Social Inclusion
2024 • Volume 12 • Article 8629
https://doi.org/10.17645/si.8629

cogitatio

ARTICLE

Open Access Journal

Drawings in a "Container": A Visual Narrative Approach to Research With Refugee Children

Glynis Clacherty

African Centre for Migration and Society, University of the Witwatersrand, South Africa

Correspondence: Glynis Clacherty (glynisclacherty@gmail.com)

Submitted: 5 May 2024 **Accepted:** 21 August 2024 **Published:** 24 September 2024

Issue: This article is part of the issue "Perceptions, Reflections, and Conceptualizations of War and Peace in Children's Drawings" edited by Lisa Blasch (University of Innsbruck), Phil C. Langer (International Psychoanalytic University Berlin), and Nadja Thoma (University of Innsbruck), fully open access at https://doi.org/10.17645/si.i407

Abstract

Drawings can be a useful research tool as they allow children and young people to reflect on their lived experience in a form that is not dependent on words. They can, however, evoke strong memories and cause distress, particularly among children affected by war. This article describes a visual narrative approach where drawings do not exist on their own as a research tool but are embedded in an actual container, like a suitcase, or another artistic form such as a sculpture, a book, or a layered collage. The challenge this seeks to address is how to work with difficult topics in a way that allows us to apprehend the depth and complexity of the lived experience of children affected by war while protecting them from distressing memories evoked by the visual images they create. In an attempt to answer this question, the article describes a number of research encounters that have taken place over the last 15 years in eastern, central, and southern Africa in both refugee settlement and urban contexts. It explores examples of how multiple drawings are placed in a metaphorical "container" that resonates with the research purpose and the participants. The approach contains emotion, but using a multiplicity of drawings also allows children to reflect on the complexity of lives affected by war, a complexity that includes both strength and vulnerability.

Keywords

art-based research; children; drawings; ethics; refugee

1. Looking Beyond Drawing

This article describes a particular approach to using drawings in research that has developed over years spent working with refugee children and youth in eastern, central, and southern Africa. It explores research

encounters where drawings do not exist on their own as a research tool but are embedded in an actual container, like a suitcase, or another artistic form, such as a sculpture, a book, or a layered collage.

The motivation to look beyond a simple drawing began with a research project undertaken in 2003. As part of a southern Africa-wide research study for a large INGO, I was asked to work with children and young people in refugee settlements to find out about their perceptions of "being a refugee." The INGO, like many international agencies, had a particular protocol for describing the refugee experience, and therefore requested that I ask for information on three migration stages: "pre-migration," "the journey of migration," and "post-migration." I framed the research interaction around an activity where the participants did three drawings illustrating their experience of the three stages.

It soon became clear that this activity unsettled and disturbed the children; their drawings depicted graphic scenes of soldiers, of fires and flames, and of people running away. A girl of 10 said to me: "I don't want to draw that because it will make me dream." I, therefore, suggested she draw something that made her happy instead. It also became clear as the children and I discussed what they had drawn that the descriptions of the drawings were flat, chronological narratives that fitted with what the INGO asked for but not necessarily what the children wanted to tell. I felt I could not probe the children's responses or ask too many questions because of the traumatic experiences that they represented. I subsequently changed the research activity to an open-ended one where the children and young people could choose what they represented in their exploration of "being a refugee." This allowed them the choice to avoid drawing experiences that had been traumatic.

Sometimes, though, we do need to understand narratives of escape, journey, and arrival, for example, if our work is to be used to inform the nature of transit support programmes or the types of psychosocial recovery activities needed in a cross-border arrival centre. The question is, how do we work with these difficult topics in a way that allows us as researchers to apprehend the depth and complexity of the lived experience of children affected by war and, at the same time, protects them from distressing memories evoked by the visual images they create?

This article seeks to answer this question by describing an approach where drawings become part of a larger artwork, or what I call a "container." The section on art-based research below outlines some of the theory that guides the approach. This is followed by a definition of the term "drawings in a container," and, to show what that means, two examples are described. Finally, the article explores three themes that have emerged as I have worked with containers. Throughout I refer to a range of research projects I have undertaken over the last 15 years with children and youth who are refugees. Their contexts range from refugee settlements to urban environments in South Africa, Zambia, Angola, Botswana, Malawi, and Uganda. The age range of the participants was mostly from 7 to 18 (divided into different age groups for the research) and included girls and boys, young women, and young men. Their countries of origin included Burundi, Rwanda, Angola, the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), Ethiopia, Somalia, and Zimbabwe.

2. Visual Methodologies

My own journey with visual approaches began early in my career as an independent researcher working with international and local NGOs. Practitioner-theorists such as Boyden and Ennew (1997) were a particular influence. They emphasised the need to:

> Find ways in which children's ideas and perceptions can be expressed in their own terms without being blocked or misrepresented by the ways adults think and talk. [This means] using techniques that are less dependent on words. (Boyden & Ennew, 1997, p. 37)

As a way of using techniques less dependent on words, my initial work used drawings, as they often allowed children to share their lives in their own unique ways. I began, though, to look for ways that allowed children to share the complexity and texture of their lives beyond a simple description of what they had drawn. Secondly, I needed to find approaches that did not break down the essential psychological defence mechanisms that children affected by war employ (Perrotta, 2020).

Though visual methodologies have been used for many years as a research tool (e.g., Collier & Collier, 1986), there is a growing body of work that reflects on the power of the approach in creating rich, textured and often surprising understandings that go beyond surface description. Bradbury (2017) describes how visual methodologies allow research participants to move beyond the idea that a "'good' narrative…entails logical flow, integration and coherence" (p. 14). She suggests too that they create the possibility to reflect context and interconnection, the kind of detail we seek if we are to understand more about children's inner and outer worlds.

There is also work exploring how visual methodologies that employ a variety of materials and allow young people to choose the form of their artwork can empower them (Driessnack & Furukawa, 2012; A. White et al., 2010). Children affected by war often live with a sense of powerlessness as "the bonds that tether [them] to the everyday world become stretched, distorted, and even torn" by the experience of war (Lester, 2013, p. 753). Using visual methods where young people create a three-dimensional artwork with different media confirms their control over materials and a concrete product. Their choice about what to represent and how to represent it builds a sense of agency. Additionally, choice allows children and young people to decide what they will or will not reveal as they employ the defence strategies they have put into place to protect their emotional well-being (Perrotta, 2020). Mitchell (2008) suggests that it is not only multiple materials such as paint, crayon, charcoal, and ink that build depth. She discusses the benefit of using multiple visual genres such as photographs, video, collage, drawings, and found objects, for example. Using only "one practice or one set of tools" (Mitchell, 2008, p. 366) in visual research methods restricts what we as researchers come to know. She suggests that bringing the full complexity of visual modalities into our research practice will "deepen" the narratives that emerge.

Some of the work on visual methodologies explores how the approach is particularly useful when working with children affected by war. Green and Denov (2019) used mask-making and drawing as a participatory visual method in work with children born as captives of the Lord's Resistance Army in northern Uganda. They describe how the use of visual methods facilitated their ability to work ethically with this particularly marginalised and vulnerable group of young people. Using the visual arts made their work less intrusive because it was focussed on "making" rather than "talking." Working together to create something built community amongst the young people and built trust between researchers and the young people because it reduced the power imbalance between them. It allowed the young people to be "active agents" creating something, rather than "passive" objects answering questions or describing experiences and perceptions. All of this "greatly enrich[ed] the quality of the research" (Green & Denov, 2019, p. 1).

Another reason why visual methods can be effective when working with children affected by war is that images can allow children to articulate what M. White (2005, p. 20) calls the "unmentionable," or what Emmerson and Frosh (2004) call experiences that are "beyond words," i.e., traumatic experiences that are often hidden deeply in the psyche as a form of psychological protection. An artwork can allow children to depict an experience and then talk about it with emotional distance. Johnson (1987) helps us understand this process:

> Instead of the discussion of a feeling, one has a discussion of a picture of a feeling, a less threatening situation for the [participant] because the picture is concrete and external to the self. (p. 11)

The thinking described above has informed my exploration of drawings in a container.

3. A Container

The approach described in the rest of this article focusses on placing children and young people's drawings into a "container." The container could be an actual object, such as a box or suitcase, or another artistic form, such as a book, a sculpture, or a collage. The idea of using a container is not new. Art therapy literature describes a long history of using containers. For example, Frings Keyes (1983) describes using a self-box in therapy as "a visible graphic record of your perception of you" (p. 14). Farrell-Kirk (2001) suggests that boxes are commonly used in art therapy as they can "enclose and conceal contents, create a new realm of space…and encompass past, present and future" (pp. 88, 92).

There are examples too in the research literature of placing drawings in another art form. One example is Walker and Oliveira's (2020) work in Johannesburg with refugee women. They began with drawings of "a story you choose to tell." At the women's suggestion, they then transferred these narrative drawings onto cloth which was sewn and glued onto a large three-dimensional quilt. De Jager et al. (2016), in a systematic review, describe a number of research projects where drawings are contained in body maps. Kollontai (2010) describes innovative work where children displaced by war place artwork in "homes" they have made from found objects in the environment around them.

The following two examples illustrate the idea of drawings in a container. Before exploring these, the reader will notice that another mechanism that I have found to be useful—for me as a researcher (to keep my focus) and for the participants—is to link the container chosen to the purpose of the work. When looking at layers of violence one uses layers of paper; when researching a journey, one uses a suitcase; when researching the impact of living conditions on refugee children in urban contexts one can build a house.

3.1. Example 1: A Small Parcel Tied Up With String

To explain the idea of placing drawings into a container that will protect research participants, deepen our research, and reflect the research purpose in the container, we can begin with the simplest example: a parcel tied up with string. Research in 2018 looked at the psychosocial impact on refugee young adults in South Africa of the difficult process of accessing documentation to legalise their stay. We used a small zig-zag book made from a long strip of folded paper. Working from left to right, participants drew their stories of attempting to access documentation. The long rectangular paper and drawing from left to right encouraged a chronological representation of the process and the passage of time, the focus of the research. The narratives that grew from

the drawings described an ongoing struggle that often took years in a system that did not want them, treated them as "not human" (a quote from one of the young people), and blocked them from moving ahead into their adult lives. Their stories about their interactions with officials and attempts to live life without documentation were traumatic and full of frustration and anger.

While the drawings enabled an understanding of the young people's lives that achieved the aims of the research, I did not want them to take these feelings away with them after the research interaction. Therefore, after asking the young people's permission to use their drawings for the advocacy work that the research would feed into, we folded the small zig-zag books and tied them up into small parcels with coloured ribbons and string. The young people chose the material they wanted to use to tie up their story. The tying up was done in silence and in an intentional, almost ritualistic way. We symbolically closed the drawings and (hopefully) contained the feelings. The container (the long piece of paper) had focussed the research question for the young people (a chronological story and the passage of time) and tying it up allowed an ethical containment of emotion. This containment did not mean ignoring their emotions but acknowledged that talking about difficult emotions can break down their natural psychological defences.

3.2. Example 2: A Suitcase Full of Stories

Another example is the use of an actual container, a suitcase, as a repository for drawings. In this example, the container was chosen intentionally to resonate with the children and young people's experience:

> I remember when I left my country, there were many people waiting at the bus and there was a pile of suitcases. My suitcase reminds me of that time when we were all pushing to get on the bus, and we were afraid, and we wanted to get away because of the war. (young man from Angola, 15 years old, 2002)

The young man quoted above was a participant in a research project conducted between 2001 and 2005 involving refugees newly arrived in Johannesburg, South Africa, from the DRC, Angola, Ethiopia, Rwanda, and Burundi (Clacherty, 2019). The research sought to understand their experience of their original homes, why and how they left, and what their new lives were like. At the beginning of the research process, each child chose an old suitcase and, using a large array of art materials, placed drawings about "my life now" and "my life in the past" in and on the suitcase. The suitcase was a container that allowed the children to choose what they wanted to share because it had an exterior that everyone could see and a hidden space inside that they could choose to expose or not. It was also a concrete metaphor for them for the aim of the research and the narrative of their journey from their home country to Johannesburg. Using the fact that some of the suitcases had old labels attached, no handles, and battered edges, I introduced the suitcases as an object that itself had been on a journey:

> A suitcase is something we take on a journey. You have all been on a long journey from the place where you were born to Johannesburg, so your life is a bit like a suitcase—it has been on a journey. So, this suitcase you have chosen can tell the story of your life. (researcher introducing the research task, 2001)

Over several meetings, the young people created visual narratives that described happy childhood memories such as climbing trees, mothers who placed them in the shade of a tree on bright cloth as they worked in

the fields, and the gardens of beloved grandfathers. They told stories of friends they had made in their new homes, the park where they played basketball and chatting with friends at home. They also told stories that covered traumatic war experiences, dangerous journeys, and their present lives in a violent city that did not welcome them, these were often placed inside the suitcase. If they chose to (and some did not), they talked about what the drawings represented, often in detail, and most chose to have the story recorded for use in the research. What they presented were rich narratives where dark and light, past and present, despair and hope were interwoven. This built an intensely textured understanding of some aspects of the young people's lived experience.

Having explored the meaning of the word "container" the remainder of this article explores three themes that have emerged over time as I have worked with the idea: the power of being able to place "layers" within a container, the role that the metaphor of the container holds, and why working on a container-like artwork allows for the use of fragments, which are an important reflection of the lives of children affected by war. These themes begin to explain why the idea of a container holds the possibility of reflecting on and understanding the complexity of the refugee experience while protecting young people and children from being retraumatised.

4. Emergent Themes

4.1. Theme 1: Layers

Containers allow for layers of drawings and layers are one of the important elements for allowing the emergence of "complex human experience [that goes beyond the] surface level" (Siegel, 2006, p. xiv).

The concept of layering drawings emerged from the suitcase research. The children who worked on the suitcases often placed one drawing over another, either completely hiding the first drawing or allowing part of it to be seen. When we discussed what they had made they often referred to these layers. In the quote below a 10-year-old girl describes how she had layered two drawings:

> This is a drawing of me on a swing in Congo when I was little. I tore [a piece of] it and made a drawing of the flats [apartments] where we live now here on it. (a child from the DRC, 10 years old, 2002)

What the layers allowed the young girl to do was to represent both her past and her present; a garden with a tree and a swing replaced with the decaying inner city apartment block in which she now lived. Through a simple layered image, she helps us capture an essential part of the experience of being a refugee. Her two images echo Summerfield (1998), who describes how those forced into exile experience "a rupture in the narrative threads running through their lives" (p. 16). She allows us to see how she mourns for what is now inaccessible (Kohli & Mather, 2003).

Building on what I had learned from the "suitcase children" I began to use the idea of layers intentionally. One example of this is a process used in research on violence against children living in refugee settlements in southern Africa conducted in 2004. The research was submitted to the UN study on violence against children (Pinheiro, 2006) to include the experience of refugee children in the global study.

The container in the UN study was a large collage made of layers and layers of drawings where pages were pasted one over another in such a way that each drawing could be seen, like many small books pasted on the collage. The process began with the children drawing a map in pastel crayon of "all the places I go in a week" on a large piece of canvas. They were asked to identify the places on their map where violence against children took place, then draw a picture of the violence and paste it on the map. The drawings showed physical bullying, often related to ethnic difference, corporal punishment by teachers and parents, verbal and physical harassment of girls by adolescent boys and older men, the impact of alcohol abuse on violence (many of the drawings of violence were placed outside taverns). Rape and intimate violence in the home were also included, and in some of the settlements, young women drew forced early marriage as violence.

The young people then drew anything else they wanted to say about the violence on other small pieces of paper that were pasted "over" the drawings of the violence they had already made in such a way that the drawing underneath could be seen. The result was a number of small books placed all over the map. The drawings the children chose to layer over their first drawing showed what children do about the violence, how it makes children feel, what power children have over the violence, what parents should do, what other adults such as camp management and security should do, how other children help each other or perpetrate violence and how gender is related to violence. The drawings allowed for a rich discussion where many themes emerged. One dominant theme was the fact that, in every settlement, violence was a pervasive part of young people's lives. There is not enough space here to explore all the different forms of violence so I will focus on one of the richest seams of discussion (which emerged from the use of layers) amongst the girls and young women, namely violence related to gender. In one of the groups in Botswana, a young woman placed a blank piece of paper in amongst her layers. This led to the following discussion:

> Participant 1: This paper is blank because girls can do nothing [to keep safe].
>
> Participant 2: Nothing.
>
> Participant 3: Nothing.
>
> Participant 4: There is nothing they can do.
>
> Participant 1: Maybe you're going to school or you're coming from school, then you meet some boys; they can beat you or fight you if they have asked you for love and you refuse. They catch you on the way, waiting if you pass.
>
> Participant 6: Or they call, "will you marry me?"
>
> Participant 1: Usually, it is ok because there are people around, but sometimes when I go to school, nobody can be there. Those boys might be there.
>
> Participant 4: There is nothing you can do. (young women aged 14–18, 2004)

A single piece of blank paper placed amongst a layer of drawings allowed for an understanding of the powerlessness these young women feel and a picture of how boys understood their masculinity and

relationship with young women. Further discussion with the group led to exploring why these patterns of belief and behaviour emerge. We also spent time discussing the responsibility of adults, particularly officials in the refugee settlement to protect young women. The discussion on the powerlessness of young women raised the issue of being powerless as a refugee and the young women's belief that no one was going to do anything to make their lives safer:

> Here we do not belong. We are not allowed to move out of the camp, I cannot get work in the city, I cannot go where I want. I cannot go back to my country; I am nowhere, and they [officials] know that. They are nationals [local Batswana], they do not understand or care. (young woman aged 14, 2004)

Another strong emergent theme, again from all the groups in every country, were layers of drawings showing the patterns of structural violence that pervade the lives of young women in the settlements. In the following discussion, which took place in a refugee settlement in Malawi, two young women have drawn an image of a *chigayo*. This is the name in the local language for a machine used for milling maize. A *chigayo* is a valuable resource as the owner can earn money from local farmers who pay for their maize to be ground. Notice how the use of layers of drawings facilitates a deepening story:

> Participant 1: That picture that she has shown [referring to one of the layered drawings of a girl and an old man made by another young woman]. Sometimes, there are some parents who like money. If they see their daughter is growing, they tell her to stop going to school so that she may decorate herself and she may be married, and they may get money. It is old men that they marry [she points to one of her layered drawings showing an old man]. These old men give the family *chigayo*. The girl for a milling machine [she points to the next image she has drawn—a milling machine].
>
> Participant 2: Also, here in the camp most of the girls themselves are called *ibigayo* which means [that, since] she is born, she is seen as someone who will bring money [because she can be sold for a milling machine]. This here [she points to a drawing in her layers that shows parents giving their child to an old man] and this here [she points to her next layered drawing of a young woman standing firm] shows that girls can refuse. It tells the story of a girl who ran away to her uncle when her mother told her to marry. (young women aged 14–18, 2004)

What the layering has allowed this group of young women to do is explore the details around early forced marriage, how women and girls are seen in their social context, and that there are young women who resist the social mores. What we see here is literally a form of "thick" (Geertz, 1973d) data; each layer tells us more. Additionally, as they describe each layer, we see how the young women are making meaning of the structural violence against them.

Finnström (2008) when describing his work in war-affected Northern Uganda, describes how those in a situation of armed conflict and displacement wrestle with how to "orient and seek meaning as they engage the world and live their humanity" (p. 28). He suggests that meaning is often found when "people who live together articulate and mediate experiences and stories among one another in a patterning and systematic manner" (p. 7). Zarowsky (2004) describes a similar process as "engag[ing] the logic and structure of violence" (p. 204). As a researcher, I was able to listen in to this process of making meaning as the young women described the drawn layers on the map that contained them.

4.2. Theme 2: Metaphor

As the use of the suitcases described above illustrates, using a metaphor can allow children to engage with the research topic. A research process with young women migrants living in an inner-city shelter in Johannesburg (Walker & Clacherty, 2015) helps us understand how metaphor and the idea of a container can work together to give insight into the complexity of making meaning out of displacement and marginalisation.

The shelter where the young women lived was housed in an old office block with a sign outside proclaiming that it was a "shelter for abused women." It was run by a religious organisation. The women's lives were dominated by spoken and unspoken rules that they felt they had to obey or risk eviction. The unspoken rules were built around religious observance, particularly asking for forgiveness of sin. The young women had to attest to being saved and adopt a "clean and holy" life, and they had to often testify to this process in religious services attended by the Christians who donated money to keep the shelter running. Within this controlling space, a colleague and I embarked on an action research project built around an art group that met regularly in an empty room in the old office block. All but one of the women in the art group were migrants, some from rural areas in South Africa, others from Swaziland, Zimbabwe, and the DRC. Some were in their teens, others in their twenties, and a few had young children or babies.

Making the room comfortable with mats on the floor, a heater in winter, and tea and muffins, we created a homely, safe place very different from the institutional space with its rules and expectations. This room was essentially also a container. Slowly over time, the young women began to feel comfortable making art and talking about their lives, though we never made them feel any obligation to do this. We wanted this to be a safe space where they had the power to choose what they wanted to do and say. Though we were committed to allowing them to lead the process and create their own agenda for the work we were to do together, we did have an idea of how an art project might be supportive of the women. We hoped to provide an opportunity for the exploration of narratives the women might want to tell (or not tell) in different ways.

What emerged from the process crystalised our understanding of the power of the metaphor one chooses as a container for drawings. Working from our experience with the suitcases as containers we brought in a selection of clothing that we thought might evoke stories that the women might have wanted to tell, an old school shirt, a grandfather's jacket, a young girl's dress, a pair of trousers. We suggested they choose an item and use the art materials we had brought along to tell a story about themselves on the piece of clothing. After choosing an item of clothing they began making and pasting drawings and magazine cut-outs onto them. One young woman made a cut-out drawing of a coat a beloved grandmother wore and pasted it on an old coat, another drew the journey she had made from Zimbabwe on a young girl's dress. One of the young women, who had come to Johannesburg from Swaziland as a child, drew a story about her estranged father on many small pieces of paper and pasted them in a long line down a pair of trouser legs. She then turned the trousers over and decorated the other side with magazine cut-outs of wedding dresses and brides. Talking about the wedding dresses prompted us to begin thinking about the container we had chosen. Did the metaphor of the old clothes resonate for the young women as the suitcases had for the children?

Though they enjoyed being in the space we had created, and chatter and laughter accompanied the art-making, they placed few drawings on to the item they had chosen, and we sensed a lack of enthusiasm about the clothing item they had chosen. They did not treat it as a "special" item that carried weight and their narratives about their drawings were thin and reluctant.

We asked them, therefore, what they would like to make, and they said: "ballgowns!" We realised that young women who had been labelled as "worthless," "bad," and "marginalised" because of the place where they lived, a shelter for abused women, would not relate to second-hand clothing. In fact, the metaphor we had chosen reinforced all the negative stereotypes that built barriers around their ability to create their own personal identities.

We brought in rolls of coloured paper, thinking that paper ballgowns would overcome a lack of sewing skills. We also gave each young woman a dressmaker's mannequin which we had found in second-hand shops. They then set out to use a ballgown as a container for their drawings. Each week we were asked to bring other materials as they became more and more engaged with how the dress could work as a metaphor for their lives, a thick rope, a roll of wire mesh, silver paper, beads. One young woman made a ball gown with stiff corrugated card which represented roofing for a house. The back of the dress, which fishtailed down to the floor, was painted black and represented the "sad house." The front of the dress was decorated with silver stars—"the happy house." While working she told us the story of how the two houses were part of her reason for leaving home and migrating to Johannesburg. Another created a huge purple skirt with a small bodice, a drawing of a broken heart stitched together on the bodice.

Perhaps the best example of drawings in another piece of artwork or container was the dress encircled with a wire mesh frame. Inside the wireframe was a beautiful bright tissue paper skirt decorated with drawings. The drawings represented images from the young woman's life, the first Christmas tree that she had seen as she arrived at the station in Johannesburg, drawings of her baby, the abusive man she had lived with before coming to the shelter, her grandmother's coat, the bus she had travelled in to get to Johannesburg, the street violence she had experienced, and the shelter. The wire mesh perhaps representing how her life was fenced in.

Ricoeur (1978) suggests that metaphor "has the capacity…to provide untranslatable information and…yield some true insight about reality" (p. 143). This is what the young women were doing, using the metaphor of the dresses to narrate their reality, a reality that few people outside saw or acknowledged.

As they worked, each in their corner, often over a few hours, they commented on what they were making. One young woman informed us that she had made the hips wide as the woman had an African body, another named her mannequin Basetsana Khumalo, a powerful local businesswoman. These young women were reframing their identities from "abused, marginalised woman" to "strong, beautiful, successful African woman." The drawings integrated into the dresses and the forms of the gowns themselves all included the women's past, present, and futures, the complexity of their lives. Using a metaphor that resonated had allowed us to witness how they were making meaning of their displacement and marginalisation and their longing to make meaning of the disorder of their lives. Jackson (1995) suggests how metaphor can play a role in this process. He writes that "metaphor mov[es] us…as we seek connections between experiences" (p. 157), as we try to make meaning of the "given and the chosen, then and now, here and there" (Mallett, 2004, p. 80).

What the gowns as container, as metaphor, allowed us as researchers to see was the process of the young women making connections between past, present, and future, the given and the chosen. Through the power of the metaphor, the young women were able to share narratives in drawings of the happy house, the sad house, the first Christmas tree, the grandmother who wore a warm coat, the abusive partner, the broken

heart, the wish for a wedding gown, the feeling of being fenced in and the ability to be a strong businesswoman alongside the difficulty of their lives.

4.3. Theme 3: Fragments

In all the processes I have described in this article, we were working with fragments. The small drawings tied up with string and ribbon, the pieces of drawing pasted, torn, and layered into and onto the suitcases, the small drawings layered on the maps, the drawings hung on and behind the wire mesh of the paper gown are all fragments. Placing drawings into another piece of artwork that works as a container can allow fragments to emerge. Listening to these fragments can give us as researchers a deeply privileged view into the meanings children and young people are making around their lives.

One of the most powerful examples I have experienced was working with young adult unaccompanied refugees in Cape Town, South Africa, in 2023. The container we worked with in this research was a "zine." Zines (Knobel & Lankshear, 2001) are small handmade and photocopied books, often associated with counterculture, where drawings, prints, photography, and text are used to tell unconventional stories. We used them as a container for drawings where the young people were asked to explore the idea of "belonging." A zine is in itself a metaphor and as such could be used in the discussion of the previous theme, but here I use it to illustrate the importance of fragments as an aspect of drawings in a container.

We made myriad art materials available, including different kinds of paper, paint, crayons, charcoal, magazines, newspapers, string, and tape. After making the zines we used them as a point of discussion and participants told us, if they chose, about what they had made.

One young woman made a small book of drawings that contained a deeply poignant fragment. On the first page of her zine, she pasted a map of North America that she had cut out of an old atlas. She wrote a single word on this page: "mum." The next page had a cut-out of Europe and the single word "dad." On the third page, she drew a small picture in pencil of a girl and wrote "me" on the page. Other pages followed but through the first three pages she had threaded a piece of wool that linked the words, mum, dad, and me. In a single fragment within the container of the zine, she had reflected her story of loss and abandonment. The single drawing of herself in pencil, alone on the page spoke deeply of being alone, of not belonging. This small fragment represents, for me, how a piece can hold a deeply personal narrative. Fragments can evoke a deeper narrative because lived experience is fragmentary, particularly for refugees. Summerfield (1998) suggests that refugees escaping conflict have experienced a "a rupture in the narrative threads running through their lives" (p. 16). Zarowsky (2004) in her work with Somalian refugees describes the narratives shared with her as "scraps of inchoate memory…characterised by dream fragments, elision or innuendo" (p. 204). This resonates with the idea of fragments. By placing the drawings in other pieces of artwork or containers rather than leaving them as flat pieces of art we were accepting fragments, we were accepting the "rupture of narrative" and "memory as inchoate."

Some researchers may be hesitant about using an approach such as that described in this article because of the practical implications of time, space, and familiarity with art processes. There are strategies for responding to these. Some of the processes described here have taken place in as little as five hours. I have made strange places work for this kind of research—a room in a clinic, a hair salon, a church, mats under a tree. A lack of

experience and the confidence to use art materials can be solved by bringing in an artist to work alongside the researcher, someone to introduce materials and quietly guide the art processes.

5. Conclusion

The idea of placing drawings into a literal or metaphorical container made up of another artwork builds on the power of the simple use of paper and drawing materials. What's important is to find a container that both resonates with research participants and holds within it the purpose of the research endeavour. The three emergent themes—layers, metaphor, and fragments—described in this article illustrate a process for using drawings that provides psychological protection to children and young people. The approach also allows participants to choose how to describe their lived experience, past, present, and sometimes the imagined future, with all the complexity with which they live as refugees. In this way, narratives about "home" (which can be conceptualised in different ways), their journeys, their present experience, and, in fact, any other research topic that we wish to explore, can emerge from the individual metaphors, layers, and fragments of their personal memory and meaning.

I suggest that working with containers can help to make displacement "comprehensible" (Finnström, 2008, p. 7). Creating a narrative that involves deciding which part of a drawing needs to go into the container, where it should be placed, if it needs a layer over it, or if an object like string, tape, or cloth needs to be added to it, can be a process of meaning-making. This means that, though our research has the depth that helps those who use our research understand the lives of children and young people, it also makes a small contribution to their ability to cope with the complexity of loss and displacement of war.

Acknowledgments

Thank you to Cogitatio Press for granting me a publication waiver.

Conflict of Interests

The author declares no conflict of interest.

References

Boyden, J., & Ennew, J. (1997). *Children in focus: A manual for participatory research with children*. Save the Children Sweden.

Bradbury, J. (2017). Creative twists in the tale: Narrative and visual methodologies in action. *Psychology in Society*, *55*, 14–37. https://doi.org/10.17159/2309-8708/2017/n55a3

Clacherty, G. (2019). Art-based, narrative research with unaccompanied migrant children living in Johannesburg, South Africa. *Journal of Borderland Studies*, 36(4), 547–563. https://doi.org/10.1080/08865655.2019.1621766

Collier, J., & Collier, M. (1986). *Visual anthropology: Photography as a research method*. University of New Mexico Press.

de Jager, A., Tewson, A., Ludlow, B., & Boydell, K. M. (2016). Embodied ways of storying the self: A systematic review of body-mapping forum. *Qualitative Social Research*, *17*(2), Article 22. https://doi.org/10.17169/fqs-17.2.2526

Driessnack, M., & Furukawa, R. (2012). Arts-based data collection techniques used in child research. *Journal for Specialists in Pediatric Nursing*, *17*(1), 3–9. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1744-6155.2011.00304.x

Emmerson, P., & Frosh, S. (2004). *Critical narrative analysis in Psychology: A guide to practice*. Palgrave Macmillan.

Farrell-Kirk, R. (2001). Secrets, symbols, synthesis, and safety: The role of boxes in art therapy. *American Journal of Art Therapy*, *39*(3), 88–92.

Finnström, S. (2008). *Living with bad surroundings: War, history and everyday moments in Northern Uganda*. Duke University Press. https://doi.org/10.1215/9780822388791

Frings Keyes, M. (1983). *Inward journey: Art as therapy*. Open Court.

Geertz, C. (1973d). *Thick description: Toward an interpretive theory of culture. The interpretation of cultures*. Basic Books.

Green, A., & Denov, M. (2019). Mask-making and drawing as method: Arts-based approaches to data collection with war-affected children. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*. Advance online publication. https://doi.org/10.1177/1609406919832479

Jackson, M. (1995). *At home in the world*. Harper Perennial.

Johnson, D. (1987). The role of the creative arts therapies in the diagnosis and treatment of psychological trauma. *The Arts in Psychotherapy*, *14*(1), 7–13. https://doi.org/10.1016/0197-*4556*(87)90030-X

Knobel, M., & Lankshear, C. (2001, January 25–28). *Cut, paste, publish: The production and consumption of zines* [Conference presentation]. State of the Art Conference, Athens, GA, USA.

Kohli, R., & Mather, R. (2003). Promoting psychosocial well-being in unaccompanied asylum seeking young people in the United Kingdom. *Child and Family Social Work*, *8*, 201–212. https://doi.org/10.1046/j.1365-2206.2003.00282.x

Kollontai, P. (2010). Healing the heart in Bosnia-Herzegovina: Art, children and peacemaking. *International Journal of Children's Spirituality*, *15*(3), 261–271. https://doi.org/10.1080/1364436X.2010.523073

Lester, R. (2013). Back from the edge of existence: A critical anthropology of trauma. *Transcultural Psychiatry*, *50*(5), 753–762. https://doi.org/10.1177/1363461513504520

Mallett, S. (2004). Understanding home: A critical review of the literature. *The Sociological Review*, *52*(1), 62–89. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-954X.2004.00442

Mitchell, C. (2008). Getting the picture and changing the picture: Visual methodologies and educational research in South Africa. *South African Journal of Education*, *28*(3), Article 3. https://doi.org/10.4314/saje.v28i3.25163

Perrotta, D. G. (2020). Human mechanisms of psychological defense: Definitions, historical and psychodynamic contexts, classifications and clinical profiles. *International Journal of Neurorehabilitation*, *7*(1), 1–7. https://doi.org/10.37421/2376-0281.2020.7.360

Pinheiro, P. S. (2006). *World report on violence against children*. United Nations.

Ricoeur, P. (1978). The metaphorical process as cognition, imagination, and feeling. *Critical Inquiry*, *5*(1), 143–159. http://www.jstor.org/stable/1342982

Siegel, D. (2006). Series editor's foreword. In P. Ogden, K. Minton, & C. Pain, (Eds.), *Trauma and the body: A sensorimotor approach to psychotherapy* (pp. xiii–xvi). Norton.

Summerfield, D. (1998). The social experience of war and some issues for the humanitarian field. In P. Bracken & C. Petty (Eds.), *Rethinking the trauma of war* (pp. 9–37). Free Association Books.

Walker, R., & Clacherty, G. (2015). Shaping new spaces: An alternative approach to healing in current shelter interventions for vulnerable women in Johannesburg. In I. Palmary, B. Hamber, & L. Núñez (Eds.), *Healing and change in the city of gold* (Vol. 24, pp. 31–58). Springer. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-08768-9_3

Walker, R., & Oliveira, E. (2020). A creative storytelling project with women migrants in Johannesburg, South Africa. *Studies in Social Justice*, *14*(1), 188–209. https://doi.org/10.26522/ssj.v2020i14.2218

White, A., Bushin, N., Carpena-Mendez, F., & NiLaoire, C. (2010). Using visual methodologies to explore contemporary Irish childhoods. *Qualitative Research*, *10*(2), 143–158 https://doi.org/10.1177/1468794109356735

White, M. (2005). Children, trauma and subordinate storyline development. *The International Journal of Narrative Therapy and Community Work*, *3*(4), 143–165.

Zarowsky, C. (2004). Writing trauma: Emotion, ethnography, and the politics of suffering among Somali returnees in Ethiopia. *Culture, Medicine and Psychiatry*, *28*(2), 189–209. https://doi.org/10.1023/b:medi.0000034410.08428.29

About the Author

Glynis Clacherty (PhD) is a research associate at the African Centre for Migration and Society, University of the Witwatersrand. She has worked as an independent researcher for the last 20 years in southern, eastern, and central Africa for organisations such as UNHCR, UNICEF, Save the Children, and ChildFund. She is recognised internationally as an expert in qualitative, participatory research work with children. Her academic publications have focussed on the use of art-based methodology in the context of child migration.