Photography and Oral History as a Means of Chronicling the Homeless in Miami: The StreetWays Project

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This article describes the use of Photography and Oral History research methods as part of a collaborative research project on homelessness in Miami. Issues involving the use of documentary photography and oral history as a means of creating greater social awareness in the general public are explored, as well as broader issues of Social Justice.

Historically, the use of the arts, such as photography, has not been widespread in social justice education. This is despite the long-standing tradition in the United States of documentary photography being used to bring attention to oppression and discrimination. Social photographers such as Jacob Riis (1849–1914), who chronicled the living conditions of tenement dwellers at the beginning the twentieth century in books such as How the Other Half Lives: Studies among the Tenements

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of New York (1897; see Figure 1), and Lewis Hine (1874–1940), who in the years just prior to the First World War chronicled the abuse of child laborers in coal mines and factories (see Figure 2), did so as journalists and reporters, not as documentary photographers (Provenzo, 1982).

This article describes the development of a photographic and oral history project, dealing with the South Florida community, that attempts to not only chronicle the conditions of homeless people living in downtown Miami and Miami Beach, but also to make the larger South Florida community aware of these individuals as human beings with hopes, aspirations, and needs, rather than simply anonymous persons living at the edge of the city and its culture. It describes how the Social Foundations classroom can be used to create meaningful research on local communities and that advance the cause of Social Justice.

We undertook our research for this project with a very deliberate point of view. It is one that involves the use of photography and oral narratives to educate the general public about issues of inequality and social justice. In doing so, we see ourselves as propagandists. Propaganda is defined by the Oxford English Dictionary (2010) as: “The systematic dissemination of information, esp. in a biased or misleading way, in order to promote a political cause or point of view.” This definition, which is also the most commonly used understanding of the term, is somewhat misleading. One of the older uses of propaganda is the systematic propagation of a doctrine that reflects the views and interests of those advocating a specific cause. This use of the term is similar to how W. E. B. Du Bois, the great African American educator, used the term. For him, poetry, novels, plays, and sociological writings were directly
intended as vehicles for changing the country’s perceptions of African Americans, and were seen as a means of improving their condition. Propaganda represented, for him, a conscious report for the purpose of creating greater social justice. In his essay titled “Criteria of Negro Art” he argues, for example, that:

All Art is propaganda and ever must be, despite the wailing of the purists. I stand in utter shamelessness and say that whatever art I have for writing has been used always for propaganda for gaining the right of Black folk to love and enjoy. I do not care a damn for any art that is not used for propaganda. But I do care when propaganda is confined to one side while the other is stripped and silent (Du Bois 1926, 296).

Du Bois’s model provides us with our essential philosophical perspective for our research and this article.

Du Bois was not alone in using propaganda in his efforts to try to achieve social change and social justice. Roy Styker (1893–1975), the head of the Information Division of the Farm Security Administration’s (FSA) photo project during the Great American Depression, saw himself and his agency (the FSA) as creating a deliberate visual propaganda that would educate and alter the general population’s view of rural poverty (American Memory, 2010; see Figure 3). We see this work
FIGURE 3  “Migrant agricultural worker’s family. Seven hungry children. Mother aged 32. Father is a native Californian.” Photograph by Dorothea Lange, Nipomo, California, March 1936. A much more famous photograph of this same women commonly titled “Migrant Mother,” is included in this same series of pictures taken for the Farm Security Administration by Lange. Courtesy of the Library of Congress.

as an attempt to continue their tradition of employing propaganda through both biography/narrative and images as a form of art, and as a vehicle for trying to effect social change.

The project was a result of a chance meeting between Eugene F. Provenzo, Jr. (Gene), a professor at the University of Miami, and Lewis Wilkinson, a former business executive and documentary photographer. Lewis had been working through his church with homeless individuals for some time in the downtown area. In the process, he began to document their lives by taking photographs of them. Convinced that the homeless deserved to be better understood as people by the larger South Florida community, he developed the idea of creating postcard- or trading card-sized portraits of these individuals, which would include not only the picture of a person, but also a brief biography. Lewis’s idea was to provide these largely anonymous individuals with an identity they could share with others—one that included not only who they were, but also what their hopes and needs were.

This project was unique in that it went beyond simply recording the lives of people on the street, to providing them a means of describing who they are and what they care about so that they could share this information with others, including friends, family acquaintances, social workers, and the general public. By providing homeless individuals’ photographic postcards or trading cards to
give to people whom they meet, Lewis felt that they would be able to make a connection with the larger Miami community and overcome their anonymity.

Following several discussions with Lewis about his work, Gene proposed that it might be interesting to have his doctoral students engage in the collection of interviews with Lewis’s subjects and to develop a series of projects including a photographic exhibit, an album book, and a Web site that would tell the stories of the people Lewis was photographing in more detail. The project eventually was named StreetWays.

After a careful review by the University’s Rights of Human Subjects panel, the project was launched in late March of 2010. A total of twenty-seven homeless individuals were eventually identified who wished to be interviewed and photographed, as well as an additional group of eight key homeless advocates and support professionals in the community who could provide background the conditions and needs of Miami’s homeless population.

Interviews were conducted at the First United Methodist Church in downtown Miami, at the Miami Beach Community Church, and on the street in downtown Miami and Miami Beach during March and April of 2010. As part of the project, extensive data were collected on homeless conditions in the United States, as well as the specific conditions of the homeless in Miami. In the following sections, we report some of these data, as well as some of the interview content and photographs of one of the study’s participants.

MIAMI’S HOMELESS POPULATION AND THE NEED FOR DIALOGUE

In 2000, 2.3 to 3.5 million individuals of those identified as living in poverty in the United States experienced some extended period of homelessness within a single year (Urban Institute, 2000). The most recent statistics for homelessness in Miami reflect that as of January 2008, there exist 4,574 homeless people in Miami-Dade County, 1,347 of whom are living on the streets and 3,227 of whom live in emergency or transitional shelters. Of those individuals who reside in the streets, 40 percent live in the areas north of Kendall Drive (the northern half of the country) to the Broward County line, 38 percent live within the Miami city limits, 14% stay in the area south of Kendall Drive (the southern half of the county) to the Monroe County line, and the remaining 8% of homeless people live on Miami Beach (Miami Coalition for the Homeless, 2008).

Throughout Miami, charitable organizations strive to provide the most basic essentials for individuals living on the streets, principally food and clothing. Camillus House, a homeless shelter in the downtown area of Miami, consistently holds clothing drives and arranges fundraising events encouraging large donors to
participate in their efforts to improve conditions for the homeless. In a past Thanksgiving donation drive, a local furniture store, City Furniture, donated 5,500 pairs of new boxer shorts and 3,000 pairs of new socks. Camillus House also provides overnight shelter and bathing facilities. HOPE in Miami Beach, known for its community outreach, has a fundraising drive every two months at the Miami Beach Community Church where hygiene products, clothing, prescription eye glasses, haircuts, and other services are provided to the homeless community. Other organizations in the Miami-Dade area that engage in similar practices are the Miami Rescue Mission, the Salvation Army, Temple Beth Shalom (Miami Beach), the Salvation Army in several locations throughout Miami, the Miami Rescue Mission in North Miami, St. Vincent De Paul Thrift Shop in Hialeah, Baby City, Douglas Gardens Thrift Shop, and Goodwill Industries of South Florida. The Community Action Agency’s Meals On Wheels Program serves up seven balanced meals at certain locations within the following eight areas of Miami-Dade: northwest Miami, downtown Miami, Homestead, Naranja, Perrine, Goulds, Opa Locka, and south Miami.

HELPING TO CREATE A BETTER UNDERSTANDING AMONG THE GENERAL PUBLIC OF ISSUES FACING THE HOMELESS IN MIAMI

Having noted the aforementioned efforts, and many other similar efforts underway in Miami for the homeless, there is a need to recognize that the general public has very little sense of who these individuals are in Miami and the challenges that they face on a daily basis. Our purpose with this project was to try to make clearer to the general population the complexities of homelessness in a major city such as Miami—how it does not have a single face, but is driven by different forces, including economic conditions, drug and alcohol dependency, mental illness, and sometimes simply the desire to live a solitary life outside of traditional community norms. Through Lewis’s photo cards with their biographies, the publication of a rich visual and descriptive narrative, and the systematic exhibit of the photographs in public venues, we felt that we could effect a change in people’s attitudes—one that would be more accepting and tolerant. As a result, we hoped that this would help the general Miami community develop better solutions for addressing the needs of homeless individuals. We also felt that by chronicling the homeless and their stories (both visual and spoken), we could encourage a meaningful dialogue regarding issues facing the homeless in Miami and develop ways of helping them and respecting them as human beings, despite their problems, limitations, and misfortunes. In doing so, we saw ourselves as potentially contributing to the creation of a more tolerant, caring, and just community.
FIRST CONTACT

After completing a detailed Rights of Human Subjects review (one involving several revisions) by the University of Miami’s Office of Research Administration, we completed our first interview. Gene Provenzo and Eddy Ameen conducted the interview with the members of the class and with Lewis Wilkinson. Gene had familiarized the students with oral history methodology, and the students also read several technical pieces, as well as visited the Chicago Historical Museum’s Web site of urban history interviews by the oral historian Studs Terkel (http://www.studsterkel.org/). Interviews by Terkel were assigned and briefly discussed. An interview schedule for the homeless in Miami, as well as one for homeless service providers, was constructed by the students for our interviews as part of the StreetWays project. Using one of these interviews, we tested its effectiveness with one of the project’s subjects, Roberta Ann Olson (Bobbie; see Figure 4), a woman in her mid-forties whom Lewis had befriended and who acted as an informal liaison for us with several of the people who eventually took part in the project.

FIGURE 4  Front and back of Bobbie Olson’s photo card created for the StreetWays project.
Bobbie’s story is unique and, in many ways, typical of many of the histories we recorded on the street as part of our project. She was born in Leighland, Illinois, a small town about 90 miles south of Chicago. Bobbie describes her father as having been abusive to her as a child. She moved out of her house when she was 15 and went to live in Parkersburg, West Virginia, where she completed high school. She returned home when she was almost 19 and eventually moved to Chicago, Illinois and Dayton, Ohio. In Dayton she met her husband. About six or seven years ago they came to Miami. He worked as a fund raiser for the Fraternal Order of Police. He died in early 2009.

Bobbie (see Figure 5) lived from paycheck to paycheck with her husband, who was the sole money-earner in the house. She had no family to turn to for help. She initially started panhandling (see Figure 6) about a year ago in the northern part of Miami in the Golden Glades area, and migrated down to the Wynwood neighborhood where she had friends. When asked where she stays, Bobbie was reluctant to say where, because safety is a constant problem for her. As she explained: “That’s one of the things I don’t disclose. Because too many things can happen. It’s pathetic. They will literally steal the clothes off your back ... the homeless.”
Bobbie does not like shelters and avoids living in them. She feels they take too much of her money and dislikes the fact that their doors close by 7:00 in the evening and that everyone needs to leave by 7:00 in the morning. Police are a problem for her when she panhandles for money out on the street. Bobbie describes a typical day as panhandling for as long as she “can stay out there.” People get to know her and bring her things, not just simply give her money. Bathrooms are found in a vacant lot. Showers are taken for a small amount of money in a local house. Moving is a constant necessity. There is always a threat of being robbed. As she explained: “If someone finds where you are at, when you walk away to do go do something, when you go out to panhandle or to get something to eat or to go to the bathroom, the chances of your things being there are slim to none.”

Bobbie has a companion on the street named Margo. They watch out for one another. For a long time, they stayed together in a parking lot until they were thrown off by a local policeman. Bobbie sees all sorts of reasons for people being out on the street—no story is the same. For Bobbie, drugs—specifically heroin—became
FIGURE 7  Bobbie in a wheelchair on the street. Photograph by Lewis Wilkinson.

FIGURE 8  Bobbie out on the street. Photograph by Lewis Wilkinson.
a problem for her after the death of her husband. Bobbie is (sometimes) on methadone (a synthetic narcotic used in treatment of heroin addicts which is less habit-forming than heroin), but it is difficult for her to get to the clinic, which requires a long bus ride and a $14 daily fee, not to mention lost income from panhandling (see Figure 7). Maintaining a heroin habit costs $50 a day. Most of the money she makes to support her habit is from panhandling. Others, Bobbie explains, “work the street” (see Figure 8). She sees getting off the street as a major challenge. As she explained: “I don’t know how to begin really at this point. Once you hit so hard down it’s hard to come up. Just coming up with an apartment. Think of how much that would cost” (see Figure 9).

We conducted our primary interview with Bobbie as part of one of our regular class sessions. Gene has successfully used this technique in a number of projects over the years, where he conducts an interview with a subject together with a student. Typically, interviews take place in front of a class and are somewhat informal, which allows the student interviewer to receive guidance and suggestions from the instructor and from the class. In addition, the interviewee is able to provide suggestions for improving the interview by indicating topics that he or she felt were important that might have been left out.

Lewis brought Bobbie to the University’s campus in suburban Coral Gables from downtown. The interview was conducted by Gene and Eddy. Gene’s observation notes of the interview explained how:
Eddy and I met prior to the interview with Bobbie to review the questions we wanted to ask. We practiced our questions on each other trying to anticipate the potential response of the interviewee. When I actually began to conduct the interview, however, I found myself quickly caught up in the fact that this was not like other interviews I had done in the past. Bobbie was clearly intelligent and articulate, yet I felt she was living in a world and describing an experience that was utterly out of my experience. I was profoundly impressed by how much her life ran on a day-to-day basis, how she was totally living in the present. The possibility of hope and a future did not even seem to be part of her consciousness or world. In the interview, Bobbie described in detail the practicalities of life on the street that were totally a surprise to me—how she took methadone at the clinic because it only cost her $14 a day, while maintaining her heroin addiction cost $50 a day. How finding a place to live on the street involved finding a secret space that was safe from being looted by a fellow street person, or from the police who confiscate her things because they were on public property. I found myself thinking how little the world that I lived in related to Bobbie’s world. How distant my experience was from hers, and how lonely her existence seemed to me—so isolated.

Sabrina Sembiante’s post-interview notes explained how:

As the questioning started, Bobbie’s answers were quite lengthy, and the descriptions that she used were detailed. She discussed her childhood, her abusive father and unsupportive mother, her high school graduation, and her relocation from Chicago to Miami with her husband. As the questioning continued and as the topics of the queries began to target more personal issues, Bobbie’s answers to these questions decreased in depth and breadth. Her body language, while unchanged throughout most of the interview, turned increasingly inward as the questioning continued. She sat on the chair with her legs uncrossed and the injured leg extended. Her arms were kept in close proximity to her body. Her hands were either clasping each other and resting on her thighs, or her arms were folded and held close to her chest. While she seldom used her hands to gesture as she spoke, Bobbie would move her head in accompaniment to the issues she was discussing.

After informing us of the hardships of homelessness, the offensive behavior of apathetic motorists when she panhandled, and her constant worry of the theft of her belongings, Bobbie paused in her speech. Her voice, while always at a low and coarse pitch, waivered slightly as she recounted these events. At this point, she unclasped her hands to wipe away the tears that fell from her eyes. As she lightly wiped the tears from her cheek, I could see the wrinkles on her tanned skin intensify under the pressure of her hand. Her hands, slightly disfigured from what seemed to be arthritis, were dirty. Her fingernails were short, and brown on the edges. After this point, Bobbie seemed to become increasingly restless as the questioning continued. Her tone of voice changed from one of patient description to one of slight frustration and irritation when queries similar to those asked before were raised again. These intonations of annoyance were intensified when questions were asked about how her situation could be ameliorated and how this project could be better designed.
She repeated her responses of not knowing the answer to these questions. A notable change in her disposition was incurred when Dr. Provenzo asked her the question about her relationship with Lewis, to which she responded cheerfully that he was her very good friend and supporter.

Ryan Pontier responded to the interview on a very personal level, explaining that:

I experienced a range of emotions while witnessing the interview. At the onset, I found myself excited to meet someone new and to hear her story. . . . I realized that (a) the subject is a real person who actually lives through what she was telling us, (b) there are many people who must endure what she does on a daily basis, and (c) my father—as a psychotherapist—listens to equally difficult stories at least 4 days a week, and has done so for 30 years. This realization made me think about how many people suffer and how my father must struggle not to take on the problems of his clients (or, at least how I personally would struggle not to do so if in his place).

Alain Bengochea reflected that Bobbie’s:

mere survival was an indication of the heavy burden placed on these individuals who are commonly viewed as sharing no purpose in society. According to Bobbie, some of the menial responsibilities that influence her daily functioning are tasks deemed effortless by the average citizen. These include gathering enough money to travel miles away to pick up one’s own correspondence from the nearest homeless shelter or consistently fending off other homeless individuals attempting to steal one’s few valued possessions. The homeless are required to remain mobile with few means of transportation, cordoned off with the necessity to spread out to achieve small tasks, and subjected to the menace and lack of safety abounding our streets. While facing these hardships, the homeless are shunned and prohibited to wholly re-enter the community of which they once partook. As Bobbie’s only request to her community, which has accorded her very little in terms of having an option of exiting the homeless lifestyle, she hopes to simply be acknowledged by the rest of society. Reassessing our perspectives on these individuals who truly form part of our community can enlighten us and perhaps even improve, with little effort, the conditions of our streets and the lives of those who exact very little from the rest of mainstream society.

Finally, Kristen Doorn reflected:

Prior to the interview, I was filled with thoughts and concerns. I was concerned with making Bobbie feel welcome. I wanted her to feel safe in the environment that we provided her. I didn’t want her to feel ill at ease being on a university campus, interacting with students and professors that might appear to have it “all together” on the outside; when in fact, we are all human and struggling with our own internal
issues. I wanted her to feel comfortable and open to sharing her story with us. I
hoped that we would ask her the right questions and wouldn’t offend her.

During the interview, I was filled with thoughts of respect and admiration. I was
impressed with Bobbie’s communication capabilities. I was struck by how articulate
she appeared to be. I was impressed with her organizational skills. I was amazed by
her intelligence. I admired her resourcefulness. I was struck by her open manner of
communicating with our group. I respected her presence and grace.

Following the interview, I was filled with thoughts of regret and guilt, but also
hope. I wanted to help Bobbie immediately, and regretted that I didn’t know what
to do. I wanted to discover that key piece that would help her turn her life around. I
wondered why unfortunate circumstances had befallen her and how I could help her.
I felt guilty about how much I had to be thankful for in my life. I questioned why
she didn’t want to share more about her background with us. I desired to connect
with her more deeply, through an embrace or words of encouragement. I wanted to
let her know that we are there for her, and I wanted to know her better as a person.
Following the interview, I also thought about how we’re all connected as members
of the human race and about how any one of us could be in Bobbie’s situation at any
time. I thought about all of our similarities as human beings. I thought about how
close we all are to homelessness. This is what gave me hope; that we are bonded to
each other through our sameness and humanity.

We have kept in touch with Bobbie throughout the entire semester we conducted
this project, primarily through Lewis who continued to photograph her on the
street. Twice, he has had to take her to the emergency room of Jackson Memorial
Hospital—the main emergency medical facility for indigent people in downtown
Miami. Basically, a minor infection in her groin where she used a needle became
abscessed and burst, allowing blood to gush from a major vein (see Figure 10). It
was after midnight. Fortunately Margo, her friend, was with her and called 911.
After getting treatment at the hospital, where she was told to stay off her leg and
keep it as clean as possible, she left the hospital prematurely so that she could
get a “fix” to help her with her heroin dependency. Subsequently, two trips to
the hospital followed at weekly intervals to address repeat infections. As of the
writing of this article, Lewis reports that Bobbie’s infection has worsened and
Margo believes that gangrene may be setting in. She is now in serious danger of
having her leg amputated.

Although Bobbie’s interviews provided us an enormous amount of information
about her situation and that of other homeless people in Miami, it has been Lewis’s
photographs that have provided some of the most compelling information about
her situation. Like previous photographic documentarians, such as Riis and Hine,
he is attempting to create a record, while at the same time creating art—art that
has as its purpose propaganda, and which also has its purpose the achievement of
greater social justice. We unabashedly embrace this purpose.
FIGURE 10  Bobbie in the hospital showing her groin infection. Photograph by Lewis Wilkinson.
In this article, we have focused on a single subject, Roberta Ann Olsen, as a means of describing our project on homelessness in Miami. The StreetWays project, however, includes not only an additional two dozen street-based subjects, but also the insights of over half a dozen service providers for the Miami homeless community. The limited time and space provided by this article do not allow us to focus on our total population of interviewees. In the case of the homeless people interviewed, many had the same needs as Bobbie. But they are also unique. Some are on the street because of a bad economy, others because of mental illness, some because of drug and alcohol dependencies, and others simply because they like the street and the freedom that it offers them. What is important, in our opinion, is that their stories be told.

REFLECTION

In articles such as this one, in an approximately 200-page illustrated book of interviews and photographs that is near completion, through newspaper and magazine articles, through a Web site, and by means of library-, church-, and gallery-based, exhibits, we are determined to make the face of homelessness in Miami more visible to the community. We see ourselves as having the potential to effect change through our words, as both documentarians and artists, and even as propagandists, in the best use of the word.

In conducting the StreetWays project, we have felt strongly that could use the classroom setting to pursue meaningful research focused on social justice issues and community awareness that incorporated not only traditional interviews, but persuasive narratives and photographs of the highest artistic order. We viewed our words and pictures as having the potential to create a transformative dialogue—one based on the record of the spoken word and the documentary photographer as record-keeper and artist. Most important, we wanted to provide an instrument that would reduce one’s sense of isolation and consequently increase self-advocacy and connection with other people, homeless or not. The photo cards seem to be an appropriate technique for this aim.

In conclusion, we strongly feel the need for our research, as historians and social scientists and social foundations scholars, to be relevant and meaningful. We feel oral and visual storytelling is a critical means by which to achieve this end. We wonder how social justice across a range of fields and communities might be more widely realized if similar projects, whether on the homeless, the rights of older citizens, or the needs of the poor and underserved, were undertaken. The costs of such projects are often small, but the findings are both fascinating and rewarding. The potential payoff in the real-world seems significant as well, by providing individuals within our society a greater sense of community, its problems, and the
ongoing need for meaningful dialogues at many different levels as a means by which to achieve greater social justice.

REFERENCES


