



Positioning the arts for intervention design research in the human services



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ABSTRACT

The arts have been integral to the human experience fostering innovation in social arrangements, strengthening group cohesion, and merging esthetics with the utilitarian properties of technology. For intervention design research in the human services the arts can harness innovation and creativity in meeting human needs and addressing social issues. Given their capacities to stimulate expression of first person experience through interpretative strategies, the arts can equip people and groups, including researchers, with opportunities to express primary experiential knowledge through creative means, portray useful ways of meeting human needs, educate others about the social issues people experience, and formulate intervention strategies or even models to address the causes and consequences of those issues.

In this paper, the authors discuss how the arts can inform and deepen human service intervention design and development and, as a result, advance innovation in the human services. They offer a rationale supporting the inclusion of the arts in the design of human service interventions, examine the contributions of the arts to the formulation of intervention concept and developmental research to further improve interventions, and consider how the arts can advance the reflexivity of intervention designers. The authors draw implications for how researchers can position the arts in the nine steps of intervention design and development the authors offer in this paper.

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1. Introduction

Within the human services, the arts have moved beyond their very specific role in therapy to serve as a primary strategy and tool for advancing intervention across the spectrum of the helping professions. For multiple disciplines, including health and medicine, disability studies, social work, psychology, and counseling, the arts inform social action and human service interventions in numerous functional areas. These include outreach and engagement particularly of people facing serious issues like homelessness, or physical illness, social action for the purposes of facilitating problem formulation and the building of community awareness, developing group cohesion or intentional community among people experiencing serious social issues, and as primary methods of evaluation and dissemination. Even those individuals uncomfortable with entering creative settings can often point to a photograph that says, “this is like *my* experience,” or identify aspects of themselves in the stories of others.

For the authors, one an artist and art therapist, and the other a social worker and evaluator, the arts involve multiple forms of self-expression in which people can portray a particular situation or experience in graphic and rich terms while they simultaneously express a particular truth inherent in their lived experience. It is this interplay between the particular or specific and more general truths that make the arts distinctive in human development. From such interplay meaning emerges not only for artists themselves but for those who engage the arts as members of audiences. Meaning here emerges from interpretation in which artists and audiences co-construct their understanding of a particular experience often times mediated through one or multiple senses (Washington & Moxley, 2008).

The artist can serve as the catalyst for amplifying meaning or for making it more ambiguous through the induction of paradox or irony (Leavy, 2009; Moore, 2000). Yet finding that meaning may require an engaged audience whose members come to interpret what a particular piece of art communicates or otherwise means for them. Interpretation of art requires the members of audiences to find their own value in the work. Artists interacting with audiences within certain contexts – whether an exhibit, performance, or educational venue – can create powerful settings for the

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production of meaning, achieved either individually or collectively. Thus, potentially the arts can offer those human service professionals interested in the process and product of intervention design new avenues for creating human understanding of serious social issues (Banks, 2001; Brandt, 2008; Knill, 2011). It is this distinctive kind of understanding that makes the arts relevant to intervention design research in the human services.

Human service professionals often interact with individuals or groups whose exposure to serious social issues can evoke representations or images but without a way of expressing them they do not have avenues to communicate such insights to others. It is through the evocative that the arts may offer a different form of knowledge compared to quantitative or even qualitative methods typically used by human service researchers and program development specialists (Banks, 2001; Eisner, 2008; Leavy, 2009; McNiff, 2011). The usefulness of the arts in a form of development the authors refer to as intervention research is somewhat different than the idea of developmental evaluation as Patton (2011) conceives of it. In intervention research, development requires an investment in problem and concept formation from which subsequent stages of intervention development flow, such as testing the helping method in action. Investigators who practice developmental research align methods of inquiry with specific stages of intervention development so they can systematically improve and develop the helping method by testing it in action to see if it works. Here the practicality of what works highlights the importance of what Thomas (1984) calls “objective capability”: testing involves refinement of the helping method and then ultimately an evaluation of its impact on the problem the intervention was designed initially to address. The arts can add methodological diversity to intervention research increasing the range of tools intervention researchers can employ to better understand a helping method.

Involvement of users in each stage of the design and development project can become part of the change or innovation process and imbue the project with empowerment features. Actively involving users in developmental testing by engaging them in artful representation of their experience can also become part of the intervention and emerge as a vital component for not only documenting how the design as emergent prototype performs and what it achieves but how the prototype functions (for better or worse) in the lives of particular recipients of the intervention.

The arts lend themselves to constructing intrinsic cases in which users document their direct experience with the helping method. This kind of development strategy respects recipients, providers of the assistance and other stakeholders as artists or potential artists who find meaning in their own experience. The arts here in service to the refinement of a design and the further development of a prototype of a particular helping method join the particular and more intrinsic with potentially greater common themes encompassing the recipients' or providers' experiences with the design.

Given their capacities to stimulate and support expression of first person experience through creative and interpretative strategies, the arts can equip those individuals or groups with opportunities to express themselves who can also educate others about how they experience their situations, and the helping methods they use (Washington & Moxley, 2008). For the arts, “understanding” is a product of a given perspective in which people who possess different stances on a given issue come away from their experience with altered insight into a social issue. Given this kind of standpoint epistemology, the arts can challenge the experience, attitudes and knowledge of people who may have had little exposure to perspectives of others, particularly those who experience firsthand the negative consequences of social issues.

What Connolly (2013) calls pluralization can emerge from the arts as audience members bring to bear different backgrounds, points of view, and experiences in their interpretations of a given object of art. Artists interacting with diverse audience members or groups can introduce considerable controversy into a given domain. An appreciation of such pluralities in understanding may introduce multiple ways of knowing with each of the pluralities possessing its own legitimacy for a particular group. Alternatively reconciliation of these differences in understanding may unite groups since artistic portrayal or representation of a given situation may tap into a common set of values supporting a mutual stance on a social issue (Brandt, 2008; Knill, 2011).

2. Rationale for the inclusion of the arts in the design of human service interventions

The arts can advance intervention design research in a number of ways all reflective of the distinctiveness of the arts in human experience. The arts are tools for enlightenment as artists can reveal ways of interpreting the human experience offering a particular perspective but one that can contain either a personal or universal message (Carey, 2006; McNiff, 2011). The diversification of the arts is indicative of the paradigm shift that has occurred over a period of approximately 60 years (Belfiore & Bennett, 2008). No longer is art only for the elite alone (McNiff, 2011). Artists from multiple backgrounds, and using multiple media, employ the arts for different purposes: to illuminate social circumstances, document violations of personal integrity or well-being, exemplify what can be, and inform audiences about particular circumstances, such as homelessness or incarceration, are only some of those aims (Berger, 1997; Campana, 2011; Junge, Alvarez, Kellogg, & Volker, 1993; Junge, 1999). The arts serve important functions in preserving memories, even dreaded ones implicating human cruelty, neglect and violence (Harvey, 1996; Kaminsky, 1984). Thus the arts can join narrative to evaluation to better judge a social issue (Abma, 1999).

Neither is formal training required to make art. Artists can educate themselves and one another through apprenticeships, and they come to produce art as a form of personal practice informed by cultural and social attachments, folk ways, personal experience, and temperament (Rhodes, 2000). Increasingly vernacular, brute, and naïve art reflect the work of people who have not received formal training or education in the arts. They possess a particular view of the world, express an inherent talent in the arts, and build on that talent advancing their craft through direct engagement in the arts typically undertaken on their own initiative. Those artists who produce folk art reflect such a process of self-learning or self-development.

Artists can also form particular contexts supporting the production of creative forms, and thereby create and strengthen group life among people who may not readily fit into mainstream community life. Consortia, collectives, studios, and educational programs can bring people into supportive intentional communities (Timm-Bottos, 2006). Through the arts, members of those communities can create distinctive world views, communicate their particular experiences, and form identities offering ways members can think of themselves from the standpoint of strengths, assets and capabilities (Timm-Bottos, 2006). The formation of such a standpoint may infuse people's involvement in arts communities with considerable meaning that they cannot obtain from other sources in society. This standpoint may strengthen the group's own epistemology – their own knowledge useful in interpreting and in establishing a politically informed and culturally distinctive stance unifying people who otherwise would be labeled as outsiders. Thus, it is not surprising to find the arts central to how people can

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