Visual Methods for Qualitative Research with Older Refugees: Reflection on Strengths and Drawbacks

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Abstract

Although older refugees have similar characteristics and vulnerabilities as other populations that have benefited from visual research methods, there is scarce evidence of these methods being used for qualitative social work studies with older refugees. In this article, we discuss the application of visual methods for social work research with older refugees for a better understanding of their experiences and challenges, highlighting how it can be evocative, improve discussions by reaching senses that ordinary interviews cannot grasp, avoid re-traumatisation during research, and build resilience and coping in older refugees. We propose that visual methods could address power dynamics that privilege researchers over participants like older refugees, thus empowering and ensuring older refugees control research processes. This can be crystallised by using visual methods in participatory research. We also outline the drawbacks and concerns of using these methods for research with this population. We conclude by presenting a discourse on how visual methods can advance social work knowledge for practice and social change.

Keywords

social work, qualitative research, visual methods, older refugees

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Visual Methods for Qualitative Research with Older Refugees: Reflection on Strengths and Drawbacks

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Although older refugees have similar characteristics and vulnerabilities as other populations that have benefited from visual research methods, there is scarce evidence of these methods being used for qualitative social work studies with older refugees. In this article, we discuss the application of visual methods for social work research with older refugees for a better understanding of their experiences and challenges, highlighting how it can be evocative, improve discussions by reaching senses that ordinary interviews cannot grasp, avoid re-traumatisation during research, and build resilience and coping in older refugees. We propose that visual methods could address power dynamics that privilege researchers over participants like older refugees, thus empowering and ensuring older refugees control research processes. This can be crystallised by using visual methods in participatory research. We also outline the drawbacks and concerns of using these methods for research with this population. We conclude by presenting a discourse on how visual methods can advance social work knowledge for practice and social change.

Keywords: social work, qualitative research, visual methods, older refugees

Introduction

Visual research methods are a collection of research approaches used to collect, interpret, and understand graphics and images (Barbour, 2014). Asaba et al. (2014) define it as "systematic ways in which visual materials are gathered, generated and worked with to understand, explain, or express phenomena – a process that is in constant development" (p. 155). Visual research methods enrich data by unearthing layers of meaning, improving depth and validity (Glaw, 2017). In doing so, they transcend the simple display of data to multiple sensory approaches, increasing access to different areas of human consciousness and resources that may be unexplored and dormant, leading to the generation of new knowledge (Chaplin, 1994; Prosser & Loxley, 2008). Quantitative positivist and post-positivist scholars predominantly used visuals to analyse and present research findings, but in the past decades, visuals have grown as novel and innovative approaches to qualitative research through the works of early sociologists and ethnographers, particularly those concerned with the problem of power differences in the research process (DeVault, 1996; Veroff & DiStefano, 2002). Thus, sociologists led the move for novel approaches, like visual methods, aimed at developing data collection strategies that can help address the power imbalance between researchers and research participants (Chaplin, 1994; Hurworth, 2003; Packard, 2008).

Drawing from the critical constructivist paradigm, which challenges the positivist monopoly of knowledge production by professionals (Gibbons et al., 1994) and seeks to understand how people construct knowledge, visuals promote alternative thinking and knowledge creation, subject to participants' traditions, norms, values, and social issues

(Coghlan & Brydon-Miller, 2014). This encourages democratic, pluralistic, and multiple perspectives to knowledge creation through language and visual art (Given, 2008). Visual methods align with critical constructivism, which allows research participants control over the knowledge production process and ownership of knowledge (Bentley, 2003).

Several visual methods breakthroughs and innovations have been recorded over the past decades, including visual ethnography, visual mapping, photo-elicitation, photovoice or participant-driven photography, filmmaking, diagramming, and art (see Table 1 for explanations). These approaches have equipped qualitative scholars with various visual tools, including photography, video, film collage, graffiti, cartoons and comics, drawing, sculpture, painting, and other artworks. Often, visual methods are combined with traditional interviews or narratives to add new dimensions and valuable insights into participants' realities (Barbour, 2014; Crilly et al., 2006). Scholars appreciate visual research methods because they facilitate communication by serving as icebreakers and improve collaboration between researchers and participants by promoting rapport-building through shared activities (Nascimento et al., 2014). Visuals serve as multisensory reflective tools (Pain, 2012) that encourage expressing evocative emotions and tacit knowledge as they can move people more than words alone (Correa et al., 2010; Ekoh & Sitter, 2023; Umoquit et al., 2013). Further, visuals can help people reach multiple layers of consciousness, which yields richer data (Mannay, 2016). The frequently shared activities of visual creation make participants feel more relaxed and facilitate the empowerment of participants within the research process (Goldenberg et al., 2016). Visuals also allow researchers to triangulate between different data sources to highlight additional insights.

Table 1
Visual methods and their applications

s/no	Visuals	Application	Sample Studies
1.	Visual ethnography	Adopted for studying cultural contexts using photographs to create an environment that helps researchers and participants to see the world through participants' eyes.	(Hepburn, 2018; Harris & Guillemin, 2012; Whitfield et al., 2023)
2.	Visual mapping	Applied in building relationships and connecting ideas, especially during the development of themes.	(Kellogg & Nogi, 2018; Mammen & Mammen, 2018; Vitman-Schorr & Ayalon, 2020)
3.	Photo-elicitation or participatory mapping	A data collection technique that uses photographs to elicit information on values, and meanings to interview questions, creating a conducive space for self-expression.	(Bailey et al., 2021; Harrison et al., 20221)
4.	Photovoice or participant-driven photography	Enables participants to use photography to create stories about their daily lives,	(Kadowaki et al., 2023; Shari et al., 2017; Sitter

		challenges and experiences for improved support, community engagement and resources.	& Mitchell, 2020)
5.	Film making	Creates films to provide insights aimed at creating awareness and promoting advocacy efforts.	(Burns et al., 2020; Gustafsson et al., 2018)
6.	Diagramming	Graphic representations to explore complex experiences and different relationships between parts and concepts.	(Ekoh & Sitter, 2023; Miller et al., 2023; Umoquit et al., 2011)
7.	Visual art	Applied art to showcase life experiences, personal and community challenges, and promote societal awareness.	(Huss et al., 2013; Rodrigues et al., 2019)

Source: Adapted from Tyminski et al. (2022)

These various visual methods have their unique advantages for research with older refugees. Specifically, they have been found to be useful for research with participants who have experienced crisis and may be exposed to the risk of re-traumatization in traditional interviews (Umoquit et al.*,* 2008), participants who find themselves in new cultures and may have language difficulties (Pell et al., 2020), participants who have experienced losses of agency, dignity and worth and in need of empowerment (Kolar et al., 2015) and so on. We, therefore, suggest that visual methods are ideally positioned as a viable qualitative research tool for studies with vulnerable populations like older refugees. However, the application of these methods in social science research with older refugees has been scarce in existing literature. Thus, in this paper, we describe the importance of visual methods to understand older refugees and, specifically, their experiences, social networks, and social support needs. We highlight the strengths and weaknesses of visual methods and conclude by offering a discourse on how visual methods can produce knowledge to advance practice, policy, and social change.

Older refugees are defined as older adults aged 60 years and over who, as a result of conflict, violence, perceived or real persecution, human rights violation, or other disturbing public situations, have been displaced and have crossed international borders to settle in a new country (United Nations, 2019). They comprise approximately four per cent of global refugees (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees [UNHCR], 2020) and typically migrate from Low- and Middle-Income countries, which accounts for 86% of global violence (World Bank, 2021). Many of them lack language skills, have lower levels of education, and have a different culture from that of their host communities (Barbelet, 2018; Este, 2013). These factors affect older refugees' experiences, social networks, and support, making them apt for research adopting visual methods. However, there is a dearth of literature on applying visual methods in this population; hence, we will draw from extant literature with research on participants with similar characteristics to argue for the suitability of applying visual methods in research with older refugees.

Application of visual methods in understanding the experiences of older refugees

Forced migration, such as refugeeism, is characterised by losses. Many older refugees lose their families, friends and communities to the conflicts and violence that lead to migration.

A recent review by Ekoh et al. (2022a), maps out several studies showing how refugeeism leads to loss of social networks and its impact on older refugees. Migration removes them from surviving social ties (Ahmad et al., 2020), denying them social support, which is critical to the survival and well-being of older adults, especially during and after crises (Ekoh et al., 2022b). Older refugees' age, language, and cultural differences also make it challenging for them to recreate new social networks in their new environment (Ajlan, 2021). Visuals have been effectively used to explore vulnerable populations' social networks and support dynamics, helping older refugees reflect, organise, and map out the nature of their relationship with their social networks. As an example, Miller et al. (2021) used visual methods to depict older inmates' relationships with service providers (see Figure 1).

Figure 1
Diagram of the ecomap circle of incarcerated older adults' relationship depicting support systems
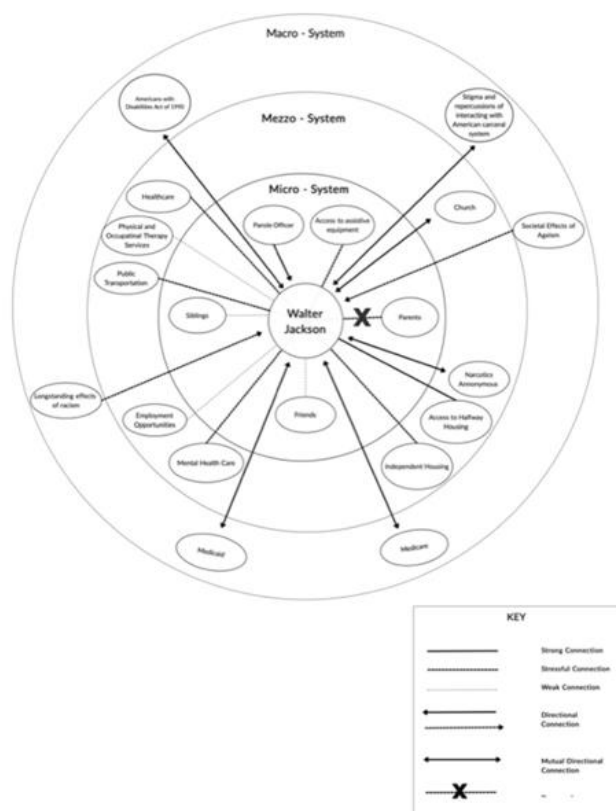

Source: Miller et al. (2021)

Visuals can also expose the gaps in social support and care (Ekoh & Chukwuemeka, 2023; Rodrigues et al., 2014). The methods can provide a snapshot of older refugees' social ties after forced migration, illustrate older refugees' social network structures before and immediately after migration, and, via longitudinal studies, show how their social support systems change with time in their place of refuge. For example, Ekoh and Chukwuemeka (2023) used diagrams of concentric circles to explore the changes in social network systems before and after the forced migration of older internally displaced persons in Nigeria (See Figure 2). Visuals such as ecomaps and photovoice can also unravel the complex dynamics within the relationships of older refugees; presenting supportive relationships, abusive relationships, and relationships that can be supportive and abusive at the same time (Ekoh et al., 2022b; Kwan & Walsh, 2013; Washington, 2009).

Figure 2

Diagram of concentric circles depicting the social networks of older people before and after displacement
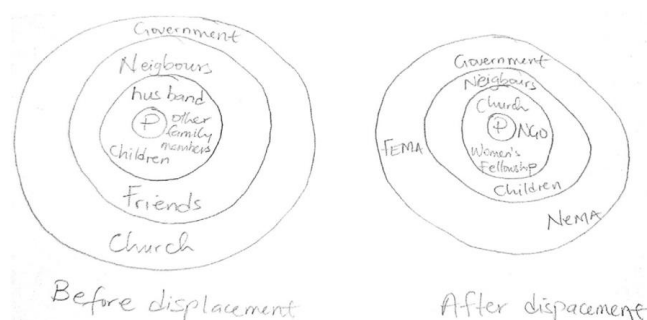
Source: Ekoh and Chukwuemeka (2023)

Visual methods are also conducive to collecting data from people who have experienced trauma, reducing the risks of re-traumatisation (Umoquit et al., 2008). Many older refugees experience trauma as they witness the destruction of their community and loved ones (UNHCR, 2020); the forced migration journey can also be traumatic, and their integration and resettlement in the new environment can be a source of distress for them (Barbelet, 2018). Hence, special care should be taken in collecting evocative data from older refugees to avoid re-traumatization. Visual methods have been found to be practical tools for collecting data on sensitive topics in ways that limit potential distress, anxiety, and re-traumatisation associated with reminiscing on traumatic events (Hollway & Jefferson, 2013; Kolar et al., 2015). For instance, Kolar et al. (2015) highlighted that visual expressions such as visual arts and drawings provide participants who experienced psychological distress and trauma and may struggle with verbally recounting their traumatic experiences in a safe way with alternative means of communicating their feelings. They further suggest that it also allows for the use of abstractions, such as metaphors and symbols, to express trauma in a less emotionally impacting way by creating some psychological distance between themselves and the events. Also, visual methods have also been found to help vulnerable groups build resilience and strength and feel empowered because they give participants some control over how they present their experiences in the research process. Further, many visual methods, such as diagramming, photovoice, and filmmaking, aim to assist participants in reflecting and building upon their strengths. As an example, Shari et al. (2017) used photovoice to show how ageing immigrants in Canada build resilience and support (see Figure 3).

Figure 3

Photovoice study illustrating how older immigrants build resilience

Trauma of the past **Resilience** Solidarity and support

Source: Shari et al. (2017)

Thus, visual methods may be suitable for collecting data from older refugees with little risk of re-traumatisation, ensuring the research is empowering and helping them increase their resilience.

In this article, we propose that the migration journey of refugees, including older refugees, can be better elicited, analysed, and presented using visual methods such as timelines and art. They can help older refugees to reflect on their migration journey linearly or chronologically, facilitating interactions that promote understanding of their experiences (Harris & Rhodes, 2018). Visual methods can help older refugees reflect on their migration journey, significant events, meanings and context of such events, and their expectations for the future. The use of these methods can also help researchers avoid the challenge-oriented focus of refugee studies, which reduces refugees to weak, vulnerable and dependent populations, and, in contrast, support presenting the positives of older refugees' journeys and life experiences; identifying the strengths, agency, and resilience exhibited through the significant events within the journey. This orientation is shown by Kolar et al. (2015) in their study of resilience with marginalised groups, including immigrants.

Additionally, visual methods such as visual ethnography, relief maps and photo-elicitation can be useful tools for gathering insights into the current challenges of older refugees. Adopting intersectionality in understanding the experiences of vulnerable groups can be a complex concept for researchers; however, visual methods help simplify and contextualise the intersecting experiences of vulnerable people (Ferré & de Zárate, 2016; Glaw et al., 2017). Relief maps can help show how distance and social relations, gender, and other factors intersect to affect the well-being of older refugees. For instance, Kellog et al. (2018) used visual maps to illustrate the intersection of patient care and quality of life (see Figure 4). Visuals like photo elicitation can provide a comfortable space and prompt for older refugees to discuss the interacting and intersecting determinants of their challenges in the place of refuge. Older refugees can also use visual ethnography to help researchers see their realities and world through the older refugees' eyes. Many older refugees struggle with the language of the new environment (Barbelet, 2018), causing limitations in communication and difficulties expressing themselves through traditional qualitative interviews. The addition of visual methods can provide new avenues for older refugees to express themselves better and overcome the communication barriers created by language differences (Umoquit et al., 2011).

Figure 4
Visual map of patient care and quality of life
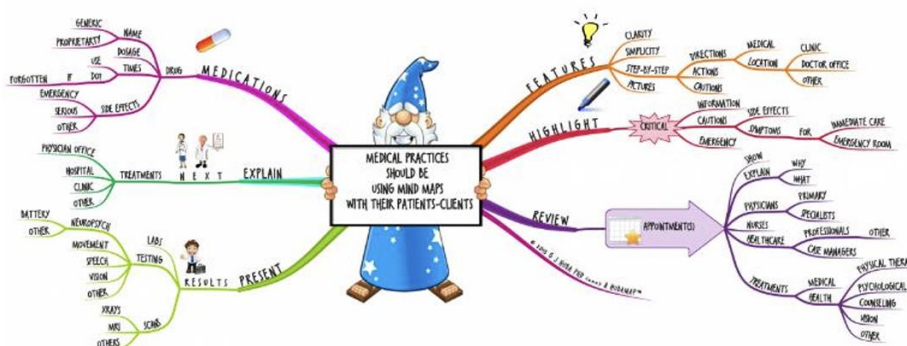
Source Kellog et al, (2018)

Participatory Visual Methods

Visuals can be participant-led, with participants creating the visuals and graphics; researcher-led, where the researcher(s) creates the visual and uses it to elicit data from participants; or co-created by the researcher(s) and participant(s) collaboratively and cooperatively (Bagnoli, 2009; Bravington & King, 2019; Manja et al., 2021; Umoquit et al., 2011). Given that visual methods were historically developed to address the issue of power imbalances between researchers and participants, more recently, they have been predominantly used in participatory research where visuals are created by participants alone or co-created with the researcher (Manja et al., 2021).

Using visuals in participatory research with vulnerable populations like older refugees can help to address the power dynamic that privileges researchers over participants, thereby empowering participants to take control of the research process by assigning them active roles and making them experts in creating knowledge about their realities (Cleland & MacLeod, 2021; Baumann et al., 2020). Aligned with the critical constructivist paradigm, visuals give control of data collection and the pace of the research to older refugees, as well as enable them to decide what they consider the most significant representation of their experience (Cleland & MacLeod, 2021). With this, older refugees can drive the creation of visuals and dialogue. It can also give older refugees, who may not be verbally fluent or have language difficulties, the opportunity to express themselves devoid of the cultural bias which plagues questionnaires and other data collection instruments (Langmann & Pick, 2018).

Furthermore, as many refugees lose their agency and dignity because of their experiences of loss (Ekoh et al., 2022b), visual methods in participatory research can elevate the voice of older refugees and thereby increase their agency and ability to reflect on their strengths and resilience (Shari et al., 2017). Through participatory visuals, older refugees can then become experts in telling their stories, allowing them and the researcher(s) to gain significant insights into their lived experiences and perspectives.

Furthermore, compared to the challenge of convincing participants to participate in interviews, especially on sensitive topics, Pauwels (2015) reported that participants are more willing to use visual methods in data elicitation. This can benefit research with older refugees as it can serve as an invitation to engage in participatory research through shared activities. It can also improve participatory research by creating stimulus and concrete talking points, making participatory research less confrontational and allowing participants to move through the research at their own pace.

Participatory visual methods' polysemic and engaging nature can prompt unexpected and vivid responses, making them attractive to both researchers and participants. This is especially true for scholars with constructivist epistemology who appreciate the plurality of knowledge and realities (Pauwels, 2015). Participatory visuals can jog older refugees' memories and access different areas of consciousness, leading to an investigation into layers of experiences that are difficult to express in words (Gauntlett, 2007). It also maintains the interest of research participants as they remain active throughout the research process, from data collection to dissemination (Collier, 1967). Hence, the attention of older refugees can be maintained through the engaging graphics associated with visual methods and can be used in dissemination activities to depict study findings.

Drawbacks and concerns about visual methods

While we have highlighted the strengths and benefits of visual methods in research with older refugees, some significant drawbacks and concerns about visual methods have been raised. Confidentiality might become an issue, especially when participants' images appear in

the visual data. To address this, Wiles et al. (2012) recommended blurring or pixelating the images while taking care to avoid objectifying participants in visuals and making the visuals less powerful. Consent can also pose a challenge, as some visual methods can capture people without consent. For instance, in participant-led photography, film or video ethnography, the participant might capture bystanders and others within their camera lens view, and it may be impossible for the researcher(s) to seek their (bystanders) consent. These, again, can be made anonymous through photographic techniques.

The linguistic imperialism of text may still be maintained because visuals are typically used with interviews or narratives; hence, more eloquent participants and hence language and text will still be privileged. For example, older refugees who are not verbally skilled or lack language skills may struggle with photo elicitation as they are expected to develop verbal discussions from photographs. Furthermore, digital technology is becoming integral to visual methods and may pose unprecedented challenges for older refugees as they remain digitally excluded (Ekoh et al., 2021; Ekoh et al., 2023). The Centre for Ageing Better (2018) reports that older adults make up 94% of people without access and skills to utilise digital technology. Some visuals may also be classist and ableist, privileging the educated and people living without disabilities (Glaw et al., 2017). Thus, older refugees who are typically less educated and living with disabilities (Ekoh et al., 2022b) may need help with such visual methods. Therefore, researchers must be sensitive to the needs and capabilities of older refugees in selecting visual methods to be adopted in their research endeavours and in modifying visual methods to meet the specific needs of their population.

Visuals are also subjectively interpreted, and their meaning can change over time. This might be uncomfortable for non-constructivist scholars who prioritise rigid interpretations of data. Also, visuals, like other forms of research, are a permanent statement, which research participants may be less comfortable with over time-reflection. Furthermore, some scholars have questioned the assumption that visuals give vulnerable people a voice, leading to calls for case-by-case empirical analyses to prove that visuals empower research participants (Pauwels, 2015; Umoquit et al., 2008). Table 2 below summarises some of the strengths and drawbacks of visual methods.

Table 2
Summary of strengths and drawbacks of using visual methods

Strengths	Concerns and drawbacks
Empowers and gives older refugees a voice; helping them to build agency.	May give a false assumption of the voices of older refugees being heard.
Allow for different points of view and new sources of knowledge.	Can be easily abused and made paternalistic.
Strengthen relationships and trust between researchers and older refugees.	Difficulties ensuring consent in some participants generated visuals.
Promotes collaborative and reciprocating research and teamwork.	Difficulties ensuring anonymity without losing the power of visuals.
Improves dialogue and communication.	Digital divide may prevent older refugees from access to some visual methods.
Present powerful visuals for awareness creation and social change.	Some visuals may fail to stimulate desired responses and produce off topic discourse.
Access multiple senses and produce quality data.	Ownership of visual materials can be challenging.

Allows for discussions on sensitive issues associated with forced migration.	Some visual tools like digital cameras and tablets may not be cost-effective.

Using visual methods to produce knowledge to advance practice, policy, and social change?

Visual methods, especially in participatory research, aim to develop and advance scholarly knowledge, improve the lives of vulnerable groups, and promote social change (Pauwels, 2015). The knowledge generated from visual participatory research with older refugees can advance social work practice with older refugees. Human relationships are central to social work practice with older adults and refugees. Research has shown that social networks and support are essential to the survival and well-being of older refugees (Ahmad et al., 2020), and social workers continue to find ways to improve the relationship between refugees, their networks, and the community. Visual methods such as ecomaps, concentric circles, and genograms are powerful tools for understanding the dynamics of human relationships. Social workers have historically used these visual methods to map clients' connections and find new ways to improve their social ties (Hartman, 1995). Hence, these visual methods can present a viable understanding of older refugees' support network, which social workers can leverage to provide both informal ethnic and culturally sensitive support and formal support to older refugees.

Visual methods can also better represent older refugees' views and lived experiences of migration-related challenges, which can inform social work intervention. Older refugees who typically have specialised health, nutritional and psychosocial challenges are made experts in presenting and discussing their problems. Hence, visuals can be used to understand the diverse problems of older refugees and channel social work intervention for efficient impact. Participatory visual methods also ensure the collaboration of researchers and participants in options for research presentation and use. Visual methods can ensure that older refugees collaborate with researchers to design the action piece of action research and, in some situations, visually present the research findings.

The action piece is an essential aspect of every participatory research for its advantage to research participants without focusing primarily on the benefits of the research to the researcher (Pauwels, 2015). Visuals such as participatory or community videos, animations, and pictures can be used to present research findings and can be adopted as a tool for social change (Wilson & Milne, 2016). These visuals can raise awareness about the challenges of older refugees, empower them, and influence policymakers to improve the living conditions of older refugees. For example, images or videos can be codesigned by older refugees and researchers and presented in exhibitions to human service disciplines like social workers, immigrants serving agencies, and policymakers can be compelling and evocative and offer a better understanding of this population's challenges and areas needing immediate intervention.

Finally, the results of visual research with older refugees can inform policy. Refugee policies in many countries are heavily focused on younger refugees, and there is scarce literature on older refugees to inform policies (Barbelet, 2018; Hathaway, 1987). There is a need for policies and programmes targeting the peculiar needs and challenges of older refugees, such as health needs, social support, access to education and employment, abuse and neglect, and social exclusion. Knowledge generated through visual methods can be adopted for research that will inform and advocate for cognisant and evidence-based policies and programs for the well-being of older refugees.

Conclusion

Despite the growing use of visual methods in social research with vulnerable populations, especially those with language difficulties, cultural differences, experiences of trauma, diminished agency and in need of empowerment and resilience building, there is little use of these methods with older adults and refugees. This paper discussed the need to apply visual methods in exploring the social networks and support of older refugees and their experiences as forced migrants. It also presented a brief discourse on visual participatory research and how it can benefit older refugees. In reviewing the extant literature, we conclude that visual methods can improve collaboration between the researcher(s) and participant(a), which significantly improves dialogue, addresses the risk of re-traumatisation through distance reflection and empowers participants by allowing them to have more control over the representation of their experiences. Aligned with critical constructivism, visual methods capture a diversity of perspectives through different visual methods and, combined with verbal data, can improve the triangulation of data and comprehensive understanding of participants' experiences. In this paper, we argue that similar to research with vulnerable groups that have benefited from visual methods, research with older refugees can benefit from visual methods due to their unique characteristics and challenges. Given the importance of conducting ethical research, especially with vulnerable people who have experienced trauma, we also highlight some of the significant concerns and drawbacks, especially in relation to the ethics of consent and anonymity In conclusion, we advance that visual methods can advance scholarly knowledge and improve the lives of vulnerable groups through enhanced and targeted interventions because the evocative nature of visuals can reach multiple senses and paint a more vivid picture of the challenges of older refugees, drawing more significant attention to their plights.

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