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## **'Knit "n" natter': A feminist methodological assessment of using creative 'women's work' in focus groups**

### **Abstract**

This article outlines the methodological innovations generated in a study of knitting and femininity in Britain. The study utilised 'knit "n" natter' focus groups during which female participants were encouraged to knit and talk. The research design encompassed a traditionally undervalued form of domestic 'women's work' to recognise the creative skills of female practitioners. 'Knit "n" natter' is a fruitful feminist research method in relation to its capitalisation on female participants' creativity, its disruption of expertise and its feminisation of academic space. The method challenges patriarchal conventions of knowledge production and gendered power relations in research, but it also reproduces problematic constructions of gender, which are acknowledged. The study contributes to a growing body of work on creative participatory methods and finds that the 'knit "n" natter' format has utility beyond investigations of crafting and may be used productively in other contexts where in-depth research with women is desirable.

### **Keywords**

craft, creative methods, domesticity, feminism, knitting, participatory methods, space, women

### **Introduction**

This study discusses the use of the 'knit "n" natter' focus group as a method of data collection and argues that this creative approach provides valuable feminist methodological insights, particularly vis-à-vis working with older female participants. We suggest that the 'knit "n" natter' focus group has three benefits: firstly, it provides a creative, relaxing and enjoyable experience for participants, which facilitates openness and the production of rich qualitative data; secondly, it **may** position participants as experts, disrupting power hierarchies between the researcher and the researched; thirdly, it feminises space, allowing for a gendered experience that contrasts with common constructions of academic knowledge production as masculine. While we posit these findings as methodologically useful, we also acknowledge and reflect on the problematic gendered assumptions that underlie some of our arguments.

Our **sociological** study explored the links between knitting, femininity and women's everyday lives (Author and Author, 2019), hence the 'knit "n" natter' method directly matched the skills of our targeted participants. **Participatory textiles workshops have been used productively in arts and design research (Shercliff and Holroyd, 2016; see also the special issue of *Journal of Arts and Communities* entitled 'Stitching Together' (2020)).** There has also been a recent shift towards creative and arts-based methods in **social scientific** qualitative research to democratise the research process (Henwood et al., 2019).

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3 Our research adds to this by focusing specifically on an undervalued form of creative 'women's  
4 work' that has potential as a participatory method to engender inclusivity and help elicit  
5 women's stories. Our 'knit "n" natter' method encapsulates feminist research principles and its  
6 strengths lead us to argue that it may be of value to research that aims to explore other issues  
7 impacting women, especially under-researched groups such as older women excluded from  
8 or intimidated by traditional academic research settings. Nevertheless, the 'knit "n" natter'  
9 method is also in tension with feminist research principles because it naturalises the  
10 association between women and domesticity.  
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16 'Knit "n" natter' is a contemporary name for a knitting circle where knitters gather  
17 together to practice their craft and talk. Knitting circles can be informal groups within the home  
18 attended by relatives and friends or bigger collectives in public venues such as yarn shops,  
19 pubs or parks involving knitters who are unacquainted or linked predominantly via social  
20 media. Knitting is not exclusive to women but Parker (1996) has examined the long history of  
21 women's homosocial needlework practices, noting that in Victorian Britain textiles-based  
22 hand-crafting was common to women of all social classes: a means of subsistence for  
23 working-class women and 'correct drawing-room behaviour' for middle-class ladies (p.152).  
24 Needlework occupies a special place in women's history because it has long been 'a source  
25 of pleasure and power for women, while being indissolubly linked to their powerlessness'  
26 (Parker, 1996: 11). Turney (2009) has discussed the historical knitting circle as 'solely the  
27 domain of women' (p.145) and today as an activity that still 'recognises the power of group  
28 work [and] discussion' amongst women (p.203). The contemporary knitting circle acts 'as a  
29 communicative tool', expressing women's subjectivities that otherwise tend to be 'hidden,  
30 marginalized or ignored' (Turney, 2009: 203). Recently, knitting circles have been resurrected  
31 under a new name, 'stich "n" bitch' (Stoller, 2003). We use the name 'knit "n" natter' because  
32 several of our older participants disliked Stoller's term on the grounds that the language was  
33 vulgar. We acknowledge the subsequent potential for representing women's talk as 'natter',  
34 or mindless chatter, which is not our intention.  
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46 To explain the methodological innovativeness and utility of the 'knit "n" natter' focus  
47 group, this paper first provides the context for our interest in knitting in the twenty-first century,  
48 including our observations of reductive distinctions made in popular media discourse between  
49 'hipster-knitters' and 'granny-knitters' (Author and Author, 2019). As we show, the so-called  
50 'granny-knitter' and her particular practices have been disparaged as tedious and out-dated,  
51 whereas 'hipster' craft pursuits have been valorised as cool, desirable accomplishments. This  
52 raises interesting questions about how the meanings of knitting are differently constructed  
53 according to intersections of age, gender, ethnicity and level of feminist or political activism of  
54 knitters (Bratich and Brush, 2011; Author and Author, 2019; Literat and Markus, 2019;  
55 Pentney, 2008; Turney, 2009). As we have argued elsewhere (Author and Author, 2019), older  
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3 female knitters have been overlooked in research linked to domestic leisure practices and  
4 constitute an under-researched group.  
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6 Following the contextualisation of our study of knitting, the paper outlines the unusual  
7 reactions our research elicited from colleagues, emphasising the undervaluation of women's  
8 domestic leisure practices in the Academy. Lessons learned from these reactions informed  
9 the research design as it was necessary to create a safe space within which participants could  
10 feel valued. The paper also discusses our recruitment strategy for accessing participants  
11 before providing a critical account of the three main strengths of the 'knit "n" natter' focus group  
12 method: its capitalisation on women's creativity, potential disruption of hierarchies of expertise  
13 and feminisation of academic space.  
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### 20 **Knitting in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century**

21 Knitting has undergone a dramatic revival in popularity this century. An estimated 7.3 million  
22 people in Britain knit: around 11 per cent of the population, **though these statistics must be**  
23 **treated with caution since they derive from commercial research** (Wool and the Gang,  
24 2015; Rowan cited in Turney, 2009). The majority of knitters in Britain – 5.9 million – are  
25 thought to be women in their mid-thirties or older (<http://www.ukhandknitting.com/about-us>;  
26 Immediate Media, 2017). Although it is known that, historically in Britain and elsewhere, the  
27 craft was practiced by men (Rutt, 1987), knitting and other sedentary textile handicrafts, such  
28 as crochet and embroidery, have a long history as 'women's work' and, consequently, have  
29 been undervalued in terms of skilfulness and cultural importance (Parker, 1996; Turney,  
30 2009). Particularly since the mid-twentieth century, when the popularity of hand-knitting  
31 declined – partly effected by the availability of low-cost, machine-manufactured clothing –  
32 making textile products in the home accrued 'cultural stigma' (Turney, 2009: 5). As Turney  
33 (2009) observes, the idea of knitting was embodied by 'grannies in rocking chairs' (p.5) and  
34 symbolic of 'non-liberated femininity' (p.216); thus the craft is understood as 'a highly  
35 gendered relic from yesteryear that... somehow deserves derision' (p.5). Today, the public  
36 image of knitting, as communicated in news media reportage and online lifestyle content,  
37 divides knitters into two camps: fusty granny-knitters situated within the private home, who  
38 personify all that is outdated and undesirable for women, and youthful, cool, feminist, public  
39 knitters, who represent a new form of what we have called 'hipster-knitting' (Author and Author,  
40 2019). The artificial division of contemporary knitters into notionally oppositional camps of  
41 grannies and hipsters reproduces what Close (2018) calls 'the postfeminist stereotype of  
42 grandmothers: politically inert but domestically skilled' (pp.878-9).  
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57 Research into knitting has, to some extent, replicated the cultural preoccupation with  
58 hipster-knitters and their new knitting practices at the expense of practitioners who may be  
59 uncritically classified as granny-knitters. There have been studies of knitting in relation to:  
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avant-garde performance art (Rees, 2018); fan art (Cherry, 2016); celebrity and lifestyle cultures (Drix, 2014; Parkins, 2004); online social networks (Minahan and Cox, 2007; Orton-Johnson, 2014); feminism (Groeneveld, 2010; Kelly, 2014; Pentney, 2008); yarn-bombing and political activism (Black, 2017; Bratich and Brush, 2011; Close, 2018; Hahner and Varda, 2014; Literat and Markus, 2019). These forms of knitting may involve women of all ages but are discursively constructed as youthful activities, representative of a new ethos of trendy, public crafting and the feminist reclamation of knitting from anachronistic 'grannies'. Where **sociological** studies have engaged empirically with knitters, which is fairly rare, they have selected young women as research subjects, such as Stannard's and Sanders' (2014) work with college students in the USA (**research with knitting participants is more common in arts and design research. See, for example, Shercliff and Holroyd, 2016**). Only a few studies have engaged with older women; for example, Shin's and Ha's (2011) ethnographic work with knitting groups in South Korea. All the above research is invaluable to understandings of contemporary knitting, but it also risks reproducing the patriarchal privileging of public, intellectual, politically engaged forms of leisure over sedentary, domestic practices that are largely, but not exclusively, enjoyed by older women. This links to patriarchal value systems that understand the home as of lesser significance than the masculine public sphere. The undervaluation of 'granny-knitting' also recalls second-wave feminism's imperatives for women to escape the stultifying confines of housewifery. Germaine Greer (2007) wrote that 'women have frittered their lives away stitching things for which there is no demand ever since vicarious leisure was invented... for centuries, women have been kept busy wasting their time'. Attitudes towards 'women's work' that equate domesticity uncritically with gendered oppression have been challenged by writers who argue that traditional practices of housewifery can be enjoyable and fulfilling for some women and that women negotiate domesticity in more complex ways than have been fully recognised in scholarship and culture. Johnson and Lloyd (2004) argue 'the project of feminism has itself been built on this tradition of domesticity as a source of critique of the contemporary social world' (p.160). The findings of our study corresponded with this as many of our participants reported enjoyment of knitting within the home and talked about the craft's facility for forging emotional links with other women, eliciting positive memories of and feelings of kinship with female ancestors and providing creative space for relaxation and personal accomplishment. The next section will discuss the unusual reactions to our research from some academic colleagues.

### 55 **Researching 'women's work' in the academy**

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Unexpectedly, we encountered derisory attitudes towards knitting research amongst some academic colleagues. When discussing our work in both informal and formal professional contexts we experienced light mockery. This was unusual compared to responses to other

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3 research projects we had been involved in. Some colleagues – male and female – appeared  
4 puzzled or amused by our study of knitting, as though it was unworthy of scholarly attention.  
5 We were asked incredulously, ‘do you knit?’, as if this was an incongruous pastime for  
6 academics and we must have a personal investment in it. It became apparent that patriarchal  
7 attitudes to ‘women’s work’ persist in some spaces in academia. Parker (1996) found that  
8 when women’s needlework ‘is carried across the borders into masculine territory’ it is  
9 considered to be ‘out of place’ (p.215). We experienced quite literally the validity of Parker’s  
10 (1996) observation that a female needleworker ‘can become a sociologist but does not bring  
11 her work out in staffroom, boardroom or pub’ without risk (p.215). It is unlikely that social  
12 scientists researching more traditionally masculine leisure practices would have met with  
13 similar scepticism about their projects, nor been interrogated about their personal habits. Stalp  
14 (2015) finds that feminine, sedentary leisure pursuits conducted by ‘aging women in the  
15 private sphere’ are ‘on the sidelines in sociology and leisure research’ (p.261). This sidelining  
16 necessitated extraordinary defence of our research. Some colleagues, however, were  
17 supportive and eager to share knitting stories. A surprising number of female colleagues  
18 revealed they could knit, something they had never before mentioned in the workplace.  
19 Overall, knitting proved to be an unusually polarising object of research, eliciting incredulity or  
20 strong personal affinity. The exposure to derision allowed us to understand how knitting can  
21 be perceived negatively and the patronising encounters knitters may have experienced in their  
22 everyday lives, which helped when designing the research and establishing rapport with our  
23 participants.  
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### 36 37 **Focus groups as a feminist method**

38 The tradition of women knitting together in family, friendship or community ‘circles’ has  
39 endured into the present (Turney, 2009). We felt that focus groups had the potential to  
40 replicate the knitting circle scenario with a degree of authenticity, especially as both  
41 researchers were women. Focus groups have been identified as particularly appropriate to  
42 research with women. Kook et al. (2019) suggest that focus group research ‘holds a special  
43 appeal for researchers committed to feminist concerns’ (p.88). Wilkinson (1999) has identified  
44 it as ‘a feminist method’. Reasons for this include the potential for focus groups to listen to  
45 many different women’s voices to reflect female diversity, the creation of shared naturalistic,  
46 unthreatening social spaces generative of open conversation and the ‘strong sense of  
47 validation that participants often feel when being listened to and when listening to other  
48 women’s stories’ (Kook et al., 2019: 89). Moreover, focus groups can break down the  
49 ‘exploitative power relations between researcher and researched’ that are normative in  
50 patriarchal research contexts (Wilkinson, 1999: 224). This is partially due to the favourable  
51 ratio of research participants to researchers and the reduced power the researchers have to  
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3 influence conversations as compared to one-to-one interviews. Although there are  
4 counterarguments to the understanding of focus groups as especially female-centred and the  
5 method has been used successfully with men and mixed gender groups, the tipping of the  
6 balance of power towards the participants corresponds with 'principles of feminist research'  
7 and is inclusive of under-represented and difficult-to-reach groups (Wilkinson, 1999: 233). The  
8 commonalities between knitting circles and focus groups, and their reported shared utility for  
9 generating women's talk and co-operation led us to conclude that the 'knit "n" natter' format  
10 would be ideal for our research. Next, we outline how knitters' networks assisted us with  
11 recruitment for our study.  
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### 19 **Participant recruitment**

20 Recent studies on knitting have collected data from established knitting groups or online fora  
21 (Cherry, 2016; Fields, 2014; Literat and Markus, 2019; Wills, 2007). This approach has proven  
22 fruitful, but we were interested in capturing knitters who may not be part of any social knitting  
23 scene. We developed a recruitment strategy that opened the door to solitary, non-networked  
24 knitters while not excluding knitters who participated in knitting circles and social media. While  
25 advertisements for participants were placed on local online fora on the knitting social network  
26 Ravelry.com, we also utilised physical noticeboards in supermarkets and leisure centres. It  
27 was notable that one of our locations – a Welsh town – did not have its own Ravelry.com  
28 group and there was no response to adverts placed around town. For this, we recruited based  
29 on word-of-mouth which was significant in attracting older knitters in their late fifties and sixties  
30 who may not have had the opportunity to see our advertisements or may not have felt  
31 themselves directly addressed by them. Snowball sampling was utilised in a big-city location  
32 after our Ravelry.com post was shared to a knitting group's membership. Our youngest  
33 participants in their twenties were recruited in this manner, but also our oldest participant,  
34 aged 69. Thus, knitters' networks – local and based in social media – helped us to recruit a  
35 diverse age sample of knitters. This practice could be reproduced in other studies where the  
36 research aims were of interest to knitters.  
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47 The inclusion criteria for the study required adult participants to have been knitting for  
48 at least 6 months. This period encompassed people new to but serious about knitting as well  
49 as life-long knitters. We did not specify any age range or gender in our selection criteria to  
50 avoid preconceptions about who knits but the 15 people who came forward were relatively  
51 homogenous. The majority were over 35 years of age. All but one classified themselves as  
52 female. All identified as White British or White Other. This could have been a representative  
53 reflection of knitting participation in Britain (Hahner and Varda (2014) have noted the white,  
54 middle-classness of knitting in this context) or, more likely, of how snowball sampling works  
55 to obtain people of similar demographics. While little attention has been paid in research to  
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3 older white female knitters, Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic knitters have been almost entirely  
4 neglected (Close, 2018) and further efforts must be made to employ different strategies to  
5 recruit a more ethnically diverse range of knitters.  
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### 9 **Outline of the research**

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11 The research took the form of three one-off 90-minute 'knit "n" natter' focus groups in three  
12 locations in Britain. Each group comprised 3-6 participants plus two researchers. The 15  
13 participants ranged from 25 to 69 years of age. Ten participants were 35 or over, which  
14 corresponds with market research indicating that, despite media coverage of youthful hipster-  
15 knitters, the typical consumer of knitting materials in Britain is 35 or above (Immediate Media,  
16 2017). 14 were female and one was gender neutral. Participants were sent information sheets,  
17 consent forms and invited to bring their knitting. This decision was made, as opposed to asking  
18 participants to knit using materials supplied by us, for three reasons. Firstly, a pilot study where  
19 we had supplied knitting materials had elicited criticisms from participants who felt that our  
20 synthetic yarns and plastic needles were inferior quality compared to their own, making the  
21 knitting task less enjoyable. Budget restrictions prevented us from being able to supply natural  
22 yarns and higher quality needles. Secondly, we anticipated that participants would feel more  
23 confident entering an unfamiliar space if they brought something familiar to work on. Thirdly,  
24 we hoped that participants could make meaningful use of their time by progressing their own  
25 projects rather than working on a purposeless knitting task devised by us. The invitation also  
26 established that we valued participants' knitting and provided an initial talking point for each  
27 focus group. This strategy had unintended benefits, which we discuss in more detail below.  
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38 The data generated by the research was in-depth and our findings were that older  
39 female knitters, aged 35 or above, had diverse knitting experiences but the majority diverged  
40 from stereotypes of granny-knitters and hipster-knitters, which led us to conclude that these  
41 were gendered constructions and unrepresentative of real knitters in twenty-first century  
42 Britain (Author and Author, 2019). Below, we discuss three factors in the research design that  
43 contributed to the success of the research but also posed some problems for our feminist  
44 methodological principles: the use of feminine creativity in a focus group setting, the  
45 positioning of participants as experts and the feminisation of institutional space.  
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### 52 **Creativity**

53 Knitting is an embodied creative practice, so we capitalised on the findings of recent research  
54 that advocates creative methods to democratise the research process through participatory  
55 and non-linguistic forms of knowledge production. Knitting is often experienced as a meditative  
56 task conducive to thoughtfulness. As knitting scholar and practitioner Rutt (1987) explains,  
57 knitting is 'reflective and repetitive. Wherever you are engaged in doing a purely repetitive  
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3 thing, your mind can reflect upon life' (p.157). This was borne out in our focus groups where  
4 participants reflected on the relaxing, expansive effects of knitting:  
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7 Hazel: Knitting keeps me awake in an evening. If I just sat and watched the telly or read  
8 a book or read the newspaper, my eyes would close, but because I'm knitting, I  
9 stay awake. So that's, I think, a great asset of knitting.  
10

11 Joanne: It's just enough concentration that your mind can drift. Like it's not so arduous  
12 that you have to think about it constantly... it's enough to focus you... other  
13 thoughts can drift away. Yeah, you don't realise that you're kind of focusing down  
14 on something... I do Pilates and it's exactly how I feel after that.  
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17 Drawing on Jung's work on the unconscious, Gauntlett (2007) suggests creativity enables 'an  
18 uninhibited state during which meaningful material would surface' (pp.77-8). Engaging in  
19 creative practices allows a person to access their unconscious and bring out 'significant truth'  
20 (Gauntlett, 2007: 79). Gauntlett concludes that brains are 'narrative-producing machines' and  
21 approaches to research that allow the unconscious to be explored 'reveal different kinds of  
22 account and give us a fuller understanding of those subjectivities' (2007: 90). Our research  
23 sought to generate data regarding women's subjectivities in relation to a creative task that has  
24 been culturally undervalued so enabling 'different kinds of accounts' was our primary aim.  
25 **Gauntlett's (2011)** idea that 'making is connecting', both materially and socially, was  
26 important here. The 'knit "n" natter' format demonstrated that people felt able to tell stories in  
27 different ways and/or with fewer inhibitions while concentrating on a creative task, even when  
28 in the company of strangers. The shared practice of knitting between participants and the  
29 familiar, repetitive nature of the activity generated relaxation and feelings of connectedness,  
30 leading to in-depth conversations. Some knitters spoke intimately about love and how knitting  
31 and knitted objects were intertwined with deep personal connections with female relatives and  
32 friends, some of whom had passed away. Others disclosed feelings of anger when knitted  
33 gifts were not treated with care by ungrateful recipients, including children, husbands and  
34 other family members. We argue, therefore, that 'knit "n" natter' enables freer, deeper  
35 participation in group discussions than more conventional focus group formats. The level of  
36 disclosure here may also have been enhanced by the one-off nature of the session.  
37 Notwithstanding this benefit, the research format also presented a problem.  
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50 Using a form of 'women's work' as a creative task to appeal specifically to women in  
51 our research reproduced gendered cultural associations between women and domestic  
52 labour. As discussed, knitting is an undervalued practice that encapsulates ideas of femininity  
53 as docile, sedentary and virtuous. This is a gendered and classed construction of both knitting  
54 and women that we did not intend to sustain. To disrupt this, we considered the contrivance  
55 of a public knitting activity – yarn-bombing – to challenge problematic associations between  
56 women, textiles and domesticity but this proved to be counterproductive for two reasons.  
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3 Firstly, we wanted to access non-networked, non-public knitters who may have been put off  
4 by this ostentatious, 'hipster' form of knitting. Secondly, Hahner and Varda show that the  
5 articulation of yarn-bombing as a 'progressive vision of modern womanhood' meant to subvert  
6 masculine urban space overlooks the idea that 'such posturing may actually reify women's  
7 labour practices as valuable only when womanly bodies are able to publicise their domestic  
8 prowess' (2014: 305, 306). Yarn-bombing thus reproduces reductive associations between  
9 women and the home. It is also practiced by older, white, middle- to upper-class women  
10 making it a 'comfortable' and acceptable form of street art that firmly locates the female as  
11 domestic and inoffensive (Hahner & Varda, 2014). Comparatively, our private, mundane 'knit  
12 "n" natter' circle format was advantageous because of its more egalitarian history as a practice  
13 of women from all social classes (Parker, 1996) and its appeal to introvert as well as extrovert  
14 knitters. One unpredicted consequence was that the research imbued knitting with new status  
15 in the eyes of some participants and their colleagues:  
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24 Sarah: Maybe we can exploit your research to up the prestige of knitting... I was walking  
25 through the car park with wool for this [focus group] and, as always, you see the [male  
26 senior colleague] and you say, 'why do I always see them when I'm carrying it'? And  
27 OK, they didn't say anything, they looked at the wool and when I got to the meeting they  
28 said, 'oh you're doing the research, aren't you?' Not like 'haven't you got anything else  
29 better to do?'  
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32 Our attempt to simulate the experience of a private, domestic knitting circle had the  
33 paradoxical effect of imbuing knitting with status in the public workplace and, here, despite our  
34 efforts, reproduced the gendered public/private binary. The following section demonstrates  
35 how knitting can be used to trouble hierarchies of power within research but also poses  
36 problems in relation to gendered notions of expertise.  
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### 41 **Power relations and expertise**

42 Focus groups disrupt the conventional power imbalance between researcher and researched  
43 and are particularly favourable for research with women, as discussed above. However, Van  
44 der Riet and Boettiger (2009) demonstrate that focus groups can still be intimidating and used  
45 creative methods to overcome perceived status difference between the researcher and  
46 researched. The 'knit "n" natter' format enabled a useful development of this because not only  
47 are knitting 'circles' notionally non-hierarchical female-centred social contexts, the creative  
48 activity allowed participants to function as experts. Our research design drew on a  
49 participatory model. We aimed 'to confront the way in which the established and power-holding  
50 elements of societies world-wide are favoured because they hold a monopoly on the definition  
51 and employment of knowledge.' (Riley and Reason, 2015: 171). Although the study did not  
52 conform to all aspects of the participatory paradigm (because we had manufactured the  
53 knitting circle format and devised a semi-structured series of questions), it did establish more  
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3 equal research relations than conventional studies (Cornwall and Jewkes, 1995). Arguably,  
4 the inclusion of knitting circles in research challenges patriarchal knowledge production by  
5 privileging predominantly female experiences, which Reid and Frisby (2008) identify as  
6 important within a feminist participatory research framework. As knitting itself is marginalised  
7 both in social scientific research and broader culture, the adoption of a participatory framework  
8 that actively set out to challenge what counts as valued knowledge was appropriate. Much  
9 participatory action research is committed to mitigating wider forms of injustice and enhancing  
10 marginalised communities (Reason and Bradbury, 2008). We aimed to take seriously  
11 women's craft work and challenge patriarchal power structures that diminish the value of  
12 gendered and vernacular forms of creativity (Edensor and Millington, 2012). However, knitting  
13 circles themselves have their own hierarchies.

20 Our pilot study found that some participants who had attended knitting circles had  
21 encountered cliques and off-putting hierarchies of proficiency. In the main study, Sarah  
22 echoed this experience. They felt that their knitting had not been good enough and they did  
23 not 'belong' in the knitting group: 'There were two circles, the one that was there and the one  
24 that wasn't... so it wasn't very welcoming'. Many of our participants had been knitting for much  
25 longer than the six months required by our inclusion criteria and were highly skilled, so there  
26 was potential for our 'knit "n" natter' groups to reproduce this exclusivity. This was mitigated  
27 to some extent by our status as inexpert knitters. Scholars who write about knitting tend to be  
28 expert knitters (Cherry, 2016; Holroyd, 2017); however, we were beginners with demonstrably  
29 limited skills. This disrupted insider/outsider status in the groups and created space where  
30 participants recognised their own knitting proficiencies in comparison to ours and allowed for  
31 non-judgemental discussion of their work by deflecting it on to ours. **Scholars who are expert  
32 knitters could foster a positive research environment for participants by ensuring they  
33 are situated as fellow experts, however** recent research by Walters used drawing in focus  
34 groups with teenage girls and found that a lack of skill on the part of the researcher was  
35 productive not only for reassuring participants that they would not be judged by an expert, but  
36 also for inviting 'gentle mockery' that further disrupted the researcher-researched power  
37 hierarchy (2019: 9). Like Walters (2019), we openly demonstrated our lack of expertise in the  
38 creative task, which allowed our participants to take a position of authority. Unlike Walters'  
39 study, our participants did not mock us but rather encouraged us to improve. This was perhaps  
40 due to differences in age and levels of maturity compared to the teenagers in Walters'  
41 research. Skilled participants were thus able to adopt a pedagogic role, consigning us as  
42 researchers to a less clearly authoritative position in the group, as the following exchange  
43 shows:

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59 Joan: I don't know whether you're [the researchers] a knitter, do I?  
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3 KH: I am a bit – amateur.  
4 Joan: There you go, yes...  
5 KH: Properly amateur, not really good.  
6 Natalie: But we're all there together, aren't we?  
7 CO: I knit, I'm the same as Katherine really...  
8 Joan: Yeah, so you can knit, you can cast on and you can...?  
9 Lorraine: And you make stuff for yourself?  
10 CO: Yeah, if needs be.  
11 Lorraine: There's nothing wrong with that.  
12  
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14 In exploring the advantages and disadvantages of insider/outsider status in qualitative  
15 research Dwyer and Buckle (2009) assert that adopting a space 'in-between' is valuable.  
16 Among the advantages of occupying 'insider' status is the ability to enhance understanding of  
17 the population and in our 'knit "n" natter' groups we were able to share the satisfactions and  
18 frustrations of knitting. But, as beginner knitters without a serious investment in the craft, we  
19 could also be critical. **Although expert knitters can provide critical insights into their craft,**  
20 in qualitative research with established knitting groups in the USA, Wills (2007) paints an  
21 insightful but entirely positive picture. It appears that being invited into established knitting  
22 circles as a committed knitter might influence the researcher to be idealistic, as insider status  
23 **may** make it harder for the researcher to distinguish between their own and their respondents'  
24 experiences (Dwyer and Buckle, 2009). **Scholars who are expert knitters and utilise the**  
25 **focus group research method may be better able to notice specific detail in craft**  
26 **practice compared to beginners. Nevertheless,** by eschewing established knitting circles  
27 and being open about our lack of expertise, it **may have been** easier for us to identify negative  
28 aspects of knitting groups. **We found that** occupying the space 'in-between' established  
29 empathetic understanding with participants and generated materially based subjective  
30 knowledge. However, our willing self-divestment of expertise had problematic consequences.  
31 As female researchers investigating the domestic pastimes of older women, we already  
32 occupy 'the sidelines' in sociology (Stalp, 2015: 261). Positioning ourselves as 'inexpert' within  
33 our field of study reaffirms the under-valuation of knitting research as productive of worthwhile  
34 academic knowledge. A double bind was thus created. As knitting research 'experts', we found  
35 that our intellectual capital was questionable for some academic colleagues, but as 'non-  
36 experts' within our own field of research we wilfully undervalued our knitting skills. In our  
37 attempt to challenge patriarchal knowledge production, then, we could also be criticised for  
38 playing up to gendered stereotyping and 'dumbing down' our own proficiencies, further reifying  
39 patriarchal ideas of expertise. The next section discusses how introducing knitting materials  
40 into the research setting feminises space but also draws on problematically gendered sensory  
41 and aesthetic categories.  
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### Feminising space

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3 Historically, knitting circles have been noted as private, female-only spaces, 'hidden zones' in  
4 domestic locations that allow women to share stories and skills and, as such, are dismissed  
5 as unproductive and sentimental (Bratich and Brush, 2011: 240). Knitting circles therefore  
6 have potential to capture women's subjective experiences. Today, some knitting circles meet  
7 in public places like pubs and, arguably, these sites become feminised and domesticated. This  
8 interpretation is problematic since it associates femininity with an anodyne 'snuggly feeling'  
9 and overlooks the ways in which some women's domestic labour – particularly that of working-  
10 class and ethnic minority women – already occurs in public (Hahner and Varda, 2014: 304).  
11 Nevertheless, in this section we discuss how our research method capitalised on participants'  
12 gendered perceptions of the knitting circle to create what may be understood as feminine  
13 space within masculine institutional contexts.

20 Reproducing a knitting circle with any degree of authenticity was challenging because  
21 the locations we were obliged to use were institutional and typically associated with the public,  
22 masculine world of work rather than domestic feminine space. Like many researchers, we had  
23 a limited choice of venues because of budget restrictions. Two focus groups took place in free  
24 university classrooms and the third in a privately hired events space. The university locations  
25 were bland teaching rooms replete with strip-lighting, whiteboards and computer equipment.  
26 The privately booked space was designed with corporate away-days in mind, with a screen  
27 and projector for presentations. These locations were not conducive to an inviting environment  
28 generative of in-depth discussion. Moreover, the hard, institutional design and corporate  
29 aesthetics were potentially off-putting or intimidating for participants unfamiliar with university  
30 and business settings and risked reproducing the power hierarchies between researchers and  
31 researched outlined above. We attempted to make each space welcoming by moving furniture  
32 and providing refreshments; however, this did not do much to mitigate the environments. As  
33 discussed, we could have designed the research so that we worked with pre-existing 'knit "n"  
34 natter' circles in their regular venues but since we wanted to bring together knitters who did  
35 not necessarily know one another, using participants' homes would have been problematic.  
36 Joining a pre-established group in a public place could have excluded unsociable knitters  
37 and/or reproduced divisive ingroups and outgroups. Additionally, established 'knit "n" natters'  
38 usually took place during the day whereas our data collection was scheduled for early evening  
39 to be accessible to knitters with work or caring responsibilities, when most venues were  
40 closed. Despite the uninspiring and potentially off-putting locations we used, we found  
41 participants' sensory and aesthetic perceptions of and interactions with knitting materials  
42 worked to some extent to soften and feminise the research space in ways that were beneficial  
43 but also mobilised troubling constructions of gender.

58 The introduction of participants' knitting materials, specifically their yarn and knitting  
59 works-in-progress, into the rooms had a positive effect for generating what may be described  
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3 as 'cosiness'. This quality is associated with homeliness and hospitality and has been  
4 identified as particularly valued by older people (Devine-Wright et al., 2014). The 'snuggly'  
5 construction of femininity in knitting cultures criticised by Hahner and Varda (2014) is partly  
6 linked to the perception of the tactile properties of yarns and items made from these materials.  
7  
8 In a study about old pairs of jeans, Woodward (2016) discusses participants' interactions with  
9 fabric. She suggests these are important because 'The material properties of things are central  
10 to understanding the sensual, tactile, material and embodied ways in which social lives are  
11 lived and experienced' (p.359). Attention to sensory perceptions of the material can be  
12 productive of new forms of knowledge that unsettle conventional social scientific  
13 understandings of experience. Although we did not set out to collect data regarding the tactile  
14 properties or affordances of knitting materials, these became evident in participants'  
15 verbalised descriptions of and physical interactions with yarn and partially made garments  
16 during the focus groups. Participants' sensory engagements with materials, particularly wool,  
17 and the enthusiastic ways they talked about feel, colour and smell, or recalled these, were  
18 conducive of pleasure. For example:

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28 Beatrice: It's the smell of wool, I just love wool.

29  
30 Joanne: Like the smell of it when it's in your hands... oh, it's just beautiful, 100%  
31 Lambswool, I could just stand and sniff the piles of wool.

32  
33 Hebrok and Klepp (2014) investigated sensory perceptions of wool amongst women from  
34 different national contexts and concluded that senses are embodied interactions that are  
35 interpreted culturally. For our participants, who were all keen knitters, wool had cultural  
36 connotations of feminine cosiness and indulgence that contributed to a plenitude of sensory  
37 satisfactions. Generally, yarn was understood as a feminine material and repeatedly  
38 discussed in relation to feminine 'touchy-feely' concepts such as love, maternal caring  
39 practices and gift-giving. Referring to a gift she was currently making, Joanne linked the  
40 tactility of yarn to being physically close to the recipient:

41  
42 I enjoy that people have a jumper that keeps them warm, or they have a scarf that keeps  
43 them warm, or they have something that's, you know, about their person, it's quite sort  
44 of tactile and you know it's very close to them somehow.

45  
46 The recollection of warmth and closeness with recipients of knitted gifts and the sensory,  
47 emotive nature of discussions about knitted objects present in the room infused the focus  
48 groups with a soft cosiness that was unlikely to have been achievable without the material  
49 presence of textiles. This was a highly gendered cultural affect rather than a natural property  
50 of the materials.  
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3 The partially knitted items that participants showed us also elicited feminised aesthetic  
4 responses. An exhibition of Christmas decorations provoked repeated declarations of  
5 'cuteness' from participants and, inadvertently, researchers:  
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9 Natalie: Aren't they adorable?  
10 KH: And you've got here some baby booties.  
11 Natalie: I thought little stockings for a Christmas tree.  
12 KH: Oh, little Christmas stockings!  
13 Lorraine: Christmas bunting.  
14 Natalie: Aren't they cute? ... I do love bunting.  
15 KH: They're very cute as well.  
16 Natalie: Oh, they're so cute. That one's a bit bigger... Are we getting a bit carried  
17 away?  
18

19  
20 The aesthetic category of cuteness is intrinsic to the 'ideological consolidation of the middle-  
21 class home as a female space organized around consumption' (Ngai, 2010: 951). Our  
22 inadvertent mobilisation of this aesthetic reproduced the construction of women's knitting as  
23 domestic, docile and bourgeois. Nevertheless, this experience highlights how bringing tactile  
24 knitting materials, culturally conceived of as soft, cosy and cute, into a research setting can  
25 enable gendered sensory and aesthetic responses in participants, indicating a feminisation of  
26 masculine institutional or corporate space. This was conducive to creating safe space for  
27 female participants to talk openly between themselves and in which 'women's work' was  
28 valued and 'at home'. An additional benefit for us as researchers accustomed to institutional  
29 environments was 'making the familiar strange' through the introduction of incongruous  
30 materials, creative practices and sensory and aesthetic awarenesses (Mannay, 2010).  
31 Processes of defamiliarisation of space, particularly those involving art and creativity, force us  
32 to 'slow down our perception, to linger and to notice' (Mannay, 2010: 95). Finally, the inclusion  
33 of the 'private' feminine space of 'knit "n" natter' groups in research settings challenges the  
34 patriarchal, public arena of the Academy.  
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#### 44 **Conclusions**

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46 This article has outlined the methodological benefits of the 'knit "n" natter' focus group and  
47 reflected on the method's drawbacks in relation to constructions of gender. The research  
48 design had three advantages that aligned with feminist research principles. Firstly, the 'knit "n"  
49 natter' format recognised the value of knitting as a significant form of creative 'women's work'.  
50 Incorporating knitting into focus groups acknowledged participants' experiences, skills and the  
51 embodied act of performing their craft. We utilised the positive unconscious effects of the act  
52 of knitting to facilitate an open, relaxing environment conducive to in-depth discussion and the  
53 production of rich qualitative data. Secondly, 'knit "n" natter' enabled the participants to be  
54 positioned as skilled experts with experiences and talents not shared by the researchers. We  
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3 were thus situated more equitably with our research subjects, leading to disruption of the  
4 patriarchal, hierarchical process of knowledge production. This allowed for insights into  
5 overlooked and undervalued female subjectivities associated with sedentary textiles work.  
6  
7 Thirdly, the research method feminised masculine institutional and corporate space, creating  
8 a soft, homely, cosy environment which felt intimate and familiar. This potentially reassured  
9 participants who were not used to the university and corporate settings we were obliged to  
10 use. The introduction of participants' knitting materials into the research setting helped us gain  
11 understanding of the material significances of their tools and hand-made objects in their  
12 stories. Taken together, we argue that these advantages show 'knit "n" natter' to be an  
13 inclusive research method that corresponds with feminist research principles and may be  
14 useful in other research that aims to engage with women. However, this method also had  
15 some drawbacks.  
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22 The 'knit "n" natter' format unavoidably reproduced some gendered and class-based  
23 assumptions about women and domestic pastimes that were problematic. Firstly, in attempting  
24 to recognise the value of women's textiles-based creativity, we potentially reinscribed the  
25 gendered association between women and needlework, which has been naturalised  
26 throughout European history and is linked to constructions of the feminine as sedentary, docile  
27 and domesticated. Despite work by sociologists who critique such understandings of women  
28 and the home, this conception is still predominant in patriarchal binaries of private/public and  
29 their relative values in contemporary society. Secondly, while we positioned the knitters as  
30 experts, we simultaneously diminished our own status to non-expert. For our participants, our  
31 'dumbing-down' was beneficial but in a broader, institutional context, as female sociologists of  
32 women's leisure, we may have reconfirmed the dismissive attitudes we encountered towards  
33 academic studies of 'women's work' from some quarters. Embracing our non-expertise as  
34 knitters created tensions with the need to defend the significance of our research into knitting  
35 as a skilful, culturally valuable form of female leisure. This double bind arguably reproduced  
36 wider tensions about what is deemed 'worthwhile' knowledge in the Academy. Thirdly, in  
37 feminising university and corporate space, we mobilised gendered sensory perceptions of  
38 cosiness and the feminine aesthetic category of cuteness, thereby replicating the cultural  
39 infantilisation of women and the idealisation of the home as the antithesis to the public sphere.  
40 While we created a familiar, safe space for our participants to talk, we mimicked the  
41 sequestered, bourgeois female homosocial domestic context that falsely separates 'women's  
42 work' from the public realm of masculine value. In so doing, we inadvertently reinscribed the  
43 otherness of the domestic realm and, simultaneously, coded the home as a place particular  
44 to women's leisure, which is highly misleading since domestic labour (both within and outside  
45 the home) is still largely conducted by women. Furthermore, this constructed our participants  
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3 as vulnerable and in need of paternalistic protection, metaphorically wrapping them in  
4 (cotton)wool  
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6           Having considered the benefits and problems of the ‘knit “n” natter’ method, we  
7 recommend the one-off craft-based focus group format for research around women’s domestic  
8 leisure. Previous **sociological** research in this area has often accessed pre-existing groups,  
9 which our research found to contain their own hierarchies of proficiency and privilege that  
10 alienated some participants. Therefore, we recommend the contrivance of one-off groups  
11 where participants may be less likely to feel that they are being judged by peers. We also  
12 suggest that the method may be employed in research with women – particularly older women  
13 – that is not necessarily concerned with craft practices but seeks women’s in-depth stories.  
14 We learned that the creative act of making and the incorporation of material objects into the  
15 research setting could both facilitate non-linguistic forms of knowledge and generate particular  
16 affects (in this case cosiness) that constitute under-researched feminine subjectivities.  
17 Further, the critical participatory paradigm that underpins the sedentary, craft-based focus  
18 group research design challenges patriarchal forms of knowledge production and  
19 simultaneously ensures that reductive constructions of gender, women’s expertise and  
20 vernacular, feminine forms of creativity are acknowledged.  
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