

Walk and draw: a methodology to investigate subjective wellbeing

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Abstract

This paper presents recently completed AHRC funded research investigating walking and self-narration as a methodology for revealing insights into individual and community wellbeing. Shared flows and connections, illuminated through 'in the moment' personal reflection via spoken words and drawings, have been used to inform knowledge concerning personal and cultural wellbeing of the participant groups.

The paper describes two complementary interventions: one in which the participants were drawn from a Somali immigrant community and the other an 'expert group' of artists. In particular, this paper focuses specifically on walking combined with visual self-narration and the ways in which drawn representation can reveal hidden thoughts, memories and emotions, which are palpable and yet difficult to articulate through words.

A qualitative research methodology is described in which data was gathered through audio and video recordings of activities as well as participant sketchbooks and communal drawings. Two investigations are presented: a participant group for whom drawing is not a familiar narrative tool and an expert group of artists for whom drawing is a natural language. Both studies reveal how walking and drawing narratives are able to articulate difficult and deeply embedded emotional connections and thereby support subjective wellbeing.

Keywords: wellbeing, creativity, walking, drawing, research methodologies

1. Introduction

This paper describes two studies that focus on walking and drawing as a research methodology emerging from a wider study funded under the AHRC Connected Communities scheme, investigating self-narration as a research methodology. The overall aim of the work is to gain insights into community connectivity and wellbeing. The methodologies used in the research were selected in order to reveal the different layers of interaction, meaning and identity which are placed upon the existing local landscape and its features

and use this to understand issues that impact upon community and personal wellbeing. Further findings from the project as a whole can be found in the AHRC project report: *Hidden Connections and Environmental Flows - how local environmental interaction induces individual and community positivity in urban locations* (Prytherch, Coles et al. 2013).

Self-narrated walking has been found to uncover deep memories, which are brought to the fore when articulated, resulting in a sense of elation and a deep personal connection with the environment (Millman 2011). This personal uncovering and connection seems to be therapeutic and enables deeply felt emotions, which are often difficult to articulate, to be identified and reflected upon. Walking is known to have positive benefits for wellbeing, both as a form of exercise and also as a means of promoting positive emotion (Huppert, Baylis et al. 2005). Health professionals now advocate walking groups as a positive activity for people suffering from low mood and depression. There is evidence that walking in a group with some form of verbal reflection is particularly therapeutic and walking with self-narration has been found to elicit positive emotions (Holmes and Evans 2011). There is also research evidence to show that creative activities and outdoor pursuits particularly those that engage with nature help sustain subjective wellbeing (Huppert, Baylis et al. 2005). The activity of drawing whilst walking elicits and narrates experience; stimulating memories, heightening senses and sharpening focus (Treadaway 2009). The research presented in this paper explores walking and self-narration through drawing and words, examining it as a research methodology to reveal the hidden connections and flows that can be used to promote subjective wellbeing, community cohesion and increase a sense of belonging.

Both self-narrated walking and walk and draw involve the use of language – spoken and visual. In order to assess how drawn imagery, produced during the research as a whole, might be interpreted and analysed as data, a second concurrent case study focused on a group of professional artists for whom drawing can be described as a natural visual language. The following sections describe the two related studies: one with a community group of ‘non-experts’ and the other an ‘expert’ group of professional artists.

2. Somali Community: self narrated walk and draw

The first study took place in Newtown, Birmingham in 2012 and involved a series of interventions, based around walking, with participants drawn from the Newtown Somali immigrant community. Guiding Stars, a non-profit company, which organises various activities and events to empower and support the achievement of individuals in Birmingham, facilitated the interventions. The walking activities comprised a short narrative walk (lone or in pairs) where the participants either spoke to a digital voice recorder, or produced visual documentation in the form of schematic drawings, doodles and sketches. The walking route was not prescribed in detail but was centred around a two-mile area of the Huda Community Centre. Participants were provided with maps and some chose to include the small green space/park nearby whilst others did not. Each participant was given a small A6 sketchbook and a variety of dry point drawing media including pencils, pens, charcoal and coloured pencils. Although some chose to produce drawings, in

this instance the majority self-narrated their walks. The walks were followed by a group activity based on mapping, where the whole group collaborated by drawing landmarks, their relationships and significance to them, on a single large piece of paper (Figure 1).

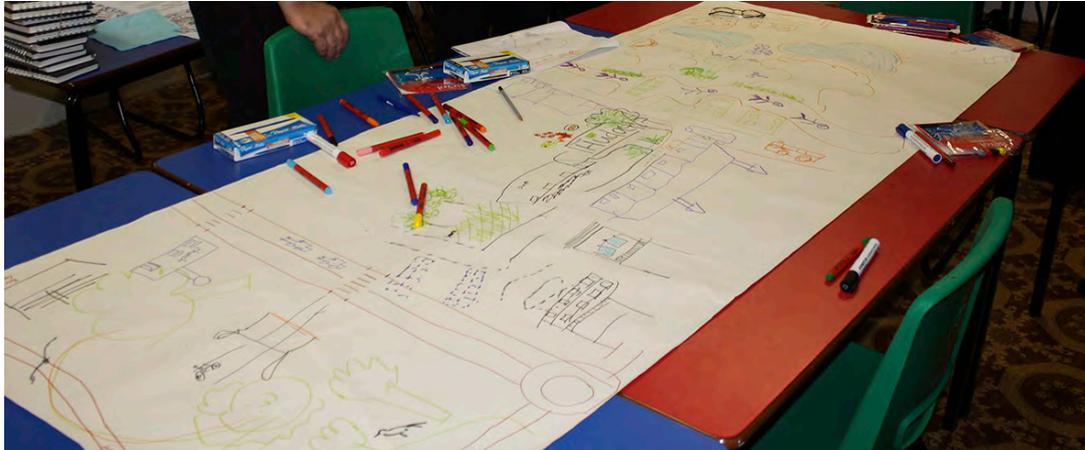


Figure 1. 'Community drawing', Somali Group, Newtown, Birmingham

A vast amount of data was created during the self-narrated walks. The research team retained the sketchbooks for analysis following the intervention; the dictated narration was transcribed and in some cases translated from Somali language prior to transcription. Subsequent content analysis of the textual and visual data has begun to reveal important connections between the activities of verbally and visually describing a prescribed route and the emotional attachment and memories it has stimulated. Insights have been revealed into the impact of the intervention on subjective wellbeing of participants in the context of the activity and the location. Although data analysis is ongoing due to the volume of data acquired, certain generic observations can already be made. It is evident that there is a need for a further longitudinal study that is embedded deeper in the local communities. This might involve training individuals from the relevant communities to organise and manage data gathering; their contribution to the subsequent analysis would also provide invaluable insights.

2.1 Initial observations

It was noticeable that there was a contrast between those whose route took them through the green space and those who did not. Deep memories and connections were made evident in the narration indicating the importance of this amenity to communities, (as is well known to urban planners). However, this was substantially mitigated for this particular community by fear factors. A high level of anxiety in participants was noted, arising from perceptions of physical threat from people sharing the environment who were not considered to have the same values as them. This affected participants' perceptions of the green space amenity. Several participants narrated stories of physical abuse and robbery, including an attack of a mother with small children in the playground (Figure 2). Where participants were in good view of other people walking, the space was described as peaceful and well looked after. Some participants discussed their fears and anxieties with the research team in some detail following the walk. It seems evident that there is a connection

between participants perception of immediate fear with anxieties in the past, relating to their personal histories as refugees from Somalia. Further detailed study is needed to assess the influences of these deeply personal and harrowing experiences upon the integration of such individuals into the wider community. This study was not set up to investigate this issue but the evidence that self-narrated walking could provide a profound methodology to reveal this is strong

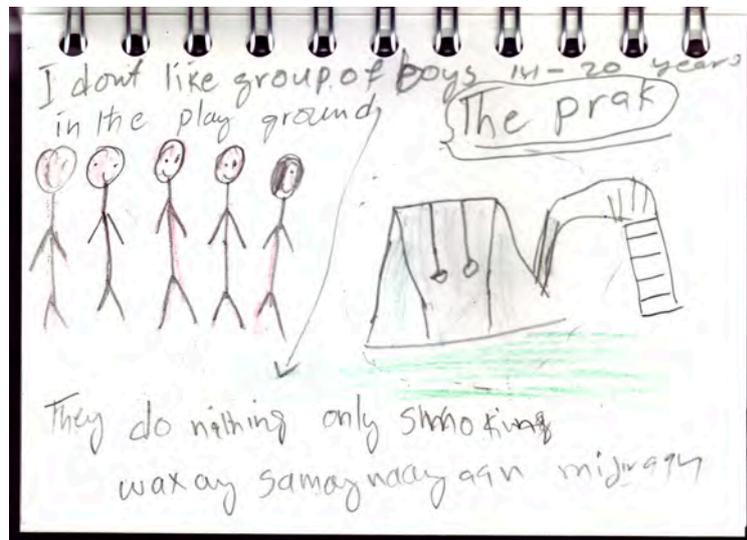


Figure 2. 'Children's Playground' Somali Participant

The data also reveals an emphatic negative reaction, ranging from sadness to disgust, at certain aspects of the local environment: litter, abandoned buildings etc. This perception of abandonment of the environment seemed to be reflected in a generalised underlying feeling of abandonment of the community itself. The act of walking, experiencing and self-narrating by the participants provided the research team an opportunity to study their sensorial engagement and interaction with the environment. Complex and profound personal descriptions, meanings, memories described in the data reveal how this community experiences the local environment. It also provides evidence of how past experience echoes in their lives.

The group mapping activity demonstrates a negotiated consensus, vital to developing communities, and illuminates relative priorities and significances between individuals. The activity generated a great amount of good-natured argument concerning which landmarks should be included and where they should be situated on the paper, their relation to each other and the relative size (importance) of each. It involved a communal reflective mapping of the whole area and seemed to galvanise the individuals who participated in this activity as a group. Further research into this aspect of the intervention would be useful in order to refine the methodology and maximize its value. The findings from this study reveal how the self narrated walking and drawing intervention provided participants with the opportunity to leave a visual trace of their experience, physical and emotional, which could later be interrogated, re-interpreted and displayed to others.

The overwhelming response of the participants following the day's activities was positive. All participants: research team members and the community representatives, said that they had enjoyed the experience. The process of describing physical and emotional experiences, concurrent with the activity of walking seems to provide a sense of emotional uplift and positive connection with the environment. The act of drawing a location appears to make a deeper emotional connection with that place – providing a sense of belonging; this could promote deeper community cohesion but further research is needed to validate this. Findings from this study indicate that in order to illuminate this further, a longitudinal study would be required using a research team who are embedded within the community. The self-narrated walking methodology was considered to be successful, producing profound understandings and considerable rich data.

Initial observations suggest that although the self-narrated walking has immediate impact and is quickly and easily adopted, the walk and draw approach could be considered to be problematic for those without any form of creative training. The second study used an expert group of artists to examine whether previous drawing experience and training is crucial in order to self-narrate experience.

3. Expert Group: Monknash

The following section examines the walk and draw methodology using an expert group of artists as participants; it provides a comparison between the Somali group who had no training or particular expertise in drawing. The 'expert group' case study is on going and data drawn from the first three artists' walks is presented in the following section. The study examines ways in which drawing can be used as a visual language to annotate and narrate hidden flows and connections as a result of walking in a given environment. The location used in this study was a coastal rather than urban environment and was selected to encourage participation by the chosen practitioners. The location per se was not a focus of the study rather the ways in which experience of it was used as a stimulant for visual self-narration of the route.

Three professional artists undertook individual walk and draw sessions with the researcher, herself a practicing artist, along a prescribed route. The location was a four-mile path in Vale of Glamorgan, South Wales, between Monknash and the coast. The route follows a public footpath along a picturesque stream to the rocky estuary and waterfall ending at the beach. The route was selected as it was well known to the researcher and therefore easily risk assessed (for university research ethics approval) but not familiar to any of the selected case study participants and therefore could be experienced without bias. The artists were selected for participation in the research, as all three are professional artists whose work represents a range of approaches to drawing practice:

- Artist 1 uses her drawing practice to focus on detail in the environment and is concerned with representations of texture, pattern and colour.
- Artist 2 creates drawing in a figurative non-observational manner in which imagination and memory is key.

- Artist three specifically uses the performative action of walking and drawing to make work that expresses her physical sensory experiences.

All three artists exhibit their work professionally as does the researcher. The researcher's own creative practice is a vital component of the walk and draw research methodology since it provides an empathic corroboration of the creative process experienced by the participants (Treadaway 2007).

Participants noted that they were put at ease and were more able to be creative knowing the researcher would also be drawing. Artist 3 commented that this had removed fear of judgment, a factor known to be detrimental to creativity (Amabile 1996) stating that: *'You also respond to the environment in your way; I was comfortable knowing that whatever way I responded you weren't likely to say: well you shouldn't have done it like that, that's rubbish, it doesn't look real'*.

The interventions took place on three separate days over a number of summer months. Each event was broken into three sections of time comprising:

1. A pre-walk semi-structured interview involving open ended questions regarding the participants' definition of what constitutes drawing and questions about their exercise habits (to ascertain that the route would not be too strenuous); completion of ethics forms and a discussion about the route, around a printed map
2. The walk and draw activity
3. A post-walk debriefing to reflect on the drawings that had been made followed by a number of semi-structured questions about the wellbeing aspects of the walk

The walk and draw took approximately two hours to complete but freedom was given to each artist to meander along the route, pause, stop and draw or draw continuously as they felt inclined.

3.1 Definitions of Drawing

One of the purposes of undertaking the study was to make explicit a definition of drawing within the context of professional artistic practice in order to gain valuable insight into the validity of the visual representations made by the Somali participants in the Birmingham intervention. Preconceptions about what constitutes a drawing can be contentious in a non-professional context and assumptions are made concerning accurate observational representation and choice of media. The aim of the initial series of questions to participants was to explore how they would characterize drawing as outcome and process. All three artists were unanimous in their responses; their definitions agreed that drawing comprised mark-making or division of space that could be executed in any media and on any substrate. It was also perceived as having a direct relationship with thought and is an *'outward expression of inward thought'* (Artist 3) *'anything that you can take in from the exterior and anything you can take in from the interior'* (Artist 1) and *'a visual interpretation of the world'* (Artist 2). Artist 1 described the mode of drawing as *'any way of expressing yourself...it can be very expressive, very abstract, very carefully observed'* and Artist 3 stated that, in her opinion, drawing could

'be light, it could be string it can be any media if it does those things, if it has that relationship between seeing and thinking....it's almost like you could use the word drawing as "drawing out a feeling" or "drawing out an action" if it does that then it's drawing even if...you could draw with stones, we could collect grass today and draw, it doesn't really matter.'

The intensely personal nature of translating internal thought to visible representation has repercussions for the privacy of the artist and both Artist 1 and Artist 2 expressed concerns about the need to be alone, safe and without fear of scrutiny in order to be creative. Artist 2 reflected: *'I think in the studio space I live in a little vacuum, a bubble, and it's a very secure bubble as I know there's nobody around and there is no invasion of my privacy.'* This is balanced with the knowledge that the expressed outcome would be likely to be placed in a public arena (exhibition, publication etc.) where it would be likely to be evaluated by both the artists' peers and the general public: *'The whole thing about doing a performance, or making a statement that has to be looked at by others, is that it always puts you on your metal'* (Artist 1). The tension between drawings expressing public and private thoughts was evident in the drawings by Artist 2 (Figure 3), which were made following an incident when a child decided to sit next to the artist to watch her draw. She states that she became less confident as a result of the child violating her private creative space: *'She sort of... um...in a way woke me up...she brought me back into where I was, but I had gone into a little bubble'*.



Figure 3. 'No Privacy', Sue Williams

Artist 1 stated that she didn't feel inclined to start drawing until she had reached the shoreline when she was able to wander off and be on her own: *'I needed to be by myself...I didn't mind you being there but I just needed to be on my own'*. She describes drawing as a *'very personal and complexly inwardly focused activity'*.

These insights reveal the ways that intensely private personal thoughts are translated out from the body as a visual 'drawn language' that can be used to narrate thoughts and feelings that are uncovered during the performative

action of 'walk and draw'. The immersion in the activity of translation has a meditative quality. All three artists commented on the way in which their total absorption in the task took them to a state of flow (Csikszentmihalyi 1996). Artist 2 states that drawing is *'a bit like a form of meditation...before I know it I have been working for an hour...'* and Artist 3: *'The process of drawing and painting is the same, you get lost in it in the same way, it becomes a meditative thing that I associate with feeling good'*. Artist 1 comments on the act of walking itself as being meditative, and an opportunity to create *'an inner space'*.

All three artists approached the walk and draw activity differently. Artist 1 was concerned with detail, pattern and line observed in the environment; Artist 2 drew from her imagination fueled by memories stimulated during the walk; Artist 3 drew as she walked along expressing her movement through the landscape in a series of layered continuous line drawings. The post-walk evaluation comprised discussion and reflection on the drawings that had been made and a recorded interview comprising semi-structured questions concerning wellbeing. The following sections highlight common themes that were expressed by all three participants following the walk and draw activity: immersion in the environment, memory and subjective wellbeing.

3.2 Environment

The route took the participants along a narrow tree lined route alongside a stream with waterfall, which opened out to a small estuary with further waterfall onto the beach. All three artists responded to the physical sensations of being in the location in their drawings, making comments about the light, sound and flora experienced along the route and the sound and smell of the sea (Figures 4 and 5).



Figure 4. (left) *'Bluebell'*, Celia Johnson and Figure 5. (right) *'Grass'*, Helen Watkins

Artist 1 noted that *'responding to an environment makes you "think" makes you "feel" and brings and whole new set of experiences to you'*. Her drawings focused on detail: *'homing in on one tiny plant in the whole patch of grass rather than taking in anything of the scene'* (Figure 6).

Artist 3 commented on the way that being in an environment and drawing it creates a personal meaningful connection with it:

'You don't see anything properly until you draw it; so for me a landscape if I want to make a response to it or if I have a relationship with the particular landscape or if I'm exploring it for the first time... the way in which I can really see it or feel it, or be connected more closely with it, is through drawing – so it's a tool for me to feel that kind of connection.'

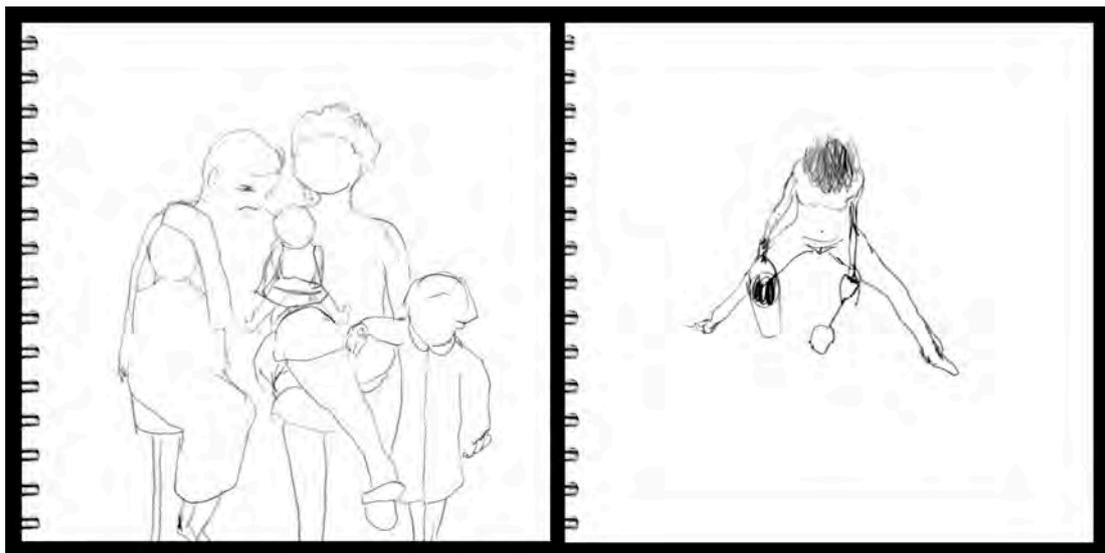
At the end of the walk the same artist commented that having been in the place she had *'left a trace and its traces have been brought into me, which is fabulous'*. The reciprocity of this experience, through the drawing process, enables her to rekindle the memories of being in the location:

'They bring the place back to me, any time, so they really exist as a record of me in the place. They trace the relationship, which is between my body and the place, and they act as a reference for me and they make the place important for me. These are my marks that I have created from that kind of experience; the landscape has marked me and I have marked the paper.'

Artist 1 concurred that the experience of drawing along the route had created connections that changed the way it would be perceived by her in the future: *'If I went back to that place I would definitely feel differently about it because of having spent the day there doing what we were doing'*.

3.3 Memory

Memory played a key role in the way Artist 2 responded through her drawings. Her thoughts were brought into focus through the things she observed and the thoughts and memories they evoked became the subjects of her drawings. In particular the whole experience of a walk to the beach rekindled childhood memories resulting in several sketches that make reference to childhood (Figures 7 and 8).



Figures 7. (left) *'Family'*, and Figure 8. (right) *'No clothes on'*, Sue Williams

She describes arriving at the end of the footpath where the beach comes into view:

'We got to the front, to the beach at the end of the little walk and I thought... all I can remember thinking of, as a kid, ending up at Perranporth with my bucket and spade and all I wanted to do was sit with no clothes on, on the sand – and I have this sudden memory.'

Artist 3 also recalled childhood memories on reaching exactly the same location on the walking route. For both artists arriving at this point stirred deep emotional feelings. Artist 2 commented that these memories had given her a sense of security:

'I just had this amazing memory of my family being on the beach and there was a photograph taken, we had taken as kids, with Mum and Dad, and I don't know (pause)...it just threw me into that sense of being safe' (Figure 8).

Making the drawings in response to spontaneous thoughts and sensory stimulation along the route has enabled the memories of the actual and remembered experiences in situ to be recorded and reflected on. Artist 3 comments that *'when I re-look at the drawings I can see things like trees, fence posts and things like that and leaves and stuff.'* She describes her drawings as *'a record of what I've looked at...and what they mean to me, they mean 'place' to me; they are a record of my movement within a place'*.



Figure 9. 'Walk to the beach', Celia Johnson

3.4 Wellbeing

All three artists commented on the way the walk and draw activity had helped to induce positive emotions and would be something they would want to do again in the future. Artist 3 commented: *'It made me happy; I wasn't unhappy before but it made me very happy'*. Artist 1 and 2 both said they would definitely want to repeat the activity. The emotional uplift appears to result from a combination of exercise, which is known to release endorphins, with a positive creative experience (Sternberg 2009). Artist 1 commented:

'What I felt today is I get this fantastic surge of inner positivity, massive. That's why I said to you wouldn't it be interesting if our brains could be wired up as an experiment to see what happens when you're drawing. I'm sure it's been done; I felt you could almost see it. I could feel it... Yes, and it's right inside.' (Puts hand to heart).

Both artist 2 and 3 comment on the way in which their imagination was stimulated:

'Actually it releases my imagination. I've had lots of ideas about how to work creatively which may or may not get into work but it's that process of thinking creatively, it helps, it induces, just makes you, you know, feel great...and feeling alive and happy and wow this is great!' (Artist 3) and

'There is a sense of elevation if that's the right word, when you feel elevated psychologically, you are on another level; it's a sort of a high. People talk about meditation, I suppose going into my work and drawing is quite meditative so I come out of it feeling quite good about myself, even though the imagery might be something quite serious; the actual act of doing it, being somewhere else, is positive' (Artist 2).

All three artists also comment on the ways in which the experience of drawing the route had connected them psychologically to the place – there was a sense of belonging; they had changed the location through their presence and it had shaped their thinking. This has been observed through the practice and is evident in the drawings that have been created. There are a combination of activities involved: recording of sensory experience, stimulation of imagination and rekindling of memory in an iterative process in which body (hand) and mind responds to movement through walking. Reflection by the artists, on the drawings made along the route, seems to rekindle the emotional experience felt when the original drawing was made. This also seems to contribute to a feeling of positivity and emotional uplift – remembering the sense of wellbeing seems to remake it. The drawings act as a memory prompt to reveal and enable the emotions to be re-experienced. They also appear to be a catalyst that enables an emotional connection to be forged with the place in which they were made.

4.0 Discussion: Interpretation of drawn imagery

Findings from the expert-group study support the contention that all marks made as a visual response by an individual can be considered as drawing. In this way, drawings produced by the non-expert Somali group in the Birmingham intervention can be considered rich research data containing strong visual cues that signify the experience of the walk and draw participants. Although many of the drawings suggest schematic or diagrammatic representations of the walking route, these are able to provide a pictorial narration. The drawings enable key places of social and cultural importance (playgrounds and shops) to be identified as well as sites of emotional concern (such as the trees where muggers lurked in the park (Figure 10)).



Figure 10. Flats and park - Somali Participant drawing

The process of articulating these kinds of responses through drawing is dependent less on artistic training than on the confidence of the participant to make representational marks; it is hindered by a misguided understanding that drawn imagery must be representational and 'look like' what is being observed. The reticence of the artist 'expert group' (expressed as a desire for privacy and fear of judgment about the aesthetic quality of the drawings) indicates a similar (or amplified) emotional response is also likely in a less experienced walking group for whom visual language is less fluent. Any future research using this methodology should take this into account. Mitigation for this could be achieved through a clear definition and explanation of what constitutes a drawing, along with empathic researchers who are aware of the need for privacy and personal space while the participants are engaged in the activity.

Both interventions indicate the ways in which emotional connections are made with locations through the process of walking and drawing. The activity of pausing to take notice and be mindful of the environment, and then capture the experience through drawing, enables deep narratives to be uncovered and strong connections to be made with the location. The expert group 'walk and draw' intervention has provided evidence of ways in which drawn descriptions (visual language) can be considered comparable with verbal self-narration. This research reveals the activity of walking and drawing to be useful as a methodology for revealing deep emotions and hidden connections that may be difficult for research participants to verbally articulate and explain. This research has also shown that involvement in these activities stimulates positive emotion and contributes to the subjective wellbeing of participants. This happens not only through the experience of 'walk and draw' but also through subsequent reflection on the drawings that have been created or in the communal mapping of the drawings after the event.

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