

Hip Hop Mental Health Project *Assessing the Practices of Public Scholarship*



Rigor

Generativity

This case study features two assessments of LOW that the artist Rha Goddess conducted in collaboration with different researchers. One involved clinical psychologists from City University of New York (CUNY) using an IRB-approved (Institutional Review Board) study, and the other occurred in collaboration with Callahan Consulting for the Arts. The case illustrates the power of assessment when driven by an artist's goals as well as the value of different systematic approaches and methods. The two studies complemented each other and allowed comparison of two research processes that asked similar questions in different ways.

This summary relies upon an interview with Rha Goddess in October 2012 and a report titled Moments of Transformation: Rha Goddess's LOW and Understanding Social Change by Suzanne Callahan developed for Animating Democracy, a program of Americans for the Arts, which details the two assessments. As participants in Animating Democracy's Arts & Civic Engagement Impact Initiative, Goddess and evaluation professionals engaged in a collaborative inquiry about evaluation practices that could best serve the needs of arts/cultural practitioners in terms of improving practice and understanding of the social impact of their creative work.

Who: Rha Goddess; clinical psychologists from City University of New York; Suzanne Callahan and Callahan Consulting for the Arts; audience members

What: Assessment of a performance piece called LOW: Meditations Trilogy Part I about the stigma surrounding mental illness

Where: Performance sites in four different states: New York, Illinois, Maryland, and Florida.

Assessment Questions: How are people and community changed by the performance? What moves people to action after art?

Assessment Methods: Questionnaires were the major tool. In one case, a pretest-posttest design was used. In another case, a posttest-only design used a questionnaire that included items for quantitative and qualitative analysis.

Assessment Snapshot

City University of New York (CUNY) Collaboration

Description

Collaboration with a clinical psychologist at CUNY, Dr. Peter Fraenkel, began long before assessment; the psychologist helped develop the script for the performance piece in 2002 and became involved again in 2004 to develop the assessment of the performances' impact on audiences. A second clinical psychologist, Dr. Karen Singleton, later took over and administered the assessment, which occurred after five performances in 2006-2008 in New York, Illinois, Florida, and Maryland.

The CUNY study examined audience members' reactions to the performance with a pretest-posttest design. Audience members, recruited beforehand in a variety of ways (e.g., postcards, outreach activities, mention during radio interviews), arrived at the theater early and completed a questionnaire before the performance. After the performance, a community dialogue led by a professional counselor encouraged participants to react to the piece and discuss societal definitions of mental illness and health. Technically not part of the assessment, the dialogue was meant to augment the performance. Following the discussions, audience members completed a second questionnaire and indicated whether they were willing to answer questions in a follow-up phone call six months later.

Linkage between artist's intentions and assessment

Although the response rate was low in this study (23 percent), probably because participation added extra time before and after the show for completing the lengthy questionnaires, the results nevertheless indicated that the artist's intentions were realized. Following the performance, participants showed an increased willingness to believe that a host of social factors can contribute to mental illness, such as racism, classism, sexism, the quality of the neighborhood you live in, and how you were raised as a child. They also expressed a decreased willingness to attribute the cause of mental illness to biological factors. The performance also led to a decrease in participants' approval of how the health care system handles mental illness and a decrease in participants' perceived ability to care for someone with mental illness, which the researchers believe had to do with concern about the cost of care.

Callahan Consulting for the Arts Collaboration

Description

This study took place at a single performance of *LOW* in the Clarice Smith Performing Arts Center at the University of Maryland with 99 audience members. Like the CUNY study, this one also involved a questionnaire, a post-performance discussion, and a post-performance questionnaire (this time administered immediately after the performance). Unlike the CUNY study, however, the questionnaire was limited to a single, graphically-pleasing page, and participants were recruited personally before the performance by a member of Callahan's staff, who greeted audience members and gave them a penlight as an incentive to participate. Before and after the performance, a staff member also went onstage and encouraged audience members to participate. During the post-performance discussion, Suzanne Callahan asked guiding questions



that were similar to those on the questionnaire, and then Goddess joined the discussion, giving audience members a chance to ask questions and offer feedback. Audience members received a resource list about area mental health services in their playbill.

The questionnaire that audience members completed consisted of an “emotion canvas,” single words scattered across a two-tone box in such a way that no single emotion appeared to rank higher than any other. Instructions asked participants to circle the feelings evoked by the performance and add others not included. Other questions asked respondents about the images and insights they took from the performance as well as what they would have done if they were part of the performance. Another question asked about actions respondents were prepared to take, given what they had seen, and a final question asked people about features of the play with which they identified.

Even stronger linkage between artist’s intentions and assessment

Roughly 75 percent of the audience stayed for the post-performance discussion, and of that group, nearly 98 percent filled out the questionnaire. Quantitative and qualitative analyses of the questionnaires revealed that the performance affected respondents in many of the ways that Goddess thought would be indicative of personal transformation. Quantitative analysis revealed that the most frequent emotional response was sadness, followed by feelings of being touched and engaged. Qualitative analyses of open-ended comments through coding for meaning or themes revealed that many respondents who either suffered from mental illness or worked in the field felt validated. People felt reconnected to community and gained insight about mental illness from the performance. Not only did the majority of participants report insight gained about mental illness, but the majority also expressed an interest in taking action after seeing the performance.

Core Values: Rigor Meets Practicalities Meets Generativity

Early consultation between the artist and researchers in the first study led to an ambitious plan for assessment: questionnaires would be filled out by audience members before and after the performance and follow-up phone calls would assess impact six months later. The **rigor** of this plan met the reality of the limits of participant energy: only 23% of the performance goers at five sites agreed to be in the study. As documented above, the second study implemented innovative methods to enhance response rate.

Although the project as a whole did not reflect collaboration with the “community” or stakeholders, early consultation between the artist and researchers also marked the second study. Goddess stressed, “having a voice in what to measure is very important.” She spoke of acquiring this voice as a breakthrough she had in her collaboration with Callahan in the second study. The process felt very organic and holistic. The learning that Goddess gained from the

CUNY to the Callahan study illustrates the core value of **generativity**. Finally, the **rigor** of applying multiple methods—in this case qualitative and quantitative ones—contributes to the trustworthiness of the analysis.

Where to Learn More about Rha Goddess's LOW

- Report: Callahan, R. (2009). Moments of Transformation: Rha Goddess's LOW and Understanding Social Change. Washington, DC: Animating Democracy.

Rha Goddess's LOW assessment tools

- Pre-Performance Questionnaire
- Post-Performance Questionnaire
- Demographic and Mental Health History Form
- Six-month Follow-up Questionnaire
- The “emotion canvas” survey form is found in the report, Moments of Transformation