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'Liminal identities' and power struggles, reflections on the regulation of everyday foodways at a homeless centre and the use of creative participatory research as a tool of empowerment and resistance

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Abstract: (262 words)

In this paper we contextualise the presentation of 'i-poems' and 'they-poems' used at the AMH Annual conference, in an attempt to continue to give 'voice' to socially excluded research participants, who engaged in a 'food as a lifestyle motivator' (FLM) project funded by an Institute of Sustainability Solutions Research (ISSR) collaborative award in 2014, to support wellbeing and life skills in marginalised groups. The inter-disciplinary research team adopted a 'photo elicitation' method, part of a range of creative participatory techniques, with participants invited to photograph everyday food activities in order to empower/engage. The project aim was to demonstrate how 'photo-elicitation', could be used as a tool of empowerment. We reflect on this technique and its' potential to disrupt power relations, through analysis of a focus group discussion conducted with participants about their photographs, alongside analysis of some of the photographs. We illustrate the power relationships inherent in all social research practices and how creative participatory research approaches are no less influenced by these dynamics (Letherby 2003, Liamputtong 2007). Hence, whilst there were clear power relationships apparent within the homeless centre (HC) itself, as demonstrated through our oral presentation, these were also played out within the processes of research and knowledge production. Yet, the research

participants' photographs challenge the notion of 'the homeless' as an homogenous group, instead these can be considered 'presentations of the self' (Goffman 1959), outside of the label of 'vulnerable' and/or 'marginal'. We therefore further demonstrate how residents at a homeless centre resist the regulation of their lives around food, illustrating Foucault's maxim; 'where there is power, there is resistance' (1990:95).

Introduction

Our everyday foodways or ways of 'doing' food, when, where and what we eat, as well as with whom, have become an increasingly powerful means of drawing boundaries between social groups, distinguishing 'self' from 'other', defining who we are and where we belong (Parsons 2015:01). Further 'food is a political issue, a matter of leisure and recreation, a topic of health, a resource for media industries, as well as a primary necessity of daily life' (Warde 2016:01). Also, when we eat, we are not only consuming nutrients, we are also consuming gustatory experiences, cultural meanings and symbols (Beardsworth and Keil, 1997). The symbolic potential of food is so powerful, Fischler (1988) argues, that it is central to both our collective identity within society as well as our individual identity. When considering the role of food as a lifestyle motivator amongst marginalised and socially excluded groups, it is evident that food and foodways can also be routes to empowerment and change.

This paper, following the AMH conference presentation in 2015 draws on data gathered for an Institute of Sustainability Solutions Research (ISSR) collaborative award 2014, 'exploring food as a 'lifestyle motivator' to support wellbeing and life skills in marginalised groups. This exploratory project involved an interdisciplinary team from a range of backgrounds (PI: Public Health Dietitian, research assistant with an interest in foraging, quantitative research expert, sociologist, social worker, occupational therapist, centre volunteer/gatekeeper and General Practitioner). The aim of the project was to utilise creative and participatory methods of research to gain insight into the food practices, needs and preferences of residents using a city centre homeless centre (HC). At the heart of the project was the 'photo elicitation'

method developed to enable otherwise silenced or marginalised individuals a means of expression. Thus participants were invited to a 'photo dialogue' workshop, and then given cameras to take photographs of their everyday food activities for 10 days. The photographs were developed and used to form the basis of discussion exploring their motivations for taking the photographs and the potential impact of food-related activities on their lives within focus groups run by the Public Health Dietitian, research assistant and HC key worker. There was also an exhibition of the participants photographs held at the HC and the production of a bespoke newspaper. In addition data were gathered through an e-survey with staff from the HC and observational data (photographs) collated by the research assistant.

For the AMH presentation, photographs taken by participants were displayed every few seconds on a loop running constantly in the background, whilst we read alternately from a script of 'i-poems' created from focus group interviews held with the HC residents who had participated fully in the photo-elicitation part of the project (n5) and 'they-poems' developed from responses from the HC staff questionnaires (n10). Hence, one of the presenters spoke on behalf of respondents through the use of i-poems, which are part of a voice centred relational method (VCRM) that aims to prioritise the voice of narrator above that of researcher, (Mauthner and Doucet 1998). These are created from respondent transcripts and focus on the 'I', 'you' and 'we' statements, which are powerful speech acts embedded in everyday talk. The other presenter juxtaposed these 'i-poems' with the use of responses received in an open-ended e-survey sent to staff and volunteers at the HC. The aim of the presentation was to contrast the agency of the HC residents, as they asserted their individual identities and resisted the label of 'other', with the more generalising attitudes of staff towards them as 'Service Users' or 'SUs'. The resulting dialogue was further constructed to weave a story from a slightly negative perspective of the 'Service User' as 'lacking' (Skeggs 1997) to one in which both staff and HC resident acknowledge the possibility of positive change.

The original title of the presentation focussed on the notion of 'liminal identities', to highlight how the HC resident occupies a barely perceptible space in-between, always potentially on the threshold of 'becoming' (Deleuze and Guattari 1998) non-homeless/homeless and there is ambiguity across the boundaries of these spaces. The HC resident is also not 'homeless' by virtue of being a resident. However, there is precariousness around the HC resident status and a sense of a need to move on, to establish a non-liminal identity, to be seen as 'other' than homeless. Indeed, in terms of identity formation, it could be argued that the HC is a type of Total Institution, as Goffman (1969) notes a central feature of total institutions is the breakdown of barriers that separate three spheres of life; sleep, play and work, with all 'aspects of life conducted in the same place and under the same single authority' (Goffman, 1969:6). Indeed, in homeless centres, routines are often disrupted by the institutional environment and lack of freedom. Strict guidelines regarding curfews, mealtimes and check-in times leave little room for natural routines (Whiteford, 2000). Certainly staff at the HC regulate and control meals to fit with the demands of the HC and outside of the rhythm of everyday life beyond the centre. There is also a 'mortification of the self' (Goffman 1969) at work, as HC residents struggle to assert individual tastes. It is notable that staff refer to HC residents as 'service users' and not as 'homeless'.

In the remainder of this paper we will not be making use of the 'i-poems' or 'they-poems', instead we have provided a link to a nine minute audio file online that can be listened to at '*soundcloud*' [link to follow], as the power of the 'i-poem' lies in it being spoken out loud rather than read as a flat text. Nor will we be able to include all of the photographs, as we have been limited to including just 4 images. However, those included here relate specifically to the participant's explanations as discussed in the first of two photo-elicitation focus group/interviews. The purpose of these was to give participants the opportunity to talk around their photographs and to gain an insight into their motivations and experiences of everyday foodways (see Parsons 2015 for further discussion of 'foodways' or ways of doing food) at the HC. Indeed, 'the practice of asking participants to explain the visual images they have created is a common feature of research' that makes use of participant-led visual

methods (Mannay, 2013:138). Further, it is argued that a significant aspect for understanding the photographs is not how the researcher/audience interprets them but what the maker of the image intended to show, what Rose (2001) refers to as *auteur theory*. However, following a reflexive approach to research, throughout our discussion we attend to both perspectives. In keeping with the original rationale for the study, the focus is on the HC residents and their voices as choosing what to eat/not eat, when, where and with whom becomes a means of asserting agency in the face of intense regulation and control of food and mealtimes (and/or other aspects of everyday life). Indeed, the photographs and the narratives that accompany them provide valuable insights into the 'presentation of the self' (Goffman 1959), outside of the label of 'vulnerable' and/or 'marginal'. What emerges is a lack of fit between the expectations and demands of stakeholders towards a group of people that 'need' to change, and the highly individualised perspectives of those who are doing the best they can in light of multiple deprivations. These are important acts of resistance in keeping with Foucault's maxim; 'where there is power, there is resistance' (1991:95), which also demonstrates a certain ambivalence towards the research aims.

Prior to discussion of the photographs and narratives from Nemo, Jeffrey and Ross, we provide the background to the study, methods and methodology, discussion and then round up with concluding comments.

Background

High levels of deprivation are apparent in all UK cities with evidence of certain social groups being particularly vulnerable to inequalities. Plymouth, in particular, has over 11 years life expectancy difference between neighbourhoods', supporting recent evidence that confirms many people in the city experience profound unfairness in many areas of their lives (Fairness Commission, 2014). Social disadvantage, including homelessness, is on the increase nationally due to recent economic and welfare reforms (Fitzpatrick et al, 2015). Plymouth has seen increases in levels of statutory homelessness of single people in relation to mental illness/disability. The diversity of this community is marked, often including substance misuse and mental illness

(Radley, Hodgetts and Cullen, 2005), which leads to marginalization (Laurenson and Collins, 2006) and disempowerment (Norman and Pauly, 2013). Finding ways to tackle these issues is challenging with people who are withdrawn and alienated from society. Compromised nutritional intake results in more food-related health problems than in the general population (Evans and Dowler, 1999). Understanding the factors driving this group's eating habits is crucial (Sprake et al, 2013) to improvement of food choices, dietary intake and subsequent wellbeing.

There is a common public misconception behind the causes of homelessness, leading to societal stereotypical views of homeless people (e.g. alcoholics, drug addicts, dangerous, mentally ill). This creates a profound stigma around being homeless (Anti-Defamation League, 2015). The amalgam of stereotypes associated with 'homeless identity' are socially constructed, yet are said to be 'binding and mis-guided' (McCarthy, 2013). Low self-esteem and self-efficacy are commonly cited, but Leigh Parker (2012) argues that these attributes are only apparent in individuals exposed to longer periods of homelessness where social support systems have broken down.

There is a lack of UK research on the food and nutrition experiences of those individuals whose circumstances fall outside of official surveys (Dowler 2008), so there is a need to explore these communities in more depth to better understand social inequalities, a current key priority for public health (Public Health England, 2013). It has been suggested (Minkler, 2010) that such inequalities should be addressed via equitable processes through which low-income communities and other marginalized groups can 'gain a seat at the table'—and stay at the table, having a real voice in decision making affecting their lives. The voices of homeless people should be heard so that they are enabled to contribute to policy and decision making (Norman and Pauly, 2013; Whiteford and Hocking, 2011).

Community engagement interventions have the potential to positively influence inequalities (O'Mara Eves et al, 2015) but evidence is lacking for successful engagement approaches in homeless populations specifically

(Olivet et al, 2010). A recent local Plymouth-based project engaged marginalized men (including homeless youth) in growing and cooking projects, demonstrating that participation in food projects can improve self-esteem, food skills and build social connections (Pettinger and Whitelaw, 2012). Further, engagement with food has been shown to lead to positive social outcomes associated with other cultural activities, such as creative arts practices (Stuckey and Nobel, 2010). Such expression has the potential to engage individuals in personal and community-level change through reflection, empowerment and connectedness (Gray et al, 2010) all important building blocks of community cohesion and resilience.

Participatory Action Research (PAR) is defined as a "systematic investigation, with the collaboration of those affected by the issue being studied, for the purposes of education and taking action or effecting social change." (Minkler, 2010). Given the challenges associated with the homeless, such creative methodologies, can be beneficial in engaging participants. 'Photo-Elicitation', involves inserting a photograph into a research process in order to maximise the possibilities for empirical and ethnographic enquiry (Harper, 2002). Harper maintains that the use of images can "evoke deeper elements of consciousness than do words". Such an approach allows participants to generate their own images in which they express their 'voice'; their perspective on an issue. The photograph can be a neutral third party (Schulze, 2007) and particularly useful when discussing issues with vulnerable people (Liamputtong, 2009). The act of taking the photograph in itself may provide further motivation to engage with the study's focus on food centred relationships in an otherwise traditionally 'hard to motivate' population.

Methods and methodology

The primary objective of the FLM project was to involve support workers and residents at a Plymouth based homeless centre with creative qualitative approaches 'Participatory Action Research' (PAR; Minkler and Wallestein, 2003) consisting of:

i) Surveys with key support staff

Key support staff members (SM) were given a survey to complete asking for their opinions on HC residents health behaviour barriers and motivators, as well as their thoughts on how food could facilitate well-being. This was distributed for completion via email and hard copy, depending on the needs of the staff. All support staff working in the centre (n=12) were asked to complete the survey.

ii. Photo-Elicitation

Convenience and purposive sampling were adopted, using a gatekeeper (Namageyo-Funa et al, 2014), to select participants who were able to engage with the study, with clear exclusion criteria for those demonstrating signs of being 'heavily under the influence' or 'visibly unable to communicate'. In total 12 HC residents were recruited (although only 5 completed the photo-elicitation element of the study).

An introduction to Photo-Elicitation took the form of a 'Photo-Dialogue' exercise. Images of various food types were placed in front of the group and participants were asked to choose food images that they 'liked' and 'disliked'. Discussions followed. Participants were each issued with a disposable camera, given brief instructions on its use, then asked to take photos of their food activities over a ten-day period. There was minimal instruction given as to composition or aesthetic considerations in taking photos, so as to allow for authentic portrayal of their relationship to food and food activities. Food experiences and reflections on the process were then explored through two focus group discussions (one of which is presently discussed).

Analysis

'Constant comparison' of transcript data was conducted in a systematic way (Hancock et al, 2009) to allow themes to be developed and interpreted. The adoption of thematic analysis (Braun and Clark, 2006) suited the multi-disciplinary nature of the research team as it has the advantage of being independent of theory and can be applied across a range of disciplines and epistemological approaches.

The 'Voice Centred Relational Method' (VCRM; Mauthner and Doucet, 1998) was adopted to give authenticity to the voices of participants. We generated a set of 'I-Poems' drawing on statements incorporating "I/we/you" made in response to images. Similarly with the staff survey responses, 'They-Poems' (referring to the services users) were created using the same analytical process.

One of the key anchor staff members assisted the qualitative data process by working with HC residents to create 'pen portraits' for of each of the participants, in order to identify anonymous pseudonyms adopted for the transcripts. This task presented opportunities for personalising the dynamics between participants and facilitated more interactive analysis of the data in the true nature of PAR and VCRM.

What follows are some of the comments from those who participated in the first photo-elicitation focus group and discussion. The participant's reflections on their photographs and the process are presented here in the order in which they participated in the focus group. All names are pseudonyms chosen by them. Nemo was the first to arrive and left before the session finished, as he was not feeling well, Ross arrived after the discussion had started. It is notable therefore that Ross's contribution can be read in part as a response to comments made by Nemo and Jeffrey, who explained how they had individually interpreted the photo-elicitation brief. It is also worth noting that both Jeffrey and Ross (in different capacities) work in the HC kitchen and this adds to the shifting power dynamics expressed within the focus group. Hence, although 'the homeless' can be described as having 'fallen out of' universally accepted social hierarchies (Osinksii, 2004), 'power is everywhere', (Foucault, 1990:121) and this is no less the case than amongst the residents at the HC.

A food diary

Nemo is a 43 year-old white male with dual Australian and British nationality, who has been at the HC for six months. He illustrates a positive, yet calculated response to the photo-elicitation method, systematically

considering each step, by building what he describes as a 'photographic food diary' to reflect his relationship with food.

Basically I wanted to make a food diary of the food I'm eating and the food I'm not eating because I can't eat in the dining room because I'm scared of crowds and large groups of people. I have problems with my head, PTSD, epilepsy and people basically – well, manners, elbows out and passing wind and shouting at each other...

Here Nemo demonstrates a range of personal struggles, with mental (and other) health issues playing a role in the manifestation of agoraphobia, suggesting the social aspects of eating are not his priority. Indeed commensality or the sharing of food around a table from the Latin '*cum mensa*' (in the company of a meal/table) (Fischler 2011) is a powerful socio-cultural norm, associated with family mealtimes, special occasions and as a means of performing social solidarity, defining where we belong and with whom. In this setting there is a form of 'institutional commensality' at work, one that Nemo positions himself outside of, further highlighting the power of commensality, as it can encourage segregation and transgression (Grignon, 2001: 23-36, cited in Parsons 2015).

Despite Nemo's alienating experience of 'institutional commensality', he praises the 'people who work on serving food' for 'looking after him' and his special dietary needs. It is commonly reported that the primary goal of food provision in homeless shelters is 'hunger relief' (Dachner et al, 2009), yet Nemo's individualism is catered for. He is not just another 'service user' as his personal food preferences are known to the kitchen staff and accommodated.

It's a food diary of what I eat in a week and every single picture is... I've taken a picture of food before I eat it, a picture of food after I've eaten it and whatever's left is the food I can't eat, simply through... I just physically can't because I'm full or because I don't want it. The people who work on serving food know that I don't eat that much, but

the food is really quite good. Most of the time you couldn't ask for better...

Nemo's rationale therefore challenges the notion of 'the homeless' as a homogenous group. He is resistant to 'institutional commensality' (Grignon 2001) and his methodical and meticulous approach challenges Goffman's notion of the 'total institution' as undermining of individuality (Goffman 1969). Further his photographs demonstrate knowledge of government and public policy initiatives on 'healthy' eating and the dietary advice to eat five fruit and vegetables a day (image 1).

Image 1: '3 of 5'



It is possible to interpret Nemo's photograph as an act of resistance. He has carefully set up this photograph and written on the white board '3 of 5', in a nod to government dietary guidelines. Here he is demonstrating his power/knowledge and ability to participate in wider socio-cultural norms and values.

The history of a meal

Jeffrey is a 62 year-old white British male who has lived at the HC for nine months. The photo-elicitation process enabled Jeffrey to think about his long standing personal interest in photography and food in a different way, he said 'I suppose I've never sort of thought about taking pictures of food' and he goes on to explain his own personal thought processes:

I've sort of generally looked at things and I went from basics like... the animals before like they're made into meat, which is why I've got

pictures of sheep [image 2 below]. Then I sort of say a history of a meal [shows photos] then I went to the materials used in preparation and then all sorts of different desserts. And at the end I sit down with a nice cup of tea. Your meal is complete then. In my head just to do a history of a meal from the raw beginning to a cup of tea and a cigarette and that's just how I saw it.

Image 2: 'Sheep'



Jeffrey's interpretation of the photo-elicitation brief demonstrates a desire to create a narrative with his photographs; it is an artistic challenge as he claims:

I could have gone further and taken more interesting photos. It was just the idea of, trying to portray the history of your meal from start to finish, you know from the wild animal to the dish at the end. That was the picture that I wanted to portray.

Jeffrey thoroughly engaged with the photo-elicitation process and considers the wider implications of a photographic method for others, suggesting how it might be a useful approach for them to 'open up' and 'get it out'.

A lot of the people in here don't always have the opportunity to put their feelings, their thoughts whatever out to the staff and who can return something back, and that's what I think is necessary. [There needs to be] more people here who just sit and listen. And this sort of thing [points to photos], if you can make it creative, you know just get it out...

Jeffrey is therefore suggesting that a creative approach could enable others at the HC to engage in meaningful interaction as a potential route to becoming 'other' than a service user. He highlights the importance of creativity [points to photographs], as a means of expression, but also as an activity that could lead to being identified as an individual through one-to-one interaction with staff. Hence, creative methods have the potential for engaging 'vulnerable' groups in food (and other) discourses as well as for meaningful co-productive research (Beebeejaun et al, 2013). The use of creative methods is corroborated by O'Kane and Pamphilon (2015), in their 'narrative inquiry' food research, the findings of which contends that closer attention to hearing, (reading) and interpreting people's food stories can offer alternative ways to understand people's meaning making of food. Further food narratives are relevant in terms of identity formation and securing belonging (Parsons 2015).

Food has become a major part of my life

Ross is a 34 year-old white British male from London who has lived at the HC since November 2013 as well as on three previous occasions in recent years. At the time of the study he was employed part time as relief cook and night receptionist at the HC. He claims he has turned his life around through food and his positive developmental journey with cooking now seems to define his identity - he spends most of his time in the kitchen, which he uses as a positive occupation to distract him from drinking. The literature describes engagement in occupation, as an important determinant of self-concept, self-identity, health and wellbeing (Chard et al, 2009) and 'occupational deprivation' is a common phenomenon amongst 'the homeless' (Whiteford, 2000). Ross says:

Food has become a major part of my life. I really enjoy cooking; actually it beat the demons in my head. I've gone from being a drinker to turning myself around back to normality just through the hard work I've done and with the support I've had... My photos are mainly from the kitchen really... even on the days when I don't have to go in I can still go in and keep myself busy, keeps me occupied, instead of going away with the lads and having a drink...

In terms of the photo-elicitation Ross mostly captures images relating to his cooking (pre) occupation (image 3) and these centre on what he is 'doing' and reinforce his emergent 'chef' identity, he notes:

[I have taken] pictures of the garden as well, as that's a big part of my cooking... 'cos I have to go up there and pick the Rosemary [Image 3]

Image 3: 'Rosemary'

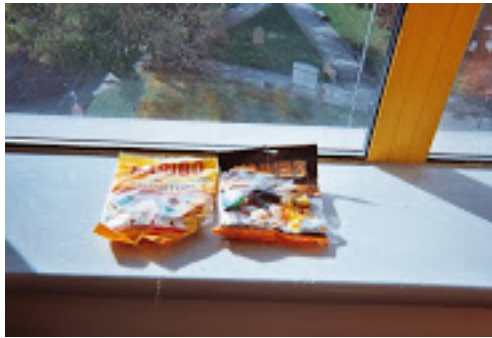


However, despite the fact that Ross followed the photo-elicitation brief exactly, he is apologetic and says:

Even though I was in there every-day I should have taken more pictures. I got silly pictures of things like crisps and that. I should of took a bit more care of the pictures. It isn't really telling a story. I dunno why I took a picture of Haribo. I think it's because they were in there. Because I like them as well [Image 4]

In the context of this particular photo-elicitation focus group/interview, Ross's anxiety could be partly explained by the fact that he had just listened to Jeffrey's rationale for his photographic narrative, and how his photographs 'told a story'. Indeed, whilst a 'significant advantage of participant-led visual data production is the limits it places on the intrusive presence of the researcher' (Mannay 2013:136), there are inevitable power dynamics at work/play within any social interaction, not least within a research encounter (Letherby 2003, Liamputtong 2009).

Image 4: 'Haribo'



It is notable that Ross claims the crisps and *Haribo* images are 'silly'. It could be argued that these images disrupt his identity as a serious 'chef' with an interest in good food. In the context of the focus group, he refers to 'we' when discussing the food he prepares in the kitchen and he clearly crosses the boundary between staff and 'service user' at the HC. On the other hand he says:

I'll go out and talk to the guys... and the next time I make that meal I'll do it the way they've asked for it. Whereas a lot of the staff don't like... you know, they just don't bother because some of them do just bitch and like to moan a lot. But I will go out and talk to the guys because at the end of the day they're the ones eating the food. It's good to have their input back.

It is notable that Ross values the input from those consuming the food he has cooked, in contrast he claims to 'a lot of the staff'. This highlights the clear divisions and power relationships at work/play in the HC. Also, how Ross is precariously balancing the two identities, he wants to please both staff and 'service users' through his work in the kitchen. Although, he clearly wants to move on and identify as staff and 'they' are 'the guys' outside of the kitchen environment. Here he differs from the staff as well, as he transcends both the physical and symbolic boundaries that separate the two fields. His photographs betray another side to him and he is anxious to explain this, though he does 'like them [*Haribo*] as well'.

Overall, the photographs and accompanying narratives provide valuable insights into participant's individual identities and the 'presentation of the self' (Goffman 1959), outside of the label of 'homeless', 'vulnerable' and/or 'marginal'. Hence, Nemo emerges as particular about his food preferences, but conscious of government guidelines on healthy eating. Jeffrey is a photographer who enjoys creating a narrative around his everyday food activities. Ross is carefully negotiating his new and precarious identity as a member of staff at the HC, whilst maintaining a hold on his previous and reassuringly familiar identity as 'service user'. In all they demonstrate the usefulness of participatory-led visual data production for participatory research that limits the intrusiveness of the researcher. It also highlights the importance of the follow up focus group/interview in ascertaining how the maker of the photographs intended them to be read.

Concluding comments

Through the use of creative methods, the FLM project has successfully extended the remit of food related photographic methodologies, providing reflective qualities of engagement through 'beyond text', participatory-based methods. These rare narratives are enhanced by their associated images. Further, when the images produced by participants are considered alongside their narrative accounts during the photo-elicitation focus group/interview, they can be seen to empower and enable resistance to some of the forces of institutionalisation and wider stereotypical assumptions. It is through these photographs and narratives that participants transcend the liminal spaces associated with being seen as 'service users' and in a process of 'becoming' they emerge as 'other' than 'homeless' individuals.

We acknowledge limitations in our work, namely small sample size and exploratory processual aspects. We are confident, however, that the analysis, method and narrative strength provided by the participants' voices is still relevant. The participants discussed here - Nemo, Jeffrey and Ross are individuals, who happen to have been affected by homelessness - a unique and complex situation, the experience by which those, who have been without a safe place to call home, should not be defined. Despite the obvious

overtone of the stereotypical gritty realities faced by homelessness, there is a deep emerging humanity expressed by these individuals. The insights gained from their voices are fascinating: they have valuable stories and experiences to share about the emotional importance of occupational practices and meanings around food, coupled with the harsh realities of institutionalisation.

Indeed, this work goes some way to suggest that by understanding the diversity of this population group, giving them a 'seat at the table' and listening to their voices, their engagement can be realized. Creative methods relating to food and food activities can, therefore, offer meaningful occupation, thus food becomes an expression of empowerment, with the potential to enhance health, wellbeing and social justice.

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