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Crafting Quality of Life *Creativity and Well-being*

The “Everyday Creativity of Women Craftmakers” is a narrative research project exploring the ways that contemporary women narrate the meanings of home craft-making in their lives. Craft-making enjoys continuing popularity among contemporary women including young women, and women from different cultures and socio-economic groups. Many of these women have busy lives; they are juggling domestic responsibilities, motherhood and paid work and yet they make time and space for their craft-making. In this article, we focus on three of our participants who are mothers with children still living at home, the meanings craft-making has for them, and how craft-making is linked with their well-being and quality of life. We discuss the ways these three women use craft as both an expression of themselves as mothers, and as escape or relief from the demands of mothering. We explore a number of key themes emerging from the research: craft-making as a challenge and a creative outlet; craft-making and gift giving; intergenerational connections; and the strong belief on the part of these women that craft-making is important and in some instances vital for their well-being, and contributes substantially to the quality of their lives.

Craft-making, as an everyday expression of creativity, carries multiple and complex meanings for women craftmakers. This article reports on some of the findings of our narrative research into the *Everyday Creativity of Women Craftmakers*. We focus on three of our participants—women who incorporate craft-making into their mothering practices and somewhat paradoxically use their craftwork as a way of taking time out from their responsibilities for paid and unpaid work. We discuss how these women use their craft-making as a way of managing and maintaining their well-being

There has been some attempt by previous researchers to document the meanings of craft-making as a form of creative expression for women. Although

there is evidence that there are links between creativity and well-being, health and life satisfaction, the connection between craft-making and well-being has not been explored. Our research aims to contribute to the understanding of the meanings of craft-making to women and the ways it can contribute to quality of life and well-being. The women we interviewed for our research identified a number of links between their craft and their well-being. The links are not as clear and easy to understand as more familiar links, for example between nutrition, exercise, sleep and health, but they are present. The women who feature in this article, Jacinta, Karen and Sulistijo, spoke about their craft-making as being a challenge and a creative outlet that resulted in relaxation and stress relief; they spoke of the significance of making and giving handmade gifts as a way of connecting and contributing to others as well as a source of pride; they gave examples of intergenerational connections around craft-making that are both grounding and uplifting; and they stressed the importance of time out from their multiple responsibilities as mothers and/or members of the paid workforce.

The everyday creativity of women craftmakers research

The Everyday Creativity of Women Craftmakers is a small narrative research project supported by Victoria University and Spotlight Pty Ltd, a large Australian retailer of fabrics, wool and craft supplies. This research focuses on women's engagement with craft-making such as knitting, crochet, and quilting. The purpose of the research is to explore the role of craft-making in women's lives, its meanings, intergenerational and community connections, and links with well-being.

During 2008, we conducted narrative interviews with 15 women in their own homes. The interviews were filmed, and a short film was produced early in 2009. Each interview started with a guided tour of the woman's craftwork. 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-making has in these women's lives. We asked each woman about the genesis of her interest in craft making, her past and current engagement with craft, and the roles and meanings of craft-making in her life. We included women of different ages and from different cultural backgrounds, and women undertaking a range of different craft activities as amateur craftmakers.

The interviews were transcribed, coded and analysed according to key themes and narrative sequences. Project outcomes include an exhibition of participants' craft works, a book about the participants and their work, and a short film. The results of the research will be reported in newsletters, print media, scholarly journals and via conference papers.

Everyday creativity, craft-making and well-being

While much research has been done on "eminent" creativity—the work of highly accomplished and innovative thinkers—the study of "everyday" creativity

and its value in everyday life has only recently begun to gain prominence in creativity research. Ruth Richards (2007a) considers that understanding the nature and extent of creativity that is exercised in everyday lives can assist us to use creativity to improve physical and mental health, and to develop healthy societies and cultures.

Richards (2007b) criticises the privileging of “genius” and “true creativity,” and is concerned that this hierarchy is played out in life, suppressing the broad-based creativities of ordinary people who do not conceive of themselves as artistic geniuses. Instead, she prefers to promote an understanding of creativity as a spectrum and a resource, rather than as a quality that one has or has not.

Sally Reis (2002) in her work on women and creativity explores the way that the privileging of traditional masculine notions of creativity has led to the under-recognition of women’s creative contribution. She argues that there has been a failure to understand women’s creativity and proposes the “diversification of women’s creativity” theory which acknowledges women’s creativity is often “diverted to multiple areas of their lives, including relationships, work related to family and home, personal interests, aesthetic sensitivities and appearances” (Reis, 2002: 312). Reis acknowledges that there are various reasons for this diversification and while for some women there may be a preference towards diverse activities for other women the diversification is a result of a lack of opportunity related to life circumstances, constraints and other people’s expectations of women.

Reis and Richards are among a number of contemporary researchers thinking broadly about creativity and moving towards a view of creativity as an important component of many people’s lives. There is increasing evidence that creativity has positive associations with *well-being*, health, and life satisfaction (Hickson and Housley, 1997; Milgram, 1990; Cropley, 2001; McQueen-Thomson and Ziguas, 2002). In a study of the social impact of community arts, for example, François Materasso (1997) found that: “participation in the arts can have a significant impact on people’s self-confidence ... [and] there was considerable evidence that participating in the arts projects could make people feel better” (vi).

Richards highlights examples of creative writing leading to improvements in health, both physical and psychological (Richards, 2007c) 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, 2007c). Other studies have shown that creative work can help elderly citizens cope with aging, illness, grief and death (Adams-Price, 1998), and creative play can help children negotiate trauma and fears, and build social skills (Richards, 2007c).

The importance of craftwork to women has been recognised and documented in a number of historical studies including Rozsika Parker’s (1984) important work *The Subversive Stitch: Embroidery and the Making of the Feminine*. Here Parker explores the changing nature of women’s relationship with

embroidery from medieval times to the present. She argues that embroidery is “subversive” because it has “provided a source of pleasure and power for women ... employed to circulate femininity in women, it also enabled them to negotiate the constraints of femininity” (11).

In *The Gentle Arts: 200 Years of Australian Women's Domestic and Decorative Arts* (1987), published for the Australian Bicentenary, Jennifer Isaacs, an art consultant and curator, writes of the enthusiastic response to her call for “the handwork of Australian women”:

Women's interest in domestic arts overrides social background and class ... CWA members, participants in the homecrafts section of the annual agricultural shows, feminist theoreticians or contemporary crafts practitioners all reacted similarly—their gaze would soften and with great pride the treasures would be produced. (7)

However, the value of craft-making has also been questioned. As early as 1872, some feminists expressed reservations about crafts as time fillers (Bodichon, 1872:7). With second-wave feminism came both a fierce rejection of women's traditional domestic activities, crafts included, and an equally fierce reclaiming of activities that were previously devalued because of their association with women (Parker, 1984). 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: 317).

At the same time, feminist artists including 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 and Lucie-Smith, 1999).

Women's craftwork has been through rises and falls in popularity since second wave feminism. However, craft-making is increasingly gaining credence as the distinction between “high art”—public, unique, expressions of genius—and craft—private, traditional, expressions of life—comes under critical scrutiny in postmodern times. Stephanie Shapiro (2004) sees the new generation of crafters as third wave feminists, liberated from traditional gender roles and able to choose freely, whether their interests lie in knitting hats or riding Harleys. They honour ancestors whose “women's work” was undervalued, and value expressing their creativity in ways that express “feminine identity values [that] contrast starkly with the dominant masculine values in the world of work away from home” (Mason, 2005: 264). Claims about free choice must be considered in socio-political and global context. Women have differing access to resources such as money to buy supplies. Women around the world pursue traditional crafts, and improvise, adapting their crafts to the context and the available materials (Tyabji, 1998; Edwards, 2006). Some women long in vain

for the most basic of craft supplies. Nevertheless, contemporary women situated in many differing contexts pursue and value craft-making.

There have been very few studies that focus on the meanings of craft-making to contemporary amateur women craft-makers. They include Carlyne Adams-Price and Bernard Steinman's (2007) work on women who make jewellery in midlife; Joyce Starr Johnson and Laurel E. Wilson's (2005) study of a group of American female handcrafters and their motivations; and Rachel Mason's (2005) work on the value and meaning of home-based craft with Cornish and Brazilian women. Emerging from these studies a number of themes indicate the complex relationship women have with craft-making: creative expression, autonomy, and skill; intergenerational or familial identity; personal workmanship; nurturing through giving; location in the community; engagement in "feminine arts"; thriftiness; domesticity; politics through level of conformity or subversion chosen in your craft and the pleasure of making.

All of these studies demonstrate the positive relationship that women have with craft-making, but they do not directly connect craft-making and well-being. In our study we specifically asked women whether they saw any links between their craft-making and their well-being. Almost all of our participants articulated a direct and obvious link between craft-making and well-being.

The three mothers who are the focus of this article often used craft as both an expression of themselves as mothers, and as escape or relief from the demands of mothering. Four themes are particularly significant in exploring the ways that craft-making is linked with well-being for these three women. The first is the way that craft provides a challenge and an opportunity for creative expression. The second is the making of functional objects that can be given as gifts to friends and family members. The third is the intergenerational links and the fourth is the way the women use craft-making as time out and time for themselves. Each of these aspects of craft-making is complex and layered, and each provides a way of understanding the links between craft-making and well-being.

Three mothers and their craft: Jacinta, Karen and Sulistijo

Jacinta has two young children aged four and two. A prolific craft-maker, she practises many different crafts and is always keen to try something new.

Karen's children are young adults and she is a long-term and dedicated quilter. She has a well-appointed sewing room and well developed ideas about quilting and life. Karen believes that it is important for women to make time for themselves and to have a creative outlet.

Sulistijo grew up in Indonesia and has now settled in Australia with her husband and two sons aged about five and eight. She loves to make small, functional gifts, she calls "souvenirs": scarves, brooches and pins, doilies, baby wear and costumes. She would rather make things than buy them.

Challenge and creative outlet

Jacinta, Karen, and Sulistijo prioritise craft-making in their full and busy lives. For all three women the value of craft is strongly related to the process of “making” which involves setting themselves a challenge, gathering the necessary materials, learning the skills and process, and then utilising their creativity to accomplish the goal they set.

In her interview, Sulistijo spoke about craft-making being both relaxing and a challenge. She gave up paid work when she married and had children, and craft-making provides some of the enjoyment Sulistijo previously found in her study and paid work. She spoke with enthusiasm about the requests her sons make for costumes or toys, and the pleasure she derives from being able to make these things for them:

It's relaxing for me. I really like a challenge, and the craft thing for me is challenging... like whenever my sons ask me "Mum, can you make a pocket for my ball, I want to be Jack of Jack and the Beanstalk?" They design things and it's a challenge and I like to be challenged.

Karen spoke of creating a challenge for herself, but keeping the project to a manageable size so that the challenge was fun rather than overwhelming:

I'd heard it was very difficult and I thought if you're going to do something, challenge yourself, push the boat out. And I found not only wasn't it as difficult as I thought, but I really enjoyed it. It was a lot of fun. I didn't make it huge. A big part of it was, don't overwhelm myself. I think if I'd have made a queen size or something then yes, maybe I would have tired of it very quickly... it was a lot of fun.

For Jacinta the challenge comes from trying new things, learning new crafts:

I like to challenge myself all the time and I go to those craft fairs and I just go, "I want that and I want that"... I'd like to try everything. I don't think I'll become an expert in one particular area but I like to have a go.

Challenge and creative expression are closely tied. Craft-making could be viewed as a continuum of creativity and originality: from projects that follow a pattern and use established techniques to projects that are completely designed by the craftswoman. For most women their craftwork falls somewhere in between. And the pleasure often comes from that possibility of choosing where to start, and how far to move along the continuum based on individual interests and skills. As Karen points out:

I really like the traditional more so than say the art quilts. But I like the challenge of perhaps being able to put my own twist on things. So I did

a little bit of designing with this one, so that it's a little bit unusual, just something a little different.

Giving craftwork

The women in our study, like the women in other studies (Johnson and Wilson, 2005) all spoke of the joy of giving their craftwork to others, particularly their children, nieces and nephews. The giving incorporated the craft-making practice into the women's practice of mothering as a particular kind of nurturing, at the same time tangible and symbolic. The craftwork itself is quite tangible, but the symbolism of giving something made with one's own hands goes well beyond the usual meanings of giving.

Jacinta told us that she has given a handmade present to every baby she has known in the past ten or twelve years:

I love giving presents to people that I've made myself. It's really nice for them to know you've made something and they appreciate what you've done ever so much more... I love the craft thing. I love how it can be beautiful and functional at the same time. Every piece has its purpose, so not all of it just gets hung on the wall.

Karen associates making and giving quilts with her desire to be nurturing:

It's my thing. It's that thing that I do for myself, as much as for my family. It probably feeds that nurturing thing that women are hard wired for. I can't cook to save myself. My children would starve if it was down to me for food. So you feel a bit of a failure that you can't even nourish your own children. So these things are good.

The authors would not agree with Karen's view that women are "hard wired" for nurturing. However, her words here illustrate one of the paradoxes of craft-making. She is clear that she does it as self-expression, as something for herself; and she is equally clear about her desire to express the nurturing aspect of herself by giving the quilts she makes to others. Giving quilts expresses warmth in both tangible and intangible ways. The quilts themselves keep people warm, and the giving of a handmade quilt is a generous expression of personal warmth towards another person.

Sulistijo crochets a set of baby things whenever her friends have a baby. She loves making things for her sons, but also says:

I really like making girl things for birthday presents or just to give away. Whenever I know a cute little girl I like to give her something, and I make a hair clip or a brooch.

Sulistijo is an Islamic woman in a predominantly non-Islamic community.

She adds:

I made these as year gifts for my son's teachers. Because we don't celebrate Christmas, but we also want to say, "happy holidays," or something like that. We don't give Christmas presents so we give something like that.

Making craft pieces and giving them as gifts is an important part of the craft process for all three women. It is clearly a way of nurturing and contributing to their families and social groups, and it is also a demonstration of particular philosophies and values. Sulistijo makes special gifts for the children instead of having lolly bags at her sons' birthday parties:

Since I don't like the lolly bag idea, I don't give away a lolly bag, but I give away a souvenir like this one—a pocket for girls where they can put hair clips and a pencil case for the boys.

Jacinta had just completed a series of library bags for her daughter and her friends. Each of these bags was individually made for the particular child and given as a birthday present when the child turned four. These bags connect the children and build a sense of community.

Intergenerational connection

The intergenerational meaning—or “generativity”—is a theme that has received attention from other researchers. It seems that the familial base of craft-making is often important to its meaning for the crafter. In a study of the motivations of contemporary handcrafters, Johnson and Wilson (2005: 121) found that “being a textile handcrafter provided many women and their families with a pattern of continuity and a trail of artifacts...” Women expressed a “keen awareness of longstanding textile handcraft traditions” (121). Carolyn Adams-Price found that craft-making assists older women to negotiate their own mortality, by leaving a legacy in the most meaningful space—with family and in the home (Adams-Price, 1998; Adams-Price and Steinman, 2007).

Craft-making traditions connect women with each other, and often with familial craft-making practices. These connections were clearly cherished by the women in our study, for the comfort and pleasure of connection, as well as the sense of identity. Most of the women were introduced to craft by their mothers and grandmothers, and these introductions were significant and memorable.

When we asked Jacinta about how she started craft-making, she began by telling us the story of her first cross-stitch bought for her by her mother on her sixteenth birthday and she also spoke about being influenced by a number of women craft-makers in her family:

My mother always sewed and knitted. My dad's mother, so my paternal

grandmother, she did a lot of cross stitch, tapestry, crocheting, knitting, all of those sorts of things. My aunts and my dad's sisters did a lot of dressmaking, one was a dressmaker, one did her own wool and knitted that up and so there's always been crafty influences in the family.

For Sulistijo the connection is with Indonesian culture, but the particular version of Indonesian culture experienced in her family:

I think there's a part of culture there. Especially in my family, my mother taught us to be able to do girl things and boy things. She taught us to do craft work and cooking or whatever, and she also taught us to do man things, like paint the walls ... as I'm growing, as a teenager I just leave it ... But then after, especially after I get married and I found out I get pregnant, I want to do that again. I want to make anything for my baby myself.

These women are aware of the intergenerational connections and this adds value to their practice of craft-making, however, as with the women in the Johnson and Wilson (2005) study this is not their main motivation: "they participated in handicrafts traditions because of the personal enjoyment that they experienced" (121).

Well-being

Jacinta and Karen, as well as incorporating craft-making into their mothering practice, actively use craft-making to support their well-being and quality of life through relaxation, relief and time out from the demands of their paid and unpaid work. Jacinta said:

It's essential ... if I don't do some at least every other day I get withdrawal symptoms. I do, I feel the stress levels building. I hate just not doing anything, even when we watch TV. We put the kids to bed, put the TV on, sit in front of the box, but I'll be doing something unless I'm so tired I can barely see ... I'll always have some sort of hand embroidery on the go and I'll have something to do on the machine ... when I was working as a teacher—it's a really stressful job; it's great fun but really stressful. 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.

Karen said:

I'd be a neurotic mess if I didn't have something to do. I'd drive everybody mad. And it gives me an opportunity to centre, to get away from everybody else, to do something just for me. And I know a lot of women that don't and their whole life is wrapped up in their families and doing for others all the time. And never having that moment to themselves, to be able to sort of

shut the door, push everybody else out and say, "look, you just have to fend for yourself." I think it's really healthy and very important and I'm sorry that more women don't perhaps make that effort. Or believe in themselves to give it a go.... You've got to give things a go.

Conclusion

The early twentieth century has seen a resurgence of craft-making in the community; increased scholarly focus on understanding women's creativity in new ways; and government-level interest in developing social policies that promote mental health and well-being. Previous research and writing has demonstrated links between creativity and well-being; and the importance of craftwork to many women. Our *Everyday Creativity of Women Craftmakers* study brings these streams of thought together and explores the meanings of craftwork to women and how they understand the links between their craftwork and their well-being. This article focuses in particular on three mothers who participated in our research.

The women in our study expressed their creativity through craft-making, and its meanings for them were complex and multi-layered, as was their understanding of how their craft-making supported their well-being and contributed to their quality of life. They spoke of loving their craftwork, the fabrics, the colours, the making and the giving. The joy and pleasure of this important aspect of their lives was evident, and there was a lightness about their engagement with craft-making. It was fun.

The mothers we interviewed were very aware that craft-making contributed to their well-being and they make deliberate efforts to find a time and a place for it. Their craftwork connects them with their mothers, grandmothers and aunts, and with the next generation of children, nieces, nephews and friends. They use their craft-making to express themselves and their life philosophies. They express love and nurturing through the things they make, and through giving hand made objects to other people. And they use craftwork to nurture themselves, finding relaxation, challenge, relief from stress and the joy of self-expression in their craftwork.

Craftwork, even in this period of resurging interest, is often dismissed or belittled, sometimes in the name of feminism. In our *Everyday Creativity of Women Craftmakers* research and in this article we aim to convey an enriched understanding of the role and meaning of craftwork to amateur women craft-makers, including its role in promoting well-being.

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