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Mindful Stitch: Generating dialogue in and around the threads of wellbeing

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Abstract

This article investigates wellbeing and mindfulness within contemporary art and craft practice, exploring initial introductions by Jon Kabat-Zinn of mindfulness practices into modern westernised medicine as a group or independent outlet.

21st Century sociological observations suggest we are infected by the 'Hurry Virus' (Kickbusch, 2012). Studies into mindfulness practices through established services such as the NHS and Arts and Minds show how crafts can be used as a tool for slowing down pace of making/doing, influencing overall wellbeing.

Mindful Stitch is a community derived workshop exploring hand embroidery as a mindful practice, using methods of social inclusion and outrospective empathy. Independent mindful craft practitioners, Kathryn Vercillo and Tara Jon Manning, show the benefits of mindfulness knit and crochet practices. Mindful Stitch addresses the gap in the research regarding hand embroidery as a mindful craft practice, catering for a wide audience, additionally welcomed to the 2013 conference The Subversive Stitch: Revisited, at the Victoria and Albert Museum, London.

Keywords: Mindful Stitch; Wellbeing; Mindfulness; Practices; Arts; Crafts; Embroidery; Social Inclusion

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Mindful Stitch: Generating dialogue in and around the threads of wellbeing

This article explores the contextual positioning of mindfulness art and craft practices in a community and personal frame of reference.

Research into the importance of societal wellbeing has led to the introduction of mindfulness practices within westernised medicine during the latter part of the 20th Century and 21st Century. Medical pioneers have taken aspects of the spiritual approach of Zen Buddhism and created pivotal influence, highlighting the positive impact mindfulness practices can have on mental health.

Factors within our impressionable modern society, such as the pace of living, can have negative effects on our mental wellbeing. It is essential that studies and practical pursuits focusing on mood improvements are practiced by society. A key example of such a practice is a mindfulness approach to various tasks and daily living.

Arts and crafts, along with a mindfulness approach, have proven to make significant contributions to mood improvements through established health and wellbeing services, as well as informal and less recognised services. Details into my own practice will analytically address independent and group mindfulness practice, as well as a gap in the research regarding mindfulness hand embroidery practices. Mindful Stitch documents the experimentation of less conventional embroidery techniques, as well as alternative mark and stitch making techniques using approaches such as the Zentangle Method.

The Contexts of Wellbeing

Research into current approaches to national and global wellbeing, particularly mental wellbeing, contribute to identifying wellbeing as a government policy concept. With the initiative of established medical services such as the National Health Service (NHS), mindful practices have become embedded within wellbeing in both spiritual and secular medicine.

Global, National & Mental Wellbeing

National and global individual wellbeing has gained recognition as a significant contribution to the development of factors such as the economy, environment, social practices, and culture in day-to-day modern society. Over the latter part of the 20th Century and the present 21st Century our involvement as a society, in measuring and maintaining a subjective national wellbeing, has helped us to understand more about the considered effects impacting on individual, national and global wellbeing. Wellbeing can be both physical and mental, but it is our mental wellbeing that this research focuses on, looking at how to achieve and maintain a positive state of mental wellbeing. The 2012 World Happiness Report states that “the most fundamental indicator of your happiness is how happy YOU feel, not whether others see you smiling, your family thinks you are happy, or you have all the presumed material advantages of a good life.” (Helliwel et al, 2012).

In April 2011, the Annual Population Survey (APS) from the UK Office of National Statistics (ONS) began collecting data from the UK's population on individual subjective wellbeing. Three theories were adopted to frame the four main questions asked, answered on a simple 0-10 scale, where 10 is the maximum and 0 is the

minimum (New Economic Foundation, 2011, p.8). The Hedonic theory stresses the importance of a frequent positive emotion, and an infrequent negative emotion. The Eudaimonic theory suggests that it is more than just emotion that contributes to our wellbeing, expanding to include concepts including self-worth, autonomy and engagement. Finally, the Evaluative theory aims for questions to be answered considering an overall satisfaction of an individual's life, responding to all they deem personally important. Key findings from this report showed correlations between wellbeing and ethnicity, part-time and full-time employment, gender and regional factors including urban or rural settings.

Australian Professor, Ilona Kickbusch, is recognised throughout the world for her contributions to health promotion and global health. In 2012 Kickbusch had pre-proposed the entering of women into the work place to be a contributing factor to mental wellbeing issues: "Urbanisation, modern media, new forms of work, women's entry into the employment market – all have contributed to time pressure and increased stress, anxiety and depression" (2012). It is the juggle of all of these impacting on home and employment that has led to what Kickbusch calls the 'Hurry Virus' (2012).

Mental wellbeing has, at times, alternatively been redefined as 'Happiness'. Gross National Happiness (GNH) has officially been used to "measure quality of life or social progress in a more holistic and psychological term, not only the economic indicator of Gross Domestic Product (GDP)" (McDonald, 2010). In 1972 Gross National Happiness was fabricated as a term by Bhutan's fourth Dragon King, Jigme Singye Wangchuck (crowned in 1974), a phrase used to nationally communicate the economy in Bhutan, (located in the East Himalayan Mountains of Central Asia), whilst simultaneously serving the unique Buddhist spiritual values of Bhutanese culture. With the success of the GNH report, any strategy put forward has always had to answer the question of whether it would promote the happiness of the people. This pioneering consideration for national happiness and wellbeing stems from Bhutanese Buddhist culture, highlighting the importance of material and spiritual development.

Mindfulness Practices in Westernised Medicine

As theories developed, Jon Kabat-Zinn (Massachusetts, USA) who practiced Zen Buddhism himself, developed a particular fascination with the notion of paying attention "to inner experience by quieting the mind, through first-person experience" (Gordon, 2009). It was these Buddhist meditative techniques that introduced Kabat-Zinn to mindfulness practices. In 1979 Kabat-Zinn took these tools of concentration, awareness and insight into mindfulness as a mainstream medicine, opening the Centre for Mindfulness in Medicine, Health Care, and Society at the University of Massachusetts Medical Centre. It was here that Kabat-Zinn introduced Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) to his practices and to mainstream westernised medicine.

A mindfulness approach means we channel our attention to the present moment, accepting and nonjudgmental, using our thoughts, feelings and senses. With the 21st Century 'Hurry Virus' (Kickbusch, 2012) it is easy to go through life without taking the time to stop, recognise and practice this way of being.

The NHS now recognises mindfulness practices as one of their recommended five steps for improving mental wellbeing, stress, anxiety and depression. The NHS has,

in recent years, also been using Mindfulness Based Cognitive Therapy (MBCT) group sessions to combat depression as a parallel to or even an alternative to prescriptive medication. There is a third type of mindfulness practice to adhere to in the improvement of both physical and mental wellbeing: Mindfulness Based Art Therapy (MBAT), (NHS, 2011).

Outrospective Empathy & Social Inclusion

The art of mindfulness can be applied to any task we undertake, from household cleaning to walking. It is the mindset we undergo that will adapt our learning of mindfulness practices and can be learnt through the repetition of self-cognitive training, which can be achieved in traditional MBCT group sessions, or independently. As an international audience, or part of the Big Society (a term used by the University of Central Lancashire's psychosocial research unit), we are becoming more comprehensively acquainted with, promoting awareness of, and practicing the artistry of an overall positive mental wellbeing, as both individuals and as a society.

Settling within an art based community project we open ourselves to the experiences of others. Giving us the opportunity to connect with the emotions of others, this non-cognitive link can be referred to as "outrospective empathy", as explored through the RSA Animate, *The Power of Outrospection* (Krznicaric, 2012). Empathy isn't just something that expands your moral universe, empathy is something that can make you more of a creative thinker. "A 21st Century revolution of human relationships" (Krznicaric, 2012) has the intention of stepping outside yourself to partake in outrospective empathy and discover other's lives, a contemporary take on self reflection and Socrates' philosophy "to know thyself...the way to live a wise and good life" (Krznicaric, 2012).

A contemporary exhibition, October 2013 to January 2014, featuring a collaboration of artists/makers works at the Woodend Gallery, Scarborough entitled *Make It Slow*, explores the pace of making: "The Slow philosophy is not about doing everything at a snail's pace. It's about seeking to do everything at the right speed." (Honoré, 2013). Making a conscious decision to take part in activities that are not necessarily time consuming, but done at the right pace, can slow the heart rate and allow the mind to become absent of stress and worry. Examples of community and collaborative practices could again refer to outrospective empathy and the idea of social inclusion.

Social inclusion and community projects are an important aspect of the social-wellbeing relationship. From 2008-2011 the South West Wellbeing program (SWWB), comprised of 15 community based organisations across South West England, initiated workshops enveloping activities with fun, leisure, creativity and socialising (Jones et al, 2013). The workshops focused on both mental and physical wellbeing. One of the activities included a craft project; a type of group textile activity to create a knitted representation of a community picnic (Jones et al, 2013). Another which stood out was a 'moving-on group' consisting of peer-led advice for people who had a history of poor mental health and social isolation, showing the equal importance and success of both palpable expression and conversation. The study as a whole found that group-based activities in community centres are associated with improvements in the health and wellbeing of adults.

Within modern society it is important to be aware of the impact of a radical pace of life on our mental wellbeing. The introduction of mindfulness practices for both mental and physical relief into the NHS in the UK is allowing individuals to develop skills for independent practice. With the opportunity for application of a mindful state of mind to any task, a personally catered release will contribute to a control of cognitive behaviour, a lift in mood and achieving happiness. It is also proven medically beneficial to immerse one's self into group activities, exploring shared experience and conversation alongside a task.

Mindfulness Craft Practices

Evidence shows that mindfulness practices, outside of the traditional Buddhist spirituality, are most prominent in western culture. Westernised cultures use arts as meditation and textile crafts as mindfulness practices, varying both group and independent mindfulness craft practices.

Group Practice

The Dorcas groups are a key example of historical westernised support groups encompassing textile practices over the last 300 years. Dorcas groups became popular for Victorian women for emotional and economical support, making, supplying and exchanging textiles such as cloth and clothing. They were also closely linked with the Church as a religious act of outrospective empathy (Krznaric, 2012). Rose Sinclair spoke of the Dorcas groups and how "textile practice was seen as a gift through empowerment" (2013), specifically within her Caribbean heritage at the conference *Subversive Stitch: Revisited, The Politics of Cloth* (November 2013).

It is suggested that through confidence gained and social inclusion within these group environments, enhanced creativity and self-belief of an individual's craft could blossom. This, however, evokes that only as a group stance did these women feel they had emotive license and the gift of textiles, whereas today there is evidence of empowering craft practices as both an independent and group activity.

Stitchlinks (established in 2006) is a UK based organisation sharing support and experience at the core of ground breaking research into how craft, in particular knitting, can help to improve wellbeing. Stitchlinks manages therapeutic knitting classes, formally acknowledged by clinicians and academics for their benefits on wellbeing in mainstream healthcare. Stitchlinks aims to enhance positive outlooks on life for mental illness and long-term illness, in GP surgeries, hospitals, care homes, the work place and schools. Knitting can help to divert the attention from chronic pain, worries, stresses and depression. Within descriptions of Stitchlinks, cross stitch is touched upon slightly, although the main focus remains on the benefits of knitting. This is one of few formally established examples of therapeutic hand embroidery within group experiences. One suggestion as to why there is a gap in the research regarding embroidery and mindful practices is from an interview with Melissa Fletcher (Fletcher, 2013) (See App. 1), Embroidery Technician at the University of Huddersfield, suggesting that embroidery, particularly hand embroidery, is not as widely practiced as knit and crochet, which have made a revival in recent years. Stitchlinks promotes the binary actions of knit, working both sides of the brain, benefitting even those with dementia, whereas embroidery can be argued to be a

task requiring a more mindful state of mind as there is less determined by the tools and stitch (i.e. the size and placement) as there is with knit/crochet.

Independent Mindfulness Practices

“Probing Consciousness in Order to Reinterpret it” (Kirwin, 2012)

Brendan Kirwin suggests that “in the act of creating, artists probe consciousness in order to reinterpret it, artists are involved in an analogous process when they attempt to represent objects as they really are, they are extracting information about the essential aspects of the visual world.” (2012).

Whether we consciously or subconsciously make the decisions we do when we make/create, it seems that as artists and makers we are drawn to a state of mind that resembles that of a meditative level. Whether we achieve that consciously or subconsciously, it is an essential tool in the act of creating. It is also this ‘analogous process’ that can suggest that, for some, the formal group meditative classes are not necessarily personally engaging for a creative mind to achieve a mindful state and lack visual aspects for reflection of being. It is then the notion of environment we can take into account as an important factor whilst achieving a meditative state. With mindful practices we concentrate on the current moment, suggesting environment to not be a contributor in any way as it should be ‘blocked out’ or forgotten momentarily. For the mindful practitioner, mindful awareness will increase over time and practice, like with anything, as will the feeling of mindful being rather than an act of mindless doing. Environment may resonate subconsciously or even consciously and if not deemed a comfortable environment by an individual may detract from achieving a mindful being or awareness.

Environment

Tara Jon Manning regards environment as a significant element within both her mindfulness practices and her knitting. Manning has practiced Zen Buddhism from a young age but currently explores the work of the hands and the qualities of the mind. Manning has taken a first-hand approach to her mindfulness knitting practices.

“I began to tune into the commonalities between practicing mindfulness meditation and the actions of knitting. Both require light attention to the environment, both allow the mind to rest, both have a natural object of focus that contributes a rhythmic quality to the experience” (Manning, 2004).

Manning proposes that the act of mindful knitting does allow the mind to be conscious of environment, therefore being considerate of a positive, comforting environment is compulsory to the success of a mindful approach on the mood of the practitioner.

Kathryn Vercillo, a mindful crochet practitioner, experienced just this. In her blog, ‘Crochet as Meditation’ Vercillo gives an account of her experiences, and although the community group still carries its benefits toward a positive mental wellbeing including managing and combating stress, anxiety, and depression, it is not necessarily the environment for everyone. Vercillo tried formal meditation, in a class with others closing their eyes and letting go of all thoughts, focussing their attention on their breath. Vercillo felt uncomfortable and as though she was disturbing the

peace around her and it is this that led to her independent approach to mindfulness practices through meditative crochet. The repetitiveness of the craft, like many, can be practiced as a means to mindfulness. “The combination of constantly counting, gentle recurrent hand motions and focus on the work is a stress reducer and a path to being present in the here-and-now” (2013).

Vercillo recommends choosing a beginners project that only requires basic skills but still revolves around repetitiveness, for example a scarf or a large granny square. Also recommended is choosing colours that comfort and a quiet relaxed space to work in that will help celebrate the craft and yourself. For some, in particular those suffering from health conditions such as stress, anxiety and depression, the combination of a mindful state with a craft task can be much more successful than simply sitting and practicing controlled breathing. With only the breath to occupy one’s mind, there is potential room for the mind to wander. We could also argue this even with the repetitiveness of crochet itself, as the size of stitch is determined, it may leave the mind vulnerable to worrying thoughts or stresses. Similarly with of cross stitch, which was mentioned briefly in the practices of Stitchlinks, the canvas has a compulsory grid formation, leaving a slightly limited conscious decision of making, which could also lead the mind to wander. These craft practices may not be as beneficial as that of free hand embroidery, where the attention remains focused through decision making for composition, colour, scale and type of stitch. The intensity of embroidery could impact positively on the mindfully aware state of mind. In contrast to Vercillo’s idea of picking a simpler crochet pattern (2013) with repetitive stitch, Melissa Fletcher (2013) has reflected on her own embroidery practices. Fletcher observes how perhaps the repetitive nature of the running stitch may be most mindful at first, however, it leaves the mind open to worries, which then leads her to adopt a more complicated embroidery stitch which requires more concentration for construction.

It is subjective as to whether we feel the benefits of either group or independent craft practices or even both. All share qualities of a meditative state when we create, subconsciously channelling emotive thought as a release from our conscious reality. Research suggests a trend within mindfulness practices and crafts, in particular the popularity of highlighting the success of craft practices. However, there is a lack of exploration into mindfulness hand embroidery practices.

Mindfulness craft practices have proven successful for mental illness and long-term physical illness through research and support services such as Stitchlinks. However, with the modern day ‘Hurry Virus’ taking a hold of westernised society it is our mental wellbeing, stress, anxiety and depression that will be pushed to its limits. Introducing a wider variety of community/independent craft practices to society, to cater for a wider range of personal choice, will call for more in-depth research into outlets such as mindfulness hand embroidery practices.

Mindful Stitch - Hand Embroidery as a Mindfulness Practice

Through research into crafts and mindfulness practices, it was noted that there was considerably less exploration into mindful embroidery practices at an academic level, as opposed to other crafts including knit and crochet, which has been extensively explored by practitioners such as Tara Jon Manning (2004) and Kathryn Vercillo (2013). My own practice has been led through confrontation of this distinct gap in the

research and with a personal gravitation towards crafts as an outlet for stress, anxiety and depression. This informs both my independent mindfulness practices and Mindful Stitch, a community derived workshop positioned under the umbrella of health and mental wellbeing, using my position as a researcher and practitioner to facilitate public opportunities and mediate the relationship between hand embroidery and mindfulness meditative techniques.

The workshops have taken into consideration the initial sociological methods of social inclusion and outrospective empathy that have had such a positive impact on national wellbeing, mood improvements and integrated parallel values to a craft environment.

Wellbeing Services

Contacting a number of organisations aided a thorough insight into wellbeing services in the community, one of which was the Arts and Minds Network in Leeds through a partnership with the NHS. The charity foundation supports people with mental health issues such as stress, anxiety and depression, through engagement with a workshop audience.

The artists at Arts and Minds focus more on traditional art practices such as drawing and painting as part of therapeutic sessions, artistic techniques that seem to dominate the mindfulness art practices within and outside of medicine at present. The artists also sell their works to raise funds for the charity. One of the aims of Mindful Stitch is to highlight the importance of a group environment sharing an experience in mental wellbeing and the arts. Along with a visit to Artists in Mind (AIM) studios, a studio residency space funded by Huddersfield Council aimed at artists (some of whom suffer or have had experiences with mental health), the popularity of traditional arts practices as an informal, independent practice soon became evident.

Through personal participation of group workshops at AIM studios, I acknowledged the success of group activity, independent endeavours and collaborative interactions. Dialogue seemed to be a key part of the positive dynamics, encouraging a happy atmosphere, which consequently would impact on the mental wellbeing of the participants.

I attended some sessions at the Wellbeing Services at the University of Huddersfield. These weekly workshops/support groups were based around sympathetic yet remote written tasks on anxiety, depression, stress and self-esteem. They mainly focused on group conversation as a tool for sharing, advising and learning new coping mechanisms, specifically tailored for a student lifestyle, although displaying efforts in catering for the individual. Immediately after these sessions I would return to my studio space, when instinctively I felt the need to apply these mechanisms whilst incorporating my love for embroidery. For Mental Health Week at the University of Huddersfield 2013, there was a small task promoted by the Wellbeing Services. This involved writing five tasks/hobbies (Five-A-Day) that one enjoyed and felt good for the mind/improved mood, called 'Mindapples'. Undoubtedly, embroidery was at the top of my list.

Independent Mindful Stitch Practices

The pivotal point in my current practice was when I had already gathered research into therapeutic art methods. However, it was not until I had experienced those

applications subconsciously through my own making that I truly understood mindfulness practices. After a week away from the studio due to illness, I was stressed and anxious and at a loss for the direction of my University project. Through the power of 'Gifting', a term discussed in depth in relation to crafts through June Hill's paper *Sense and Sensibility* (2008), I was handed by one University of Huddersfield tutor, a mixture of threads and fabrics and told to "just stitch". I can now speculate that the idea behind the act of stitching was to distract me from worry and unpleasant thought, and replace with confidence and improved mood through the exploration of doing.

Amongst the fabrics was a soft fleece which immediately I began to put on the body. The contact between a fabric, which I associated with comforting connotations, and my arm, which somewhat resembles a sleeve at this point, emulated practitioners' works such as Heather Hansen, and how her body and body movements direct her making. Hansen performs her drawn mark makings to music, taking her subconscious responses to a level of palpable descriptive analysis.

Within my own mindfulness embroidery practices, each stitch was probing an emotive consciousness that impacted on subconscious decision making of colour, stitch, scale and pace. Here I consciously took note and discovered, as a first-hand experience, the benefits of mood improvement as a result of mindfulness embroidery practices. The techniques explored on the body had subconscious influences through the way that the fabric was pulled across the arm which made for interesting lines to follow. The composition of the stitch was also influenced due to the position I felt most comfortable and relaxed in for embroidering, here it was the top of the forearm, leaving a linear strip of embellishment on the fleece fabric. At a later stage I reflected again upon why I had subconsciously chosen my left lower arm and wrist as a 'canvas' mould, and concluded the possibility that I seek most comfort here because I suffer in this area from physical pain through repetitive strain injuries. It is the connection with the body, the textures, the warmth and the portrayal of a sleeve that took preference, rather than a more detached nature, for example in an embroidery hoop. Holding the fabric clenched in my hand was a second technique which incorporated both body and mind as a mindfulness approach to embroidery. This mode of body connection felt even more personal through means of touch in both hands, taking those more binary techniques used to energise both sides of the brain, explored through *Stitchlinks* with knitting. Each sample differed and seemed dependent on starting mood and the intensity in which I held the fabric. Despite this varied starting point, the end result was an improved mood after mindfully preserving that negative space in the palm through stitch.

As my mindfulness embroidery practices developed, I became interested in comforting objects that I could incorporate with mindfulness embroidery. With a recycled blanket and jumper, although I did not have a full emotional connection with the two pieces because of their found nature, the idea that they represented resonated a comforting memory. In an extract from *A Mindful Golfer*, it is suggested that embroidery simulates qualities of what a memory can be. "Memories stick to the present moment, hanging there like the underside of an embroidery. That is messy, complicated, while the finished side is smooth, unencumbered, and ...well...finished." (Altschuler, 2013). When exploring the idea of holding the fabric within the palm as an approach to mindful embroidery, it was near impossible to see these underside

stitches as they were captured within the body of the sample, existing as a metaphor for distancing one's self from these unwanted memories or feelings in that present moment. The finished visual article embodies the final stitches the maker had left visible through mindful attachments.

Walking as an art was something that had interested me as an approach to a mindful state of mind after reading a review on the Tate Britain exhibition *Walking as Art* (2012). I wore my 'mindful stitch jumper', a jumper that I had been using as a sample to encompass ideas of using body and mind as a mindful practice. Whilst wearing the jumper, I stitched into it as I walked, being very attentive not to damage myself. I had to be aware of the busy town centre environment, splitting my attention but taking the same slow philosophies as the *Make it Slow* (2013) exhibition into consideration. I felt that in this particular case paying only light attention to my environment was challenging, and that potentially a quieter route to walk would develop a mindful state of mind. Additionally, being aware of a repetitive approach to mindfulness practices as cognitive behavioural training will improve my ability to be mindfully focused.

The independent research allowed me to experience first-hand the benefits of using hand embroidery as a mindful practice. The success of the samples on the body added a higher level of intimacy and comfort to the process. It was the overall observations of mood improvements and attention to being in the present moment during the stitching that led me to recognise how this could work for others in an environment either alone or within a community setting like a workshop.

Mindful Stitch in the Community

Development of Mindful Stitch workshops

Mindful Stitch is a community derived workshop inspired by independent research, led by mindful embroidery practices on the body, exercising mindful attachments through body and mind to hand embroidered crafts with the aim of mood improvement. Kickburch's modern westernised theory of the 'Hurry Virus' provides insight into the pace of making with time to share experiences in a group environment away from the hurried momentum of day-to-day living in the Big Society (2011), whilst highlighting the success of mindfulness practices as a tool for managing stress, anxiety and depression to the community. This research acted as a facilitator and a mediator in the workshops providing opportunity for time out and social inclusion, creating awareness of mindful hand embroidery practices and informing participants of successful independent experiences in this area. Background independent research was highlighted to participants through personal success with how the approach to embroidery as a mindful practice had developed naturally and was pivotal in my own practice. This encouraged others to consider not only embroidery or even the arts of any sorts, but to gravitate and consciously be known to tasks that improve their own mood and how calming dynamical processes can be achieved through the act of mindful being.

Having explored the idea of holding the fabric and the fabric being wrapped around the arm, the decision was taken to include these techniques in future workshops. There were other avenues explored in the workshop setting through alternative mindful mark making, drawing and stitching into paper, however, it was apparent that the two initial techniques were most sought after, potentially because they were

palpable in a more intimate and comforting nature. In my independent practices I had collated a range of familiar fabrics including fleece, recycled jumpers and a range of coloured yarns for a preliminary workshop, open to the public. It was apparent that some of the yarns did drag through the fabric, detracting from the relaxed movement of the stitching process as summarised through verbal feedback. With trial and error the process identified with floss yarn which I hand dyed for a range of colours and tones, to provide a wider range of personal choice.

Later workshops focused on aesthetically creating an amicable environment by adding soft lighting and cushions, considering the idea of participants sitting on the floor if they wished, reflecting Buddhist methods; however, whatever was most comfortable to the individual was encouraged.

The initial wellbeing workshop had a feedback questionnaire that explored experiences and knowledge of mental health in relation to stress, anxiety and depression. The questionnaire also requested participant information including religious orientation, age, living arrangements, birth location, employment status and studying status. It was religious orientation that had the most potential to impact on the research because of links between mindfulness practices and Zen Buddhism. With these statistics I had hoped to see a correlation between mood and personal environment in day-to-day living. This feedback also touched upon preferences of colour and fabric. At the end of this workshop I felt this type of feedback seemed to be too intrusive and complex, which detracted from the relaxed atmosphere hoped for this workshop. Later observations deemed this detailed questionnaire to be unnecessary as it is the mood on entry to the workshop and the individual experiences during the workshop that would influence the results directly.

Once Mindful Stitch was developed and established under this name, data collection took influence from the UK Office of National Statistics (2011) 1-10 scale survey layout. Participants were asked to score their mood (1 being a poor mood, 10 being a positive mood) as they entered the workshop, whilst stitching and after stitching. This enabled documentation of the impact on mood over the duration of the workshop, observing techniques, yarns and fabrics that were most sought after. This allowed a clear way to identify and analyse correlations in mood scores before and after participants had engaged with stitch. The simplistic layout of the Mindful Stitch mood scoring sheet felt welcoming and thought provoking, in the shape of an individual colourful gift tag, which could be later attached to the corresponding samples for post analytical reflection. There were some personal interpretations of June Hill's ideas on 'gifting' (2008) to oneself and others through the gift tags. By adding these to the sample it could be assumed that the physical end piece is the gift, but it was in actual fact the process of making and being kind to one's self that was metaphorically represented through the gift tag. With the physical samples having no function or even determined form, it was simpler to explain this idea of gifting through process to participants.

Mindful Stitch: An investigation into community mood improvements through mindful hand embroidery practices

The following three Mindful Stitch workshops are inspired by the previous improvements and formats discussed. These consist of; the first workshop opened to the public in Huddersfield on 21 November 2013, the second at the conference

Subversive Stitch: Revisited on 29 and 30 November 2013 at the Victoria and Albert Museum, London, and finally, on 4 December 2013, a workshop integrated into the Textile undergraduate course at the University of Huddersfield.

Participants that took part in these workshops were asked to score their mood three times overall on the scale of 1-10, one before mindful embroidery, once during and once when the workshop was completed. Participants were informed of and consented to the ethical values of these results through Mindful Stitch University of Huddersfield ethics forms, stating how these results would be used for further research or publication, always remaining individually anonymous. A sensitive approach was taken when explaining the ideas behind Mindful Stitch regarding mental health and participants were given service contacts and a list of literature if they felt they wanted advice or more information. Dialogue within each workshop was open to choice, it didn't have to revolve around mental health or even stitch, but the idea of being mindful of the present conversation.

The overall mood improvement of participants for each workshop was documented in a line graph format (see Figure 1), each graph representing the mood of participants on the day they took part in the workshop, allowing for environmental contributions such as the weather or the length of the duration of the workshop and to measure any complementary or contrasting correlations.

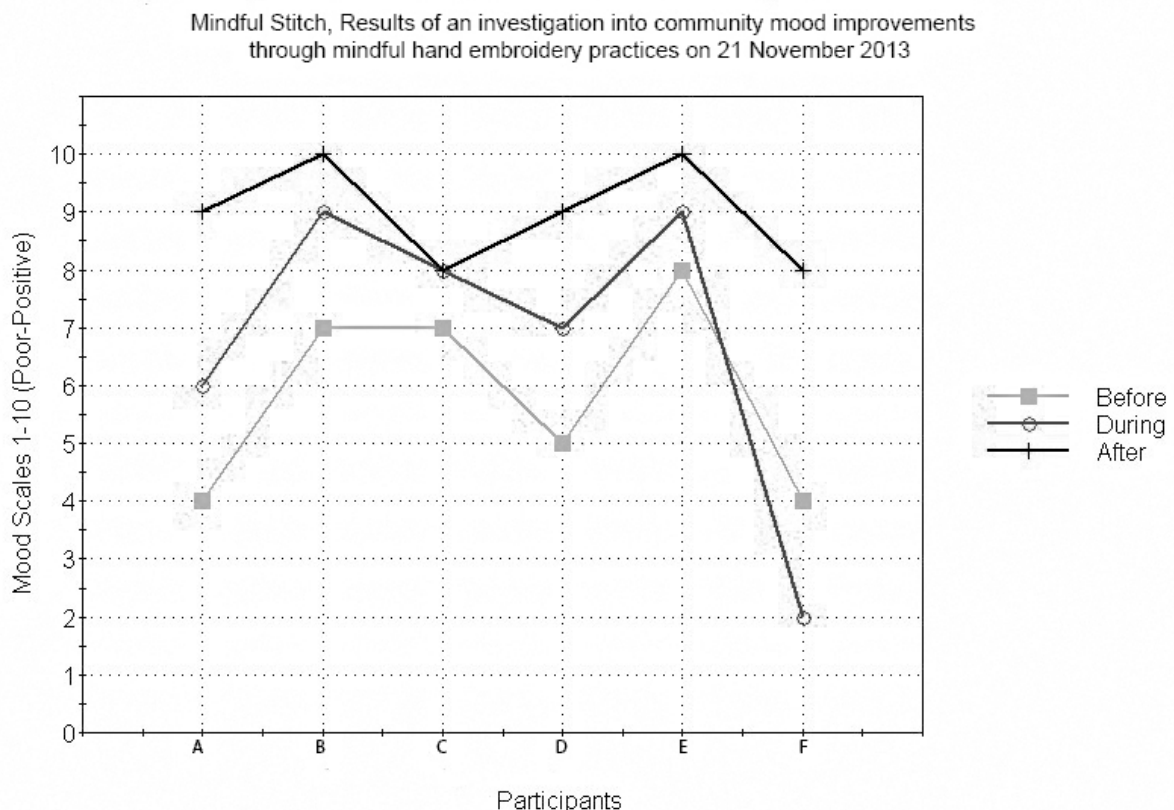


Figure 1: Mood changes of Mindful Stitch participants

At a later stage of evaluation for the 21 November 2013 workshop, scores from the line graph were copied on to an acetate sheet and projected into a larger format but

still to scale. This wall projection featured the samples created and the gift tag scoring sheets which were pinned to a cork wall as a representation of the line graph for this particular workshop. Red thread was used to join all these scores together. This was inspired by Professor Lesley Millar's conference paper *The Red Thread. A life line? A blood line?* (2012). I felt it not only gave a composition to the findings as an art piece for public reflection, but added a great sense of connection and community, mapping a network of progression of mood through this one shared experience.

One result that was highlighted was a score reflecting a drop in mood during the mindful stitching (Participant F, 21/11/2013, see Figure 1). The possibilities as to why this particular participant had decreased in mood were explained by themselves as not having a history in crafts and feeling their skills were limited; crafting and stitching was out of their comfort zone. This participant chose a woollen scarf fabric that had a grid pattern for the sample on the arm. Using this fabric, the participant felt that the lines acted as a guide to stitch along. This raises the question of whether this kind of subconscious influence would lead to a more or less mindful approach. Melissa Fletcher reflects on her experiences of leading embroidery workshops and observes that together both embroidery and flowing conversation as a partnership helps to improve mood as a whole. Fletcher adds that a lot can depend on the individual. This particular participant thought they could find comfort through some alternative emotional outlet but by still using the skill of a mindful practice. (Fletcher, 2013) (See App.1)

One workshop was held at the Victoria and Albert Museum at the conference *Subversive Stitch: Revisited* (Swinnerton, 2013), and was well received. There were achievements and confidences to be felt tackling something that seemed to have so much interest and positive encouragement from other academics and enthusiastic arts and crafts practitioners. The workshop on 4 December 2013 was integrated into an undergraduate module. Participants stated that their moods would benefit further if they were to have had more time to spend with their pieces, slowing their pace of making.

Each workshop provided 48 strands of different coloured floss yarn. Consequently, I was able to observe the participants choice of colours, bright blues, yellows and reds were most popular, leaving purples, browns and greys the least popular over the three workshops.

Overall, each workshop successfully integrated methods of social inclusion and outrospective empathy, as well as highlighting the powers of mindful embroidery practices and generating dialogue through ideas of wellbeing. Results show that as each workshop progressed in duration, the average mood improved steadily, ending significantly higher for some than when individuals first entered the workshop. Observations of the relationships between colour and mood improvement of each workshop were not taken closely for each individual regarding the floss yarn, however, the results were clear for overall preference of bright blues, yellows and reds with least preferred being browns, purples and greys. The gift tag written feedback showed similar results of colour representation for a positive or negative mood, however, the language was more specific in describing colour, for example teal or burgundy. For future research to allow a greater insight into the impact of

colour on mood, different colours of yarns could be randomly allocated to participants to see if there was any impact on their mood scores, whether this score increased during the workshop, and if it did, by how much. This approach could lead to clearer findings of the direct impact of certain colours on mood.

Conclusions

Contextual research has shown that in 21st Century western society we are infected with a pace of doing that can often leave us stressed and more susceptible to other mental illness stemming from this. It is important to educate society of the resourcefulness of a mindful approach to any task, as without awareness society could just suffer in silence because of the still stigmatised values we hold against mental health. Group textile practices in westernised cultures show a contribution to mood improvements and shared experience through methods of social inclusion and outrospective empathy. Slowing the pace of making as a community creates more control over the 'Hurry Virus', impacting on atmospheres, our wellbeing and even our happiness. The Mindful Stitch workshop illustrates how group activity and dialogue, along with a shared task at a slower pace, improves mood at a gradual rate. Recording the process through the collection of mood scores at the beginning of a workshop, whilst stitching, and then at the end of the workshop, allowed for a greater understanding of how embroidery is a significant tool for slowing the pace of making and for concentrating on the task in hand.

As a practitioner and researcher of mindful craft practices, I have a natural interest in developing this void in the research regarding mindful hand embroidery practices. So far, both my independent and mediated group practices have inspired one another, from a community engaging level to a personal outlet, both of which intend to be upheld for future research and facilitation of workshops. An aim to gather scores of mood improvements from a variety of different communities in the westernised world will allow me to observe a larger body of qualitative data.

Taking Mindful Stitch into other westernised countries will mean research can compare the implications of a greater interest in physical wellbeing in society over mental wellbeing, and indeed if this is even a stigma at all. Research will aim to discover the kinds of safeguards in place, especially those linked to art, craft and mindful practices, and introduce Mindful Stitch, through my newly discovered medium of animation, as an evolved international resilience for the 'Hurry Virus'.

Techniques

The use of current techniques on the body has been successful in combining body and mind for the process of mindful embroidery making. As investigations through Mindful Stitch develop, I aim to explore in more depth the change in scale, techniques, freedoms/constraints through embroidery, the affect this has on the attentive thought process and the power this has to alter one's state of mindfulness. The aim is to draw closer to answering the following questions:

Which traditional/experimental embroidery techniques require a more mindful or attentive approach to the process?

Which materials, environments, senses and techniques are most successful, viable and which will an audience engage with?

Does creating your own pattern make you more attentive to the embroidery process, or following one that already exists?

As well as this, does spontaneity and freedom over choice of composition, scale, colour and other components make the mind and body more mindful of the task and decision making processes, or would the freedoms lead the mind to wander?

Other techniques to be explored in depth will be the Zentangle Method. The Zentangle Method is an approach to drawing where you are mindful of shape, line and fill, plus the contact of the pen on the paper. These mark makings on paper mirror those of stitch on fabric. Being conscious of the process of placement and arrangement of marks creates a less conventional way of mindfully stitching. By introducing the Mandala as a running motif for mindful embroidery and drawing practices, its close links to mindfulness through Zen Buddhism provide direction. The Mandala as a circular form is for me both pleasing to produce and to own afterwards. Using shapes to create a bigger picture, it is not just about the end piece, it is about the drawing process, concentrating on the feeling of the pen on the paper, as is the aim of mindful hand embroidery practices. Zentangle provides artistic satisfaction along with an increased sense of personal wellbeing. By drawing each stroke consciously and deliberately, your attention is focused on the process of Zentangle (Krahula, 2012).

Recording the Process

By using mindful stitch practices on the body, one can be more mindful of the present moment, slow down the pace of making and combat stress, anxiety and depression. Recording this slow pace of doing captures the process of mindful practices, ultimately more important than physical aesthetics.

The Happenings (Kaprow, 1966) was inspiring in terms of highlighting the way a piece was created rather than the finished art object. Kaprow coined the term 'happenings' as he saw his pieces as performance art and was excited by the performance possibilities of painting. This surrounds the ethos of acknowledgments within creation that may not have otherwise been acknowledged. The Mindful Stitch video shows me stitching into my Mindful Stitch jumper whilst wearing it, a film representing creative process, the stillness and attention given to the stitch, producing a form of visual idea around mindful embroidery practices (Swinnerton, 2014).

The Mindful Stitch jumper encompasses attentive thought to the dimensions of body and mind. The contact between my body and the fabric is enhanced by mindfully being whilst wearing the jumper. Stitching into the jumper preserves the contouring and negative space of my body, making this a very personal three-dimensional composition. Blanketing myself with this shape adds warmth and security. Process of making is the key to mindful embroidery practices. Documenting the practice with film not only gives a visual dimension of the mindful process, but becomes a therapeutic piece in itself for others to take time out and watch. The Mindful Stitch video was shortlisted for the 2014 Batsford Prize.

Public Awareness

Whilst planning the Mindful Stitch workshops, my research led me to encounter risk assessments and ethics forms, and this inspired my thinking; there are plenty of precautions within the workplace and within education to facilitate physical wellbeing,

however, there are no real safeguards in place to protect our mental wellbeing. There are places to go and talk, medications to take and mindfulness classes to attend once you are suffering with a mental illness such as depression and anxiety, however, there are no regular services within these high-pressure environments to maintain a positive mental wellbeing without having been diagnosed with a mental illness first. "Why is it we wear hard hats, aprons and goggles to protect our physical being but there is currently no real armour for our minds?" (Swinerton, 2014).

The idea of an animation came from my previous video of capturing myself stitching, the slow process of making being both an enjoyable process and interesting viewing. Having used the Zentangle method as a part of my stitch making research, and for me this had been the most pleasing technique explored, I composed a Zentangle stop motion animation bringing awareness of Mindful Stitch and the stigma towards mental wellbeing as opposed to physical wellbeing which is accepted as highly important in society.

RSA Animate (Royal Society for the encouragement of Arts, manufactures and commerce) is an innovative, accessible and unique way of illustrating and sharing world-changing ideas, something I have always been inspired by. The animations are fun and exciting and incredibly clever, as well as educational. It is this format of animation that has inspired me most, with a narrative voice talking synchronised with the visual aspect. The animation then takes on another form, something more personal, and may appeal to a wider audience. The idea of the visual and the audio working together will potentially allow the viewer to be more immersed in the animation using more senses, and attentive to the present moment.

In October 2013, a visit to the *Cloth and Memory 2* exhibition in Saltaire, Yorkshire, highlighted a video of Lesley Millar, Creative Director of the exhibition that was memorable. The video was simply talking about the exhibition but it was the sympathetic way Lesley Millar talked on the video herself that made you feel welcome and connected to the exhibition. Wearing headphones to hear the audio blocked out the rest of the room, directing my senses into being mindful of what I was seeing and hearing, and most importantly, learning.

It is the intention of the Mindful Stitch Animation to allow the viewer to feel comfortable, drawn into the animation, with all thoughts, senses and emotions in the moment of that showing. Pleased with the outcome, I hope others are inspired to take part in Mindful Stitch, to raise awareness of mindfulness as an embroidery practice and to recognise that, as a society, there still exists a stigma around mental illness/wellbeing. The Mindful Stitch Animation first premiered at the Textile Craft degree show at the University of Huddersfield, June 2014 (Swinerton, 2014). The versatility of the Mindful Stitch Animation allows for global viewing online, within a gallery space, conference or forum or even on a personal one to one basis.

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Appendix 1

13 December, 2013 Interview with Melissa Fletcher, Embroidery Technician, University of Huddersfield (published with permission)

1. From your own observations as an embroidery workshop leader, have you observed improvement in mood over the duration of a workshop? Is this as a group encounter, or are there only a handful of participants you could speculate to have improved mood?

1. I have found that there is always a marked improvement in mood from the start of a workshop to the end (I refer to hand stitch workshops where a group is sat around a table and working on a common task). The class is often subdued and quiet when the class begins but notably more relaxed and chatty by the end of the workshop. This isn't true of all groups; I think a lot depends on the individuals within the group. Whilst I don't think it is necessarily purely the practicing of embroidery that has this effect, I believe that the act of hand stitching helps to relax a group and make them feel more comfortable within the group, allowing conversation to flow.

2. What do you feel embroidery has to offer to mood improvement that differs from knit/crochet? This might be the stitch, the physical contact, body movements, binary brain activities, the finished product.... And WHY do you think this differs?

2. I practice both embroidery and crochet and whilst I find them both relaxing and mood enhancing, I definitely think that embroidery has more of a positive impact on my mood. I think that they differ in that, once learnt, knit or crochet can be done almost subconsciously for example whilst watching TV, the motion is repetitive. Embroidery on the other hand requires more focus and engagement throughout. For each stitch made a conscious decision has to be made about where the needle enters the fabric and where it returns to the surface of the fabric. Stitch size is not predetermined as with knit or crochet. I think it is this conscious involvement with the work that can allow for a greater improvement in mood. I would suggest that Embroidery as a craft promotes mindfulness above knit or crochet as the mind can not drift to other thoughts or worries as it is involved in the decision of each stitch being made.

3. All crafts mentioned encompass a repetitive approach, freedom over colour and expressive narrative. From your experience does a finished piece reflect on the mood you have observed from that specific class?

3. I haven't found this to be true. I think whilst a finished piece may hold memories of a specific mood for the individual involved in making it, the finished piece is dictated much more by the students individual project.

4. Is there a stitch in particular you find as an observer to be most successful for achieving a mindful state, that is calming to participants?

4. From my experience I would say that no one particular stitch is more mood enhancing than another. I believe that stitching enhancing or calming a mood is a subjective experience, dependant on ability, initial mood and attitude.

5. Do you feel there's a reason that maybe I haven't come across any research specifically into mindfulness and embroidery? Maybe it's more of a refined audience? Or is there just a gap in the research?

5. I think there is a gap in the research. Perhaps more research has been done into knit and crochet as mindful activities as these are more widely practiced crafts and have seen a revival over the last few years. I don't think embroidery, particularly hand stitch, is as widely practiced.

6. Do you feel some participants might not engage as effectively because of environment? Do you think a more independent approach might leave participants feeling more positive in an environment of their choice? Or is a group task advantageous in improving mood in any way?

6. I can see advantages to both. I think the reasons for group tasks being advantageous are the same as for any other craft activity and less to do with the act of stitching. Sharing a common activity allows for a dialogue to be opened up amongst the group and promotes a relaxed environment in which to work. I think an individual approach has the advantages discussed when talking about my own practice.

7. Does scale have an impact for participants' mood? The smaller tighter sample might feel more personal, but the larger might encourage freedom for expression.

7. Again I think this depends on the individual student. It is obvious that Students who naturally work on a large scale find that the restrictions of working on a small scale have a negative impact on their mood often becoming irritable with the work and vice versa. I think the mood can only be enhanced by stitching if the student feels comfortable with the scale of the work.

8. Your personal practices:

1- Most effective stitch/stitches in relation to your own mood improvement and why?

1. My automatic response to this question would be running stitch. I use this stitch a lot in my practice. I find the simple repetitive nature of the stitch both relaxing and reassuringly familiar. However it really depends on my mood and state of mind before I start stitching. I can suffer with anxiety and at times when I am feeling anxious or stressed I find that stitching can help to calm me. However at these times a running stitch will not work for me as the action is too far iliac and my mind can drift back to my worries. Instead I will turn to a more complicated stitch or a stitch that I have to

concentrate on constructing. This occupies my mind and helps to calm my thoughts.

2- Do your colours of choice reflect on your mood?

2. I don't believe that my colour choices reflect my mood. I would say that my practice and individual projects dictate the colours that I use and I only ever work with colours and fabrics that I really love.

3- Do colours dictated by design impact on your mood?

3. If the colours I used were dictated to me and I had to work with colours I didn't like then that might have a negative impact on my mood, primarily because I wouldn't be happy with the design or finished sample if I wasn't happy with the colour.

4- Is your mood improved most through embroidery as a group task, as a teacher, or participant, or as an independent practice?

4. Generally I would say that my mood is most improved through embroidery as an independent practice, however I also think my mood can be improved by all the other options. Probably least so as a group as I find it much more relaxing to be stitching something that is wholly mine, without having to consider other influences. Whilst I appreciate that working as a group can have its benefits in terms of furthering my practice, it is not something that I would do specifically to improve my mood. Teaching embroidery can also improve my mood. I have found that this is most evident when I am teaching a group that is fully engaged in what they are doing and when teaching new stitches to students who then get pleasure out of what they have created and achieved.

5- Is environment important to achieving a relaxed state while embroidering?

5. For me environment is incredibly important to achieving a relaxed state whilst embroidering. Perhaps environment is the wrong word as I suspect that for me it is more about the atmosphere of a place or room. I need to feel comfortable and content in the place in which I'm working and I am most relaxed in familiar surroundings eg the embroidery workshop, home or the office. I never watch television whilst stitching, instead I will work with music on or listen to the background noises of the room I am working in.

6- Scale? The smaller tighter sample might feel more personal, but the larger might encourage freedom for expression. Which comforts you most?

6. Definitely the smaller sample. I find it very difficult to engage with larger pieces as they feel less personal to me. I find I can lose myself in a smaller sample and total engage with the material and the technique.

7- Do you feel an attachment to a finished piece? Does it resonate your mood, does it stimulate a recollection of mood in the future?

7. I always feel an attachment to my finished pieces and would find it hard to get rid of any of my finished work. I can easily recollect working on each piece, where I was sat, conversations I had whilst stitching them and how I was feeling at the time. When

I am creating a piece I am totally invested in that work and so recollect things associated with the making of it as one might recollect memories from an event they attended or enjoyed.

8- Anything you want to add about your own practice in relation to mood/mindful awareness improvements or impacts?

None