



ARTICLE

Remote graphic elicitation: A critical reflection on the emotional affordance and disruption management in caregiver research

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Abstract

Graphic elicitation, an arts-based method that focuses on participant-led drawing activities, is often conducted with the researcher in situ and discussed in an interview setting, either during or after drawing. However, the COVID-19 pandemic and the subsequent lockdowns have meant that using graphic elicitation in its current form required a re-evaluation. Reflecting on a research project that undertook graphic elicitation remotely, this paper considers the emotional affordance and disruption management of the method in caregiver research. While informal caregiving may be an emotionally fraught topic for the participants, we demonstrate how graphic elicitation explores emotions and experiences with sensitivity and care. Furthermore, we show that graphic elicitation enabled us to acknowledge the pandemic but maintain focus on caregiving itself. The caregivers were responsive to the method and found it rewarding and insightful, albeit with some initial hesitancy and ingrained perceptions of arts-based outputs. Through our discussions, we show the potential for remote graphic elicitation in geography as a method to explore potentially sensitive, emotionally charged topics like caregiving.

KEYWORDS

caregivers, disruption management, emotional affordance, graphic elicitation, older adults, remote research

1 | INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic has had widespread and uneven societal consequences, from loss of life to social isolation (Vindegaard & Eriksen Benros, 2020). It has prompted significant forms of change in the lives of older adults, with a renewed emphasis on the realms of home and the local environment (Osborne & Meijering, 2021). Such changes have been challenging for caregivers, who have experienced increased emotional stress, social isolation, and caring responsibilities (Cohen et al., 2020; Hughes et al., 2021). Similarly, disabled people have experienced a 'triple jeopardy' (Shakespeare et al., 2021), facing compromised access to routine health care and social support, greater risk of severe illness with the virus, and increasingly eugenic undertones about the value of disabled lives in how pandemic mitigation

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strategies are devised and communicated (Goggin & Ellis, 2020). This includes people with dementia and their caregivers, each reporting significant increases in anxiety and lower mental well-being levels since pandemic onset (Giebel, Lord, et al., 2021).

The pandemic has also instigated major shifts in how in-depth qualitative research is conducted (Howlett, 2021). Despite a well-established history of online research methods that predates the pandemic (Ahlin & Li, 2019), the introduction of pandemic restrictions necessitated the rapid reconfiguration of many existing qualitative research projects from planned in-person fieldwork to remote online approaches that required new technological skillsets and interview sensibilities (Watson & Lupton, 2022). They also prompted critical reflection about alternative opportunities to build rapport and put people at ease from afar in discussing more challenging, emotional experiences; for some participants, these experiences were exacerbated further by the anxieties and pressures of the ongoing pandemic.

This methodological paper builds on the rich discussions on visual and creative methodologies in geography (e.g., Madge, 2014; Rose, 2001) through a discussion of conducting graphic elicitation to explore an emotionally charged research topic: informal dementia care. Graphic elicitation, as a visual and creative method, is used to access dimensions of experience that can be challenging to articulate verbally (Bagnoli, 2009). It typically involves the use of researcher- or participant-produced drawings – from sequential diagrams like timelines to more relational drawings depicting key networks, interactions, or relationships in someone's life (Bravington & King, 2019) – each used as a springboard to deeper discussion within the interview context (Chen, 2018).

This paper explores how participant-produced graphic elicitation activities support the sharing of more challenging emotional caregiving experiences by participants from a distance. We reflect on how these activities enabled us to understand people's wider caregiving journeys, beyond the pandemic's more immediate pressures and anxieties, among a participant group who have been profoundly affected throughout (Canevelli et al., 2020).

2 | UNDERSTANDING CAREGIVING JOURNEYS THROUGH REMOTE GRAPHIC ELICITATION INTERVIEWS

Geographers have studied the practice, spatialities, and temporalities of care for many years (e.g., Conradson, 2003; Milligan, 2000), exploring the 'meanings and experiences of care, both paid and unpaid, for the self and for human and non-human others and for those both physically close and distant' (Cox, 2013, p. 491). Feminist geographers have played a key role in discourses on caring, placing a focus on emotional, everyday caring relationships (Bowly & McKie, 2019; Lawson, 2007). Indeed, providing care for a family member diagnosed with dementia can be understood as 'emotional labour' (Milligan, 2005). Understanding how caregivers feel and negotiate these emotions is central to the care relationship and the well-being of caregivers and those cared for (Herron et al., 2019). The emotional elements of caring are often unpacked using qualitative methods, including interviews (Herron et al., 2019), ethnography (Emmerson, 2017), and narratives (Milligan & Morbey, 2016), supporting a rich depth of knowledge into experiences of caring.

Given the emotional qualities of care, the imperative to move rapidly from carefully planned in-person in-depth interviews with dementia caregivers to remote fieldwork in the context of the pandemic instigated new methodological, technical, and ethical considerations. Alongside awareness of the increased time and emotional pressures experienced among caregivers with the pandemic (Giebel, Cannon, et al., 2021), concerns about limited digital literacy and access among older adults are widely acknowledged within the existing literature on online methods (van Deursen & Helsper, 2015). Furthermore, it can be difficult for researchers to identify signs of distress if conducting interviews over the phone or through video conferencing where visualisations are limited or absent (Adams-Hutcheson & Longhurst, 2017).

Yet, studies also suggest potential benefits of remote online or telephonic methods. They can give participants greater flexibility and control over the fieldwork timing and environment, contributing from the sensory familiarity and comfort of home, at their own pace and on their own terms (Phenwan et al., 2021), with the opportunity to end the interview 'just a click away' (Thunberg & Arnell, 2021, p. 7). It has also been suggested that time spent building familiarity with the technology can help develop researcher-participant rapport, iron out potential technical difficulties, and contribute to a more relaxed interview situation (Thunberg & Arnell, 2021).

As the pandemic unfolded and the face-to-face fieldwork we had planned became unfeasible, we began to explore alternative ways of building rapport, putting participants at ease, and enabling discussions about the emotional dimensions of participants' caregiving journeys where appropriate. To do so, we turned to visual and creative methodologies that have been shown across geographical inquiry to provide a more sensitive way to approach emotional topics than direct interview questioning (de Leeuw & Hawkins, 2017; Kearney & Hyle, 2004; Madge, 2014). Graphic elicitation methods

encourage participants to ‘draw or chart representations of a concept, experience, belief or behaviour’ (Copeland & Agosto, 2012, p. 514) and approach emotional topics in a creative and sensitive way. Traditional interviews largely privilege language to communicate participant experiences (Bagnoli, 2009), yet emotions and affective activities like caregiving can be challenging to put into words. Wetherell conceptualises affective activity as a form of social practice – a field of both open and habitual affective patterns that ‘emerge in bodies, in minds, in individual lives, in relationships, in communities, across generations and in social formations’ (Wetherell, 2015, p. 147) that are continually ‘customised and reworked’ in light of current and past situations, sometimes becoming ‘so taken for granted that their very existence disappears from view’ (Wetherell, 2012, p. 104). Burkitt noted that, like the eye, our emotional dispositions ‘are the emotional lens through which we see the world but which may not itself feature in our vision’ (2014, p. 119). Asking caregivers to reflect on the emotional dimensions of caregiving practices within an interview without prior consideration may have been challenging, particularly over the phone when a researcher cannot identify non-verbal cues of confusion, contemplation, discomfort, or distress. Bagnoli noted that the inclusion of non-linguistic graphic elicitation activities gives participants more time to reflect on the issues under study, and relying on ‘other expressive possibilities’ can enable researchers to access alternative aspects of experience (2009, p. 547). As participants and the researcher make sense of these drawings together in the interview context – moving from description of the visuals to their co-interpretation and evaluation – such approaches are also thought to ‘yield deeper, more complex data than otherwise can be collected’ (Copeland & Agosto, 2012, p. 517).

This methodological paper reflects on our experiences of embedding graphic elicitation activities within a remote study into caregivers’ mobility experiences. To unpack the experiences of dementia caregiving journeys, 17 self-identifying informal dementia caregivers were recruited (12 female, five male, age ranging from early 50s to mid-80s, living across England) across the UK between January and September 2021. Convenience sampling was used for this research, working with key gatekeepers from dementia-related charities and organisations across England. Some of these invited us to present our research during an online meeting, while other groups simply shared our research in a newsletter or on social media. We offered our email address for interested individuals to contact us in all these interactions. The names of all recruited participants have been pseudonymised for this paper.

Caregivers were asked to create three drawings depicting: (1) a time in their life before becoming a caregiver – ‘before’; (2) their current life as a caregiver – ‘during’; and (3) their possible futures with or without the caregiver role – ‘future’. This approach combined aspects of both sequential and relational graphic elicitation. The sequential dimension (focusing the drawings on three distinct periods) supported discussion about the temporal shifts in caregiving relationships, including the ‘tinkering’ of care in response to shifting circumstances over time (Taylor, 2010), and encouraged reflection beyond the immediate emotional and practical demands of the pandemic. The relational dimension provided insights into the interdependent qualities of caregiving, including ‘the intricate ordering and distribution of bodies, technologies, architectures, texts, gestures and subjectivities’ of care (Law, 2010, p. 67).

Rather than relying on researcher-created templates, we prioritised participant-produced drawings to support them as ‘critical navigators of the content of their discussions’ (Kolar et al., 2015, p. 26). The diversity of content across the three drawings – often including both positive and negative dimensions of experience – also allowed the researcher to use the drawings to shift the direction of discussion if participants seemed distressed while speaking about particularly challenging events (Kolar et al., 2015). The drawing instructions, provided via email to the participants on being recruited, were intentionally left open to encourage participant interpretation and exploration. An effort was made to alleviate participant concerns about ‘artistic limitations’ (Malhotra et al., 2021; Monico et al., 2020), explaining that the process was more important than the visual aesthetic or accuracy of representation of the output (Natali et al., 2021). Our approach established a playful and creative way to explore deeply emotional journeys and allowed the caregivers to guide the researchers through their memories and experiences. The drawings were elicited in advance of a telephonic interview. Telephonic interviews were chosen for their sensory and technological familiarity, recognising that participants were already dealing with significant amounts of everyday change with the pandemic. The drawings were discussed in the initial stages of the telephonic interview, conducted once the drawings had been securely transferred to the researchers via a secure platform, Unishare. We developed a set of questions for the drawings, discussing the drawing process, before considering each sequential drawing individually and then reflecting on all three together. For example, some questions asked about the drawing process were: ‘How did you feel whilst doing the drawings and why?’ and ‘Did the drawing activity allow you to adequately express yourself?’ Considering the drawings early in the interview process set a precedent for the rest of the interview, as participants could refer back to the drawings to inform the discussion.

3 | EXPRESSING EMOTION WITH GRAPHIC ELICITATION

Caregiving is often emotionally charged. Caring for a loved one can be a full-time responsibility and may become more emotionally and practically difficult as dementia progresses (Milligan, 2005). Through telephonic interviews guided by graphic elicitation, we facilitated deeper reflections on experiences of caring in a participant-led way, giving participants time in advance of their interview to think through – and reflect on how to articulate – their experiences in their own way and at their own pace. Graphic elicitation is well-positioned for uncovering emotional narratives and experiences (Copeland & Agosto, 2012), affording rich emotional discussion in ways that can be missed in traditional interview methods alone (Rose, 2014).

Most participants noted the enjoyment and benefits of using this method: ‘the actual thing of drawing it, as I say, was quite pleasant. It took me out of myself in a way, but the content was a bit painful’ (interview with Mrs Smith). For all participants, the ‘present’ and ‘future’ drawings were the source of painful and difficult emotions because they accentuated perceived losses. For example, Mrs Smith discussed feeling imprisoned by her caring role and how the future felt bleak due to the progression of her partner’s dementia and the resulting financial toll. This challenging foresight was painful for Mrs Smith to depict; however, the drawing activity cushioned this pain to some extent due to its reflexivity and flexibility. Instead of confronting participants directly with painful memories and experiences, our process allowed them to approach such experiences independently and in their own way. Furthermore, the structure of the drawing activity eased the participants into the process. The ‘before’ drawing, while ostensibly for comparison, provided a positive opportunity of reflection for many. Having each drawing as individual pieces enabled us to explore each period with participants carefully. If the discussion of one drawing became too distressing, the separation of drawings meant the researcher could move on, alleviating the participant somewhat of their distress (Kolar et al., 2015).

While the drawing activity was emotionally challenging for most participants, many participants also found it enjoyable, speaking fondly of the activity. Ms Peel reflected on this mix of positive and negative experiences:

I felt quite emotional, more emotional than I expected. I hadn't really thought about what's gonna happen in the future and what my role as a carer's going to be. So, it was a really good exercise, I think, just to kind of think I need to get a bit more prepared.

The drawing activity fostered reflection on her caring role and preparedness for the future. Reflexivity was a mainstay among all participants who did the drawing activity. Kearney and Hyle (2004) note the ability of drawings to bring spoken thoughts and emotions to the surface, raising personal awareness of and helping people to process and discuss these emotions and thoughts (Vince & Warren, 2012). Many participants felt that the drawing activity also provided a fresh perspective on their lives, stirring in some a ‘call to action’.

Despite the strengths of the method, individuals may find it challenging to explore the emotional complexities of subjects like caregiving with the drawing medium:

In terms of translating my thoughts onto paper, um, I found that difficult because there's so many complexities around it. What you got was only the second iteration of the drawing. That's because I sort of schooled myself [and] said ‘just get a theme down’.

(Interview with Mr Philips)

The drawings by Mr Philips, like those by Ms Collins (Figure 1) and Ms Oliver (Figure 2), relied on words to help articulate the meaning and emotion of each drawing. When discussing the method during the interview, Ms Collins observed: ‘I am somebody who will write down my emotions, you know, a pros and cons list of things. I like to see things in black and white. I found it quite therapeutic to see where I was, where I am now, and maybe what the future was’. It emphasises our flexible approach, where participants could take greater autonomy over their data by choosing a balance between words and images. This aligns with calls for flexible methodologies that do not see research as linear but as uncertain and changeable (McArdle, 2022).

While flexibility was our intention, it was not made as explicit to the participants as it could have been. This was evident with Mr Andrews (Figure 3), who did not feel that the drawings adequately expressed his emotions and did not realise words could be used. Again, the process rather than the final product needs to be foregrounded (Natali et al., 2021) in all communication with participants.

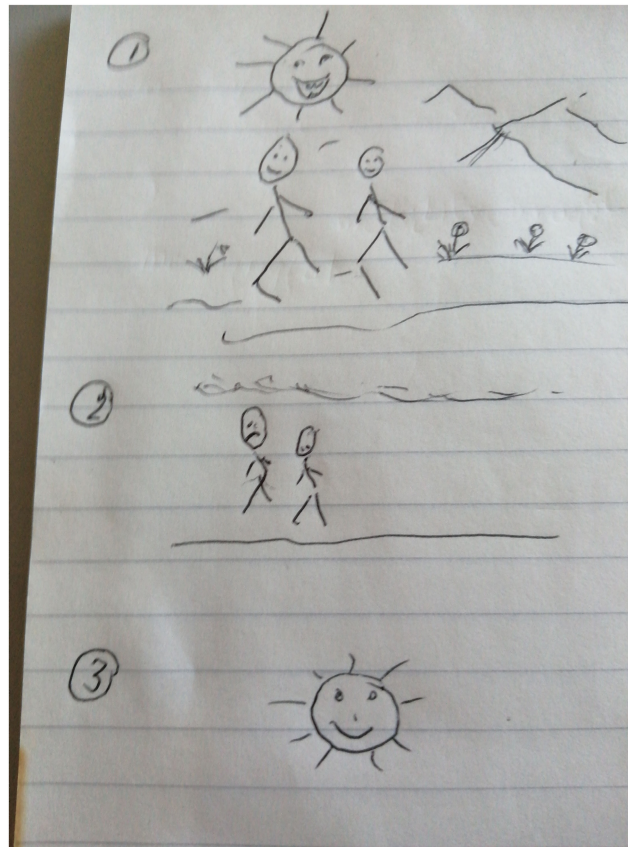


FIGURE 3 Mr Andrews' drawings emphasising the inadequacy to express himself

Through her shifting use of colour across her drawings (Figure 5), Ms Bradley was able to elaborate during the interview on the role of the pandemic in shaping her caregiving journey. The colours were diminished from the 'before' to 'present' drawing and remained absent in the 'future' drawing. This example highlights that researchers need to give due attention to shifting contexts illustrated via the sequential nature of the drawings, and to examine carefully how participants can be supported to convey such contexts through their drawings. Through this sequential process, the COVID-19 pandemic was unpacked as one of several important contextual influences on participants' caregiving journeys, rather than dominating discussion in a more intrusive way.

5 | THE LIMITATIONS OF GRAPHIC ELICITATION WITH OLDER ADULTS REMOTELY

Our research provided many insights into the remote use of graphic elicitation with older adults. The expressiveness of graphic elicitation was a key point of discussion with participants. For example, Mrs Jones, when asked whether the activity had allowed her to adequately express herself, argued:

No, because I'm not very good at drawing. There's just so many things to include. As soon as I looked at it again three days later I'm thinking, 'oh, I left that out and I left that out' so it didn't adequately express everything. Nevertheless, it was good fun to do.

Mrs Jones also suggested that she would prefer to express herself through the written word. Of all the participants, Mrs Wilkinson was the only one who did not make any drawings but discussed what she might have drawn and even suggested an alternative medium of using photographs. If research remains inflexible, participants like Mrs Wilkinson would remain unheard. Other participants who drew also noted concerns related to expressiveness: 'I'd just do an interview, to be honest. You've had the same story off me whether or not' (interview with Mrs Chapman). Indeed, during

Yet, several participants valued the activity. For example, Mrs Christie appreciated the reflective nature of the drawing activity but was worried about providing the 'right' information: 'I was as much concerned that you should have information as me thinking about it'. This is a common concern in research that participants may try to provide what they think is the 'right' or socially acceptable information (Bergen & Labonté, 2020). To some extent, graphic elicitation seemed to ease that concern. Such arts-based methods and the subsequent interviews help interviewees elaborate on their thoughts, create tacit knowledge, and engage in reflexive practice (Bravington & King, 2019), moving the interview beyond simply a 'speech event' (Langley & Meziani, 2020). Overall, our approach enabled us to provide various and varied opportunities for participants to express themselves, taking care to create a supportive, non-judgemental interview experience to reassure participants that there are no right or wrong answers.

Due to the various restrictions arising from the pandemic, the drawing activity was adapted for remote use and raised logistical challenges. For example, Mrs Smith mentioned: 'I'm a bit of a technophobe, and I said to my daughter would you help me put these drawings up because I need to and I'm not sure what I'm doing'. While technological difficulties were rarely mentioned in the interviews, they were raised during the recruitment process, where some required further explanation on how to use Unishare. Additionally, some participants sent copies of their drawings via email, which was not as secure as we wished, but crucially was easier and a more familiar process for the participants. Generally, sharing of drawings was completed successfully and ultimately both participants and researchers could navigate the drawings in-depth and with ease.

6 | CONCLUDING REMARKS

This methodological paper critically discussed the effectiveness of conducting graphic elicitation remotely to explore the emotionally charged and sensitive topic of informal caregiving. In doing so, we argue that graphic elicitation, like other visual and creative methods, provides valuable opportunities for participants to reflect on their experiences and emotions (Copeland & Agosto, 2012; Rose, 2014). Not only did graphic elicitation help foster a safe space for participant expression and vulnerability, it contributed visual outputs that offer in-depth, nuanced understandings of informal dementia caregiving journeys. Graphic elicitation was integral to the success of the interview, both as content and preparation.

Despite the recruitment issues, we have demonstrated the promise of conducting visual and creative methods remotely and discussed how the method moved the research beyond the immediate preoccupations of the pandemic (Canevelli et al., 2020; Taylor, 2010). While remote approaches are paramount in a pandemic setting, our remote application of graphic elicitation demonstrates how geographers can engage with visual and creative methods regardless of the participant's geographical distance, thus presenting more flexibility and resource efficiency in data collection. However, our mixed method use could be enhanced further with the inclusion of other visual and creative methods, for example in the context of multi-media story-telling, to challenge stereotypical assumptions and dominant narratives around illness trajectories and caregiving journeys (Rice et al., 2020; Rice & Mündel, 2018). By highlighting the effectiveness of graphic elicitation for unpacking emotional narratives, even when conducted from afar, graphic elicitation can access new dimensions of experience and thus contributes to ongoing discussions around arts-based methods in geography.

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DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

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