

Moving Towards Experience: The Process and Significance of Identity Reclamation Among
Sheltered Women Experiencing Homelessness

By

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INTRODUCTION

“Would you like a tour of the women’s suites?” one of the directors, Alison, asked me as we began our meeting. “Sure, that’d be great!” I responded while mentally making a note to ask her about the choice and use of the term “suites” for the women’s wing. The residence for single women was under renovation, but we were still able to walk through as it was near being finished. Alison showed me down the long hallway that led to the entrance of the single women’s suites through a secure door that could only be used by the women who lived there and the staff. Any visitors, including myself for the next year, would have to be buzzed in each time we visited. She walked me through the private suite area, pointing out the shared spaces: laundry room, bathroom, kitchenette area, and TV room complete with a brand-new flat screen on the wall, and then the “private”¹ spaces: eight dormitory style rooms that lined the perimeter of the suite. The rooms were painted a clean bright white, but not an institution-type-white, and furnished with a new twin bed, nightstand, and chest of drawers for each woman. “This is beautiful,” I said, while also thinking, “this is better than my dorm room in college!” I didn’t say this part out loud because *why shouldn’t it be?* I may have been standing in a supportive living facility for people experiencing homelessness², but this was not the stereotypical space we imagine for people without options. If I had been dropped into this space with no previous context I would be asking questions about the suite’s residents - Who lived here? What were they like? Why were they here? Instead, I wasn’t asking those questions because I assumed I already

¹ I use private in quotes here to notate that while the rooms were considered the women’s private spaces, they were shared rooms – up to two women lived in each room.

² Throughout this paper I will use “people experiencing homelessness” as opposed to the term “homeless people.” This use of first-person language honors the individual before, and separate from, their living situation.

knew: single women experiencing homelessness lived here while they looked for housing. But, knowing their ascribed social role of “homeless person” told me nothing about who they were.

The definition of homelessness in the United States continues to be elusive, varied, and, at times, organizationally specific. In this paper, I will refer to homelessness as it relates to the current definition provided by the United States Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD). HUD is the federal agency tasked with creating and managing national housing law and funds, including the issue of homelessness (HUD 2020). With HUD being the grantor of essential funds, their definition is integral to organizations working to combat homelessness. In 2012, HUD released changes to the definition that resulted in delineating four categories of homelessness (NAEH 2012). Currently, someone is considered to be experiencing homelessness if (1) they are “living in a place not meant for human habitation, in an emergency shelter, in transitional housing, or are exiting,” (2) they are “losing their primary nighttime residence, which may include a motel or hotel or a doubled up situation,” (3) if they are part of a family “with children or unaccompanied youth who are unstably housed and likely to continue in that state,” or (4) they are “fleeing or attempting to flee domestic violence” (NAEH 2012). Based on this definition, over 550,000 individuals were experiencing homelessness on any single night in the United States in 2017 (Henry et al. 2017). While men continue to make up the majority (61%) of individuals experiencing homelessness in the United States, the number of women who reported experiencing homelessness has increased in the past several years (HUD 2020; Homelessness Revisited n.d.). This increase combined with expanded knowledge of the situations in which women enter a shelter or homelessness calls for further investigation of women’s unique experiences with homelessness.

This study examines the role of identity in the lives of women experiencing homelessness at a supportive housing program in a large, metropolitan, Southeastern city. We, the women and I, developed an understanding of identity through five months of participation in a photovoice group. In this group the women, my co-researchers,³ shared photographs and engaged in meaningful dialogue that answered the question: *What do you want the world to know about you?* Through analysis of these group sessions, including narratives and photographs, I learned that: 1) the identities expressed by the women have little relationship to “being homeless,” 2) reclamation of their personal identity is integral to women’s efforts in navigating homelessness, and 3) the use of visual imagery provides women with an innovative way to process and reclaim identity. This paper contributes to the literature by extending scholarly understanding of identity management among women experiencing homelessness through a focus on the process and importance of *identity reclamation* for this marginalized group. Second, this paper uses a participatory-action research (PAR) model and visual methodology to demonstrate the ability of “power sharing” research methods to produce unique and fertile sources of empirical evidence.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Scholars in sociology have long studied various aspects of homelessness (Marx and Engels’s (1967) introduction of the *lumpenproletariat*), but research on this phenomenon has increased immensely since the 1980s, coinciding with the increase of people experiencing homelessness in the U.S. (Meanwell 2012). Since that time scholars have set out to understand a

³ Participants will be referred to as co-researchers throughout this study in line with the principles of power-sharing in participatory-action research (Chevalier and Buckles 2013).

variety facets of the experience of homelessness. Scholars have explored structural aspects of the phenomenon, such as pathways into homelessness (Casey 2002; Shinn 2010), the success of particular housing interventions (Henry et al 2007; Shinn 2010), gendered experiences with homelessness (Anderson and Rayens 2004; Bukowski and Buetow 2011; Liebow 1993), and experiences on the streets (Snow and Anderson 1993; Wang et al 2000) and within shelters (DeWard 2007; Metraux and Culhane 1999). However, scholarship seeking to generate knowledge concerning the individual and agentic experiences of homelessness has also been profuse (Parsell 2011; Meanwell 2012). Research concerning identity development and management among people experiencing homelessness is a popular area of scholarship that considers both the role of structure and agency (Anderson et al 1994; Gonyea and Melekis 2017; Parsell 2011; Phelan et al 1997; Snow and Anderson 1987).

Women's Experiences with Homelessness

In the late 1970s sociologist Diana M. Pearce introduced the term “feminization of poverty” into the scholarly world (O’Dea 2013). This concept refers to the high percentage of female headed households that experience poverty and the ways in which poverty became their part of their lived experience (O’Dea 2013; Pearce 1983). At that time “almost one-half of the poor people in the United States lived in house-holds headed by women and that two thirds of poor U.S. adults were women” (O’Dea 2013: 273). As Pearce (1983) points out, avenues of broken relationships, motherhood, and discrimination were the main contributing factors to women living in poverty. Sex/gender is explicitly linked to ways women interact with the job market, including receiving lower pay and holding lower status jobs than men on average (O’Dea 2013), while racism is evident through the ways in which women of color, especially

black women, are disadvantaged in the job market and over represented in public assistance programs (Pearce 1983). Unfortunately, the feminization of poverty is still operating today and many of the ways Pearce described women entering poverty map directly onto the experience of women entering further poverty through homelessness.

Previous research illustrates avenues to homelessness that may be more frequently travelled by women, many of which are similar to Pearce's (1983) description of poverty. Women are more likely than men to experience homelessness following the breakdown of a relationship (Arangua et al. 2005; Anderson & Rayens 2004), while attempting to flee violent or traumatic situations (Winetrobe et al. 2017; Anderson & Rayens 2004; Browne 1993), or as the single head of a household with children (Rossi 1994). Further, these instances of trauma or precarious relationships don't have to take place simultaneously with homelessness for them to impact a woman's risk for being unhoused. A "breakdown of relationship" may refer to current relationships or conflict within an individual's family of origin. For example, reporting a history of trauma and lack of a social support network as a child has been associated with a lower ability to live with autonomy and intimacy (Anderson & Rayens 2004). Moreover, childhood sexual abuse (CSA), other childhood trauma, or family violence have all been linked with experiencing homelessness for women (Browne 1993).

What is a 'homeless identity?'

Even without entering homelessness, people *know* what it means to be homeless. Through propagated cultural stereotypes "being homeless" has become equal to being dirty, being a nuisance, and being the "scum of the earth." One would be hard pressed to come across a description in a contemporary novel or television show that imagines what it means to be

homeless in any other light, except for maybe that of one needing immense sympathy. But what is an identity of “homeless,” really? From our cultural misgivings, we know it *means* much more than the tangible reality of not having a house or shelter to live in, but the robust meaning is more difficult to extract. Asadi (2013) effectively illustrates this gray area of meaning by drawing upon previous theoretical frameworks of *normals* (Goffman 1963) and *outsiders* (or *abnormals*) (Becker 1966) to label the “homeless ‘social type’” as a “boundary violator” (77). How can one determine their identity when one’s social role constantly resides in between boundaries?

After entering homelessness, the identity of an individual is then bombarded not only with the devastation and social re-classification that accompanies homelessness, but also the stigma that is suddenly placed over them. In addition to the “gray area of meaning” of homelessness, the concrete meaning that is extracted is typically a negative stereotype – like those mentioned above. In 2001, Link and Phelan defined stigma as “exist[ing] when elements of labeling, stereotyping, separation, status loss, and discrimination occur together in a power situation that allows them” (377). People experiencing homelessness are portrayed in cultural mass media, colloquial narratives, and embedded generational understanding as being at the bottom rung of the social ladder through their own shortcomings (Asadi 2013; Phelan, Link, Moore & Stueve 1997). Public opinion and stereotypes of people experiencing homelessness are blamed for their situation as much as the housed poor, while simultaneously being stigmatized more severely (Phelan et al. 1997). Considering the power situation at play (Link and Phelan 2001), the question of who determines the identity of “the homeless” comes to the forefront.

Identity Management

The crucial first step in understanding the importance of identity management among vulnerable groups is to consider the ways in which identity plays positive and negative roles in our lives, that is, why does it matter that we see people as “homeless”? Rosenfield et al. (2005) find that individuals’ self-salience, the relative relationship of the self to others, profoundly affects how they process those relational schemas and their resulting emotions, experiences, etc. One’s identity lives in the part of that schema that considers oneself in relation to others and must be fairly well understood to make sense of that relationship. Further, the authors found an appropriate balance of self-salience provided the best outcome for individuals’ well-being: “Well-being should be enhanced by balanced self-salience, that is, a sense of self that is equally worthy, equally tied, and equally influential in relation to others” (Rosenfield et al 2005: 335). Therefore, identity is essential to understanding one’s self and one’s relationship to others. A schema that views self and others as equally worthy provides the best opportunity for well-being, increasing one’s ability to meet physiological needs, such as attaining and retaining housing. In this paper, I argue that *identity reclamation* is one process that women experiencing homelessness use to build this “equally worthy” schema within their identity, which ultimately aids in their navigation of homelessness.

A good amount of existing research has explored and analyzed the ways in which people experiencing homelessness manage their identities and navigate the social roles imposed on them. Previous scholarship has indicated the cognitive dissonance people experiencing homelessness may experience when they try to marry their personal identities with the public perception of them (DeWard 2007, Rogers-Dillon 1995; Rokach 2005; Snow & Anderson 1987;

Takahashi, McElroy and Rowe 2002). Such dissonance prompts them to engage in identity management strategies to reclaim a “balance.”(Snow & Anderson 1987; Burke 1991) There is a tension between what people experiencing homelessness can control (their personal identity) and what they can’t (their stigmatized identity or ascribed social role) (Phelan et al. 1997). Further, it has been shown that among adults experiencing homelessness, women manage this tension within a multitude of other marginalized identities, causing for a compounded experience of stigma (Gonyea & Melekis 2017).

One of the most enduring studies on identities of people experiencing homelessness in the social sciences is Snow and Anderson’s (1987) “Identity Work Among the Homeless: The Verbal Construction and Avowal of Personal Identities.” The typology created by Snow & Anderson (1987) to illustrate how people experiencing homelessness construct their identities include patterns of distancing, embracing, and fictive storytelling. Through many varieties of actions under these umbrella concepts, Snow and Anderson (1987) found that people experiencing homelessness negotiate who they are in relationship to who they want to be associated with, including in-group (those also experiencing homelessness) and out group (those who are housed) individuals. Additionally, in this work the authors provide evidence that “calls into question [the] popular assumption” that identity-related concerns are secondary to physiological needs (Snow & Anderson 1987: 1365).

While Snow and Anderson (1987) focused on a group of people experiencing homeless that included both women and men, in *Tell Them Who I Am* Elliot Liebow (1993) provided crucial information on the unique experiences of women during homelessness. His ethnographic account of women experiencing homelessness within emergency shelters provided an intimate portrayal of how women navigate the ins and outs of daily life, their relationships, and their

struggles operating within the system of social services. He further illuminated women's experiences with homelessness by recognizing the juxtaposition of the severity and weight of their experience with homelessness and the critical role of their life before homelessness as a protective factor.

“What sets these homeless women apart is that, sane or crazy or physical disabled, they are all engaged in a titanic struggle to remain human in an unremittingly dehumanizing environment.” (222)

Recent scholarship on homelessness moves towards rejecting the view of people experiencing homelessness as passive players and instead acknowledging ways in which people experiencing homelessness “navigate and survive daily life... recogniz[ing] the homeless as active, resourceful agents in their social worlds” (Meanwell 2012: 73). Previous research leads me to ask: “how can people experiencing homelessness be expected to successfully move through the arduous process of housing attainment and retention if their personhood and worth is consistently in question?” This study fills a gap of knowledge that moves scholars one step closer to the answer by purposefully combining the push towards scholarship that recognizes people experiencing homelessness as agentic individuals and research interested in the process of identity management.

The current study contributes to this need in scholarship by 1) investigating identity reclamation as a key strategy of navigating homelessness, not simply a mechanism of identity management, 2) exploring these questions with a group of women who are experiencing homelessness to speak to marginalization that may be occurring due to gender and 3) by using a participatory method of investigation that relies on the agency of study participants. To do this the following questions were asked:

- 1) How do women experiencing homelessness in a supportive housing facility describe themselves?
- 2) What processes do women experiencing homelessness in a supportive housing facility use to negotiate and reclaim their identities from their ascribed social status as a “homeless person?”

METHODS

This is a qualitative study designed to critically examine and explore the lives of women experiencing homelessness. To do this I used photovoice, a participatory action research (PAR) method that combines photography and critical group discussion, to facilitate understanding and social action amongst the researchers and co-researchers (Wang & Burris, 1997). Participatory action research (PAR) is an innovative research methodology that walks the line between theory and technique, creating a tension between generating empirical evidence and centering ‘human relations’ in social science research (Chevalier and Buckles 2013). Studies using PAR methodology center the participation of study participants (aka co-researchers), include an *action* portion of the project that engages the community, and aim to produce new knowledge (research) that also honors “the goals of a genuine encounter between self and other” (Chevalier and Buckles 2013: 5). PAR methodology, including the method of photovoice, has been largely absent in sociological inquiry. However, these novel approaches offer benefits to the process of research, and the findings it generates, not found in other qualitative methods.

First, using photovoice for this study helped to equalize the power dynamic and relationship between co-researchers and myself, the principal investigator, to the best of my ability (Seitz & Strack, 2016). Equalizing power within field work and qualitative studies works towards dismantling and decolonizing the academy's history of abusing study participants for professional gains. As Chevalier and Buckles (2013) state, "Science is at a crossroads: either it continues to strengthen ivory towers and serve the interests of the few, or it embraces a firm orientation to society and the common good on a global scale" (1). One of the co-researchers in this study confirmed suspicion of research based along these lines; she relayed her hesitance because "this sort of research goes nowhere, you come in and then you leave and nothing ever comes of it." The sharing of power and commitment to an "action" piece of the project within PAR methodologies provide an opportunity to work towards more just social science research.

Consideration of the power dynamic in research was integral to this study because, as illustrated in the review of literature, women experiencing homelessness may endure added distress due to multiple marginalized identities (Thoits 1985; Thoits 2005). Women are often accustomed to holding a secondary position in society or internalizing a lack of power and agency (Rosenfield et al 2000; Rosenfield et al 2005); a social phenomenon this study wanted to observe, not recreate for participants. The photovoice framework, specifically, provides the opportunity for the investigator and co-researchers to operate on a more equal power level as co-researchers (Wang & Burris, 1997), dismantling the traditional hierarchical relationship found in much social research and providing a safer space for co-researchers to discuss vulnerable aspects of themselves and their identities.

Through its participatory nature, PAR methodology also provides a unique opportunity to engage more intimately with co-researchers. This deeper engagement creates an opening for an

added layer of rich detail within the research findings. The importance and need for building rapport with participants while doing fieldwork has long been documented (Lofland et al 2006), but the “participation” piece of PAR methodology extends beyond building rapport. The goal is for co-researcher participation to be included at every level of the research process, including research design and dissemination of results (Chevalier and Buckles 2013). There is flexibility in this “requirement” as the ideal is not always obtainable, but the principle of including co-researchers in as much of the process as possible is an important component of PAR. Through this inclusion co-researchers are able to hold ownership over not only their roles in the study, but also the message and direction of the study itself. The extent of co-researcher participation also has the ability to enhance or diminish the shared power amongst the group. The relationship formed between the investigator and co-researchers in PAR methods can also be strengthened through the processes of sharing power and participation. Consequently, as trust is built in this research-participant relationship, more detailed and robust data may be unearthed through the equalizing research experience.

Visual Methods

Visual methods, while still uncommon in sociological scholarship, have seen a surge in implementation since the publication of Howard Becker’s seminal article, *Photography and Sociology*, in 1974. In this piece Becker (1974) draws similarities between the work of photographers and sociologists, concluding that both investigate society through a variety of means. The use of photography and other visual methods aids in providing records of otherwise unreachable communities (more important pre-internet), reporting news and current social events, and unmasking political and social problems such as poverty (Harper2012; Becker 1974).

Visual investigation provides a unique perspective on society that is not available through text alone. Harper (2012) states, “[Visual sociology] is based on the premise that the world that is seen, photographed, drawn or otherwise represented visually is different than the world that is represented through words and numbers” (4).

I chose to use a visual methodology alongside the PAR framework based on the above premise. Just as images transcend the barriers of language, visual findings transcend what can be learned from narratives alone. The success of visual methods, like photovoice, with marginalized populations is evidence that 1) some concepts, like emotions, may be better understood and/or impactful through images and 2) incorporating visuals into research provides an opportunity for expression often craved by people in vulnerable positions. As I have learned through my own experience as a researcher, individuals in precarious situations, such as homelessness, are often asked about their vulnerability or experience in an ascribed social role, but they are not given the chance to fully explore their answers to such questions. The use of visuals in these instances provide an opportunity to fulfill this missing component and, in return, unearth a hidden trove of knowledge.

Still, visual methods in social science research do pose some ethical dilemmas (Gold 1989). Ethical research in visual sociology is confronted with 1) needing to rethink confidentiality if images of a person or place are identifiable, 2) concerns raised if investigators produce images with little to no interaction between themselves and participants, and 3) managing and alleviating individual or collective harm to participants that may be produced through visual research (Gold 1989). While these concerns should always be addressed when conducting visual research, the method of photovoice provides some alleviation to these ethical dilemmas. In photovoice, co-researchers are taking their own photographs and deciding which

images to share with the group, thus they hold the power of deciding the level of anonymity they want to preserve in their pictures. The participatory nature of the photovoice method, including viewing all photographs during dialogue sessions, eliminates the possibility for lack of interaction between the investigator and co-researchers. Photovoice sessions also provide the opportunity to process any negative feelings towards self or others in vivo, making the investigator aware of harm that may be occurring through the research process. The current study enacted additional safe-guards by employing the use of informed consent through the IRB process, requiring that co-researchers obtain written consent to take and share pictures of any identifiable person, including themselves, and, I, the investigator promising to not publish any identifiable pictures of minors that were shown to the group.

In addition to using photovoice in this study for 1) the purpose of generating additional information beyond text and narratives and 2) as a solution to ethical dilemmas in visual research, I incorporated this visual method because of its novel approach to investigating homelessness within sociological scholarship. Photovoice was first used as an approach to qualitative research in the public health field (Wang & Burris, 1997) and has since been adapted for use with various populations in a spectrum of disciplines. Photovoice's creative methodology, participatory orientation, and commitment to social action lends itself to research with vulnerable or marginalized populations, including youth (Davison, Ghali, & Hawe, 2011; Denov et al., 2012; Kaplan 2013), individuals with disabilities (Indelicato, Underwood, and Kane 2019; Newman, Maurer, Jackson, Saxon, Jones, & Reese, 2009), older adults (Andonian & MacRae, 2011), women (Simmons, Roux, & Avest, 2015; Duffy, 2010), and individuals experiencing homelessness (West et al, 2016; Bukowski & Buetow, 2011; Wang et al, 2000). However, while its "success" has been well documented in other fields, sociology has been slow

to adopt photovoice, and other participatory methods, as a qualitative method of investigation. Reasons behind this are outside the purview of this paper, but this would be a critical perspective to undertake in future work.

Photovoice Components and Procedures

Implementation of the photovoice method may vary depending on study resources and needs, but the critical components of all photovoice projects include group formation, picture taking, group sharing through critical dialogue sessions, and a culminating *action* (Wang and Burris 1997; Harper 2012). Forming the photovoice group operates similarly to recruitment for participation in other qualitative studies, including developing a research question, completing the IRB process, the investigator approaching potential co-researchers with the opportunity, and providing informed consent before the group begins. However, since it is a PAR method, a photovoice group may also be formed through the direction of, or tandem with, the co-researchers who confirm this would be a salient opportunity. Once a group is formed and logistics are sorted out (where/when to meet, etc.), individuals in the group begin taking pictures to later share with their other co-researchers. Investigators often provide either digital or disposable cameras needed to complete this portion of the project and an introductory “workshop” may be scheduled to help co-researchers learn how to use the camera equipment. In this study, and one previous (Indelicato, Underwood, & Kane 2019), I have seen the need for providing cameras diminish as co-researchers prefer to use the cameras on their phone. Additionally, the investigator may provide prompts for picture taking or develop them with co-researchers depending upon the group’s research question. This study used both approaches.

Once pictures have been taken group members come back together to share their photographs in critical dialogue sessions. Photovoice gets its name from the premise that the visual is understood in conjunction with the verbal. Therefore the combination of taking pictures (photo) and discussing the pictures (voice) is the crucial component. The structure of the critical dialogue sessions and the ways in which photographs are viewed are up to the discretion of individual groups/projects. However, the photographer is not the only person who comments on the photograph being viewed – the image is often introduced by the photographer and the group joins the discussion once they have “voiced” the context of their image. The final component, following the culmination of group sessions, is an actionable piece of the project that seeks to engage the community (“community” in this sense is variable) with the co-researchers and the products of the photovoice group. An example of this is presenting photographs of camper experiences at a camp for youth with upper limb differences to staff and parents at the end of the camp session to start a dialogue about camper needs (Indelicato, Underwood, & Kane 2019). I discuss the specific procedures of the current study when I introduce the process of data collection later in this section.

Community Partnership

To facilitate this study, I formed a partnership with a local faith-based organization dedicated to helping individuals experiencing homelessness achieve and retain housing. The organization provides a supportive program for families, single men, and single women utilizing a hybrid Housing First model. Housing First is an approach to securing permanent housing for people experiencing homelessness. Under the Housing First model individuals and families are quickly connected with housing solutions and supportive services to aid in housing retention

without barriers to entry that other programs may have in place, such as graduating from a residential program or maintaining sobriety (HUD n.d.). The hybrid model used by the community organization in this study includes a combination of Housing First principles and transitional housing approaches that include intensive residential support services. This study was implemented exclusively with women from their facility.

The community partners are essential components of ethical and feasible implementation of the project. Partnership organizations make it possible to implement field work studies for logistical, ethical, and opportunistic reasons. Logistically, community partners provide a space to conduct research and are often part of the grant process (if applicable) for securing research funding. Ethically, these organizations provide consent to implement research in their space that often translates to consent to approach and recruit organizational members for study participation. Finally, partnering with a community organization may signal trust of the researcher to potential participants, making the processes of building rapport and recruiting participants more feasible. Co-researchers were recruited for this study by the investigator, who served as volunteer with the organization before and after the project, with help from some staff members in relaying information about the project.

Sample of Co-Researchers

Women entered the partner organization's supportive housing program through a dual selection process. While they were selected to enter the program by way of an application process, they also "self-selected" into the program by choosing to complete an application. This distinction is pertinent because it provides further insight into the group of women who participated in this study. For example, the community-partner is a faith-based organization with

explicit rules pertaining to consuming alcohol or other substances while living on site. This may influence individuals who apply to their programs based on whether they agree with, or don't want to abide by, the organizations rules.

The study included 18 women from the partner organization's single women and family programs. Co-researchers were selected using a combination of purposive and convenience sampling (Schutt 2014; Weiss 1995) based on who was living at the supportive housing facility and interested in participating. Staff at the facility were helpful in setting up informational sessions for potential participants and connecting me with women they felt would be most interested. Co-researchers were eligible to be a part of the project if they 1) were 18 years or older, 2) identified as a woman, 3) associated with the community partner organization,⁴ and 4) willing to participate in the photovoice groups. Co-researchers were between 24 and 56 years old and many (7) had some level of college education; 5 participants identified as white, 5 identified as African American, and the remaining (3) identified as either mixed race or another ethnicity. A majority of the co-researchers were single (8) and had children (10), however for some who had children, the children did not live with them at the time of the group for a variety of reasons. Table 1 provides more details about the demographics of the co-researchers.

Data Collection

Data collection began with me, the principal investigator, spending a period of approximately six months building rapport with the case managers and women associated with the partner organization. Spending this substantial time building trust and communication not only increased the validity of the study by decreasing the response bias (or Hawthorne Effect)

⁴ I use "associated" here instead of "living at," because some women continued participating in the project after they moved into permanent housing. All co-researchers began the group while living at the supportive housing program.

that may take place when participants know they are being watched (Lofland et al. 2006), but also helped to gain and retain co-researchers who were initially weary of the research process (Walling 2009). During this time, I held multiple informational project meetings to introduce and explain the study. In these sessions, I described the project, explained informed consent, and answered any questions potential co-researchers had before agreeing to participate in the study.

Table 1. Co-researcher Demographic Information

| <i>Age</i> | <i>Race/ Ethnicity</i> | <i>Highest Level of Education</i> | <i>Relationship Status</i> | <i>Children</i> | <i>If yes: Children Live w/ you</i> | <i>Length w/o residence</i> | <i>Been w/o residence before</i> | <i>If yes: Times w/o Residence</i> | <i>Physical Illness</i> | <i>Mental Illness</i> |
|------------|----------------------------|---|--------------------------------|-----------------|---|-------------------------------------|--|--|-----------------------------|---------------------------|
| 50 | White | Some College | Married | Yes | No | 2 MO | Yes | 1 | Yes | Yes |
| 46 | Belizian | Some College | Single | Yes | No | 6 MO | No | - | No | No |
| 42 | African American | College Graduate | Single | No | - | 4 MO | Yes | 3 | No | No |
| 56 | American Indian | College Graduate | Divorced | Yes | No | 3 YRS | Yes | 3 | No | No |
| 43 | African American | Some College | Separated | Yes | Yes | 1 YRS 7 MO | Yes | 2 | Yes | Yes |
| 25 | White | High School Diploma | Married | Yes | Yes | - | - | 4 | Yes | Yes |
| 29 | African American | Some College | Single | Yes | Yes | 3 YRS | Yes | 1 | No | Yes |
| 50 | White | Some College | Divorced | No | - | 1.5 YRS | No | 1 | Yes | Yes |
| 30 | White | Professional Degree | Single | No | - | 2 MO | Yes | 2 | Yes | Yes |
| 55 | Mixed Race | Some College | Single | Yes | No | 1.5 YRS | Yes | 3 | Yes | Yes |
| 46 | White | Some College | Single | Yes | No | 4 MO | Yes | 7 YRS | Yes | No |
| 35 | African American | College Graduate | Single | Yes | Yes | 2 WKS | No | 1 | No | No |
| 24 | African American | High School Diploma | Single | Yes | Yes | 1.5 YRS | No | 1 | No | No |

Note: Only 13 co-researchers completed and returned their demographic surveys.

Data collection through photovoice group sessions ran for approximately five months and included a total of 14 group sessions throughout. Sessions were typically held weekly with flexibility for holidays, events at the center, or researchers' schedules. The first session was an introductory session with the purposes of ensuring voluntary, consensual participation in the project as well as building rapport between the investigator and co-researchers. This session lasted approximately an hour and included a verbal and written project description, answering co-researchers' questions about the project, obtaining written consent for project participation and permission to be photographed from each co-researcher, having each co-researcher fill out a de-identified demographic survey, distributing cameras, and discussing use of the cameras and ethical picture taking practices. The demographic survey (Appendix A) included questions related to age, race, marital status, time experiencing homelessness, and health diagnoses. At this session, each co-researcher received a copy of the consent form they signed, multiple copies of the photography permission consent forms (to be signed by anyone they wished to take a picture of during the project), a pen, and a camera. As co-researchers joined the group, which they could do at any time, this process was repeated with the investigator for each new participant during their first session. While there were "officially" 2 rounds of photovoice groups during the data collection period, there were no cohorts of members as they could move in and out of participation in the group as they needed. Co-researchers' variable work schedules was a common reason for changes in group participation.

Following the introductory session, co-researchers in each group used the cameras⁵ to take photographs to answer the overarching question, "*What do you want others to know about*

⁵ Following a couple of sessions, co-researchers relayed that it was easier to take pictures using their cell phone cameras. Many returned their digital cameras and began using their phones instead. When new co-researchers joined the group, they were given the option to borrow a camera or use their phone's camera.

you?” The picture prompt was left intentionally broad and open-ended to allow each co-researcher to make meaning from their photos. All co-researchers who photographed a person in the pictures collected and returned photography permission forms to the investigator when they returned their cameras. If the co-researcher took a picture of their minor child, they signed a form on their child’s behalf. Pictures were uploaded for viewing to a secure folder on my laptop, via email or directly from digital camera, at the beginning of each session. Each session lasted an average of one and a half hours.

All of the sessions after the first were critical dialogue sessions that lasted approximately 90 minutes. Each dialogue session was audio recorded to ensure accuracy of analysis. The critical dialogue sessions in photovoice are essential to determining meaning of the photographs according to the photographer as well as to provide a space for co-researchers to voice their narratives individually and collaboratively. During each session co-researchers shared one to two⁶ photographs guided by the SHOWeD framework (Strack et al 2003). This framework is the most widely accepted “standardized” guide for Photovoice projects (Harper 2012). The SHOWeD protocol asks co-researchers to answer a set of questions about their photograph wherein these questions follow the acronym SHOWeD (What do you SEE here? What is really HAPPENING here? How does this relate to OUR lives? WHY does the situation exist? How could this image EDUCATE others?⁷ What can we DO to address these issues?) This framework was helpful in guiding co-researchers to answer relevant questions about their photographs and in directing the group’s critical dialogue. However, I found the guide’s questions did not map

⁶ The original plan was to show and discuss all group members’ photos taken during the previous week during each session, but we had to quickly change expectations after the first two sessions. The discussion around each photograph, plus the propensity of sessions starting late for variety of reason, was longer than expected. However, the information being generated was robust and essential to the project, so very little time limitations were imposed.

⁷ There are alternate versions of this question, including “How can we become EMPOWERED by our new social understanding?” (Harper 2012)

onto the needs of our research question and population as smoothly as I had anticipated. For example, many co-researchers felt that the question, “why does this situation exist?”, was inherently negative and did not match the “positive” photograph they shared. Therefore, we added a question in to our “group question guide” in between the O and W questions that asked: Does this situation (being viewed) represent a problem or a strength? Although we used the SHOWeD method (Appendix B) loosely it was a helpful guiding framework to uncover the narratives that existed behind and between the co-researchers’ photographs.

Co-researchers also discussed the ways they would like to share the photographs with their community and city in these sessions. The final portion of the project was a celebratory and community-driven gallery event showcasing the photographs taken as part of the project. This event was held at the end of the data collection period at the supportive housing center. Co-researchers, other residents and staff of the center, community partners, and partners of the center were invited to attend this drop-in event. Visibility and voice, of the project and co-researchers, were the two main goals of participation in this event.

Data Analysis and Reflexivity

Following data collection, the audio recordings from the dialogue sessions were transcribed verbatim. Identifiable information was removed to retain confidentiality before analysis. I used a modified grounded theory approach (Charmaz 2014) to code and analyze both the photographs and the discussion transcripts. While this approach to analysis is iterative and inductive, it is not fully divorced from the researcher’s perspective and position. Consequently, I felt it necessary to situate my perspective of reference and practice reflexivity throughout the project (Bolton 2010). To do this, I regularly reflected on my thoughts, feelings, and experiences

related to the project and its findings. I did this to not only ensure the magnification of the co-researchers' experiences versus my own, but to actively implement checks and balances against doing so if needed.

FINDINGS

Who We Are: Self-Expressed Identities

When asked, “What do you want the world to know about you?” the women gave many answers that varied while simultaneously being similar and consistent. Being able to hold the group for as long as we did allowed for saturation of answers to take place. While the women discussed being “uniquely them” on multiple occasions, there was clear comradery and support based on their similarities, including their shared journey of experiencing homelessness. In these juxtaposing conditions is where the complexity of their identities became most clear; a complexity that the group decided should be celebrated. While this discussion will center on what the co-researchers had in common, it would be remiss to not to share their uniqueness as well. As Sarah put so eloquently,

“Something like bright and vibrant and that stands out maybe in the middle of things that aren't so beautiful... I think it's be yourself. And don't be afraid to be yourself, be unique.”



Image 1. Standing Out While Blending In

When Sarah shared this image with the group there was immediate recognition of the concept she was attempting to display. Group members *felt* the lone yellow flower among the green weeds. They chimed in with praise and interpretation of the photograph. The shared thought process of the group was palpable and illustrative; members were responding as if saying, “I know how that feels, to feel beautiful, unique, and alone all at the same time.” The tension felt amongst the group with this photograph sets the stage for understanding identity through the perspective of women experiencing homelessness: constantly stuck in between the self (perception, esteem, worth) and society (where they belong within the group).

Further illustration of the women’s unique and shared personhood is found in Table 2. Table 2 illustrates co-researchers’ answers to the questions, “What is one thing you want me to know about you?” and “What is one thing you want your community to know about you?” which appeared on the demographic survey. Answers to first question (what they wanted me to know about them) ranged from light-hearted, like hobbies such as being outdoors and listening to music, to serious personal information about themselves, for example “I’m adopted,” or their

families. In the second question (what they wanted their community to know about them), many co-researchers' answers shifted to discussing who they are outside of homelessness or attempting to placate the community about why they may be experiencing homelessness. The answers to both questions set a strong foundation for what I observed within the Photovoice group through photographs and dialogue. The group of women I met with conveyed the difficulty of managing their identities due to the tension they feel between their perception of self and ascribed social status as a "homeless person."

Table 2. What the Co-Researchers Wanted Us to Know

| <i>One thing you want me to know about you?</i> | <i>One thing you want your community to know about you?</i> |
|--|---|
| Contrary to popular belief, I am very nice | I am very dependable and a hard worker |
| I are many "layers" that me | "Homeless" does not mean "hopeless" |
| I have been working with homelessness of women with children and teens who have aged out of foster care system for 20+ years | I am serious about ending the condition of homelessness in the USA while I am alive! |
| I love outdoors | I love to love others |
| I am a loving mother of 4 babies and a wife of an amazing man | That I have a past but I am not my past |
| Everyday I fight life's up's and downs for five people and it fills good to only do it for the most important ppl in my life | I am strong through it all |
| I am a music fanatic!!! | Not all homeless people are unhappy & miserable. Some are better off homeless than where they were & much happier. |
| I'm adopted | I'm homeless |
| I struggle with finding housing. | I am more than my mental illness |
| Goofy; like have fun (lol); smart if I play attention; survivor; child of God | I child of God that is a survivor |
| I love to smile and bring positive energy to all spaces! | "Ditto" :) |
| I have 2 kids 1 year old and 5 year old | That I understand what most of my community is going threw and have been through some of those same things first hand |

Note: Co-researchers' answers were recorded verbatim, the only omission was to protect identity.

During our photovoice groups I observed co-researchers expressing “who they are” through discussion, photographs, and embodiment. Their identities comprised a multitude of social roles, familial roles, and self-perceptions that either served or soothed the tension they expressed between these parts of themselves. However, there were common themes among the group. Co-researchers expressed that they were 1) hopeful individuals, 2) women of God, and 3) mothers. Below I discuss each of these identities and how their assertion led to processes of reclamation.

Hopeful

When considering their shared identities, the women often identified themselves through their photographs and narratives as people with hope and future plans. Hope was discussed as both an active and passive piece of the women’s lives. For example, having hope or keeping hope was an important coping strategy mentioned throughout the groups. Believing that things would get better or there was a purpose for this experience played a significant role in the women’s ability to stay mentally and physically well and to make the needed strides towards their goals, including attaining housing. Hope was even expressed as an active process within identity management and reclamation among the women. As JoAnn stated, “I hope that we as women don't lose ourselves because who are we if we're not ourselves.”

This process of drawing on hope served as a reminder to not lose one’s self within this experience of homelessness, signaling 1) the importance of not succumbing to the role of “homeless person” and 2) staying true to the person outside of this experience will open the door for good times ahead. Shawna told the group that,

“It still gives me hope, because I can remember the good times with her and it gives me hope that I can still have those eventually in my new life.”

At other times, hope was treated as something that was a part of you, a trait of your spirit, an *identity* in and of itself versus an action that needed to be taken. Being a joyful or hopeful person was a coveted identity amongst the group – co-researchers expressed their desire to remain hopeful even on days with tremendous obstacles. Hopeful people were viewed as more likely to succeed with their goals or be happy in life, something that seemed to feel elusive at the time for many. Reina illustrated the value of being a hopeful person with this quote:

“Even though you can see the clouds, you can also see the sunshine and the blue skies so it gives you hope that there's better.

In sum, hope was expressed as a gateway among the group. Being a hopeful person supported the women in navigating homelessness through its ability to help alleviate fear and grief often experienced during homelessness, illuminate a pathway to the future, and act as a reminder to be “the person outside of homelessness” – to just be Sarah or Reina or JoAnn.

Women of God

An overwhelming majority of co-researchers expressed a large portion of their core identity to be “women of God.” This role was most often described through professions of faith in God and/or by describing themselves as “believers.” Spirituality, specifically through the Christian faith, was one of the most frequently discussed themes throughout the groups. Women illustrated ways that God was present in their lives through their strength to get through, by bringing them to this supportive housing facility, and providing the hope they held onto. It was unusual to have a group session where none of the photographs presented pertained to faith or

belief. Often, the women expressed their faith through taking pictures of how God was portraying beauty in the world or showing them the way, like in the picture below.

Alanna took the photograph below and described it in this way:

“I was just letting light through darkness. You know? Cause everybody needs light. If you sit in darkness then your whole life will be in dark so I just feel like everybody just needs God's light, some light to shine upon them.”



Image 2. The Way

At times the women’s identity as a “faithful person” often seemed conflated with their description of themselves as a “hopeful person,” like in the quote above. However the difference in these pieces of their identities was in who was taking control of the situation in which hope or faith was needed. Angelica expressed this when she said:

“I feel like, being attached [stuck in my head]and wanting to become de-attached, so I can start doing more what God wants me to do, but for right now, I feel like I'm attached

and going around in circles over and over and over. Trying to figure out what my calling is and what I need to be doing.”

Being a “hopeful person” signaled one’s ability to control their perspective and actions in a way that would provide relief and positive outcomes. Alternately, being a “women of God” or a “faithful person” demonstrated one’s ability to “let go and let God,” that is to take direction from God and believe that direction will lead towards happiness, stability, and purpose. God was a clear and prominent piece of the co-researchers’ support system. Being a faithful person meant not only that the women had perspective beyond this experience, but they also had someone to carry their daily burdens when they got too heavy to bear.

Hope and faith serve intertwined yet distinct roles in the process of identity reclamation among this group of women. Hope was a self-initiated action or thought that expressed a link to their identity outside of homelessness, while faith provided the *permission* they needed to believe in that identity. This is another example of the tension the women felt between displaying an identity other than “homeless person,” and feeling as if that identity would be honored within society. Being a faithful person instilled the belief that who they perceived themselves to be would be honored by God, an entity outside of homelessness.

While faith and spirituality were at the center of many of the women’s lives, it’s important to recognize that the supportive housing facility they were living in was part of a faith-based non-profit organization. God was all around us (a majority of our sessions took place in the facility’s chapel), even appearing in multiple co-researcher’s images. Image 2, *The Way* (above), was taken from one of the women’s suites as Alanna sat on her bed. She told the group that she took this picture after looking up from reading her Bible and seeing that the sight from

the window mirrored God's light showing the way. The group's response to this image was awe and acknowledgment of Alanna's experience in "seeing the way."

Although the co-researchers lived in a faith-based facility, the environment did not necessarily dictate what the women believe, as reliance on faith and religion among us women experiencing homelessness has been shown before. Referring to women on the street outside of Washington, D.C., in the mid-1980s, Liebow (1993) stated, "For homeless women... religious belief was typically unquestioning and uncomplicated." However, it is contextually necessary to consider the ways in which the women in these groups may have self-selected into this particular living facility or were being educated in particular ways. Faith was clearly a major part of the co-researchers' identities and their environment invited more questions around how faith became a part of their identity; these questions cannot be answered by this analysis but should be taken up, nonetheless.

Mothers

Finally, the women identified themselves as people focused on the love in their lives, including children, family, friends, and pets. They were raising children or grieving the loss of their parents, and, for some, the loss of their children either through untimely deaths or a loss due to children being removed from their homes by child protective systems. Grief and joy are universal emotions that all humans experience, and, above all, the women wanted to take pictures representing these emotions to tell about their lives. The roles in which the women most often associated these powerful emotions were their identities as caretakers.

The caretaker role overwhelming manifested as "being a mother" among the co-researchers, but other caretaking identities were expressed. For example, Amber told the group

how even though she didn't have any children she empathized with their experience. She was her elderly mother's caretaker before she passed away and expressed understanding the joys and pitfalls of "mothering." However, because of the wealth of data presented expressing "mother" as the primary caretaking identity, I will focus on that role in this discussion.

Being a mother was not only a part of "who they are," for most of the women in this group it was a core identity. Their children were their "reason" for making certain decisions, for being hopeful, faithful, etc., regardless of the child's age or whether they were currently living with their mothers in supportive housing. For example, Jacqueline, one of the mothers in the group, shared this regarding who she was and what she considered important in her life:

"The reason I decided to show this one [photograph of me and my daughter]⁸ as my first is because my daughter technically saved my life. She changed my whole behavior ... My daily life, which is taking care of my children, making sure they're okay because that's what I ... I'm a stay at home mom."

Even though many of the women felt the strain from having small children whom they were taking care of for much of their day, the co-researchers' children also played an important role in their mothers' support system. Successfully navigating homelessness requires a combination of structural availability and stringent personal agency. I learned from this group of women that experiencing homelessness without a foundation or a "why" is often a losing battle. Being a mother provided that foundation for many of the co-researchers; their attainment of housing directly affected their children, not just themselves. Faith in God, as I discussed in the previous section, somewhat provided this foundation for many of the co-researchers, however faith is intangible, making it easy to explain away or ignore. The co-researchers showed me that

⁸ This picture was omitted from the publication because it showed Jacqueline's daughter's face and the investigator promised not to use identifying pictures of minors.

their children, if they wanted them in their lives, created a stable foundation for generating the perseverance and strength needed to navigate and exit homelessness.

But, being a mother experiencing homelessness also includes a wealth of challenges. Pam shared the distress that being a parent in this situation can lead to at times.

“I have older children and younger too and my oldest will sit there and tell me, ‘I know you stressing mom,’ but I try to mask it the best I can because they're not supposed to see you stressing, but they do and they know when something is wrong with us.”

Wanting to protect children from hardships is not uncommon among parents, however it may feel nearly impossible when that hardship is not having a shelter or a home. The women of this group were living in a supportive housing facility, some with their children in tow, but this space was not *home*. This is an important distinction. There was agreement among the group that being in supportive housing was a blessing and a “step up” from living on the streets or in emergency shelters. However, co-researchers were aware of their lack of ownership (not just home ownership) over the space, including cleaning, meals, curfews, and even décor. They appreciated and utilized the benefits that came with this living situation, but also experienced the varying (and many) challenges of being without permanent housing. The weight of these challenges increased when children were included, signaling how the identity of motherhood could also be a hinderance to navigating homelessness.



Image 3. Watching You Grow

Regardless, the women presented being a mother as an overwhelmingly positive experience, even with the challenges of homelessness. The mother of the child in this picture shared how much she loves seeing him grow, seeing herself in him, and how she draws strength from his ability to face their situation:

“He has a bigger imagination, with us going through [all of this]... It's like him doing his own thing and it gives me, it makes me happy because it's something I like to do.”

The pride she exudes from her identity as a mother is apparent through this photograph. Feeling pride in their children and their roles as mothers was another process of identity reclamation exhibited by the group. The women identifying as a mother remained constant regardless of varying ascribed social roles and other labels imposed on women experiencing homelessness. As the group discussed, being a mother doesn't change when your kids are not physically with you; no amount of hardship alters co-researchers' self-identification as mothers. In this way,

motherhood provides an identity to cling to (much like being a hopeful person did) that is recognized as positive within society (similar to the permission granted by God as previously discussed).

In sum, it became clear that what co-researchers wanted others to know about them was that they were just like them. Co-researchers were hopeful and faithful people who enjoyed their experiences as mothers and caretakers. The women found value in these identities which provided a source of positive self-perception and self-worth not felt within their ascribed societal role as a “homeless person.” Co-researchers then utilized this positive sense of self and the categorical roles of being hopeful, a woman of God, and mothers to reclaim the personal identity they perceived society had taken from them because they were experiencing homelessness.

Who We Are Not: Management of Ascribed Social Status

Homelessness came up in small ways throughout the group, like sharing experiences at certain local shelters, but was otherwise notably absent from the discussion. I vividly remember multiple instances of attempting to solicit more information on their experiences with homelessness and falling short. It quickly became clear that their housing status was not what the co-researchers wanted to talk about. There are multiple explanations for why this could be: 1) relaying their experience was so saturated in every other part of their lives that they wished to break from discussing it as much as possible, 2) I asked them to tell us what they “want the world to know about them” through their photographs and that they are experiencing homelessness isn’t who they feel they are, or 3) they assumed I already knew that part of their lives, I was sitting in their temporary home after all. As a scholar, I purport their omission of “homeless” as part of their identities is a mix of all three of these possibilities. However, the

most salient piece of this analysis for this paper is the ways (and reasons) in which co-researchers illustrated the desire for “homeless” to be extracted from their identities.

The women’s complex identities shone through when they did discuss various aspects of their experience of homelessness. Co-researchers weren’t afraid to say that they had hit hard times – no one was pretending everything was “fine.” Many times, co-researchers’ discussed their current predicaments in the form of humor (a well-documented coping mechanism), like in the photograph below. Jessica shared this picture in one of our later photovoice sessions. She had just moved into permanent housing but was returning to the facility to participate in our group. Even after reaching this milestone she wanted to share the sentiment that “life doesn’t always go as planned.” The group agreed with this concept, but they markedly enjoyed the humor that Jessica brought into the room more than the message.



Image 4. Speed Bump Ahead

“Passing”

“Not many people know that I'm homeless so I guess we are all kind of having to wear the mask at different times, which is not ... I think is not always healthy, especially if we're not getting ... Like receiving support from people who do know and who are aware because then you can start to feel like you have a double life or something, I think.”

For the majority of our group sessions, the women did not talk about “being homeless,” even when *homelessness* was brought into the discussion. The times I heard the co-researchers even adjacently refer to themselves as “homeless,” they were reflecting a societal belief about them. By this I mean that the women were speaking about themselves as they believe the world already sees them because they are currently without housing. Even if they couldn't name it, co-researchers were keenly aware of the dissonance they felt between their personal identities and who the world now expected them to be. A significant mechanism of identity management expressed by the co-researchers was the concept of what they called being “double-minded” or having to wear a mask. Co-researchers felt that to move through life with as little stress as possible they had to wear a mask when it came to the outside world. Barbara told us:

“Well sometimes we have to wear a mask. Like if I'm suffering with something or dealing with something, I can't let that show, for example, at work.”

The metaphor of the mask was a way to represent what went much deeper than the “fear of repercussion” – the mask became their way of expressing that their true identities could not often be shown outside of the shelter, but they instead had to act as the world wanted them to. Barbara shared the photograph below in one of our first group sessions. She expressed not only the frustration with having to wear a mask, but also how that mask must look “pretty” on the outside. While Barbara had this mask before the group began, it was no coincidence that this is *the* mask she chose to share. The embellishment on the mask and its luminous appearance

represented the appearance Barbara felt she had to present to the world. Other co-researchers in the group agreed with this feeling and added that although most people in the world had to wear masks at one point or another, theirs (the women in the group) had to be more impressive to hide that they were experiencing homelessness.



Image 5. *The Mask I Wear*

“The mask” as a metaphor quickly became an enduring theme throughout the group of women. What the co-researchers were expressing is a phenomenon known as *passing*. This concept is most connected to Erving Goffman (1963) and his work, *Stigma: Notes on Management of Spoiled Identity*; however, sociologists have since applied the concept to numerous social groups, including people experiencing homelessness (Anderson et al 1994). Definitions of passing have varied, but Kahuna (1999) sums up its conceptual focus in saying “not only is an individual endowed or prescribed with some kind of personally discrediting

information about self, but that his information is undisclosed to others who observe and/or interact with that person” (28).

Simply, passing is a way to manage stigma associated with one’s ascribed identity. One presents oneself to those outside one’s discredited identity to mitigate attached stigma in those situations and preserve one’s “belongingness” in society. When co-researchers are discussing having to wear a mask outside of their housing facility or being “double-minded,” they are describing the ways they use the management strategy of passing to not appear “homeless.” Wearing their mask in public interactions, like at work, helps them hide this marginalized social role which co-researchers felt they must do to be accepted.

Group members expressed exasperation and indignation, but also acceptance of this experience. They felt sorrow and frustration for having to hide parts of themselves, but accepted it as a necessary part of “being homeless.” Gina explained her exasperation with passing like this:

“And [having to wear a mask] really needs to stop. People should love you just for who you are, not because of a mask you put on.”

However indignant the women felt about having to *pass* as a “housed person,” they recognized its necessity and participated regardless. While the need to pass in public concealed co-researchers’ identities, the strategy of *passing* also served to protect what the women saw as their true selves.

One of the ways in which the women in the group passed in society was to separate themselves from people “obviously” experiencing homelessness. Angelica expressed this tactic when sharing this story:

“I'm just thinking to myself, because I've had a couple of them [people “obviously” experiencing homelessness on the street] approach me, and I'm thinking, what you see is not...I mean, I'm struggling just as much as you are. Can you beg up on one of these applications at one of these places? You standing in front of their door, begging for some money. Go in there, beg for a job.”

Unfortunately, she didn't have a photo depicting this experience, but her narrative depicts some vivid imagery nonetheless. Although Angelica expresses (silently) that she shares the experience of homelessness with the person who approached her she uses a common societal reaction to “homeless people” (why don't you just get a job?) to separate herself from them. In this instance she is protecting her personal identity and purposely extracting it from the ascribed social role of “being homeless.” I argue that this act of protecting is also a mechanism of identity reclamation. Reclaiming one's identity does not have to occur publicly. It can be a private process, such as in the narrative above, and still have the positive affects of strengthening one's self worth, which is the same outcome as when co-researchers “publicly” reclaimed their identities through expressions of being hopeful, faithful, and holding a *worthy* role (i.e., being a mother).

The women in the group also used their experience of passing to reclaim their personal identities openly, but this occurred in safe spaces. Co-researchers were keenly aware of the affect constantly having to “pass” would have on their identity, like in Reina's statement below, and openly sought support in processing this experience. Reina stated, “sometimes if you keep the mask on too long you can learn to not even know who you are.”

To mitigate the possibility of forgetting who they were the co-researchers sought affirmation of their personal identities in spaces where they perceived this tension was understood. The supportive housing facility, and, as expressed by co-researchers, our photovoice group operated as safe spaces for this to occur. I observed this process of identity reclamation in the ways the women not only expressed agreement with one another while sharing their

photographs and narratives, but also in how they added their own interpretations to the photographs. While these interpretations served to differentiate their unique identities – one co-researcher may have seen a photograph differently than others – they also helped the photographer reconstruct, and thus reclaim, the parts of themselves they were expressing through their pictures. There were a few circumstances where others imposed their view of the image onto the photographer, such as telling a photographer what they meant instead of letting the photographer confirm or deny their interpretation, however a majority of the interpretations were affirming to the personal identities co-researchers were attempting to express.

Co-researchers had two options 1) to reveal that they were experiencing homelessness and be confined to that identity by those around them (at work, at church, etc.) or 2) to hide their experience and/or where they lived and be trapped in an invisible cage, to not be able to act as their true selves, to others. *What would your choice be?* As Goffman (1963) and other scholars have made clear, the need for *passing* affirms the reality that we are seen as the world sees us. Passing is not unique to people experiencing homelessness. Many other marginalized individuals have expressed similar sentiments, fears, and emotions.

The group often discussed the support they needed to lean on to get through this time, including God, each other, service providers, and their families and their frustration with having to wear their mask or *pass* in public. However, the most striking piece of their discussions of homelessness was not what they had to say about it – I think their words would confirm those said previously in the literature – it was instead what they *didn't* say about homelessness. Their focus was not on the fact that they were experiencing homelessness, but, instead, on how these support systems reinforced their identities outside of homelessness. The noticeable absence of talking about homelessness in a majority of the group sessions and a personal narrative that

declined to *center* their homelessness when it was mentioned were both part of the identity reclamation process.

DISCUSSION

Reclaiming Identity: A Necessary Experience of Homelessness

The knowledge gained from the way women in this study identified themselves goes beyond an elicitation of identity development. Co-researchers depicted that the part of themselves they saw as “homeless” was not a self-imposed identity. Instead, they recognized “homeless” as an identity constructed by society and then ascribed to them. While scholars have previously noted this distinction, the link between how much of this knowledge is scholarly analysis versus voiced directly by people experiencing homelessness has been unclear. The photographs and narratives from this project work to connect the agency of women experiencing homelessness to the structure of homelessness and class-based social roles in a unique way: by centering the ways in which individual agency outweighed the power of structure through the process of identity reclamation.

The guiding question of the group was “What do you want the world to know about you?” and the women essentially answered, “that I am so much more than this experience.” Experiencing homelessness was clearly a major part of their lives at the moment; during the groups I would overhear and participate in discussions about the stress that accompanies juggling work or finding work, taking care of children, taking care of one’s self, and then performing all

of the necessary steps to find and retain affordable housing. But this was not who they see themselves as being and what they wanted to illustrate about their lives.

Identity versus Experience

The women of this group confirmed that homelessness was an experience, not their identity. Co-researchers expressed resignation t in having to carry the weight of their imposed social role as a “homeless person” while simultaneously grasping at their personhood. Moving towards understanding homelessness as an experience, not an identity, would begin the process of releasing this felt burden. *What might happen when we give people permission to accept their situation and move forward without entrenching them with “who they are now”?* Answers to this specific question are outside the scope of this paper, however the women of this project alluded to ways that acceptance of their personhood by those not experiencing homelessness would directly benefit their quality of life.

While there are pragmatic limitations to the role of identity in the experience of homelessness, for example not being labeled as a homeless person doesn’t automatically grant someone housing, there is merit in situating the empirical evidence of the pitfalls of forcing identity within the larger structure of housing and housing policy. As has been noted, stipulations and requirements for entering shelters, supportive housing, and even permanent housing have an ingrained *scale of worthiness* (Marvasti 2002; Shinn 2010) that determines who is accepted and who is not. Experiencing homelessness is a necessary requisite to retain any of these services, so I’m not arguing that we erase it completely; and doing so would further marginalize these individuals in multiple ways. However, scholars, service providers, and policy makers should be asking to what extent identity plays a role in affording someone housing and how is this practice

helpful? If society begins to view homelessness as an experience, much like losing a job or becoming a widow (both of which often lead to homelessness), perhaps prevention and intervention of homelessness will not center someone's character but instead their situation and need. Divorcing the identity from the situation opens up these possibilities. Therefore, moving towards a deconstruction of the "homeless identity" is crucial to not only breaking down barriers between the in group and out group (homeless and housed) to promote empathy and understanding, but also to further housing-positive policy agendas. Moving towards an understanding of homelessness as an experience, one with a distinctive set of systemic and compounded obstacles that can be overcome, versus an identity that is static and ingrained, has the potential to redirect society's perspective of homelessness.

Finally, make no mistake, while I have used the phrase "people experiencing homelessness" throughout this paper, the identities and experiences being shared are those of self-identified women. Women experiencing homelessness often move more invisibly through the world than their male counterparts, either due to necessity (wearing a mask to protect one's self from judgement or harm) or at the direction of someone in a higher social position. And as Pearce (1983) pointed out, with the feminization of poverty, women experiencing homelessness are met with further marginalization due to sexism and racism surrounding lack of economic resources and the secondary social position of women and people of color. Therefore, any framework suggested to combat this marginalization must include a gendered perspective to power in addition to a class perspective. Transposing a framework that centers the person and the experiences of their gender, race, and class in tandem onto the experiences of homelessness for women will be the most efficacious path forward to restoring their power and the opportunity to reclaim their personal identities.

The Power of Visual Storytelling

The secondary purpose of this study was to explore how participatory and visual methods aided in the research process and data collection. Visual methods are being increasingly implemented within sociology and other social science disciplines, but are still largely absent from major publications in the field and relegated to their own spaces. Participatory methods, such as PAR, are conspicuously absent from sociology as well, although momentum may be gaining as the methodology comes to be better understood. Photovoice was chosen for this study because of its demonstrated ability to extract meaningful data from marginalized groups of people through its visual and power sharing nature.

The rich qualitative data generated from this study is due to this participatory and visual method. The images produced by the co-researchers provided an additional level of analysis that is not present when working with words alone. The combination of narratives and visuals enhanced the information being presented, much like how mixed method research does, affording more confidence in the data. Additionally, the use of images was inviting to reluctant participants. Participation in this group was completely voluntary and the amount of participation was up to the co-researcher's discretion. Some women were very comfortable talking amongst the group while others preferred to listen, which is expected in a group setting. However, introducing the production and viewing of photographs allowed more naturally quiet co-researchers to participate and voice who they were in a way other than talking. I believe that without the use of a visual method in this study vital data would have been missed because of the limited options for presenting one's identity.

Finally, the creativity involved in photovoice was an attractive feature of this project and served as a valuable recruitment tool. While the creative aspect may have deterred some from

participating in the group I am confident that the number of potential co-researchers that were gained outweighs those who were lost. Future sociological investigation would benefit from implementing visual methods as a way to gather additional data, a recruitment tool, and an opportunity to hear and honor quieter participants in group settings. These advantages have been demonstrated in studies with marginalized populations, but would be beneficial to qualitative studies across the board.

CONCLUSION

In the previous sections I have made the argument that reclaiming one's personal identity is imperative for navigating the experience of homelessness. This study shows that the women of this photovoice group did not identify themselves as "homeless" when asked what they want the world to know about them. Combining this observation with Link and Phelan's (2001) definition of stigma (that it must occur within a power-driven situation), I conclude that identity reclamation is an imperative piece in restoring the lost power of those experiencing homelessness.

Although this study provides an increased understanding of the unique, multifaceted issues facing women experiencing homelessness, it is not without its limitations. First, women experiencing homelessness who currently live on the streets or do not participate in shelter programs were not included in this study. Further research with a focus on this subset of the population would provide invaluable insight into the challenges faced by women living on the streets. Each of these types of experiences holds a unique set of stresses, and opportunities for

stigma, which should be explored to provide a more comprehensive picture of the social factors that may affect those experiencing homelessness.

Additionally, while the demographics of the overall group of participants reflect racial diversity, I became aware some time into the group that the majority of women who were attending the group regularly were white. I didn't come to this realization in time to ask questions to the group on why this might be, but I did "file it away" as an important piece to mention. Regardless, it is important to acknowledge that some diversity in experience is lost due to this racial dynamic that occurred weeks into the group sessions. Future research should specifically seek out voices of women of color experiencing homelessness as their experiences and identities continue to be more deeply marginalized.

Finally, there is a possibility that expression of personal identity was obfuscated by the women agreeing with another to better "fit in" versus truly sharing their own experiences. This was briefly mentioned in the discussion section, but bears repeating as a limitation. The cost of implementing qualitative research within a group setting as opposed to their individual interviews is uncertainty as to whether responses are individually derived and not influenced by the group. While this was considered during the design of this study, I determined the benefits of a group setting outweighed this limitation. The photovoice group served as a safe place to process and provide support and I believe this environment greatly enhanced the data generated from this study.

Throughout this paper I have shared how the co-researchers of this study, women currently living in a supportive housing program, viewed themselves and what they considered salient to their identities. They are the experts of their own experiences and I have attempted to amplify their voices while providing commentary and analysis. Co-researchers relayed these

narratives through photographs and critical dialogues during 14 weeks of photovoice group sessions. During this project they shared their experiences in managing their identities while simultaneously navigating homelessness. Co-researchers defined themselves as hopeful people, women of God, and caretakers and expressed fear of how being seen as a “homeless person” would erase these identities. Asserting these self-defined identities in a safe spaces where they could be affirmed was one of the major ways in which co-researchers reclaimed their identities. However, the most outstanding “finding” from the photovoice groups was the way in which their identities did not center their experiences with homelessness and the processes used to reclaim individual identity.

Future research should consider identity reclamation as worthy of further scholarly investigation as an imperative mechanism for navigating homelessness. Existing research has provided copious amounts of meaningful knowledge on the importance of identity for people experiencing homelessness and how they manage tensions felt between their personal and social identities. Research tailored towards how the identity management process affects the attainment and retention of permanent housing is a crucial area for investigation. Additionally, further scholarship on identity reclamation has the potential to not only uncover additional mechanisms within the identity management process, but also to affect society’s view and social expectations of the experience of homelessness.

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APPENDIX A: DEMOGRAPHIC SURVEY

Please fill in the blank or check the appropriate boxes for the following questions to your level of comfort. Leave blank any questions you do not feel comfortable completing. **All answers are confidential.**

Age: _____ **Place of Birth:** _____ (city/state/country)

Gender: ___ Female since birth ___ Female since transition in _____ (year)

___ Other: _____

Race/Ethnicity:

___ African American ___ Arabic (Middle-Eastern) ___ Asian

___ Caucasian(White) ___ Hispanic ___ Multiple

___ Other: _____

Highest Level of Education received:

___ Some high-school ___ High School diploma ___ Some college

___ College graduate ___ Professional degree (Master's, Doctorate, etc.)

Relationship Status: ___ Single ___ Married ___ Separated ___ Divorced

If "Single", have you ever been married? ___ Yes ___ No

Do you have children? ___ Yes ___ No

If "Yes", do your children currently live with you? ___ Yes ___ No

Are you currently homeless? Yes No

If “Yes”, please answer the following questions

How long have you been without a residence? _____

Have you been without a residence before in your life? _____

If “No”, please answer the following questions.

When was the most recent time you were without a residence?

How long were you without a residence during this time?

How many times have you been without a residence in your life? _____

Are you currently experiencing any physical medical illnesses? Yes No

If “Yes”, please explain _____

Have you ever been diagnosed with a mental illness? Yes No

If “Yes”, please explain _____

What is one thing you want me to know about you?

What is one thing you want your community to know about you?

APPENDIX B: SHOWeD METHOD INTERVIEW GUIDE

During the critical dialogue sessions each co-researcher will present 1-2 photographs to the group. The PI will pose the following questions for each photograph, adapted from the SHOWeD Method, to the co-researcher and then to the group as a whole.

SHOWeD Method

1. What do you SEE here?
2. What's really happening here?
3. How does this relate to OUR lives?
4. Why does this problem or situation exist?
5. How could this image Educate others (the community, policy makers, etc.)?
6. What can we do about the problem or situation?

Adapted from : Robert W. Strack, Cathleen Magill, Kara McDonagh. 2003. Engaging Youth Through Photovoice. *Health Promotion Practice*, 5 (1), 49-58