

LINKING AFRICAN AMERICAN MOTHERS ACROSS LIFE STAGE AND STATION THROUGH PHOTOVOICE

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Abstract: Homeless young African American women and low-income, elderly African American women have housing needs specific to their age cohorts, yet they also have parallel and complementary housing, health, and personal needs. The young struggle to afford decent housing, while the old may have difficulty maintaining their homes. In this pilot study, intergenerational contact was established between young homeless women and elderly independently housed women through photovoice. Over six months, five African American women discussed photographs they had taken that focused on their current living arrangements and activities. Although the women spanned three generations, had different life experiences, and resided in a variety of home settings, the sharing of photographs revealed many commonalities. In the process of discussing photographs, the women established mutual respect, exercised reciprocal affirmation, and built alliances. The preliminary study is preparatory to exploring the feasibility of establishing house-sharing arrangements for mutual assistance between these cohorts.

Key words: African Americans, life stage, motherhood, photovoice.

This paper describes a pilot project designed to establish intergenerational contact between young, homeless women and elderly, independently housed women through the use of photovoice, an innovative participatory action-research approach. Photovoice involves providing people with cameras so that they can photograph their everyday lives to create and promote knowledge about personal and community issues through group discussions of photographs.¹⁻⁶ Presented here is the photovoice concept, project method, findings, advantages, and limitations and emphasizing the unique contributions of photovoice as a tool for promoting intergenerational contact between two groups with divergent life courses but with shared needs.

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Photovoice enables people to identify, represent, and enhance their community through a specific photographic technique.⁴ The process is based on health promotion principles and the theoretical literature on Paulo Freire's education for critical consciousness, feminist theory, and a community-based approach to photography.¹ Photovoice has three main goals: (1) to enable people to record and reflect their personal and their community's strengths and concerns, (2) to promote critical dialogue and to enhance knowledge about issues through group discussions of photographs, and (3) to reach policy makers.^{4,5} The photovoice concept, method, and use for participatory needs assessment and evaluation was first developed and applied by Wang, Burris, and colleagues in the Ford Foundation-supported Women's Reproductive Health and Development Program in Yunnan, China.^{4,5} There, rural women snapped pictures of their own and their community's health and work realities, discussed the everyday social and political forces that influenced their lives, and communicated these issues to policy makers.

In the pilot study of photovoice reported here, the focus is on establishing multigenerational links between homeless, young African American women and low-income, elderly African American women. Ordinarily being unlikely to encounter one another, these African American women have housing needs specific to their age cohorts yet have parallel and complementary housing, health, and personal needs. For as the young struggle to find and afford decent housing, the old may have difficulty in maintaining their homes. This study is a pilot project for a larger endeavor that will explore the feasibility of establishing house-sharing arrangements between women otherwise separated by age and life station.

Method

Five African American women participated in the project: two homeless women, ages 28 and 36, and three women ranging in age from 67 to 86, who lived independently in their own homes. The women were nominated for participation based on demographic criteria of the study (age, ethnicity, residential status), their potential to communicate rich information,⁷ and the likelihood that they would be available throughout the duration of the project. The homeless women were recruited from a large family shelter in a major mid-western city. Women older than 65 who lived in a variety of residential arrangements were also sought. Those who lived alone in their own home or apartment, those who lived in housing designated for seniors, and those who lived with their families were included. They were nominated by health professionals in various local health agencies. Consideration was given to the extent that they could independently participate in the project. The homeless women and the elderly women were also selected based on the degree to which they could contribute to an understanding of the health and housing needs of other women like themselves.⁷ They had experienced a range of housing arrangements, from being homeless to stably housed, and had

personal characteristics similar to those of women who could benefit from the results of the study. All the women lived in predominantly African American neighborhoods. Both homeless women self-reported a household income range of \$200 to \$800 a month; the range for the elderly women was \$800 to \$1,200 per month. Pseudonyms are used for all of the women and locations described.

After informed consent was obtained from the participants, the women met several times at a local church highly esteemed for its social, political, and economic ministry. The first of five meetings, held over a seven-month period, included a discussion of cameras (the authority cameras confer), ethics (how participants can use cameras in a responsible manner without putting themselves and others at risk), and power.^{2,3} Instructions regarding what to photograph were minimal; however, the women were encouraged to photograph not only their place of residence and their neighborhoods but also where they worked, socialized, and conducted business. The women were instructed to photograph places, objects, events, and people that were related to their everyday experiences or usual routine and that were important to them. Within this broad scope, the women were asked to center their picture taking around three questions: (1) What are the things, places, and people I love? (2) What are the things (people, places, events, situations) that have an important impact on my life? and (3) What do we (the photovoice group) have in common? These questions provided guidance for each photographing cycle without structuring what the women actually photographed. Participants were provided with disposable cameras equipped with a flash.

After the women finished each roll of film, they turned them in to be developed. Their photographs were discussed at subsequent meetings. Each meeting was facilitated by the researchers; free discussion was based on photographs the women selected as the most significant to them or simply the ones they liked the most. Some photographs were selected by the researchers to augment discussions. For each session, the selected photographs were made into slides. The group's viewing of selected photographs sparked dialogue and allowed group members to compare and contrast the content of photographs from their own collections with those of the other women. Each session was audiotaped and transcribed. Participants received a stipend of \$20 for each meeting attended. A clinical psychologist observed each meeting. Her role was to facilitate the group process in the event that a photograph or discussion was painful to any of the participants or a major conflict arose.

Snapshots of the participating women. Monica Thomas was a 28-year-old divorced mother. Her two oldest children, ages 10 and 12, resided with relatives. Monica's two younger children, ages 2 and 7, lived with her in the shelter, and she gave birth to her fifth child during the course of the study.

Rhonda Lerner and her 12-year-old daughter had lived in the shelter only a few weeks prior to Rhonda's involvement in the study. She was 36. The shelter was her first residence after moving to the area from Alabama.

Helen Wyatt lived with her husband in their single-family residence. She was a 67-year-old professional storyteller who conducted educational storytelling sessions in local elementary schools and other community agencies.

Sarah Patterson, a 69-year-old divorcee, was a homeowner who lived in a two-bedroom bungalow with her dog, Scotty. She was a retired, registered nurse who was actively involved in the community and taught a class on arthritis to other seniors in the community.

Alice Quincy was an 86-year-old widow who resided in a high-rise apartment building for seniors and drove her own car. She liked to crochet, cook, and visit family and friends.

Findings and discussion

Although the women spanned three generations, had different life experiences, and resided in a variety of home settings, the discussing of photographs revealed many commonalities. The differences that were exposed provided a frame of reference for viewing each other's life circumstances and provided a forum for making connections to become better acquainted. Several themes emerged from the photographs: "my own space, my own place," "transitions," "kinships/friendships," "our heritage: our hope," "children are a blessing," and "the perils of poverty."

My own space, my own place. The women photographed favorite people, places, and things. Their images emphasized the importance of having their own space and possessions. Alice cherished an artificial lemon tree, which adorned the corner of her living room, and accented a black lacquer chest that she had had for years and had brought from the house where she formerly lived. She enjoyed the convenience of living in a high-rise apartment but missed many of the advantages of living in a single-family home, which she had shared with her now-deceased husband. A number of her photographs taken in a nearby park were of birds and a deer. She loved her apartment's riverfront view but missed having a yard. Mrs. Quincy had adapted spaces and places in her new apartment to recreate the essence of the home in which she had spent most of her adult life.

Sarah, another of the elderly women, lived alone in her own home. One of her favorite photographs was of her dog Scotty peering out of a front window. The photograph of Scotty's face, both suggesting his mournful gaze every time she left and his anticipation of when she would come home, displayed her delight in having the unconditional companionship of a pet. The dog also kept watch of congregationalists from the church across the street as they arrived and left. Not only was Scotty aware of the comings and goings of most of the neighbors in the immediate area, he seemed watchful of the activities of the neighborhood children as well. Sarah also was very attuned to the activities in the neighborhood. Often she visited her shut-in neighbors. Her love of

and involvement with the children was reflected in the many photographs she had snapped of them. In response to her son's urgings for her to move to the suburbs where he thought she would be safer and more comfortable, she countered, "But everything I'm familiar with is right here. I'm staying right here until I can no longer stand staying." Sarah's desire to hold on to those familiar and comfortable things that gave her a sense of identity, grounding, and community parallels what is described as a desire of many seniors to "age in place."⁸⁻¹⁰

Monica's stay in the shelter had been extended primarily because of her pregnancy. The additional time had allowed her to stabilize her life and provided the opportunity for her to save enough money to make a down payment on a home, which she planned to purchase for \$13,000. She had been anxious for her house to be ready for occupancy. Some of the minor repairs had been completed, and she had done extensive cleaning. She even had her eye on the vacant lot next to the house, which she thought would make an ideal play area for her children. She had taken several pictures of the exterior of the house. Toward the end of the project, however, the focus of her photographs changed and revealed that she had indeed moved from the shelter but was renting a different home instead of buying. She had had to find another place because the house she hoped to purchase needed to have a new furnace installed. Apparently, this investment in time and money was beyond Monica's current reach.

Rhonda also moved from the shelter during the course of the study. She had found it necessary to seek shelter at a place called HAVEN shortly after arriving from Alabama. After living in the shelter for a few months, Rhonda regularly contemplated the ability to make a home out of someplace that was undesirable. She had photographed the row of dilapidated houses across the street from the shelter. The architecturally beautiful, stately Victorian houses were wasting away and in serious disrepair. Rhonda explained,

See, these houses are beautiful, aren't they? I mean they could be, if they were fixed up. It would be good for HAVEN [the shelter]. That's what we have to look at when we walk outside. HAVEN would be better if they improved the neighborhood.

Rhonda was able to move from the shelter and finally had her own place. Determined to make a go of it, Rhonda was proud of her new apartment. Her choices were limited because of her financial status and her lack of general familiarity with the new surroundings. Rhonda stated,

Don't get me wrong, I love my apartment, but it ain't home. I mean it is for now and I love it, but it still ain't really mine, and it's not what I really want. It needs a lot of work, and it's overpriced, but it's better than being in the shelter. . . . And, of course I appreciate all the help I got at HAVEN, but I really want my own place.

The women expressed the significance of space and place for developing and retaining family rituals and traditions. In the shelter's cafeteria, for example, eating dinner together with one's family depended on logistics and what parents could enforce, given the communal style of eating. According to Monica,

I was just trying to show the atmosphere of the cafeteria in this picture. Some families eat together, and some of them don't. Like now, my daughter sits with her own little crowd and [my son] T.J., he sits with his own little crowd. They say cause I fuss too much about them eating. So they don't sit with me no more. Every once in a while they might sit with me.

By contrast, Helen showed several pictures she had taken of her dining room, which adjoined her family room. She explained, "This is where we spend a lot of our time. That's where everyone hangs out. It's really a comfortable room. There's lots of music. We have a lot of family gatherings here." With this explanation, the group was reminded of the essence of the family coming together: the good feelings engendered from the family sitting down and eating a meal together even when circumstances were not optimal. Monica reflected about the message from the photographs. She said, "I guess maybe if I didn't nag my kids so much, they would sit with me more."

Transitions. During the course of the study, both the younger mothers and grandmothers were experiencing transitions in their lives. The elderly women were immersed in some of the developmental changes characteristic of their age cohort. For example, Alice, who was 86 years of age, became a great-great-grandmother. She was extremely proud of the four generations in her family and basked in her role as the family matriarch. The subject of several of her photographs was the four generations of her family posed together.

Sarah was also a grandmother and a godmother. Her goddaughter gave birth to premature twins, whom she treated as if they were her own grandchildren. She updated the photovoice group on their status regularly via photographs and stories. Early in the project, the group saw photographs of frail premature infants. Toward the end of the project, the group celebrated with her subsequent pictures revealing two thriving babies.

During the course of the project, Monica gave birth. Brian was her fifth child. During her pregnancy, Monica had seemed very confident about managing the new addition. Her two youngest children resided with her in the shelter. Occasionally, she mentioned her two oldest children who were being raised by other relatives. In addition to the transitional phase of becoming a parent again, Monica had the tasks of finding a permanent place to live and staying drug free. The impact of multiple, simultaneous transitions, developmental and situational, influenced her ability to move forward, but each gain made her more confident and motivated her more than ever. Several of the photographs Monica snapped were evidence of her increased economic

independence and her ability to take full responsibility for her family and herself. One photograph was the front door of her bank. At age 28, Monica had opened her first savings account and had saved enough to make a down payment on a house. Also, for the first time in a few years, she was able to buy gifts for her children at Christmas. Their beautifully wrapped presents were artistically arranged for one of her photographs.

Only a few months prior to the beginning of the project, Rhonda had moved from her home state of Alabama and wound up in the shelter. Learning the city, finding work, and adjusting to comparatively harsh winters were transitional challenges Rhonda faced. Her move from the shelter to an apartment gave her hope and a sense of pride. During the course of the study, she married. Rhonda, her new husband, and her daughter worked together to rebuild a family and a new life.

Transitions are normal, regular occurrences in the life of every individual and family. But multiple, major changes can be overwhelming, particularly when an individual has meager personal, social, spiritual, and economic resources. Case managers and other shelter personnel were diligent about providing some of the support the younger women needed. Although encounters in the photovoice group were brief and took place over a very short period of time, the affirming mentoring and expressions of positive regard from the elderly mothers also contributed significantly to this support.

Kinships/friendships. Although all the women in the group photographed family members and friends, these subjects were more plentiful among the snapshots of the elderly women. This phenomenon was, in part, related to the homeless women's limited mobility and restricted living arrangements but also provided evidence that homeless women are generally isolated.¹¹ In fact, many women become homeless because they are estranged from their families for any number of reasons.^{12,13} While some contacts are usually maintained with at least one family member, these connections are often tenuous.^{11 14,15} The homeless women's focus on the family was therefore often fixed on their children. Monica's pictures, for example, showed her children as a dominant theme; however, attempts to recreate and reify some semblance of the extended family were evident. Monica photographed the cooks in the shelter's cafeteria as they prepared a meal and said, "They're like family." In fact, the shelter community became a kind of alternative or attenuated family. Certain familial roles were performed by the shelter, such as providing child care while the women sought jobs, went to work, or enrolled in school; taking the families on special outings for recreation and enlightenment; emphasizing life-management skills; and providing spiritual uplift for those who sought such guidance. Such supportive services helped the families of the shelter to stay afloat, move toward self-sufficiency, and reestablish some positive connections.

While social isolation is often a reality for many elderly women, particularly those who live alone,¹⁶ this was not the case for the grandmothers in this

study. They were actively involved in the community, their churches, and with friends and families.

Aside from the photographs of family taken by the women during the course of the study, visual representations within the snapshots showed the primacy of the family. One photograph included a portrait of Helen's grandmother. Helen stated, "She represents all of the strength, all of the suffering, and all of the gentleness, everything that we live with everyday. She is just symbolic of what I want to become."

Friendships were nearly as significant as family was. Monica lit up as she described her best friend, Delia, who had also spent a few weeks in the shelter and then returned to Tennessee. "We're tight. We go way back! Her people are from the same town I'm from in Tennessee. I used to do her hair. Sometimes we wear our hair the same way." The photograph of Delia was striking because she greatly resembled Monica. Although the circumstances of Delia's short stay in the area were not revealed, the significance of their friendship came to light in Monica's enthusiasm.

Alice talked about her friends with the same degree of gusto. She had friends and acquaintances throughout the apartment building in which she lived. Her closest friends in the building resided across the hall from her. It was as if she had an "across the back fence" relationship with many of them. She and her neighbors and friends swapped recipes, dishes, and jokes. They each looked out for the other.

Although the context and specific dimensions of the women's relationships varied greatly, family and friends were at the core of their lives.

Our heritage: our hope. The African American ethos was communicated directly and indirectly in the women's photographs. Two of the elderly women had previously visited several countries in Africa. Helen took great pride in the African mask collection she had acquired and anchored on one entire wall of her family room. Throughout their homes, Helen and Sarah displayed African paintings and sculptures they had brought from their visits to Africa. Alice photographed her own lit television screen to capture scenes from programs featuring individuals important in the African American community. She had taken a picture of Nelson Mandela at his home, in his garden, and at his office from a PBS special about South Africa. Other photographs highlighted Jessie Jackson, Oprah Winfrey, and Whoopi Goldberg via the television screen. Photographs were also taken of the local Museum of African American Art and History. Photos of specific displays and exhibits were made. Sarah had focused on a display of quilts made by African American quilters. The quilts highlighted works of art in African national colors, and many were collages or pictorial chronicles of the African American experience.

Other photographs revealed the kinds of things for which African Americans strive. For example, Monica's angled photograph of stacked tires in

various arrangements might easily have been eligible for an art or photographic award, but the purpose of her taking the photograph was to provide an example of a family business, a retail tire shop. She explained,

I chose this picture because that's a family business. My children's father's father's tire shop. I always wanted a business of my own. I've been going to school for accounting, so I thought it would be interesting. I don't know if y'all wanted a business, or ever thought about having your own business.

Monica also photographed an antique shop. She had learned from her mother to appreciate antiques and had begun to collect them herself as a way to keep history alive. During her homelessness, her avocation necessarily had been suspended. The photograph of the antique shop was an important reminder of what she enjoyed and may have motivated her to continue to strive to get her life so that she could resume participating in the activities she loved.

The strength of oral tradition has been key in transmitting African American culture, history, and values.¹⁷ Helen was a professional storyteller who shared facts and wisdom in schools and community agencies. She shared photographs of herself guiding schoolchildren on learning adventures through the telling of exciting tales. She exclaimed that often the classrooms were "steamed with excitement" about mathematical concepts and other lessons that had come alive from her stories. She taught one math lesson by telling a story about meal preparation for Kwanza, an African American holiday.

Other photographs were taken of churches: the interiors and exteriors, close-ups and long shots, structures only, or events and services within. One photograph showed the doorway of a church. Evidence of other spiritual grounding included photographs of nature; beautiful landscapes; an array of "strategically" fallen, frosted leaves in an alley; and birds on the ground and in flight.

Children are a blessing. An overwhelming number of the photographs showed the extent to which children were valued. The women's interpretations of their photographs revealed delight in children simply for their own sakes. For example, a series of pictures taken by Sarah depicted children at play during recess on a neighborhood school's playground. She reported,

Oh, those little ones make my life a joy! They never stop running. They run for a half-hour, up and down. And that just delights me to see them, because that's just joy, that any human being can just enjoy something that much. And, they never fight, they just run. They're so . . . children are a blessing. They are really a blessing. So I am blessed to live in a house where I can look out my window and see those little bits. And what happens, Scotty hears their voices and asks me to let him out so he can watch them play. He loves them.

On the weekend, Sarah watched other groups of children come to the school's playground with their fathers. She had taken photographs of other children in the neighborhood as well. One snapshot, captioned "Children Going Places," showed three children on their way home from school. Sarah kept abreast of all their achievements, encouraged them, and made gifts for them on holidays. She also spent a great deal of time with her own children, her nieces, her grandchildren, and her godchild and her family.

Helen talked with pride about her children and reflected on the changes in tradition that occurred as they had grown. Her niece had become a concert violinist and was treated with much respect and admiration. Alice was also ecstatic about her entire family. She loved to talk about her four-year-old great-grandson in particular, who wants to be a preacher. Monica's children also were primary subjects for her photographs. She also enjoyed explaining their activities in great detail.

The perils of poverty. In the photovoice study, two challenges of being African American, female, poor, and a mother came to light: finding affordable, suitable housing and raising children with limited resources. Monica, who had small children, was determined to overcome the obstacles related to her situation. She struggled to find an affordable house of her own, but when that opportunity was thwarted, she found an apartment instead. Both she and Rhonda lamented over not having the kind of accommodations they wanted. They complained that their housing was too expensive for what was offered. Women often must pay a disproportionate amount of their incomes to secure housing that is safer, closer to amenities, and is more aesthetically pleasing.¹⁸ Women are most vulnerable to being cost burdened or having to pay more than 30 percent of their income for rent or mortgage. Moreover, women with children often are denied housing, particularly if they are recipients of public assistance.^{10,18-20}

Raising children alone and with limited resources was also a challenge that emerged while viewing and discussing the photographs. Monica took photographs of her son in the shelter lobby doing his homework with other children. She was encouraged by his zest for learning and relieved that he willingly engaged in his schoolwork. Yet it bothered Monica that he really did not have a proper place or all of the tools he needed to complete his work. Monica made every effort to fill in gaps and reinforce what both her children learned in school. She visited her daughter's kindergarten classroom each week.

The grandmothers reminisced about how it had been for them when they were younger. Sarah could relate to the issues involved in finding appropriate housing. Divorced during the 1950s, she found herself looking for a place to live with three small children. She conveyed some of the difficulties she had, including some of the discriminatory practices in housing she encountered. She explained,

Just because you were a woman, alone with children, at that time, landlords would ask you, "Do you have parties?" "How many men do you have?" I was insulted! Ask me about how many men I have. Hell, you don't know how I live! Don't you dare ask me that. . . . They ask you all kinds of questions, like you're nothing but street trash. And then they don't want you if your children are teenagers. . . . When we moved [into our own home] my youngest son said, "Mommy, now we know when our door bell rings, it's just only for us." I said, "Thank you Jesus."

Sarah raised her children under a number of constraints and helped them survive in an often hostile world. She gave specific suggestions about how to "penny pinch" and emphasized the importance of having an overall philosophy for raising children. The younger mothers always listened intently, nodding affirmatively and sometimes interjecting that their own strategies were synchronous with hers.

Although the grandmothers had not experienced homelessness, they had experienced very lean periods, times when they had to make do and engage in making difficult decisions while keeping their families together and functioning. The grandmothers could identify, to a certain extent, with the younger mothers and offered experienced insight and positive support for the young mothers, who in essence had hit rock bottom and were making every effort to get back on their feet.

The process. The process involved in the photovoice experience was as informative as the photographs and their interpretations. The group moved from mutual respect, mutual exchange of ideas and information, and mentoring to establishing "the village," mutual affirmation, and building alliances.

Mutual respect. From the first meeting to the last, there was a progression of heightened regard for one another. Interaction moved from polite exchange to easy conversation, acceptance, and mutual respect. Although the women were quite different, no apparent uneasiness existed among them. In fact, they discovered they had many common bonds. The younger mothers voluntarily and unhesitantly disclosed that they lived in a shelter for the homeless. The senior mothers were interested and concerned about their circumstances but not shocked or put off.

Mutual respect was facilitated because the women presented themselves authentically. There was no apparent pretentiousness, condescension, or self-aggrandizement on the part of any of the mothers. Group members were relaxed, and the women presented themselves honestly. The power of who the women were was reinforced by the actual photographs that they took and presented in the group.

Mutual exchange of ideas and information. Each woman was an authority on her own life experiences. The mothers and grandmothers served in roles of

both teacher and learner. The two grandmothers, who visited Africa, were able to share information concerning African heritage, about which the younger women had little or no exposure. The family traditions that the grandmothers revealed through photos and discussion were traditions that the younger mothers had either experienced or had hoped to incorporate into their own family life. One of the grandmothers had a family member who had recently lived in a shelter. She was somewhat familiar with the services provided in shelters and the circumstances that could lead to living in a shelter, but she appreciated the additional input from insiders and had a better understanding of what her nephew had endured. Alice had given donations, along with other residents in her apartment, to another local shelter. She, too, seemed to be grateful to hear firsthand information about the daily routines, policies, and services of the shelters.

Mutual affirmation. At the final meeting, the facilitator invited participants to "think about what had been learned about one another; from the photographs and stories told." When the question, "What have we learned about Monica?" was posed, the 86-year-old great-grandmother said,

She is a strong young woman who has made a commitment to herself and her children. She knows what she's up against. She's willing to take a risk. We expect wonderful things from you. I think you're going to be fine.

Another member of the group said, "I marvel at her energy." Said a third, "I admire her. We are proud of you."

Each mother was honored by group members. Helen was praised for her rich, calm, and resonating voice and her "mother wit." Sarah was admired for courage, strength, and compassion and her willingness to always reach out to others. Rhonda was affirmed for her tenacity and singleness of purpose. She had literally been transformed in appearance and lifestyle over the course of several months. The oldest member, Alice, was admired for her independence, her stylish appearance, and her "take charge" abilities. The offering of positive reinforcement and mutual affirmation was genuine and had become a usual part of the group's *modus operandi*.

Mentoring. The grandmothers gave informal advice to the young mothers about child rearing, teaching values, being an effective parent, and living independently. While no formal measures assessed the extent to which the older women benefited from their advisor roles, they seemed to enjoy it immensely and take on the role naturally, as if it were expected of them. Much was learned from the others within age cohorts as well. Although advice was given on specific areas and certain issues, there were lessons to be learned about interacting in the small group that the women often appreciated.

Establishing the village. A version of the African proverb, "It takes a village to raise a child," came to life when Monica brought her newborn and two

other children to the group's last meeting. Everyone participated in assisting Monica, giving her relief, holding the new baby, making sure her children were comfortable and occupied. When the entire group viewed a series of slides of photographs, Monica's children became engaged in identifying themselves, providing their interpretations, and giving new meaning to the photographs.

Building alliances. Early on in the group meetings, the elderly women bonded together. After learning about some of their common interests and activities, the three women arranged to go to water aerobic classes together. The younger mothers were acquainted prior to their involvement in the project because they had met at the shelter. By the end of the project, however, important connections were made between the grandmothers and the younger mothers. Telephone numbers were exchanged at the last meeting. "You call me any time. . . . I'm going to call you to see how you're doing," exclaimed one. Tentative invitations were also extended. The grandmothers invited the young women to their homes for dinner.

Conclusion

Photovoice offered several unique contributions to establishing multigenerational links. First observed was that the process deeply engaged participants in vivifying and describing their own daily life realities. It provided the opportunity for core living experiences of a heterogeneous group to converge to the extent that mutual understanding evolved. For example, light was shed on the challenges of transitioning from homelessness to self-sufficiency. Concurrently, the lessons for maintaining independence were made clear. The mutual affirmation was striking, given the relatively limited amount of time spent together. This was attributed to the photovoice approach, which enabled the mothers to become inordinately familiar with one another's lives and histories in a short time. The second observation was minimal attrition during the project period. Third, photovoice helped nurture ties among participants, as evidenced by alliances lasting beyond the project period. Although bonding was stronger among the three grandmothers, who actually established friendships, telephone contact was initiated by the older and younger women after the completion of the project. While the stipends undoubtedly helped to sustain participation, it was likely that the innovative and meaningful nature of the project also secured participants' return time after time. Given the stigmatization experienced by homeless people,^{21,22} such perceived or actual social support was among the most valuable of project outcomes.

Limitations arose with photovoice, however. Photographs were easy to take but were challenging to summarize. A range of elements were evaluated in photographs, to include spatial and temporal components.²³ For this study, photographs were reviewed for the identification of themes only. Every effort

was made to work with the photographers themselves to identify the meaning and context of photographs. Mary Price²⁴ noted, "The use of a photograph determines meaning. The language of description may reveal, impose, or limit use." Many photographs, with seemingly valuable meaning, were not analyzed, however, because the women did not select them for discussion.

The logistics of carrying out the project posed few problems. Researchers retrieved the cameras from the women at their residences to have the film developed. This approach enhanced the rapport between the researchers and the photovoice participants and assured the expeditious return of the cameras. Only one camera was lost. One participant had made arrangements with the researchers to retrieve her camera from the receptionist desk at the shelter. The camera was left at the location in the morning and could not be found in the afternoon.

Each of the women had a positive experience from the photovoice group meetings. "I hate to see the group end," was a comment made by one woman at the last meeting. She seemed to speak for everyone, as judged by the unanimous nods around the room. The women engaged in somewhat of a novel, yet familiar activity: picture taking and storytelling. Even though the women had all previously engaged in individual picture taking, photovoice constructed this activity as a collective, community-building experience. The photographs not only represented images of people, things, or events to be remembered and shared, they also provided a mechanism for bringing together women who otherwise were unlikely to have had any contact with one another. The photovoice process provided a vehicle for participants to say what they ordinarily might not have said, and it established common ground among the women. It also allowed the women to engage in a kind of hypothetical trying on of shared lives.

A main objective of photovoice was to reach policy makers and engage participants in influencing policy and program design. This pilot project did not involve outreach to policy makers but began to provide a program model for involving intergenerational women in using photovoice to build community. It provided a vision for program design that enabled intergenerational participants to use photovoice as a tool to explore and create house-sharing options.

Future projects may involve other, larger groups of women across life stage and station. In addition, Ensign and Santelli²⁵ observed that basic variations in health needs of homeless people were often slighted in health planning; in a larger photovoice project, participants may further focus on their health states, needs, and strengths and communicate them to policy makers.

This pilot project was designed to inform a larger study aimed at using photovoice to promote house sharing among African American women otherwise separated by age and life station. An unanticipated finding of this pilot study was that it facilitated a metaphorical house sharing among participants; women welcomed one another into their homes through their photographs and stories. The initial efforts provided here support the feasibility of a larger study. The photovoice process was as important as the themes that emerged

from the photographs and holds promise for establishing sustainable links among African American mothers and other groups²⁶ across life stage and station.

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