experience that may be difficult to engage with through conversation alone. When working with vulnerable participant groups, such as refugees and asylum-seekers, many

participants may have witnessed or experienced torture, sexual violence, war and many other atrocities (O'Brien & Charura, 2022). From what we know of psychological trauma, and other psychological difficulties such as depression, post-traumatic stress disorder [PTSD] and complex PTSD [cPTSD], it is often difficult for individuals who are experiencing these conditions to express their phenomenological lived experiences, which instead manifest in embodied trauma (O'Brien & Charura, 2022). The novel term embodied trauma has recently been defined as:

> ... the whole body's response to a significant traumatic event, where mental distress is experienced within the body as a physiological, psychological, biological, cultural, or relational reaction to trauma. Embodied trauma may include psychosomatic symptoms alongside the inability to self-regulate the autonomic nervous system and emotions, resulting in states of dissociation, numbing, relational disconnection, changed perceptions or non-verbal internal experiences which affect every-day functioning.
>
> (O'Brien & Charura, 2022, p. 6)

Object elicitation therefore encourages research participants with likely embodied trauma to engage in research activities, as they are invited to select objects they encounter and interact with in their day-to-day life, that carry personally significant meanings, and which are relevant to the phenomenon under investigation. The participants are then invited to bring the objects to the research interview, which focusses on each of the culturally relevant objects in turn.

This innovative method used in qualitative research interviews focusses on providing an opportunity for participants to talk about their relationship with the objects and aims to explore and illuminate their wider lived experience and the symbolisation of the object to their relationships. Object elicitation offers a new way of engaging with participants that is different from the status quo of purely asking participants direct questions about the nature and quality of their experience. Our observations using object elicitation when conducting qualitative research with refugees and asylum-seekers align with those of others, such as Taylor et al. (2020), and with those who have used this method successfully with other vulnerable groups experiencing health difficulties, such as cancer (Willig, 2017; Willig & Nelson, 2014). The commonality of these findings is that participants are more easily able to share the quality and texture of their lifeworld (Husserl, 1970) than if they were asked to talk about it unaided, thus highlighting an innovative method that is clearly demonstrated to perform better than comparable methods.

1.2 | Clarification of the term *'object'* in the 'object elicitation' method and 'object relations' theory

Our psychotherapy research facilitates us often being questioned about the differences surrounding the use of the term *'object'* in object elicitation methods and within psychoanalytic object relations theories. Our clarification here will highlight why we value both 'object elicitation' methods and 'object relations' theory, by providing an explanation of these concepts. This is particularly important because our approach, and the examples held within this research, takes these concepts one step further by applying object elicitation to symbolised relationships, psychologically internalised and transitional inanimate objects. These concepts are especially important for vulnerable groups, such as refugees and asylum-seekers, who often arrive in their host country without any belongings. Despite experiencing multiple losses, we have witnessed how sanctuary seekers often communicate about being significantly and psychologically attached to particular artefacts or relationships that they have left behind, or lost along their journey.

With particular reference to people and relationships, it is important for us to clarify that from some psychoanalytic lenses (Boag, 2014; Ogden, 2010; Winnicott, 1953) the term 'object relations' is used to refer to the theoretical perspective that human beings are primarily motivated by a need for contact and relationship with others, rather than by sexual and aggressive drives (Boag, 2014; Ogden, 2010; Winnicott, 1953). Therefore, in the context of psychoanalytic object relations theory, the term *'object'* refers to significant other(s) with whom an individual relates or has relationships with, such as one's mother, father or primary caregiver, rather than an inanimate entity. These relationships that the self has with a whole range of others (objects) constitute one's sense of selfhood (Boag, 2014; Cashdan, 1998; Ogden, 2010; Winnicott, 1953). In the case of refugees and asylum-seekers, it is then clear that despite being geographically removed from their place of origin, their sense of selfhood often remains influenced and conceptualised through relationships with others, that is, 'object relations'. Additionally, *artefacts* or *inanimate objects*, which they may possess or remember as significant, may also help them make links to or symbolise valued relationships of security, emotional connection or well-being. We conceptualise such *artefacts* or *inanimate objects* as 'transitional objects' (Winnicott, 1953). In this study, we will use three examples of how the participants have engaged with an inanimate object, an internalised object and a transitional object.

2 | METHOD

Thirteen sanctuary-seeking participants based in the North of England were asked to bring a culturally relevant object reminding them of their refuge or asylum-seeking experiences to a qualitative semistructured interview exploring potential embodied trauma. The purpose of engaging with the culturally relevant object was to act as a warm-up to stimulate conversation and build the research alliance during the data collection process (Bordin, 1979; Gabriel & Casemore, 2009; Rogers, 1957a, 1957b), aiding memory recall and elicitation of migration experiences (Burden et al., 2015; Taylor et al., 2020). Each participant was offered the option of using an interpreter in their mother tongue, to assist them with engaging in the research,

which included an informed consent process, a research interview and a debrief. Out of the 13 participants, 10 relayed that they were happy to speak in English, and three participants requested the use of an interpreter. These three participants were from Syria, Pakistan and Eritrea.

2.1 | Participants

Participants were from various cultural contexts of origin, described in detail in Table 1. In our inclusion criteria, we did not specify how long a refugee or asylum-seeker needed to have stayed in the United Kingdom, because we wanted to be inclusive of anyone who wanted to take part. This was exemplified by the richness of the diversity of dialogue we engaged in with participants. For example, some stated:

> When I arrived in the UK, I get my passport after eight years. Five years and two months as an asylum seeker and after that (I) get my refugee status. Yeah, all in all eight years.
>
> (I) stayed more than about eight years without status, after eight years I got it.
>
> I've been here 11 years.
>
> I have been in this country 16 years now.
>
> ...10 years is a very long time...when I come here after two and a half years my husband died...I have been separated from my children for 10 years.
>
> I don't know what (will) happen for the future...I'm waiting nearly 20 years on that.

As can be seen by these quotes, the length of stay varied between 2 years and some who had been here for approximately 20 years. Table 1 outlines their demographic data:

This activity replicated Taylor et al.'s (2020) method and was an intimate process where the objective was to gain insight into the participant's worldview, life circumstances, cultural norms and values. Any artefact could be brought by the participant that would help them express or represent their refuge or asylum-seeking experiences, and where no culturally relevant object was available to the participant, they were asked what they would like to have brought if they could or to express their thoughts and emotions about the absence of their artefact.

3 | RESULTS

Table 2 describes the culturally relevant object brought to the semi-structured interview by the participants to help elicit their refuge and asylum-seeking experiences and build the research alliance necessary for the interview (Bordin, 1979; Gabriel & Casemore, 2009; Rogers, 1957a, 1957b; Taylor et al., 2020). Notably, six out of thirteen participants were not able to bring a physical culturally relevant object due to the lack of belongings, the symbolic nature of their item (such as it being their daughter or their story) or the use of imagery (such as being a living statue or a caged bird), and one participant would have liked to bring their asylum ID. Of those seven participants who did bring a culturally relevant object, two were official documents of the refuge and asylum-seeking process (British Passport and Asylum ID Card), two had cultural significance including an

TABLE 1 Demographic description of participants.

Gender	Age range	Country of birth	Ethnicity
Female	55–64	Somalia	Black (African/Caribbean/Black American/Black British/Other)
Female	35–44	Democratic Republic of Congo	Black (African/Caribbean/Black American/Black British/Other)
Female	45–54	Iraq	Other Ethnic Group: Kurdish
Male	35–44	Nigeria	Black (African/Caribbean/Black American/Black British/Other)
Female	45–54	India	Asian (Asian British/Indian/Pakistani/Bangladeshi/Chinese/Japanese/Philippine Islander/Thai/Vietnamese/Cambodian/Southeast Asian/Korean/Other)
Female	55–64	Eritrea	Black (African/Caribbean/Black American/Black British/Other)
Male	45–54	Nigeria	Black (African/Caribbean/Black American/Black British/Other)
Male	35–44	Kenya	Black (African/Caribbean/Black American/Black British/Other)
Male	45–54	Pakistan	Asian (Asian British/Indian/Pakistani/Bangladeshi/Chinese/Japanese/Philippine Islander/Thai/Vietnamese/Cambodian/Southeast Asian/Korean/Other)
Female	35–44	Nigeria	Black (African/Caribbean/Black American/Black British/Other)
Female	45–54	Pakistan	Asian (Asian British/Indian/Pakistani/Bangladeshi/Chinese/Japanese/Philippine Islander/Thai/Vietnamese/Cambodian/Southeast Asian/Korean/Other)
Female	35–44	Syria	Arab (Middle Eastern/North African)
Male	25–34	Pakistan	Asian (Asian British/Indian/Pakistani/Bangladeshi/Chinese/Japanese/Philippine Islander/Thai/Vietnamese/Cambodian/Southeast Asian/Korean/Other)

TABLE 2 Results of participants' culturally relevant object.

Participant No.	Culturally relevant object
1	No artefact (belongings in different cities)
2	No artefact brought to the interview (participant described their artefact as 'My Story')
3	Photograph of father and mother's prayer beads
5	No artefact brought to the interview (participant described their 'object' as 'My Daughter')
6	No artefact brought to the interview (participant described their 'object' as 'Living Statue')
7	British passport
8	Quran
9	No artefact brought to the interview (participant described their artefact as 'Asylum ID')
10	No artefact brought to the interview (participant described their artefact as 'Caged Bird')
11	Asylum ID
12	African style dress
13	My hair (shaved off)
15	Caged bird art and video

Note: As participant numbers were randomly generated and assigned, and with one participant withdrawing from the study, there are no participant numbers 4 and 14. Where no artefact is cited, the item in brackets is the item the participant would like to have brought or an internalised object such as their story or feeling like a living statue or caged bird.

African style dress and their hair shaved off (as hair is a symbol of beauty in their culture), two were of religious or spiritual significance (Quran, mother's prayer beads and a photograph with their father who had died), and one was a YouTube video of the participant's art of a caged bird with clipped wings, including their reflections on their own sanctuary-seeking experiences and mental health, which are captured in the transcription.

3.1 | Results of object elicitation

The excerpts in Appendix S1 (https://doi.org/10.25421/yorksj.24153084.v1) illustrate how engaging with a participant's self-selected, culturally relevant object assisted in building the research alliance, exploring the lived experiences of participants and accessing otherwise potentially hidden narratives of self. A compassionate research approach was used throughout these qualitative interviews, with emphasis on Sommers-Spijkerman et al.'s (2020) five compassionate attributes (empathy, care for well-being, distress tolerance, sensitivity and common humanity), and four compassionate skills (compassionate attention, feeling, reasoning and behaviour) that are commonly used in compassion-focussed therapy, which we apply to our research. We also note the importance of pausing, respecting, returning and using appropriate endings when working with culturally relevant objects, much akin to the approach used in family constellation therapy (Hellinger et al., 1998), where to touch or move a participant's artefact would be to touch or move a symbolic family member (Hunter & Struve, 1999), and therefore advocate on behalf of instilling these practices when working with culturally relevant objects to ensure therapeutic safety (Scarminach, 2021). This is particularly important when working with participants from vulnerable groups, such as refugees and asylum-seekers, who may begin to access their grief and trauma through this process.

3.2 | Learning from the use of object elicitation

We propose the following learnings as a result of our engagement with object elicitation as a compassionate research method in working with this vulnerable participant group:

1. Enhanced research alliance—The participants noted that they felt better, more comfortable and relaxed, expressing themselves in a culturally authentic way using their self-selected culturally relevant object in object elicitation. This included the expression of emotions that have been previously questioned or suppressed by others, bringing with it a real-felt sense (Gendlin, 1978) that was shared between the participant and the researcher, enhancing rapport, trust and a sense of relational depth (Mearns & Cooper, 2017) in the research alliance.
2. Emergence of spontaneous phenomenological narratives of lived experiences—Participants spoke organically about subjects which were important to them, such as fleeing from war or being separated from loved ones, which may not have been specifically addressed in the research otherwise, giving the participant ownership of the focus of the interview.
3. Decolonised empowerment of the participant and respect for cultural and spiritual values—The experience also appeared to be decolonising and deeply respecting of the participant's experiences and invoked a sense of power with the participant, working mutually alongside them in the research alliance. The participants appeared to be empowered in their autonomy to express whatever part of their culture, experience or worldview that was important to them, such as the importance of religion or relationship.
4. Difference from other interviews—All the participants noted the impact of engaging in the research using object elicitation instead of just personal questions, which led to it feeling like a different experience, perhaps to the approaches of the home office interviews or customs, which may seem more persecutory in nature, leading to freedom of expression.
5. Space for mutual reflection—Object elicitation allowed space with the participant for mutual reflection on and exploration of their topic of choice, tapping into symbolism and object relations, and allowing time within the interview to mutually reflect on their meaning.
6. Trauma informed approach—As evidenced in the excerpts, the participants began to relay some of their experiences and name some of their trauma. We have learnt that object elicitation, as a

method, offers a way to approach trauma that is contained and incremental, as the object remains an anchor on which both the researcher and the participant can focus, and participants can relay their lived experiences without feeling pressurised.

7. Culturally respecting objects and narratives—We note, as part of good practice, given the personal meaning and significance of each object to the participant, that the researcher needs to pay attention to asking moment by moment for permission to touch or photograph the object if invited to, as well as to explicitly ask about any personal, cultural or spiritual observations that the researcher needs to in relation to the object. For example, some participants hold reverence for certain culturally relevant objects, and may not want them to be touched. In some cultures, culturally relevant objects need to be held using both hands as a sign of honour and respect, or in some cultures the left hand should not be used, or the culturally relevant object should not be pointed to. Therefore, it is important to be culturally informed and aware of each participant's cultural norms, and this can be done by asking when unsure throughout engagement with them.

4 | DISCUSSION

In this section, we will begin by outlining our ontological and epistemological stance as researchers, moving on to consider symbolising the psyche and the importance of internalised objects. We will then explore the importance of decolonising ways of knowing, cultivating a compassionate, creative and culturally informed research alliance and the importance of transitional items. Finally, we will consider why a stance of power with the participant is so important within research methods to enable an accurate, meaningful and significant depth of phenomenological data gathering with vulnerable groups, which is innovatively assisted by our method of object elicitation.

4.1 | Importance of clarifying the researchers' ontological and epistemological stance

As with all research processes, we believe that it is important for the researcher(s) to clarify their ontological and epistemological stance which influences their theoretical perspective and methodology, which, in turn, governs and chooses the method(s) of the research (Al-Ababneh, 2020; Crotty, 1998). Object elicitation, as a method, is no different, and it is particularly important for us to consider our beliefs about the nature of reality (ontology), the theory of knowledge (epistemology) and how knowledge may be gained (methodology) when working with vulnerable groups due to the detrimental impacts of power, colonisation and previously subjugated ways of knowing, which are inherent in some traditional research methods (Al-Ababneh, 2020; Proctor, 2021; Rose & Kalathil, 2019).

We note our own positioning ontologically as rooted in constructionism, acknowledging that truth, reality or knowledge can never truly be known (Pring, 2004; Punch, 1998), using epistemology to engage with theory and method to explore the meaning based on social reality (Charura & Lago, 2021). Each researcher will have their own idiosyncratic lens, and we, as both psychologists and psychotherapists, are drawn within our own psychoanalytic theoretical epistemological ideas to consider how engaging with tangible, transitional or internalised cultural objects (Boag, 2014; Fairburn, 1952; Freud, 1910, 1915a, 1915b, 1915c, 1923; Ogden, 1993, 2011) can evoke a richness of dialogue and elicitation of experience, enhance an ethical and relational research alliance (Bordin, 1979; Gabriel, 2009) and provide a compassionate, decolonised and culturally informed approach to research (Charura & Lago, 2021). We also advocate on behalf of a research method which prizes and empowers the participant's emic voice, denoting an approach to the study of a particular culture in terms of its internal element and function rather than any existing external theme (Oxford Press, 2022) and which honours previously subjugated ways of knowing (Proctor, 2021; Rose & Kalathil, 2019; Ward et al., 2020), highlighting the importance of relational ethics and conducting compassionate research with, not on, vulnerable participants (Gabriel & Casemore, 2009; Martineau et al., 2020).

In this section, we take a relational (Gabriel & Casemore, 2009; Martineau, et al., 2020; Paul et al., 1996) and psychoanalytic approach (Freud, 1899, 1910, 1915a, 1915b, 1915c, 1923) to conceptualise the importance of working with a participant's self-selected culturally relevant object as a compassionate, creative and culturally informed research method. The importance of taking a psychoanalytic and indeed psychodynamic object relations (Cashdan, 1998) stance when working within the field of psychological trauma is that we inherently begin to tap into symbolised meaning and repressed feelings due to the natural defences of the psyche against such abhorrent traumatic experiences (Cashdan, 1998; Coleman, 2022; Freud, 1899). It is therefore of value to the researcher to conceptualise their approach within this theoretical lens, as it enables them to work with aspects of the unconscious, the repressed and with Jung's (1964) idea of the connection between man and his symbols.

4.2 | Symbolising the psyche and the importance of internalised objects

The first question that arises is how engagement with a participant's self-selected culturally relevant object can be useful in compassionately creating rapport, building trust and enhancing the research alliance. For exploration of this novel approach, we draw on the psychoanalytic literature, highlighting the importance of human symbols (Jung, 1964) and internalised objects (Freud, 1899; Klein, 1975) for displaced, sanctuary-seeking participants who often arrive in the United Kingdom or other foreign shores with minimal or no belongings, due to the impact of fleeing persecution in their home country.

Ogden (1993) suggests that whilst approaches to Freud's (1899) concept of object relations are diverse, commonly situating them in terms of interpersonal relations, contemporary psychoanalytic philosophical thought notes that they are more fundamentally a

theory of the unconscious and intrapersonal object relations. Fairburn (1952) suggests that the ego can become fragmented into multiple endopsychic structures, where differentiation of the ego results in frustration and repression, leading to splitting off aspects of the central ego which are attached to certain internal objects (see also Boag, 2014; Ogden, 2010).

We therefore postulate that engagement with a culturally relevant object can help the participant to engage with otherwise unconscious, nonverbal or traumatised parts of self (Van der Kolk, 2014), giving voice to those frustrated, repressed or split off parts of the ego utilising the safe base of the research alliance (Bowlby, 1979; Gabriel & Casemore, 2009). This concept of using symbolism of phantasy of an individual's internalised thoughts, desires, fears, beliefs and wishes (Maze, 1993) through projection onto a culturally relevant object (Breuer & Freud, 1895; Freud, 1911, 1913, 1915c, 1922) can potentially help the participant to externalise an inner world or reality (APA, 2022), applying them to objects of the outer world (Fairburn, 1943; Ogden, 2011), as explored in our example.

Furthermore, some participants also noted how their culturally relevant object symbolised their family members (object relations), such as their mother left behind in their home country, noting that they could almost smell her in the prayer beads. Or how a photograph of the participant with her father who had recently died evoked an internalised relationship with parts of herself as a daughter. It is suggested that these internalised objects act within the personality as internalised parts of the self, as daughter or sister for example, and can be manifested autonomously and phenomenologically through engagement with a culturally relevant object, giving access to previously untold narratives of parts of the self (Boag, 2014; Symington, 1993).

Using Jung (1964) psychology, we can also conceive of participants and their symbols, or culturally relevant objects, as a transformational part of the healing process, whereby the possible assimilation of trauma recognised externally within the culturally relevant object may be followed by transformation within the psyche (Minulescu, 2015). This concept was validated by participants in this study who voiced that through the mutual sharing of their culturally relevant object within the research alliance, they felt some relief from their trauma akin to being in therapy. Yet, the importance of internalised objects is more than that which purely constitutes the object itself. Not only does the object play a vital role in symbolising the psyche, but it can also provide a tangible way to enable decolonialised learning in qualitative research through its practical application (Thambinathan & Kinsella, 2021), which we will consider in the following section.

4.3 | Importance of decolonising ways of knowing

The relationship between humans and artefacts has long been studied, researched and recognised in the field of anthropology (Edwards & L'Anson, 2020). Yet, research as a whole has seemingly shifted from the concept of learning as dwelling (Plumb, 2008), where the researcher weaves their way alongside the participant through their social, natural and cultural world and its tensions, towards the preferential perspectives of cognitive learning situated solely in the mind (Edwards & L'Anson, 2020). This shift appears to have lost the learning in the realm of research, which stems from mutuality and from the continuous nature of flow between the material world and that which is embedded in the immaterial, the human and the relational.

Makela (2007) advocates the role of engaging with artefacts as a new creative way of carrying out research where the object can also be seen as a method for collecting, preserving or understanding participant knowledge or information, where the crucial task is giving voice to the artefact and interpreting the meaning embodied within it. However, Ward et al. (2020) take this concept one step further and note the centrality of the relationship within participatory research which provides a framework around accessing indigenous ways of knowing, where assuming a posture of humility allows the nonindigenous researcher to enter relational and collaborative spaces with and for the participant, which privilege emic and previously subjugated ways of knowing, providing a foundation for decolonisation (Rose & Kalathil, 2019; Ward et al., 2020; Whitesell et al., 2020). By building an alliance with vulnerable communities, it is purported that one can establish a foundation of humility, mutual accountability and trust, enabling a compassionate and creative research method which allows for new ways of knowing through the development of strong reciprocal relationships (Ward et al., 2020).

Tateo (2015) notes that the future of qualitative research methods must exist across the realms of experiencing involving the cognitive, bodily, affective and ethical dimensions, which always include linguistic and iconic signs and allow our methods to co-evolve with the object of our study. Gelman (2013) argues particularly for the examination of the essence-like nature of individual artefacts in research which can track an individual's history through space and time, carrying within them knowledge which extends beyond the bounds of the physical into traces of culture and identity or into the essence of the individual or collective.

As part of our reflexive thematic analysis, and drawing from our experience of working with refugees and asylum-seekers, the theme 'Narratives of Time' in relation to the experience of trauma and development of complex psychological challenges is one that warrants continual attention when working with this client group. We have, for example, as already noted in this paper, seen how some individuals had been waiting for up to 20 years for refugee status. Participants described this as 'A long time waiting', 'Waiting for a decision is unbearable', 'You can die waiting' and 'Life is passing by,' which begins to reflect the pain inherent in 'Narratives of Time' both phenomenologically and chronologically (Ricoeur, 1980). We therefore believe that the element of time has a significant impact on trauma and mental health, especially for displaced individuals seeking refuge and asylum.

However, alongside this we must also cultivate a compassionate, creative and culturally informed alliance, which enables us as researchers to enter with empathy (Rogers, 1957b) into the participant's cultural worldview (Ibrahim, 1991).

4.4 | Cultivating a compassionate, creative and culturally informed research alliance

The psychoanalytic concept of the working alliance was first introduced by Bordin (1979) as a collaborative stance applied predominately, but not exclusively, to psychotherapy, where it is underpinned by three main processes: agreement on (therapeutic) goals, tasks and the bond between the practitioner and client. However, Bordin (1979) notes that the term working alliance is a universal concept, which can be valuable for integrating knowledge in any field, being popularly applied to both the therapeutic and supervisory relationships (Cobb et al., 2019; Rogers, 1965), but which, in his view, is particularly important for pointing research in new directions. It is the latter concept of the working alliance that we consider in this study, or what Gabriel and Casemore (2009) now term the research alliance.

In parallel to the working alliance (Bordin, 1979), the research alliance seeks to create a relationship or bond with the participant, meet mutual goals in terms of the research aims and objectives and set tasks within the research process required to achieve them (Gabriel, 2009). Notably, using an in-depth qualitative interview holds the potential for elicitation of rich narrative data, which can be enhanced by the researcher's capacity to build rapport (McLeod, 1994) and create a safe base (Bowlby, 1979), allowing the participant to tell their biographical story (Gabriel, 2009; Holloway & Jefferson, 2000).

During this study, we use engagement with a participant's self-selected culturally relevant object to foster the research alliance and create a bond in a compassionate yet focussed way (Gabriel, 2009). By approaching the creation of the research alliance using a sensitive, empathic and compassionate research method, we argue that it has resulted in a strong rapport with the participant, enhanced trust, and created a relational depth akin to that of intimate conversations found in counselling (Mearns & Cooper, 2017), whilst also maintaining a compassionate distance and tension, allowing for an impassioned and impassive research stance (Gabriel, 2009).

We suggest that engagement with a participant's self-selected culturally relevant object acted as a vehicle to free association, whereby the participant's narrative was seen to bypass the psychological defences (Freud, 1899; Gabriel, 2009; Holloway & Jefferson, 2000), whilst enabling the participant to remain empowered within their own locus of control (Gabriel, 2009; Mearns & Thorne, 2000; Rotter, 1954). An example from this study shows how a female sanctuary seeker from Nigeria shared her culturally relevant object, which was her hair shaved off, symbolising her disengagement with her cultural symbol of beauty. By exploring this symbolic culturally relevant object together with compassion and empathy (Rogers, 1957b), we experienced a co-created relational depth (Mearns & Cooper, 2017), building trust within the research alliance, which assisted the participant in feeling safe throughout the semistructured interview, working together to maintain her window of tolerance (Siegel, 1999). The process of engaging with the participant's symbolic culturally relevant object empowered the participant to speak openly and autonomously, using free association (Freud, 1899), of her experiences of sexual abuse throughout her marriage and sanctuary-seeking journey. The purpose of sharing this story was of great importance to the participant, who wished for the voice of young women in Nigeria to be heard, expressing a strong desire to educate other women more openly about making informed choices regarding marriage and about the cultural expectations of women in her cultural context of origin. For the participant, the research was an opportunity to give voice through free association (Freud, 1899) with her symbolic culturally relevant object to her experiences and to empower those who come after her in their choices. It is also important to note that whilst no physical or tangible object was brought, sharing a symbolic culturally relevant object was significant.

4.5 | Transitional items in the sanctuary-seeking journey

Another important aspect of the self-selected culturally relevant object brought by participants is their value as transitional objects (Winnicott, 1953) during the sanctuary-seeking journey. Winnicott's (1953) concept of a transitional object can be understood as that which can stand for a part or whole person, emphasising the importance of transitional phenomena as a defence against the absence, threat or anxiety of the real-world phenomena. For example, a culturally relevant object may act as a transitional object in the absence of a mother, containing the origins and essence of what makes life worth living (Caldwell, 2022), such as the essence of the participant's mother in her prayer beads in this study.

Caldwell (2022) suggests that not only do these transitional objects represent a part or whole of a person who is absent, but they also importantly evoke within the participant a creativity, which enables the mutual research encounter using both the real and imagined objects. We therefore suggest that through the engagement with a culturally relevant object as a transitional object, this creative engagement enhances the phenomenological encounter within the research alliance and helps to explore in depth the lived experiences of the individual.

Another example of this during this study was a participant's engagement with their culturally relevant object, the Quran, which not only evoked experiences of attending the mosque as a child with their mother in Somalia but also acted as a transitional object whereby they felt safe each day in their host country by laying down childlike with this religious text and feeling reconnected with their mother in Somalia and spiritually with Allah.

4.6 | Power-with participants rather than power-over participants

The final theme that emanates from the engagement with culturally relevant objects in research is its capacity to emulate power with the participant (Proctor, 2021). Recent findings by Matheson

and Weightman (2021) highlight how involvement in research is seen as an empowering intervention by participants experiencing PTSD (as all participants in this study have), as they felt it contributed to their recovery. As per the findings of this study, Matheson and Weightman (2021) demonstrated that taking part in research had been a therapeutic process in itself and benefitted the participants' mental health.

We therefore argue that enabling a culturally diverse participant group to engage in this research through the engagement with their own self-selected culturally relevant object has empowered individuals to share their world view, cultural norms, values and history in a culturally informed way, facilitating the flow of the interview information and providing phenomenological insight into their own lived experiences (Taylor et al., 2020). We view our methodology as being respectful, and we reflected on this by agreeing that given the nature of the asylum process in which individuals are displaced, some may not be in possession of the culturally relevant objects that they would like to bring. As a result, rather than not proceeding with the interview, the absence of the physical object or artefact did not prevent engagement in the research. However, we respected the participant's circumstances and situation, enabling them to speak about absent or internalised culturally relevant objects. Some, for example, stated:

> ...I don't have any object. I do have, but I'll share my art, which I did my by myself. So if you don't mind, I can share a replay of video. It's a six-minute video.

This was in contrast to other participants who were able to bring a physical culturally relevant object significant to them:

> When I was told, you told me interpreter to bring some items. You know, I thought I didn't know what to bring. But I thought this my soul is in these two items. So I brought them with me.

Another participant stated that their artefact was their life story:

> I just know that my experience is something which I have been through, that I have passed through.

Another way in which we demonstrated respect through this methodology was when participants spoke of their future dreams to help others who are still in difficult circumstances in their home countries. Part of this respect is deeply valuing the participant's actualising potential (Rogers, 1957a, 1957b); given their present circumstances of displacement, discrimination and poverty because of the asylum process, their vision may seem impossible.

An example was:

Participant: 'So I talked (in this research) about what was in my mind, because I plan to write a book. My focus is to give it to young girls in my tribe, in my country...some of us were not exposed to certain things because of our religion. Our parents won't allow us to know some things...but there are things you need to know before choosing (a husband). When I was at university, I was optimistic, I had goals about what I wanted to become or have, and how I wanted to live my life after school, but all that was shattered'.

Researcher: 'Thank you for sharing that. I am really aware of what you have been through and how it has impacted your life, but also how much hope you hold and education that you want to bring to the younger people from your tribe'.

Participant: 'It's really important because I know some people are still going through that...and not everyone has the opportunity to have a visa and move away when it's becoming really dangerous'.

As noted through these examples, this research methodology demonstrates respect, and the creation of an opportunity for participants' voices to be heard, have their embodied experiences witnessed, and their vision accepted for what it is without judgement. Hence, this research embraces a stance of power with the participant (Charura & Wicaksono, 2023; Proctor, 2021). It also evidences the repositioning of power in the research alliance to the participant, seeing the researcher as the learner, dwelling alongside the participant through their narrative journey (Plumb, 2008) and positioning the participant as the expert of their own experiences (Rogers, 1961).

The result of this study acknowledges engagement with a culturally relevant object as a valuable, culturally informed, compassionate and creative research method, which, alongside a growing body of literature incorporating creative methods in mental health research (Milasan et al., 2022), can empower the participants, support their recovery and enable their voices to be heard in a decolonised approach to psychotherapeutic research.

5 | CONCLUSION

The conclusion of this study highlights how engagement with a self-selected culturally relevant object can enhance the research alliance, build rapport and trust, enhance the researchers' cultural understanding and empower the participants to share their phenomenological lived experiences, which not only benefit the accumulation of knowledge within the field of psychotraumatology research but also appear to have a therapeutic impact on the participant.

We conclude with the following suggestions for research and practice:

(i) the pedagogical need for training in compassionate, creative and culturally informed approaches to qualitative research in psychotherapy;
(ii) the need to refocus on and decolonise the field of psychotherapy research and its methods;
(iii) the importance of empowering the emic voice of participants and advocating previously subjugated ways of knowing within qualitative psychotherapy research, practice and policy.

6 | LIMITATIONS

We note the limitations of this study with its application to refugee and asylum-seeking participants within the North of England and advocate the replication of results using globally situated vulnerable groups. Furthermore, our approach was important to us as we were interested in engaging in a decolonised approach, which is innovative and clearly demonstrates better performance than comparable methods. However, as a goal it is not to uncover findings, but rather to promote more open and inclusive constructions, and reconceptualisations of experience. We have brought our own intersubjective interpretations of our epistemological positions, and other researchers may bring their own. The flexibility of this method, however, may also be viewed as its strength. Whilst it may be noted as a limitation that not everyone was able to bring a physical culturally relevant object, in this research we mitigated this by planning ahead, noting that displaced individuals might not have access to their culturally relevant object. We agree with Willig (2017), whose reflections on object elicitation highlight the importance of participants having time to prepare and reflect on the object they would like to bring. From our research, we concur with Willig (2017) that to maximise the potential richness of the interview, researchers should make contact to remind the participant before the interview, allowing them time to reflect on their object of choice prior to attending the research interview.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

We have no financial benefits for conflicts to declare in relation to this research.

ETHICS STATEMENT

This investigation was granted ethics approval by the Research Ethics Committee for the School of Science, Technology, and Health at York St John University (Approval Code: RECCOUN00025).

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SUPPORTING INFORMATION

Additional supporting information can be found online in the Supporting Information section at the end of this article.

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