

Successes & Challenges of Feminist Arts-based Research with Street-involved women

What you need to know

Homelessness is often seen as a “male” issue, which has often led to social service resources being directed at men. However, there is a growing number of women living in sub-standard housing or on the streets. Although similar causes of homelessness exist between men and women, such as poverty and a lack of affordable housing, women’s homelessness is largely a result of fleeing situations of domestic abuse. Although art is one of the earliest forms of communication, it has not been used much in social science research. Arts-based research is strongly related to therapy and because feminist researchers work in collaborative, participatory and social-change oriented ways to better the lives of women, feminist arts-based approaches to research offer a female-friendly approach to knowledge gathering.



What is this research about?

This research exposes the contributions that feminist arts-based research makes in the lives of homeless/street-involved women. It explores the personal and political realities of these women’s lives and shares them with a larger audience. This type of research provides an alternative to traditional scientific experiments that narrowly focus on questions and answers, and allows researchers flexibility in gathering information.

ARTICLE SOURCE

The article *Successes and challenges of feminist arts-based participatory methodologies with homeless/street-involved women in Victoria* by Darlene Clover was published in *Action Research*, 9(1): 12-16 in 2011.

KEYWORDS

aesthetic empowerment
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What did the researchers do?

The researchers drew upon women's artistic sensibilities to encourage them to tackle pressing contemporary problems and to take control of their lives. For 18 months, 20 homeless/street-involved women met with two feminist university researchers, two facilitators and two artists to explore issues and concerns, and share experiences through individual and

group artwork. Workshops were held three times a week for four hours at a time. Two public exhibitions of the artwork were held at the end of the 18 months. Data was gathered at these exhibitions by interviewing attendees and encouraging them to write their impressions in a guest book that was later interpreted by the researchers.

COLLECTIVE WORKS



A quilt, a life-size marionette, and a tile mosaic featuring a phoenix taking flight

What did the researchers find?

The researchers found that **contrary to popular belief** most of the homeless/street-involved **participants were educated with either college degrees or undergraduate degrees.**

The collective projects provided an **opportunity for the women to open up to each other, to communicate and share, and to feel empathy and grow.**

The women reported being **better able to build alliances, cooperation and trust** from the arts-based exercises offered.

As the meetings progressed, the women began to **embrace the idea of working collectively in groups** as opposed to competing with one another. This was understood by the researchers to be a reality of the women's experiences that makes connecting with others difficult.

The women also reported that the skills they learned from participating in the workshops gave them a sense of identity as artists, improved their confidence, and empowered them to teach other women how to be advocates and mentors.

HOW CAN YOU USE THIS RESEARCH?

This research can be used to inspire other women to come forth with their stories by informing them that they are not alone. It can be used to build new understandings, new co-operations and new connections amongst homeless / street-involved women. Finally, this research provides an example of alternative approaches to research that may be more appropriate and effective when studying particular groups of people.



ABOUT THE RESEARCHER

Dr. Darlene Clover is an Associate Professor in the Department of Educational Psychology and Leadership Studies at the University of Victoria. Her research interests include women in leadership, community activism and leadership, and arts-based research and education.
