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"I never actually thought about it": a novel dialogical approach to qualitative interviewing combining audio-visual elicitation and member reflection techniques

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ABSTRACT

We describe a novel approach to member reflection interviewing which integrates audio-visual elicitation materials based on researcher interpretation of participant-generated social media data. Informed by Bakhtinian dialogism, this method extends existing member reflection and elicitation methods to develop a new phase of data generation and analysis at the mid-point of a research project, in this case one exploring men's social media stories of Crohn's disease. A major purpose of this second phase was to illuminate how the interviews with and analyses by the researchers shaped participants' responses. Three participants took part, each of whom reported gaining new insights into themselves and their posts. We argue that this method fostered transformative dialogue, producing fresh understandings and generating new perspectives for both participants and researchers. We propose that this innovative form of interviewing encourages compassionate and mindful interaction, offering the potential to enhance the depth and significance of participant involvement in research.

KEYWORDS

Dialogical analysis; elicitation; interviews; member checking; qualitative

'Member checking' or member reflection processes have long been considered an important, though often debated, quality tool for consulting with participants towards the end of a research project (e.g. Motulsky 2021). Depending on the paradigm used, such processes may be considered invaluable for checking the accuracy of representations of participants' experiences or for sharing and elaborating on findings in collaboration with participants (e.g. Tracy 2010). Similarly, there has been an increasing use of creative approaches to interviewing in qualitative research, with visual elicitation approaches in particular being a popular method to access otherwise taken-for-granted or difficult to access experiences and encouraging greater collaboration with participants (King, Horrocks, and Brooks 2019). Here, we propose a distinctive approach to member reflection to generate a second round of

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data and analysis grounded in Bakhtinian dialogism. To do so, we created video and textual summaries of the researchers' interpretation of secondary multimodal social media data produced by participants as elicitation materials prior to interview with them. Our purpose is to describe this novel approach, explore our aims and objectives in its development, and to reflect on its use.

Elicitation methods, member reflection and dialogical approaches to interviewing

Over the past decade, there has been an increasing interest in creative approaches in qualitative research in psychology (Chamberlain et al. 2018) and in the use of creative research methods more widely (e.g. Kara 2020; Mannay 2015). Such approaches have been seen to offer alternative ways to know and understand phenomena by making the familiar strange and moving beyond the constraints of language (Mannay 2010). Within this move towards creative research practices, there has been an increasing use of elicitation techniques, particularly in combination with visual materials, as a means to generate and facilitate discussion during interview (King, Horrocks, and Brooks 2019). Both participant and researcher-generated photos, videos, timelines, maps and collages have all been used as a means by which to encourage deeper reflection on a topic and bring visibility to aspects of experience which may otherwise be overlooked or taken-for-granted (e.g. Dawson and Bain 2022; Duara, Hugh-Jones, and Madill 2022; Mannay 2014; McGrath, Mullarkey, and Reavey 2020). Furthermore, such approaches have been used as a means by which to engage harder to reach groups (Milne and Muir 2020) and are frequently deployed to give participants a more active role within research, minimise power imbalances, and thus make the research process potentially more inclusive, participatory and community-focussed (Catalani and Minkler 2010).

Another means of increasing participant involvement in the research process has been via member reflection (also known as member checking or member validation) interviews. Depending on the research paradigm used, such processes can be concerned with the validity or 'trustworthiness' of analysis in the sense of checking and verifying the results to ensure accurate reflection and resonance with participants' experiences (Birt et al. 2016). However, in approaches which do not assume a singular reality, increasingly the emphasis is on 'sharing and dialoguing' about study findings with participants to provide the opportunity for 'questions, critique, feedback, affirmation, and even collaboration' (Tracy 2010, 844). For the latter, the credibility of the research comes not via its apparent accuracy but the 'reflexive elaboration' of findings (Tracy 2010, 844). To use Madill and Sullivan's (2018) metaphors, these differing approaches thus offer the research as either

a 'mirror', reflecting a given reality, or a 'portrait', generating a version of reality via the researchers, their subjectivity and their particular analytical lens. Taking the latter position, rather than ultimate arbiters of the truth, participants become interpreters alongside the researchers (Josselson 2011; Madill and Sullivan 2018). As a result, new data is produced to further enrichen and deepen existing analyses (Bloor 2001), multiple meanings can emerge (Tracy 2010), and there is the potential for a transformative impact on both researchers and participants as their previous understandings and reflections are opened up to question and dialogue (Koelsch 2013; Madill and Sullivan 2018).

This focus on opening up research to discussion rather than closing it down to a singular, representative meaning aligns with dialogically informed research influenced by the works of (Bakhtin 1981, 1984a). From a Bakhtinian perspective, language is always relational: no utterance belongs solely to the individual or has fixed meaning but is both polyphonic – anticipating and resonating with the voices of others – and heteroglossic – rooted in the social, cultural and ideological codes of language (Frank 2012; Gíslason 2019). As such, 'two voices is the minimum for life, the minimum for existence' (Bakhtin 1984a, 232): even a singular utterance by an individual cannot escape its dialogical nature as it always inevitably answers an anticipated word, be it real or imagined. Dialogism has therefore been used to position research interviews not merely as sites of knowledge production, but of intervention and critical reflection (Way, Kanak Zwier, and Tracy 2015). Tanggaard (2009) recognises interviews as 'dialogical social events,' (p. 1498) a way to explore the social and historical embeddedness of individuals' understandings as well as the conflicts between them.

Bakhtinian theory has also been employed by Harvey (2015) to reconsider the role of member reflection in qualitative research interviews. In Harvey's (2015) dialogic interview approach, rather than a final 'check' prior to completion of the research, each macro-stage of interpretation forms the basis for the next round of interviews, centring participants as agentive and capable of theorising their own experience. In a sense, then, the interview process utilises researcher-generated interpretations in a way akin to elicitation techniques: to prompt reflection, facilitate discussion, and elicit ideas, thoughts and memories which may otherwise have remained unarticulated (King, Horrocks, and Brooks 2019). Whilst in elicitation research it is typically considered essential that the meaning of materials is generated and articulated by the participants themselves, rather than assumed by the researcher, in Harvey's (2015) dialogic approach, interview data generated by both participant and researcher is analysed by the researcher first before taking the interpretations back to participants for their responses. As Harvey (2015, 35) suggests, this leads to 'a more

collaborative, more ethical alternative to member-checking' as meaning is developed in a process of dynamic co-construction with the researcher.

Limitations of these approaches

Despite clear strengths, research which relies on multiple timepoints for data generation with the same participants may create retention issues and place practical and emotional burdens on participants. Not only is more time and effort involved on the part of the participant, but there is also the possibility of harm if revisiting sensitive topics and if interpretations presented by researchers are perceived negatively (Motulsky 2021). Ethical issues are also raised when seeking dialogue with participants about interpretations given requests to adapt analytical insights may leave the researcher in an awkward position. This is particularly fraught in interpretative work, where whose opinion should take precedence – that of the researcher with their theoretical and academic grounding or that of the participant with their experiential grounding – is not always clear cut (Morse 2015; Motulsky 2021).

Furthermore, there has been scepticism more generally over how much elicitation and member reflection methods can be claimed to be empowering for participants. In elicitation approaches, whilst participants certainly tend to be more involved in the interview process and in the construction of meaning, researchers are usually still in control of the overall research process (Joanou 2009). As Packard (2008) points out, participants do not always have access to the power and knowledge which researchers do within these processes; thus, whilst they may bring an alternative lens and fresh perspective, they are not always able to participate on the same level as the researchers themselves. Similarly, it has been noted that member reflection methods have the potential to strengthen, not lessen, researcher power if interpretations feel disconnected from the participant's experience or understanding of a topic, leaving the possibility of harm to both the participants and the researchers themselves (Goldblatt, Karnieli-Miller, and Neumann 2011; Motulsky 2021).

From a Bakhtinian perspective, this reflects the 'dark side' of dialogue (Sullivan 2012, 170): anticipating the other's (in this case, the researcher's) response can lead to a heightened sense of paranoia and suspicion. Providing participants with an analysis and interpretation of their words potentially exposes them to a version of themselves which may feel unfamiliar: they may be 'transformed into "others"' in a way that is alien to them (Sullivan 2012, 170). This may be heightened even further when their individual data has been synthesised with that of other participants (Motulsky 2021). As a result, some participants report having a greater sense of power in initial research interviews than in member reflection interviews (Buchbinder 2011). In the former, participants are able to control the content and choose the level of depth of their responses. During the latter, however, the researcher imposes

structure and interpretation to those responses, which may leave some feeling defensive or critiqued, creating *more* of a power imbalance (Buchbinder 2011). Even when researchers show openness to participant critique, their analysis may be received as what Bakhtin (1981) would call an 'authoritative' form of discourse, i.e. that which is persuasive due to its foundation within (in this case, academic) tradition, rather than its constitution of any logical coherence. This makes it arguably difficult for participants to refute findings due to the relational discomfort in giving negative feedback (Birt et al. 2016) or a sense of deference to researcher expertise (Varpio et al. 2017). This in turn limits the range of possibilities participants may feel are open to them.

A dialogical approach to interviewing combining elicitation and member reflection techniques

Approach rationale

Building on the advantages and in response to the potential limitations of the approaches outlined above, we developed a novel dialogical interview approach combining elicitation and member reflection techniques when generating a second phase of data collection in our study, *Men's social media stories of Crohn's disease: A dialogical analysis of three cases*. This was an in-depth longitudinal qualitative study which aimed to develop an understanding of how men who post publicly on social media author themselves and their experiences of Crohn's disease (CD). Three participants (Troy, Vern and Nigel) were recruited to the study, all of whom had a diagnosis of CD and posted to a blog and other social networking sites (SNS) about it. All three participants were of white ethnicity, with one living in the UK (Nigel) and the others residing in Canada (Vern and Troy), thus all cases originated from a Western context. They were 65, 52, and 28 years of age, respectively, at the time of recruitment. For context, the authors are also all white and Western, and all three live in the UK. The first author is female, and it was made known to participants in initial contact emails and participant information sheets that she, too, has a diagnosis of CD. She conducted all interviews and analyses as part of her doctoral project. The second author (male) and third author (female) supervised this research. The latter has a diagnosis of ulcerative colitis which, alongside CD, is a prevalent form of Inflammatory Bowel Disease.

For the first stage of the research, we analysed multimodal data from blogs, X (then Twitter), Instagram and Facebook across two years of participants' social media posts (Prodgers et al. 2024). For the second stage, we presented these initial case study analyses back to participants in the form of short video and written summaries. In-depth, individually tailored, semi-structured member reflection interviews then followed using the video and written summaries as elicitation materials.

Whilst this method engaged participants in dialogue about and reflection on analysis already conducted by the researchers, this process took place at a mid-way point in the project and formed an additional round of data generation and analysis, unlike typical member reflection processes which occur towards the end of a study. As such, the aim was not to extend, clarify or even enter into a phase of co-construction of pre-existing analyses with the participants, but instead to develop entirely *new* analyses from interview data which centred around dialogue *about* the first stage of analysis. This would not only bring insight into the topic and enable reflection on how participants used social media in relation to their illness but also bring attention to the ways in which the interviews with and analyses by the researchers in turn shaped participants' responses and their shaping of themselves. This follows Bakhtin's (1981) suggestion that, 'Every word is directed toward an answer and cannot escape the profound influence of the answering word that it anticipates' (280). It is only by looking at ourselves as if from the outside – through the eyes of an 'other' - that we can understand who we are in any given context. As such, this outside perspective is crucial for the ongoing development of our self-consciousness (Harvey 2017).

Given the first stage of analysis was based upon found social media data which pre-dated our contact with participants (but was only collected following their informed consent), this was also our first and only interview with them. By occurring mid- and not towards the end of the project as in a typical member reflection interview, the hope was this would open dialogue up by making the researchers' words feel less final. Each participant received an overview of their particular social media case study in advance in video as well as written formats ranging between 5–8 A4 pages and 22–29 minutes in length, respectively. These incorporated quotations from their social media as well as visual data, such as images and screenshots of posts made by the participants themselves and were used for elicitation purposes during the interview. Much like other elicitation approaches, then, the aim in sharing these materials in advance was to give participants an active role during interview, as well as the opportunity to reflect deeply on their social media posts and bring visibility to aspects which may otherwise have been overlooked (King, Horrocks, and Brooks 2019). The focus on each individual case, rather than a synthesis of all cases, meant that participants could respond directly to analysis specifically about themselves, rather than attempting to see their own experiences synthesised within the experiences of others (Motulsky 2021).

In the pre-interview materials sent to participants, it was made explicit that the analyses presented were our interpretations only, that they may view their posts differently to us and, if this was the case or if there was anything they felt did not reflect their experience, that we wanted them to raise this with us, either via email or during the interview itself. In offering both asynchronous and synchronous options here, we aimed to avoid, or at least reduce, some of

the awkwardness that may have come with refuting or questioning our analyses directly (Birt et al. 2016; Varpio et al. 2017). As part of the generation of participants' case studies, we inevitably produced certain identities for them, so we wished to give them the opportunity to 'enter into and collaborate with or resist or oppose' these (Vitus 2008, 486); however, following Josselson (2011), we emphasised our interpretations were of their social media posts, rather than of the participants themselves. In addition, we stressed that we did not want their voices lost within our interpretation and that anything they raised would be taken forward into the next stage of analysis. In so doing, we aimed to show and maintain respect for participants' subjectivity whilst retaining interpretative authority (Josselson 2011), creating a clearly marked boundary around our respective roles in the process.

We felt it was particularly important to produce video as well as written analytical summaries for the participants, which included the first author as a 'talking head' presenting the summary with the aid of MS PowerPoint slides (see Figure 1).

Bakhtin (1993) points to the difference between the *istina*, or abstract truth, and the *pravda*, the complex, emotionally invested lived truth, positing the latter as of particular importance (Madill and Sullivan 2010; Sullivan 2012). As has already been noted, there is a dark side to dialogue which can lead to a sense of judgement or criticism. We felt that a compassionate, careful and – importantly – *embodied* presentation of the material with a focus on the 'pravda' of accounts was more likely to avoid participants' suspicion or fear of cold, academic judgement that may come with an abstract written summary from researchers they had previously not met. Moreover, it was hoped that this would build some rapport in advance of our meeting, a key element in elicitation approaches (Pilcher, Martin, and Williams 2016). As Emerson (1997) puts it: 'By having a real other respond to me, I am spared one thing only: the worst cumulative effects of my own echo chamber of words' (p. 153).

Pre-interview summaries: content

Although the content of each summary was unique to each participant, they all followed the same structure: overview of the research (brief lay summary of the overall project and analytical approach); check-in (highlighting potential risks); analysis (the overarching analytical 'story' of the participant's social media); points for further reflection (particular areas for further discussion during interview); and conclusion (summary of the main points and closing remarks). We ensured that both video and written formats were presented in a sensitive and accessible way (Birt et al. 2016) by simplifying the language and adopting an informal style to ensure it was not too academic, authoritative and 'dry'. An initial, anonymised version of each written summary was first sent to a patient representative, a white, male, UK-based Psychology researcher with

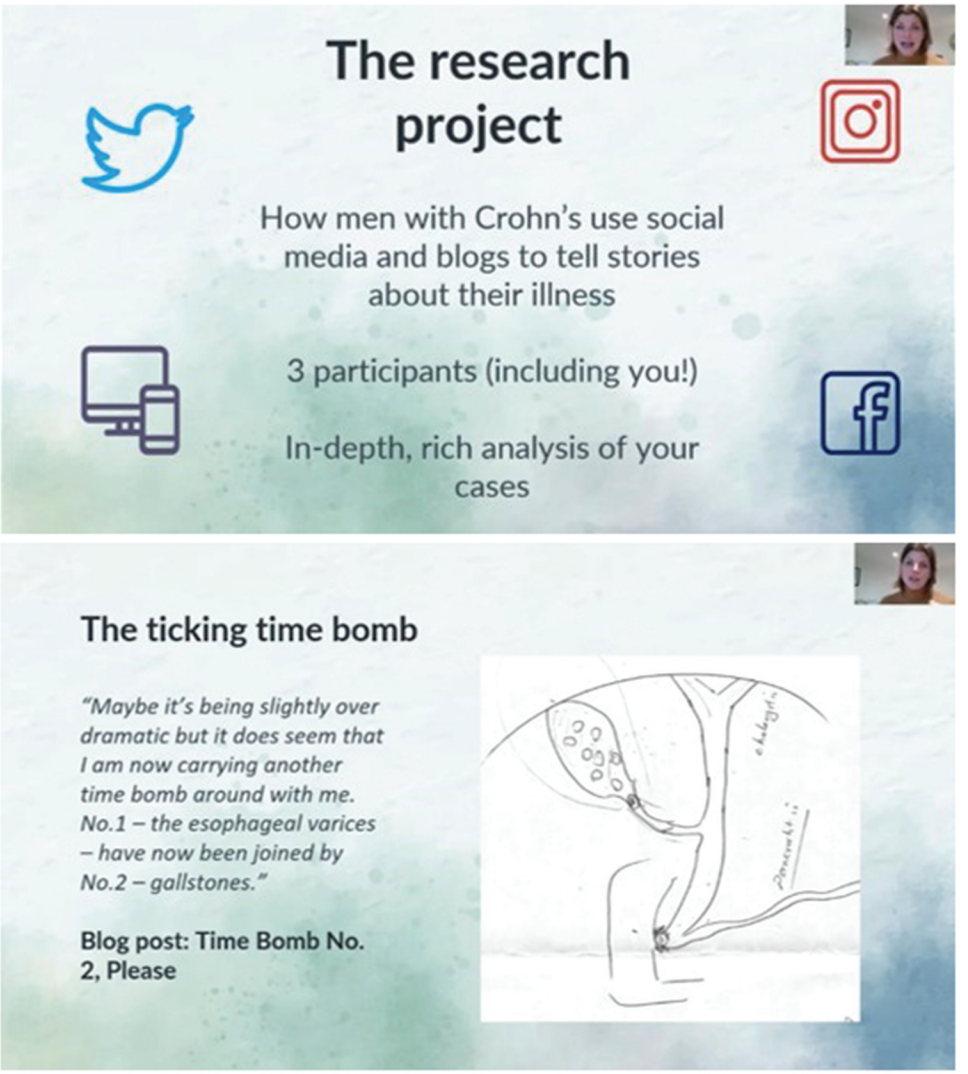

Figure 1. Screenshots from a pre-interview video summary.

CD who had no previous experience of this research project or this type of research. The involvement of patients in health research is increasingly recognised as crucial in improving health services and research, particularly in the UK (Biddle, Gibson, and Evans 2021). Though true representation of any participant group is always inevitably contestable (Maguire and Britten 2017), our aim was to get an alternative, rather than an a definitive, perspective on how the summaries may be received by someone without prior knowledge of the research but with some broad and relevant aspects of experience – for example, being a man and having a CD diagnosis. The patient representative read through each summary in-depth to check: (a) clarity of expression and legibility; (b) for anything which may be deemed insensitive or potentially

upsetting, and changes were made accordingly. For instance, in one account, phrasing was noted which he felt could be misconstrued as judgemental. Whereas we were referring to what we believed to be a self-critical narrative that the participant had built up for themselves based around what they 'should' do when unwell, the patient representative noted that it could be read as what *we* believed they 'should' do. We carefully reworded this to avoid any misunderstanding along these lines.

The 'check-in' section immediately prior to the analysis outlined the risks that came with reviewing the analysis, namely, the potential for discomfort, particularly if our version of them and their posts felt unfamiliar, and the potential for difficult emotions to be raised in returning to past posts and periods of difficulty (Birt et al. 2016). Participants were advised only to proceed once they felt ready to do so and had the space for quiet reflection afterwards. The 'points for further reflection' section focused on tensions, inconsistencies, or seemingly emotional aspects of participant's online stories which we wanted them to speak to further.

Part of our analyses of the social media data highlighted the polyphonic nature of participants' online stories. Literally meaning 'many voices', polyphony refers to the presence of different voices, each with its own set of intonations and values, resonating from within one singular voice (Bakhtin 1984a). Tanggaard (2009) suggests that a good dialogical interview must 'acknowledge the possible existence of conflicts, oppositions, and struggle between the different discourses voiced' (p. 1505). We were aware that the different and often opposing voices we identified in participants' accounts were likely not always intentional nor conscious, and whilst we were interested in how this potentially spoke to moments of uncertainty or ambivalence in their shaping of themselves and their experiences of CD, we were aware that explicit mention of 'tensions' or 'contradictions' could be viewed negatively. We therefore avoided direct use of such terms and attempted to use more neutral language emphasising non-judgemental observation and interest. For example:

> There are times when you seem torn between 'positive' messages . . . - wanting to work out, eat the best foods to achieve the best physique - but at the same time battling through severe symptoms that are stopping you from doing this. [At times], I [the first author] hear a more frustrated and vulnerable voice, which you usually try to avoid. When you refer to difficult episodes, you are clear you are not looking for sympathy and that being 'negative' isn't very comfortable for you. You seem to be responding to a self-critical voice here - one that demands you are at your best and trying your best all of the time. I am interested in learning more about this. (*Pre-interview summary extract 1*)

> You mention that you have lost friends along the way since your diagnosis and also lost a long-term girlfriend shortly after you found out you had Crohn's. You 'don't blame them' for this, yet clearly these were quite painful episodes in your life. I would like to learn more about those experiences. (*Pre-interview summary extract 2*)

As such, following Way, Kanak Zwier, and Tracy's (2015) dialogical approach to interviewing, the aim was to provide a space for participant self-reflexivity and non-judgemental engagement to enable participants 'to let down their defences and listen to *themselves*' (pp. 721–2) with the possibility of transformation of both their and our understandings.

The interviews

All three interviews took place within two months of receipt of the pre-interview summaries[1] and were conducted over the video conferencing platform, Zoom, following participants' informed consent. They were audio and video recorded and lasted between 1.5–2.5 hours. The interview schedules consisted of three main sections. In the first section, aimed at building rapport, general questions about the function and use of participants' social media accounts were used to gather more understanding about the role the latter played in their lives in relation to their CD. The second section was around the social media case study elicitation and formed the bulk of each interview. The questions in this stage followed the structure of the pre-interview materials sent to participants. This provided a focus, but flexibility was retained such that any unanticipated and relevant digressions could be explored in more detail. The third section covered ethics and reflections, giving participants the opportunity to reflect on being part of the research process itself and the extent to which it impacted their use of social media.

In the main, the first, third and concluding sections contained questions which were relatively consistent across all participants, whereas the second section was unique according to each participant's case. Overall, the schedules used a mixture of non-leading questions, as well as prompts aimed at encouraging participants 'to reflect on, explain, and modify' initial statements, ideas and concepts from their social media (Way, Kanak Zwier, and Tracy 2015, 723). Mirroring the 'Points for further reflection' section of the pre-interview summaries, however, we also posed some questions to participants which we felt would be more challenging. For instance, we asked one participant, 'What would you say to someone who says that, given it's an incurable disease, you can't overcome or beat your Crohn's?' This was a tension both within his accounts, but also in the first author's initial response to them in relation to her own CD experiences. We therefore formulated this question carefully, posing it hypothetically, in part for 'interactional ease' (Madill 2012, 4), to mitigate the preference for agreement in conversation (Pomerantz, 1984), but also to avoid any direct conflict or confrontation. As with the pre-interview summaries, our efforts were to maintain a respectful and safe space which we felt may be disrupted by any sense of overt criticism, be it intentional or otherwise. The

[1]Note that for two of the participants, delays occurred in scheduling due to unexpected life events.

aim, then, wasn't to critique or imply that participants' views should change, but an attempt to further understand their views in relation to our own. By making the words implicitly, but not explicitly, the first author's, we were able to sensitively approach an area of potential tension and further explore how our positions and the voices which informed them both converged and diverged.

Following analysis of the interview data, we chose not to return to participants for a further member reflection interview. We felt this would be an unnecessary additional burden given there would be no fresh round of analysis and, as per Buchbinder (2011), such processes can in fact close down dialogue as participants feel obliged to commit to the analytical structure imposed by researchers. Instead, we sent participants videos of around 15 minutes in length featuring the first author talking through our interpretations of the interview data and inviting their responses. At the same time, we sent full written analyses of each participant's social media cases and their interview data as they would appear in the final doctoral thesis, asking them to highlight anything they were uncertain of or unhappy about. By offering both formats, we aimed to give participants some choice over the level to which they wished to engage. For example, they could choose a more passive and brief form of engagement by simply watching the video summary or scanning particular areas of interest in the written analyses or a more active and involved form of engagement via an in-depth reading of the analyses. Due to the searchable nature of the social media data, participants had agreed not to be pseudonymised in this study; however, they were given the option to agree some level of pseudonymisation at this point. As Farias et al. (2019) note: 'the option to waive anonymity is one that should be open for discussion in a dialogical project given the role of participants' (p. 243). In addition, participants were invited for further discussion should they wish and reminded of their right to withdraw from the research. All of the participants replied having read and agreed to the analyses in the original form. Interestingly, they all commented on having enjoyed this process, despite our fears that it may feel burdensome.

Analytical approach

As in the 'portrait' approach previously mentioned (Madill and Sullivan 2018), the dialogical method we used was based on an assumption of multiple truths rather than a singular truth. The aim was not to capture the concrete *reality* of the participants' experiences, thoughts and reactions, but rather what they *said* about them in the context of the interview (Howitt 2010) and in response to the analytical materials. As Bakhtin (1984a) explains, dialogue:

> is not the threshold to action, it is the action itself. It is not a means for revealing, for bringing to the surface the already ready-made character of a person; no, in dialogue

> a person not only shows himself outwardly, but he becomes for the first time that which he is . . . not only for others but for himself as well. (p. 252)

As such, we viewed the interview dialogues working not to reveal something already given, but as productive, creating the self and other afresh. They were 'a way of bringing the world into play' (Denzin 2001, 24), offering an opportunity in which both the participants *and* we as researchers could think through aspects of the topic and our analysis of it in new ways to generate new understanding (Curtis and Curtis 2011).

Rather than consensus, then, we aimed towards a more agonistic approach which embraced opposing perspectives and different ways of understanding a phenomenon (Vitus 2008). We viewed participants' cases not as reflecting a singular or 'flat' perspective, but as complex accounts which were 'in motion', continually re-shaping, developing and becoming richer and more complex in the presence of others, both real and imagined (Cornish 2020). As Sullivan (2012) points out, a good dialogical analysis is polyphonic in that it clearly interacts with participant voices. In the written interview analyses, we attempted to speak *with* rather than about participants (Frank 2012) by interacting explicitly with their polyphony using extended verbatim extracts. These participant 'truths' were then put into contact not only with our truths as researchers via our interpretations but also the outside truths of academic discourse around the topic or experience via incorporation of the wider literature. When analysing the data, we also noted moments of 'double-voiced' discourse (Bakhtin 1984a), the presence of more than one voice within a participant's utterance. Known as 'disclaimers' or 'denials in talk' in discursive analysis (Goodman 2017), examples of this in Bakhtinian-informed analysis are referred to as 'loopholes,' discourse that is presented as final whilst allowing for the possibility of reinterpretation, and 'sidewards glances,' when the anticipation of disagreement from others reworks, or is designed to rework, one's discourse via, for example, hesitations and reservations (Sullivan 2012). We particularly noted when these appeared to speak to indirect disagreement with our interpretation and incorporated them within the analyses. In so doing, our hope was that the reader would be able to interact with the various voices presented and evaluate them against one another (Sullivan 2012). Rather than aiming to find consonance, then, we aimed to add further layers, nuance and richness to the interview analyses by acknowledging instances of difference and disagreement (Turner and Coen 2008).

The reception and impact of the pre-interview elicitation materials

As has been noted in other visual elicitation approaches (Rose 2014), the pre-interview summaries gave all three participants a view of their social media

practices distanced from what they were typically immersed in, seeing themselves and their social media posts in a new light: 'I never thought of it that way' (Troy); 'I never actually thought about it' (Vern); 'I hadn't thought of it (.) like that before' (Nigel). For Vern and Nigel in particular, the interpretations presented were treated as surprising, interesting and affirmative[2]

> I- I found it- I found it very interesting and fascinating actually . . . I think it's going to make me think more when I start writing more how people are going to perceive it. (Vern)

> I was (.) interested and (.) surprise- well not surprised (.) i-it's sort of (.) it confirmed what I suppose I should have known -t his thing about [your interpretation of me as] the de- detective I mean that's the big one I love that . . . I found the process fasc- fascinating. (Nigel)

Nigel later contacted us to request use of aspects of the analysis in upcoming blog posts and podcasts he was involved in. Both he and Vern also noted that our contact with them had encouraged them to start posting on social media more regularly again. Whilst Troy found aspects of the analysis uncomfortable and unfamiliar – 'it's definitely weird that someone's (.) looked that in depth into you . . . sure it's a little uncomfortable (.) at first but talking to you I mean it's not (.) it's not something I'm (.) really awkward about' - he did not reject our readings. Indeed, the dialogue between him and the first author during interview was warm and amiable, and he was open to further discussion of the aspects of the analysis he was less certain of:

> you definitely brought up some questions and I was like, 'Oh that was a little uncomfortable (.) reading' but . . . I think I cleared them up when I kind of shared my (.) side of things and it's like that wasn't my intention but that might have been what (.) what was portrayed in that specific thing . . . I just thought that, 'well that was a little different way to think about it' but it wasn't *wrong* (Troy).

Moreover, despite having the option of pseudonymisation of his case prior to publication, he was happy to remain identifiable in research outputs.

The interviews also highlighted the impact of the researchers and the pre-interview summaries on participants and their illness stories. Both Nigel and Troy seemed to anticipate, counter and encourage psychological readings, for example. Troy in particular appeared aware of potential criticism as he anticipated both our actual views, as presented in the pre-interview summary, and what he imagined our ideas about him may be. For example, when he explained that he tended to post on his blog more regularly when his Crohn's was flaring, he noted:

[2]The symbol . . . is used to denote where, for efficiency of exposition, some text has been omitted mid quote. (.) denotes a brief pause in speech and ((pause)) denotes a longer pause. Underlined text denotes stressed or accentuated words.:

> it was- it was helpful I (.) I felt ((pause)) it w-wasn't therapeutic for me but it was definitely helpful to kind of get my thoughts out on paper . . . and other people can hopefully relate to them.

Whilst Troy presented blog writing as 'helpful', he swiftly moved to assert that it wasn't 'therapeutic'. This sidewards glance served to centre on action – 'get my thoughts out on paper' – rather than the emotional *re*action he may have anticipated our interpretation to infer – that this activity was somehow cathartic. This awareness of a potential psychological interpretation was anticipated again in a later sequence in which Troy discussed his aversion to sympathy and his positive outlook:

> it's kind of shaped me and I think that's what has kind of driven a lot of my success is (.) . . . whether it's (.) an insecurity or (.) whether it's (.) just something that (.) lights a fire inside of me and says, 'look you know what I'm not going to be sick all the time I'm going to beat this I'm going to continue moving forward' and that's kind of ((pause)) what has really helped me

Here, he anticipated two potential reactions to how he presented himself: one in line with his preferred self-representation – his approach 'lights a fire inside' which, with a focus on action ('moving forward'), avoided passivity and vulnerability and thus drove him on into his battle with illness – and another, more cynical response which viewed his positivity as a mask for an underlying 'insecurity' – an arguably classical psychological interpretation. Later still, there was another clash, this time between the first author's actual psychological discourse and Troy's 'epic' version (that which, from a Bakhtinian perspective, centres values of strength, resilience and perseverance (Sullivan 2012)):

> Int: I-I think it it helps me as from a motivational perspective to look back and say (.), 'I went through all of that and it was really tough but look (.) look at where I am now ((pause)) I'm better off or (.) or I made it through (.) I think I can do that again if it ever happens' so then I'm not as worried about it
>
> Troy: Mmm (.) so it- (.) it helps ((pause)) cope with (.) the difficult times?
>
> Troy: Sure ((pause)) yeah I guess you could put it that way

Here, the first author rephrased Troy's 'motivational perspective' to become a more psychological 'help [to] ((pause)) cope with (.) the difficult times'. Whilst he didn't reject this response outright, his hesitant 'I *guess* you could put it that way' acted as a loophole, providing him an escape from any definitive judgement along such psychological lines.

It is notable that all of these clashes between Troy's discourse and both our anticipated and actual responses were in reference to 'help' with his Crohn's, were it in the form of blog writing, as in the first and final extracts, or his more positive outlook in general, as in the second.

In Troy's preferred narrative, the 'really tough' times presented by Crohn's were to be escaped from: the focus was 'moving forward' and making 'it through' in order 'to beat' sickness and reach a place of 'success' in which one was 'better off'. These values of positivity and stoicism linked with his preferred self-representation on social media as the courageous warrior willing to do whatever it takes to conquer his illness. Troy thus responded to the first author's suggested 'help' with Crohn's with intonations of optimism, enthusiasm, 'drive' and a determination not 'to be sick all the time', all part of his warrior-like character.

Prior to interview, Nigel used sarcasm in response to our suggestion in the pre-interview summary that reading the analysis could raise some difficult emotions: 'That was fascinating and I'm pleased to say that I don't feel the need to ring any support lines' (Nigel, personal communication, February 23, 2022). Although deadpan, given our familiarity with Nigel's style and use of wit, the undertone of sarcasm here was clear: he did *not* require emotional support and the suggestion he may need to was thus marked as preposterous. When during interview, he raised the issue of his mortality in relation to what he called his 'health project', i.e. his documentation of his medical history, and his previous job as a planner, he used a playful and gently mocking tone:

> Int: I can see the influence [of your job as a planner] on- on your blog an- (.) and on (.) Twitter (.) yeah
>
> Nigel: There is a downside though to being a planner
>
> Int: Oh go on
>
> Nigel: In that if- if- (.) well you're used to planning projects (.) and projects always have an end date so if you treat your health as a project (.) there has to be an end date and you don't know what that end date is ((smiling))
>
> Int: ((laughs)) Yeah
>
> Nigel: So you have to be (.) you have to- (.) yeah you have to face up to your own mortality I think (.) and maybe it's worse if you're a planner because you know there's gonna be an end date (.) rather than (.)
>
> Int: ((in overlap)) yeah
>
> Nigel: you know (.) go on forever
>
> Int: So it makes you more conscious of that I guess?
>
> Nigel: Erm (.) possibly yeah yeah
>
> Int: It's interesting
>
> Nigel: Yeah (.) I've never written that one down and I thought you'd like that one

Int: Ha! I did like that yeah ((laughing))

Int: ((in overlap)) You can- you can analyse it (.) get the couch out and- ((both laugh))

Int: I did like that one!

The interaction between the first author and Nigel here was light-hearted and jovial. Nigel anticipated that his discussion of the potentially emotionally heavy topic of his 'own mortality' – what he euphemistically referred to as the 'end point' of his 'health … project' – would be of interest to us analytically, which the first author wholeheartedly confirmed: 'I did like that one!' Here he positioned the first author as a psychoanalyst, evoking a stereotypical therapist-patient dyad: 'I thought you'd like that one … you can analyse it (.) get the couch out.' However, by doing so in a subversive way, he challenged the prevailing truth that death is a serious topic requiring solemn contemplation and psychological work to uncover its meaning. Instead, he opened up an alternative side in which the subject of death was something to be mocked, derided and not taken too seriously.

Yet Nigel's playful use of humour did not simply aim to overturn and challenge the authority of our psychological interest or of the subject matter itself; it was more ambivalent. He actively offered his observation about 'end dates' and 'mortality' without prompt: his utterance, 'There is a downside though to being a planner,' was a non-sequitur freely given. Furthermore, our questions and interpretations given in advance in our email communications and the pre-interview summary made no mention of the role his future death played in his narratives. As such, this insight came from Nigel himself and was proffered (albeit wryly) to the first author as a gift: 'I've never written that one down and I thought you'd like that one.' At once, then, his light-hearted mockery undermined the authority of her psychological interest in his feelings about death just as it sustained and encouraged it. In Bakhtin's ([1968]1984b) words, it was: 'gay, triumphant, and at the same time mocking, deriding. It assert[ed] and denie[d], it burie[d] and revive[d]' (pp. 11–12).

Whilst Troy resisted, albeit subtly, aspects of our interpretation, then, Nigel encouraged them, albeit from a slightly subversive and ambivalent position. Vern, on the other hand, unambiguously welcomed our interpretations, something which appeared to open up, rather than close down, dialogue between us. In our initial contact with him prior to the social media analyses, Vern indicated that he had a preference for an email interview and we were happy to oblige. Given he often experienced sudden and unexpected bouts of illness, this asynchronous approach felt potentially more accessible, offering Vern the time and space to respond when convenient and giving him a greater sense of control to reflect upon and edit his responses as necessary (Braun and Clarke 2013). It was several years from our initial contact to when the first author reached out again to Vern with his pre-interview summary, and we were

surprised when at that point he agreed to an interview via video call instead. He explained this change of heart during the interview itself:

> Int: I just (.) wondered what it felt like erm or what your reaction was you know when I sent you the- the summary and everything how did that feel?
>
> Vern: Well it like (.) ((laughs under breath)) it's funny because when you sent it to me I'm like (.) honestly I was like ((looks confused)), 'what?' ((both laugh)) erm because at first I- at first I thought (.), 'okay' cos I get a lot of (.) not- not- not like yours but I get a lot of stuff from people ((pause)) wanting to do (.) erm interviews or talks or something about it and I usually turn them down (.) because (.) erm (.) I honestly don't- I don't- and maybe I should but I don't like talking about [Crohn's] that often with other people erm ((pause)) and I don't know what they they want to talk about but yours was something specific (.) related- (.) it's related to the Crohn's but (.) from a different point of view? like the- like the psychology side . . . and honestly when you- when you sent this- (.) sent this stuff I'm like and you're mentioning what your take of what I was saying (.) I honestly didn't think it that way ((smiles)) and- and (.) it was interesting to me (.) so that's why- that's why I agreed to go- to do it because I found it very interesting ((pause)) it's like when I write it (.) I honestly don't think about what other people are thinking when they read it because I'm writing it so I don't read it I write it and I have a- a few people who- who I know in my family who read it and they go, 'oh yeah that's interesting' (.) but not from like your point of view what- what you- what you said about how you (.) well (.) ((signals inverted commas with fingers)) 'analysed' it . . .
>
> Int: Ohh so it wasn't-
>
> Vern: ((in overlap)) how- how you perceived it
>
> Vern: Yeah (.) and it- so I didn't like- (.) I- you didn't read it thinking, 'what is this woman on about?!' ((laughs))
>
> Vern: Oh no (.) no no no no (.) no ((smiles shaking head)) no (.) when I- when I like- when I first saw it I'm like, 'oh God' (.) but then when you sent the (.) all the stuff like (.) what you were talking about I'm like, 'Ohh oh that's- that's interesting (.) I never thought of it that way'

When Vern came across our first interview request, he met it with a sense of mundanity and repetition – 'I get a lot of . . . stuff from people ((pause)) wanting to do (.) erm interviews or talks'. This in turn produced a sense of foreboding – 'I'm like, "oh God"' - considering 'I usually turn [interviews] down . . . I honestly don't . . . like talking about [Crohn's] that often with other people' – suggesting that exploring his inner thoughts in a live interview situation felt too exposing. The pre-interview elicitation materials that we sent to him broke this expectation, however, being met initially with a sense of bafflement: 'I was like ((looks confused)), "what?"' By presenting him with our analyses in advance, we effectively gave Vern clear boundaries and expectations: 'yours was something specific.' This contrasted with the greater ambiguity of previous interview requests whereby, beyond the general topic, typically 'I don't know what they want to talk about.' This greater degree of

transparency appeared to provide Vern with a sense of reassuring specificity about his future dialogue with the first author; that is, rather than have to anticipate who he might be in her presence – how she might respond to him and vice versa – he could go into the interview with some ready certainty of what that response would be. As such, he had advance reassurance that she was unlikely to say anything too challenging which may 'amplify the worst paranoid imagining of an active consciousness' (Sullivan 2012, 171). With the addition of the pre-interview materials which provided our responses to him and his social media case studies in advance, the live interview and its open-ended questions became more grounded and well-defined. Furthermore, given the actual questions posed and overall structure of the interview were not shared with participants in advance, the spontaneity of a typical real-time interview was largely retained. Contrary to the mundanity and repetition conjured by a standard interview request, the novel nature of this more specific and transparent approach was stimulating for Vern. Whereas family who had read his blog 'go, "oh yeah that's interesting"', passing a generic, albeit positive, comment, the materials we sent offered him a response to his social media posts which he found thought-provoking: 'you're mentioning what your take [is] of what I was saying . . . and (.) it was interesting to me'. As he repeatedly pointed out, this was stimulating because 'I honestly didn't think it that way', 'I never thought of it that way': it opened him up to an unexpected response which he had not encountered before. He distinguished clearly here between the first author's 'take' as the other and 'what [he] was saying' as the author. As he pointed out, 'I honestly don't think about what other people are thinking when they read it because I'm writing it'. Whilst perhaps not consciously anticipating his readers' responses as he writes, our analysis nonetheless brought our response as reader out of ambiguity and, in contrast to Troy, did so in what would appear to be a reassuring, rather than a challenging, way. The synchronicity of a live interview and its demand for spontaneity thus felt potentially less daunting when combined with the more thought-provoking pre-interview materials which foregrounded an unexpectedly sympathetic and novel response.

Lessons learned and future directions

This approach used researcher-generated analyses of participant-generated online materials as an elicitation device as part of a member reflection process. Occurring at a mid-point in the project, this signalled the start of a new round of data generation and analysis, rather than a final means of analytical refinement and summation marking the end-point of the project. The aim of this approach was not for participants to simply reflect upon or confirm adequate representation of their experiences, but for them to respond to the shaping of them and their experiences within the analyses. In so doing, we wished to open

up dialogue to transform understandings and generate new insights for both the participants and the researchers themselves.

As Way, Kanak Zwier, and Tracy (2015) remind us, participants are not mere information sources, but 'people with complicated and developing worldviews' (p. 730). As such, interviews are opportunities for meaning making and transformation (Way, Kanak Zwier, and Tracy 2015). Putting participants in contact with an actual 'other' (i.e. the first author) who had read their social media and offering them an alternative perspective on their online narratives of CD enabled expansion of existing aspects of participants' online stories. In turn, this helped to generate new insights and analyses which brought into view the ways in which participants' stories were shaped by and evolved from our analytic input. The approach therefore had both communicative validity, in that the validity of interpretations were worked out in a dialogue between the researchers and participants (Kvale 1995), and transformative validity, following Li and Ross's (2021) dialogic and intersubjective conceptualisation of the term. That is, via dialogue, both the participants and the lead researcher articulated understanding anew multiple aspects explored in the research, including their identities and experiences of CD within the context of the social media stories they told of it. Where one wishes to offer space for participant and researcher self-reflexivity within the research process, then, we believe this is a useful approach which has the potential to be adapted and applied to research using different forms of data, and is not restricted to social media data alone.

By following Vitus's (2008) agonistic approach, which worked not to gain consensus between us (the researchers) and participants, but to retain a polyphony of contrasting views and approaches, we encouraged multivocality, making space for different opinions and empathic understanding (Tracy 2010). As per Koelsch (2013), divergence in voices did not lead to a battle of interpretations; rather it enabled the production of new forms of meaning-making in which the self was understood intrapersonally and relationally. Through this process, we aimed to communicate and enact compassion for our participants to ensure that they felt meaningfully included in the research process whilst also making the boundaries of ownership clear. That is, we emphasised participants' ownership of their stories, experiences and social media posts, whilst retaining ownership of our interpretations of those stories, experiences and social media posts. In this sense, following warnings from Kvale (1995), we did not rely too heavily on intersubjective validation and took responsibility for the interpretations we made, as well as the impacts of them.

Inevitably, such an approach does not come without its risks. Whilst we were heartened by our participants' responses to our analyses, there was always the possibility that this would not be the case and the question therefore arises of how to manage negative reactions. This must be anticipated and factored into any planning prior to the development of the interview

elicitation materials and the interviews taking place, not only in terms of the participant's wellbeing but also that of the researcher(s). The approach relies upon a certain level of relational intelligence and skill that some researchers may not feel adequately experienced in, particularly if relatively new to interviewing and working with participants. For the first author, awaiting participant responses to our interpretations at each stage was particularly nerve-wracking given the research was part of her doctoral thesis. This meant much was at stake, and whilst she was keen not to disillusion participants and risk their withdrawal from the research, at the same time, she did not want to undermine the interpretations or patronise the participants by being overly cautious. Thus, as noted previously, whilst being admittedly careful with language at points, she tried to remain open about her interpretations with participants throughout. This was a balancing game; however, and a supportive research team and self-reflexivity are therefore essential.

Another potential drawback to the approach is that, whilst it potentially lessens the burden placed upon participants in comparison to some other collaborative and elicitation approaches as previously mentioned, it can be labour-intensive for the researchers, particularly as separate analyses, summaries and interview schedules must be developed for each participant. Given the intention was for this research to be transformative for both the participants and researchers, we feel this was an appropriate and rewarding use of time. We saw this as a process of 'indwelling', a form of data familiarisation which prioritises working from *within* a case from an empathic, rather than sympathetic, perspective (Maykut and Morehouse 1994). Engaging in each participants' case in this way allowed us to know and understand each one deeply and helped us consider not only how to explicate each case from an academic perspective but how to make it understandable and – importantly – meaningful for the participants themselves. However, we recognise that this inevitably reduces the number of participants it is feasible to include. Whilst such an approach could work with synthesised results from a greater pool of participants, we feel an integral part of this method is dialogue between participants and researchers about the participants as individuals. Therefore, it would be important for some individual participant insights to be included in relation to such syntheses in the elicitation and interview materials.

Finally, whilst we believe this approach is collaborative rather than extractive in nature and is thus more equitable in terms of the power dynamics between researchers and participants, it is inevitable that power differentials remain which largely play to the favour of the former. Although complete equity may not be possible (indeed, what would that look like?), we believe what such an approach can offer to participants is more meaningful involvement in research – the space for a compassionate and mindful dialogue with an interested other which may allow them to see, shape and 'think' themselves in ways previously unexplored.

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The authors confirm contribution to the paper as follows: study conception and design: LP, BG, AM; data collection: LP; analysis and interpretation of results: LP; draft manuscript preparation: LP; critical revision of manuscript: AM, BG. All authors reviewed the results and approved the final version of the manuscript.

Ethical statement

Our study was approved by the Ethics Committee of the School of Psychology University of Leeds (approval nos. PSC-638, PSYC-231, PSYC-373). All participants provided electronic informed consent prior to enrolment in the study.

Data availability statement

The participants of this study did not give written consent for their data to be shared publicly. Due to the sensitive nature of the research, supporting data is therefore not available.

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