

QUILTING A CONNECTION: THE USE OF QUILTING IN GROUP ART THERAPY TO  
PROMOTE WELL-BEING FOR OLDER WOMEN

JESSICA GARDNER

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By: Jessica Gardner

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Research Advisor:

*Janis Timm-Bottos PhD, ATR-BC, ATPQ, PT*

Department Chair:

*Yehudit Silverman M.A., DTR, RDT*

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## ABSTRACT

### QUILTING A CONNECTION: THE USE OF QUILTING IN GROUP ART THERAPY TO PROMOTE WELL-BEING FOR OLDER WOMEN

JESSICA GARDNER

This qualitative research paper explores the potential of quilting, and the quilting process, as a therapeutic tool for promoting the well-being of older women within the context of a group art therapy setting. Social isolation acts as a prominent risk factor for the population of older women in Canada, and is influenced and incited by the social stigma and perspective that older women are an economic and societal burden to Western society. Through an integrative methodology, involving a theoretical approach with elements of arts-based inquiry, this research paper reviews and analyzes the literature focused on quilting, group art therapy, and the well-being of older women. Additionally, this author's personal learning experience about quilting, in context with being an art therapy student, is explored through the engagement of the quilting process as an arts-based inquiry. This personal learning is discussed in correspondence with the main findings from the analyzed and synthesized literature, and as a way to better inform the explored concept of the use of quilting for well-being within an art therapy context. Connection with the body, connection with womanhood, and connection through generativity emerged as main themes. These findings are discussed in attempt to distinguish quilting as an appropriate and therapeutic tool for fostering and promoting the well-being of older women.

*Keywords:* quilting, older women, well-being, art therapy, group therapy

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## **Chapter 1: Introduction**

### **Personal Intention**

“Fiber, perhaps more than any other material, has the ability to embody the individual ... Everyone has a personal connection to fabric that is fundamental” (Wright, 2001, p.11).

My interest in the current research project, which explores the use of quilting as a tool to promote well-being for older women, initially stemmed from reflection on my current relationship with my grandmothers and my ambiguous, yet unexplored, attraction to textile art forms and processes. I have always viewed the care, skill, and time taken to produce a textile work as an astonishing creative process and portrayal of self-efficacy. I find myself feeling fortunate for having had the opportunity to witness this process first hand, as my maternal grandmother used, and continues to still use, sewing and knitting methods to fabricate clothing for my family. At the young age of six, my maternal grandmother began learning her sewing and knitting methods in a small community in Italy. These textile methods and skills proved to be resourceful for my grandmother when she immigrated from Italy to Canada with my grandfather, to start a new life and begin their family. Although I have not often partaken in the activity of knitting and sewing with my grandmother, having witnessed her process and received the tangible results in the form of clothing, provided a sense of appreciation, inspiration and wonder towards textile arts.

In regards to quilts I experience a strong curiosity towards their re-purposive nature, patched aesthetics, and technical processes of coming into being. In my own artistic process, being primarily painting, I felt mostly influenced and inspired by modern and contemporary painters; however, now I am beginning to observe an implicit influence from quilting which resonates in the colour blocking and abstracted nature conveyed in some of my paintings. When I have observed the presence and use of quilts in other people’s homes, or even in art galleries, feelings of comfort, home, and warmth would emerge along with metaphors of caring and nurturing. I have sensed these qualities in my personal encounters with quilts, and have continually wondered about the type of qualities the process of quilt making could evoke for me and for others.

The focus of an art therapy group context in this research paper is inspired by my recent experience of working, as an art therapy intern, primarily with women, including older women, in group or communal settings. The women that I worked with were experiencing adversities

such as living with cancer, living with a form of dementia, or transitioning out of a domestic violent situation. In my role as an art therapy intern I was able to witness how partaking in art therapy within a group or communal setting allowed for socialization and social connections to occur for these women, who may have been feeling socially isolated due to their life circumstances. In general, social isolation is a prominent risk factor affecting older women and therefore researching and finding ways to counteract social isolation for this population is integral in promoting and fostering their well-being (Bogunovic, 2011; Broadbent, Wander, & McGillivray, 2013; Cohen, Perlstein, Capline, Kelly, Firth, & Simmens, 2006; Cohen, 2009; Covan, 2005; Gadalla, 2011; John, 2012; World Health Organization, 2011).

This qualitative research paper will explore and attempt to distinguish quilting as a tool to promote well-being for older women within a group art therapy setting, and its counteractive qualities towards potential social isolation.

### **Research Question**

My primary and subsidiary research questions are: How can quilting promote well-being for older women within an art therapy group setting? And as an art therapy student who is exploring and discovering the process of quilting for the first time, what has been my personal experience learning about the use and process of quilting?

### **Methodology**

For this qualitative research paper, a theoretical approach with the integration of partial elements of arts-based inquiry will be applied as a way to appropriately address the research questions. The theoretical approach is used with the purpose of reviewing the existing literature on well-being for older women, and on the use of quilting as therapeutic tool within the context of an art therapy lens. The literature will then be analyzed and synthesized with the intention of integrating prominent themes and theories, and as an attempt to explain and demonstrate how quilting may be used as an effective tool to promote the well-being of older women in an art therapy group setting.

I will use elements of arts-based inquiry in order to address my subsidiary research question, and therefore demonstrate my experience as an art therapy student who is exploring and discovering the use of quilting for the first time. The subsidiary research question arose from a concern of not being able to clearly grasp the literature obtained using the theoretical approach, due to never having experienced the process of quilting for myself. With this concern,



I thought it was important to explore the nature of my learning, and found the use of arts-based inquiry to be an appropriate approach. Arts-based inquiry can be described as using visual means and artistic process, within a research perspective, so that understanding and knowledge can be obtained (Kapitan, 2010). Kapitan defines the use of arts-based inquiry by stating, “[arts-based inquiry] is founded on the principle that art practice is a form of thinking, problem solving, and the investigation of direct perceptual evidence that, as in all research, lays the groundwork for concept formation” (Kapitan, 2010, p.162). Arts-based inquiry has been described as being more connected to the practices of art therapy, and as described by McNiff (1998), stems from, “a trust in the intelligence of the creative process and a desire for relationships with the images that emerge from it” (p.37). Allen’s (1995) writings emphasizes this point in her strong conviction and encouragement in the use of artistic process as way of knowing. Therefore, the integration of elements of arts-based inquiry within a theoretical methodology allows for a more holistic approach that more closely reflects what I have learned and understand, as a researcher and as an art therapy student, about the quilting process and the use of quilting. This reflection on my personal learning process may better inform discussion on the application of quilting as a tool to promote well-being for older women in an art therapy context.

In context with the potential heuristic aspects of my arts-based inquiry, it should be noted in further situating my role as a researcher that I identify as a young, feminist, woman who is currently a student within an art therapy training program. These factors may influence bias in my research process; however, these factors can also inform the framework of this research project as being situated in perspective with feminism and art therapy. Halifax (2003) describes how a feminist understanding in context with art therapy can be particularly useful as we currently live in a Western society and culture where so many, including women, have been marginalized by the dominant, patriarchally informed, discourse. A feminist perspective in art therapy can allow for the hardships and truths of those who have been oppressed by patriarchal society, including women, to be brought forward, a concept that is particularly integral in this current research paper.

### **Data Collection and Analysis**

The data used in this research paper will include literature applicable to the research question, and relevant to the well-being of older adults, older women, art therapy and quilting. The literature was located through database searches that included, Psych Info, Google Scholar,

PubMed, JSTOR and Eric and also located through Concordia University's CLUES library catalogue. In relation to the arts-based inquiry element of my research process, I engaged in the process of making a quilt. The collection of literature was not exhaustive due to the scope and time limitations of this research paper.

The data collected from the literature will be analyzed using the qualitative analysis of coding (Creswell, 2013; Neuman, 2006). Neuman describes that the method of coding for data analysis is guided by the research question, and involves both the process of data reduction and the analytic categorizing of prominent themes from the data. More specifically, the coding methods of open coding, axial coding, and selective coding will be used. Neuman describes open coding as the first pass through of the collected data where the main themes are located and manually coded, allowing for the data to be primarily condensed into categories. The process of axial coding, as described by Neuman, then proceeds when the second pass through of the data occurs. Axial coding involves a focus more on the initial coded themes, and moves towards organizing pre-existing themes and ideas in order to identify "the axis of key concepts in analysis" (p.322). Finally, during the third and last pass through of the data, selective coding occurs. Selective coding involves selectively scanning the data and previous codes in attempt to make comparisons and contrasts to assist in illustrating themes (Neuman, 2006). The findings that arise from this three step coding process will be discussed in context with the research questions.

In response to my learning and understanding of the process of quilt making, which corresponded with my own personal engagement in the quilting process, a form of "reflexive action" occurred as further data analysis. Kapitan (2010) describes that "reflexive action" within data analysis occurs as, "[the researcher] influences or is influenced by changing dynamics of experience that are the result of artmaking" (p.170). I engaged in the reflexive practice of creative dialogue in reflection with my quilt. Creative dialogue could be further explained as the process of acknowledging an artworks physical presence and by initiating a dialogue with elements of the artwork and the work as a whole, critical perspectives and insights may be imagined through this dialogue (McNiff, 1992). This creative dialogue can also be described in context with Allen's (2005, 2016) concept of witness writing, where closely observing, describing and dialoguing with an artwork acts as a form of witnessing that is autonomous and

capable of providing knowledge. My creative dialogue is re-imagined through a written poem, which will be presented in the findings section of this research paper.

## **Chapter 2: Literature Review**

### **Risk Factors for Older Women**

Older women currently make up a majority of the older adult population worldwide (World Health Organization, 2011). In Canada, there is approximately 4.8 million people aged 65 years and older, and of this population 56 percent identify as women (Statistics Canada, 2013). This accounts for about 16 percent of the Canadian women population, and is projected to increase to 24 percent of the Canadian women population by 2031 (Statistics Canada, 2013). This projected increase in the aging population can be seen as resulting from the aging baby boomer cohort, consisting of people born between 1946 and 1965, during a period of high fertility rates (Statistics Canada, 2013). In comparison to men, older women also have a higher life expectancy, living an average of three years more than men (Statistics Canada, 2013). This may impose late life transitions for older women into the role of a caregiver or a widow, adding to other psychosocial concerns implied by physiological decline and decreasing social networks, as seen in older Canadian women. (Bugonovic, 2011; Statistics Canada 2013).

Gadalla (2010) emphasizes other risk factors specific to older Canadian women with findings showing that in comparison to older men, older women had, “poorer physical health, lower socioeconomic conditions, higher levels of chronic stress, felt less tangible support, and had higher levels of psychological distress” (p.525). The literature specific to older women identifies the importance of valuing gender differences in aging, so that proper resources can be explored to more appropriately meet the population’s needs (Bugonovic, 2011; Covan, 2005; Gadalla, 2010; Huet, 2002; Liddle, Parkinson & Sibbritt, 2013; Maidment & Macfarlane, 2011; Martin, 2003; Statistics Canada, 2013; Stephenson, 2013).

The risk of social isolation for older women can be seen as being particularly prevalent. Social isolation may occur due to decreasing social networks, transitions into residential homes, and the high likelihood of living alone (Statistics Canada, 2013). The risk factor of social isolation can also be applied to Western societies’ stigma and perspectives about the population of older adults (Covan, 2005; John, 2012; Stanley & Cheek, 2003). Stereotypes of older adults being highly dependent on societal resources may influence negative perspectives of older adults being an economic burden to society (John, 2012). Kerr (as cited in Wald, 2003) describes this

developed stereotype in Western society by stating, “where once our elders were revered for their wisdom, and encouraged to inspire the intergenerational family constellation, now our aged are often viewed as burdensome and subordinate” (p.38). This perspective may minimize the reality and potential of older adults’ contributions and roles in society, and skew an older person’s personal perspectives of these roles (John, 2012). Social isolation may in turn exacerbate feelings of loss and loneliness, and cause forms of psychological distress and depression (Bogunovic, 2011; Broadbent, Wander, & McGillivray, 2013; Cohen, Perlstein, Capline, Kelly, Firth, & Simmens, 2006; Cohen, 2009; Covan, 2005; Gadalla, 2011; John, 2012; World Health Organization, 2011).

These negative perspectives by Western society towards older adults as being societal burdens has been described by Huet (2002) and Martin (2003) as occurring earlier and more prominently towards women. The authors describe how the strong focus on the importance of maintaining youth and commercialized versions of beauty provokes a blatant intolerance towards aging women, and this focus on youth and beauty is both produced and consumed by Western society, again contributing to social isolation, along with feelings of worthlessness and helplessness, and in turn possible psychological distress (Huet, 2002; Martin, 2003). This societal intolerance, and other noted risk factors for older women within Western society, has appeared to have influenced research to change its direction from a focus on managing deficits, towards a focus on promoting well-being. This re-focusing on well-being may allow for a better exploration of the appropriate resources for the population of older women (Bogunvic, 2011; Cohen et al., 2006; Cohen, 2009; Covan, 2005; John, 2012; Lamb, Brady, & Lohman, 2009; Stanley & Cheek, 2003). In this research paper, I will focus on exploring and discussing the literature which emphasizes this direction of promoting well-being for older women.

### **Well-Being**

While reviewing the literature there appeared to be an incongruence in how the authors decided to define well-being (Broadbent et al., 2013; Collier, 2011; Diener & Chan, 2011; Maidment & Macfarlene, 2011; Quadros-Wander, McGillivray, & Broadbent, 2013; Stanley & Cheek, 2003; Stephenson, 2013). The definition of well-being was either implied as being already known by the reader, or was described in relation to aspects that may constitute well-being. For example, some of the most frequent aspects listed by authors as constituting well-being specific to older adults were social support, social connections, a sense of mastery or self-

efficacy, self-esteem, meaning making, a sense of purpose and self-acceptance (Broadbent et al., 2013; Collier, 2011; Gadalla, 2010; Liddle et al., 2013; Maidment & Mcfarlene, 2011; Quadros-Wander et al., 2013; Stanley & Cheek, 2003; Stephenson, 2013). However, these aspects are not very consistent within this literature, as the authors' note different sets of aspects from one another.

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) (2016) echoes this notion of incongruence on the definition of well-being by stating, "there is no consensus around a single definition of well-being" (para. 6); however, CDC continues by concluding, "but there is general agreement that at minimum, well-being includes the presence of positive emotions and moods (e.g., contentment, happiness), the absence of negative emotions (e.g., depression, anxiety), satisfaction with life, fulfillment and positive functioning ... encompassing physical, mental, and social domains" (para. 6). Although CDC (2016) states the generally agreed upon aspects of well-being, this generality of agreement does not guarantee that all research will focus on the same set of characteristics when deciding how to focus on well-being, and will in turn continue to lead to inconsistencies and a non-consensus as to how well-being can be clearly and concisely defined.

The concept of involving the perspectives and voices of older adults' within research was encouraged by the authors of the reviewed literature, as a way to better guarantee that research on well-being for older adults would be more directed towards this populations' needs (Bogunovic, 2011; Broadbent et al., 2013; Moxley, Feen-Calligan, Washington & Garriot, 2011; Stanley & Cheek, 2003; Wander et al., 2013). Stanley and Cheek (2003) particularly focused on this subjective perspective of well-being for older adults when differentiating between the concept of well-being and the concept of successful aging in stating, "it appears that successful aging implies an external evaluation on certain criteria, whereas well-being is a state experienced by the individual" (p. 54). In line with this statement, a concentration on involving older adult's perspectives in the research will be explored by looking at the literature which emphasizes a focus on subjective well-being (Broadbent et al., 2013; Covan, 2005; Quadros-Wander et al., 2013; Stanley & Cheek, 2003;).

Broadbent et al. (2013), Diener and Chan (2011) and Quadros-Wander et al. (2013) defined subjective well-being, or personal well-being, as an individual's own evaluation of their life and life circumstances. Research by Broadbent et al. and Quadros-Wander et al. specifically

looked at how subjective well-being was influenced by an older adults' perceived control of their environment. The authors found that primary perceived control, or one's capacity to make changes to one's environment, becomes more influenced in later age by secondary perceived control, or one's "cognitive changes within the self to adapt to the environment" (Broadbent et al., 2013, p. 846), and this in turn affects an older adult's subjective well-being. In other words, these findings suggest that although it is important for older adults to maintain a primary perceived control of making changes to their environment, their primary perceived control can be adjusted to incorporate and acknowledge their acceptance of unchangeable circumstances, such as physiological or cognitive declines, and as a result they will view their well-being more positively (Broadbent et al., 2013; Quadros-Wander et al., 2013). While it is important to recognize this definition of subjective well-being for older adults, it is also important to gain more clarity in how to define well-being by acknowledging a universal and operational definition of well-being as proposed by Dodge, Daly, Huyton and Sanders (2012).

Dodge et al. (2012) explored the challenge of defining well-being by undertaking a holistic and multi-disciplinary review. Dodge et al. concluded by acknowledging the complexities of well-being and proposing that well-being could be defined as, "the balance point between an individual's resource pool and the challenges faced," and that, "in essence, stable well-being is when individuals have the psychological, social and physical resources they need to meet particular psychological, social and/or physical challenges," (p.230). Dodge et al. illustrated this definition in the diagram displayed in figure 1. Dodge et al.'s (2012) illustration of wellbeing depicts a sort of see-saw, with the concept of resources weighing on one end, and the concept of challenges weighing on the other end. In between the resources and challenges lies the concept of well-being, remaining astatic as it can "dip" or decrease in level when there is an imbalance between an individual's resources and challenges.

For example, when faced with a challenge, an individual's well-being will begin to "dip," and the individual will need to adapt their resources in order to meet the challenge, in turn adding balance to one's well-being. Broadbent et al.'s (2013) description of well-being for older adults, in relation to perceived control, could also be seen as an example in context with Dodge et al.'s definition of wellbeing. When an older adult faces the challenge of having less control over their environment due to physiological and cognitive declines, they must adjust their sense of control by lessening their sense of a primary perceived control, or sense of controlling one's

environment, to allow for more secondary perceived control, or sense of acceptance; and as previously mentioned, this adjustment can allow for a more positive view of one's subjective well-being. However, it's important to note that Dodge et al. explicated that their definition does not imply that well-being is static at best, as Dodge et al. (2012) exclaims that a form of stagnation will occur when no challenges are presented in one's life.

Stagnation could be described as having a sense of a lack of purpose and a state of unproductivity in one's life (Erikson, 1950). This sense of personal stagnation could lead to decreases in psychological, social, and physical resources in a person's life, adding imbalance between resources and challenges and consequently, affecting the person's well-being negatively. As a result, a challenge is required to continue towards balancing well-being. Therefore, well-being can be viewed as being quite dynamic, which is best described by Marks (as cited in Dodge et al., 2012) who stated:

Well-being is not a beach you go and lie on. It's a sort of dynamic dance and there's movement in that all the time and actually it's the functionality of that movement which actually is true levels of wellbeing. (p.230)

When pairing Mark's (as cited in Dodge et al., 2012, p.230) description of well-being as a dynamic dance with Dodge et al.'s (2012) depiction of well-being being symbolized as a circular form (fig. 1), a visual sense of a continual and dynamic movement becomes more prominent in the illustrated see-saw.

This dynamic of continual movement between balance and imbalance to achieve a positive sense of well-being resembles Csikszentmihaly's (1990; 2002) concept of flow. According to Csikszentmihaly, flow is, "the state in which people are so involved in an activity that nothing else seems to matter" (p.4). This state of flow, according to Csikszentmihaly, occurs when there is a balance between skills and challenges, which in turn can lead to happiness. This concept is portrayed in figure 2, which depicts a flow channel in which a person may fluctuate in and out of depending on the skills and challenges present, and the corresponding balance between the available skills and challenges. Csikszentmihaly's model of flow also elaborates that when there is an imbalance between skills and challenges, anxiety and boredom could ensue. For example, when there are more skills present than challenges, an individual may experience boredom; and when there are more challenges present than skills, an individual may experience forms of anxiety. The exponential growth of the flow channel, as displayed in figure

2, elaborates that as skills and challenges develop, this fluctuation between anxiety, flow, and boredom continues to occur and remains dependent on the balance and imbalance between incoming skills and challenges (Csikszentimihaly, 1990; 2002). Again, this concept of flow echoes a strong resemblance to the ceaseless and dynamic movement that is expressed by Dodge et al.'s (2012) definition and illustration of well-being.

The idea of having proper resources to face a challenge also resembles Agaibi and Wilson's (2005) definition of resilience, being, "a capacity for successful adaptation under adverse conditions" (p.714). Lamb et al. (2009) discussed the use of a strengths-based approach to encourage the continued learning of resiliency enhancement for older adults. In reflecting back to the definition of well-being proposed by Dodge et al. (2012), the use of a strengths-based approach to enhance resiliency learning for older adults could relate to encouraging and assisting an older adult to have the appropriate psychological, social and physical resources in order to face a particular challenge, so that well-being can be promoted. This will be explored further in the literature in context with art therapy.

### **Art Therapy for Older Women**

Malchiodi (2013) writes, "art therapy with older adults often focuses on the current interests of participants, improvement of quality of life, assistance with the adjustment to life changes, and increasing socialization" (p.281). These factors could be seen as encouraging resources for older adults facing challenges in their life, allowing for a promotion of their well-being. Research emphasizes how the older adult's brain is still in a state of development, and engaging in activities, such as the arts, can be seen as not only positive stimulation, but as a multifaceted process working on implicit and explicit levels, and allowing for beneficial coping and learning (Cohen et al., 2006; Cohen, 2009; Liddle et al., 2013; Malchiodi, 2013). Group art therapy directed towards older adults has also been described as assisting with reintegration of socialization for older adults, which in turn helps to facilitate their well-being (Wald, 2003). Before discussing group art therapy specific to older women, the general concepts about the beneficial elements of group therapy, as proposed by Yalom and Leszcz (2005) will first be discussed.

Yalom and Leszcz (2005) described that interpersonal bonds are innate to human beings, and that social connection and integration have a positive impact on the course of people's health. In contrast to the beneficial qualities of socialization, Yalom and Leszcz stated that



social isolation is as much of a risk factor for early mortality as the physical risk factors of smoking and obesity. While considering the inherent human need for interpersonal relationships, Yalom and Leszcz wrote that the therapeutic process in group therapy can counteract the risk factor of social isolation as it allows for social learning and adaptive modification of interpersonal relationships. The authors describe this adaptive modification as occurring within the dynamics of a group in therapy, where clients will eventually play out their interpersonal ways of being in an implicit manner. Yalom and Leszcz elaborate this point by stating, “[the client] will interact with group members as they interact with others in their social sphere, [and they] will create in the group the same interpersonal universe they have always inhabited” (p.32). The group therapist facilitates the group so that it is conducive to effective group interaction, and so that social learning and adaptation can manifest (Yalom & Leszcz, 2005).

Riley (2001) reiterated the dynamic nature of group therapy by stating, “there is nothing static about group dynamics, they are palpable life of the group and no two groups are exactly the same” (p.2). It is important for the group therapist to recognize that the dynamics of a group will differentiate from group to group, and express a fluidity as interactions occur; this acknowledgement can allow the group therapist to facilitate an effective group that promotes interpersonal aspects of interaction. Riley (2001) emphasizes that art making can play an effective role in mediating group interactions. This mediation could occur as the art process, and presenting art forms, allow for concrete and implicit feelings and themes to be visible when verbal means of expressing are not immediate or available; therefore, art could allow for a distanced approach to integrating interactions and interpersonal aspects without being confrontational.

More specifically to older adults, the goals of group art therapy are described by Wadeson (2000) as, “often focused on increasing quality of life, including socialization to counter isolation, allowing for self-expression, adjustment in current life conditions, and increased self-esteem” (p.370). The use of participatory art programs within an art therapy framework have specifically been found to be beneficial towards the well-being of older adults. For example, Stephenson (2013) researched older adults’ participation in community art therapy programs to promote well-being and examined the way older adults engage with their peers and initiate activity in their own lives. With the use of a strengths-based approach, and an open, non-directive setting, Stephenson (2013) found that older adults in a community art therapy program

achieved an activated sense of purpose and motivation in their life through creative thinking and the encouragement to connect to others as supported by the program.

In a more clinical focus, Huet (2002) facilitated an art therapy group directed towards older women who dealt with mental health issues. Huet found that the use of art provided the women in this group with an accessible language when they had felt as if they had been silenced by their personal experiences of prejudice directed towards them on account of their gender, mental health and age. The context of the group allowed the women to find a better sense of their personal voice with the support of others who had faced similar adversities (Huet, 2002). Huet also found that an art therapy group setting allowed for a more defined and protected personal space for older women. This personal space, consisting of peer support, offered the women a unique opportunity to explore personal issues without feeling like they were imposing onto others. Huet (2002) described that this assumption of imposing onto others was apparent as the older women in the art therapy group identified as carers to others and prioritized this caring role before taking time to care for themselves.

The concept of older women identifying with the role of the carer is also mentioned by Martin (2003), an art therapist who has found that it is beneficial to encourage clients who are older women to direct their inner nurturer towards themselves and meeting their own needs, as Martin (2003) witnessed that these clients had difficulties doing so, especially in their role as a carer towards others. Therefore, an art therapy group could allow for older women to internalize their nurturing qualities to meet their own needs, and externalize feelings and experiences of prejudice, all within the context of being validated through the support and shared experiences of their peers.

According to Anderson and Gold (1998), the concept of women coming together through creative activities can be seen as a historical event, as the authors state:

Many authors acknowledge the role of the creative process in developing women's sense of community and facilitating women's connections to each other. The history of women's art characteristically reveals an intimate relationship between the content of art itself and the realities and experiences of women's lives. In this way women's personal experiences and history are reflected and embodied in their artwork. The craft and textile activity of women around the world gives us valuable historical and contemporary

examples of the therapeutic value of art and its role in providing women with the tools to survive extreme isolation, traumatic events and loss. (p.17)

By coming together through creative art making, women found a way to work through the adverse situations they had experienced within the supportive and understanding context of a communal setting, when clinical models of healing were either non-existent, not available or not accessible (Anderson & Gold, 1998).

In more current research on well-being for older women, Maidment and Macfarlane (2011) discovered, from interviews conducted with older women in a community arts and crafts group that pursuing an interest in art making within a group setting allowed for older women's self-esteem to be supported and for community connectedness to occur. This support and sense of connectedness appeared to foster the older women's individual well-being. This finding is also reflected by Liddle et al. (2013), who found that older women who participated in group art and crafts activities commented on finding purpose in their life, as well as, social connections, which contributed positively to their subjective well-being.

The specific use of textiles has also been shown to have positive art therapy implications in regards to older women's well-being. Collier (2011) found, after surveying 821 women who worked with textiles, predominantly 50 years and older, that the women viewed their use of textiles as a self-initiated coping resource when experiencing demanding challenges, such as dealing with difficult or negative moods. The women surveyed also commented that their use of textiles was least likely for professional or financial reasons, but rather for aesthetics, grounding qualities (i.e. tactile elements, rhythmic and repetitive motions in making), and its tangible outcomes (i.e. having something to show to or give to others), which influenced the textile as a coping tool (Collier, 2011). The use of the specific textile technique of quilting will be explored and discussed further in relation to well-being.

## **Quilting**

Quilting is a method of sewing that can be accomplished either by hand or with the use of a sewing machine (Kokoli, 2009). Traditional quilts involve the use of three layers which includes the top layer, or quilt top, the batting or filler material, and the backing material; however, the act of quilting is mostly concerned with the process of joining two or more layers of fabric and material together with the use of needle and thread. Kokoli (2009) describes,

“quilting is done on bed spreads, art quilt wall hangings, clothing, and a variety of textile products” (p.695).

Quilts, and the process of quilting, were brought to Canada as an already established tradition by the settlers arriving from Europe (Conroy, 1976). The tradition of quilting in Europe developed not only for functional use, but out of necessity, centuries ago (Howell & Pierce, 2000). Quilters pieced together fabrics and layers that were used as undergarments for padding and body temperature control when materials were limited (Conroy, 1976; Howell & Pierce, 2000). This practice of quilting proved to be resourceful as families dealt with great hardships and long journeys during the Western migration to North America in the 19<sup>th</sup> century (Conroy; Edelson, 1973; Moxley, Feen-Calligan, Washington, & Gariott, 2011). The history of the development of quilts differs within different regions around the world; however, in North America its functional use of providing durable warmth and comfort has been emphasized, while allowing for engagement in the aesthetics of design for visual enjoyment, which could be passed down as folk art for generations (Cheek & Piercy, 2004; Conroy, 1976; Kokoli, 2009).

Quilting has been described by Moxely et al. (2011) as providing multiple purposes which have been observed over different cultures and periods of quilting. Moxely et al. (2011) outlines a variety of quilt types that have influenced different aspects of quilt heritage. These types of quilts include “adversity quilts,” “advocacy quilts,” “art form quilts,” “signature/friendship quilts,” and “six-hour quilts” to name a few (p.114). The use of adversity quilts have allowed for particular historical events and hardships, as lived experiences, to be memorialized and communicated. The quilts made by the women of Gee’s Bend could be described as having qualities of an adversity quilt, which will be further discussed in the following section of this literature review focused on quilting as a collective process for women.

Moxely et al. (2011) described the purpose of an “advocacy quilt” as being, “constructed to communicate injustice and to memorialize both individuals and events” (p.114). One primary example of an advocacy quilt is the continued development of the Names Project AIDS Memorial Quilt (Moxely et al., 2011; Kokoli, 2009; The Names Project Foundation, 2011). The Names Project AIDS Memorial Quilt was initiated by gay rights activist Cleve Jones in 1985 and currently consists of more than 48,000 individual three by six foot panels, each panel personally sewn together by the loved ones of an individual who has died of AIDS (Kokoli, 2009; The Names Project Foundation, 2011). This quilt continues to expand, both as an object and in its

symbolic and meaningful commemoration of the hardships that are faced by those who experience AIDS. The Names Project AIDS Memorial Quilt is a prominent example of how a quilt can provide a tangible and advocate voice, and powerful visual presence, to the stories and adversaries of thousands, allowing for a valued element of connection and activism within the public domain (Moxely et al., 2011; Kokoli, 2009).

The purpose of an “art form quilt” is described by Moxely et al. (2011) as having a focus on the aesthetic and potential commercial folk art qualities of quilts, and will likely have more in common with aspects of the fine arts rather than aspects of traditional quilting. The process of making “signature/friendship quilts” allows for a validation of the particular interpersonal bonds between quilters, where these bonds are further affirmed as each quilter in the quilting group may sign a panel, noting each individual’s contribution to a collective quilt. Lastly, a “six-hour quilt” occurs when a quilt is constructed with limited time for the quilting process, and may be given to a particular person as an act of caring (Moxley et al., 2011). However, regardless of the type of quilt made, quilting has been described by literature and research as providing context for the collective gathering of women. This notion will be discussed in the following section of this literature review.

### **Quilting as a Collective Process for Women**

Quilting and quilts have been described as a collective memory of, or a collective response to, the women’s experience by women (Anderson & Gold, 1998; Donnell, 1990; Stalp, 2007). Quilt making, and the object of the quilt, represent this collectiveness through the shared skills and techniques of quilters, and the visual elements encountered in a quilt (Stalp, 2007). Donnell describes, “The actual making of a quilt as a continuous piece of fabric addresses itself as a system of continuity...a bridge to all from whom we felt excessively separated” (p.127). In this statement Donnell (1990) expresses that this collectiveness and connection to others can be symbolically explored in the process of making a quilt, counteracting forms of social isolation.

The literature comments on the object of a quilt being given away for others to use, accentuating a woman’s role as a caregiver; however, the quilt also symbolizes a woman’s caretaking of herself, as pursued during the leisure and restoration process of making the quilt (Howell & Pierce, 2000; Piercy & Cheek, 2004; Martin, 2003; Stalp, 2006; 2007). This caretaking of the self through quilting has also been explored prominently within a group setting, where women come together to make quilts. Traditionally, Western women would meet as a

quilting bee, where women would come together as a group to sew and connect the different pieces and layers of a quilt, and also share the time for socialization and community building (Eldelson, 1973; Howell & Pierce, 2000). Conroy (1979) accentuated this type of gathering by stating:

If you have ever sat around a quilting frame with a group of women, you will know that the talk centres not just on homemaking, child-rearing and the latest gossip. The topics are frequently serious matters affecting the life and health of the family, community and the country. (p.86)

Women who gather for the shared experience of quilt making access a form of social support which can act as a protective factor and resource for women's well-being (Piercy & Cheek, 2004).

This tradition of women gathering to make a quilt has been exemplified and highly recognized in the small rural community of Gee's Bend, Alabama (Beardsley, Arnett, Arnett, Livingston, & Wardlaw, 2002; Levit, 2004). These African-American older women had found themselves partially isolated due to geographical location, and had experienced forms of oppression as rooted in their slave era, African-American heritage. This community of women started group quilt making over the past century as a tool for socialization, and as a way to express their resourcefulness, identity and self-sufficiency within the adverse conditions of poverty and isolation (Beardsley et al., 2002; Levit, 2004). Quilt making has become a prominent part of the culture in Gee's Bend, and encourages learning, resourceful practices and strong social connections on an intergenerational level (Beardsley et al., 2002; Levit, 2004). As previously mentioned, the quilts and quilting process of the women in Gee's Bend could be seen as having qualities of adversity quilts, as these quilts can be seen as commemorating and symbolising the resourcefulness and resilience portrayed by the women of Gee's Bend, who found quilting as a resource in facing their adversities of oppression.

Influenced by the phenomenon of the use of quilting in Gee's Bend, quilting has been explored as a group art therapy intervention for older African-American women leaving homelessness (Moxley et al., 2011; Washington, Moxley, Garriott, Crystal, 2009). Two workshops were provided to groups of women from this demographic for them to share their stories within a therapeutic group context, allowing for these older women to be supported as they worked through the difficult transitional aspects of leaving homelessness and finding new

life directions (Moxely et al., 2011; Washington et al., 2009). This art therapy group also allowed for the older women to take on a role of advocacy in making a tangible quilt that expressed the hardships encountered in experiencing, and transitioning out of, homelessness. The researchers found that the quilting groups encouraged sources of self-efficacy and recovery to arise, allowing for expression, catharsis, feelings of involvement, social support, vicarious learning, social interaction, informal learning and cultural learning through the shared experience of quilting (Moxley et al., 2011).

The literature reviewed exemplifies how quilting can be used as a therapeutic resource, and appears inherent to collectives of women, allowing for a venue to respond to possible forms of adversaries, such as social isolation. Olshansky's (2000) findings from interviewing quilters summarizes this perspective well, where quilting groups were perceived as supporting the development of relationships and community, providing opportunities for stories and feelings to be shared, and allowing for the fostering of self-esteem through the exchange of validation and encouragement. The following chapter will explore these notions, and others, which emerged within the literature review, in context with the findings that resulted from the data analysis process.

### **Chapter 3: Findings**

“Quilts are artifacts of the social need for connection” (Behuniak-Long, 1994, p.167).

Through the analytic process of thematic coding, and through my process of arts-based inquiry, the prominent themes of connection to the body, connection to womanhood, and connection through generativity, emerged. These findings will be discussed in this chapter of this research paper, in context with the literature reviewed.

#### **Connection with the Body**

Before discussing the practice of quilting in connection with the body, the concept of cloth and its primary relationship to the body will be discussed. Wright (2001) elaborates this inherent connection with cloth in asserting:

Fiber, perhaps more than any other material, has the ability to embody the individual...Clothing protects our nakedness from the elements. Clothing can be the symbolic outward expression of our inner aspirations...Clothing was the first public art, as ancient as any human cultural activity. (p.11)

Cloth's relationship with the human body therefore not only acts as a form of protection, but has formed to symbolize and embody an expression of oneself. This symbolism of clothing as self-expression has been influenced greatly by the developed consumerism in Western society, where our relation to clothing corresponds with our relation to our bodies and the bodies' aging process. The concept of clothing as a metaphor for aging is described by Gullette (1999), who articulated:

The fashion cycle suggests that as we master a technology of remaining fashionable, within the current economic and discursive climate, we practice identity stripping and learn decline unconsciously... It's not the past that is shameful, it is we who incur shame if we ally ourselves with the past, the unwanted, the 'old' ... Once we recognize our location in a cultural war centered on age, we need to experience ourselves consciously as both targets and resisters. (p.52)

The consuming and disposal behaviours of Western society towards clothing and cloth resembles the stigma and perspective of Western society towards older women. An imposition for both clothing and women to be new, youthful, and up to date, is portrayed in Western consumerist culture. When signs of aging or forms of decline are apparent, both clothing and older women are viewed as unwanted excess or a burden to society. An attitude of negligence and ignorance towards used clothing and older women becomes a normalized response. However, as voiced by Timm-Bottos (2011), it is important to have an understanding of the life cycle of discarded clothing and acknowledge the social repercussions and the negligent attitudes this lack of awareness may cause. This notion could similarly be attributed to perspectives of older women; a better understanding of older women's life experiences could help lessen stigma towards aging, leading to better acknowledgement of older women's gifts and needs.

Quilting could be seen as an activity that counteracts negative perspectives of aging clothing and body, when considering the re-purposive nature of the quilting process. This counteractive quality is voiced by Donnell (1990) who writes:

The treatment of cloth and quiltmaking requires many daring actions which are accompanied by much reflection. The dismantling and rearranging of something old – as we cut up old pieces of cloth and worn out clothes – and the creation of something new takes courage and is aimed at liberation. (p.20)

Through quilting an aspect of meaning making could occur for an older women through witnessing, and partaking in, the re-purposing of fabrics and materials. The act of cloth being re-



purposed into a quilt, an object that could be described as a tangible object that has both a comforting functionality as well as an outward expression of creativity, symbolizes purposeful and renewing qualities to something that has aged and been discarded. This meaning making process could allow older women to experience feelings of being liberated from the imposed stigma towards being an aging and older women. Older women may connect with this concept metaphorically, allowing for new meaning towards personal aging and purpose to emerge within society.

Howell and Pierce (2011) discuss the use of quilts and quilt making in relation to restoration for the body. Howell and Pierce describe that one way restoration is achieved is through the act of making a quilt. The act of making a quilt was associated with calming qualities, as the rhythmic and sequential method of piecing and stitching a quilt together may allow for focused attention, and for direct reflection to be able to occur. Within the literature reviewed, findings of focused attention and effects of relaxation from quilt making were associated to the concept of flow as defined by Csikzenmihalyi (1990, 2002), and elucidated that the tasks and techniques done in quilt making allowed for a flow state to occur for the quilter, leading to beneficial factors such as promoted well-being and reduced stress (Collier, 2011; Dickie, 2011; Howell & Pierce, 2000; Liddle et al., 2013; Maidment et al., 2011; Stalp, 2006).

The use of a quilt was described by Howell and Pierce (2000) as also being strongly associated with the restorative act of sleeping. The comforting and warmth providing qualities of a quilt are viewed as directly facilitating the act of sleep, for example when someone uses a quilt to sleep under, or wrapped around their body to facilitate rest and relaxation. With this purpose, quilts are traditionally made to be paired with the human body and to fit its anatomical frame, which is exemplified by baby quilts, which are made smaller, and wedding quilts, which are made to accommodate couples (Howell & Pierce, 2011). The quilt is not just viewed as a facilitator of sleep, but also as a protection for the body during the act of sleep. As Beardsley et al. (2002) states, “quilts are rituals of life. Along with shelter, the quilt safeguards the human body during its greatest vulnerability, sleep” (p.41). The symbolism and direct experience of protection and comfort provided by a quilt also allows for associations of the pleasure of closeness with an intimate object, related through the tactile rewards of touch that may be experienced when using a quilt (Donnell, 1990).

The sensations and tactile elements of quilts and quilt making could be posited as having a strong sensory component through the modality of touch. Lusebrink (as cited in Hinz, 2009) distinguishes the healing dimensions of sensory experiences through art making as, “[a] slow sensual experience” (p.62). Working with materials on a sensory level may allow for external stimulation to become lessened, so that a focus on increased internal awareness and calm can occur (Hinz, 2009). This idea of internalized and focused awareness resembles the flow state qualities of quilt-making as discussed above. Donnell (1990) elaborates on the idea of quilt making and quilt use being a sensory experience in writing, “quilting is a touch-intensive work process...rewarding on so many levels, quilts appeal most of all to touch, and to the eyes as they come to rest” (p.67). Donnell notes how by visually experiencing a quilt, we are reminded of the tactile qualities a quilt has to offer, as Donnell (1990) believes these qualities are inherent in quilts.

This idea of visually experiencing the tactile rewards of quilts illuminates potential mnemonic qualities of quilts. Hinz (2009) describes how sensory experience can be seen as a primary way of experiencing the world, where memories of experiences during the first few years of life are encoded through sensations since these years of age are preverbal. Sensory experiences continue to evoke affective responses throughout life from this primary learning, and objects, such as quilts, can elicit memories of these experiences (Hinz, 2009; Peters, 2014). It could then be said that the visual presence of a quilt may evoke emotions and memories related to tactile experiences with cloth. If these memories are associated with a quilt’s restorative qualities of warmth, protection and comfort, as previously discussed, then just the physical and visual presence of a quilt may provide restoration for the body. This form of restoration and experiencing of a quilt could be evoked not only in the maker of the quilt, but by anyone who views it, as everyone has memories and experiences with cloth (Donnell, 1990). Therefore, quilts allow not just for symbolic and experiential connections with one’s own body, but also allows for connections with others to materialize. The next section will discuss how quilts facilitate connections with others, specifically within the framework of womanhood.

### **Connection with Womanhood**

“The seam is a woman-created connection evoking a woman-inspired version of equality” (Donnell, 1990, p. 25)

The online Merriam-Webster dictionary defines womanhood as, “the state of being a woman; the distinguishing characters or qualities of a woman or of womankind; women considered collectively” (n.d.). The tradition and use of quilting has been discussed in the literature as having inherent relations to women and the universal culture and history of women and their experiences (Anderson & Gold, 1998; Behuniak-Long, 1994; Cerny, Eicher & DeLong, 1993; Cheek & Piercy, 2004; Cheek & Piercy, 2008; Conroy, 1976; Dickie, 2011; Donnell, 1990; Edelson, 1973; Howell & Pierce, 2000; Kokoli, 2009; Moxely et al., 2011; Olshansky, 2000; Pauls, 2014; Piercy & Cheek, 2004; Stalp, 2006, 2007; Washington et al., 2009). This inherency of quilting being associated with womanhood could be viewed as beginning from the socially gendered-constructed role of women being resourceful caregivers and creating quilts from limited materials as a way to provide a functional form of warmth for their families (Conroy, 1979; Donnell, 1990; Edelson, 1973; Stalp, 2006, 2007). However, even with this original functional purpose, quilting has continued as a tradition beyond the functional aspects of a quilt, where even with industrialized and commodified versions of quilts, quilt making still continues to be a common practice and art that brings women together (Donnell, 1990; Pauls, 2014). Therefore, quilting and its connection with womanhood will be discussed in this section primarily in context with how the use of quilting corresponds with, and responds to, the oppression and marginalization of women, particularly older women in Western society.

Quilting could be described as having evolved from just having a functional purpose as an outcome of a women’s caregiving role, to acting as a central point for the gathering of women who could creatively express their personal, familial and communal experiences and needs. Quilting bees and quilting guilds exemplify the development of this gathering. Quilting bees, as previously mentioned, involves the gathering of women who work together to stitch and join the different layers of a quilt (Anderson & Gold, 1998; Kokoli, 2009; Pauls, 2014; Stalp, 2007). The quilt worked on in a quilting bee may be designed and worked on collectively, or it may be designed and partially made by one quilter and the other women in the quilting bee assist in the joining and completion of the quilt as whole (Pauls, 2014). Therefore, the roles of each women in a quilting bee could differ, allowing for a diversity in how each women may participate.

A quilting guild is described by Cerny et al. (1993) as a modern day version of the quilting bees observed in the nineteenth century. Quilting guilds bring large amounts of quilters together, and allows for implicitly shared experience and expression, but also encourages and

facilitates learning towards quilting methods and techniques (Cerny et al., 1993; Donnell, 1990; Kokoli, 2009; Pauls, 2014; Stalp, 2006, 2007). Modern day quilting guilds, therefore, allow for community building, shared experience and skill sharing; qualities that have reverberated through the history and tradition of quilting. Pauls (1994) articulates how these qualities of connection transcend when she writes:

[Quilting is] a form of communication that resonates with people's experiences of creative hand-making, quilting could foster a common understanding between people with great differences. As creators speaking through similar mediums, quilters may feel a kindred spirit with others across barriers of age, culture, and geography. (p.119)

It is important to discuss how these resonating qualities of the tradition of quilting have developed in response to women's experience of oppression and marginalization. Cerny et al. (1993) articulated the concept of quilting representing women's voice in this oppression when they stated, "modern quilt making builds upon a rhetoric shared among quilt makers: textile handwork represents a visual record of [women's] social life and occupation that parallels the written history of male dominated society" (p.16). This marginalization and oppression of women in connection with quilting is exemplified in how quilting has been appropriated and rejected by the art world which is dominated by men. Quilting, along with other women-orientated art forms, has been designated as a form of low art, meaning quilting has been distinguished as not appealing to those of cultivated taste as high art does, but rather acts as an easily comprehensible form of functional art (Donnell, 1990; Halifax, 2003; Pauls, 2014). Although quilting does act as an accessible and functional art form, its purposes, meanings and cultural influence extends much more beyond this hierarchical notion of how quilting qualifies as art. For example, Donnell (1990) and Pauls (2014) suggest how modern abstract art's appearance and use of blocking colours and patterns, and grid like compositions, exemplifies a strong, yet unmentioned, influence and inspiration from quilt making. This rejection and ignorance towards quilt makers and the role of quilting in the art world is exemplified further by the perspectives towards the quilt makers and quilting tradition in Gee's Bend (Pauls, 2014; Beckman, 2012).

When the quilts of Gee's Bend gained a strong public awareness and attention in the 1960's, they were viewed as spectacular pieces of modern art that were comparable with the works of modern artists such as Barnett Newman and Frank Stella. This positive reception of the

quilts of Gee's Bend could be seen as a positive recognition of quilts in the art world, however, the quilts were portrayed as a rare phenomenon rather than being acknowledged as a part of a tradition that has influenced and has a role in art discourse (Pauls, 2014; Beckman, 2012). Beckman argues that during this period of publicity for the quilts of Gee's Bend, the quilters of Gee's Bend were exploited by white and urban entrepreneurs and art dealers rather than being fully appreciated in parity with other modern artists. Beckman explains in her article, "Quilt story: Black rural women, white urban entrepreneurs and the American dream," that she personally witnessed this exploitation, and felt that the quilters of Gee's Bend were profiting quite well from their quilting culture in regards to financial and communal needs before white male entrepreneurs arrived. Beckman suggests that although these urban entrepreneurs may have brought the quilts of Gee's Bend to a certain level of international recognition and fame, it was done through an unethical approach meant to primarily benefit the white urban entrepreneurs. Beckman summarizes this unethical approach when she summarizes:

It's well-known that more urban talent seekers and dealers have frequently been unscrupulous with less sophisticated folk-artists of all races, and they have - mythologized and cheated - them. Indeed, this has been standard procedure (that musicians have been exploited hardly shocks people who know about the experience of blues, jazz, rock n'roll, or country music performers and composers). It is an old story, but certain aspects of what happened in Gee's Bend stand out. (para. 69)

The case of the quilters of Gee's Bend being exploited and portrayed as a phenomenon exemplifies the white male dominated perspective of the art world, which undervalues, and is ignorant towards, the richness of quilting tradition and the resilience, resourcefulness and creativity of the women in Gee's Bend (Beckman, 2012).

This example of the quilters of Gee's Bend encompasses the undermining and biased perspectives towards quilting and quilters in general, and the marginalization and oppression of women and their creative expression. Pauls (2014) situates quilting as an instrument for counteracting this oppression and opening up a venue for an egalitarian expression and acceptance of creativity. Pauls (2014) expresses this point when she writes:

The craft-oriented approach of hand-making, the creative support within quilting bees, and the sharing of patterns have contributed to an artistic tradition that provides a great

amount of material for a feminist re-evaluation of aesthetic standards with the aim of nurturing the creativity of many people (p.108)

By acknowledging the connection of quilting with womanhood, the use of quilting as a continued practice of counteraction towards the adversities experienced by women, and caused by marginalization and oppression, can emerge and be appreciated. It is also important to note that the inherent connection with womanhood, as found in quilting, does not imply that quilting is exclusionary towards those who identify as a gender different than woman, but rather allows for a more progressive and open discourse of the use of quilting for all. With this said, the next section will explore and discuss how quilting allows for connections to others, extending the framework of connection from womanhood, through the process of generativity.

### **Connection through Generativity**

Generativity has been described as concerning the involvement of an individual in the caring and nurturing of others, particularly towards future generations (Cheek & Piercy, 2008; Piercy & Cheek, 2004). This caring and nurturing could occur through the act of creating something, which could range from being concrete, such as in the form of an object, or more abstract, such as in the form of knowledge, and passing it onto others (Cheek & Piercy, 2008; Piercy & Cheek, 2004). Although it was not always defined by the term generativity, the concept of generativity was conveyed by a majority of the literature reviewed, and emerged as a prominent theme as a result of the analytic process in this research project.

The aspects of caring and nurturing in generativity reverberates the caregiving role that can be taken on by older women and quilters. This caregiving role was discussed in connection with the body, in how quilts are made and given to others as a way to provide qualities of warmth, protection and comfort, along with memories and experiences of tactile experiences and sensations. It is also important to acknowledge how the connection with womanhood through quilting, as previously discussed, involves virtues of caring and giving through the processes of passing down traditions, experiences and skills within quilting bees, guilds, and culture. With these themes of connection with the body and with womanhood in mind, the theme of connecting through generativity and aspects of quilting will be discussed with examples from the literature.

Piercy and Cheek (2004) conducted a study that explored how quilting contributed to the social connections and interpersonal relationships of older women quilters from Amish, Mennonite and Later Day Saint communities. Piercy and Cheek came across strong aspects of

generativity in their findings, working on both vertical and horizontal levels. On the vertical level it was found that generativity was present in the way skills, tradition and legacy were passed down to following generations, occurring through quilting bees, quilting guilds, familial relations, and friendships between quilters, and were passed on through forms of teaching, shared experience, and interpersonal relationships. One quilter who participated in Piercy and Cheek's study articulates this vertical nature of generativity in stating:

[Quilting is] a way of leaving yourself when you are gone. I have a quilt that my grandmother made me. She is still with me. I think my children will feel that same way. They are snuggled up in one of my quilts when I'm gone. (p.28)

The horizontal nature of generativity through quilting could be viewed as occurring with the formation of, and continuing of, bonds and relationships that quilting and quilt making facilitates between quilters. These formed relationships may involve friendships between quilters within quilting groups, bees, and guilds. The quilters in Piercy and Cheek's (2004) study voiced finding friendships formed with other quilters to be a primary benefit of quilting, as a shared experience was possible and could deepen over time. This horizontal effect was also observed in Moxely et al.'s (2011) quilt making groups for older African-American women leaving homelessness, as the participants were able to give and receive an appropriate form of support and acceptance by quilting amongst others who had similar experiences. These women were also able to learn from one another's experiences and quilting process, and together advocate for others facing adversities while transitioning out of homelessness (Moxely et al., 2011). These examples suggest both giving and receiving qualities of quilting, where through quilt making, generativity occurs which in turn allows for personal benefits. This concept will be discussed in context with Erikson's (1950) psychosocial stages of development.

According to Erikson's (1950) stages of psychosocial development, middle aged adults experience the psychosocial stage of generativity versus stagnation, where if generativity is accomplished, personal stagnation, or a sense of having a lack of purpose, can be avoided and the adult can move onto the next stage of development, ego-integrity versus despair. Erikson's ego-integrity versus despair stage of development can be described as the stage where an individual enters older adulthood, and takes on a retrospective view of their life. If an older adult views their life contently and as meaningful, they may view their sense of self and their experiences with integrity; however, if an older adult does not view their life as meaningful they

may experience feelings of regret which could lead to feelings of despair. While keeping in mind that Erikson's (1950) stages are theoretical and a descriptive overview of human psychosocial development, quilting could be described as a resource to encourage and facilitate generativity for older adults, particularly older women who may experience social isolation or feelings of lack of purpose due to imposed stigma. Quilting could even be seen as a resource that promotes ego-integrity as quilting encourages skills, experiences, connection and creativity to be received and expressed, which in turn fosters forms of meaning in one's life, and increased self-esteem. This perspective of quilting acting as a resource that could theoretically promote generativity and ego-integrity for older women relates back to Dodge et al.'s (2012) definition of well-being, as the resource of quilting counteracts possible imbalance influenced by factors such as social isolation, decreased self-esteem and possible despair; therefore, promoting well-being.

### **Connection Through my own Quilting Process**

During the process of analyzing the data from the reviewed literature, which alleviated themes about connection, I began to feel ambivalent about my own personal connection to the topic of quilting. I believe this ambivalence resulted from the fact that I had never experienced the process of quilting for myself, which produced doubts towards my intention and process for this research paper. I began to feel a strong desire to have my own subjective experience of the quilting process as to allow for a better and deeper connection to this topic, and in order to better inform my learning and understanding about quilts and quilting. To do this I decided to add elements of arts-based inquiry to my methodological process by engaging in the making of a quilt.

During this phase of the research, where I felt quite immersed in the literature and data, I was also partaking, as an art therapy student, in an academic course that allowed me to learn about and experience the approach of creative process called *The Story Within - myth and fairy tale in therapy* (Silverman, 2004). This course was facilitated by Silverman herself, where she guided students through a creative process that involves an association and sustained projection with a personally chosen myth or fairy tale. The influence of this class presented itself within my quilting process through exploration of my own personal transition out of an art therapy training program, and the exploration of personal intentions and identifications as an art therapist and an artist. I feel that this influence is relevant to this research paper as I am exploring quilting as an art therapy intervention not only through theoretical methods, but also through my own



process, as an art therapy student, for understanding the potential of quilting as a tool and intervention in art therapy.

My arts-based process of making a quilt began with searching through my own clothing. I felt a need to re-purpose my clothing in my quilting process as a way to avoid potential waste if my clothing was discarded, and to re-visit potential attachments and memories that I may have had with the cloth. Immediately, I came across a bed comforter that I had forgotten about in my closet that I had used throughout part of my childhood and adolescence. Memories of my childhood home became strongly present for me as I pulled the comforter out of the closet and began to re-experience it through my visual and tactile senses. I experienced a positive affect through the sentimental connection that occurred while I re-experienced this comforter. This regained attachment influenced me in deciding to use the comforter as the base of the quilt that I would make for my arts-based inquiry.

After deciding to use my old comforter as the quilt base, I began to look through other pieces of clothing and material that I had forgotten in my closet. I came across particular pieces of clothing and material that portrayed colours, patterns and textures that coincided with my feelings and experiences that were evoked from both my creative process in context with Silverman's (2004) *The Story Within* approach, and from reviewing and analyzing literature within my research process. Again, I experienced these materials and cloth through looking and touch, allowing for symbolic and affective experiences to occur. Once I decided on the fabrics and clothing I wanted to use for my quilt, I then began to cut forms and shapes from the materials intuitively. After forms were cut, I followed by exploring different placements and arrangements of the pre-cut pieces of cloth onto the base that was the comforter. Eventually, I found a layout and combination of the material that I felt conveyed my coinciding experiences of my research and *The Story Within* process, and transitioned into joining these pieces onto my comforter base with the use of a sewing machine.

Since I had never before used a sewing machine for quilting, I found this phase of my quilting process to be very cognitively engaging as I felt the need to be technically focused in order to meet the task at hand. I referenced videos on the internet, which were produced by quilters, and even called my maternal grandmother for advice and technical support in regards to properly using my sewing machine for my quilting process. During this machine quilting process, there were definitely moments of frustration on my part; however, as I witnessed my

quilt coming together, and finally saw all the pieces secured onto the comforter base, I remember experiencing strong feelings of pride and satisfaction with having learned a new skill and accomplished something with it. I then felt a desire to add some final details by sewing on some pieces of cloth by hand. This gesture returned me back to a more sentimental level, where I felt more directly in contact with the quilt itself as I took the time to hand stitch some pieces of cloth onto the quilt with a more slow and rhythmic movement. Although I may continue to work on this quilt in the future, I felt that by adding the handstitched details, along with the rest of my quilting process, I had been able to experience the quilting process to an extent that provided me with an informative learning experience. My quilt, as a result of this process, is displayed in figure 3.

I wrote the following poem as a reflexive action of working through a creative dialogue with my quilt, which conveys more substantially what my personal learning experience of quilting has been for me:

*Connected*

*You were lost.*

*Forgotten.*

*Cut off, with no air to breathe.*

*Once you comforted.*

*You cared for.*

*Provided warmth and security.*

*To the bodies that left you on the ground.*

*Now*

*You are seen*

*You are remembered.*

*I tend to you*

*I sense your touch.*

*I begin to see more of you*

*Stitch by stitch*

*Stitch by Stitch*  
*We come closer*  
*And together, we give*  
*Life.*  
*Growth.*  
*Warmth.*

*We may not be inviolable*  
*But we are*  
*And always will be*  
*Connected.*

#### **Chapter 4: Discussion**

Quilting could be described as a multi-faceted resource in promoting well-being for older women facing the adverse effects and challenges of potential social isolation due to aging. The resourceful aspects of quilting are inherent in quilting's connective qualities, most prominently in connection with one's body, with womanhood, and through the act of generativity.

In facilitating connection with the body, quilts and quilt making may allow an older woman to develop and practice positive associations and experiences with her own body, counteracting and dismissing the damaging perspective of women's aging bodies imposed upon by Western society's consumeristic culture. Developing a more positive perspective of one's body may provide protective factors and enhance resilience towards challenges presented by the aging process and encourage focus on strengths, capabilities, experiences, and connections with others.

By encouraging connections with other women and womanhood, quilting can invite an older woman to have a better sense of her own identity, and recognize her place and importance in society and locate herself in the history and culture of other women facing similar adversities and experiences. This connection with womanhood therefore provides an older woman with a strong form of validation towards her personal experience. This sense of validation is also facilitated through the horizontal and vertical aspects of generativity that quilting promotes,

which allows for a form of reciprocity to occur where an older woman can fulfill her role as a caregiver and nurturer, not only towards others, but also towards herself.

The act of quilting itself, as informed by my arts-based inquiry and personal engagement with the quilting process, provides its own multi-faceted elements, which could be explained in context with the Expressive Therapies Continuum as presented by Hinz (2009). During my personal process of quilting I experienced the different components of the Expressive Therapies Continuum. The sensory component was experienced through a tactile manner, as I touched and worked by hand the different cloth and materials. The kinesthetic component was most prominent as I used the method of sewing, particularly with the rhythmic motion of hand-stitching. The affective component occurred in the sentimental attachment and memories I felt while searching through my closet and by visually representing and expressing my experiences of this research project and *The Story Within* process. The perceptual component was most experienced when arranging and rearranging the composition of the materials on the comforter base, to best represent my experiences and processes. The cognitive component felt most present during the technical process of using the sewing machine for my quilting process. Finally, the symbolic component of the Expressive Therapies Continuum was experienced throughout my quilting process, as I reflected on the inherent symbolism and the metaphoric quality that quilts evoke in relation to the associations and themes of connection previously discussed.

Symbolic and metaphoric qualities were also reflected during my creative dialogue process. My poem presented in the findings section reveals the symbolic qualities of a quilt and the quilting process through metaphors reflecting societal views of older women, as well as the promotion of well-being for older women in connection with others and the self, to counteract minimizing and isolating perspectives. The presence of all of the varying components, in context with the Expressive Therapies Continuum, allows for diversity in how an older woman could partake in a quilting art therapy group.

In order for quilting to be used appropriately, and inclusively, for older women in an art therapy group setting, it is important that older women varying in physiological and psychological abilities partake in the quilting process. Just like the format of a quilting bee, older women participating in a collective quilting process could take on different tasks and contribute to the process in a way that focuses on personal abilities, allowing for each individual in the group the opportunity to participate comfortably. This format of the quilting bee being

appropriated into an art therapy group setting allows for different types of quilts, as previously discussed in the literature review, to be made. The presence of an art therapist would play an important role in facilitating a safe group framework that is conducive to the connective qualities of quilt making, and also to the capabilities of each participant. An art therapist can also help in facilitating aspects of presenting challenges and interpersonal relations, as presented either verbally or non-verbally, at an explicit or implicit level. Therefore, an art therapy group setting can allow for quilting to be used properly as a resource for any adversities or challenges participants may be facing or going through. With this said, and in line with the findings presented in this research paper, quilting, within a group art therapy context, could be viewed as an effective therapeutic tool in promoting well-being for older women.

### **Limitations and Recommendations for further Research**

This research project portrays limitations due to its data collection not being exhaustive and beyond literature emphasizing Western perspectives, and due to the exclusion of the direct perspective on the topic from the population of older women. As a future recommendation, it would be effective and beneficial to involve participants within the context of this research topic, as a way to extend from the theoretical basis presented by this current research project. By including the voices of older women, personal biases and perspectives could be alleviated. This inclusion of older women's perspectives could take form through qualitative interviews or surveys on the topic, or through the process of intervention research. Intervention research, as discussed by Fraser and Galinsky (2010), would allow for the use of quilting as an intervention within a group art therapy setting to be explored more intricately through the actual designing and planning of such intervention, and observing and re-evaluating it through the context of a pilot study. Participatory action research would more thoroughly allow for older women's voices to be heard and partake in this research topic. As demonstrated by Moxely et al. (2011) and their quilting workshops for older African-American women leaving homelessness, participatory action research very directly involved older women's perspectives, and allowed them to directly influence the research process towards their own personal experiences and processes of both life, and quilting. By directly involving older women and their subjective experiences within the research process, older women can advocate for their own needs and adversities, allowing for the acknowledgment of aspects of intersectionality experienced by older

women, such as race, gender, social class, ability, religion, and sexual orientation, and for an intervention, such as quilting, to be more appropriately understood and utilised.

## **Conclusion**

Although this current research project has limitations and could benefit from further research, the themes of connection that arose from the research helps to acknowledge a theoretical base for the use of quilting as an effective resource for counteracting adversities, particularly social isolation faced by older women. In answering the primary research question, the resourceful aspects of quilts and quilting suggests that quilting can be a therapeutic tool in promoting the well-being of older women, specifically in a group art therapy context, through quilting's connective qualities, which emerged as connections with one's body, with womanhood, and through the act of generativity. My own personal learning and process of quilting allowed for me to understand quilts and quilting not only as a tangible form of connection, but also as a metaphoric tool in experiencing the themes of connection that materialised from my research process. To conclude this research paper, I will reiterate the strong metaphoric aspects of the connective qualities of quilting in relation to life, by quoting Coulter (1990), who articulates, "in quilt making, as in our lives, we are piecing together fragments and remains in an attempt to form an integrated whole" (p.4).

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Appendix



Figure 1 Definition of well-being (Dodge et al., 2002, p.230).

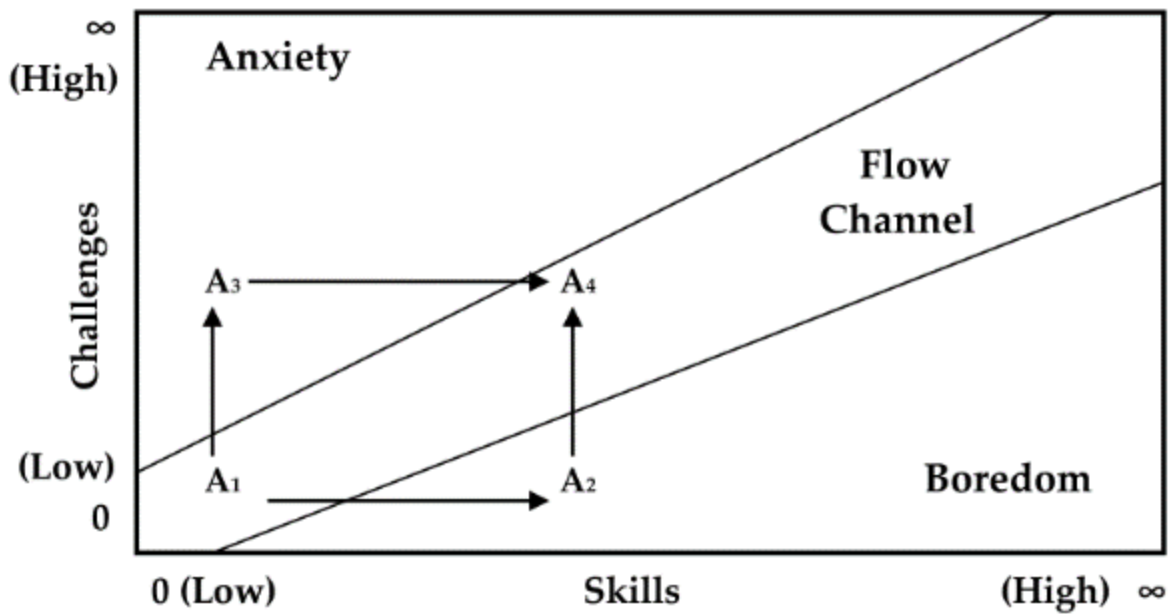


Figure 2. Concept of flow (Csikszentmihalyi, 2002, p. 74).



*Figure 2. Untitled, 2016. Quilt produced as arts-based inquiry.*