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Telling My Story

From Narrative to Exhibit in Illuminating the Lived Experience of Homelessness among Older African American Women

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Abstract

The authors document the integration of methods from the arts and humanities into a social research and development project, the objectives of which are to create and test promising interventions helpful in assisting older homeless African American women get and stay out of homelessness in the city of Detroit, Michigan, USA. The exhibit incorporates multiple forms of narrative, includes performative features, promotes public awareness of homelessness in the city of Detroit, and engages homeless and formerly homeless women in social action. The authors examine the prototype design and the involvement of participants in creating artistic portrayals of their homeless experience.

Keywords

- *health disparities*
- *homelessness*
- *social action and the arts*

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Introduction

WHAT PURPOSES can be achieved by drawing together in close correspondence social science, the humanities, and the helping professions? While much of traditional social science seeks generalizable knowledge derived from the quantification of social and human phenomena, other avenues of portrayal focus on first person accounts, derived from the illumination of individual stories and narratives (Josselson & Lieblich, 2001). Certainly the focus on story within narrative social science (now often referred to as narratology) and the humanities suggests that much is to be learned from the experiences of individuals, particularly those coping with the exigencies of daily life (Coles, 1990). While traditional social science seeks the nomothetic, that is, generalizable principles to guide understanding and action in particular venues of inquiry, the humanities demonstrate how the lived experience of a sole individual can express the entire scope of a particular social issue (Hyde, 1998), such as when a biography captures the scope and detail of the experience of discrimination or stigma (Lee, 2000) and illuminates important aspects of the social context of the life course (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 1994). Certainly the humanities can communicate new insights into how an individual experiences a given social issue and, as a result, foster understanding useful in shaping social action and the provision of assistance in ways that are informed by a biography and responsive to the narrative of a lived experience. Increasingly the social sciences are incorporating the perspectives of those who must cope with the causes and consequences of serious social issues as evidenced by the legitimization of qualitative methods, the use of performative strategies, and the incorporation of multiple voices to document the lived experience (Denzin, 1996, 2003; Reed-Danahay, 1997).

The authors' own experience with the integration of traditional social science research methods with those of the humanities in service to the design of assistance useful in helping older homeless African American women underscores the usefulness of mixed or multiple methods in the process of social research and development. Underappreciated within mixed methods is the role of artistic portrayal, representation of experience, and performative approaches which can illuminate, from the perspective of those who directly experience human suffering, the causes and consequences of social issues (Gusfield, 2000). Alternative methods can serve as a form of critique or protest concerning social issues (Hamill, 2003; Marcus & Fischer, 1999). Forms of understanding that emerge from the humanities, such as narrative, art, exhibit, poetry, and performance, can serve as important tools for knowledge development when the aims of inquiry include an understanding of the lived experience or capturing first person accounts of trauma (Dorfman, 2004; Kaminsky, 1984).

The strengths of methods and products derived from the humanities reside in their capacity to place a human face on quantified data, which can be limited in their richness and nuance by virtue of their highly structured and well-focused character. By illuminating the human face of the lived experience, researchers may reach audiences who find more resonance in how actual people see and negotiate serious social issues. It is likely that the characteristics and qualities of the audience do not match those of the participants whose goal is to bring aspects (or the totality) of their experience into public awareness. Thus, such discrepancy between the perspectives of the audience and those of the participants imbues humanistic methods with even more legitimacy: while communicating the lived experience is a challenge, it opens up the possibility of creating representations that at a minimum help members of the audience to appreciate the lived experience of those individuals with whom audience members may have little or no contact. Such methods may place considerable demand on the viewer who must interact with participants to discover potentially new and disturbing knowledge, a knowledge which may well exceed the viewer's own experience. Given this challenge, humanistic methods may actually demand considerable emotional and empathic regard from audience members achieved through the linkage of performance, vicarious participation, and informal education (Washington & Moxley, 2007a). Certainly a viewer may not be open—cognitively or emotionally—to such insight or understanding, a risk such methods must assume, and a potential limiting factor.

From the standpoint of social action, the portrayal of the lived experience may be adept at stimulating public awareness, arousing public indignation, and fostering collaborative action to find ways of rectifying human tragedy. Consistent with the tragedy of the ancient Greeks, and modern day dramaturgical approaches, communicating social science findings through alternative methods forms a way of not only disseminating information to public audiences but also arousing people to action (Woodruff, 2005).

Integration of social science, the arts, and social action

Within this article, the authors document the integration of methods from the arts and humanities into a social research and development project, the objectives of which are to create and test promising interventions helpful in assisting older homeless African American women get and stay out of homelessness, and address the health and mental health consequences of homelessness on a community level. The research seeks the formation of a continuum of transition that supports the women's efforts to help themselves and each other. By bringing together outreach, group support, advocacy, and community development interventions, project staff members collaborate with participants to formulate and test specific interventions useful in resolving successfully those serious issues and challenges participants must resolve so they can get and stay out of homelessness.

The project incorporates methods from the arts and humanities to tell the story of homelessness and communicate in first person detail the issues and challenges participants face. The incorporation of narrative, the telling of individual stories and the use of an exhibit cohere within the Leaving Homelessness Intervention Research Project (LHIRP) into a form of public education that emanates from the women's lived experience of homelessness. Through performance (such as gospel singing) undertaken by homeless and formerly homeless women, audiences experience the stories behind the data, which illuminate in first person detail the tragic toll this social issue takes in health and well-being, the strengths and virtues of the women, and the strategies that they see as useful in the successful resolution of homelessness. Art and performance not only offer an avenue for involvement of participants in the project, they amplify the influence the participants can have on audiences in structuring public conceptions of homelessness in late life. Such control is consistent with LHIRP's emphasis on facilitating the self-efficacy of participants. The integration of research data with alternative forms like the exhibit and performance enables audiences to see and feel a situation in a manner that is different than what they would normally achieve through other forms of representation, like a research report (Grimshaw, 2001).

Implications of homelessness for the health and well-being of older African American women

Women, and particularly minority women, are increasingly represented among the homeless, with African American women disproportionately represented (de Chesnay, 2005; Interagency Council on Homelessness, 1999). Although accurate statistics on the number of homeless women of color are unavailable, the number of older homeless people approaching 50 years of age is expected to increase dramatically as unmet demands for affordable housing continue unabated and increasing numbers of baby-boomers reach older adulthood (Cohen, 1999; Rosenheck, Bassuck, & Salomon, 1999). In 1999, Rosenheck et al. estimated that 360,000 older African Americans women were homeless, a number that is expected to grow considerably as the baby boom generation ages, and more women of color enter their retirement years with limited resources.

Homelessness among minority women poses substantial personal threats including poor nutrition, harsh living conditions, poor health, and serious mental health consequences, which can set the stage for even more serious life outcomes, like the onset of debilitating illnesses. Triggered by diverse events, homelessness among women of color that occurs in later life is often caused by poverty, the absence of a living wage, and scarce if nonexistent affordable housing (Cohen, 1999; Warren, Menke, Clement, & Wagner, 1992; Williams & Jackson, 2000). Substance use and mental illness are only two of the numerous factors (e.g. change in marital status, onset of serious health problems) that can propel women into homelessness and therefore there are multiple pathways into such situations. Long term exposure to life altering inequities can result in discouragement, hopelessness, and homelessness among many Black families (Hill, 1993). These inequities can serve as potent factors in creating vulnerability and risk, and serve as a context heightening the probability of negative life outcomes (Washington & Moxley, 2007b). Cutbacks in social services and in the social wage (the support low income people derive from social benefits and opportunities) can further increase vulnerability to homelessness.

The older minority women's move out of homelessness and the issues they face are significantly shaped by their *diminished status*, a product of the risks of vulnerability and social forces (i.e. social status, race, and gender) that combine to produce marginality. Diminished status in turn produces numerous issues for older minority women who may lack the supports they require to resolve them successfully. These issues—like credit problems and predatory lending practices—can heighten the vulnerability of older African American women and can literally push them into homelessness if they remain unresolved. The authors' own research identifies how these issues can form a vicious cycle in which unresolved issues pile up and set in motion increasingly higher levels of stress depressing self-help and self-care capacities (Washington & Moxley, 2007c). Such unabated distress in turn can compromise motivation and threaten health. Unmitigated chronic stress can compromise basic health setting in motion serious illness as a result of the exacerbation of pre-existing physical vulnerabilities.

Exposure to violence and trauma from present and past victimization can heighten vulnerability. Brandt (2004) indicates that 73 percent of the homeless women in one study reported their most recent assault was from a present or former sex partner. According to Brandt, the most violent trauma occurring among homeless women was rape. Assault is a risk factor for depression, post traumatic stress syndrome, alcoholism, and substance use. Sustained exposure to the threat of assault, as well as long term exposure to the elements, and poor nutrition can compromise dramatically the health of homeless women.

Multiple, serious, and unresolved issues of daily living older African American women face can deprive them of essential life sustaining resources, like adequate income, proper nutrition, legal protection, and retirement benefits, which in turn can set in motion negative life outcomes, such as the loss of housing (Washington & Moxley, 2007c). Accumulation of negative life outcomes may create additional predicaments as women, threatened by homelessness, lose control over health, appearance, and motivation, further diminishing their status, and threatening their well-being. The accumulation of multiple issues weakens a person's resistance, and increases their susceptibility to conditions that threaten health. Tipping into homelessness in later life is a form of social vulnerability in which mounting unresolved issues overwhelm the resources a woman has available. Overall, such conditions disrupt the internal homeostasis a person needs to ward off illness, and enjoy good health.

When a particular woman lacks health care, adequate housing, and appropriate employment, her vulnerability to events that emerge unexpectedly can be amplified. The diminished status of a woman suggests that she has few claims to necessary resources, with little societal obligation to supply or make them readily available at an adequate level. When a trigger event occurs (i.e. a house fire without adequate income or insurance) the woman has limited alternatives: abandon her home and take refuge on the streets, stack up with family who may not be able to sustain her, compromise her safety by seeking shelter with people whose conduct may threaten her, or enter a homeless shelter.

Still, a woman may see the issues she faces as a private affair, one that she is unwilling to share with others. Social services that neglect to focus on the assessment and resolution of the issues an older woman faces, ones that often times are financial in character, or involve diminished supplies, such as nutrition, are likely limited in their effectiveness. Communicating the dynamics of homelessness among older African American women is daunting given the complexity and multiplicity of the issues women of minority status face in their daily lives. Without public or community understanding, the voices of these women may go unheard and unheeded. Often homelessness remains out of the public eye, and in a society in which access to housing is not a basic right, but in which housing is considered a normal part of life the availability and stability of which can be easily ignored, the public may not have a good understanding of why and how homelessness can occur, particularly late in the lifespan.

The incorporation of arts into LHIRP

Simply documenting the problem of homelessness in later life through traditional social science methods may not be powerful enough to facilitate public understanding of an issue as misunderstood and serious as homelessness among older African American women. Expanding ways of helping the public understand this social issue, its dynamics and severity, involves placing a human face on the issue, and helping members of the public understand the human toll of what can be considered a remote problem for many otherwise well established people.

The incorporation of the arts into LHIRP was a purposeful strategy for developing a capacity for communicating research findings to numerous public and professional audiences, including community leaders, human service and health professionals, and the media. The multiple methods the project embraces ensured the production of rich and detailed portraits of the homeless experience as it was experienced by individual older African American women. The investigators invoked Dewey's (1934) notion of art as an expression of 'the life of the community'. Giving further direction to the exhibit was Anderson's definition of art, which is grounded in the connection of art to culture: art involves 'culturally significant meaning, skillfully encoded in an affecting, sensuous meaning' (1990, p. 238). The women's production of their own art was a way of capturing meaning and communicating this meaning to various communities. In this way, the exhibit, and the contributions the women made to it, is a form of Art Brute: those productions undertaken by humble people whose personal creation communicates their own experience (Freeland, 2001; Marwick, 2002).

The arts, particularly what the investigators conceived as the social action exhibit and educational forum, formed a vehicle for communicating the lived experience of homelessness among eight older African American women, selected from over 100 participants in an innovative group work project, each of whom represented a particular pathway into homelessness late in life.

Method: From narrative to social action installation

Background

LHIRP is a multi-intervention and multi-level action research project that seeks partnerships with older homeless minority women, service providers, and community volunteers to develop ways of facilitating the transition of older African American women out of homelessness, and helping participants remain out of homelessness. Since its inception in 2001, 514 women have participated in at least one intervention design substudy of LHIRP. Within LHIRP, substudies are used to develop and trial test new tools, instruments, and interventions with the aim of constructing a continuum of transition for homeless women. The investigators chose to focus on older African American women because of their vulnerability and because of the great number of these women living in the city of Detroit often times without strong systems of support.

Over the past three years, the project has melded action research, social research and development, and the arts to achieve three objectives: (1) illuminate the lived experience of homelessness among older African American women; (2) develop useful and effective interventions that are responsive to the lived experience, particularly the causes and consequences that service providers may ignore; and (3) amplify the voices of older homeless African American women whose stories can foster community understanding of homelessness and perhaps arouse action among community members useful in the resolution of homelessness. By listening closely to participants, and coming to understand their lived experience, the project seeks to create interventions that participants find relevant and responsive to their needs. Participation in the project is one form of intervention since it facilitates the involvement of the women in finding solutions to this social issue.

While LHIRP was originally conceived as a focused group work project designed to protect and increase the self-efficacy of older homeless African American women, the various group modalities (which included experiential, cognitive, and mutual support options) proved useful in a limited way (Washington & Moxley, 2003). Group work can offer a supportive environment in which homeless women can strengthen bonds, express powerful emotions, share concerns about their homeless situation, and protect self-efficacy, but it proved limited in its capacity to help women resolve the complex and multiple issues they faced. LHIRP's successful community-based experiments involving group work did help the investigators and participants better understand the causes of homelessness operating in each woman's life, the issues the women faced, and the personal consequences of homelessness they experienced. The use of structured intervention protocol in a group context, however, limited the extent to which each participant could tell her story of homelessness, which could amplify the nature of the many issues she experienced, ones that increased vulnerability, and threatened health. While these experiments revealed the importance of expanding the scope of assistance designed specifically to help the women resolve the issues they faced, which would speed their transition out of homelessness, early in the project it became clear to the investigators that they did not fully understand either the magnitude or multiplicity of the issues the women faced.

The use of narrative

The use of narrative then became a central feature of project methodology when the investigators sought to illuminate the personal lived experience of homelessness among a select group of participants. The eight women who were selected for an initial trial in the use of narratives to illuminate the exigencies of the homeless experience as it unfolded over the career (conceptualized as involving stages of getting ready for homelessness, tipping into, moving through, emerging out of homelessness, and achieving stability even though precarious). The investigators worked with these eight women for over 300 hours, and produced narrative transcripts that ranged from 180 to 300 pages each. To fully understand each of the eight women's homeless experience, research assistants helped the women complete photographs of 'monuments to their homelessness', places that either helped or hindered their transitions. Each woman produced at least 50 photographs. The investigators then met with each woman to discuss her collection of photographs, rationale for the selection of the subjects, and interpretation of the themes of the photographs. These interviews added to the narrative content and also facilitated the identification and documentation of challenges and struggles operating in the lived experience of homelessness. This interview content was then incorporated into each woman's grand narrative.

The narratives proved very effective from three perspectives: first, they revealed the processes that pushed each woman into homelessness; second, they fostered catharsis of pent-up emotions among the women; and third, they indicated important advanced organizers of help and assistance (such as the substantive issues each woman faced). The narratives themselves influenced the formation of subsequent intervention components including: (1) the creation of a set of assessment tools useful in identifying supports and barriers for leaving homelessness operating in each woman's life; (2) a framework for understanding substantive issues the women faced; and (3) the design of an advocacy intervention the purpose of which is to resolve successfully the issues participants struggle with. Constructing the narratives placed the investigators in roles as participant witnesses, as individuals who experienced through the lens of each woman those social and cultural forces tipping them into homelessness.

The compression of the narrative approach the investigators undertook initially with the eight women resulted in the emergence of the process of *rapid narration* in which through structured dialogue new participants tell their stories of homelessness within a two hour period (to date, some 60 women have participated in rapid narration as part of their involvement in the advocacy subproject of LHIRP). Such story telling yields a narrative written by a clinician-researcher that frames the basic story of a woman's homelessness (articulated along the phases of getting ready for homelessness and tipping into, moving through, emerging out of homelessness, and achieving stability).

Learning the details of a participant's story through narrative inquiry can reveal a woman's strengths and virtues, the dynamics of her homeless experience, and the issues she must resolve to achieve a successful transition. Post-story telling debriefings undertaken with participants reveal that narration offers cathartic benefits: participants can express powerful pent-up emotions and unburden themselves of these feelings and thereby liberate energy for problem solving. Typically participants emphasize how important it is to share the details of their lives and their homeless experience with a sympathetic listener. Narration (combined with structured assessment instruments) facilitates the identification of pressing and serious issues that participants face in their transition. While the structured instruments reveal the presence and extent of these issues, the narratives illuminate more deeply the factors influencing and sustaining the issues.

The investigators did not expect the cathartic or empowering consequences of the narrative process. It became apparent that each of the eight women (and a subsequent group of 30 women) gained considerably from telling their stories in dramatic detail. The eight women who told their stories in great length and detail amplified the injustices they faced, and sought to reframe their roles in the project as participant researchers who wanted to undertake advocacy and social action in collaboration with the investigators to address the issue of homelessness among older African American women. In 2005, the eight women of the Telling My Story subproject came together as a group in a workshop format to discuss the commonalities and differences in their lived experiences.

Collaborative production of a quilt over eight sessions with each woman contributing a panel that captured her way of thinking about the homeless experience strengthened the bonds among group members (Washington, Moxley, & Garriott, 2007). Consequently, the women participated in their first public presentation on their homeless experience before an audience of 50 people. Their presentation of the encompassing themes of their narratives, supplemented by the performance of gospel songs and poetry, proved effective in arousing the audience emotionally. It was this performance that literally set the stage for the creation of the exhibit and social installation. Later in 2005 the women participated in a weekend long leadership development camp in which they further strengthened solidarity and readied themselves for appearing in future public venues.

The public exhibition and educational forum

What began as a project focused almost exclusively on therapeutic intervention in 2001 evolved by 2005 into an expanded project of therapeutic support and social action informed by the narrative content of the lived experience of homelessness among the participants. The empowerment of the eight Telling My Story participants, while unexpected, pushed the project further in the direction of participatory action research and heightened the motivation of the women to tell their stories in public forums. The idea of a public exhibit took root in 2005 among the investigators and the eight women who then formed an advisory committee of the project. Accumulation of diverse content illuminating the homeless experience among the women was a critical enabling factor in making an exhibit possible, which by 2005 included data on the health issues faced by 124 older homeless African American women, data on psychosocial indicants (such as self-efficacy), narratives, photographs, remnants of the homeless experience (which included artifacts women collected from the streets and apartments), poetry, diary entries, products of workshops, such as quilting, speeches, and scrapbooks women constructed during their homeless experience. The broad scope and considerable mass of content was an unobtrusive indicator of the documentation of the lived experience of homelessness available to the project.

The interdisciplinary team, composed of investigators from nursing, social work, and counseling, research assistants, and participant-advisors expanded to include an artist and curator whose expertise in social action was well established. This person brought the requisite expertise for the formation of the exhibit and was able to incorporate the principal values of the investigators and participants into the exhibit's design. With financial support from a university-based humanities center, the project developed the design focus of the exhibit, which would include eight conceptual portraits that involved the eight women working collaboratively with the curator/artist to organize content. The curator expanded content through videography undertaken with each woman.

The resulting eight 14 foot by 3 foot portraits served as the centerpiece of the exhibit, which were installed in a rotunda of one of Detroit's large corporations in June of 2006 and attended by 97 carefully selected participants (out of 120 who were invited). Each portrait, which communicated a woman's lived experience of homelessness, and included arrangements of the materials that best told her story, hung from specially designed wood trusses. Serving as a docent, each woman guided visitors through her exhibit, and clarifying the sections of her portraiture organized along the dimensions of tipping into, moving through, and emerging out of homelessness, she shared the details of her homeless experience. As docents, each woman educated visitors about the personal causes and consequences of homelessness through the lens of her own experience. Linked to the exhibit was an educational forum in which the investigators offered an overview of the research on homelessness among older African American women and each woman discussed her homeless experience, amplifying the process of survival, and identifying the personal health and mental health toll homelessness exacted. The panel incorporated performative activities in which the women presented poetry, sung gospel, and read excerpts from their writing. Following the performance, the women responded to questions from the visitors.

Supplementing the exhibition and forum was a catalogue designed to augment the knowledge base of the exhibit. The catalogue captured the aesthetic of the exhibit, communicated the underlying idea that homelessness wastes human potential, and yet illustrated how the women sought to overcome homelessness through spirituality, social support, the use of their own internal psychological resources such as self-efficacy, and responsive social services. Juxtaposing content on the social issue of homelessness and its consequences with the lived experience of homelessness among the eight women, the catalogue focused on the set of conceptual portraits, capturing the story of each woman, offering reflections by the artist/curator of the exhibit, and identifying local resources for service and assistance. The catalogue also summarized the various LHIRP subprojects.

From plight to efficacy: themes operating in the conceptual portraits

Each woman advised the artist in the construction of her portrait selecting materials, arranging specific artifacts, such as photographs shot during the earlier period of narration, and revisiting the lived experience in dialogues with the artist. The portraits are conceptual because of their reflexive character: according to Godfrey (1998) the configuration refers back to the object of the representation, which in the case of the exhibit is the lived experience of homelessness. The piece itself does not merely present an object, but it communicates a critique or commentary of homelessness, in which the lived experience, captured through the purposeful arrangement of artifacts, is seen through the eyes of a real person. That the person is standing next to the portrait gives the concept even more power. The conceptual portraits challenged each woman to define homelessness for herself and to communicate this definition (and experience) to others, people typically uninformed about the social reality of homelessness in later life among minority women. Conceptual art challenges the viewer to make sense of what is going on within the portrait.

Each of the eight portraits forms its own pictorial narrative building off of the original linear and literary narratives. The conceptual portraits align elements of plight and efficacy as the women identify representations of the social forces that brought them into homelessness and their emergence out of homelessness, typically portrayed as an effort of personal triumph. Linda's 'fist of triumph' is instructive here. Living on the streets of Detroit for over three years, coping with assault and manipulation by predatory men, surviving harsh winters, the viewer sees Linda standing tall and with pride in her own apartment. While she will tell you that the home does not meet her needs, the achievement represents a personal victory for her. The movement from plight to victory is an important thematic line within all of the portraits. Ilene's drawings reflect her emancipation from homelessness: getting an apartment, finding employment no matter how marginal, and reconnecting with family and friends. The photographs of family members within Ilene's portrait reveal a reconnection with sisters, nieces, and nephews.

Louise's story reveals her movement from living in a city park to the achievement of status as a poet laureate. Her plight, well documented in the first few feet of the portrait, addressed her escape from domestic violence by taking up residence in a city park. She willingly chose the danger of homelessness over the constant threat of violence. Poetry swirls through the length of the portrait revealing her self-efficacy as the narrator of her own experience. A segment of one poem, entitled 'I'm on my way', Louise read before an audience, captures the efficacy the portrait communicates of both her recovery from domestic violence and her victory over homelessness:

I haven't got there yet, but I'm on my way.
I have a destination
And I'm headed in that direction
With my map in my hand.
I might have to take a few detours
But there are no short cuts
To get where I'm going
No ifs, ands or buts.

Leslie's portrait reveals a journey 'out of a prison' since this is how she characterized her movement (or she says her escape) from one of the worst homeless shelters in the area. From the degradation she experienced and felt (early in her homeless experience she interpreted her situation as punishment) her portrait takes the viewer from the darkness of homelessness (plight) to the light of an apartment (efficacy). Embedded within the last segment of the portrait, her expression of efficacy, is a window of her apartment wide open and overlooking a rejuvenated theater in the Midtown district of Detroit. And, she identified how issues of race, gender, and class operated as causal factors in her homeless experience: 'I have three strikes against me', she emphasized. 'I'm a woman, black and poor.' For Leslie, homelessness was not merely an accident: it was a social location formed by the intersection of multiple structural factors, ones that finally produced a horrific situation.

When examining the women's interpretation of plight viewers see much of Detroit. Certainly a principal theme is environmental degradation: how helping resources and shelters are located in areas of the city that are degraded, a not so subtle way of communicating the diminished status of people coping with homelessness, but a way nonetheless common within many communities struggling with social change. Photographs of the community context of one shelter are telling: it is adjacent to abandoned buildings while the shelter itself stands as a form of dark and foreboding institution. Narratives highlight how responses to homelessness form an anti-aesthetic: according to interview content, this was a place that sought both to criminalize and infantilize homeless individuals. One participant mourned her loss of community by taking photographs of what was once a vibrant neighbourhood, which now stood in ruins. Likewise abandoned churches populate Ellen's portrait: for Ellen a battered and weathered mural of Jesus symbolizes both the absence of hope, and the revitalization of the spirit. She was confident of her own rejuvenation even in the face of homelessness and the ensuing depression she experienced although she understood that her journey of recovery would be challenging.

Inspection of the portraits reveals how efficacy goes hand in hand with rejuvenation. Homelessness 'depresses the spirit and erodes the soul', according to Louise. 'It can eat you alive.' While efficacy is a concise technical term in psychology, for the women it involves mustering all of one's tolerance, patience, creativity, and persistence. Getting out of homelessness requires a personal rejuvenation achieved through the mobilization of personal virtue and strengths. Indeed, each portrait captures this process of recovery and an important intervening variable is the well of strengths the women can draw from during a trying and unanticipated period of the life course.

All of the portraits raise questions about the relevance and responsiveness of helping resources and services. While the portraits do not specifically communicate what worked for each woman in terms of relevant human services, in their early interviews, each woman identified a mentor who facilitated emergence out of homelessness whether through the provision of nurturance and guidance along with either material, legal, spiritual, or social support. Three women underscored the helpfulness of lawyers, social workers, or counselors who stuck with them during this most trying period of their lives. And still other women highlighted how some programs welcomed them, offered support and generosity, helped them get housing, and 'stuck with me', as Louise indicated. While such factors were apparent in the women's narratives, the women expanded further on these positive qualities of support when people in the audience of the educational forum asked, 'What did you find helpful?'

Participant observation within the prototypic exhibit

The investigators were well embedded in the exhibit while the artist/curator and the participants (who became docents within the exhibit) were the center of attention. Participant observation procedures allowed the investigators and research staff to move through each portrait and observe the interactions between the visitors and the docents and among the visitors as they discussed in small groups the meaning and significance of the eight portraits. The installation of the exhibit in the physical space of the rotunda facilitated ease of movement of the 97 visitors who attended the 1.5 hour exhibit (while 47 remained for the educational forum, which lasted another hour). Visitors were invited from four sectors of the community: higher education, city government, corporate, and human services. The first exhibit was referred to as the prototype since it represented the initial organization and testing of the installation. While the public presentation in the form of the educational forum was trial tested with two previous audiences in 2005 (one lay audience of 50 people, and one professional audience of health science students and faculty of 75 people), the exhibit represented an initial trial through which the research team could learn about this form of public presentation.

Incorporated within the exhibit was a form of free choice learning, which is characteristic of learning that takes place in museums (Falk & Dierking, 2000). Visitors are able to prioritize their viewing, interact at will with other visitors, move at their own pace, return to objects of interest, and interact with the docents, curator, and investigators. The free choice learning atmosphere meant that the exhibit possessed little formal structure except for the arrangement of the exhibits and the deployment of the docents.

A salient observation was that the exhibit was not a trivial viewing experience. The visitors were engaged immediately in the viewing experience and the cognitive demands of each portrait required careful study and clarification. Visitors, therefore, needed to rely on the docents for guiding them through and interpreting the construction and content of the portraits, which offered each of the women an esteemed role within the exhibit. These design features amplified the role and knowledge of the docents who were treated in respectful and dignified ways by the visitors who wanted their insight into the lived experience. Interactions involved considerable and rich dialogue in which visitors solicited the input of a docent as they observed and walked the length of each portrait. The sheer length of the portraits required visitors to move systematically across the 14 feet of material giving the viewing experience a linear sequence: a beginning, middle, and end even though the content was not necessarily arranged in a strictly linear fashion.

Numerous visitors were observed gathering in small groups discussing the aesthetics and content as well as story lines within particular portraits. Aesthetic dialogues included examination of photographs, poetry, narrative statements of the women, and scenes taken directly from the life (and architecture) of Detroit and its neighborhoods. Visitors discussed the portraits at multiple levels: civil society and the problem of homelessness, the relationship between social institutions (like health systems) and homelessness, city infrastructure and homelessness, and the individual experience of homelessness. Still other visitors reflected on social structural issues: race, gender, age, and class. Five visitors, all women of color, were highly aroused by the content of the portraits and the presentations by the docents: the exhibit provoked a self-assessment of their situations. 'This could be me', asserted one woman who was almost brought to tears by the portraits. 'This was me', shared another woman. It was obvious that visitors were interested in the personal stories of the docents—their homeless careers, and the personal consequences of homelessness. Human service and health personnel were interested in how services succeeded or failed to help the women. One group of visitors, human service personnel, was engaged in a dialogue involving prevention and social action.

The physical and social architecture of the exhibit influenced the engagement of visitors. The women as docents interacting with visitors in front of their own portraits expanded the kinds and quantity of knowledge available to visitors. A visitor could readily approach a docent and inquire into her experience. Such inquiry attracted other visitors, which fostered the formation of small groups. The conceptual portraits could not stand on their own without the interpretative and story telling competence of the docents. Subsequent showings of the portraits without the docents failed to arouse visitors in a manner achieved by the prototype installation. The tacit knowledge of the women, their ability to verbally and emotionally engage visitors, and the details of their narratives augmented the information the portraits contained. Such knowledge strengthened a portrait's aesthetic: by each woman supplementing her portrait with her own narrative the experience communicated a certain beauty inherent in individuals overcoming life threatening circumstances. As one visitor suggested: 'Each woman is heroic, and each portrait captures the epic journey of a hero.' The involvement of the women themselves, and their centrality within the exhibit proved to be an important design factor. Subsequent showings, held on other days, with only a research assistant posted to greet and escort visitors, proved to be less engaging.

To further arouse and inform visitors, the educational forum incorporated factual content on homelessness and on the design and findings of LHIRP substudies. These presentations were brief and were followed by each woman sharing vignettes of her homeless experience. Each woman took about two minutes to highlight an important aspect of her homeless experience. The women then captured their stories of plight and efficacy through performance including dramatic reading, poetry, song, and reflection.

Conclusion and implications for action research

Returning to the opening question of this article, what purposes can be achieved by drawing together in close correspondence social science, the humanities, and the helping professions?, the authors assert the important relationship among different forms of knowledge and their relevance to social action in homelessness. Structured social science methods play a crucial role in understanding both basic aspects of the social issue of homelessness among older African American women, and the design and effectiveness of potential interventions. But it is important to put such understanding and technology into a human context, something the humanities can invigorate in participatory social action research. The arts capture aspects of human existence that social science cannot, and the humanities remind us of the importance of placing a human face on what often times are seen publicly as faceless problems. Accurate yet arousing portrayals of the lived experience, which incorporate both plight and efficacy, can illuminate ways of understanding that other forms of inquiry cannot and so the arts, whether in the form of poetry, narrative, drama, or portraits, can inform action in a resonant manner. Such portrayals or representations can enrich the public's understanding of complex social issues, in ways that highly structured social science research or journalistic accounts cannot achieve.

The idea that individuals can encapsulate almost the entire scope of a particular social issue as complex as homelessness is inherent in the humanistic enterprise, which can locate the voice of the person whose lived experience touches us deeply—emotionally and politically—in a specific social context. Such a humanistic perspective complements the aims of participatory action research. Through participation of those who experience the very phenomenon or issue we seek to understand researchers transform the status of the subject by valorizing their competence to tell their stories and affirming the knowledge and wisdom they garner through the lived experience. Valorization and affirmation can empower participants as members of the research team, imbuing them with power that emanates from their insight into their own experience and the commonalities they experience with others who have survived. Participatory action research in health requires such valorization, which can strengthen collaborative relationships among those who seek to know or understand and those who possess direct experience.

It is not easy to sequence research in a manner that diversifies ways of knowing within a particular domain of inquiry. The investigators found themselves lacking key competencies in the arts and humanities. They needed to learn more about approaches from the humanities and to understand the work of visual artists and curatorial professionals. Translating research knowledge, whether it is a product of quantitative, qualitative, or mixed methods, into a new form such as an exhibit or a catalogue proved quite challenging.

The exhibit itself as a synthetic product of research offers opportunities to broaden dialogue with stakeholders who seek understanding about a particular social issue. The social installation is one strategy from the humanities that can broaden engagement and facilitate dissemination. As a form of research dissemination and utilization, the exhibit can facilitate the translation of findings into a form of representation that builds public awareness, educates decision-makers, and enlightens practitioners about how serious social issues are experienced by those who bear their negative effects.

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