

# Women doing it forever: The everyday creativity of women craftmakers

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## KEY WORDS

Craft, creativity, well-being, women

## ABSTRACT

In this article we discuss our narrative research project, *The everyday creativity of women craftmakers*. The research explores what craftmaking means to contemporary Australian women, including perceived links with their well-being. We filmed narrative interviews with 15 amateur women craftmakers. Each interview began with a guided tour of the woman's craftwork. The interviews explored in detail the complex and varied roles and meanings that craft has in these women's lives. We identified six key themes in the interviews: craft as a form of personal creative expression, craft making and well-being, intergenerational and familial connections through craft, the significance of making objects to give as gifts, social and community connections, the incorporation of craft skills into a sense of self and identity, and the pleasure, joy and love of making as an intrinsic aspect of craftmaking.

Note: Permission has been sought and given by the photographers whose images appear in this article.

## INTRODUCTION

Women's crafts and craftmaking can be traced back through history for centuries, with various traditions and styles emerging from different parts of the world. Indigenous Australian women, for example, made 'baskets for collecting food, nets for fishing and skin cloaks for warmth' (Powerhouse Museum 2010). The list of traditional crafts, originating from different cultures would, if we were to attempt it, take up several volumes, these include mirrored embroideries from Rajasthan, intricate Turkish rugs, Japanese silk and dyed fabrics. In Australia, Jennifer Isaacs (1987) has documented the history of non-indigenous women's craft in Australia from the 1800s through to the 1980s. The works she collects in this volume include the decorative and the functional, the traditional and the more experimental, intricate lace and embroidery

in various styles and traditions, clothes for children and adults – sewn, knitted and crocheted, quilts and patchworks, jewellery, baskets, and decorated cakes. The works she brings tell the story(s) of women's multiple roles in their homes. They provide an insight into economic and class differences. The works range from basic garments made from the only materials at hand – recycled flour sacks and sugar bags – to those made by women with access to the finest fabrics and threads and plenty of time to dedicate to intricate and detailed work.

Contemporary women around the world, living complex and demanding lives, continue traditional craft practices and develop new ones. In this article we discuss a narrative research project undertaken in 2008/9 in Melbourne, Australia with amateur

craftswomen. The project set out to explore what craftmaking means to contemporary Australian women, including any links they perceive between their craftmaking and their well-being.

## THE EVERYDAY CREATIVITY OF WOMEN CRAFTMAKERS RESEARCH

Craftwork, especially the domestic crafts such as embroidery, have often been viewed as 'time-fillers', frivolous, and of little intrinsic value. Some second-wave feminists were caught in a bind – on the one hand wanting to acknowledge and give value to women's work and on the other wanting to reject those domestic activities, like crafts, that seemed to be keeping women at home and away from opportunities available through education and public work. Reflecting on the 1960s and 1970s in Australia, Marty Grace writes "My own experience of second-wave feminism included a suppression of stereotypically feminine activities. This pressure could be characterised as 'Don't mention the children and don't knit in public'" (Grace, 2006, p.317).

While some women felt the pressure to hide their knitting, others, including the artist Judy Chicago, challenged distinctions between 'high art' and craft, using techniques including needlework in their art. This was a very deliberate political move to reclaim and revalue women's traditional crafts (Chicago & Smith, 1999).

In undertaking this research, we expected to find that women would have complex, perhaps ambivalent, relationships with their crafts. We knew of women whose craftwork seemed to give them solace at difficult times in their lives, and we wondered whether links between craftmaking and well-being were common among women craftmakers.

We chose a narrative approach because the aim of the research was to explore the meanings of craftwork to craftmakers, and we believe that storytelling enables people to articulate the context, complexity and multiplicity of meanings associated with particular aspects of their lives; to explore 'different, sometimes contradictory, layers of meaning...' (Andrew et al., 2008, p.1).

We filmed narrative interviews with 15 women as well as spending half a day talking with 18 women who belong to a quilting group: the Wednesday Quilters<sup>1</sup>. Each interview was conducted in the woman's home and began with a guided tour of the woman's craftwork, except for the Wednesday Quilters where we spoke with all of the women together at one of their meetings. The discussions that started during the tour flowed into the interviews, providing an opportunity to explore in detail the complex and varied roles and meanings that craft has in these women's lives. We asked each woman about the genesis of her interest in craftmaking, her past and current engagement with craft, the roles and meanings of craftmaking in her life, and any links she saw between her craft and her well-being. We asked each woman to tell us stories about her craft in general and about particular pieces that have special meaning. We included women of different ages and from different cultural backgrounds, and women undertaking a range of different craft activities including knitting, sewing, embroidery, quilting, patchwork, mosaics and quilling.

In our data analysis, we preserved and attended to the narrative sequences in the transcripts. As a first step we identified the stories that the women told, and read them closely for meaning. We followed this with a more traditional qualitative thematic analysis of our

interview data. We then cross-referenced the analyses to identify the themes that emerged from the stories, and stories that encapsulated particular themes.

We planned from the outset to include the craft work itself in the research. We filmed the interviews thus preserving not only the words of the narratives, but also the contexts of the participants, and images of their craftwork as the tangible expressions and symbols of their stories. In February 2009 we had an exhibition of the women's work, and finalised a short film which presents an edited version of the interviews. Also in 2009, we published a coffee table book that includes excerpts from the interviews and photographs of the women's craftwork.

### WHAT IS CRAFT?

*Something that is crafted is made as well as possible, with care and attention and with a thorough understanding of materials and processes towards an imaginative end. Things can be made, they can be manufactured or they can be crafted. We all know the differences in meaning... Pursuing an idea, through an affinity for materials and an enjoyment in understanding the necessary skills and processes associated with them, to make something well, remains the core of crafts practice (Cochrane, 1992, p.412).*

Cochrane draws attention to the affinity with materials and the skilled processes of making that characterise craft. While most of us have an understanding of what craft is and if asked we give examples of craftworks – knitting, quilting, sewing, embroidery, and then maybe mosaics, woodwork and jewellery making – the boundaries of craft and craftmaking are unclear. Debates about art and craft highlight this ambiguity:

*Probably the most common question people ask about craft is how it differs from art... In terms of practice, there is no art without craft; the idea for a painting is not a painting. The line between craft and art may seem to separate technique and expression, but as the poet James Merrill once told me, 'If this line does exist, the poet himself shouldn't draw it; he should focus only on making the poem happen (Sennett, 2008, p.65).*

Most of the women we interviewed were unconcerned about the art/craft debate.

They were more interested in getting on with making something than questioning whether it was art or craft. However, some were quite fascinated by this distinction and its politics.

Different women took different positions.

On one side of the debate is Rae Fairweather: "When you see some of the work that's produced by people; they're just absolutely beautiful. You just think, why isn't it regarded as art, it's just brilliant".

On the other side, Jan Newell who says of her own quilts: "I think art says something sort of transcendental over time and space, and I don't think these do. I think that to my eyes they are attractive things but no one would say they were art".

The view by some women of their work as craft and not art is not a belittling of craft but rather an acknowledgement of its particular qualities; making craft can be, maybe because it is not taken so seriously, both liberating and joyful. For some women the fact that they make functional objects – quilts, jumpers, library book bags – is what makes their craftwork so important and precious to them.

We believe that craftwork is creative and that much of women's craft is art. Although this issue is not of major concern to our participants, it is worth noting that this distinction between art and craft continues

to be raised as a key issue in almost all writing about women's craft.

For us, as it does for Cochrane, craftwork places the importance on the process of making, on skills that can be learned, developed and passed on, on making objects that have some level of functionality (although varying) and while the motivations for making reflect a level of practicality, there is always some desire for creative expression.

Craft and craftmaking among amateur craftswomen constitutes a personal and accessible avenue for creative expression. It involves skilled practice and processes, some passed down by older generations, and others developed by the individual, an aesthetic engagement and an intent or desire to make something, that is to give form and existence to an idea or design. Craftmaking could be seen as occurring along a continuum. At one end is the practice of following patterns and traditional methods to create replicas of works made by other craftmakers, at the other end is the work of developing new designs, new processes and practices to create original and contemporary works.

The craftswomen who participated in our study were aware of the traditional forms and processes associated with their crafts; most of them took these as a starting point, adopting some and discarding others. A number of the women invented their own methods and practices. Angela Monitto, for example, uses saucepan lids and plates as templates to create the base designs for exquisite wool embroidered blankets.

The act and process of making is central to craft practice, often more important than the product itself. In our research interviews, the women told the stories of making particular

pieces, beginning with the initial idea, sometimes inspired by materials, sometimes by a person, sometimes by a piece made by another craftswoman, and then developing the design. This was usually followed by excursions to craft shops to buy the materials, and then re-working the design and developing specific techniques and processes appropriate to the particular project. The women were eager to express their personal preferences – hand versus machine sewing of quilts, European versus Australian knitting styles, traditional fabrics versus contemporary or imported fabrics.

Most of the women we interviewed were taught craftmaking skills as children by their mothers, grandmothers, aunts, and sometimes fathers. As adults they learned new skills from fellow craftswomen or by attending classes. Each craft requires particular skills and processes that can be taught, learned and then developed and perfected by practice.

While we have seen highly decorative craft objects, beautiful lace and cross-stitch made to be framed and hung for example, most craft items are made to be functional; often the aim is to make an object that is both aesthetically pleasing and useful. Craftwork is mostly done at home and made for domestic and personal use; often the finished products are given as gifts to friends and families.

## **CRAFT IS ALIVE AND WELL IN CONTEMPORARY SOCIETY**

Our interest focuses on the continuing popularity of craft at a time in history when more women have access to education and participate in paid employment than ever before. Many women struggle to balance their paid work with family and domestic

responsibilities. However, amateur craftswomen, working in a range of professions and at various levels, not only make time for their craft but give it priority in their busy lives.

While it is difficult to compare the level of amateur craftmaking today with the level of craftmaking that existed in the past, it does appear that in recent times there has been a resurgence in the popularity of craft and craftmaking, especially among women, including young women (Minahan & Cox, 2007). Across Australia and globally an increasing visibility of interest in craft is reflected in the proliferation of formal and informal craft groups and clubs, craft fairs, websites, blogs, and crafts books. Contemporary crafters engage in diverse ways with craft. Political and subversive craft activities include: guerrilla knitting where groups of knitters work together to produce knitting that is used to cloak public monuments or structures as part of campaigns for peace or the environment; and subversive cross-stitch or embroidery that uses traditional embroidery techniques to create works that make political statements.

The increasing popularity of craft in Australia is confirmed by the Australian Bureau of Statistics 2007 Survey of Work in Selected Culture and Leisure Activities. According to this survey, participation in craft activities in Australia increased threefold in the decade prior to the most recent survey. In 2007, 2.1 million persons were involved in art and craft as a hobby activity, and a further 2 million received some form of payment for their involvement (ABS, 2007). According to this survey, women are almost twice as likely as men to participate in craft activities.

## PREVIOUS RESEARCH

Previous studies focusing on the meaning of craft to contemporary amateur craftswomen include: Adams-Price and Steinman's (2007) work on women who make jewellery in mid-life; Johnson and Wilson's (2005) study of a group of American female handcrafters and their motivations; Mason's (2005) work on the value and meaning of home-based craft for Cornish and Brazilian women; and Maidment and Macfarlane's (2008) study of the involvement of older Australian women in craft groups. These studies reflect on the continuing importance of craftmaking to women:

*These women understood that participating in textile handicraft production enhanced the quality of their lives as they created special items for themselves and the people they loved (Johnson and Wilson, 2005, p.12).*

While the motivations for engaging in craftmaking indicated by participants in these studies ranged from creative expression to economic necessity, they also reflected a complex relationship with craft and to their identity as craftmakers. The women participating in these studies, although living in very different parts of the world, and engaged in various craft practices, had much in common with each other and with the women in our study.

## FINDINGS – KEY THEMES

Craft and craftmaking plays an important role in the lives of the amateur craftswomen we interviewed. A substantial portion of each week is spent craftmaking or in craft related activities. This often requires careful negotiation with family members, forward planning and scheduling. Each woman's relationship with craft and craftmaking is complex and multi-layered.

We identified six key themes in the interviews: craft as a form of personal creative expression; craft making and well-being; intergenerational and familial connections through craft; the significance of making objects to give as gifts; social and community connections; the incorporation of craft skills into a sense of self and identity; and the pleasure, joy and love of making as an intrinsic aspect of craftmaking.

We are conscious that categories create distinctions that do not exist in practice; for the women there are many links and cross-overs and these were evident in the stories they told. For example, while the majority of the participants make craft objects to give as gifts and giving is a primary focus for them, the motivation to make is an interplay between the love of making, the love of the object, the love of the person for whom they are making, the value they place on a handmade gift, the pride they take in their work, the pleasure they gain from the recognition of their skills, the delight they take in the other person's love of the object, and the notion of leaving behind something of themselves.

### **Creative expression**

Most research on creativity focuses on 'genius', on major artists, writers and thinkers. Only recently researchers have begun to study 'everyday creativity' and the value of creative expression in everyday life. Ruth Richards argues that understanding the nature and extent of the creativity that is exercised in everyday lives can assist us to use creativity to improve physical and mental health, and to develop healthy, 'evolving' societies and cultures (Richards, 2007). She promotes an understanding of creativity as a spectrum and a resource, rather than as a quality that one has or has not.

Creative expression is a key theme emerging from our interviews with craftswomen. Some of the women are reluctant to call themselves creative but once they begin to speak about their craftwork they acknowledge that it is for them a form of creative expression. For each woman creativity has a slightly different form and expression. For Jenny Chantry, there is a focus on play and absorption; for Angela Monitto, a connection with freedom: 'I can let go and I feel that it's free, I'm free'; for Sulistijo Mumpuni, an emphasis on setting and meeting challenges: 'It's relaxing but for me I really like a challenge, and the craft... it's a challenge.'

The craftwork produced by these women involves an aesthetic engagement with the materials – whether fabric, wool or marble – and an intent or desire to give form and existence to an idea or design – and it is a creative expression:

*I wouldn't say that I'm a creative person actually. But I do know that when I start playing with the pieces of fabric, or selecting them... I get so involved in it that it occupies me completely... I think it's good that you can be creative with bits of fabric. (Jenny Chantry)*

None of these women are full time professional craftswomen. Craftmaking is integrated into, combined with, and squeezed into their already busy lives. It is part of their everyday lives. It is a creative activity that they have available to them, 'a resource' – to use Richard's term – that they can access and use to express their creativity.

### **Well-being**

Different disciplines use different definitions and measures of well-being including economic wealth, health, education levels, employment, life satisfaction, and perception of happiness to name just a few. In this research

we use a subjective, everyday understanding of well-being and we focus on the participants' own perceptions of their well-being.

There is a body of evidence that positively associates creativity with well-being, health, and life satisfaction (Hickson & Housley, 1997; McQueen-Thomson & Ziguras, 2002; Materasso, 1997; Milgram, 1990; Crompton, 2001). Ruth Richards highlights examples of creative writing leading to improvements in health, both physical and psychological, as well as the success of the arts therapies in the treatment of people with eating and mood disorders, and in assisting those coping with severe and chronic illnesses (Richards, 2007). Other studies show that creative work can help elderly citizens cope with aging, illness, grief and death (Adams-Price & Steinman, 2007), and creative play can help children negotiate trauma, and fears, and build social skills (Richards, 2007b).

Although craft is considered a form of creative expression – both within popular culture and in some of the literature on creativity and on art and craft – there is very little research looking at the impact of craftmaking on well-being. A couple of recent studies of craftswomen (Johnson & Wilson, 2005; Maidment & Macfarlane, 2008) note the positive benefits of craftwork for women but these have not been explored in any detail. In our research, we asked the women about the links they perceive between their craftwork and their well-being. All the women said their craft has a positive impact on their well-being.

Two women we interviewed were confronting serious health problems, and others had done so in the past. These women speak about the way craftwork provides a distraction, a pleasurable way of spending time, a positive

way of connecting with people and an alternative identity to that of being the 'sick person':

*I've spent a lot of time in hospital, like one year – 145 days in hospital. That's a long time of just not being able to do anything. Having the craft to do and particularly that big quilt, the tumbler quilt, it gave me something that I could look forward to and it was a distraction from everything happening around me, from medical things you just don't want to deal with. (Vicki Cameron)*

Several women talk about craft supporting and promoting their mental health:

Rae Fairweather says: "...it keeps you sane, well because of that it's relaxing and it's almost therapeutic..." and Jacinta de Besten says "I found that when I was working as a teacher, it's a really stressful job... I found if I wasn't doing craft at night, even for just half an hour, an hour, I'd just feel the stress building up".

While confident a relationship exists between craftmaking and well-being, the women often found the exact nature of the relationship between craftmaking and well-being somewhat mysterious and therefore difficult to articulate:

*I don't know how to explain it – there's an ad on TV for a medicine that, when the little girl takes it, it's like a warm mother's hug and that's how I feel about my knitting. It's not necessarily the warm mother's hug, but that type of feeling when I am making something that I kind of feel warm and loved. It's a bit hard to explain.*

(Linda Rohrs)

For us, the most powerful finding in relation to links between craft and well-being arose from the way that the women clearly and without question understand their craftmaking as a crucial support for them in the promotion of their well-being, and then actively utilise it for this purpose in their everyday lives:

*It's very therapeutic. I remember once in Ireland when my first marriage was breaking up, one of my friends said, 'I wish I could take those needles off you.' And I said, 'Do, and I'll go insane.' Because it was my therapy, it was my way of relaxing and calming down. It's my creative fidgeting... I can produce something from it and if it's not in my day, it's a bad day.*

(Trish O'Connor)

What emerges from reviewing all of the women's comments about the relationship between craftmaking and well-being, is the complex interplay of a number of factors: the process of making itself, the engagement with ideas and materials, the all-consuming and absorbing nature of craftmaking, and the sense of achievement and pride that comes from skill development, the accomplishment of completing a project and the recognition by others.

### **Intergenerational and familial connection**

Craft traditions in families connect women with each other, and often with familial craftwork practices. Many of the women in our study have treasured memories of being taught craftwork skills by their mothers, grandmothers, aunts, and one woman by her father:

*I started to sew when my Nanna got me a little Strawberry Shortcake sewing machine, where you turn the handle and the needle goes up and down when I was about three or four. And so that was when I first started sewing. She'd give me her scraps. I'd always see mum sew, she sewed all of our clothes when we were growing up. So they just started me. I had an interest like forever. I've always known about sewing and they just encouraged me. (Amanda Smith)*

The intergenerational and familial connections are a complex entanglement, web-like. For Vicki Cameron, for example, the links and associations are multiple. She values

the tradition of craftwork in her family, and in addition Vicki uses craft as a way of maintaining and developing relationships with various members of her family in very individual ways. She and her mother, who taught her to knit when she was a child, share each other's craftwork and make special gifts for each other. Craft also connects Vicki with the younger generation. She is close to her nieces and nephews and their children. She likes making things that give them pleasure.

One of Vicki's nieces encouraged her to set up a blog and to write about her craftwork. This acknowledgement and demonstration of the value that her family puts on her work is particularly important for Vicki: "my family means so much to me, I'd like to be able to leave them a memory of me that's tangible. Something that's not just a picture. Rather than have a gravestone, I'd rather them have a quilt."

Vicki articulates here what a number of the other women also alluded to – the creation of family heirlooms. This is the idea of making and giving something of themselves for the next generation. They want to be remembered, in a way that gives something precious to the receiver of the gift, not a grave site to be visited out of duty, but things of use and beauty that represent something of the relationship.

The importance of intergenerational links is also associated with the pleasure taken in continuing the traditions of women's work. The women take pleasure in knowing that their craft has been practised by women throughout history; and that it is a tradition passed down from woman to woman. Jan Newell says: "I also like the notion that women have been finding meaning and solace in this sort of thing for thousands of years and I'm in a relationship with them."





Figure 1: Participants meet for the first time at the 'it keeps me sane' exhibition (Photographer – Maurice Grant-Drew)



Figure 2: Doily by Laura May Wright – Marty Grace's grandmother. (Photographer – Daniel O'Brien)

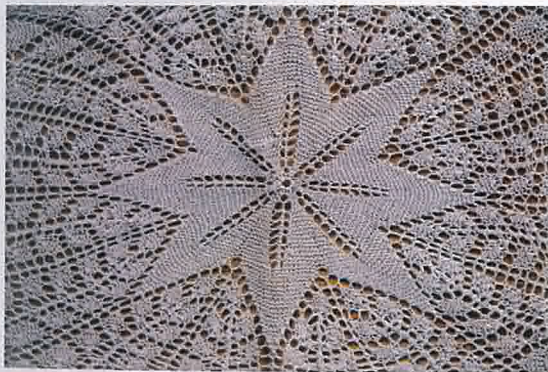


Figure 3: Detail from a doily by Rosa Gandolfo – Enza Gandolfo's mother. (Photographer – Enza Gandolfo)



Figure 4: The opening of the 'it keeps me sane' exhibition. (Photographer – Maurice Grant-Drew)



Figure 5: Jan Newell's quilt. (Photographer – Daniel O'Brien)



Figure 6: Detail from one of Angela Monitto's wool embroidered blankets. (Photographer – Carla van Laar)



Figure 7: Amanda Smith's jewellery. (Photographer – Daniel O'Brien)

## Giving

The giving of gifts is significant in most cultures. We give gifts as a way of acknowledging other people, of celebrating, of building and strengthening connections and relationships, of expressing love and friendship. The gift itself can become symbolic of the relationship, the level of intimacy and attachment.

Gift giving is very closely linked with craftmaking for most of our participants. Sometimes the objects are made with a specific person in mind, and at other times, they are made and then given away when the situation arises. Either way this process of giving something that is handmade is seen as an integral part of craftmaking for the women:

*I give most things away... Most presents, I'll try and make something... Even their birthday card, I'll make their birthday card rather than going and buying it. It's partly because I want to do it and it's partly that I think it's more special to give something that you've made and it's partly also because I think, well I've got the stuff here, so why go and buy something when I could just make it...*  
(Amanda Smith)

Jenny Chantry, Jacinta den Besten, Karen Clarke and Sulistijo Mumpuni make things for their children; Marilyn Sullivan enjoyed making things for her mother when her mother was alive and loves sharing her interest in craft with daughters. Angela Monitto and Trish O'Connor enjoy making special gifts for their nieces.

Most of the woollen embroidered blankets Angela Monitto has made over the past 18 years – she kept only one for herself – have been gifts for close friends and family members. At different times people have suggested to Angela that she make her blankets

to sell but Angela says: 'I couldn't put a value on it because they were made for people'. Each blanket takes Angela hundreds of hours to make; they are special gifts, and they signify and express a close bond with the recipient. Angela says: "I've made them with love and they're given with love".

Gifts are made not only for family members and close friends but also for members of particular communities. Jacinta den Besten makes gifts for her daughters' friends. Sulistijo Mumpuni makes gifts to give out instead of lolly bags at her children's birthday parties; and makes gifts for her sons' teachers and friends. The Wednesday Quilters made quilts for people who lost their homes in the bushfires in Victoria in February 2009.

While gift giving sometimes provides the impetus and the motivation for making a particular piece, the motivation for craftmaking itself precedes it. In other words, these women knit, sew, quilt or quill, constantly thinking about and generating new projects; they value and are proud of their work and when they would like to give a gift, they naturally turn to their craft. In this way, gift giving provides a way of creating the space to make more craft.

## Social and community connection

During the interviews it became clear that for a number of women craft is a vehicle through which they make, create and maintain community. As Vicki Cameron says: "It's a very social thing. It brings people into your life and you into their lives as well...".

As well as intergenerational and familial connections, women also make connections with other groups and communities through their craft. Vicki Cameron took her craft into the hospital and other patients, cleaners, nurses,



Figure 8: Jenny Chantry's quilts.  
(Photographer – Daniel O'Brien)

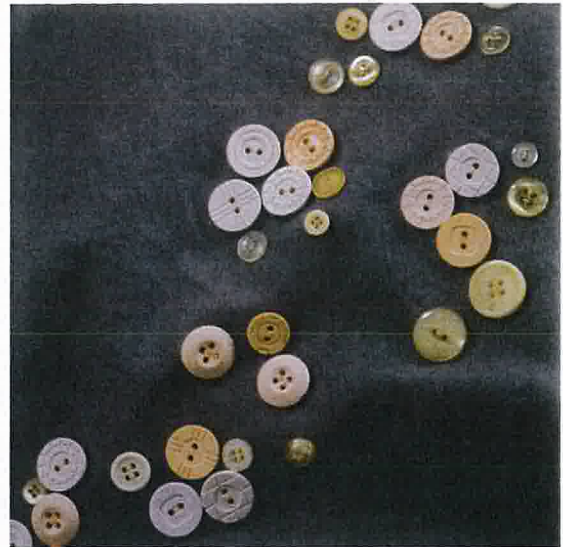


Figure 11: Detail from Amanda Smith's Button dress.  
(Photographer – Daniel O'Brien)



Figure 9: Detail from one of Vicki Cameron's quilts.  
(Photographer – Enza Gandolfo)



Figure 12: Necklace made by Trish O'Connor for her niece.  
(Photographer – Maurice Grant-Drew)



Figure 10: Trish O'Connor's Graduation dress.  
(Photographer – Daniel O'Brien and Monica Liu)



Figure 13: Detail from one of Angela Monitto's wool embroidered blankets.  
(Photographer – Carla van Laar)

and kitchen staff came to have a look at her work, to talk about craft, and to show her their work:

*I was in hospital for so long, that was over about three to four years I was in and out of hospital, that it was a link to the world that wasn't just medical. And a link to the staff there, that people would come in, sit down and talk to me about their craft, which would never have happened before.... Instead of coming in and saying, 'How are you feeling today?' It was, 'How's your quilt going today?' It was just a totally different focus that took the focus off me being sick, for myself, but for other people too, onto something that other people could identify with and share in with as well. And it went right around the hospital. Even the people in the kitchen would come up and say, 'Where's your quilt, I've heard about it and I want to see it?'*

Linda Rohrs and Cathy Yue have found knitting in public spaces like trams, trains and parks, is a way to connect with strangers both in Australia and overseas. Linda says: "People have an excuse to say something to you". Sulistijo Mumpuni uses craft to develop particular relationships with the other parents while they are all waiting for their children who are participating in sports and other leisure activities.

For Trish O'Connor, who moved to Australia from Ireland, knitting has been an important part of the process of making new friends in her new country. She has met some of her closest friends through the local Stitch n' Bitch knitting group and also by knitting on the train: "The first friend that I met three and a half years ago, Debbie, she does knitting... We actually met because my wool was in a mess and she helped untangle it."

Classes and groups are important aspects of the culture that surrounds craft. There are many

opportunities for women craftmakers to meet by joining groups or going to classes. After returning from living in the United States of America, where she perceived craftmaking as much more mainstream than it is in Australia, Rae Fairweather formed her own quilting group. Jenny Chantry goes to classes to learn new techniques or skills.

Some groups have been going for many years and members become close friends as well as supporting each other in their craftwork. The Wednesday Quilters, a group based in Kew, have been meeting for almost 30 years. Alison Head, one of the members says:

*I find patchwork very relaxing. Being in a group of people, many of whom I have known for a long time through local school and church is an added bonus. The group shares ideas and advice about patchwork, family news and concerns and even pieces of fabric. At times the group is more important than the patchwork.*

## Identity

The women we interviewed are amateur craftswomen. Craft is not their sole occupation nor their profession. With only a couple of exceptions, the major part of these women's time is occupied with paid work and/or with family and childcare responsibilities.

During this project, the spotlight was on craft and the women rarely talked about those other aspects of themselves; the focus was very much on their identity as craftswomen. However, it is important to see their craft as only one aspect of who they are, what they are committed to and interested in. These women are full-time workers, they are mothers, wives, daughters, aunts and nieces. They have to deal with the challenges of illness and of providing an income for their families. They belong to groups and associations, to friendship and



Figure 14: Judith Howard's painting of the Wednesday Quilters. (Photographer – Enza Gandolfo)



Figure 15: Marilyn Sullivan's cross-stitch. (Photograph supplied by Marilyn Sullivan)



Figure 16: Detail from one of Leonie Scott's mosaics. (Photographer – Maurice Grant-Drew)

community networks and in these contexts they have other identities and roles. Their identities are fluid, multiple and shifting.

While each of us has some agency and we can and do take action to construct our own identity(ies), the range of identities available to us is generally culturally limited by our gender, ethnicity, class, education and cultural background. One of the things that fascinated us was the ways that women actively use their craftwork as a way of shaping and forming a particular identity. Vicki Cameron uses craft to develop an alternative identity to that of 'Vicki, the sick person'. Jenny Chantry uses quilting to build a post-retirement identity and interest. Angela Monitto has, by making her beautiful embroidered blankets for all of her nieces and

nephews as well as other family members and friends, developed an identity as a craftmaker among her inner circle.

For all of the women we interviewed, their craft is a source of pride. They have developed their skills, and shared their craftwork and in this way they have built a reputation among their families and with their friends as skilled craftswomen. This reputation is part of who they are both for themselves and for their various communities:

*I'm very proud, and I think that proudness for me comes out in these blankets. Yeah, I'm proud and I can do something. I think now, well I know now, I am good at what I do... I still love it. Yeah it is me now, I know it's me now, because I haven't given up. I haven't sort of gone, 'Oh yeah, done that, try something new...'* (Angela Monitto)

The women we interviewed understand the ways craftwork and craftswomen are seen by some sectors of the community. They know and acknowledge that some people still see craft as a mindless, time-filling activity of little value; they are aware of the craft/art debates. They also understand, to varying degrees, and with varying levels of interest, that by the very act of doing craftwork they are challenging ideas about women who take up craft. They referred to and addressed the negative views that they themselves might have held and many others hold of craft and craftmaking:

*Right at the beginning and I don't give two hoots now... I was horrified at the perfectionism people were striving for. I thought 'How could anybody spend their life trying to get equal sized stitches across a quilt? This is the dumbing down of women!' I was really taken by that. I thought, 'This is shocking'. All my political sensitivities and all my feminism went 'This is wrong. This is wrong!' And to an extent there's a little bit of that, that nags me; that says if you lost contact with it, you could easily lose contact with reality in a way. And that it could be the dumbing down of women... [In a lighter tone, and with a wave of her hand] But I just get carried away with it so it doesn't matter. It's just enjoyable and life goes on and so on. (Jenny Chantry)*

Jenny is referring to second-wave feminist concerns with craft and craftmaking. She articulates those concerns – craft as time-filler, craft 'dumbing down' women. She addresses those views and situates herself as both a feminist and a craftmaker, demonstrating the fluid, shifting and multiple nature of identity.

### **Pleasure, joy and love of making**

One of the key motivations for most of the women in our study – and maybe the reason it does contribute to their well-being – is their love for their chosen craft (or crafts) and

the pleasure and joy it brings them. This was obvious in all of the interviews. The women spoke with delight about their work, about the processes, the meanings and the objects themselves. Jenny Chantry encapsulates the feelings many of the women expressed.

Jenny says:

*I just love it. I love going to shops, buying stuff. I love looking. I love the travel around it. I love websites. I love op shops for books. I love the feel of the quilts. I love the look of them. I love giving them to people. It's touched something in me... a very basic thing, I get a lot of enjoyment out of the whole thing.*

### **CONCLUSION**

Craft and craftmaking continue to play an important role in the lives of many contemporary Australian women. Women are motivated to make time for their craft practices, often very traditional practices and techniques, by the joy and pleasure that they derive, and the joy and pleasure their work gives others. We highlight the value it brings to their lives, and the links the women perceive between their craftmaking and their well-being – how it keeps them sane. The women who participated in our study articulated some of the benefits and the positive contributions of craftmaking in their lives. They express themselves through craftmaking and they use their absorbing, joyful, challenging relationships with their craftwork to sustain themselves, to promote their well-being and to connect with other people.

We found, as did Johnson and Wilson in their study of the motivational factors of contemporary women handcrafters (in their case textile crafts) that:

*women understood that participating in textile handcraft production enhanced the quality of their*

*lives as they created special items for themselves and the people they love. They determined it was worth the time and effort to make these items, and they cherished the relations that were symbolized through the giving of textile handcraft objects* (Johnson & Wilson, 2005, p.129).

We came to our research asking why busy contemporary women are continuing to dedicate hours of their time to craft. Why is it that even with the ‘bad press’ that craft often has among feminists and others, many women – feminists and non-feminists – take such pleasure in their craftwork? What does craft mean to amateur craftswomen?

We found that the women in our study see their craftwork as a haven and a creative outlet. It is neither a time-filler nor another demand on their time. It supports their well-being and iteratively shapes their identities. It provides a point of connection with other people, and builds communities. Sometimes it subverts allocated identities and creates alternatives cultures.

In the contemporary world where many of us suffer from the competing demands of work and family, craftmaking can provide a way of supporting and maintaining well-being. Of course not all women are interested in or have a desire to make craft. However, this exploration of meanings of craftmaking and its links with well-being produced findings that are broadly relevant to considerations of how to promote well-being, and the significance of leisure activities in the promotion of well-being. The findings also highlight the importance of introducing women (and men) to craftmaking opportunities, and supporting the development of craftmaking skills for children.

In a world where often people feel stuck in jobs and roles that are undertaken out of duty and/or necessity, it is important to identify activities that bring pleasure and joy, and that can be easily incorporated into everyday life. Craftmaking does not need to be expensive (although it can be), it does not need a room of its own (although some women have wonderful sewing rooms), it allows for the nurturing of self and others and while it may be a solitary activity it is often shared with others.

## ENDNOTE

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